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COVID-19: The Pandemic’s Impact on Grading Practices and Perceptions at the High School Level

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Abstract

For years the traditional, criterion-referenced grading systems utilized in America’s public schools have been the focus of heavy scrutiny, as many have criticized these practices for their arbitrariness, inclusion of non-academic factors, and exacerbation of the achievement gap. In March of 2020, the world was shocked by the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic, which amplified the inequities of how America’s schools traditionally graded and assessed. Suddenly, students in distance learning became entrenched in the harsh realities of lost instructional time, inadequate educational resources, and difficulties beyond the classroom. Despite these limitations, the conditions of the pandemic may provide an opportunity to change traditional grading practices and beliefs at the high school level. As such, research was conducted which focused on traditional grading systems and their shortcomings, alternatives to traditional grading, and the initial impact of COVID-19 on grading in America’s public schools. As the foundation of this work, the above referenced inquiry prompted the researcher to ask: in what ways has COVID-19 and the transition to distance learning influenced teacher perceptions and impacted factors teachers consider when grading at the high school level? To help answer this question, a convergent parallel mixed-methods study was constructed and carried out using a survey. Quantitative data collected from the study was examined using Qualtrics analytics, while qualitative data was interpreted using In Vivo coding protocols. Both quantitative and qualitative data were given equal weight and triangulated so as to maintain the study’s validity. The survey results indicate teachers changed the factors they considered while grading more so when the factor was directly connected to the conditions created by the pandemic. For example, a student’s access to technology, their non-academic responsibilities, or the exclusion of multiple-choice tests over assessment integrity concerns in distance learning. Furthermore, while practices were
impacted by COVID-19, teachers’ perceptions, that grades should measure student achievement and understanding, remained largely unchanged. Of note, the research does indicate a minority of teachers’ view grades in distance learning as a reflection of effort, participation, and engagement. The results of the study are indicative of a change in grading practices and beliefs, though not to the degree the researcher anticipated. Furthermore, a contradiction exists between teachers perceived beliefs of what a grade should mean about a student, and the factors they use to compute their students’ grades. While the results of the survey do signify a move towards more equitable grading practice, the researcher recommends the study participants institute alternative grading structures, such as Standards-Based Grading (SBG) moving forward. Through the formation of Professional Learning Communities (PLC’s), teachers can collaboratively work to implement their most equitable assessment practices using Cultural Proficiency as a lens of focus to help mitigate disparities in grading. The researcher concludes the more education can work to shed light on the need to overhaul its grading practices and perceptions, the more equitable the assessment measures given to students will be.

Keywords: Achievement Gap, COVID-19-Pandemic, Criterion-Referenced Grading, Distance Learning, Standards-Based Grading, Teacher Perceptions
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Chapter One: Definition of the Problem

Perhaps as synonymous as just about anything in America’s schools is the issuance of letter grades to indicate and/or communicate a measurable level of academic performance for students. These grades, usually computed using a criterion-referenced grading scale, marked by letter grades A through F, have, and continue to concretize the narrative surrounding student achievement since the inception of comprehensive education in the United States (Aviles, 2001). At the high school level, these grades become quantifiers of student success and play an integral role in college admissions, scholarships, athletic eligibility, class rank/promotion, and more (Feldman, 2020; Guskey & Link, 2018; Knight & Cooper; Olsen & Buchanan, 2019; Randall & Engelhard; Townsley, 2020). The tangible implications of grades at the high school level suggest their promulgation extends beyond a mere recognition of performance on academic coursework.

Although this is the grading system utilized by the majority of our nation’s high schools, questions arise as educators seek to explore the equitability and fairness of these assessment practices. In recent years, criterion-referenced grading systems have come under fire as researchers seek viable and alternative solutions for student evaluation. Critics of traditional systems of grading argue criterion-referenced systems are arbitrary, do not accurately indicate what students learn, and include non-academic factors (homework, behavior, effort, participation, etc.) into the final mark (Guskey, 2013; Knight & Cooper, 2019; Randall & Engelhard, 2010). The shortcomings and potential solutions to traditional grading systems continue to permeate the educational conversations about grading which are transpiring throughout the various halls of academia.

Unfortunately, the narrative surrounding the need to uproot and discard America’s grading policies has become stagnant, with no real actuated change. Then, in March of 2020, the
unthinkable happens. Thrust into the depths of the COVID-19 pandemic, all of America’s institutions and systems are rocked to their core, and education is not spared from the chaos and confusion. Quickly, educational leaders recognize the imbalances in our nation’s grading practices for marginalized student groups and scramble to impose no harm policies and protocols designed to ensure equitability for everyone (Castro et al., 2020; Feldman & Reeves, 2020; Kaura & Melnicoe, 2020; Malkus & Christensen, 2020; Townsley, 2020). Plagued with the prospect of failing large swaths of our nation’s high school students, districts around the United States freeze grades in their place or adopt a pass/fail system so as to mitigate the damage caused by the interruption of instruction from moving to distance learning (Castro et al., 2020; Feldman & Reeves, 2020; Kaura & Melnicoe, 2020; Malkus & Christensen, 2020; Townsley, 2020).

The start of a new school year in August of 2020 brings about an opportunity for education to engage in a case study on grading which has the potential to change assessment policies and practices for years to come. The pandemic, as counterintuitive as it may be, provides an impetus for educators to reexamine their beliefs about their perceptions and practices regarding grading and assessment. Now more than ever, education must analyze with clarity the equity gaps in assessment which permeate America’s schools. These gaps, as pervasive as they are, have been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic and the transition to distance learning. The decisions made now and in the coming months may very well effectuate real and quantifiable change in our nation’s grading practices.

**Purpose of Study**

Addressing the equity gap in assessment aggravated by the COVID-19 pandemic requires a concerted effort from a multitude of educational institutions and personnel across the nation. Every system, district, school, and teacher, regardless of ethnic background, socioeconomic
status, or political bent, must evaluate the validity of the perceptions of their members and the practices of their systems to determine if changes in grading protocols are occurring or should occur given the unprecedented circumstances brought on by the pandemic. As such, a convergent parallel mixed-methods case study will be conducted at a comprehensive high school in Southern California, henceforth known by the pseudonym, Southern California High School (SCHS). This high school is home to 2,829 students and 119 certificated teachers. Of the student population, 52.7% are white and 47.3% are students of color. Furthermore, 47.8% of the students at SCHS are socioeconomically (SES) disadvantaged (California School Dashboard, 2019). The transition to distance learning and the impact it has had on low SES students and other marginalized student groups leads this research study to evaluate:

1. In what ways has COVID-19 and the transition to distance learning influenced teacher perceptions and impacted factors teachers consider when grading at the high school level?

Current research indicates there are alternatives to traditional, criterion-referenced grading systems which have been found to be ineffective. Systems such as Standards-Based Grading (SBG) and progress-based grading, which seek to remove the capriciousness of assessment by evaluating students on their progression towards mastery of a set of common standards and learning goals may well be viable alternatives (Iamarino, 2014; Knight & Cooper, 2019; Spencer, 2012). However, there is little research which shows how teachers adapt their grading practices and perceptions during distance learning and what effect these changes have.

The purpose of this research project is to determine if teachers have altered their grading practices and their perceptions of the purpose of grades in light of the COVID-19 pandemic. The researcher will seek to evaluate factors teachers consider in grading before the pandemic and
during it, and to determine which practices have proven most effective. This research project will add to the body of research by measuring what changes have occurred in teachers grading practices and perceptions specific to the COVID-19 pandemic and the move to online learning more broadly.

**Preview Literature**

There is much literature in existence which delves into the intricacies of effective grading practices and philosophies of assessment. This literature review provides a comprehensive analysis of grading factors, perceptions, and policies both before and now during COVID-19. Since grading has been a topic of excited debate for years, it is vital to understand the research related to grading practices and perceptions before the outbreak of the pandemic. Utilized by an overwhelming majority of schools in the United States, criterion-referenced grading measures student performance by issuing a letter grade, usually A through F which communicates a percentage of points a student earned for the course, usually on a 100-point scale (Aviles, 2001). This system of grading, however, is heavily scrutinized by those who oppose its usage in public education. Critics of criterion-referenced grading argue the system is highly subjective, provides no uniformity, and often considers non-academic factors, such as attendance, behavior, and participation, when issuing a grade (Guskey, 2013; Knight & Cooper, 2019; Randall & Engelhard, 2010).

Due to the heavy criticism surrounding criterion-referenced grading, alternative systems have emerged which aim to remove the arbitrariness miring traditional systems of grading. One such alternative is Standards-Based Grading (SBG). This grading system removes non-academic factors in grading and evaluates students on their progression towards specific and measurable
learning goals and objectives (Knight & Cooper, 2019; Iamarino, 2014; Spencer, 2012). Despite alternatives, no consensus exists to confirm the most efficacious systems of grading.

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic illuminates daunting disparities in the equity and fairness of traditional grading systems. Initially, school districts around the nation offset these equity gaps by developing *hold harmless* policies designed to either freeze students grades in time or measure them as pass/fail (Castro et al., 2020; Feldman & Reeves, 2020; Kaura & Melnicoe, 2020; Malkus & Christensen, 2020; Townsley, 2020). Moving deeper into the pandemic, more tangible, long-term solutions are being tested. These solutions include developing flexible and transparent systems of assessment which measure what students are learning rather than what they are producing or how they are behaving (Feldman, 2020; Fisher et al., 2011; Hope, 2020; Link, 2018; Townsley, 2020). Teachers in the pandemic are beginning to recognize and value grades as mechanisms of communicating what students are learning, rather than simply checking off what they are physically producing or how much they are engaging in class.

The extended literature review in Chapter Two of this research study produces a comprehensive examination of grading in America’s schools. It begins with a thorough examination of traditional grading systems, the factors teachers use to determine grades, and the perceptions teachers have related to the purpose of assessment. These topics are explored through research which exists before the pandemic struck. From here, this review will explore education’s initial response to COVID-19, as well as the short-term practices, protocols, and purposes of grading within distance learning. The review concludes by examining research related to COVID-19’s capacity to provide an impetus for long-term and large-scale grading reforms to promote and implement equitable and fair practices for all students.
Preview Methodology

This project will utilize a convergent parallel mixed-methods research design which will consist of an analysis of both quantitative and qualitative data, which will be evaluated and given equal weight (Mertler, 2019). Quantitative data will be collected from Likert-type questions issued using a Qualtrics survey given to teachers at Southern California High School (SCHS). This survey will provide data which informs the research study regarding the factor’s teachers consider in their assessment practices before and now during the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as the degree to which their perceptions of grading have or have not changed. Qualitative data will be gathered through a series of three open-ended survey questions. These questions seek to assist the researcher in further crafting a comprehensive narrative of grading practices and perceptions by building upon the quantitative data collected. The convergent parallel mixed-methods research design is an appropriate system as both the quantitative and qualitative data will be given equal and independent weight in the study, then converged to draw an overarching conclusion about the state of assessment during the pandemic (Mertler, 2019).

Significance of Study

This research study will help to inform educational leaders about effective grading practices utilized in our teachers’ classrooms during online learning brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic. Furthermore, this research study will uncover the ways in which teachers’ perceptions and their philosophies of grading have been changed since the outbreak of the pandemic. Due to the infancy of this diametrical shift in education, there is not much research in existence related to the changes in or the efficacy of assessment practices during the pandemic. This research study hopes to inform the education field of how grading practices and perceptions have evolved over the course of the last year by comparing teachers’ thoughts from before and
now during the pandemic. The information garnered from this research study can help teachers, schools, and districts develop and implement equitable grading protocols for all students throughout the duration of distance learning and beyond.

**Conclusion**

Based on all available evidence it is clear the solution to the pitfalls of traditional, criterion-referenced grading systems has still not reached a consensus among educational leaders. The COVID-19 pandemic presents a unique opportunity for America’s schools to examine the efficacy and equitability of grading practices and perceptions so all students, regardless of their backgrounds can find academic success. This convergent parallel mixed-methods research study will combine both quantitative and qualitative data collected from teachers at Southern California High School (SCHS) in an effort to answer:

1. In what ways has COVID-19 and the transition to distance learning influenced teacher perceptions and impacted factors teachers consider when grading at the high school level?

This study aspires to inform education of any shift in the grading practices and perceptions of teachers brought on by the move to online learning in March of 2020. It is the researchers hope the findings can be used to enact effective assessment policies and protocols for the remainder of distance learning and beyond. In an effort to frame the conversations about grading already taking place, Chapter Two will provide a synopsis of current literature surrounding grading practices and perceptions widely used before COVID-19. In addition, this literature review will document education’s response to the COVID-19 crisis and shifts in assessment as the pandemic necessitates a move away from brick and mortar classrooms to the realm of online learning.
Definitions

COVID-19-Pandemic: (coronavirus disease 2019) is an illness caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus. This virus is a new type of coronavirus that has spread throughout the world (MedlinePlus, 2021).

Criterion-Referenced Grading: A grading system comparing student achievement to an instructor-chosen standard instead of the achievement of other students (Aviles, 2001).

Distance Learning: Synchronous and asynchronous instruction taking place via video broadcasting software online and outside of traditional brick and mortar classrooms.

Hold Harmless Policy: Education’s commitment to not implement any policy or make any decision which would damage students’ educational opportunities or academic standing due to circumstances beyond their control (Castro et al., 2020).

Stakeholders: Students, staff members, parents, and members of the community who have a vested interest or stake in the success and/or direction of the educational institution.

Standards-Based Grading: A system of assessment, grading, and academic reporting based on student demonstration or mastery of the knowledge and skills they are expected to learn (Glossary of Education Reform, 2017).

Teacher Perceptions: The thoughts, beliefs, or preconceived notions teachers have about a particular topic, person, system, ideology, etc.
Chapter Two: Literature Review

It has long been a standard in education that the letter grades a student receives in a class is a metric of how well a student performed in relation to a set of grading criteria established by the teacher. While there are differences in the ways teachers and schools assess students, the most common method of communicating student performance is referred to as criterion-referenced grading, or the traditional A through F grading scale many are familiar with (Aviles, 2001). Although grades are important communicators of performance at all levels, they hold significantly more weight once students reach the secondary level. In high school, grades become indicators determining students’ class rank, college admissions prospects, athletic eligibility, scholarships, and much more (Feldman, 2020; Olsen & Buchanan, 2019; Townsley, 2020). Still questions arise as to the effectiveness of these grading systems which seem to offer advantages for some, but not all students.

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic has brought into question the equity and efficacy of grading practices as we know and understand them. Although calls to reform grading practices are not new, a revitalization of these efforts has seemed to gain a footing as education tries to find both short-term and long-term solutions to the inequities and gaps created by the transition to distance learning. This study aims to answer the following research question:
4. In what ways has COVID-19 and the transition to distance learning influenced teacher perceptions and impacted factors teachers consider when grading at the high school level?

This review begins with an examination of traditional, criterion-referenced grading systems used by the majority of schools in the United States. Within the context of these grading systems, factors teachers consider in issuing grades will be explored and documented. In addition, a review of assessment best practices and the purpose of grades writ large will highlight important literature surrounding teacher perceptions of grading and assessment. The review will then transition and begin to encapsulate these concepts within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and the transition to online learning. This review will examine education’s short-term solutions to the grading inequities perpetuated by the move to distance learning necessitated by COVID-19. Again, within the context of the pandemic, this review will examine policies, practices, and purposes of grading best suited to the current state of education. These topics will provide the impetus to examine how COVID-19 could potentially provide the catalyst needed to reform and revitalize grading practices across a broad spectrum of educational institutions.

**Traditional Grading Systems**

Ever since the passage of compulsory education laws in the United States in the late 19th and early 20th centuries grades as evaluative measures of student performance have played an integral role in secondary education (Guskey, 2013). Although grades are not necessarily needed to illustrate student learning, they are used as determinants of performance, especially at the secondary level (O’Conner, 2009). Typically, when someone thinks of grading policies in the America’s schools, their mind will harken back to the A-F scale which has become synonymous with education for years. What would be considered a traditional grading scale, or the issuing of
letter grades $A$ through $F$, is referred to in education as a criterion-referenced system, or a system of comparison of “student achievement to an instructor-chosen standard instead of to the achievement of other students [norm-referenced]” (Aviles, 2001, p. 605). Despite how prevalent these practices are in our nation’s perceptions of grading; much uncertainty still exists as to whether or not criterion-referenced grading is a reliable barometer of student achievement.

While grading has and will continue to evolve, certain norms are undoubtedly ingrained into the frameworks our nation’s schools utilize to determine student performance and achievement. What the research suggests by looking at traditional or criterion-referenced grading systems is teachers tend to establish cutoffs for certain letter grades (Aviles, 2001). For instance, an $A$ letter grade could represent a student receiving 90-100% of points, while a $B$ letter grade represents a student receiving 80-89% of points (Aviles, 2001). How a student scores in a particular grade range is a point of contention among educators. Although this topic will be discussed at length in the following section of this review, typically the components used to determine where a student falls academically include performance on tests and quizzes, homework completion, participation, behavior, attendance etc. (Knight & Cooper, 2019; Randall & Engelhard, 2010). As the literature suggests, this type of grading, particularly the use of the 100-point scale, can prove subjective and unreliable, with teachers issuing different grades based on non-uniformed criteria (Guskey, 2013). These practices are problematic and can lead to equity concerns for certain population groups.

**Factors Teachers Use to Determine Grades**

Perhaps the fundamental and primary complaint of traditional, criterion and norm-referenced grading systems is the factors teachers use to determine students’ grades are often arbitrary and subjectively applied by the teacher of the course being taught. As a result,
formative and summative marks in courses are routinely not a measure of only achievement, but rather a combination of both a demonstration of academic proficiency and existential factors such as behavior, participation, and attendance (Knight & Cooper, 2019; Randall & Engelhard, 2010). Grades in these systems have come to represent either a reward or a punishment, rather than a standard of learning (Olsen & Buchanan, 2019). Given the exceedingly whimsical nature of grading practices within widely accepted grading systems, it is appropriate to dissect the different factors educators use to assign grades in secondary settings.

A comprehensive examination of the available literature reveals grades are calculated largely by individual teacher perceptions of what should encapsulate a student’s understanding of a required subject matter content. Notably, a large portion of the research agrees grades are the primary indicator of student achievement and proficiency used in determining whether students are promoted or retained, qualify for special classes, or are admitted to college (Guskey & Link, 2018; Knight & Cooper, 2019; Randall & Engelhard, 2010). Yet debate still permeates the education community as to what metrics should be used to measure whether or not students had met the intended goals and standards of the classes they are enrolled in.

The determinant factors teachers utilize to calculate student grades varies greatly across the field of education. A recent study discovers a broad variance of grading factors from the elementary to the secondary level, with secondary teachers being more likely to consider components such as tests, projects, and homework than teachers at the elementary level did (Guskey & Link, 2018). The same study also concludes across all grade levels, roughly 10-20% of the criteria used to comprise a student’s grade are non-academic factors such as participation, work habits, and behavior (Guskey & Link, 2018).
The use of non-academic factors in determining grades has long been the subject of scrutiny and criticism of researchers and scholars. The incorporation of non-academic factors, such as participation, behavior, and work habits in determining grades for students is largely chastised for perpetuating the arbitrary nature of traditional grading systems and brings into question the meaning of the mark the student receives (Randall & Engelhard, 2010). Even still, there are those who support the inclusion of non-academic behaviors in the calculation of grades. Some argue the inclusion of non-academic factors, such as engagement and participation, can lead to increased achievement as it can incentivize students to value investing in their education (Andersen, 2018). These scholars proclaim by incorporating those non-academic components in grading, teachers are promoting student accountability and responsibility through extrinsic motivation (Olsen & Buchanan, 2019). Critics of the inclusion of non-academic factors, such as behavior, effort, and attitude, in grading are not opposed to the collection of this assessment data, but caution against its use when issuing final grades (Brookhart, 2004).

As an alternative to traditional grading systems, which are often subjective and arbitrary, recent research suggests more and more districts are moving to a Standards-Based Grading (SBG) system. The factors teachers consider, as well as the scale used when determining a student’s grade are inherently different than those found in criterion-referenced systems. SBG seeks to eliminate the arbitrary nature of grading by focusing largely on skill acquisition and student demonstration of mastery of sets of common standards, rather than task completion and non-academic factors (Knight & Cooper, 2019). SBG considers nothing but student progression towards a specific learning goal or objective when deciding what mark to give a student (Iamarino, 2014; Spencer, 2012). This grading system eliminates work production and non-academic factors which would usually be considered in a student’s grade, rendering them
non-essential in evaluating what a student has learned. All things considered, SBG is not without criticism. Those who oppose the implementation argue SBS is overly complex, laborious, and had the potential to strip away student motivation rather than improve it (Knight & Cooper, 2019; Spencer, 2012). Despite criticisms of SBG, many educators believe this grading system to be a viable alternative to traditional, criterion-referenced systems.

**Teacher Perceptions of Assessment Practices and the Purpose of Grading**

Understanding the factors teachers use to determine grades largely stems from a recognition of teacher perceptions of grading practices and their opinion on the purpose of grades more broadly. For years, the issuing of grades has been personal, peculiar, and in the absence of adequate formal training, based largely on the grading experiences the teacher had in his or her education (O’Conner, 2009). In fact, a 2010 study which examines the grading practices of teachers found teacher education programs often focus little time on assessment, therefore teachers combine achievement measures with less reliable metrics such as behaviors and participation (Randall & Engelhard). A similar study conducted in 2018 builds upon Randall & Engelhard’s 2010 findings, noting teachers who completed non-traditional training programs rely heavily on grading practices which measure behaviors rather than practices focused on student’s mastery of standards (Link, 2018). These assessment strategies have been proven time and again to be unreliable barometers of student learning and achievement. Despite the fallacies and shortcomings of these assessment strategies, they continue to be utilized across our nation’s schools.

Luckily a review of relevant literature indicates teacher perceptions of best assessment practices are moving in a direction designed to show student mastery of standards in reasoned and purposeful ways. For instance, there is a growing movement in classrooms around the nation
to institute policies designed to not penalize students for their academic performance while learning new content and/or skills (Fisher et al., 2011). As students learn new information, they are given ample time and opportunity to practice the skills they will need to show mastery on the summative assessment teachers use to benchmark the student’s achievement level (Fisher et al., 2011). Furthermore, efforts are being made by teachers to offer and/or expand remediation efforts for students regardless of whether the district lays out an official “redo” policy (Wisch et al., 2018). A 2018 study surveying 429 teachers across five high schools discovers over 90% of teachers offer remediation opportunities for students in their classrooms (Wisch et al.) Advocates of grading policies whose aim is to seek to value the experience of learning argue a process-based approach to grading fundamentally yields greater and more meaningful learning experiences for kids.

Teacher perceptions of best assessment practices are largely connected to the same teachers view of the purpose of grades and grading. An individual teachers’ belief and perception of the purpose of grades then drives the policies and procedures they implement in their classroom. While the purpose of grading has variance by teacher, grades are commonly seen by educators as a mechanism to communicate with the student and other stakeholders a level of achievement and proficiency (Brookhart, 2004; Guskey & Link, 2018; Wisch et al., 2018). Since grades are apparatuses of communication, their issuance should be matched with meaningful feedback for students to help them work towards a goal or objective regardless of what is being measured (Percell, 2017).

Like assessment practices, philosophies surrounding the purpose of grades is shifting as education seeks to reform grading practices across the field. The issuance of a grade is moving in a direction which is indicative and reflective of the process of learning. More frequently the
research is noting a change in teachers’ perceptions about what a student’s grade should be representative of. For instance, an increasing number of educators advocate for the inclusion of only summative tasks in grades, arguing students should not be penalized for the content they are attempting to master (Fisher et al., 2011; O’Conner, 2009). Those who promote a form of learning embedded in an ongoing process discover students learn best when: the purpose of students’ grades is communicated clearly (O’Conner, 2009), students have opportunities for remediation (Fisher et al., 2011), and effective and valuable feedback is provided by teachers (Wisch et al., 2018).

As the field of education continues to re-evaluate and change the ways in which grades are issued much research still needs to be conducted to determine the efficacy of various assessment practices. In early 2020, the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic tested the boundaries, effectiveness, and resiliency of our nation’s grading systems. The past year has, and is continuing to, fundamentally alter how we perceive grading on a macro level. The decisions school districts across the country make concerning grading will have a lasting impact on the success and opportunities of our students (Castro et al., 2020).

**Education’s Immediate Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic**

The onslaught of the COVID-19 pandemic compels the education world to grapple with continuing efforts to revitalize and fundamentally change grading practices. As such, this virus has completely uprooted everything we thought we knew about teaching, learning, and assessing students. Forced with the prospect of being thrust into distance learning, and the equity challenges online learning would bring for myriad student groups, school districts around the world began to examine changes to grades and grading through the end of the 2020 school year and beyond. Typically, grading is a local issue and policies surrounding assessment processes are
left to districts and school sites for implementation and delivery (Castro et al., 2020). While each
district ultimately creates their own policies and guidelines for issuing grades, many California
school districts rely heavily on recommendations from the California Department of Education
(CDE) (Castro et al., 2020).

The pandemic immediately illuminates the disparities and inequities existing in our
schools, with thousands of students lacking the resources to even access their coursework. As a
result, school districts are looking at avenues to revamp their grading policies and institute
alternative practices aimed at providing the most equitable outcomes for the most students.
Districts around the nation and in California are instituting *hold harmless* policies manifesting in
students’ grades being frozen in time from the start date of distance learning, or decided through
the development of a pass/fail system (Castro et al., 2020; Feldman & Reeves, 2020; Kaura &
Melnicoe, 2020; Malkus & Christensen, 2020; Townsley, 2020). Many educators argue any
attempt to institute a grading system other than a variation of *hold harmless* given the
compromised instruction students received would only exacerbate a significant equity gap
pervading our schools (Feldman & Reeves, 2020). The decisions and policies put into place by
each school district which alters their grading systems at the onset of the pandemic remains a
topic of scrutiny through the end of the 2020 academic year.

Outside of California, school districts around the nation wrestle with similar policy
decisions surrounding grading and the inevitable impact those decisions would have on equity
opportunity for students. In the spring of 2020 several states are developing and executing
variations of the *hold harmless* policies adopted in the state of California. For instance, the
Illinois State Board of Education urged schools within the state to not issue grades, but rather a
pass or incomplete mark to mitigate inequities arising from a lack of access to instruction (Castro
et al., 2020). Other districts, such as Washington D.C. Public Schools, Chicago Public Schools, and Fairfax County Public Schools in Virginia are enacting *hold harmless* policies in which students could only improve upon their grades by completing assignments and assessments (Castro et al., 2020). According to Malkus and Christensen’s May 2020 survey of school districts nationwide indicates: 22% have been developing pass/fail systems, 22% state students’ grades could only go up, and 11% did not grade work at all.

Efforts made by school districts around the country to ensure equitable outcomes for all students during the COVID-19 pandemic are not without criticism. While there was less condemnation of these policies at the elementary level, several individuals and groups express concern over the implications these procedures could have at the secondary level. Many opponents of the *hold harmless* policies being adopted by districts nationwide fear these protocols may breed a lack of motivation and incentive for students to learn, therefore compounding the disparities in skills and academic proficiency many student groups already possess (Castro et al., 2020). Apart from criticisms related to student motivation and engagement, other critics argue the implementation of pass/fail systems does little to differentiate the efforts of students who would otherwise receive an A or a D mark (Feldman & Reeves, 2020). The absence of grade distinctions runs the potential of disproportionately impacting our low socioeconomic students who rely heavily on academic performance to receive scholarship and grant opportunities for higher education (Feldman & Reeves, 2020). The pandemic, like many issues in education, is fostering conversations and dialogues among leaders in the field as to what, if any, is the appropriate approach to grading.

The short-term grading solutions instituted in the wake of an unprecedented COVID-19 pandemic have forced the hand of school districts nationwide to make suboptimal decisions. As
schools returned in the Fall for the 2020-2021 school year, districts begin to reevaluate the purpose and protocols for grading in the long term. With uncertainty still looming, districts are pushing forward to develop plans and procedures to ensure grades in distance learning are equitable measures of student performance and achievement.

**The Practices, Protocols, and Purposes of Grading During COVID-19**

As devastating as COVID-19 has been on students, their families, and the nation as a whole, the pandemic provides educators with an opportunity to grow, develop, and rethink individual and systemic philosophies of grading. Since the emergence of distance learning in March 2020, educators continue to reexamine best practices and the purpose of issuing grades in preparation for a venture into online learning with no guaranteed end in sight. The months since the COVID-19 pandemic first surfaced affords the education field the ability to develop a playbook for grading as the continuation of distance learning for the foreseeable future becomes a greater reality with each passing day (Townsley, 2020). The early days of the pandemic made clear the implementation of traditional grading structures would prove to be disastrous when applied to remote learning.

What the COVID-19 pandemic has illuminated to educational leaders is traditional grading systems are fundamentally inequitable and serve as mechanisms to perpetuate and exacerbate disparities existing among diverse student population groups (Feldman & Reeves, 2020). The temporary changes instituted in our nation’s schools since last March provide ideal conditions to think about long-term solutions to the fallacies pervading traditional mechanisms of assessment and grading (Feldman & Reeves; Townsley, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic continues to take a prodigious toll on students, as many of them struggle with the loss of loved ones, financial uncertainty, mental health issues, and isolation (Feldman, 2020). Now more than
ever educators are learning the value of grades as opportunities to prioritize and benchmark student growth and understanding of learning goals over work production and subjective non-academic factors like participation and behavior (Hope, 2020). There is no question the lessons the field of education learns from the quagmire of distance learning will have significant philosophical and practical implications on grading for years to come.

The unparalleled events of the past year result in educational leaders and institutions conducting and publishing extensive research and literature on what best practices for grading look like in a distance learning format. While droves of theories emerge, one commonality presented by leaders in the field is grading should be equitable, flexible, and should place an emphasis on the process of learning rather than the products students submit (Feldman, 2020; Hope, 2020; Randel & Engelhard, 2010; Townsley, 2020). The impetus for the advocacy of these practices is not new, and aligns well with many of the well-established theories and protocols of standards-based and process-based grading systems. What is new, is the urgency of implementing concrete and effective grading policies to ensure vulnerable and historically marginalized student populations do not fall victim to circumstances beyond their control.

There is undoubtedly a sense of necessity to adapt and change grading practices writ large since the establishment of distance learning in the public education system. COVID-19 continues to change student experiences in school, ultimately rendering traditional grading practices ineffective. The literature suggests the response to the need for change resolves itself by looking at the conditions created by the pandemic and how education works to ensure those conditions do not create inequities for students. First and foremost, the transition to distance learning necessitated by the COVID-19 outbreak has impacted students’ personal lives in unimaginable ways as they cope with added stressors never experienced before (Feldman, 2020).
Students, particularly students of color and students of low socioeconomic status, have additional responsibilities mandated to them they may not have under normal circumstances. Furthermore, many of these same student groups find difficulty accessing their coursework due to problems with connectivity. These two problems cause interruptions to student learning which is fundamentally out of a student’s control. Unfortunately, traditional grading systems, many of which call for the inclusion of homework and other performance or non-academic factors to be included in the calculation of grades, would penalize students for the lack of access to resources based on the criteria they utilize in determining grades (Townsley, 2020).

Many leaders in education believe moving forward there are viable, alternative grading policies and practices school districts can implement to mitigate the inequities caused by COVID-19. These policies stem from an understanding that given the unprecedented nature of the situation, grading should be flexible and value the process of learning rather than looking holistically at the products students submit by a prescribed deadline (Feldman, 2020; Hope, 2020; Townsley, 2020). In order to effectively institute the aforementioned grading system means doing away with the inclusion of subjective and non-academic determinates in grading, such as homework, behavior, and participation (Fisher et al., 2011; Hope, 2020; Link, 2018; Townsley, 2020). Teachers can then replace these factors with constructive and frequent feedback which seeks to improve upon the progress of student understanding of learning goals, rather than penalizing for failures and shortcomings along the way (Feldman, 2020; Hope, 2020). These changes, if administered correctly, can help promote a positive school culture within the pandemic-era learning in which all stakeholders can trust and believe in the uniformity of the grade a student receives (Randall & Engelhard, 2010).
The best practices of grading during distance learning identified in the literature all speak to a particular believe about the purpose grades serve during the COVID-19 pandemic, especially at the secondary level. These policies and protocols help to establish what grades measure and what they communicate to relevant stakeholders during this anomalous stint of time. At the secondary level, particularly high school, grades are vital benchmarks used to determine college entrance, athletic eligibility, honor roll, insurance rates, and scholarships/financial aid (Feldman, 2020; Olsen & Buchanan, 2019; Townsley, 2020). It is for this reason they need to be equitable and must not preclude anyone from attaining academic success. Advocates of altering grading systems in the wake of the pandemic insist upon changes to our nations grading systems if education wishes to limit the marginalization the student groups impacted most by COVID-19. The assertion connects in part to the reasoning behind why a grade is issued in the first place.

In general, relevant literature on this topic suggests grades should be an indicator of a student’s movement towards the mastery of a learning goal or objective and should not be a metric of what a student turns in or how they behave (Knight & Cooper; Townsley, 2020). Put differently, grading should be neither a punishment nor a reward, but rather an opportunity to convey feedback to students as they progress towards achievement (Feldman & Reeves, 2020). Since movement towards mastery of a preestablished set of learning goals or standards is largely process-based, grades must be connected to tangible and quality feedback a student can use to gauge their progress towards mastery of a specific subject matter or skill (Hope, 2020). The result of reexamining the purpose of grading, educational leaders believe, will foster an equitable and inclusive pedagogy of practice. This pedagogy moves to support students with limited access to resources in distance learning by breaking down barriers to their success and therefore
inculcating a sense of fairness and meaning in the issuance of grades (Feldman, 2020; Randall & Engelhard, 2010).

Despite efforts to delve into the topic of grades during distance learning, the fact remains there is little tangible evidence to support the efficacy of these practices. There is still much we don’t know about the long-term success or effectiveness of altering grading practices during the pandemic. Educational leaders must conduct more research and publish more literature to determine the durability of best grading practices for remote learning. Regardless, efforts must continue to be made to ensure the education system can promote to the best of its ability a system of equity and inclusion during a pivotal moment in time (Castro et al., 2020).

**COVID-19: An Impetus for Large Scale Grading Reforms**

Now more than ever there are calls by leaders in the education field to enact large scale, sweeping, and systemic reforms of grading policies across the nation. It is quite possible the COVID-19 pandemic inadvertently provides an impetus to actualize change many in education have called on for years. Currently, as was stated previously, scholars and educational leaders in the field are expressing concerns over the equitability of the factor’s teachers consider when issuing grades under traditional models of assessment. The inclusion of non-academic factors like behavior and participation, the antiquated and mathematically inept 100-point scale, and product-based versus process-based grading are just a few of the practice’s reformers hope to address in the wake of the pandemic (Feldman, 2020; Feldman & Reeves, 2020; Fisher et al., 2011; Hope, 2020; Link, 2018; Olsen & Buchanan, 2019; Randall & Engelhard, 2010; Townsley, 2020). There is no, it seems, real systematicity or standard for grading applied across the board (Olsen & Buchanan, 2019). Efforts to uproot a system put in place over a century ago must compel leaders in education to find a viable alternative to replace the current system.
In recent memory, a multitude of publications continue to be put into production with consultation from professional development experts hoping to attain the singular goal of developing alternative grading practices. Despite this, there is limited modern research which connects to issuing grades for students in schools (Olsen & Buchanan, 2019). Furthermore, questions still arise as to what the longitudinal efficacy of changes to grading and assessment practices will be given the limited information available related to the impact these changes have on student performance and achievement during distance learning. These concerns notwithstanding, the COVID-19 pandemic opens a window to implement and test many of the reform practices leaders in the field of education advocate for.

As the pandemic progresses, society tries to grapple with what the world will look like beyond the 2020-2021 academic year. Not surprisingly, education is attempting to work through the challenges of the new normal which have profound impact on educational policy now and in years to come. This new normal must take measurable actions to ensure equitability in our schools grading practices in the face of larger barriers and obstacles than ever before (Cahapay, 2020; Castro et al., 2020). Since the adoption of the synchronous and asynchronous distance learning model back in March 2020, students, particularly at the secondary level, deal with the following: increased stress and anxiety, isolation, lack of access to educational resources, financial stress, and countless other conditions they may have never had to deal with before (Feldman, 2020).

The compounding inequities created by the COVID-19 pandemic dictate education must act to introduce a broad strokes approach to reforming our nation’s grading practices. Widespread reform of grading policy at the secondary level starts with a change in educators understanding of the purpose of grades. Grades should, at their core, communicate a process of
learning and emphasize progress and achievement (O’Conner, 2009). Given the increase in interruptions to student learning and the lack of access to teachers and resources, students cannot be held to the same standards of work production, participation, and engagement as before. Grades should be representative of a fluid process demonstrating an understanding of essential concepts and big understandings over time (Hughes, 2020). Furthermore, the pandemics necessitation of a move to online learning frees educators up to slow curriculum down, allowing them to accentuate important learning goals while simultaneously mitigating the high-stakes stress linked to grades, especially for secondary level students (Hughes, 2020). It may seem odd to cash in on a tragic series of events such as the COVID-19 pandemic, but it may just be the catalyst for change education has been waiting for.

Of course, none of these grading policies garner any merit or school support without a willingness to be flexible and exhibit trial and error (Olsen & Buchanan, 2019). These practices do not come without risk either. In an attempt to develop equitable grading practices educators must be cautious to avoid leniency error, or the phenomenon of teachers tending towards generosity for students, thus negating the accuracy of any student learning achievement data available for collection (Cahapay, 2020). Given education is facing a crisis it has never been presented with before, moving forward accurate data and analysis regarding the success or failure of broadly implementation grading reforms will be vital in evaluating how successful (or not) the shift was.

Conclusion

Current literature confirms despite years of conversations regarding different grading systems and practices, there is no clear answer or agreement about what is most effective or what should be implemented through broad strokes systemic reform. As it exists right now, an
overwhelming majority of school districts around the nation utilize a criterion-referenced grading system, or a system that assigns students a letter grade, usually A through F, which corresponds to certain percentage of the points a student receive in the class (Aviles, 2001). Despite the recognition and acceptance of the criterion-referenced grading system, many criticize it for its propensity to perpetuate inequities resulting from the subjective nature of the system. Critics ream traditional grading systems for being arbitrary due to their utilization of task completion (homework), the mathematically inept 100-point scale, and other non-academic factors (participation, attendance, behavior, etc.) in determining grades (Feldman, 2020; Feldman & Reeves, 2020; Fisher et al., 2011; Hope, 2020; Link, 2018; Olsen & Buchanan, 2019; Randall & Engelhard, 2010; Townsley, 2020). While education has yet to institute any large-scale efforts to combat the shortcomings of traditional, criterion-referenced systems, many advocate for a push towards an SBG system. In SBG, students generally receive grades on a four-point scale measuring only a student’s progression towards a set learning goal or objective, and nothing else (Iamarino, 2014; Spencer, 2012). Proponents of this grading system argue it is inherently more equitable as it seeks to take out the subjectivity riddling other grading models. Conversations regarding a broad policy shift in grading continues to make their way around education’s inner circles with no real momentum gaining traction.

The birth of COVID-19 strikes a blow to the heart of educational practice, and grading was not immune to the carnage. As the pandemic spreads and schooling moves from traditional brick and mortar classrooms to the realm of online learning, educational leaders are tasked with developing and implementing plans for what assessment would look like. The focus of this review of relevant literature is to establish a baseline of knowledge which will help to determine the following:
1. In what ways has COVID-19 and the transition to distance learning influenced teacher perceptions and impacted factors teachers consider when grading at the high school level?

School districts nationwide are adopting variations of the hold harmless or do no harm policies which seek to limit inequities caused by lack of access to resources in the initial days of the pandemic (Castro et al., 2020). As it becomes clear education’s venture into distance learning extends beyond a few short months, conversations are transpiring regarding what grading will look like in the new normal of education (Cahapay, 2020).

The infancy of the COVID-19 pandemic means education has yet to realize just how impacted our nation’s schools will be moving forward in either an online setting or a return to the classroom. The research being conducted on the topic of COVID-19 and its impact on grading is still so young and untested we may not know the lasting impacts the move virtual had on perceptions of grading and the efficacy of different practices for some time. What we do know is despite the pandemic’s added sense of urgency to address the equity issues of grading, dissenting and differing opinions still exist. Still the fact remains, there may be no better time than now to fundamentally examine with seriousness an overhaul of grading systems we know to not be equitable and effective, and replace those systems with something superlative and constructive.
Chapter Three: Methodology

There is little doubt the rise of COVID-19 in the United States has shaken the education system to its core and illuminated many of the glaring inequities in performance which exist between various student groups. Conversations about grades and assessment, which had long been the subject of much impassioned debate, became reinvigorated as school districts around the nation grappled with which policies should be enacted as students and teachers moved away from the classroom into the realm of online learning (Castro, 2020). This transition gave rise to conversations about the inequities and shortcomings of traditional grading systems at the high school level, many of which have been criticized for their non-uniformity, reliance on non-academic factors, and their perceived subjectivity (Guskey, 2013; Knight & Cooper, 2019; Randall & Engelhard, 2010). The COVID-19 pandemic provided an idiosyncratic window of opportunity to reexamine not only the practices teachers utilize in issuing grades, but also what they believe a grade should mean and communicate about a student. With uncertainty still looming, the researcher felt compelled to ask:

1. In what ways has COVID-19 and the transition to distance learning influenced teacher perceptions and impacted factors teachers consider when grading at the high school level?

To answer this research question, a convergent parallel mixed-methods study was designed which incorporated both quantitative and qualitative data components. In order to collect the necessary data needed for this research question, 119 teachers were homogenously sampled to be participants in this research study in May of 2021. This research study was set in a comprehensive high school in Southern California which was home to 2,829 students (California School Dashboard, 2019).
Within the context of the study, each teacher was given a chance to provide feedback related to their grading practices and perceptions before and during COVID-19 using the convergent-parallel mixed methods survey. The survey included both Likert-type quantitative questions, as well as open-ended questions to assist in establishing a narrative (Mertler, 2019). Throughout the research study, step-by-step procedures were followed ranging from the conceptualization of the problem of practice, the mixed-methods study design, and the collection of data. A comprehensive analysis of the study was conducted and interpreted using the lens of the Cultural Proficiency as a theoretical framework. Cultural proficiency is both an individual and systemic model for shifting the culture of a school, and is integral to implement widespread equitable change (Lindsey et al., 2019). This chapter sought to inform the practices and protocols utilized in answering the research question.

**Design**

In careful deliberation of various methodologies, the researcher carried out this study by designing a convergent parallel mixed-methods design in which quantitative and qualitative data was collected simultaneously and given equal prioritization (Gay et al., 2009; Mertler, 2019). In determining which research methodology to utilize, the researcher mulled over the added value of a mixed-methods versus a single method study (McKim, 2017). Although this design method requires additional time to analyze two types of data (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011), it was decided this methodology was appropriate in the context of this research study. The convergent parallel mixed-methods design was selected because a concurrent multivariable analysis of grading practices and perceptions before and during COVID-19 using both qualitative and quantitative data was crucial to answering the study’s research question (Edmonds & Kennedy, 2017). The mixed-methods approach added net value to the study as it allowed the researcher to
compare quick responses to attitudinal Likert-type questions with the respondents answers to narrative-driven, open-ended questions (Mertler, 2019).

Participants

This research study sought the input from 119 teachers at Southern California High School (SCHS), a pseudonym given to a comprehensive high school which serves 2,829 students in the Inland Empire (California School Dashboard, 2019). While not representative of the student body demographic make-up, the certificated staff at this school consists of the following ethnic/racial breakdown: 79.6% white, 17.8% Hispanic, 1.7% Asian, and 0.8% Filipino (California Department of Education, 2019). The teachers at SCHS possessed a range of experience, ranging from one to thirty-three years of tenure in the classroom.

For this study, the researcher utilized a homogenous sampling method. These participants were selected with intention, in large part because each had experience with assessment and grading prior to and during distance learning initiated by the COVID-19 pandemic. The researcher determined each participant was rich with information and possessed the requisite knowledge and experience necessary to help answer the research question (Creswell, 2005; Mertler, 2019). Of note, new teachers at SCHS were not excluded from this study as they all possessed assessment experience through past stints of student teaching and/or internships. Each individual respondent consented to participate in the survey by agreeing to a consent form at the beginning of the research survey. Participants were notified they could skip any question they wished and were free to end the survey at any time throughout the survey.

The mixed-methods survey deployed to the 119 participants was made available via district email for a two-week period. Participants were provided with reminders of the survey closure date at the initiation of the survey, one week into the survey, and the day before it closed.
In total, the researcher collected 37 responses from the 119 selected participants at SCHS. To minimize the risk of a breach of confidentiality, the 37 participant responses were secured on the researcher’s password protected computer. All notes and printed transcripts were kept in a locked file cabinet in the researcher’s home of record. All participant responses were reviewed, analyzed, and destroyed at the conclusion of the study.

**Setting**

This research study was conducted at a comprehensive high school in the Inland Empire in Southern California. This school site, known by the pseudonym Southern California High School (SCHS), is home to 2,829 students and 119 certificated staff. Of the student population, 52.7% are white and 47.3% are students of color (California School Dashboard, 2019). Furthermore, 47.8% of the students at SCHS are socioeconomically (SES) disadvantaged (California School Dashboard, 2019). Overall, the demographics of the certificated teachers at SCHS are by and large not representative of the student population. As of 2019, 79.6% of teachers were white, with 17.8% identifying as Hispanic (California Department of Education). An additional 1.7% of the staff identified as Asian and 0.8% identified as Filipino (California Department of Education, 2019).

This research study aimed to explore the ways in which teachers grading practices and perceptions were altered as a result of distance learning brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic. The study took place over a two-week period in May of the 2021 school year. As one school, SCHS furnished a conducive bounded system environment for the research study (Gay et al., 2009). The certificated teachers participating in the study had experienced grading practices and perceptions of the purpose of grades both before and during COVID-19. The study took place while SCHS was still entrenched in a distance learning model. The findings of the mixed-
methods study provided crucial information for the SCHS staff regarding the ways in which the unprecedented circumstances of COVID-19 altered teachers assessment philosophies and practices.

**Instrument(s)**

The principal researcher for this mixed-methods design dispensed the study by utilizing a Qualtrics survey. The survey employed both qualitative and quantitative instruments designed to indicate the degrees to which teachers grading practices and perceptions were altered by online learning due to COVID-19. The survey began with a series of attitudinal, Likert-type questions contrived to compare the importance of factors teachers considered in grading and assessment both before and during COVID-19 (Mertler, 2019). Teachers completed a matrix table question set which asked them to rank the importance of 12 different grading factor categories, such as homework completion, assessments, access to technology, and support structures (Qualtrics, 2021). This quantitative instrument was effective as it allowed for a comparison of grading practices before and during distance learning which allowed the research to notate any statistically significant changes, see Appendix.

Following the matrix table, the survey continued with a series of three open-ended questions which required participants to complete a narrative response, see Appendix. The inclusion of these questions provided the researcher with integral qualitative data complementary to the quantitative data collected in the matrix tables (Edmonds & Kennedy, 2017). These questions built upon the factor’s teachers considered before and during distance learning and gave the participants a chance to respond to the degrees with which the pandemic had altered their perceptions and philosophies of grading. The open-ended questions aided the data collection processes by presenting an opportunity for participants to individualize their responses
and provide explicit and extended rationale for any changes of alterations in their grading practices or perceptions brought on by COVID-19 (Mertler, 2019). Both the quantitative and qualitative data collected from the matrix table and open-ended questions were collected simultaneously, evaluated separately, and combined to make an interpretation regarding grading practices and perceptions before and during COVID-19 (Mertler, 2019).

**Procedures**

As a convergent parallel mixed methods research design, both quantitative and qualitative data was collected to help answer the research question. The researcher’s positionality, as a teacher at SCHS and an advocate for alternative grading practices and perceptions, had the potential to taint or skew the study by asking biased and/or leading questions based on individual or perceived experiences, or by impacting who responded to the survey and the responses they gave. Triangulation of data was conducted to minimize the influences of such biases.

The study began with a letter of approval between the researcher and the institution the research was to be conducted at. Once approval was granted, the researcher moved forward with a homogenous sampling method used to garner as many participants as possible. The researcher chose this sampling methodology to encapsulate the largest sample size possible for a group of teachers who all had experience grading before and during COVID-19 (Mertler, 2019). A survey was sent out using Qualtrics to 119 certificated teachers at SCHS, which included both Likert-type questions and open-ended questions (Mertler, 2019). The survey was sent by the researcher, a colleague of each participant, via district email. The researcher chose district email as the preferred method of dissemination as it was the most uniformed method of delivery.

The survey itself began with a detailed consent form in which the participants were notified of the reason for the research study, the procedures the study would utilize, the benefits
of the study, and the voluntary nature of the study. Participants were notified a negation of
consent would nullify their participation in the survey. Furthermore, participants were instructed
they could skip any survey question they did not wish to complete. In addition to the
aforementioned content of the consent form, participants were notified of potential risks and
inconveniences of their participation. Each potential risk had an equally measured safeguard to
protect survey participants.

Once the survey was emailed to all 119 participants in the first week of May, 2021, it was
open for two weeks. Reminder emails were sent out after one week and again the day before the
end of the survey to encourage participation from teachers. Upon the close of the survey, the
researcher reviewed the responses from individual participants and began to code the results.

Upon the completion of the two-week survey period, the researcher began to analyze the
quantitative and qualitative data which emerged from the participants responses. As a parallel
convergent mixed-methods research study, both the quantitative and qualitative data were given
equal weight as metrics used to answer the research question. The quantitative data was
evaluated using Qualtrics analytics, while the qualitative data succumbed to an inductive coding
process in which a coding scheme was utilized to report the findings. The results of the
quantitative and qualitative data were used to draw conclusions about teachers grading practices
and perceptions before and during the COVID-19 pandemic in order to look at ways educators
could rectify the compounding achievement gap exacerbated by distance learning.

Analysis

The quantitative and qualitative data from this research study was subjected to manual
coding efforts by the researcher. The qualitative data color coded based on similar words,
themes, and patterns identified in the narrative feedback (Mertler, 2019). This data was perused
using in vivo coding methods, and the researcher reduced narrative data by identifying patterns and similar types of information (Mertler, 2019; Parsons & Brown, 2002). In addition to qualitative data, the researcher also collected quantitative data using Likert-type questions. For the analysis each question was given a variable name and label (Mertler, 2019). Then, each answer choice was assigned a numerical value, using ordinal measures, of one through four (Mertler, 2019). Participants responded by selecting not important (one), somewhat important (two), important (three), or very important (four). The Likert-type questions were then evaluated, assessed, and reported using the following data metrics collected in Qualtrics: mean, standard deviation, and coefficient of variation.

All data collected was examined through the lens of the Cultural Proficiency framework which is designed to “foster policies and practices that provide the opportunity for effective interactions among students, educators, and community members (Lindsey et al., 2019, p. 5). This framework was chosen for this mixed-methods study because it provided the researcher an opportunity to see if barriers to change, such as resistance or a lack of awareness, exist within the context of SCHS (Lindsey et al., 2019). Furthermore, this framework gives the researcher the impetus to compare the state of grading practices and perceptions at SCHS to the five essential elements of Cultural Proficiency, notably managing the dynamics of difference (Lindsey et al., 2019). The analysis of the data collected in this research provided the researcher with an arsenal of information needed to analyze how COVID-19 did or did not influence the equitability and fairness of grading practices at the high school level.

**Conclusion**

As conversations about grading and assessment in the post-COVID-19 world continued to permeate the innermost workings of education throughout the 2020-21 school year, it became
clear myriad research should be conducted to further investigate issues of educational import.

This study sought to find an answer to the following research question:

1. In what ways has COVID-19 and the transition to distance learning influenced teacher perceptions and impacted factors teachers consider when grading at the high school level?

A comprehensive search for a valid answer to the aforementioned question led the researcher to conduct a convergent parallel mixed-methods study which compared quantitative and qualitative data collected at SCHS in the Inland empire over a two-week period. The researcher disseminated a survey to 119 certificated teachers to collect relevant quantitative and qualitative data from the respondents. Upon completion of the data collection, the researcher analyzed the findings of the research project through the lens of Cultural Proficiency (Lindsey et al., 2019). The researcher interpreted the data collected by manually coding the quantitative and qualitative data to identify patterns and values in the feedback. Themes from the data identified by the researcher as (1) factors considered in grading before and during COVID-19, (2) best virtual grading practices, and (3) teacher perceptions of grading before and during the pandemic were assessed, analyzed, interpreted, and discussed in Chapter Four of this research study.
Chapter Four: Data Analysis

A long-established and deeply ingrained practice in the field of education has been the assignment of grades to communicate a student’s performance in their academic courses. Traditionally, these grades have been disseminated to students using criterion-referenced grading, or the common A through F scale used broadly in public education since the 19th century (Aviles, 2001). Despite the storied legacy of criterion-referenced grading, questions continued to emerge as to the efficacy and fairness of these practices. Critics of criterion-referenced grading systems have argued these mechanisms of assessment are arbitrary, consider non-academic factors, and effectively permeate an achievement gap among the nation’s students (Guskey, 2013; Knight & Cooper, 2019; Randall & Engelhard, 2010). The pandemic and the transition to distance learning emboldened the conversations about grading and assessment which had taken place in education for years. Despite education’s best efforts, the equity gap which had been pervasive in America’s schools before COVID-19 only continued to grow.

As the nation fielded questions regarding the impact of COVID-19 and distance learning, many educators continued to wonder if sweeping, systemic reforms to grading and assessment were needed in public education. These conversations led the researcher to ask:

1. In what ways has COVID-19 and the transition to distance learning influenced teacher perceptions and impacted factors teachers consider when grading at the high school level?

To answer this question the researcher executed a convergent parallel mixed-methods study in which both quantitative and qualitative data was collected, analyzed, given equal weight, and used to draw conclusions (Mertler, 2019). In examination of the data, the researcher divided the chapter into three salient themes: (1) factors considered in grading before and during
COVID-19, (2) best virtual grading practices, and (3) teacher perceptions of grading before and during the pandemic. The chapter began with a presentation of the data, which examined factors teachers considered in grading before and during the COVID-19 pandemic, effective grading practices during distance learning, and teacher perceptions of grading before and during COVID-19. After the researcher presented the data, a systemic and iterative review, analysis, and interpretation was provided based on the aforementioned themes and topics. The contents of this chapter sought to highlight and outline the findings of this research study as they related to the research question.

Data Presentation

The research conducted in this study took place over a two-week period at one comprehensive high school in Southern California, henceforth known by the pseudonym Southern California High School (SCHS). In completion of this research study, the researcher collected and analyzed both quantitative and qualitative data using Qualtrics analytics in conjunction with In Vivo coding protocols. Both quantitative and qualitative data were provided equal weight in the researcher’s analysis of the study’s findings. For this study, the researcher deployed a convergent parallel mixed methods study to 119 certificated teachers at SCHS. Of the 119 teachers the study was sent to, the researcher recorded 37 (N=37) total responses, representing a 31% response rate. The following data presentation represents the aggregate findings of this research study.

Factors Teachers Considered in Grading Before and During the COVID-19 Pandemic

The researcher began the survey by utilizing a four-point Likert-type scale which measured the importance teachers placed on the following grading factors: homework completion, formative assessments (checks for understanding, exit tickets, class discussions,
etc.), summative assessments (tests, quizzes, projects, performance tasks, etc.), participation, attendance, behavior, effort, work habits, student background (ethnicity, socioeconomic status, English Learner, Special Education, etc.), parent involvement/family support, access to technology, and non-academic responsibilities (taking care of siblings, working, etc.). Respondents were asked to rank, using a Likert-type scale, the importance they placed on each of these factors individually both before and during the COVID-19 pandemic and the transition to distance learning. The researcher examined the frequency, represented as a percentage, respondents selected each answer option, then tabulated the mean (M), standard deviation (SD), and coefficient of variation (CV) of the responses. Figure 1 and Table 1 outlined the research study’s findings related to the relative importance of homework completion prior to and during the COVID-19 pandemic.

**Figure 1**

*The Importance of Homework Completion Prior To and During COVID-19*

![Bar chart showing the percentage of teachers who indicated homework completion was either not important, somewhat important, important, or very important on the

Figure 1 above compared the percentage of teachers who indicated homework completion was either not important, somewhat important, important, or very important on the
Likert-type scale for their grading practices both prior to and during the COVID-19 pandemic. The researcher found 59.46% of teachers believed homework completion was either not or somewhat important before the COVID-19 pandemic. When comparing these numbers with data collected during the COVID-19 pandemic, only 43.25% of teachers responded the same, leaving 56.75% of teachers to indicate homework completion was either an important or very important factor calculated into their grading during distance learning.

Table 1 further evaluated the data collected regarding the relative importance of homework completion before and during COVID-19. Prior to COVID-19, the survey participants were relatively split in their evaluation of homework as an important factor in their grading system (M=2.43, SD=1.03, CV=0.42). In comparing these figures to the responses collected for the importance of homework collection during the COVID-19 pandemic, the researcher noted minimal change. The respondent’s answers illustrated a slight increase in the importance of homework completion, though this change was not statistically significant (M=2.65, SD=1.02, CV=0.38). The data obtained for the importance of homework completion for teachers at SCHS both before and during COVID-19 indicated the pandemic and the transition to distance learning did not markedly influence the importance of this assessment factor.

Table 1

The Importance of Homework Completion Prior To and During COVID-19

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factor: Homework Completion</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Standard Deviation</th>
<th>Coefficient of Variation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Prior To COVID-19</td>
<td>2.43</td>
<td>1.03</td>
<td>0.42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>During COVID-19</td>
<td>2.65</td>
<td>1.02</td>
<td>0.38</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* N=37 respondents  Min. Value=1.00  Max Value=4.00
Another assessment factor examined in the research study was the importance of formative assessments for the teachers of SCHS before and during the COVID-19 pandemic. Table 2 above noted prior to the move to distance learning an overwhelming percentage of teachers (83.79%) believed formative assessments were either important or very important, while only 16.71% believed they were either not important or somewhat important. Figure 2 below recorded a $M=3.16$ with a $SD=0.82$ and a $CV=0.26$. The higher mean and low coefficient of variation indicated a high level of agreement among teachers at SCHS regarding the importance of formative assessments as an effective and important grading practice prior to the pandemic.

Since COVID-19, the number of teachers who rated formative assessments as either important or very important fell to 63.89%. In-vivo coding measures employed to analyze qualitative data revealed many teachers deployed less, or alternative formative assessments to combat what they perceived to be rampant and widespread cheating. Despite downward changes in the importance of formative assessments as a factor used in grading, the factor remained
considerably important during COVID-19 (M=2.75) with low levels of data dispersion (SD=0.98, CV=0.36).

Table 2

The Importance of Formative Assessments Prior To and During COVID-19

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factor: Formative Assessments</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Standard Deviation</th>
<th>Coefficient of Variation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Prior To COVID-19</td>
<td>3.16</td>
<td>0.82</td>
<td>0.26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>During COVID-19</td>
<td>2.75</td>
<td>0.98</td>
<td>0.36</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. N=37 respondents Min. Value=1.00 Max Value=4.00

Figure 3

The Importance of Summative Assessments Prior To and During COVID-19

The use of summative assessments for teachers at SCHS remained a consistent important factor considered when grading both before and during the COVID-19 pandemic. Figure 3 noted, of the participants (N=37), 70.27% believed summative assessments were very important before the pandemic, while 45.95% responded similarly during the distance learning. Among the 37 participants, only two (5.41%) indicated summative assessments were not important at all before...
the pandemic. While three (8.11%) respondents affirmed the same during COVID-19. Collectively, the data revealed in Table 3 divulged similar importance for summative assessments for teachers at SCHS before distance learning (M=3.51, SD=0.86, CV=0.25) as it did during distance learning (M=3.14, SD=0.96, CV=0.31), indicating a high level of agreeability among teachers.

**Table 3**

*The Importance of Summative Assessments Prior To and During COVID-19*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factor: Summative Assessments</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Standard Deviation</th>
<th>Coefficient of Variation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Prior To COVID-19</td>
<td>3.51</td>
<td>0.86</td>
<td>0.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>During COVID-19</td>
<td>3.14</td>
<td>0.96</td>
<td>0.31</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* N=37 respondents Min. Value=1.00 Max Value=4.00

**Figure 4**

*The Importance of Participation Prior To and During COVID-19*
Figure 4 presented the data collected in relation to the respective importance of participation as an assessment factor considered by teachers at SCHS. Prior to the pandemic, 70.97% of teachers believed participation was either an important or very important component of their grading system, while 29.03% felt it was either not important or somewhat important. Table 4 illustrated a pre-COVID M=3.00, with a SD=1.04 and a CV=0.35.

During the pandemic the number of teachers who responded participation was either important or very important fell to 62.16%, with 37.84% indicating it was either not important or somewhat important. During COVID-19 and distance learning the mean fell slightly, yet the standard deviation and coefficient of variations remained practically unchanged (M=2.86, SD=1.07, CV=0.37). The data indicated while there was a decrease in the emphasis of participation as a grading factor, teachers at SCHS still valued the inclusion of participation as a metric of assessment. Of note, while the qualitative data analyzed indicated a considerable increase in the emphasis on participation for teachers during distance learning, the inability to utilize this as a consideration in teacher’s gradebooks may have skewed the quantitative data.

Table 4

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factor: Participation</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Standard Deviation</th>
<th>Coefficient of Variation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Prior To COVID-19</td>
<td>3.00</td>
<td>1.04</td>
<td>0.35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>During COVID-19</td>
<td>2.86</td>
<td>1.07</td>
<td>0.37</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. N=37 respondents Min. Value=1.00 Max Value=4.00

Figure 5

The Importance of Attendance Prior To and During COVID-19
Like participation, attendance was also a factor of extreme significance for teachers at SCHS. Teachers surveyed mentioned “participation and attendance were key” and “attendance, engagement, and active participation” were critical, especially during distance learning. Figure 5 provided confirmation of the importance of this factor, with 51.35% of teachers responding attendance was very important prior to COVID-19, and another 40.54% stating it was very important during the pandemic. What the researcher found interesting in looking at the data was the increase in respondents who noted attendance was somewhat important during COVID-19. This number increased from 8.11% before to 29.73% during distance learning.

Table 5 again presented data which mirrored the percentage responses of the respondents. Prior to COVID-19 the responses had a M=3.11 with a SD=1.11 and a CV=0.36. During the pandemic the mean dropped slightly (M=2.84), while standard deviation (SD=1.10) and coefficient of variation (CV=0.39) remained essentially identical. These numbers showed a high number of consensus among teachers.

Table 5

*The Importance of Attendance Prior To and During COVID-19*
Figure 6

The Importance of Behavior Prior To and During COVID-19

Figure 6 and Table 6 delved into the relative importance of behavior as a factor considered in the grading systems of teachers at SCHS. What the researcher found is a significant drop in the percentage of teachers who believed behavior was an important consideration in assessing students. In total, the number of teachers who marked behavior as important prior to the pandemic was 45.95%. This percentage fell to 16.67% during COVID-19. Table 6 indicated prior to COVID-19 more importance and agreeability (M=2.76, SD=1.02, CV=0.37) were placed on behavior versus during the pandemic (M=2.14, SD=1.08, CV=0.50).

Table 6
The Importance of Behavior Prior To and During COVID-19

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factor: Behavior</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Standard Deviation</th>
<th>Coefficient of Variation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Prior To COVID-19</td>
<td>2.76</td>
<td>1.02</td>
<td>0.37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>During COVID-19</td>
<td>2.14</td>
<td>1.08</td>
<td>0.50</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note. N=37 respondents Min. Value=1.00 Max Value=4.00*

Figure 7

The Importance of Effort Prior To and During COVID-19

Perhaps one of the most important factors teachers considered in grading before and during the pandemic was student effort. The results of the survey noted teachers took seriously into consideration student effort when assessing them both in person and in distance learning. One teacher responded their grades “now communicate more about effort and basic understanding” than previously. According to the Likert-type responses listed in Figure 7, 75.58% of survey respondents believed effort was either important or very important during the pandemic, while 81.08% believed the same prior to COVID-19. Among the teachers at SCHS
there was broad consensus effort was an important consideration when issuing student grades.
Table 7 presented below showed similar mean’s (M=3.11 before and M=3.16 during) and low levels of variance among teachers (CV=0.26 before and CV=0.36 during).

Table 7

*The Importance of Effort Prior To and During COVID-19*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factor: Effort</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Standard Deviation</th>
<th>Coefficient of Variance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Prior To COVID-19</td>
<td>3.11</td>
<td>0.89</td>
<td>0.26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>During COVID-19</td>
<td>3.16</td>
<td>1.13</td>
<td>0.36</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* N=37 respondents Min. Value=1.00 Max Value=4.00

Figure 8

*The Importance of Work Habits Prior To and During COVID-19*

As a parallel factor to effort, work habits also elicited strong responses of importance from the survey respondents. Teachers at SCHS believed, both before and during the pandemic, student success was inherently linked to variables such as effort, participation, and work completion/habits. Figure 8 illustrated of the participants (N=37), 78.38% responded work habits
were important or very important prior to COVID-19, while 67.57% responded similarly during the pandemic.

The data collected confirms, much like effort and participation, the importance of work habits before and during the COVID-19 pandemic were statistically similar. As one teacher stated, the “effort and desire to complete work have been the most important factors in grading in 2020-21”. The mean, standard deviations, and coefficients of variation presented below in Table 8 substantiates the information stated above, as well as the information found in the qualitative data collected by the researcher in the open-ended survey questions.

Table 8

*The Importance of Work Habits Prior To and During COVID-19*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factor: Work Habits</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Standard Deviation</th>
<th>Coefficient of Variation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Prior To COVID-19</td>
<td>2.97</td>
<td>0.85</td>
<td>0.29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>During COVID-19</td>
<td>2.95</td>
<td>1.06</td>
<td>0.36</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* N=37 respondents  Min. Value=1.00  Max Value=4.00

Figure 9

*The Importance of Student Background Prior To and During COVID-19*
Unlike effort, participation, and work habits, student background seemed to be a less vital factor teachers at SCHS contemplated in their grading systems before the pandemic. Figure 9 noted prior to COVID-19, 59.46% of teachers believed student background was either not important or somewhat important in determining grades (M=2.41, SD=1.10, CV=0.46). These numbers decreased slightly during distance learning with 48.64% of respondents rating student background as not important or somewhat important (M=2.51, SD=1.11, CV=0.44). While not exorbitantly high, the variance in responses for this grading factor were elevated to those of other grading factors indicating less consensus among teachers.

Table 9

The Importance of Student Background Prior To and During COVID-19

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factor: Student Background</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Standard Deviation</th>
<th>Coefficient of Variation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Prior To COVID-19</td>
<td>2.41</td>
<td>1.10</td>
<td>0.46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>During COVID-19</td>
<td>2.51</td>
<td>1.11</td>
<td>0.44</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note. N=37 respondents Min. Value=1.00 Max Value=4.00*
Figure 10 presented the aggregate findings of the survey which show the importance teachers at SCHS placed on parent involvement and family support as a factor they considered when grading. Notably, both before and during COVID-19, a majority of teachers (72.98% before and 59.46% during) indicated they felt parent involvement and family support were either not important or somewhat important. Table 10 elucidated parent involvement and family support. Although more important during COVID-19, teachers at SCHS still believed this factor to be less pivotal both before COVID-19 (M=1.86, SD=0.93, CV=0.5) and during the distance learning model necessitated by COVID-19 (M=2.22, SD=1.04, CV=0.47) than others factors included in the survey.

Table 10

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factor: Parent Involvement/Family Support</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Standard Deviation</th>
<th>Coefficient of Variation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Of all the factors teachers at SCHS considered in response to the researcher’s survey, access to technology encapsulated the most marked change in relevance and consequence. Figure 11 denoted prior to COVID-19, 70.27% of teachers responded access to technology was either a not important or somewhat important consideration when issuing grades ($M=1.89$, $SD=0.95$, $CV=0.50$). Fast forward to the middle of the pandemic and these numbers change drastically. During distance learning, only 10.82 answered similarly, with a resounding 89.18% of respondents asserting access to technology was either important or very important ($M=3.57$, $SD=0.82$, $CV=0.23$). Along with the change in importance, came a change in variance. The coefficient of variation prior to COVID-19 was 0.50, while the coefficient of variation during
was merely 0.23. This indicated a substantial increase in consensus among teachers at SCHS of the importance of access to technology during COVID-19 as opposed to before.

### Table 11

*The Importance of Access to Technology Prior To and During COVID-19*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factor: Access to Technology</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Standard Deviation</th>
<th>Coefficient of Variation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Prior To COVID-19</td>
<td>1.89</td>
<td>0.95</td>
<td>0.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>During COVID-19</td>
<td>3.57</td>
<td>0.82</td>
<td>0.23</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* N=37 respondents Min. Value=1.00 Max Value=4.00

### Figure 12

*The Importance of Non-Academic Responsibilities Prior To and During COVID-19*

The last assessment factor evaluated by teachers at SCHS in the researcher’s survey was the importance of non-academic responsibilities of students, such as the desideratum to work or take care of siblings. Much like access to technology, the researcher found non-academic responsibilities were of significantly less priority in teachers grading practices than during the pandemic. Prior to the pandemic, an overwhelming majority of teachers at SCHS (81.08%)
indicated non-academic responsibilities were either not important or somewhat important (M=1.78, SD=0.81, CV=0.46). In contrast to these numbers, during COVID-19, 56.75% of teachers reported non-academic responsibilities were important or very important considerations when issuing grades (M=2.68, SD=0.99, CV=0.37). As one teacher stated, during the pandemic “I know that many families have leaned heavily on their high school students in the care of their younger siblings”. The inclusion of exigent circumstances, often beyond students control, in teacher’s grading practices during the pandemic was a commonality in the quantitative and qualitative data collected by the researcher.

Table 12

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factor: Non-Academic Responsibilities</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Standard Deviation</th>
<th>Coefficient of Variation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Prior To COVID-19</td>
<td>1.78</td>
<td>0.81</td>
<td>0.46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>During COVID-19</td>
<td>2.68</td>
<td>0.99</td>
<td>0.37</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. N=37 respondents Min. Value=1.00 Max Value=4.00

Effective Grading Practices During Distance Learning

As part of the data collection process for this convergent parallel mixed-methods study, the researcher utilized a series of open-ended questions to collect qualitative data. Specifically, the researcher deployed In Vivo coding protocols to establish patterns and themes in the data. In doing so, several patterns emerged which helped the researcher to answer his research question in conjunction with the quantitative data collected and analyzed. Table 13 below represented the reported most effective grading practices during COVID-19 and distance learning by those who completed the survey.

Table 13
Effective Grading Practices During COVID-19

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Effective Grading Practices</th>
<th>Quote</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Short/Informal Assessments</td>
<td>“These practices were definitely different. . . for instance mini quick checks through mediums like Edpuzzle, Quizlet, and Kahoot. Sometimes a Google Form was used where the timer was set.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Classwork</td>
<td>“Classwork carried more weight for my class during the pandemic as opposed to class activities. Classwork consisted of reading and video notes and concluded with a formative assessment task.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Project-Based Learning</td>
<td>“Project-based assessment has been extremely effective – I can give a project with time in class and outside of class and can use this as an objective measure of understanding”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oral Assessments</td>
<td>“Oral assessments continue to be the most effective measure of student ability. . . students receive a set of 10-12 questions for a unit and can prepare answers. During the assessment 3 of the questions will be selected for students to answer.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Short Writing Responses</td>
<td>“More emphasis on writing short responses and incorporating new vocabulary into writing.”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

When asked “which grading practices have proven to be most effective for you during distance learning? Are these practices different than they were before the pandemic?”, the majority of respondents communicated the following practices garnered them the most success: short/informal assessments, classwork, project-based assessments, oral assessments, and short writing responses. While several respondents noted they utilized similar practices as before the pandemic, a recurring pattern emerged between respondents which indicated an overwhelming shift away from traditional multiple-choice tests and quizzes to assess student learning. Teachers believed distance learning negated any opportunity to uphold the integrity of the assessments they would have given in this format. As a result, teachers found themselves using either extended project-based assessments, or short/informal assessments using mediums like Edpuzzle, Kahoot, and Quizlet.
In addition to changes made in the tangible grading practices by teachers at SCHS, the researcher found a vast majority of respondents were far more flexible with students during distance learning than they were before. More teachers were willing to accept late work, take into consideration student circumstances outside of class, and offer extra credit. As one teacher stated,

Because of the pressure to get students through (during the pandemic considering all of the outside influences such as: family dynamics, mental stress, lack of communication, etc.) I found myself lowering my expectations (not a lot) to manage all of those outside issues that have played a big part in the students’ overall learning process.

The researcher found teachers were far more lenient and willing to work with students by providing flexible due dates, offering re-do’s, and giving more extra credit, as many were experiencing difficulties created by the pandemic, which they had not experienced in years prior.

Teacher Perceptions of Grading Before and During COVID-19

In addition to exploring how grading practices had been impacted by COVID-19, the researcher was also keen to examine how perceptions of the meaning of grades and what they measure had changed. Table 14 below represents the qualitative data themes and patterns which emerged when exploring teacher perceptions of what grades should measure. The frequency is a measurement of how often the pattern presented itself in the data.

Table 14

Teachers Perceptions of What Grades Should Measure

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What Grades Measure</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Student Mastery of Content/Skills</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participation/Effort/Engagement</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work Habits/Work Completion</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Growth and Improvement</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
To explore whether COVID-19 impacted what teachers believed grades should communicate and measure, educators at SCHS were asked the following question:

As teachers our perceptions of grading, the what, how, and why we graded students, was clear to many of us before the pandemic. Since we moved to virtual teaching, how have your perceptions of the purpose of grades changed? In other words what do you believe grades should communicate about a student now vs before distance learning? Please provide at least one example.

In reporting the data, the researcher found there was a substantial split among survey respondents from SCHS in relation to whether their beliefs about what grades communicate about a student changed with distance learning. As stated in Table 14, the majority of teachers still believed grades should measure student progression towards mastery of content and/or academic skills. As one teacher said, “I try to consistently have grading be a reflection of what a student can demonstrate in regards to their understanding and literacy in my content”. Most teachers believed this to be the purpose of grades both before and during COVID-19.

The researcher did find an increase in the number of teachers who believed effort and participation were what grades should measure during distance learning. These teachers found the circumstances created by the pandemic and distance learning meant grades could no longer be reflective of what students learned, but rather the effort they put forth throughout the year. One survey respondent concluded grades should “reflect whether or not a student is putting forth the effort” as “digital learning does not truly assess a student’s ability to comprehend certain standards”. Other important conceptions of what a grade measured during distance learning were work habits, work completion, and areas of growth/improvement.
Data Analysis and Interpretation

The researcher fragmented the data from this research study into three salient themes, *Factors Teachers Considered in Grading Before and During the COVID-19 Pandemic, Effective Grading Practices During Distance Learning, and Teacher Perceptions of Grading Before and During COVID-19*. The data gathered by the researcher for each theme was individually analyzed and interpreted to understand how COVID-19 and the transition to distance learning impacted the grading practices and perceptions of teachers at SCHS, a comprehensive high school in Southern California.

*Factors Teachers Considered in Grading Before and During the COVID-19 Pandemic*

Quantitative data was collected and analyzed using Likert-type questions in Qualtrics to determine what, if any, changes occurred in the factors teachers considered in their grading systems during COVID-19. The survey asked teachers to respond to the importance of 12 individual grading factors before and during distance learning. Respondents rated each response as not important, somewhat important, important, or very important. Each answer selection was given a quantifiable value of one (not important) through four (very important). The results were analyzed and conclusions were drawn based on the participants responses.

The researcher concluded the degree in which a factor was important in a teacher’s grading system before COVID-19 and then during COVID-19 varied largely with the individual factor in question. Undoubtedly, when considering the mean response, the most important factor teachers considered during the COVID-19 pandemic was student access to technology (M=3.57, SD=0.82, CV=0.23). The low coefficient of variation confirms the importance of this factor as there was substantial consensus among the survey respondents. Not surprisingly, this factor registered the largest jump in net importance when compared to before distance learning
Teachers at SCHS contended, based on the survey results, student success was largely conditioned on their ability to connect and engage with their school work with the appropriate technology. This was not a consideration many believed to be important prior to the move to online learning.

Another grading factor teachers considered far more important during the pandemic than before was student non-academic responsibilities, such as work, mental health, or taking care of siblings. Prior to the outbreak of the disease, non-academic responsibilities were statistically of little consequence for teachers at SCHS (M=1.78, SD=0.81, CV=0.46). Once COVID-19 uprooted the system as education knew it, teachers found themselves being more cognizant of the lives their students were living outside of academia as evidenced by their responses to the Likert-type questions (M=2.68, SD=0.99, CV=0.37) and the open-ended questions. The pandemic has compelled students to take on additional responsibilities, help their households financially, and has increased mental health stressors (Feldman, 2020). As one participant mentioned, “I really had to take into consideration my student’s mental health, that, as teens, they were helping younger siblings during the day, and many had jobs as well”. The data also revealed a degree of agreeability between respondent’s during COVID-19 which showcases more teachers agreed non-academic responsibilities were important during the pandemic.

The data revealed the conditions of the pandemic illuminated new considerations teachers at SCHS needed to contend with when issuing grades. A broad examination of traditional grading factors reveled statistically insignificant changes for factors such as homework completion, work habits, formative assessments, and summative assessments when comparing the two time periods. Although these factors possessed varying degrees of importance for teachers, for instance effort was considered more important than homework completion, teachers
did not alter their responses significantly when comparing the relative importance of the factors across the two-time periods.

The triangulation of the extant data found COVID-19 impacted the factors teachers considered which were necessitated by the conditions created by the pandemic. Put simply, factors specific to the distance learning model and the pandemic itself, such as access to technology and non-academic responsibilities, were deemed much more important by teachers. While grading factors which did not warrant as much consideration because of distance learning, such as behavior, fell in importance. Many of the core grading staples like homework completion, formative and summative assessments, and work habits shifted minimally.

Although the findings of this research study were used to draw conclusions regarding the factor’s teachers considered in grading before and during the COVID-19 pandemic, limitations existed which fails to paint the full picture of how grading practices changed as a result of the pandemic. This research study occurred at one comprehensive high school in Southern California and did not consider how grading factors changed at different grade levels, such as elementary and middle school. Furthermore, the research study did not identify differences in the factor’s teachers considered by subject matter or years of experience. Despite the limitations, the quantitative and qualitative data collected from the study points to a poignant shift in the importance of certain grading factors which were inherently linked to the conditions created by distance learning and the pandemic more broadly.

Effective Grading Practices During Distance Learning

In addition to the quantitative data collected in the study, the researcher utilized a series of open-ended questions which sought to reveal the ways in which COVID-19 and distance learning impacted teachers grading practices. A component of this research study was to examine
the degree to which COVID-19 influenced teachers’ perceptions and usage of best assessment practices. The collection of the data from the survey respondents (N=37) revealed teachers believed short/informal assessments, classwork, project-based learning, oral assessments, and short writing responses to be among the most effective grading practices during the pandemic. These results can be viewed in the data presentation section of this chapter under Table 13.

This table displayed the myriad grading practices used by teachers at SCHS. Despite the various mechanisms of grading, the overwhelming conclusion by teachers was grading practices were deployed to help combat the harsh reality of distance learning, which was teacher’s perception the integrity of their assessments and grading practices were threatened by an inability to control a multitude of variables which would make the assessments authentic and genuine. Put simply, teachers believed the data they got from traditional assessments, like multiple choice tests, had been “muddied by the prevalence of cheating”. Teachers concerns regarding student cheating were not without merit. Bilen and Matros explored the prevalence of cheating in non-proctored Advanced Placement tests during the start of the pandemic (2020). They found a surge in the keyword searches for the examination’s topics spiked in correlation with exam times (Bilen & Matros, 2020). The inability of teachers to secure the integrity of their assessments led many teachers at SCHS to alter their grading practices during distance learning.

What the researcher found exceedingly interesting was the variability within teachers’ responses related to their grading practices before and during the COVID-19 pandemic. Of the 37 participants, responses were relatively split between those who altered their best grading practices to meet the unique needs of distance learning, and those who did not. A teacher who did not alter their grading practices stated they “continued to grade the same in distance learning as I did before we went into distance learning. I continued to provide lecture and lecture notes
along with vocabulary words and quizzes and tests”. Teachers who responded with this viewpoint believed students should be held to the same standards whether or not they were in person or not. They believed students should be held accountable for their work regardless of the circumstances of learning.

Not all survey respondents replied with similar responses. Other teachers employed a variety of other grading metrics they felt were necessitated by the conditions of the pandemic. These teachers moved away from multiple choice assessments, and focused heavily on a variety of other practices, such as short, informal assessments, project-based learning, and oral assessments to name a few. The study found these teachers utilized these grading strategies in part, given the climate of distance learning, to have students communicate a semblance of understanding and comprehension. These teachers were looking for grading strategies which “seemed to be the most authentic” means of verifying student knowledge of the concepts.

Despite the variance between teachers who availed themselves of differing grading strategies before and during distance learning, a commonality found in the data was the presence of increased grace and leniency by teachers. Overwhelmingly, teachers at SCHS responded they implemented more generous policies regarding late work, re-takes, and extra credit. Many teachers emphatically affirmed their willingness to allow “students to submit late work past the late work deadlines and excuse some assignments to reduce workloads”. Research has found leniency and the consideration of other non-academic factors has been paramount to reducing inequities since the outbreak of the pandemic (Sawchuk, 2020). While some teachers asserted leniency to be a staple of their grading practices prior to the pandemic, most respondents agreed distance learning amplified the frequency with which they utilized these strategies with students in their classes.
These findings confirm teachers at SCHS altered, with degrees of variability, the factors they considered when grading before the pandemic and during it. While not all teachers implemented a change of practice in grading, those who did, did so to combat the condition’s created by the distance learning environment. Despite the researcher’s best efforts, this study was limited in the sense it only sought responses from one comprehensive high school in Southern California. Further exploration of this topic was needed at more sites in various regions around the United States to determine if any broad strokes changes were made to the factors high school teachers considered in assessment and grading with the onset of COVID-19.

**Teacher Perceptions of Grading Before and During COVID-19**

This research study sought to not only understand how the pandemic impacted the factors teachers considered when grading prior to and during COVID-19, but the degree to which the pandemic altered teachers’ perceptions of what grades mean and should communicate about a student. In conducting this research study, the researcher recorded 37 responses from survey participants. Of the participant responses (N=37), 15 believed grades measure student mastery of content/skills, seven believed participation/effort/engagement, five believed work completion/habits, and two believed growth and improvement (eight survey participants did not respond to this question).

An analysis of the extant data collected in the survey indicated a large majority of teachers did not alter their perceptions of what grades should measure or communicate from before the pandemic to during it. Of the 15 teachers who responded grades should be indicators of student comprehension, all shared the same belief prior to the pandemic. These teachers believed grades should be indicators of achievement only (O’Conner, 2009). Grades as
measurements of compliance, motivation, or behavior did not seem to the principal motivator of a grades meaning according to the data.

What the researcher found interesting in some of the survey respondent’s answers was the discrepancy between some of the qualitative responses to the open-ended questions with their responses to the Likert-Type questions when data was triangulated. For instance, one teacher responded grades are “reflective of what a student knows and can demonstrate”. This teacher also indicated non-academic factors, such as homework completion, participation, effort, behavior, and attendance were import factors they considered in their grading system. This pattern was prevalent in a substantial minority of responses. This indicated teachers had varying degrees of their own perceptions of themselves and the reality of their practices. Overall, the data revealed little change in the overall perceptions of what grades mean for respondents who believed grades should be an indicator of student mastery of content and/or skills. Put simply, when asked to rate the importance of certain grading factors, the respondents answered differently on the scaled answer choices than they did in the open-ended questions.

Where perceptions of what grades measure were different during COVID-19 and distance learning were in the teacher’s views on effort, engagement, and participation. The data from the Likert-type questions revealed 56.76% (M=3.16, SD=1.13, CV=0.36) of respondent’s believed effort was very important during the pandemic, up from 37.84% (M=3.11, SD=0.89, 0.26) prior to COVID-19. Although a greater number of teachers placed an overall value on effort, it was important to note the data was more dispersed and contained higher levels of variance during distance learning than before. Even still, the qualitative data pointed to a net increase in effort, engagement, and participation as qualities perceived as valuable in students by teachers at SCHS. As one teacher responded, “students are in very different situations and effort and trying is of
higher importance than learning the concept”. The qualitative data suggested many teachers at SCHS were more apt to consider effort, engagement, and participation when examining the totality of high school student circumstances. The study confirmed the researcher’s beliefs, insofar as teachers considered students work schedules, responsibilities at home, mental health, etc. when factoring in effort as an important component of a student’s grade. Teachers recognized not all students thrive in a supportive environment which values educational endeavors, and therefore not all environments were conducive to success in an equitable manner (Feldman & Reeves, 2020).

Although the study revealed many teachers’ perceptions of the meaning of grades did not change as a result of COVID-19, it did illustrate a minority of teachers began to consider the roles non-academic responsibilities played in the capacity of students to excel in a distance learning format during the pandemic. As a result, several teachers at SCHS shifted their perceptions of what grades measure to include considerations such as student effort, engagement, and participation. Despite these findings, the study failed to expand beyond the auspices of one high school, and therefore was limited in conveying findings which would have spoken for large swathes of the educational community. Even still, the study provides the impetus to examine how perceptions of grades have changed since the outbreak of COVID-19 at more locations, and to determine the degree in which these perceptions will have substantial longevity among teachers.

Conclusion

The researcher set out to evaluate the degrees in which the impact of COVID-19 and the transition to a distance learning model altered the ways teachers at a comprehensive high school in Southern California graded and assessed their students. A convergent parallel mixed-methods
study was conducted and quantitative and qualitative data was collected, analyzed, and evaluated to draw conclusions using Qualtrics software analytics and In Vivo coding. These protocols were carried out in an effort to answer the following research question:

1. In what ways has COVID-19 and the transition to distance learning influenced teacher perceptions and impacted factors teachers consider when grading at the high school level?

The data from the study revealed the pandemic did influence the perceptions and practices of teachers at SCHS in some areas, while having minimal impact in others.

A comprehensive analysis of the extant data through triangulation uncovered changes in teachers grading practices and perceptions in a multitude of ways. First, the data revealed the importance survey participants placed on grading factors before and during COVID-19 largely fluctuated with the connection of said factor to the conditions created by the pandemic (e.g. access to technology and non-academic responsibilities). Second, the research study concluded teachers offered more, than before COVID-19, leniency and flexibility for students to turn in assignments late, re-do them, or complete extra credit. Lastly, the research study found minimal changes in teacher’s perceptions of what grades should be an indicator of from before the pandemic to during it (of note, the study did showcase a substantial minority of teachers who believed grades in distance learning were representative of student effort, engagement, and participation).

The results of this convergent parallel mixed-methods study contained several implications for the future regarding the direction grading and assessment could shift in America’s public schools. The bigger questions the research study illuminated were, (1) how widespread are these changes and (2) to what degree will they continue once students are back
on campus? The researcher will break down and discuss these implications, further recommendations, and limitations to the study in chapter five.
Chapter Five: Conclusion

In 1852, Massachusetts became the first state to pass compulsory education laws making education available for all elementary-aged kids (Find Law, 2021). Since the inception of this precedent, access to school has become widespread and far reaching for students throughout the United States, and serves as a symbol of the nation’s commitment to and value of education. Yet despite this devotion to concretize admission into education, the outcomes for America’s students remain inequitable, as evidenced by the substantial gaps in achievement between different student groups. These inequities are pervasive across all points of public education, but are particularly penetrating when examining grading and assessment. For as long as there has been compulsory education in the United States, grades and assessments are utilized as metrics which seek to describe the number of benchmarks a student has surpassed in a particular course.

Unfortunately, like most issues in education, the solution needed to solve the widespread inequities, which largely stem from the arbitrariness of what grades in a criterion-referenced system mean, remains a hotly contested topic of conversation (Aviles, 2001, Guskey, 2013; Knight & Cooper, 2019; Randall & Engelhard, 2010). The emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic seeks to reenergize many of the conversations surrounding equitable grading practices which have stagnated in recent years. As such, the pandemic and the transition to distance learning prompts this research to ask:

1. In what ways has COVID-19 and the transition to distance learning influenced teacher perceptions and impacted factors teachers consider when grading at the high school level?
The conditions created by the pandemic illuminate the need for change and give way to an incredible opportunity to potentially enact broad and sweeping changes to the manner in which our nation’s public schools grade and assess students.

To solicit an answer to the aforementioned research question, a convergent parallel mixed-methods study was conducted at Southern California High School, henceforth known by the pseudonym SCHS, over the course of a two-week period in May of 2021. In total, the researcher sent a survey using Qualtrics software to 119 teachers at SCHS to elicit responses to a series of Likert-type scaled questions, as well as three open-ended questions. Once the data was collected, the researcher used Qualtrics analytics to analyze and interpret the quantitative data provided by the survey respondents. Qualitative data collected from the three open-ended survey questions was individually coded using In Vivo protocols and compared to the results of the Likert-type questions to draw conclusions and interpretations.

This chapter seeks to succinctly and poignantly illuminate the culminating findings of this research study. The finding summary will provide a summation of the research study’s results, including what the research finds to be true and any adventitious findings. Along with the finding summary, the researcher will include a finding interpretation, which aims to codify a deeper analysis and interpretation of the study’s pronouncements as they relate to the research question. The study’s results will then be compared and connected to previous research on grading and assessment in the findings in context. The comprehensive product of this study leads the researcher to provide recommendations for educational leaders, teachers, and other stakeholders on ways grading and assessment can become more equitable in public education. While revealing and enlightening, this study is hampered by limitations, which largely stem from the researcher’s positionality and the scope of the project. As such, the researcher will sew up
this study with a pithy conclusion and provide an indication of the future direction of this research as it pertains to its impact on education and our students.

**Finding Summary**

The findings of this convergent parallel mixed-methods case study conducted at SCHS are organized into the following three salient categories (1) factors considered in grading before and during COVID-19, (2) best virtual grading practices, and (3) teacher perceptions of grading before and during the pandemic. An exhaustive analysis of the factor’s teachers find important before and during COVID-19 reveals the biggest impact in grading elements stems from conditions which have been created by the pandemic and the transition to distance learning. For instance, the researcher finds teachers at SCHS placed a substantially higher emphasis on student access to technology and non-academic responsibilities during COVID-19 than they had before. Conversely, factors like behavior, which is not a prevalent concern in online learning environments, goes considerably down in importance. Other factors teachers consider in grading, such as homework completion, formative and summative assessments, etc., remain important in both learning contexts.

Additionally, the researcher finds the practices teachers use to assess and grade students in a distance learning setting differ from those before COVID-19 in a couple of distinct ways. The first important difference is the emphasis teachers at SCHS place on the use of traditional, multiple choice tests and quizzes prior to and during the pandemic. Teachers are far less likely to utilize these types of assessments during COVID-19, citing their fear of cheating and the lack of assessment authenticity. As a result, many teachers at SCHS avail themselves of other means of assessment and grading during distance learning in an attempt to elicit results indicative of various levels of understanding. These common pandemic-era grading practices are cited in
Table 13 and include short/informal assessments, classwork, project-based assessments, oral assessments, and short writing responses. Notably, an adventitious finding of this research study is the minority of teachers who do not alter their grading factors, practices, or perceptions in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. These teachers believe students are to be held to the same standards regardless of the conditions of learning they find themselves in.

This research study also finds teacher perceptions about what a grade means and should communicate about a student remains relatively unchanged from before COVID-19 until now. As denoted in Table 14, 15 of the respondents to the survey give credence to the notion grades are indicators of student mastery of a prescribed learning objective, goal, or skill. As one teacher stated, grades should be “reflective of what a student knows and can demonstrate”. Put simply, the respondents believe grades should be representative of student achievement only (O’Conner, 2009). Although teacher perceptions and beliefs about what grades should measure remain largely unchanged as a result of COVID-19, a significant minority of teachers (N=7) did indicate during distance learning grades become more a referendum on participation, effort, and engagement than any other criteria. Much to the researcher’s surprise, an unanticipated finding of the research study is the number of teachers who prescribe to the dogma of student mastery assessment is disconnected from the individual factors many of these teachers consider in practice. Put simply, many respondents note they believe grades to measure student achievement, yet consider many non-academic factors in computing student grades.

**Finding Interpretation**

This convergent parallel mixed-methods study sets out to determine the extent to which COVID-19 impacts the grading practices and assessment beliefs of teachers at Southern California High School (SCHS). Based on the analysis of available data, the researcher
determines COVID-19 has a noticeable impact on teachers’ assessment practices and philosophies of grading in some facets, while registering little impactful change in others. Put differently, COVID-19 causes teachers, to a certain degree, to change some of their grading practices and preconceived notions about what grades mean, while abstaining from altering others.

Although the majority of factors teachers consider as imperative measures of student success prior to distance learning remain the same, a few notable exceptions stand out. The factors the pandemic impacts to the greatest degree are connected to the recurrent realities’ students face in the wake of such unprecedented circumstances. These findings are predictive, as the researcher anticipates teachers at SCHS will respond to the conditions created by the pandemic. As a result, teacher responses to the survey indicate they find themselves placing more emphasis on non-traditional factors of grading, such as access to technology and non-academic responsibilities. Similarly, these same teachers downgrade the importance of factors they do not interact with because of distance learning, such as behavior.

Interestingly, the researcher finds the number of teachers who did not alter their grading practices and perceptions to be highly non-predictive. A substantial minority of survey respondents indicate they believe the same factors are to be considered before and during COVID-19, and grades should not be measures of anything else as a result of the pandemic. The responses indicate these teachers illustrate significant barriers to change which inhibits their capacity to approach a level of cultural proficiency needed to actuate equitable grading practices for all students (Lindsey et al., 2019). While the researcher draws these conclusions based on available evidence, alternative explanations may exist. Teachers who do not alter their practices may feel monumental shifts in grading and assessment practices may do more to confuse and
distract the students, who are already having their education uprooted, than provide a net positive. These teachers may believe a sense of normality is necessary given the turmoil and uncertainty of COVID-19. It is unclear whether these practices, as noble in intention as they may be, are of value to all students entrenched in pandemic-era learning.

Perhaps the greatest point of discussion in the researcher’s interpretation of the findings lies in the disparities between the quantitative and qualitative data. The greatest disparity interpreted by the researcher is the mismatch in the beliefs of the meaning of grades teachers espouse compared with the practices they adopt. The majority of survey respondents indicate in the qualitative data, both prior to and during COVID-19, grades reflect a student’s mastery of a learning objective or standard. The researcher finds these conclusions interesting as they are in contrast to the quantitative data, which suggests an overwhelming majority of teachers utilize non-academic factors such as behavior, participation, and attendance as mechanisms to assess students during both grading time frames. This disparity illustrates a disconnect between what teachers perceive their pedagogical values to be and the distinct actualities of their applications.

The findings listed above notwithstanding, what is unclear to the researcher is the concerns over the permanence of established changes to grading practices and perceptions. The results of the survey communicate the uncertainty of what the longitudinal implications of the identified changes in grading practice are. In layman’s terms, the researcher does not know, due to a dearth of data available, whether or not teachers at SCHS will continue forward with the changes they effectuate in distance learning. Further evidence is needed to determine if teachers plan on continuing the changes in practice when students return to campus in the Fall of 2021.
Findings in Context

The results of this study are largely agreeable with the literature available on grading during COVID-19. The broader literature, which seeks to investigate grading and assessment over time, aligns with the findings of the study in some areas, while having less agreeability in others. The literature reveals much of traditional grading aligns with what is called criterion-referenced grading, or a grading system which assigns students a designated marker, usually A through F, based on a cumulative total of points a student receives (Aviles, 2001). Critics of these grading systems argue these systems are highly subjective, often placing importance on work completion and non-academic factors such as attendance, behavior, and participation (Guskey & Link, 2018; Knight & Cooper, 2019; Randall & Engelhard, 2010). Since this grading system is the prevailing system in use in public education, it is to be expected teachers at Southern California High School (SCHS) will utilize these metrics. The data from the study reveals survey respondents value the importance of work completion, attendance, participation, effort, etc. both before and during COVID-19.

The problem then becomes the research study’s lack of alignment with the grading systems in use to combat the arbitrariness of criterion-referenced grading, such as systems like Standards Based Grading (SBG). SBG is a system designed to remove the subjective nature of criterion-referenced grading and focuses instead on the acquisition of skills and mastery of learning objectives and goals, rather than whether or not a student completes work or excels in non-academic factors (Iamarino, 2014; Knight & Cooper, 2019; Spencer, 2012). Since the survey respondents overwhelmingly believe work completion and non-academic factors to be valuable grading practices prior to and during the pandemic, there is sufficient evidence to suggest the grading practices at SCHS are not as equitable as they could be. In fact, only one survey
respondent makes mention of SBG as the in-practice grading metric they use to confirm their perception grades should be a communication of what a student is able to master about a topic or skill.

What is interesting about the survey results is the disconnect between practices and perceptions teachers exhibit. For instance, a majority of teachers believe grades are communicators of what students should know and be able to do. Put differently, they report the value of the learning process and convey student progress and achievement as beacons of competency measurement (O’Conner, 2009). Yet, a review of their practices shows consideration for work completion and non-academic factors. Even still, the perceptions teachers exhibit in the survey responses, most notably a belief in grades as barometers of student progression towards a learning goal, objective, or skill is agreeable with existing literature on the topic. For instance, many researchers view grades as conveyors of the process of learning and student growth and advancement towards essential understandings over time (Hughes, 2020). This sentiment is echoed in the responses given by teachers at SCHS, all of which hold these beliefs prior to and during COVID-19. These findings are indicative of no change in teacher perceptions as a result of the pandemic.

The results of the study and the existing literature really converge when referencing the attitudes and sentiments of teachers during distance learning, specifically when discussing the direct conditions the pandemic creates. For instance, the survey reveals teachers in a distance learning model are far more likely to be flexible with students, often accepting late work, moving deadlines, allowing students to re-do work and retake tests, and providing extra credit. Evidence from the study and existing literature suggest flexibility and grace are vital components of teachers grading practices given the unprecedented predicaments COVID-19 causes for students.
In fact, researchers argue grading policies which negate flexibility and trial and error in practice lose their validity, merit, and support when these factors are not present (Olsen & Buchanan, 2019).

Much of this newfound flexibility connects to the myriad hardships the pandemic is placing on students and their families. As the survey results indicate, COVID-19 increases drastically the respondents’ propensity to consider what student’s lives outside the classroom look like more than ever before. Facing loss of income, mental health issues, lack of access to resources, and family tragedy, students are facing burdensome circumstances which they have never experienced, or worse they are undergoing an amplification of preexisting hardships (Feldman, 2020). It is important for teachers, a point confirmed in the literature, to be cognizant of the reality not all students have the same support systems at home (Sawchuk, 2020). The result of the illumination of students’ lives outside of school to a greater degree than ever before means teachers are willing to be increasingly flexible and forgiving to ensure educational equity during these tumultuous times (Castro et al., 2020). While many of the conclusions the researcher notes in the survey are agreeable with existing literature on the topic of grading and assessment, it is still unclear as to what degree of longevity these changes will have in a post-COVID-19 educational context.

**Recommendations**

This research study helps to add to the body of existing research and helps to inform how education can work to close the grading and assessment gaps in a post-COVID-19 world. Since the research on grading during COVID-19 is limited, this study helps to provide the education community with an indication of how high school teachers consider the pandemic in their
grading practices and perceptions. This study, while limited in its score, is an indication of the direction grading and assessment may move as students return to campus.

The results of this convergent parallel mixed-methods study leads the researcher to recommend two salient changes for high school teachers moving forward. The first recommended change is the inclusion of a culturally proficient framework to help move teachers towards cultural competence/proficiency and remove barriers to change which inhibit the implementation of equitable grading practices (Lindsey et al., 2019). The study reveals a hesitation among teachers to commit to a pedagogical change of assessment practice which stems largely from a resistance or lack of awareness of the need to change (Lindsey et al., 2019). It is therefore recommended teachers engage in transformative collaborative inquiry with their colleagues and other stakeholders to learn, share experiences, and grow as educators (Donohoo & Velasco, 2016). Engaging in this process will help illuminate the positive impact cultural proficiency can have on the educational performance of all students, but especially those who have historical marginalization and inequity.

The second recommendation the researcher suggests is the implementation of Standards-Based Grading (SBG) as the uniform method of grading in practice. Standards-Based grading seeks to remove the arbitrary nuances from grading, instead focusing on student demonstration of mastery of standards and/or academic skills (Knight & Cooper, 2019). This grading system aligns well with what teachers expressed as the vital meaning of grades in the study. However, since the research reveals a disconnect between teachers’ perceived perceptions of what grades mean and their practices, the development of Professional Development Communities (PLC’s) should be adopted by schools to provide effective training and integration of these SBG practices. PLC’s are an appropriate delivery mechanism as they are proven environments which
support collaboration and innovation among teachers (Brown et al., 2018). The proper implementation of SBG will move teachers away from subjective assignment of grades to an objective and measurable standard (Iamarino, 2014; Knight & Cooper, 2019; Spencer, 2012).

Limitations

This mixed-methods study highlights, through extensive analysis, a detailed comparison of grading practices and perceptions before and during the COVID-19 pandemic. Though the results of the study have undergone exhaustive analysis, limitations exist. The primary limitation of this study is its isolation to one comprehensive high school in Southern California. To mediate this limitation, additional research of multiple schools and age levels is necessary to evaluate how grading factors, practices, and perceptions change from before the pandemic to now.

Additionally, the researcher’s positionality is a limitation to the study. The researcher is a colleague of the survey respondents, as well as an advocate of equitable grading practices. This positionality has the potential to influence the questions the researcher asks and skew the responses teachers’ give. Fortunately, there is no evidence the researcher’s positionality impacts the validity of the survey results.

Conclusion & Future Direction

The evidence a large, systemic change needs to occur in the way public education grades and assesses students is clear. The need for revision was clear before the pandemic and is ever more apparent now. This research study begins and ends with an exuberant curiosity regarding COVID-19’s propensity to be an inadvertent vessel of friction, which provides the tools to electrify the conversations surrounding education needing to fundamentally alter the structures and systems we use when grading. This opportunity leads the researcher to ask:
1. In what ways has COVID-19 and the transition to distance learning influenced teacher perceptions and impacted factors teachers consider when grading at the high school level?

While limited in scope due to the inclusion of one school which the researcher is an employee of, this research study provides a glimpse into the ways the pandemic and the transition to distance learning can change teachers’ perception of what grades mean and should communicate and the factors they use to compute those grades.

The study reveals the biggest changes teachers’ note in their grading practices from prior to COVID-19 to now is the consideration of factors influenced directly by the pandemic, such as the need for students to have access to technology, being accountable for non-academic responsibilities, and changing assessment strategies to ensure they are authentic measures of determining what a student knows. The data reveals these to be the factors which experience the biggest changes when teachers engage with a distance learning model. Of note, it is unclear what the longevity of these changes is, and if they will continue as students return to campus. Despite this change, survey respondent’s note their perceptions of what a grade should indicate about a student remains largely unmoved. The majority of teachers believe a grade should be a metric of what a student achieves in relation to a prescribed learning goal, objective or skill.

Interestingly, the researcher finds the survey respondent’s answers for the quantitative and qualitative questions to be in conflict at times. For instance, as referenced above, the majority of teachers believe a grade should measure student advancement towards a standard, yet many respondents still affirm they consider subjective factors, such as participation, attendance, effort, and homework completion to be of significant importance both before and during
COVID-19. These findings are non-predicted and illustrate a disconnect between the respondents’ perceptions of their grading and their practices in reality.

Despite the inconsistencies the researcher references above, elements of the studies findings support much of the existing literature on the topic. For instance, the researcher finds teachers’ willingness to be more flexible during distance learning is agreeable with the idea grading policies garner less support and lack merit in the COVID-19 context when assessment practices are too rigid (Olsen & Buchanan, 2019). Furthermore, the prodigious toll the COVID-19 pandemic continues to take on students, many of whom struggle with the loss of loved ones, financial uncertainty, mental health issues, and isolation, leads many respondents to consider the lives students live outside of the classroom (Feldman, 2020). Again, questions still remain as to the longevity of these changes at Southern California High School (SCHS).

Moving forward this research study imparts ample opportunity for change and expansion. At SCHS, the researcher recommends teachers receive training in cultural proficiency to remove barriers to change which still exist among some teachers (Lindsey et al., 2019). This training, which is built on the pillars of transformative collaborative inquiry, seeks to inform teachers’ beliefs about educational and cultural equity in hopes of shrinking the achievement gap. In practice, this occurs with the adoption of Standards Based Grading (SBG), which aims to remove any grading factor which makes a grade subjective to the whims of a teacher’s discretion (Iamarino, 2014; Knight & Cooper, 2019; Spencer, 2012). This transition, which will be carried out through the implementation of Professional Learning Communities (PLC’s), mirrors the assessment philosophies expressed by the majority of survey respondents.

Although this research study provides a sliver of insight into how the pandemic impacts teachers’ grading practices and perceptions, more can be done. This study should be expanded
beyond the scope of one comprehensive high school and should include a surveying of teachers at the elementary and middle school levels. This expansion gives the researcher, and the field of education more broadly, an opportunity to chronicle the differences in grading before and during COVID-19 across a multitude of academic levels. This expansion adds to the knowledge base and expands the wealth of knowledge applicable to the research topic. The extension of this research to include more teachers at differing levels inscribes and codifies in the literature a more tenable model of research for others to repeat in different capacities.

While more research and documentation are needed to ascribe any lasting changes in grading practice and philosophy to the COVID-19 pandemic, this research provides a start. As educators, it is critical there is reflection and critical thinking regarding the ways in which we emerge out of the ashes of tragedy with a renewed dedication to equitable academic practices. Educators must ask what they wish their legacy and impact on students to be. If this pandemic teaches us anything, it is that tragedy, devasting as it is, can provide the impetus for our systems of power to build anew and build better. As Desmond Tutu so eloquently writes, “hope is being able to see that there is light despite all the darkness”. Perhaps the opportunities the COVID-19 pandemic gives us to change will be the light which comes from the darkness.
References


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Spencer, K. (2012) Standards-based grading. The Education Digest, 78(3), 4-10


Appendix

Survey Questions
- Consent form - need an affirmative response to move forward with the survey.
- PRIOR to the COVID-19 pandemic and the move to distance learning, please rate the importance the following factors had in your grading system:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factor</th>
<th>Not Important</th>
<th>Somewhat Important</th>
<th>Important</th>
<th>Very Important</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Homework Completion</td>
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<tr>
<td>Formative Assessments (checks for understanding, exit tickets, class discussions, etc.)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Summative Assessments (tests, quizzes, projects, performance tasks, etc.)</td>
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<td>Participation</td>
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<td>Behavior</td>
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<td>Work Habits</td>
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<td>Student Background (taking into consideration ethnicity, socioeconomic status, EL, IEP, etc.)</td>
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<td>Parent Involvement/Family Support</td>
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<td>Access to Technology</td>
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<td>Non-Academic Responsibilities (taking care of siblings, working, etc.)</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
- **DURING the COVID-19 pandemic and the move to distance learning**, please rate the importance the following factors had in your grading system:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factor</th>
<th>Not Important</th>
<th>Somewhat Important</th>
<th>Important</th>
<th>Very Important</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Homework Completion</td>
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<tr>
<td>Formative Assessments (checks for understanding, exit tickets, class discussions, etc.)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Summative Assessments (tests, quizzes, projects, performance tasks, etc.)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Participation</td>
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<tr>
<td>Attendance</td>
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<tr>
<td>Behavior</td>
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<tr>
<td>Effort</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Work Habits</td>
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<tr>
<td>Student Background (taking into consideration ethnicity, socioeconomic status, EL, IEP, etc.)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Parent Involvement/Family Support</td>
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<tr>
<td>Access to Technology</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Non-Academic Responsibilities (taking care of siblings, working, etc.)</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

- As teachers our perceptions of grading, the what, how, and why we graded students, was clear to many of us before the pandemic. Since we moved to virtual teaching, how have your perceptions of the purpose of grades changed? In other words what do you believe grades should communicate about a student now vs before distance learning? Please provide at least one example.
- Which grading practices have proven to be most effective for you during distance learning? Are these practices different than they were before the pandemic? Please provide at least one example.
What other factors do you consider when issuing grades that are not listed in the aforementioned questions? Those factors include: homework completion, formative assessments, summative assessments, participation, attendance, behavior, effort, work habits, student background (ethnicity, socioeconomic status, etc.), parent involvement/family support, access to technology, non-academic responsibilities (taking care of siblings, working, etc.).