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Continuation Teachers' Perceptions of Grading Practices

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CONTINUATION TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS OF GRADING PRACTICES:
A QUALITATIVE STUDY

By

Tobi Page

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In Partial Fulfillment of the
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2023

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A QUALITATIVE STUDY

By

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CONTINUATION TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS OF GRADING PRACTICES:
A QUALITATIVE STUDY

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By

Tobi Page

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This dissertation is dedicated to the many alternative education teachers and support staff who teach, mentor, and advocate for the students the other schools could not reach. Thank you!

First, giving honor to God. Without His grace, I could not have completed this journey. The conclusion of my doctoral journey is an answered prayer.

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CONTINUATION TEACHERS' PRACTICES AND PERCEPTIONS ON GRADING

Abstract

By Tobi Page

University of the Pacific
2023

The history of grading practices is riddled with inequities, dating to the inception of the traditional grading system, which was designed to rank and sort. Despite expanding public education to include all members of society, traditional grading practices have yet to evolve in response to the growing demand for equitable and student-centered grading practices. Many alternative education schools have a non-traditional grading structure in response to the students' learning needs. With an understanding of the history and challenges of alternative education settings, this study sought to add the perceptions and practices of continuation high school teachers to the current body of research to help researchers and educators understand and expand equitable grading practices for students in continuation high schools.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgments.....	4
List of Tables	10
List of Figures	11
Chapter One: Introduction	12
Background	12
Evolution of Alternative Education	12
Current Alternative Education Structure and Community.....	13
Grading	14
Grading in Alternative Education	15
Statement of the Problem.....	15
Research Questions.....	16
Significance of the Study	17
Theoretical Framework: Culturally Relevant Pedagogy.....	17
Academic Achievement and Student Learning.....	19
Cultural Competence	19
Sociopolitical/Critical Consciousness.....	19
Researcher Perspective/Positionality	20
Delimitations.....	20
Chapter Summary	21
Chapter Two: Review of the Literature	22
Alternative Education	22
History and Structure of Alternative Education Schools.....	22
Alternative Education Traits and Structure.....	25

	7
Alternative Education Students and Demographics	26
Alternative Education Teachers and Staff	30
Grading Practices	31
History of Grading	31
Impact on Students.....	33
Equitable Grading and Standards-Based Grading	36
Moral Aspects of Grading: Alternative Education Grading	39
Chapter Summary	43
Chapter Three: Methodology	44
Introduction.....	44
Approach.....	44
Methodology: Qualitative Research	45
Methods.....	46
Pre-Survey.....	46
Interviews.....	47
Participants.....	48
Data Collection and Data Analysis	49
Trustworthiness, Validity, and Reliability	50
Limitations	50
Chapter Summary	51
Chapter Four: Findings	52
Introduction/Purpose of the Study	52
Research Questions	53
Qualitative Interview: Characteristics of Teachers and Sites	53
Findings.....	54

	8
Continuation Teachers' Grading Practices: Use of Variable Credit	54
Continuation Teachers' Grading Practices: Use of Letter Grades	58
Lack of Training and Guidance	62
Effects of the Pandemic	67
Continuation Teachers' Perceptions of Grades.....	70
Chapter Summary	73
Chapter Five: Conclusion.....	75
Summary of the Study	75
Purpose and Research Questions	75
Research Question 1	76
Research Question 2	80
Research Question 3	82
Methodology	83
Correlation to the Literature.....	84
Limitations	88
Implications for Practice	88
Professional Development and Training.....	89
Recommendation for Practice.....	90
Professional Learning for Educators to Modernize Grading Practices.....	90
Learn the Practice and Benefits of Culturally Responsive Pedagogy.....	91
Partnership for Professional Learning on Effective Grading.....	91
Maintain a Focus on Learning	91
A Unified Approach to Grading to Measure Academic Grades and Variable Credits	92
Teachers Should Use a Variety of Assessments	92

	9
Participate in Professional Learning Communities.....	92
Future Research	93
Conclusion	93
References.....	95
Appendices	
A. Recruitment Email	101
B. Pre-Survey Google Form	102
C. Participant Interview Questions	107
D. Research Subjects Consent to Participate in Research	109

LIST OF TABLES

Table

1. California Continuation School Enrollment Totals by Ethnicity 2020–21.....	28
2. California Traditional High School Enrollment Totals by Ethnicity 2020–21.....	29
3. Participants.....	49
4. Variable Credit Practice.....	55
5. Top Criteria When Calculating Credits	56
6. Criteria for Letter Grades.....	59
7. Participants’ Shared Equitable Grading Practices	69
8. Teachers’ Values.....	81

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure

1. Revised Framework	87
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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Alternative education schools, which differ according to the theme and structure, serve as a safety net for a small population of students who benefit from a different learning environment. This study focused on credit-recovery schools (continuation schools), which offer a personalized learning environment with a real-world curriculum to help students graduate on time with their peers (Deloach, 2016). Often located in urban areas, these schools have a disproportionately African American and Latinx, male (Williamson, 2008), and lower-socioeconomic-status student population. As we better understand these small schools, this research examined their grading practices from the teachers' perspectives, as these differ in response to students' needs. As the education community seeks to understand and implement equitable grading, alternative school educators' practices and perspectives must be added to the conversation to expand equitable outcomes for all students.

Background

Evolution of Alternative Education

The first alternative education school opened in California in 1919 to provide a different learning environment for students who needed something outside of traditional schools (Williamson, 2008). To gain a better understanding of the current conditions and perceptions of how alternative education campuses came into existence, a brief review of the history will reveal several key trends. The first continuation schools were opened to ensure working youth had access to an education. Consequently, the focus was vocational education. With the Great Depression, the American workforce, combined with compulsory attendance laws and increased demand for a high school diploma, shifted the focus. Compulsory laws required school

attendance, and educators grappled with finding solutions for resistant students. The focus shifted to reform efforts, and continuation schools adopted small class sizes and a curriculum aimed at correcting the perceived inadequacies of “maladjusted youth” (Kelly, 1993, p. 35). The Civil Rights Era was an awakening for America, and disenfranchised communities were empowered to seek opportunity. This included schools, and alternative education and the small schools movement were innovative spaces to create schools that met the needs of the marginalized. In 1965, the Johnson Administration changed the funding structure of American education with the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, which provided Title I funding for public schools. With a focus on providing equitable solutions, this new funding stream financed literacy and special programs for lower socioeconomic American families (Zascavage, 2013). The Reagan era ushered in school accountability, including graduation rates (Baptiste et al., 2005). With this shift in education, small schools became a permanent solution to decrease dropout rates. These movements created various campuses throughout the United States.

Since their inception, these small schools have evolved to serve a significant portion of the high school population, including a disproportionate number of African Americans, Latinxs, males, and students of lower socioeconomic status (Ruiz De Velasco et al., 2008). The early alternative schools were learning communities to help Eastern European students assimilate into middle-class American culture (Kelly, 1993). This trend remains, and California schools have a disproportionate number of students of color, particularly Latinx students.

Current Alternative Education Structure and Community

“Alternative,” meaning different, is a phrase that encompasses a variety of schools. To provide order to the various schools, one would only have to look at the student population and the goal behind the service provided to students. In 1994, Raywid identified three common

structures of alternative learning communities: magnets and thematic campuses seeking a specialized curriculum, last chance or behavior modification, and remediation schools.

Remediation schools provide social-emotional remediation, but the focus is usually on academics and credit recovery to serve as dropout prevention. This study focused on continuation schools, which are academic remediation schools aimed at preventing dropouts (Raywid, 1994).

In addition to being small schools, alternative education communities are noted for an abundance of care and healthy relationships among students and staff. Like the students, a portion of alternative educators seeks out these small schools due to a desire to make an impact and not remain in a non-responsive system that is failing youth (McGee & Lin, 2017). Despite the increase in small schools, there is little research on the experiences and perceptions of alternative education teachers.

Grading

Despite the field of education's evolution alongside school culture and instructional changes, grading practices remain largely stagnant. Today, most schools use a letter grading system, which was historically designed to sort individuals for placement in higher education and employment and fashioned on the beliefs of the bell curve theory (Feldman, 2019b). The behaviorist theory was popular but did not acknowledge intrinsic motivation and held firmly to the belief that extrinsic motivation can shape behavior. Consequently, it is a commonly held belief that grades are a tool for socializing youth (Feldman, 2019b). Traditional grading systems explicitly reinforce Eurocentric middle-class values and the behaviors required for employment. Teacher education programs seldom address decision making on grading, and schoolwide grading policies are vague and left wholly to the classroom instructor (Link, n-d). Due to the

lack of norms, grading practices within the same institution can vary, and students' grades largely reflect teachers' beliefs and value systems (Feldman, 2019a).

Grading in Alternative Education

Similar to the schools' unique structure, many alternative education schools have a unique grading system that differs from traditional secondary schools. Alternative education schools commonly chart the completion of academic coursework. Researchers have noted the dominant emphasis on credit completion versus quality of work and academic grades (Kelly, 1993). Variable credits were designed to meet the needs of a student population with rolling enrollment and struggles with daily attendance. Providing credit for work earned prevents the instructor from averaging the sum of work collected and issuing a failing grade. Whereas this system is responsive, it leaves the researcher questioning the value placed on rigor and learning (Powell, 2020). Before alternative education schools can determine if the grading system is equitable, commonalities and themes need to be identified through a random sample of alternative education school sites.

Statement of the Problem

A student's transcript is the final cumulative record of grades that significantly affects that student's future, as it is used to determine academic fitness for college and university programs, employment opportunities, and access to special programs (Resh, 2010). Additionally, on a local level, grades should serve as an indicator of whether the student understood course objectives. Given the impact on the student and learning and despite the wealth of research, current methods do not align with research. Teachers care about their students' success and design their grading practices to produce the best outcomes for them (McMillan, 2019). This study aimed to share the teachers' perspectives to better understand

grading practices. As schools implement equitable systems, grading is being re-examined to minimize inequitable outcomes for students. Given the variation in methods, additional research is needed to understand how alternative education teachers approach grading. How does the alternative education community respond? The study aimed to increase understanding of grading practices and teacher perceptions in continuation schools. The duality of both practices and perceptions is best captured by McMillan (2019):

The term *grading practices* refers to the ways teachers use information from assessments and other sources of information to determine and report student grades. The term *teacher perception* denotes the range of teacher thinking about grading and grading practices. Perceptions can include beliefs, attitudes, and understandings- Because perceptions are more elusive than practices, are more difficult to document. However, recent research shows why these perceptions are important for understanding grading practices. (p. 85).

Research Questions

This research aimed to understand the grading practices in alternative education schools (continuation high schools) by understanding the teachers' perspectives. This study addressed three research questions:

1. One of the primary objectives of continuation high schools is credit recovery and dropout prevention. Given the purpose of these small schools, what are the common grading practices?
2. What are continuation schoolteachers' perceptions of grading practices?
3. Are continuation schoolteachers' grading practices reflective of the current guidance on equitable grading?

Significance of the Study

The study informs researchers and educators of continuation high schools' various instructional program structures and grading practices. Alternative education teachers' perspectives and voices add to the discussion on grading and equitable outcomes for all students. A better understanding will help educators design and apply professional development to ensure students benefit from equitable grading systems.

Theoretical Framework: Culturally Relevant Pedagogy

Feldman (2019a) stated that we cannot address grading without having an equity lens. "The Grading for Equity Initiative that I lead critically examines the legacy of traditional grading and considers how teachers can reduce bias in grading and promote educational success, particularly for students who have historically been underserved" (Feldman, 2019a, para.2). Historically, grading practices were designed to sort students and maintain a power structure and unequal distribution of resources (Smith & Smith, 2019). The structure was created when not all young people had access to education. There was no common belief that all students could and should learn and have access to post-secondary learning institutions and high-skilled career opportunities. Culturally relevant pedagogy provides a teaching framework that acknowledges and affirms students' backgrounds and cultures, with intentional inclusion in the curriculum and classroom instruction. Culturally relevant educators know their positionality and biases and how their perspectives influence their practice (Feldman, 2019b). With awareness and self-reflection, culturally responsive educators ensure the students' lived experiences and cultures are validated in the classroom and curriculum. Their efforts help create a nurturing and empowering school culture for all students.

The roots of culturally relevant pedagogy can be traced to Pablo Freire's (1970) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, which has been credited as the foundational text for the culturally relevant pedagogy framework. Having encountered hardship, Freire advocated for the oppressed. Freire brought to the forefront of education the influence of power, oppression, and solutions for healing. Teachers serve as facilitators of learning rather than experts, empowering and perceiving students as equals. Students are encouraged to think critically and engage in dialogue. The classroom community reflects students' home cultures and identities.

Given the influence on students' ability to access resources in the learning environment and its impact on post-secondary career and college opportunities, the researcher's perception is that grading is a critical component of fostering a learning community that uplifts versus diminishing. Grading practices were examined through a culturally relevant pedagogy framework to determine if students' grades serve as a tool to empower them and inform learning. In addition, this study analyzed whether the grading systems reflect the teacher's beliefs about learning and the responsiveness of the grading system to the needs of alternative education students.

Ladson-Billings (2021) defined culturally responsive pedagogy as a pedagogy that empowers students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically by using cultural references to impart knowledge, skills, and attitudes. These referents are not merely vehicles for explaining the dominant culture; they are aspects of the curriculum in their own right. (p. 3)

This definition is expanded with three primary characteristics shared by educators practicing culturally relevant pedagogy: "academic achievement or student learning, cultural competence, and sociopolitical or critical consciousness" (p. 4). As it relates to this study and grading, the

researcher used the following criteria to determine if culturally responsive pedagogy is present in teachers' grading practices.

Academic Achievement and Student Learning

According to Ladson-Billings (2021), the culturally responsive instructor is focused on student learning. Ladson-Billings defined student learning as “an opportunity to determine how much actual growth has occurred from the time a student enters a classroom in the fall until that student leaves in the spring” (p. 4). Consequently, student progress is not defined by the results of standardized exams and traditional definitions of academic achievement. Given the focus on learning, a culturally responsive instructor will use grades and assessments to understand and measure student learning.

Cultural Competence

The culturally responsive educator is well versed in the culture and lifestyles of their students. Using this framework, grading practices should reflect students' learning needs; therefore, the instructor is mindful of not hindering student success, such as with harmful homework policies. The instructor understands implicit bias reflects the influence of their background and personal values and is mindful when creating grading policies that require interpreting student motivation and behavior.

Sociopolitical/Critical Consciousness

Sociopolitical/critical consciousness is defined as “the essence of education in a democratic society. If our students cannot apply, analyze, synthesize, and critique their environment and the problems they encounter, they will not be prepared to be effective members of society” (p. 7). Research has identified grading as a social justice issue as “perception of grading practices as fair or unfair, may contribute to the shaping of students' world view and the

‘social map’ they construct in their mind” (Resh, 2010, p. 315). The study also revealed that students of lower socioeconomic status were more likely to accept lower marks without question, whereas middle-income students felt more empowered to question their grades. For this study, the researcher gained an understanding of the messages teachers send through grading.

Researcher Perspective/Positionality

The researcher is a principal in a continuation school in California. Her career started in 1998; at the time of this dissertation, she is an experienced educator with 25 years of experience. During her career, her roles include secondary (continuation, high school, and middle school) English teacher, school counselor, student support specialist, vice-principal, and principal. She has worked in numerous school settings, including two middle schools, three comprehensive high schools, and five alternative education schools in primarily urban areas. Her extensive experience in various roles in alternative education settings provides a unique lens, given that the researcher is a member of this unique community of educators and understands the nuanced approach to supporting students in a small alternative environment.

Delimitations

Alternative education is a small subset of schools; however, there are numerous structures and models. This study focused on alternative education schools designed for credit remediation (continuation high schools), which serve students primarily referred to them due to a deficiency of credits as a means of dropout prevention. Despite the variety of alternative learning environments, the study did not provide an overview of all alternative education schools.

Schooling has returned to in-person learning, but students and educators are exhausted and traumatized by the COVID-19 pandemic, which shapes the conversation. Due to perceived

learning loss, there is a strong focus on credit remediation. In addition, the pandemic and its residual effects are ongoing and significantly affect students and schools.

Kim and Taylor (2008) explored the role of alternative education schools to “serve merely as a tool to reproduce the ideologies of the dominant social groups and the hierarchy of the class structure rather than promote social change, equality, and equity” (para. 49). As we examine the study’s outcomes, we will revisit the question posed during this study which seeks to determine if alternative education schools reinforce or interrupt educational inequities. Findings will inform researchers and practitioners of grading methods that are congruent with culturally responsive practices and areas of growth and possible reform.

Chapter Summary

By providing alternative education teachers with a platform to contribute their voices to the body of research, readers will understand the history of alternative education schools in Chapter 2. As history unfolds, the reader will better understand how alternative education schools evolved to their current state. With a thorough understanding of alternative learning communities, the existing structure will be reviewed to gain insight into the grading practices and teachers’ beliefs that currently impact students. The researcher utilized a lens of equity (culturally relevant pedagogy), which acknowledges students’ cultures and experiences, recognizes the whole student who is reflected in the school culture and customs, calls on educators to reflect on their backgrounds to identify possible areas of bias, and places value on all students.

CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

On the margins of public education are a small number of alternative education schools. Since the founding of the first of these in 1911 (Williamson, 2008), these small learning communities have functioned as a solution for students who require an alternative to the traditional school. These students' needs vary, but the quest to offer a responsive solution is the tie that binds alternative education campuses. Educators' responses to those needs differ, creating a vast difference among these learning communities. This literature review will provide an overview of the current structure of alternative education and the students they serve, with a particular emphasis on continuation schools. To better understand alternative education, the review will share the historical evolution of alternative education, which will increase the understanding of the current structure, themes, students, and staff of the modern-day alternative education school. Assigning grades performs a significant function in the evaluation of student learning. An overview of the history of grading practices, including problematic ones, equitable solutions, and their impact on students will be covered to frame this research.

Alternative Education

History and Structure of Alternative Education Schools

Alternative education schools have evolved over many decades in response to current trends and student needs. Despite the passage of time, the influence of these periods is evident in modern alternative education learning communities.

Vocation Period, 1931–1944

California opened the first continuation school in 1919, following the Smith-Hughes Vocational Education Act by the Woodrow Wilson Administration in 1917. The legislation

required federal funding to maintain part-time schools for young people aged 14 to 18 (Williamson, 2008). It was even suggested to place continuation schools in factories, enabling young people to attend school, train, and educate young workers (Kelly, 1993).

Adjustment Period, 1945–1965

In 1929, California passed an anti-loafing law, which prevented youth from competing with adult males for employment in the rapidly diminishing job market (Williamson, 2008). Due to compulsory education, the number of young people struggling with personal and academic challenges was more pronounced. In addition, employers increasingly required a high school diploma for skilled trades jobs. In response, the focus on vocational education was replaced with traditional academic subjects (Kelly, 1993). The result of this period was adjustment education, which shifted the focus from working youth to juvenile delinquency. Schools aimed to provide treatment or redirection for maladjusted youth who struggled in the traditional learning environment. Due to these students' high needs, the school maintained small class sizes. In 1965, California passed a law mandating the transfer of young people who exceeded 10 days of suspension to a continuation school (John, 1968; Kelly, 1993). Some continuation schools were re-named “adjustment education” and partnered with the California Youth Authority.

Dropout Recovery and Innovation Period, 1965–Present

The Civil Rights Movement created an awareness of inequality and a push for systemic reform. Small schools were introduced in response to a growing concern about meeting marginalized learners' needs. The movement started with Freedom Schools, located in storefronts and church basements, to provide African American students with an equitable education free from the distraction of discrimination and bigotry. The visionaries of Freedom Schools called out the disparity in school funding for Black students and noted the lack of

rigorous instruction. The Mississippi Freedom Schools, which defied the conventional and created small schools designed for disenfranchised learners, set the tone for the first Freedom Schools in America. With students and community as the focus, Freedom Schools rejected the traditional structure of rules, lack of student choice, and traditional grading(Ayers, 2000).

The notion that students need choice within public schools was born out of the small school movement of the 1960s. The 1970s formally established the small schools movement, which catalyzed creating and expanding charter, magnet, and alternative education schools. Small theme-based schools increased and became a permanent fixture in public education. Following the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) passed in 1965 under the Lyndon Johnson Administration, American education had the first federal mandate to address poverty and create equitable learning conditions for all Americans. The ESEA provided funding to decrease the dropout rate. Most notably, Title I created a funding stream to improve lower-income students' reading and mathematical skills (Zascavage, 2013).

Dropout Prevention and School Accountability

The 1980s was a conservative time in American history, which changed the course of American education. The 1980s was a return to conservative ideas with the Reagan Administration. *A Nation at Risk* was published in 1983, making a well-manufactured argument that American schools were severely declining. The report called for a national standard to ensure the United States remained a competitive force in science and the global economy. The tone of American education changed to a focus on accountability versus empowerment with an increased focus on student achievement and dropouts; struggling students were increasingly transferred to alternative education schools (Zascavage, 2013).

Alternative Education Traits and Structure

Raywid (1994) grouped alternative education campuses into three categories based on their purpose and the students they serve. Despite commonalities, the themes vary according to the student population's needs. Regardless of the theme, most alternative education campuses serve secondary-age students, with very few options for elementary-age pupils. Most alternative education campuses' overarching goal is dropout prevention, which is an integral part of the school program.

Innovative and Thematic Small Schools

A small selection of alternative campuses evolved from magnet schools and offer a small thematic learning environment. These small schools of choice serve students seeking a specialized curriculum. Following the Civil Rights Era, thematic schools increased integration in urban school districts by providing strong schools that appealed to a large segment of middle-income families (Goldring & Smrekar, 2000). Magnet schools still exist and are often grouped with charter schools due to the similarities in theme, size, and offering an option outside of the neighborhood schools (Riel et al., 2018).

Academic Remediation

Most alternative education campuses are credit-recovery schools, also known as continuation schools, designed for dropout prevention. Credit-recovery schools provide a personalized environment and real-world curriculum to re-engage struggling learners to counter a host of challenges (Deloach, 2016). Most students are enrolled by choice and can return to their traditional neighborhood school after recouping the lost credits. These schools serve a disproportionate number of Black and Latino males and students of lower socioeconomic status (Dunning-Lozano, 2016).

Behavioral Support Schools

A small segment of alternative schools is designed to remediate concerning behaviors impeding students' ability to remain in the traditional learning environment. Created to provide intense mental health and behavior support, these schools offer a wealth of resources for students required to enroll due to a pattern of disruptive behavior or as an alternative to expulsion.

Compared to the total student population, a disproportionate number of Black males, students of lower socioeconomic status, and students with disabilities are enrolled. Due to the high number of Black students with emotional or behavioral disorders, researchers are concerned that these schools contribute to the de facto system of school segregation (Afacan & Wilkerson, 2019).

These students benefit from intense counseling and social services, and the schools have formalized working relationships with community and outside agencies (Foley & Pang, 2006).

Alternative Education Students and Demographics

Alternative education students' backgrounds and demographics vary. Most students at alternative campuses have a pattern of truancy, poor grades, behavior concerns, and minimal family support (McGee & Lin, 2017). Since the inception of alternative education, its students have been predominately lower-income, majority male, African American and Latinx, with early alternative education campuses serving poor students from Eastern European immigrant families. Eventually, young mothers and female students who did not embody middle-class and Christian values were transitioned to alternative schools (Kelly, 1993).

Referral Process

Most students are assigned to a local public school based on their address, which is considered their home school. The enrollment process for credit-recovery schools varies, with most students being referred from their home schools. A few students with emotional-behavioral

disabilities are re-directed to alternative education schools in response to continuous disruption or an incident that violates the school's safety and wellness guidelines (Caine et al., 2018).

Traditionally, home schools initiate the referral process based on a lack of academic progress and the perceived need for a different learning environment. These referrals often focus on students' perceived deficits with little examination of environmental factors impeding their academic progress. Consequently, the sole responsibility for the alternative education transfer lies with the individual and family, and seldom are the systemic failures that hinder the success of marginalized students acknowledged (Dunning-Lozano, 2016). Kelly (1993) noted the dominant voice of the traditional school staff during the referral process, with little input from the student and receiving alternative education school. Dunning-Lozano (2016) identified patterns of labeling and pushing out certain groups to the alternative campuses.

Student Perspectives

The continuation school referral process can be challenging for students and parents due to the stigma and outside perceptions of alternative schools. Despite serving as a safety net for generations of students, these schools' reputation stems from their inception, when they served youth considered maladjusted and requiring adjustment education persist (Kelly, 1993; Williamson, 2008). This reputation is coupled with educators' practice of placing the need for an alternative squarely on the shoulders of the student versus a much-needed reflection of traditional school to investigate the lack of an academic program and systemic interventions to serve students with the most need (Dunning-Lozano, 2016). This label has left many continuation school students feeling like second-class citizens (de La Ossa, 2005). Despite the label, most find a haven with a stronger sense of belonging, healthier relationships with the school staff, and a greater sense of support. Students often report feeling safer and a stronger

sense of community (de La Ossa, 2005; Kim & Taylor, 2008; Sperling, 2019). Sperling's (2019) research uncovered that "the majority of students felt the traditional high schools did not meet their needs academically, emotionally, and socially" (para. 23). Research has a mixed review of the effects of the academic program on students to attain future goals and academic proficiency. Most feel the program has served its purpose of providing an alternative that allows them to thrive (Sperling, 2019). Despite having a complicated academic history, many continuation school students aspire to attend college, and researchers voiced concerns that despite easy credit remediation, some schools lack academic rigor, which does not prepare students for college and university settings (Kim & Taylor, 2008).

The following charts represent the total enrollment and demographics of students enrolled in alternative education schools in California during the 2020-21 school year, according to the California Department of Education (2021).

Table 1

California Continuation School Enrollment Totals by Ethnicity 2020–21

	Latinx	American Indian	Asian	Pacific Islander	Filipino	African American or Black	White	Two or More	Not Reported
Total Enrollment	33, 492	483	791	264	428	3,358	6, 778	1,094	227
Percentage of Total	71.4	1.0	1.7	0.6	0.9	7.2	14.4	2.3	0.5

Total Enrollment	Grade 9	Grade 10	Grade 11	Grade 12
46,915	588	2,386	13,337	30,591
Percentage of Total	.012	0.050	0.28	0.65

Note. Total Enrollment: 46,915 (432 schools). Adapted from California Department of Education.

Table 2*California Traditional High School Enrollment Totals by Ethnicity 2020–21*

	Latinx	American Indian	Asian	Pacific Islander	Filipino	African American or Black	White	Two or More	Not Reported
Total	955,190	8,117	174,569	7,932	49,506	86,826	386,544	60,115	10,006
Percentage of Total	54.9	0.5	10.0	0.5	2.8	5.0	22.2	3.5	0.6

Note. Total enrollment: 1,738,805 Adapted from California Department of Education Dataquest.

A combined total of 1,785,805 students are enrolled in comprehensive high schools and continuation schools in California, with 46,915 attending continuation schools. This total does not include County Community, special education, state special schools, Community Day, alternative education, juvenile hall/court school, California Education Authority, opportunity schools, or charter schools. A significant portion of California students are enrolled in non-traditional high schools. Most are designed to serve as an intervention in response to the challenges affecting students' ability to graduate with their peers. The increased enrollment implies that a large portion of the student population is navigating personal and academic difficulties, which are not addressed in traditional schools. Per the California Department of Education's guidance, continuation school students should be in the second semester of their 10th-grade year and aged 16 to 18. Consequently, most of the students are in grades 11 and 12. A disproportionate number of Latinx students are enrolled in continuation schools, making for 71.4% of the total population, compared to 54.9% in traditional comprehensive high schools. Future research should investigate the high numbers of Latinx enrollment and the lack of systemic response. In addition, the current data dashboard does not include gender, which should be included in future research.

Alternative Education Teachers and Staff

Educators in alternative education schools have the same qualification and credentials as teachers in mainstream schools and differ only in location and community of service (Foley & Pang, 2006). Due to the small school size, these educators can have numerous roles outside the traditional job assignment to ensure their schools fulfill all the functions and obligations of a conventional school. Teachers are called to assume leadership, operational, and instructional duties beyond the classroom (Bascia & Maton, 2016). Research has repeatedly recognized the students' positive relationships with alternative educators, often noted in a shift in caring and trust from the former schools. These relationships serve as the ethos of the educators and one of the most powerful interventions. Often citing feeling different from the mainstream and the shared experience of feeling like an outsider, alternative educators cite their differences as a commonality with their students. Many of these educators expressed a disconnect with the views of the larger schools and the need to find a student-centered environment as the motivation for working in alternative schools (te Riele et al., 2017).

Despite the positive research, there has been a significant concern with the number of school staff members who have been relocated to alternative education schools to minimize their negative impact on students. In addition to being a place to house students with lesser value, educators and staff are often assigned to small schools. Like their students, a stigma exists that affects the educators' influence and importance. Kim and Taylor (2008) noted the lack of influence and input in the school site and professional development decisions. In addition to the learning opportunities, traditional educators seldom included alternative teachers during discussions that determined the best outcomes for students and enrollment in alternative education schools (Bascia & Maton, 2016).

Grading Practices

The transcript is the final record of academic performance used to determine students' fitness for future educational programs, colleges, universities, and employment (Resh, 2010). Given the gravity of grades on a student's life, few protections ensure students are graded fairly, and teachers seldom receive professional development regarding assigning grades equitably. According to Guskey and Brookhart (2019), "grading is typically the last element addressed in education reform efforts" (p. 1). Education has undergone numerous initiatives that transformed teaching, curriculum, and school culture, but there have been few movements to modernize grading practices. Despite mounting evidence of the negative impact of inequitable grading on students due to lack of training, calibration, and the effects of internal bias, current systems largely remain stagnant and subject wholly to teacher interpretation and implementation (Feldman, 2019b, p. 45).

History of Grading

At the beginning of the 19th century, a small population of young people was educated in a one-room schoolhouse. The students were typically a homogeneous group with enough financial means to provide a formal education. This instruction consisted of one teacher, usually female, who provided instruction for all grade levels for an average of 78 days a year (Feldman, 2019b; Snyder, 1993). Student feedback consisted of an extended conversation that provided an update on learning goals and next steps (Feldman, 2019b; Tyack, 1974).

The grading system developed in the 20th century remains the predominant practice to evaluate student learning. Early in the 20th century, the changing economy and social structure had a lasting impact on schools. The urbanization of America due to advancements in transportation and the increase of factories changed the economy. As the United States bypassed

European nations with factories and economic means, the country experienced a dramatic increase in European immigrants. John Dewey argued that schools should advance democracy and provide access to all members of society. Progressives agreed that education should be compulsory and accessible to the entire population to train future employees (Bowles & Gintis, 1976; Feldman, 2019b). Factory employees with specific skills and behaviors needed to provide a system to Americanize and assimilate the burgeoning American population. In 1874, 74 college presidents and school superintendents endorsed teaching obedience to create a society of employees (Feldman, 2019b; Tyack, 1974).

As compulsory education expanded, natural intelligence testing based on the bell curve was implemented to sort and track students. The testing was based on the cultural norms of the White, protestant, and middle-class population, which significantly contributed to the drastic range of results that placed Southern Europeans, African Americans, other groups of color, and lower-income populace on the lower end of the testing results. The results were not attributed to cultural differences but served as means of sorting and tracking students in schools and society and reinforcing the social hierarchy. By 1932, 75% of all urban schools utilized IQ tests as a tracking tool. In addition, behaviorism was introduced with the study of Pavlov's dog. Like Pavlov's dog, the study argued that humans are motivated by extrinsic consequences (Feldman, 2019b).

The origins of letter grades date to the 16th century at Cambridge University to develop a three-tiered evaluation system for ranking student performance. Guskey and Brookhart (2019) wrote that "early research suggests that grades should simply be a method for ranking students" (p. 203). By mid-1900, the school size increased, no longer allowing for the more intimate form of communication regarding student progress utilized in the one-room schoolhouse. This

ushered in the use of A–F grades as a singular form to communicate whether the student met the teacher’s standards of performance and employability beyond school. Twenty-five percent received exemplary feedback, 50% average, and 25% below average based on the bell curve. This system largely remains the standard for grading practices, with little change despite the drastic difference of our modern world (Feldman, 2019a; Guskey & Brookhart, 2019). An overview of the history of grading reveals that the original intent was never to evaluate student learning but to sort individuals and maintain a hegemonic system with unequal access to resources.

Impact on Students

Grades are the final indicator of academic potential and knowledge, significantly impacting students. Positive academic marks provide social benefits among adults and peers. In addition, students are granted access to specialized programs and activities based on their grades. Beyond school, access to higher education and employment are often determined by the final record of the student’s academic performance (Resh, 2010; Tedesco, 2011). Given the high stakes that grades hold for students, this is an emotionally charged issue with significant consequences for the student.

Fairness and Social Justice

Resh’s (2010) study revealed the negative impact on students of grades perceived as unfair. Students of lower-income and social status were more likely to receive lower marks, contributing to the perception of injustice in the world based on social order. Despite the perception of unfairness, students and parents did not feel empowered to contest the grades. Link (2019) noted that “the issue of fairness becomes particularly problematic when students are subjected to arbitrary grading, and the district has few or no grading policies in place.” (p. 160).

In Resh's (2010) study, lower-income students accepted the low marks, whereas middle-income students received fewer marks and were more likely to challenge unfair grades. The lack of power and access reinforced the narrative of injustice for marginalized students.

Mistakes and Risk-Taking

The acquisition of new information requires vulnerability and openness to new information, which commands trust between the student and teacher. Penalizing students for wrong answers creates a culture that does not reward or encourage risk. The continual judgment and penalty for wrong answers convey the message that incorrect information will be penalized and classrooms are not a safe space for risks. Assessments are tools to determine learning, but students are often graded during the learning process when mistakes should be used to inform instruction, not penalize students (Dueck, 2014; Feldman, 2019b).

Grades and Motivation

The belief of grades as a motivator to influence student performance was created during the period of extrinsic motivation and behaviorism (Feldman, 2019b). For students with high academic marks, grades serve as a temporary motivator to avoid consequences, but the gains are short-lived and do not increase the student's intrinsic motivation to learn (Kohn, 1999; Wormeli, 2018). Low grades do not motivate struggling learners and only serve as an additional barrier between them and the classroom, building trust, and learning (Wormeli, 161).

Flawed Grading Scales and the High Stakes Zero

During elementary school, grading is viewed as a tool to inform parents of the student's grasp of learning objectives. Late in elementary school, students are introduced to a system of grading that relies on a calculation of points and intricate grading scales. Calculated grading scales often feature weighted scores, which lack transparency and are difficult for students to

understand. Grading practices are seldom normed in departments and grade levels to ensure all students have an equitable opportunity to demonstrate learning in the same department or school (Feldman, 2019b). The study reveals how methodology varies based on teacher preference, even between two teachers at the same school and subject. Due to subjective grading differences, similar students can have radically different outcomes, despite studying the same curriculum and standards.

Numerical grading scales are flawed and present more options for failure than success. Guskey (2013) noted that “teachers who use percentage grades typically set the minimum passing grade at 60 or 65. The result is a scale that identifies 60 or more distinct levels of failure and only 40 levels of success” (para. 15). Student failure dramatically increases when the instructor uses a zero to indicate a lack of completion. “To recover from a single zero in a percentage grading system, a student must achieve a perfect score on a minimum of nine other assignments” (Guskey, 2013, p. 71).

Equity, Bias, and Non-Academic Factors

Despite the common use of citizenship grades to address non-academic student behaviors such as effort, tardiness, attendance, and behavior, non-academic factors often influence academic grades. Teachers genuinely want students to be successful, and research has revealed that the intent of using non-academic factors is to boost grades and encourage character development. Many teachers view non-academic factors as an “academic enabler” by considering the soft skills necessary for success (McMillan, 2019, p. 106). Despite the best intentions, all educators have implicit biases that affect our interpretation of student intentions and behavior. Downey and Pribesh (2004) noted that the behavior of Black students is often subjected to misinterpretation and implicit bias when teachers make subjective judgements of

student behavior. Consequently, this is particularly concerning when behavior is factored into academic grades. Further, research has documented the perception of African American children as older and more mature than their biological age. The negative interpretation of behaviors of Black children in the classroom exacerbates institutional and historical inequities in education (Feldman, 2019b; Farkas, 1990). Given the misinterpretations of student behavior based on race, factoring behavior and citizenship into grades heightens the opportunities for discrimination against students of color, particularly damaging Black children's academic records (Feldman, 2019b, p. 43).

In addition to concerns about bias, teachers must be mindful of the potential inequities of homework affecting academic grades. Many families balance numerous obstacles beyond their control, which provides an additional challenge for students. Access to technology, a quiet and focused learning environment, and time not bound by employment and responsibilities beyond the school day are a few obstacles that complicate the completion of homework. Consequently, homework often reflects access to resources available to students outside of the learning environment and compliance (Dueck, 2014). Instructors must remain mindful of barriers that complicate a student's ability to demonstrate learning outside of the classroom. Additionally, given the lack of guidance, homework should be a tool to support learning outside of the classroom, not the introduction of new material (Wormeli, 2018, p. 18)

Equitable Grading and Standards-Based Grading

The National Equity Project (2022) defined educational equity as “each child receives what they need to develop to their full academic and social potential” (para.1). The organization expands the definition to “ensuring high outcomes for all participants in our educational system”

and “interrupting inequitable practices, examining biases, and creating inclusive multicultural schools” (para.3).

Equitable grading is assessing student learning using a variety of assessments in a manner that reduces harm and maintains focus on student learning. When used properly, the classroom instructor has minimized grading systems that are biased, inaccurate, and hinder student motivation. The instructor who engages in equitable grading understands the varied uses of assessments, including formative assessment to measure student learning during the learning process to inform and adjust instruction. Bloom’s (1964) study of the mastery of learning identified frequent formative assessment that is both diagnostic and prescriptive as a means to increase student learning (Blooms et al., 1971; Guskey, 2005). Formative assessment is used to guide instruction, not make an evaluative decision regarding the outcomes of the course. Grading practices are evaluation tools to measure student knowledge of the course standards. Non-academic behaviors (behaviors, attendance, timeliness) are addressed separately to minimize bias that harms student of African American and Latinx students. The instructor understands the inaccuracy of the traditional grading scale, the harm of a zero for incomplete assignments, and the detriment to a student’s grade by using a system with more opportunities for failure. With equitable grading, students benefit from grading practices with varied assessments, rubrics, and transparency that increase trust, motivation, and willingness to engage in the learning process (Feldman, 2019b). A well-crafted equitable grading system reflects an awareness of the obstacles that may obstruct student learning and of students’ strengths, provides room for student growth, and measures the understanding of standards during and following the learning process(Ntuli & Lin, 2020).

Equitable grading is implementing practices that decrease the inequitable outcomes for students; there is a growing emphasis on standard-based grading, which bases grading solely on evidence of student learning and mastery of the predetermined learning objectives and/or standards (Feldman, 2019b). Educators who focus on student learning provide feedback solely on the student's grasp of learning objectives. O'Connor (2017) wrote, "Grades must be directly related to the learning goals for each grading period in each classroom. Teachers must understand clearly what learning results are expected and then base their assessment and grading plans on these learning goals" (p. 45). Standards-based grading requires the instructor to focus on student learning and excludes incorporating non-academic behaviors (attendance, participation, behavior) in the grading policy. Grading for learning supports the instructor's ability to emphasize learning versus compliance and increases the accuracy of representing what a student has learned.

Why Is This So Hard to Change?

Despite the uneven impact on students, teachers are not required to alter their grading to align with research-based equitable methods. Further, professional learning for grading practices is seldom offered during teaching credential programs or professional development. In the absence of current information, teachers often rely on outdated grading methods, which is often a duplication of the grading practices they experienced as a student and the procedures for grading utilized by their colleagues. (Link, 2019). The California education code ensures that assigning grades belongs solely to the teacher. Section 49066 of the California Education Code states,

- (a) When grades are given for any course of instruction taught in a school district, the grade given to each pupil shall be the grade determined by the teacher of the course and

the determination of the pupil's grade by the teacher, in the absence of clerical or mechanical mistake, fraud, bad faith, or incompetency, shall be final.

(b) The governing board of the school district and the superintendent of such district shall not order a pupil's grade to be changed unless the teacher who determined such grade is, to the extent practicable, given an opportunity to state orally, in writing, or both, the reasons for which such grade was given and is, to the extent practicable, included in all discussions relating to the changing of such grade. (California Office of Legislative Counsel, 1976)

For good reason, this practice ensures the grade remains with the educator who creates and implements the curriculum. The classroom instructor determines the final grade issued to students, which is protected by district board policy and the California education code. These efforts are meant to protect instructional freedom and safeguard grades from potential administrative abuse. Teachers' rights to grade are so entrenched in school culture that administrators are hesitant to address teachers' methods, despite grades serving as data for student performance and effective instruction. Research demonstrates that the principal, as the instructional leader, is best positioned to encourage equitable grading. However, this role is rarely pursued as it is considered a breach of trust between the principal and teacher (Link, 2019). Despite an abundance of harmful methods, research demonstrates that teachers care about their students and strive for fair grading practices that reduce harm.

Moral Aspects of Grading: Alternative Education Grading

Traditional high schools are structured on a semester or quarter system and provide students with a predetermined number of credits for each class. When students complete the course requirements and receive a passing grade, the credits are added to their transcripts. When

students fail classes, they do not receive the credits and fall behind their peers. Most traditional high schools base graduation status on the accumulated credits and completion of subject-area requirements. Continuation school students are often referred to alternative schools because they are behind in credit accumulation and, therefore, credit deficient. Most students are referred to credit-recovery schools due to a lack of credits, not a low GPA. However, credit-deficient students tend to have low GPAs due to the high number of failing grades, an additional indicator of academic challenges. Like traditional schools, continuation schools award credits and academic letter grades. Due to the nature of the referral, however, most credit-recovery schools emphasize accumulating credits over academic grades (Deloach, 2016).

Many credit-recovery campuses provide variable credit to provide an alternative method of evaluating student progress. Variable credit, also referred to as partial credit, is a grading system of providing credits based on the completion of learning, seat time, or productivity versus the total sum of instructional time. In 1906, schools adopted the Carnegie Unit to measure the length of time required for each course. Patrick (2021) stated that “these units measure contact hours in a classroom, not learning, and form the basis of high school graduation transcripts. They do not result in meaningful diplomas that report on student mastery” (p. 26). Most learning institutions utilize the Carnegie Unit, and students are awarded credit at the end of the grading period.

Due to alternative education students’ unique needs, many credit-recovery schools adopted an alternate means of evaluating student learning. It is common for continuation schools to continuously enroll due to students’ lifestyles and systemic procedures of sending students from comprehensive high schools. In addition, attendance is a concern due to work, parenting, lack of engagement, and personal challenges. Early in its inception, continuation schools were

encouraged to adopt a tutoring model of instruction, which allowed a personalized approach. A common practice of many continuation schools is to assign variable credit as an incentive to increase attendance and productivity. The *Handbook on Continuation Education in California* (John, 1968) provides the following guidance “credits are issues as earned, and the opportunity for making up work through longer school days is ready possible.” Early continuation schools were discouraged from providing whole group and direct instruction due to concerns with attendance and student behavior (John, 1968). This system of variable credits allows the school to avoid issuing failing grades, allows for more significant opportunities for make-up work, and encourages rewarding students for productivity. Competency-based education is a similar model, which is individualized instruction. As students demonstrate mastery of standards through various assignments and assessments, the student earns credits. In this model, “learning is the constant; time becomes the variable” (Patrick, 2021, p. 24).

In response to the challenges faced by foster youth, AB 490 was implemented, which requires partial credit for foster youth in California. Due to the frequent transfers of foster youth to new schools, the law requires credit for completed seat time. Guidance is provided to schools based on the number of classes attended and the mandate not to uphold student records to ensure a smooth transition to the new school setting. The spirit of this law is to lessen the impact on foster youth and implement an equitable practice for foster youth. In its current use, the law symbolizes the equitable intentions of variable and partial credit policies.

Like the instructional programs, continuation schools use a variety of structures to evaluate student learning and the practice of issuing variable credit. Like the variation in themes, campuses’ systems for assigning variable credit differ. Continuation schools do not have a universal requirement for issuing variable credits. A common model is performance-based credit

recovery, which gives credits based on the student's academic grade. This model allows incoming students to quickly acclimate to the new curriculum while retaining the interest of currently enrolled students. In some instances, credits are issued based on the quantity of work completed. In this model, an increase in productivity would result in additional academic credits. The most common process is to award credits based on student attendance and seat time. Online computer programs are increasing in popularity, allowing students to work at their own pace, and the computer program determines credits and grades (Deloach, 2016). The lack of universal guidance speaks to alternative education educators' concerns over maintaining student engagement and academic rigor in alternative schools and the need for additional research citing best practices (Bush, 2012).

Given the demographics of alternative education students, the purpose of credit-recovery schools and their role in providing equitable outcomes is often questioned. One common concern voiced by several researchers is the emphasis on credit attainment over rigor and learning. Bush (2012) stated, "however, one potential drawback of performance-based grading and crediting is an intensified focus on the quantity and completeness of work product, rather than work quality in overall student learning" (p. 3). The lack of focus on learning perpetuates a system of social reproduction, which contributes to the lack of rigor, critical thinking, and equity needed to provide a foundation for college-level and advanced career opportunities. Kelly (1993) noted that students are not penalized for not turning in assignments by reducing their academic grades and ability to earn credit by awarding variable credits. Kelly was critical of variable credits, citing "a premium on attendance, punctuality, and productivity rather than critical thinking and creativity" (p. 172), with the feedback focused on the traits of a low-skilled workforce versus a skilled and educated career. Given the variation of grading guidance,

educators in alternative settings are tasked with identifying practices and programs that meet the learning needs of their students.

Chapter Summary

During the 2020–21 academic term, in California, continuation schools served 46,915 students in Grades 9–12. Established in 1919, these small learning communities provided a second chance and new opportunities for students with academic and personal challenges. Founded to increase enrollment for employed students, the prevailing theme of continuation schools is in response to the current trends and students' needs. The Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s ushered in the need to implement equitable practices and innovation, and the conservative 1980s solidified the purpose of dropout prevention (Williamson, 2008). Today, continuation schools are a blend of their history, including being the home school for a disproportionate number of students of lower socioeconomic status, males, and students of color (Dunning-Lozano, 2016). Many factors contribute to students' success, including the means of evaluating student learning. Despite a wealth of research, grading systems have failed to evolve from the traditional 20th-century ones. Equitable grading practices provide educators with researched-based tools that reduce bias, inaccuracies, and non-motivating results to benefit all students (Feldman, 2019a). Despite the vast body of research, alternative education teachers' perceptions are absent; therefore, this research contributes their voices to ensure all students are being served.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

Introduction

Alternative education schools are a safety net for students who benefit from a different learning environment. This study focused on these schools, which offer a real-world curriculum in a personalized learning environment to help students graduate on time with their peers (DeLoach, 2016). These schools have a disproportionately lower-socioeconomic-status, African American, and Latinx male population (Williamson, 2008). This study examined grading practices at these schools from teachers' perspectives.

Grades serve as the final feedback regarding student academic performance. Grades significantly affect students and their current connection to the school and access to post-secondary opportunities. Despite the impact on students, their grade is determined solely by the teacher. Teaching programs seldom provide training on equitable grading, and many instructors lean on the familiar and utilize the grading systems of the past. Given the disproportionate percentage of traditionally marginalized youth enrolled in alternative education schools, the research is trying to understand alternative education teachers' grading practices related to their beliefs about the instructional program. As the education community seeks to understand and implement equitable grading, alternative school educators' perspectives must be added to the conversation to expand equitable outcomes for all students.

Approach

Alternative settings serve students with academic and personal challenges that interfere with learning. Their unique needs necessitate a different level of support from their school community. Given the effect of grades on student connection to the school environment and

meeting academic and post-secondary goals, how is the learning evaluated in an alternative learning setting? Due to offering a learning experience that differs from the traditional school setting, alternative education instructors often rely on different structures to evaluate student performance. Like the various structures of alternative education schools, there are many shared practices among alternative schools. However, each school has adapted a separate system with various nuances to meet the needs of its students and program structure. Traditional schools often utilize the conventional A–F letter grading system to evaluate student progress. Alternative education schools use traditional letter grades, but student progress is evaluated differently and varies according to the program structure and theme.

As educators expand the implementation of equitable grading, researchers, and practitioners need insight into alternative education schools' grading systems. This study utilized basic qualitative methodology to increase understanding of continuation or credit-recovery school educators' methods and perspectives. Before the interview, a small qualitative survey with open-ended questions allowed the participants to share an overview of their practices. Due to the variation among alternative education schools, the data will not explain each school site, but the sample will help researchers understand common themes. Interviews provided the teacher's voice to help the researcher identify common themes among alternative education teachers' grading perspectives.

Methodology: Qualitative Research

Guidance to encourage equitable grading has increased; however, there remains a need to understand the teacher's perspective of grading and equity. Given the strong correlation between a teacher's background and philosophy regarding grading and academics (Zoeckler, 2007), uncovering the root causes of how teachers create and practice their course grading policy is

necessary to provide professional learning and guidance. To gather teacher perspectives, the researcher used a fundamental qualitative research design. Qualitative research allows the researcher to gain insight into the lived experience of the participants through a collection of interviews, artifacts, and stories to acquire a better understanding of the lived experience of an individual or group (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This study adds continuation high school teachers' voices to the body of grading research to their perceptions of grading. Findings were used to determine if these teachers' practices are equitable and present recommendations for future educators.

Methods

The researcher used a variety of methods to capture the teachers' voice regarding grading practices in alternative education, specifically continuation schools.

Pre-Survey

The researcher utilized a network of continuation school principals to seek participants. A letter with a summary of the study and the benefits of their participation was shared with principals to forward to interested teachers. After a small sample of continuation teachers agreed to participate, a brief qualitative survey was forwarded to those working in public school districts throughout Northern California. Teachers filled out a short survey to collect simple data regarding grading practices. Given the unique nature of grading in alternative education schools, the survey identified patterns and commonalities. In alignment with qualitative research methods, the survey was simple, with 12 multiple-choice questions and an open-ended question to provide a space for the teacher's voice. The survey was administered with Google Forms, and teachers received a link with an invitation to complete the survey. It included a question section that helped schedule the follow-up interview. In addition to collecting data, the questions

allowed participants to start the reflection process to allow for a deeper conversation with the researcher (Billups, 2021).

Documents

Billups (2021) stated, “As humans, we create a trail of evidence for others to see, touch, read, and interpret” (p. 144). The researcher invited each participant to provide relevant documents that explain their grading policies. Given the variation in practices, the invitation did not require documents to participate in the study. Two participants shared rubrics and their grading policies. The documents were coded to increase understanding of the participants’ preferences and identify themes aligned with the study’s theoretical framework.

Interviews

Interviews are the conversation portion of data collection that captures the participant’s voice. The researcher selected seven participants to participate in a personal interview following the qualitative survey. Three participants were selected based on the outreach efforts through principals. Principals were provided an overview of the study with a request to forward it to their teaching staff. One participant works in the Bay Area, and two work at separate continuation schools in Sacramento. Three additional participants were recruited through an email invitation, and one participant was selected through a network of alternative education educators, who forwarded the invitation to former co-workers. Due to the physical distance between the participant and researcher, following the pre-survey, the researcher conducted the interviews via Zoom, an online meeting platform. This format allowed a virtual conversation and provided tools to record the interview for data collection. The recording was transcribed for data analysis. The interview consisted of 11 questions based on the research project’s goals. Following the interview, the researcher utilized otter.ai.com, an online transcription service, to

create a clean transcript of the interviews. Transcripts were interpreted using a coding system to identify the salient points and patterns to decipher the study's findings and participants' perceptions (Roberts, 2010).

Participants

The population sample consists of a range of public-school alternative education teachers. Given the broad landscape of alternative education, only continuation high school teachers were invited to participate. Continuation high schools are small schools that provide a second chance option for students in Grades 10–12 for academic remediation and dropout prevention (Foley & Pang, 2006). Alternative schools vary in structure; therefore, only continuation schools that provide services to students in Grades 10–12 and focus on academic remediation were invited to participate in this study. The researcher worked with a small sample of continuation high school teachers by interviewing educators from five school districts in Northern California. Two school districts are located in the Bay Area, and the three are in the Sacramento area. Due to the size and mission of alternative education schools, many districts only have one continuation school. Therefore, it was important for the researcher to interview participants in multiple school districts. The researcher attempted to be conscientious of diverse perspectives and attempted to interview a range of genders, settings, ethnicities, and years of experience. Participants received the invitation via email, including an email introduction and a brief interest survey. They were informed of the study's purpose and requirements and provided a link to indicate their interest. Willing participants signed an agreement outlining their rights and protections in this study. Table 3 presents the participants' relevant demographics.

Table 3*Participants*

Teacher	Subject	Total Years Teaching	Total Years in Alternative Education	School District Represented by Alpha	School Represented by Numbers
Teacher A	Social Studies	22	8	A	1
Teacher B	Math and English (Special Ed)	6	4	B	3
Teacher C	Social Studies	17	14	C	2
Teacher D	Science and Algebra (Special Ed)	9	2	D	4
Teacher E	Math	23	3	B	5
Teacher F	Social Studies	22	5	E	6
Teacher G	Science	23	3	C	2

Note. Seven teachers from six schools located in five school districts.

Data Collection and Data Analysis

Data were collected through a brief survey that allowed participants to share their grading practices and reflect before the formal interview. All of the survey questions were repeated or expanded during the recorded interview. The interview was recorded and transcribed to allow the researcher to code the responses to help identify themes. Participant documents that reflect their decision making were well received and used to increase understanding of teacher perspective to evaluate student learning. Two participants shared rubrics. Following data collection, the interviews were transcribed using otter.ai.com, an online transcription service.

All data were coded to identify commonalities, differences, and themes. The themes helped the researcher determine the findings of the study. The study framework is culturally relevant pedagogy, allowing the researcher to examine the grading practices using criteria to ensure students have equitable, culturally responsive classrooms with high expectations.

Trustworthiness, Validity, and Reliability

The research used triangulation to ensure the findings were trustworthy and reliable. Billups (2021) stated, “In qualitative studies, a combination of tools must be designed for a unified purpose, as well as to ensure triangulation and verify the findings” (p. 168). Interviews, documents, and qualitative surveys provided a variety of methods to gather data versus a singular tool or method of collection. Participants from different schools and locations offered a variety of feedback to prevent a singular voice and perspective. The researcher purposely selected participants from different schools to increase the range and perspective. The researcher provided time for the participants to fully respond to questions to capture details during the interviews. The number of survey questions was limited, but participants were provided unlimited time to allow open sharing during the interview. Following the interview, participants received a link to a Google doc with a copy of the transcribed interview notes to review for accuracy. The procedure allowed participants to make corrections or add additional comments.

Limitations

There is limited research on alternative education schools to inform this study. This study covered a small portion of alternative education schools. Given the various structures, it is challenging to understand this unique public school structure that serves as the school home for 10% of California’s high school students. In addition, the participants volunteered to work with the researcher. Several were well versed in equitable grading. Most of the participants were in

the process of learning or curious about grading practices, which limited the responses to a segment of teachers. Outliers may exist, but their feedback is not included in this dissertation.

Chapter Summary

As we lift teachers' voices in alternative education schools, the researcher will understand the history of these special schools in chapter two. As history unfolds, the reader will better understand how alternative education schools evolved to their current state. With a thorough understanding of alternative learning communities, the existing structure and grading structure will be reviewed to gain insight into the grading practices and teachers' beliefs that currently impact students. The researcher will utilize a lens of equity by using the culturally relevant pedagogy lens, which acknowledges the lived experience of students, values academic learning, and encourages the development of the social consciousness of young people.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Introduction/Purpose of the Study

This study aimed to add the voices of alternative education teachers to the research on grading practices. As a means of dropout prevention, alternative settings are designed to serve students who benefit from a small, student-centered learning community. Given the purpose of alternative learning settings, how does the schools' objective affect their grading systems? Traditional grading was designed to rank and sort students, not provide a measurement of student learning. Despite a wealth of research, schools continue to use conventional grading practices designed for a different era. Grades significantly impact students, given that grades often hinder access to current academic programs, post-secondary education, university and employment options, and social standing. Despite the disproportionate impact on students, there are few safeguards to ensure teachers receive appropriate training on modern and equitable grading. Alternative education schools provide a learning environment for students who benefit from a structure and support outside the mainstream. Since the inception of these unique small schools, a disproportionate number of lower-income, African and Latinx, and male students have enrolled in them. With the same potential, these students often face challenges in their personal and home lives that contribute to academic difficulties.

As educators expand equitable practices, how are continuation teachers responding? This study will uncover the current situation in continuation schools. In addition, this study used the lens of culturally relevant pedagogy focused on students' learning and growth and understanding and affirming their cultural identities. Finally, the perceptions of grading will be shared to increase understanding of continuation teachers' approach to grading. The researcher contacted

continuation high school principals and teachers to solicit teacher feedback for support. Three principals shared email invitations with their staff. In addition, the researcher contacted four continuation schools in Northern California with an invitation to participate in the study via email, which garnered the support of three teachers.

Research Questions

This research aimed to understand the grading practices in alternative education schools (continuation high school) by understanding the teacher's perspective. Three research questions were used to guide research and analysis of findings:

1. One of the primary objectives of continuation high schools is credit recovery and dropout prevention. Given the purpose of these small schools, what are the common grading practices?
2. What are continuation schoolteachers' perceptions of grading practices?
3. Are continuation schoolteachers' grading practices reflective of the current guidance on equitable grading?

Qualitative Interview: Characteristics of Teachers and Sites

The study participants are continuation high school teachers who work throughout Northern California. Participants have a range of experience in education; many have taught in middle schools, comprehensive high schools, and universities. Due to the small number of continuation schools with small teaching staff, the researcher limited the number of interviews at each school site. In total, this study represents the practices and perceptions of seven teachers in six schools located in five Northern California school districts. The researcher, a continuation high school principal, used her network of alternative education principals to forward the study

invitation to the teachers on their school site. Outreach efforts started with an email introduction that provided the study topic, goals, and target audience.

Once a list of potential participants was identified, the teachers received a more detailed email regarding the purpose of the study, the time commitment, assurance of confidentiality, and a link to a small survey. The survey included a list of available appointments for the interview. Following the survey, teachers participated in a brief interview (ranging from 25 to 50 minutes) via Zoom. The interviews were recorded and transcribed to help the researcher identify common responses and themes. It was noted early in the interviews that teachers shared a joint commitment and dedication to the growth and well-being of their students. The following findings reflect their collective voices regarding grading practices in continuation high schools.

Findings

As a result of data analysis, the researcher identified five main themes: (a) continuation teachers' grading practices and use of variable credit, (b) continuation teachers' grading practices and traditional letter grades, (c) lack of training and guidance, (d) effects of the pandemic, and (e) continuation teachers' perceptions of grades. These themes and subthemes will be discussed in the following sections and subsections.

Continuation Teachers' Grading Practices: Use of Variable Credit

A common practice in alternative settings is to evaluate student learning and progress using a system of variable credits. Variable credits calculate student performance according to time completed in a course, which usually indicates student attendance and productivity. The goal is to avoid assigning a failing grade, so students are provided credit based on various measures (productivity, quantity of work completed, attendance, and learning). The method of variable credits varies according to the school site and is generally determined by the school or

district policy. Participant responses revealed that despite guidance for the number of credits, the standard to determine the criteria and number of credits differed according to the instructor's discretion. Consequently, most schools have a common approach to awarding course credits with slight variation among instructors.

Variable Credit Practice

Continuation high schools' systems of calculating credits vary greatly, with some learning communities preferring opting out of student evaluation. It is common for continuation schools to assess students' learning with traditional grades and a variable credit system. Given that the school policy drives how credits are issued, most sites have a common approach to determining student credits. Table 4 presents the participants' variable credit practices.

Table 4

Variable Credit Practice

Participant	Practice
Teacher B, G	No variable credit. Students who pass the class receive all five credits. Due to continuous enrollment, credits are adjusted based on the enrollment date.
Teacher D	No variable credit. Students who pass the class receive 2.5 credits. Students with seven or more absences will not receive the credit unless the seat time is made up after school in study hall.
Teacher C, E	Variable credits. Each productive class period is 1 unit; 15 units equals a credit. The school day is three hours; consequently, students are provided credit for assignments and learning opportunities completed outside class.
Teacher A	Variable credit. The number of credits awarded is based on letter grade earned in the class. Students with A/B receive 2.0 credits, and C/D receive 1.5 credits. Students with 80% attendance receive an additional .5 credits for a total of 2.5 credits.
Teacher F	Variable credit. With no set schoolwide policy, the criteria for awarding credits vary per teacher. Students can earn .5 or 1 credit every three weeks.

The criteria for determining credit vary, with some schools focusing solely on behaviors that support learning (attendance and productivity) and assigning a separate letter grade to measure learning. Despite the clear criteria, there was ambiguity regarding the metrics to evaluate student productivity. Some alternative programs award credits based on the academic grade and learning outcomes. Only one variable credit system lacks clear guidance, leaving teachers to build systems to determine how to award credits individually. Four of the seven teachers worked at variable credit schools and reported criteria for determining the number of student credits (Table 5).

Table 5

Top Criteria When Calculating Credits

Teacher	Most Important	Second	Third
Teacher A	Productivity	Demonstrated mastery of standards	Quality of completed assignments
Teacher E	Attendance	Citizenship and Behavior	Productivity
Teacher C	Quality of completed assignments	Productivity	Demonstrated mastery of standards
Teacher F	Demonstrated mastery of standards	Quality of completed assignments	Productivity

Note. Responses only include the four participants with a variable credit grading system.

Teacher Perception

Teachers' perceptions vary, and common among them is that credits are the strongest indicator of students' success. Three teachers reported that credits are the primary focus of their academic program. Most students are identified as needing to transfer to a continuation high school due to a lack of academic credits, not the grade point average. Except for one school

district, most schools do not have a grade point average requirement for graduation; however, all students must earn the required number of credits as determined by school and district policy for a high school diploma. Teacher A emphasized the focus on credits: “Credits are emphasized the most because those are the things that lead to graduation. And at the end of the day, we’re trying to graduate and build for success after high school.”

Teacher D expressed the sentiment: “I consider credit earning our focus of grading, and there are some students who, you know, come in, and their focus is, I need to recover credit.” In addition to using credits to determine graduation status, three teachers reported that variable credits served as a motivator by avoiding an all or none grading system, which would increase failing grades. Teacher F shared,

It kind of gives that little push, you know, if they messed up but didn’t completely mess up. There’s something that they’ve earned, and they’re moving forward versus taking it all away. Of course, we can give it to them the next session, but they don’t always see it like that because it’s very instantaneous. It is instant gratification.

Many schools use variable credit to support students with attendance challenges. Teacher G stated the benefits of a variable credit system for students with irregular daily attendance:

For the most part, if students have attendance issues when they’re here and are productive, they earn their points, which translates to credits. Fifteen points equal one credit. Their grade, which is not a motivator for many of these students as much as comprehensive high school, is based on assessments.

Teacher D rejected the use of traditional grades, emphasizing the past harm experienced by alternative education students, and only embraced issuing variable credits: “We’ve de-emphasized the grade part. Every teacher does feedback differently. I avoid grades because of

the stigma of the ABCDF thing. I use a four-level scale. It's like a check, check plus, plus, minus system."

The teacher's site formerly awarded credits based on attendance and productivity. Of the seven instructors, one was critical of variable credits. Teacher B expressed equity concerns and rewarded academically strong students for their ability to be productive:

Some kids can't just sit there and hammer out 17 pages of packet work. And that's where the variable credit was not equitable because some kids had the capacity or the ability to be very productive while others couldn't. So, that was the thing that I always struggled with.

Overall, teachers were very optimistic about the variable credits system for evaluating student progress. Teacher E's site uses variable credits, which the participant expressed concern about and shared that the lack of variable credits was a disservice to students and teachers:

Our school does not offer variable credit. And we should have the option to vary things. I think that variable credit should be available because what's done at the conventional schools didn't work for our kids, and that's why they're with us. But everything's changed now, so I go with the flow.

The presence of variable credit distinguishes student evaluation from traditional school settings. It was initially created as an equity consideration and continues to dominate grading practices in continuation high schools. The use and effects of variable credits in alternative settings must be factored into the research.

Continuation Teachers' Grading Practices: Use of Letter Grades

Students in continuation high schools earn traditional letter grades in addition to a variation of credits. A commonality across all six schools is using academic letter grades to

determine students' learning outcomes. The emphasis on grades varied, with some teachers focusing on learning and a small number emphasizing credit completion and student behavior.

Practice

To understand how teachers determine letter grades, study participants were asked to rank criteria for letter grades in order of importance. Their responses (Table 6) indicate that four of the seven consider mastery of the standards to be the most important criterion. This response demonstrates the use of standards-based instruction and a system of assessments to measure student learning. One instructor emphasized that the only criterion should be the student's ability to demonstrate an understanding of the standards or course objectives. The second most common response was the quality of student assignments, followed by effort and productivity. Three teachers emphasized that grading in alternative settings should not differ from traditional or comprehensive schools, given that the tools and cycles of assessments are the same. The difference is the instruction and methods of differentiation.

Table 6

Criteria for Letter Grades

Teacher	Most Important	Second	Third
Teacher A	Productivity	Effort	Demonstrated mastery of standards
Teacher B	Quality of completed assignments		
Teacher C	Quality of completed assignments	Effort	Productivity
Teacher D	Demonstrated mastery of standards	Quality of completed assignments	Citizenship and Behavior
Teacher E	Demonstrated mastery of standards		
Teacher F	Demonstrated mastery of standards	Quality of completed assignments	Effort
Teacher G	Demonstrated mastery of standards	Quality of completed assignments	Productivity

Standards-Based Grading and Assessment Cycles

Four teachers (Teachers D, E, F, and G) reported that students demonstrating mastery was the most important criterion. The teachers shared the common practice of implementing various assessments to measure student learning. During their interviews, they provided detailed responses regarding the multiple assessments used to determine learning and instructional outcomes. They had a series of assessments to measure student learning, including formative assessments, with the intention to re-teach concepts students were not grasping during instruction. All four instructors offered numerous opportunities to make up low test scores and missing assignments. Three of the four teachers described their practice as standards-based grading and expanded their responses with examples of grading that required students to demonstrate an understanding of course standards. Teacher E provided great detail regarding formative assessments:

I use the formative assessment cycles. The kids take the formative assessment, which is usually a two-part leveled word problem. ... I pass out a rubric, and we go through it to ensure everyone understands how they were scored. They continue trying. It's a very laborious lesson, but the difference between their first try and their second try is enormous. They're justifying their answers, and they're being thorough.

Teacher G emphasized the use of assessments in the class:

I can only assess the standards, and that's what I've promised the students. Hopefully, the whole process of retakes is motivational. I've had some student retake by reducing the writing, or I allow them to verbally share the answers before the quiz or test.

The instructors used formative assessment to guide instruction, followed by a summative end-of-course evaluation. The summative assessments varied, mainly consisting of an exam.

All instructors required students to produce a work product or project. Teacher B utilized interim assessments mid-semester to determine the students' grasp of content and guide future instruction:

If you have assessments that can dictate where student levels....you're in this group because you're below standard, or you're at standard, or you're above and exceeds. Like, okay, now I can chunk this assignment. It is a lot of work for the teachers, but students come with different stories.

Rubrics

Study participants shared a variety of systems to determine student learning and progress. Four participants cited rubrics as the primary tool to identify mastery and assess student progress. Rubrics ranged from serving as a guide to determine student understanding of course objectives to providing grading criteria for specific assignments and projects. One special education instructor shared a rubric to assist general education teachers with implementing and monitoring IEP goals.

Professional Learning Community and Common Assessments

Two instructors participated in a professional learning community (PLC) and administered a common assessment that provided data to share with colleagues. Data outcomes were used to determine future learning targets to assist with the collaboration for curriculum and instruction planning. Given that most teachers are the only instructors who teach the subject on their campus, one instructor participates in a districtwide math PLC, and the other engages in an on-site PLC. Participant G shared,

I used formative assessment cycles co-created in my district subject area PLC. During COVID, the department chairs were communicating and sharing the student assessment

outcomes with the hope that one of us would come up with a different approach. The collaboration was amazing.

Non-traditional grading. Two teachers defined their grading practices as non-traditional; both expressed concern for traditional grading in an alternative setting. Despite the rejection of conventional grading, neither reported grading practices aligned with standardized-based grading and preferred non-conventional grading focused on student growth. The most important criteria for letter grades were productivity and quality of assignments, not mastery of course standards. Teacher C shared,

I've considered competency based as a way of saying, if you can get up to this level, we will give you all five credits at once. But my sense, competency-based ... enriches the rich already. If you're good at school, and you're able to get to those standards quickly, you could be done really quickly. What is the reward for working through the difficulties and struggling, right?

One teacher reported their grading practices as traditional in response to the pandemic and the need to show understanding and encouragement. Before the pandemic, one teacher practiced standardized grading but changed during distance learning. There was a desire to return to standards-based in the future.

Lack of Training and Guidance

Grades and credits significantly influence the transcripts and opportunities afforded to students. Despite the significant impact, study participants reported a lack of formal training or guidance on creating grading policies that accurately reflect student learning.

Lack of Professional Training

All teachers reported they did not receive formal training or guidance on grading practices during their teacher training; this included the graduate-level education courses. One teacher has taught in several schools in various states (California, Texas, and New York) and never received formal training or professional development. Most teachers developed grading practices for mentors and well-respected colleagues. Teacher D shared,

I did my credential in another state fifteen years ago, and we had literacy training and how to implement special curriculum. I don't think we ever did anything on grading. It was all curriculum planning. I have had a lot of fantastic mentor teachers.

School Site Leadership

The pandemic and lack of grading guidance during distance learning served as an awakening for many educators. The connection between grading and site leadership emerged during interviews. Four teachers reported that teacher leaders had a significant role in the examination, professional development, and implementation of site grading practices. Teacher leaders participated in training and led discussions with colleagues on their sites. Two teachers participated in PLCs or cohorts focused on grading and served as teacher leaders by providing professional development and guidance for other teachers.

Five teachers provided insight into the role and influence of site administrators in leading the grading change. Teacher leaders led collaboration efforts with the support of site administrators. Participant feedback was more optimistic, and teachers were more agreeable and open to new ideas and change when administrators worked in collaboration with teachers.

Three teachers provided examples of site administrators working in collaboration with teacher leaders to design and lead the site adjustment to grading practices. The reporting

teachers were open to change and eager to learn and expressed that their colleagues shared the same sentiment. Teacher A shared,

You caught us in a transitional period, where our administration is gradually moving us towards a standards-based grading approach instead of the traditional A through F, 100 to 0-based grading standard. One teacher has already adopted standards-based grading, using one to four to indicate success in understanding the curriculum. So, it is a hybrid because the teacher started, and we have agreed to transition by our six-marking term. And that was one of the ways in which we moved and changed our grading practices to be a true credit recovery program.

Teacher F expressed concern about working at a site where the administration was the lone voice to initiate change. Teacher F agreed there is a need to align and modernize grading practices but repeatedly reported there will be significant conflict. The feeling of a top-down decision that did not include teachers' voices was a common theme in her concerns. The only training was an optional teacher meeting; half of the teachers did not participate:

At the beginning of this year, the administration brought up doing standards-based versus whatever. And it was on one of those optional teacher meetings, not like a mandatory teacher meeting, even though everybody will be affected by it. And any sort of training that happened at that meeting, only a chunk of the teachers got it, which is very unfortunate. So, there's a lot of confusion right now because of that. We need training, and I haven't received any updates.

Shared or Uniform Site Grading Practices

Shared or uniform grading systems increase transparency and support students' ability to decipher the grading expectations in multiple classrooms (Feldman, 2019b). Despite working in

a small school with fewer teachers to align practices, all continuation teachers reported that grading is left to the individual teacher. With the expectation of one site, teachers reported a common approach to assigning variable credits based on site policy. All teachers shared a lack of alignment with traditional letter grades, with little effort to align practices. Despite this reality, all teachers acknowledged the value of a transparent and uniform approach to grading.

Teacher B stated the following about uniform grading:

When a whole school has similar grading practices, it's not like a surprise for a kid. Does that make sense? Like if there's uniformity? We just had a meeting to talk about uniform IEP, so the language is all the same. When everybody practices it in their classroom, there are no surprises. ... So, if there's uniformity around the staff on how they grade and their expectations, it makes it easier for the kid, the family, and the teacher to express, "Hey, this is what we expect in our school."

Three sites reported an informalized transition, with an increase in conversations and the adoption of standard grading practices. Sites focusing on credits open the discussion with a focus on the criteria teachers use to determine how to award student credits. Teacher C shared the following practice:

We usually meet at least once a month to talk, just teachers, about what we're doing. And a lot of it comes down to not grading explicitly, but it's credit-earning. And, so, it's what are we doing that's affecting credit earning? And it's usually helpful. When I started, there were definitely perceptions that certain teachers were easier to get credit from, but that doesn't exist anymore because we are increasingly on the same page. ... It's all different, but it's all maintaining a certain level. And so, it's just checking in with each other.

Teacher E's school site has a similar practice and was optimistic about the changes at their school site:

We do a lot of collaborating with our common prep, which is helpful. I think the fact that we have new teachers and half our faculty helped get everyone on board with equitable grading practices. ... It was like a blessing in disguise. So, the new teachers are on board.

Struggle with Alignment and Potential Conflict

The California Education Code Section 49066 (California Office of Legislative Counsel, 1976) ensures the classroom instructor has the sole discretion to assign students grades, which complicates large-scale change. Despite the benefits of aligning school grading practices and the positive impact of grading transparency, teachers reported concerns about reaching a consensus on a common schoolwide grading policy. Four participants openly shared doubts about reaching an agreement, especially given the emotional attachment to firmly held beliefs. Teacher D provided the following reason for the tension around grading consensus and the clash of personal and professional philosophy:

I think it's a big conflict due to individual philosophy of where the kids are coming from, right? Some teachers believe this kid is barely struggling to graduate high school. And, if they're turning in all the assignments, why should it matter if they're here? We're not going to get them into Harvard anyway, right? They're not even graduating with enough credits to be eligible for most 4-years. So, just let them have a seat and pass them. Then, other teachers are like, how are you doing them any favors in life if they can skip work and still get paid? And, it's like this sort of tension between those two perspectives of where we are with our grading policy because both sides are right.

Teacher F had a similar sentiment and expanded on the challenges of the site administration with creating effective change:

Because everybody has their own opinions, we have people who have been here for years, who are like, no, this is how we do it. This is the way we've always done it.

We've tried everything else, and this is it. We have new people who want to step up into the 21st century. So, I think that our administration has their work cut out for them.

Effects of the Pandemic

The interviews took place in October 2022. California public schools were closed in March 2020, and educational services were provided through distance learning. Teachers had no preparation to meet their student's academic and social-emotional needs. When school resumed, all stakeholders were affected by the pandemic. The interviews uncovered the forever altered perception and practice of continuation teachers.

Increased Empathy

All seven teachers reported tremendous concern for their student's well-being. The stories ranged from students assuming adult responsibilities, such as caring for siblings and working full time to participating in class from the family bathroom due to the lack of space in their households. Continuation schools typically enroll students with significant personal and academic challenges (Foley & Pang, 2006), which were exacerbated by the pandemic. In spring 2021, California schools started transitioning back to in-person instruction; however, the effects are still felt in classrooms. Upon reflection, Teacher G shared the reason for searching for a different means to evaluate student learning: "I wanted to build kids up, not break kids down. And, yeah, I don't think it's where I started the journey. But that was the straw that broke the camel's back."

All seven teachers reported changes to their grading practices and significantly lowered standards. Teacher E changed their grading practices:

Well, I changed because I had to. They were learning differently because everything was for math. It's like science; usually, we're doing things hands-on. Suddenly, they had to learn by osmosis, by just watching. I have an over-the-top camera, and I'm projecting on the screen, and they're watching me work out the problems. And it was very different. It was almost like I had to revert to what I had stopped doing with my instruction over the years. I had to go back to stand and deliver instructions.

Teacher A shared the following regarding their altered grading practices:

Absolutely. And it affected my grading, but I was happy to see kids. So, my grading was a little softer than it was traditionally. And we went over things a little slower because I didn't have the same reach I would have in person regarding them being able to get the work done. And me being able to check for understanding in a one-on-one situation. So, it affected the way that was graded.

Teachers E and G discovered equitable and standards-based grading in the quest to find answers. Both instructors were seeking solutions during distance learning. One instructor found a district workshop on equitable grading and joined a cohort. The second teacher discovered equitable grading through a relative and sought opportunities to expand their learning. Both instructors credit the distance learning experience and the need to find solutions with the discovery of their reformed practice and serve as teacher leaders in their district and school.

The Emergence of Equitable Grading and Common Grading Practices

Five teachers reported deep concern for the lack of direction during the pandemic. The lack of guidance encouraged the teacher leaders to seek resources, which led to their

involvement in equitable grading cohorts. All teachers were open to learning and expanding their practice. As educators are increasingly aware of equitable grading practices and districts, they alter their practices, and school sites are adjusting. Five teachers reported that their staff is reviewing their grading practices in response to student needs and current research. Continuation high schools are also responding to the recent shift in education.

Knowledge of equitable grading ranged, with some teachers demonstrating a high degree of understanding based on their service as site teacher leaders. Despite working in different districts, both received highly structured district- and site-level professional development and participated in equitable grading cohorts. In addition, both teachers serve as teacher leaders on their campuses and design professional learning opportunities for their colleagues. Teachers G and E shared details to explain their approach to equitable grading (Table 7).

Table 7

Participants' Shared Equitable Grading Practices

Common Grading Practices
Standards-based assessments, from formative assessments to measure student learning during instruction to summative.
Rubrics to provide an overview of mastery.
Opportunity to retake assessments. Late work is accepted, with the understanding that students learn at different times.
Non-academic behaviors do not factor into student grades.
The grading scale was adjusted with 50% as the minimum score.
The instructors followed the school policy and, when applicable, awarded variable credits. Despite the practice, the instructors are more focused on the learning outcomes of their students.

The remaining instructors had a varied degree of knowledge of equitable grading practices. Two teachers were issued a book on grading practices and participated in training. The two teachers had a working knowledge of equitable grading with the ability to provide the correct definition and identify practices. They openly shared that they were learning; consequently, it was too early to alter their practices. The remaining three teachers were unfamiliar with equitable grading practices and had no opportunity to participate in formal training. They provided an educated guess based on the term “equity” and the need to attend to the needs of individual students. Still, they lacked an understanding of how that translates to grading and evaluation systems of student learning. Teacher D described equitable grading as “measurable growth” but could not provide details to convey a grading system to capture student growth.

Continuation Teachers’ Perceptions of Grades

To understand continuation teachers’ values, approaches, and desired outcomes, participants were invited to respond to questions regarding their perceptions of grading. To guide the discussion, the researcher asked participants, “What is the most important grading criteria? Why?” Four teachers responded that the grade must demonstrate the student’s understanding of the standards or academic learning objective. Teacher F stated shared the following viewpoint about grading criteria:

I’m looking at how well they understand the content and how well they’re addressing the standard. With the literacy standards, I need you to verbalize them, pull things out, and give me those main ideas, you know, to prove your point.

Teacher E echoed this sentiment: “The student understands the content and standards. If they can show me that they’ve learned. And if they can do that, they know it because I’m not telling them to memorize these equations, proving that they’re learning by proof.”

One teacher was focused on learning and academic growth but not on the measurement of understanding course objectives and standards. Teacher D stated, “I think it’s intellectual growth, personally, in my opinion, because that doesn’t necessarily have to be academic.” The other three teachers were more interested in motivating students and acknowledging effort. It was important for students to demonstrate that they learned the academic course objectives, but a greater emphasis was placed on growth and effort. Teacher A stated, “Effort. Effort is the biggest criteria. Basically, I see that it’s important to them, then I have things where they can resubmit the work and make up some points they lost, but you have to care.”

Grades send a message to students and the world about their classroom performance, so teachers were asked to share the message they hope to impart through grading. Teacher responses centered on encouraging students to demonstrate effort. In multiple responses, effort is rewarded. Teachers want students to see the rewards of persistently pursuing their goals. Five teachers viewed grades as a tool to motivate students by acknowledging effort: Teacher A stated,

I hope that the grade reflects their effort and their skills. I hope their grade doesn’t reflect whether they like me, but it’s like, hey, you can do this. You earned an A, and you earned a B. I just hope they don’t fail. I wish we could give effort grades.

Teacher G hoped students would learn from the challenge with a renewed sense of hope:

You can do it. You can do it! And you may not always do it the first time. You may not always do it the second time, but don’t give up. Keep trying because that’s how you

learn. Learning isn't a one-and-done. Nowhere else do we do one-and-done? Nowhere else do we grade on practice.

Teacher E shared a similar sentiment with the desire to encourage resilience: "Grading is not a black-and-white thing. The first time a student does something that will not always clearly describe their ability." Two teachers were explicit in the message to acknowledge growth.

Teacher C stated, "Growth matters. Doing more than the bare minimum matters. My message, my hope, is rewarding students for multiple ways to show that they're learning and growing."

Grading in an Alternative Education School

Alternative learning communities are structured to respond to the needs of students who were underserved in comprehensive and mainstream schools. To better understand differences, the researcher asked the participants about their perceptions of grading in an alternative setting versus a traditional comprehensive high school. With the exception of one teacher, all participants had teaching experience in a traditional comprehensive high school. Four instructors had significant experience in middle school, adult education, and university programs. Five teachers reported that their grading practices do not change; the alteration is in the pedagogy and curriculum. Teacher A stated, "I grade the same with some flexibility and understanding of different circumstances and credit. I teach the same, with more time and explanation, because of gaps in preparation. I teach the basics more."

Teacher E participates in the district math PLC and equitable grading cohort; consequently, the instructor is aware of districtwide grading practices. The instructor shared, "The comprehensive high school math department is giving students opportunities to retake quizzes. We are all moving towards equitable grading." Only two teachers expressed an interest

in an alternative grading system. One teacher strongly asserted the need to grade differently.

Teacher C expressed the following comments about grading in a continuation high school:

I consider our credit earning focus of grading different since some students come in, and the focus is to recover credits. They want to know how to do that, and that's the hard part sometimes because it's not necessarily the easiest thing to do.

Three teachers emphasized the benefit of small classes to provide increased support and build relationships, which is helpful to motivate students and assess for learning. To further accentuate the role of alternative, Teacher E emphasized the need and ability to teach in an alternative style to help the student grasp concepts:

When I was teaching in another city, I had to teach math to students new to the country with limited English. That's when I started using drawings and tiles or three-dimensional objects. Kids love the different approaches. ... I always teach through an alternative lens, and you're learning it the way your brain wants to learn, which is why you're doing so well.

Teacher D shared that community is the difference for student success, not the grading:

The thing about our particular school is we only have like eight to ten kids in a class. The biggest thing that's helping them now is the actual ability to build relationships in the learning community. It's a lot of face-to-face relationships and communication to hold people accountable.

Chapter Summary

The interviews revealed that continuation school teachers have a range of grading practices, including grading procedures commonly associated with equitable grading. The use of variable credits to evaluate student progress is a non-traditional method of evaluating student

progress that is common in alternative settings. The study revealed the impact of collaboration and professional development on teachers' grading practices and the benefits of a uniform approach. This study was conducted during a unique time in education, based on the pandemic and the aftermath of the disruption to society and schools. As we pieced together each teacher's voice, the researcher uncovered a picture of alternative education grading practices and their impact on students to inform future training opportunities.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

Summary of the Study

Chapter four provided an overview of the study findings organized by the identified themes that emerged using qualitative research methods. Using the findings, Chapter Five will address the study research questions, address limitations, and provide recommendations for practice and future research. The chapter structure will open with a summary of the study: (a) purpose and research questions, (b) Methodology, and (c) correlation to the literature. Following, the chapter will address the study's limitations, implications for practice, future areas of research, and conclusion.

Purpose and Research Questions

This qualitative study examined continuation high school teachers' grading practices and perceptions. The study focused on alternative credit-recovery schools that serve students who are deficient in credits, often as a result of numerous personal challenges that interfere with learning. This population is often underserved in traditional schools. Alternative education schools, in comparison to traditional high schools, serve a disproportionate number of African American and Latinx, male, and lower socioeconomic populations with the purpose of dropout prevention. When appropriately implemented, grades reflect a student's academic progress and understanding of the course objectives. Traditional grading practices have historically been used to rank and sort, serve as tools of compliance and motivation, and are riddled with mathematical inaccuracies. McMillan (2019) wrote, "There are relatively few studies that focus directly on teachers' perceptions of grading (e.g., by asking about teachers' attitudes and values)." (p.96). To increase understanding of grading practices in alternative settings, the study aimed to add the

voices of continuation teachers to the narrative. In addition to contributing to the body of grading research, by adding the alternative perspective, researchers and practitioners can identify the current perceptions, strengths, and challenges that contribute to or hinder the implementation of equitable grading practices in continuation high schools.

Research Question 1

One of the primary objectives of continuation high schools is credit recovery and dropout prevention. Given the purpose of these small schools, what are the common grading practices?

Variable Credits

The study findings report the use of variable credits in three out of six continuation schools. Alternative education schools are unique in the structure of student evaluation methods. Traditional schools use the Carnegie Method, which provides a standard amount of credit for each course based on a set number of hours (Patrick, 2021). In response to student needs, alternative schools issue credits as students complete work. The guidance for variable credits dates to the *Handbook on Continuation Education in California* (John, 1968). The goal is to provide ongoing rewards, which increases student motivation and supports re-engagement in learning. Variable credit helps students reduce the number of failing grades by assigning a letter grade and credit for work completed. Students who are frequently absent, enroll late in the semester or are unproductive still receive credit toward their high school diploma. Many schools provide credits based on productivity and attendance. The more students attend and complete work, the more credits they earn. The use of variable credits has evolved, with some schools rewarding credits based on the outcome of academic grades. Of the three schools that use variable credit, the following model is utilized:

1. Productivity and Attendance: Students receive a point for attending each class period and demonstrating productivity by completing in-class assignments. Each day is a point, and 15 points equal a credit. There are opportunities outside of class to bank time and increase credits.
2. Evidence of Learning: Students receive credits based on their academic grades. A passing grade of A or B earns the full number of credits for the quarter. An additional .5 credits is rewarded for students with attendance as a motivator.
3. Teacher Discretion: Students are awarded full or partial credit based on the teacher's discretion for each academic quarter. The school does not have a set policy for determining the number of credits, and each teacher has a separate system.

One school does not offer variable credits, but due to recent attendance concerns, students must complete a baseline number of attendance days to earn full credit.

Given that students are referred to alternative education schools based on a lack of academic credits, not grade point average, credit recovery is the central theme for the grading practices of variable credit schools. Some teachers reported that they only focus on variable credits, and the academic grade is secondary. The researcher noted that schools that offered variable credit emphasized productivity, attendance, and academic behaviors more during the interview as indicators of student performance. Teachers who were not credit-focused provided more details regarding the variety of learning assessments and the ability of students to demonstrate mastery of the academic standards. The removal of variable credits increased the focus on learning. It should be noted that these instructors struggled with providing full credit for students enrolled late and with poor attendance, which consequently increased the risk of a failing grade.

Professional Learning Community and Cycle of Assessments

Continuation teachers use a variety of assessments to measure student learning. Three teachers participated in Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) and had highly developed cycles of assessments, including formative assessments that guide direct instruction. The assessments allowed the instructor to revisit the curriculum and learning objectives to determine if students were meeting the intended learning outcomes. All three reported the use of standards-based grading. There was a great variety of summative assessments, ranging from projects, exams, and group work. The commonality of the three instructors with highly developed assessments was participation in a PLC and minimal focus on variable credits. The findings suggest that these teachers benefited from increased professional learning, support, and collaboration with other teachers. The PLC model has an embedded cycle of inquiry which encourages a cycle of assessments. All three teachers engaged in equitable grading by allowing test retakes, minimal grading with 50% as the lowest grade, excluding behavior in calculating the grade, and an assessment cycle. The teachers continually discussed the learning targets and standards, and there was clarity regarding how students demonstrated mastery of the standards.

The remaining instructors used assessments, but there was no clear cycle of assessments to guide instruction and respond to student learning. All seven instructors used rubrics. A special education teacher had a highly developed rubric to assist general education teachers with accommodations and meeting IEP goals. The remaining instructors provided examples but focused more on student assignments and projects. One teacher shared that she used to practice standards-based grading but reverted to traditional points-based grading due to the pandemic. One particular instructor rejected the use of letter grades and expressed concern that standards-based grading was a tool that disproportionately supported students with resources;

consequently, the instructor focused solely on productivity and credits. The instructor had an alternate system using checks and pluses to determine the quality of student work and feedback. The instructor was well-versed in the course standards but did not provide a detailed accounting of assessments to measure student learning.

Relationships and Alt Ed Structure

The findings revealed that instructors were familiar with their student's personal and academic challenges. Even instructors with rigid responses regarding student lack of productivity, attendance, and timelines were understanding and provided grace. All teachers credited the small size and enriched relationships as a significant intervention to help struggling learners. The small size enabled increased opportunities to check in with students regarding concerns and allowed the instructor to determine the best solution to support students. Instructors shared a variety of structures, from weekly advisory classes to student-teacher conferences, to check with students regarding their progress. There was a deep empathy for the challenges faced by students, which was exacerbated during the pandemic. Instructors held the line on expectations, with an understanding of the mission of continuation schools to meet the needs of this unique population. Several instructors expressed concern and anger when colleagues appeared to be unresponsive to the needs of their students.

Influence of the Pandemic

The researcher anticipated the pandemic would influence teachers' grading practices and experiences. The magnitude of this influence resonated throughout the interview. The effect on students during and after the pandemic was a reoccurring theme. Empathy for the plight of students increased and remained with teachers. Teachers spoke with passion about the students' plight and experience. Alternative schools serve students with difficult circumstances and

disproportionate poverty, exacerbated during the pandemic. Distance learning left teachers with no guidance, and they struggled to support students in virtual classrooms in a school that thrives off of relationships. Equally concerning was the task of teaching struggling learners with no in-person contact. Given the circumstances, all seven teachers reported changing their grading practices. Consistently, teachers shared that they granted grace and significantly lowered the standards.

Two teachers used the crisis to improve their grading practices. In the search for answers, they discovered equitable grading and joined PLC equitable grading cohorts. The teachers are in different schools and districts but discovered the same level of support. They have continued this support and serve as teacher leaders in their school sites and district. Two teachers expressed frustration and shared that they are hardening the expectations given that students have had a year to adjust to the return to in-person schooling. All teachers reported the consistent challenges of low attendance, lack of productivity and engagement, and grappling with student trauma following the pandemic. Teachers expressed concern with grading students using traditional practices, given the current reality.

Research Question 2

What are continuation teachers' perceptions of grading practices?

Revisiting McMillan (2019), 'There are relatively few studies that focus directly on teachers' perceptions of grading (e.g., by asking about teachers' attitudes and values). The findings that teachers include effort and other nonachievement factors when determining grades suggest that these factors are perceived as important' (p. 96).

During the interview, teachers were asked to identify the most important factor in determining student grades. Table 8 presents the responses participants shared that reflect their values and attitudes when assigning grades.

Table 8

Teachers' Values

Participants	Teacher's Responses that Reflect Importance and Values
Participant A	Ability to follow directions, effort
Participant B	Intellectual growth
Participant C	Grading is biased-resistant—focus on what are they learning?
Participant D	Effort. The student has to care
Participant E	Growth in whatever way
Participant F	If they can show me that they've learned
Participant G	I'm looking at how well they understand the content

Measuring student learning is the most identified value and remains at the forefront of grading practices. Teachers want to know if students are learning, have evidence of growth, and are applying effort. The researcher noted that two of the three teacher responses that emphasized learning were shared by teachers who participated in the grading for equity PLC and served as teacher leaders on their campus. Only one teacher was specific regarding academics, but all the comments centered around the need for growth in their class. Two teachers want effort, and one shared that he gives much grace when students demonstrate effort and caring, indicating that students who cannot demonstrate mastery at the moment are provided grace with their final grade if they show effort.

Messaging Through Grading

Grades communicate a message regarding the students' performance. Resh's study indicated that students are impacted by academic feedback, and their grades influence their perspective of the world and social justice (Resh, 2010). The study's findings reveal that based on feedback about continuation teachers' perceptions of grades, their intended messages are rooted in encouragement. Teachers hoped the grades served as a motivator and a lesson of the benefits of hard work and perseverance. Given the student population in alternative schools, encouragement is powerful. Teachers carrying this spirit into the classroom can significantly boost student confidence and learning. It also demonstrates grace and understanding, which struggling students need, especially after the pandemic.

Research Question 3

Are continuation teachers' grading practices reflective of the current guidance on equitable grading?

The findings revealed three distinct groups of teachers. The first group consisted of experts on the Feldman model of equitable grading. Two teachers had extensive training and participated in cohorts focused on learning and implementing equitable grading. They were teacher leaders in the organization, which entailed designing and training other teachers. The second group reflected the emerging practice of Feldman equitable grading. Two instructors were somewhat familiar with equitable grading but still learning. They participated in limited professional learning and shared that there was a learning gap. Both teachers had adopted minimal grading with a baseline score of 50% versus 0, including missing assignments. The third group consisted of three teachers unfamiliar with the Feldman model, but they were open to learning. They expressed an understanding of their students' needs and the effects of the trauma

caused by their previous educational experiences. Their interpretation of equitable grading centered on their knowledge of equity, which involved the instructor tailoring instruction and grading to the needs of individual students.

The Feldman model of equitable grading is emerging in education. Like all school levels, alternative education teachers are learning and implementing equitable grading. There are unique features of alternative education grading practices designed specifically for alternative education students (John, 1968). Using variable credits decreases the opportunities for a student to fail a class and increases motivation. Despite the benefits, this use can be considered inequitable if the learning is de-emphasized, which produces substandard instruction. Prior research has voiced these concerns. Bush (2012) stated, “however, one potential drawback of performance-based grading and crediting is an intensified focus on the quantity and completeness of work product, rather than work quality in overall student learning” (p. 3).

An important finding is that grading practices that measure learning should not differ from those used in traditional settings. The adjustment for struggling learners should take place in the delivery of the curriculum and instruction, with adjustments to pacing, class size, and differentiated instruction. The adjustment should not be the absence of a variety of assessments to guide instruction and measure student learning. The assessment cycle should include a clear learning goal, cycles of assessments, and Feldman (2019b) equitable grading strategies (biased resistant, accurate, and encourage motivation).

Methodology

Qualitative research explores peoples’ lives, behaviors, emotions, and perceptions (Billups, 2021, p. 1). This study sought to add the voices of alternative education teachers to the body of grading research; therefore, the researcher used a qualitative method to broaden the

understanding of continuation teachers' perceptions. The study was conducted with a brief survey regarding the participant's background and experience, a brief overview of grading practices, and closed with the method for scheduling a virtual interview. All the questions centered on grading were revisited during the interview process. The data collection consisted of the findings from interviews with seven teachers, from six different alternative education schools, in five districts throughout Northern California. The districts were located near Sacramento and the Bay Area, so most teachers serve students in or around an urban or large suburban area. There were no rural school districts included in the data collection process. Interviews were conducted via Zoom, which is an online meeting program. The researcher attempted to pose questions in a conversation style to help the teacher feel at ease and open to sharing. The researcher is an alternative education principal and former teacher, so a commonality increases the comfort level during the interviews. Following the interview transcription, the researcher used coding to decipher the study findings and identify themes.

Correlation to the Literature

Small in size but large in impact, alternative settings are schools for students who need an alternative learning environment. Dating to 1911, the schools are designed to meet the needs of underserved and struggling learners in traditional schools; consequently, the enrollment has historically been male, lower socioeconomic status, and students of color (Kelly, 1993; Ruiz De Velasco et al., 2008; Williamson, 2008). Given the population and purpose, the practices have a significant impact on African American and Latinx students. Alternative schools vary in theme, purpose, and structure, but continuation schools often called credit-recovery schools, enroll students who are behind on credits and need academic remediation (DeLoach, 2016). Similar to the early model of continuation schools, those focused on credit recovery commonly use variable

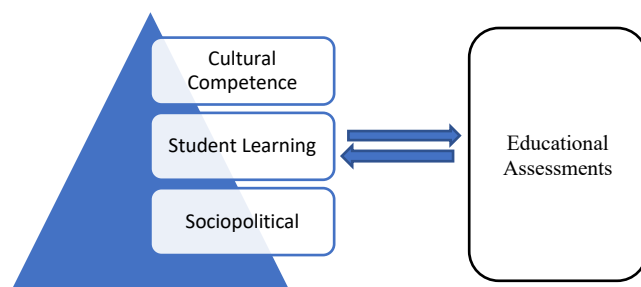
credits. Designed to meet the needs of a highly transient population, the goal is to provide credit for work completed, which would serve as motivation to re-engage in the learning process(John, 1968). The focus on variable credits as a predominant form of measuring student progress has been noted in the literature, including the interpretation that his use of evaluation has lowered student expectations. The study revealed a variety of variable credit systems, ranging from the original system of emphasizing productivity and attendance to credit reflecting academic performance(John, 1968; Kelly, 1993; Powell, 2020). In addition to variable credits, alternative education schools are noted for positive staff and student relationships, increasing student support and engagement. These relationships build a healthy culture that enriches the student and staff experience(McGee & Lin, 2017). Throughout the study, the ability to connect with students, which provided support and encouragement, was repeatedly referenced by study participants. The small size allowed increased opportunities for individual check-ins and small class sizes to tailor instruction for students and address learning deficits. The high level of support was a consistent practice shared by continuation school teachers.

Examining the findings through culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP), the researcher noted that continuation schoolteachers are aware of their students' lifestyles and academic needs and are quick to adapt (Ladson-Billings, 1995). This three-prong approach to powerful teaching focuses on student learning, reflected through academic growth, not state-mandated test scores. Cultural competence affirms students' cultural identity and background, and sociopolitical consciousness prepares students to challenge and meet the needs of their community. The focus on student learning is the most substantial connection between grading and assessment. A study by (El Alaoui & Pilotti, 2021) states that CRP currently primarily concentrates on instruction; however, the ability to determine student growth and responsive instruction requires a system of

assessments. Responsive teaching requires clear learning objectives and formative assessment, which measures student learning during the instruction and responds to student difficulties in grasping the concept, aligned with a focus on student learning. El Alaoui and Pilotti (2021) argued that “CRP dictates that summative assessment also be used as a tool for learning” (p.3).

This study’s findings revealed that continuation teachers used a variety of formative and summative assessments to measure student learning. The use varied, with some teachers utilizing a well-developed system with formative, interim, and summative assessments based on the learning standards. There was a correlation in the teachers’ perceptions. Teachers whose responses focused on learning utilized more assessments than instructors who centered the attainment of credits in their grading structures. In addition, student learning and growth were repeatedly emphasized as the most important criteria for grading. The study did not capture the learning needs of a culturally diverse student body. Still, instructors were aware of their students’ challenges and were willing to accommodate them to remove obstacles that impeded progress. Grades are transparent, as evidenced by all teachers using an online grading system showing student progress. Most schools had an advisory class for intentionally monitoring academic progress.

At the conclusion of this study, as it pertains to the topic of equitable grading, the researcher highlighted the impact and range of assessments that informs student learning (Ghaicha, 2016; Guskey, 2005).

Figure 1*Revised Framework*

The use of assessments in a manner that is (Feldman, 2019b) accurate, biased-resistant, and student motivation is increasing in education. As educators become more familiar with the Feldman model of equitable grading, it becomes more widespread in classrooms. Continuation schools are embracing equity and an increase in professional learning. The six schools represented by the interviewees were re-examining their grading practices. Four school sites have received training, and the changes were emerging across the staff. Four teachers had a grading scale with a 50% as the lowest grade, and two teachers utilized the four-point scale, which increases grading accuracy. All teachers shared that they did not assign homework, but students were welcome to finish the classroom outside of school time. Attendance and behavior were not factored into letter grades; however, they impacted variable credits. Of the three schools that used variable credits, all were open to teacher interpretation of participation and productivity, which is not bias-resistant. Finally, four teachers allowed students to retake assessments, and all teachers allowed late work. The six schools had varying degrees of commonality, but the focus on equitable grading created the conversation for staff to align teacher grading systems (Feldman, 2019b).

Limitations

Teachers were recruited via email with an invitation that included a study description. Most teachers who participated were very committed to equitable grading or interested in learning more about grading practices. Even instructors whose methods differed from the Feldman model were open to learning. Consequently, teacher feedback is limited by this perspective and does not represent all teachers. A more random sample would include divergent viewpoints, encompassing teachers vehemently opposed to change and equitable grading. There was a significant cross-section of teachers representing different schools, districts, and approaches to grading. However, the rural voice was not included in this study.

Further, this study is located in one state, and findings could change in a different region of the country or world. Finally, the most significant limitation is the timing of the study. The researcher intended to focus solely on alternative education teachers' perceptions and grading practices, but there was a third element in the study: the pandemic. The pandemic and the emergence of equitable grading significantly altered the study. Schools and their systems are evolving, so the study unintentionally reflects the effects of the two movements. Findings could change as this story unfolds.

Implications for Practice

Given the effects of grading in determining the learning outcomes and future of students in continuation schools, the researcher offers the following guidance with the intention of providing guidance for grading practices for continuation school students. The following are the implications for practitioners.

Professional Development and Training

There is ample research to suggest the lack of professional teacher training around the development of grading practices, with teachers relying on old beliefs and creating systems in isolation (Feldman, 2019b; Link, 2019). Given the cycles of assessments, the measurement of student learning should receive the same energy and focus as teaching instructional pedagogy. The two practices are aligned, and the learning should be connected. Starting in teacher credential programs and extending to veteran teachers, grading systems should be continually revisited.

Variable Credit Is a Means to Increase Student Outcomes, But Teachers Need to Maintain a Focus on Rigor and Learning

The concept of variable credit to motivate and lessen failing grades is rooted in equity. This system was designed specifically for struggling learners with personal challenges that often affect attendance and learning. Students can benefit from both systems when paired with a letter grade system that reflects learning. The variable credit system is problematic when it is based on productivity and attendance and becomes the primary grading emphasis, and learning becomes secondary. This calls into question the academic program and how we prepare students to meet a world that requires post-secondary education and career training. Our expectations, beliefs, and vision for alternative education students must remain high; anything less is inequitable and problematic. Given the population these schools serve, with an increased number of students who are Latinx, Black, male, and of lower socioeconomic status, alternative education schools can become systems of social reproduction versus upliftment and social justice if practices are not examined with high expectations and equity. We must do more than graduate our students; we must educate them.

Assessment Cycles

Grading and summative assessments are a step in a long cycle of assessments. Grading has been treated separately, despite researched best practices that demonstrate grading should be aligned to instruction and a cycle of assessments. Student learning is continually measured, instruction is adjusted, and the student and teacher have frequent indicators of the student's ability to demonstrate mastery. In addition, all teachers shared that they post grades, which provides transparency and the ability to monitor progress.

Teacher Collaboration and PLCs

The PLC model, with common assessments and teacher collaboration around the development of assessments and instruction, offers strong support for continuation teachers. Participants who participated in a PLC use the best practices, indicating the need for increased professional development and support. Alternative education schools are small, and teachers are often a department of one. This does not hamper collaboration, examining learning outcomes, and developing assessment models. The increased alignment will increase transparency for students, which will ultimately support learning.

Recommendation for Practice

Professional Learning for Educators to Modernize Grading Practices

As the field of education evolves in response to the movement to implement equitable grading practices and post-pandemic adjustments, educators are encouraged to seek professional learning. Given that grading was designed to sort and identify students versus measure student learning, all educators need professional learning on modern and equitable grading practices in the classroom. Professional development requires time and resources, which should be prioritized and provided by district and site administrators.

Learn the Practice and Benefits of Culturally Responsive Pedagogy

Equity is more than a noun to describe a way of thinking or perspective; it is a verb and a practice. If we are going to expand equitable practices, we must be intentional in our professional learning. The CRP framework focuses on teacher beliefs that drive our actions and the trifecta of student learning, culture, and sociopolitical justice to provide a rich academic environment that is nurturing yet empowering for all students.

Partnership for Professional Learning on Effective Grading

A common theme in the findings was a partnership between school site administration and teacher leaders to transform grading practices. Given the ownership of grades, as mandated by the education code, the role of a teacher leader increases buy-in and provides valuable data as practices evolve. Teacher leaders need the support of site administrators to provide resources (funding and time) and support with altering the local work and vision to include equitable grading practices. The study revealed that successful schools had a transparent partnership.

Maintain a Focus on Learning

Given the role of credits in determining student progress toward graduation, it is understandable that continuation schools heavily emphasize credit. The practice is beneficial because of the use of variable credits to decrease failing grades, increase motivation, and provide credits for transient students. There is the caution that this practice is not biased resisted; therefore, teachers need to increase uniformity around the criteria for earning credits. Educators are cautioned to maintain a focus on student learning and instruction. Continuation educators are obligated to ensure students receive a quality education that prepares students for college and careers. School site administrators must remain mindful of providing a quality academic program and support the need to focus on learning.

A Unified Approach to Grading to Measure Academic Grades and Variable Credits

To increase learning outcomes and transparency, school sites need consistent grading practices that are easily shared and communicated to students and families. Continuation schools need a common approach to variable credits, including the criteria to determine the metric system for awarding credits. In addition, teachers should build common practices for academic letter grades that measure student learning. The commonality will increase transparency, provide clear expectations, and support teacher collaboration.

Teachers Should Use a Variety of Assessments

The guidance to utilize grading as a tool to measure learning is not new; however, the increased focus on assessments is changing grading. As educators expand assessments to inform instruction, teachers are encouraged to develop a series of assessments starting with a clear learning target and formative assessments during instruction to determine the learning needs of students. An interim assessment should follow the formative assessment to determine mid-course progress, and a summative provides feedback on the student's progress and informs the next learning steps.

Participate in Professional Learning Communities

The findings suggest that PLC participation increases teacher awareness and the development of assessments. Alternative education schools often grapple with implementing PLCs due to the size of the teaching staff, and most teachers represent an entire department. The size complicates the ability to develop common assessments central to the inquiry cycle utilized in the traditional PLC model. By focusing on skills, teachers can develop common assessments.

Future Research

As equitable grading continues to expand, continued research on the implementation, outcomes and needs for adjustment should be researched in the future. This study occurs during the emergence of equitable grading. As this practice evolves, further research would uncover the effects and future adjustments with new research and increased implementation. Given the tremendous effect of the pandemic, the world and system of education were altered. The effects of the pandemic on schools and alternative education in particulate should be researched to determine how schools responded to the changed learning and social-emotional needs of students. Finally, the study findings reveal that grading practices based on learning should not differ from traditional settings, and academic gaps should be addressed through differentiating instruction. To increase equitable outcomes, continuation academic programs and supports need further study.

Conclusion

Regardless of where the educator falls in the spectrum of implementing equitable grading in their classroom, a common thread in all discussions was the sincere desire to do what is best for students. During the discussions about grading, the philosophy and practice were scattered, but the sincere desire to support students remained the same. This strongest-held belief should motivate us to re-examine and adjust our approach to grading. As a career educator, I do not believe any educator sets out to cause harm, and we are all doing our best with few resources and limited support. Maya Angelou said, “Do the best you can until you know better. Then when you know better, do better.” With a lens on equity and student outcomes, professional learning needs to be expanded, and grading practices revisited to reduce harm and amplify the practices that provide equitable outcomes for all students. Often overlooked, the same urgency and

accountability must hold for alternative education schools. The system will remain inequitable until all students benefit from rigorous standards-based instruction that measures student learning (grading). Teacher leaders and administrators must lead this charge to benefit our students.

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APPENDIX A: RECRUITMENT EMAIL



Hello,

My name is Tobi Page, and I am a doctoral candidate at the University of the Pacific. More importantly, I am the principal of [REDACTED] an alternative education school in the [REDACTED]. I am researching alternative education teachers' perceptions of grading practices for my dissertation. I only need **one** additional teacher interview to complete my study. This has been a very long journey, and I am close to the finish line. If you can spare any time, would you be willing to participate in my study?

I am only requesting three things:

1. Sign a Research Consent Form
2. Complete a 10-minute survey
3. Participate in a 20–40-minute Zoom interview

After all three steps, I will send a \$20 Starbucks card to express my gratitude.

Please let me know if you are interested, and I will send the consent form and survey link.

If you are not available, please feel free to forward this to another alt-ed teacher.

Thank you for your consideration,
Tobi Page

APPENDIX B: PRE-SURVEY GOOGLE FORM

Alternative Education Teacher's Survey

Please provide an overview of your grading practices. There are no right or wrong answers.
Thank you for your support with my research dissertation project.

1. How long have you been a teacher?

2. How long have you taught in an alternative education school? What subject do you currently teach?

3. Are grading practices in your school individual (every teacher has their individual practice) or is there a common school-wide approach to grading?

Mark only one oval.

☐ Individual

☐ Hybrid, each teacher has an individual approach combined with common school-practices

☐ Common schoolwide practice, all teaches share a common grading practice based on school policy

☐ Other:

4. 4. Are grading practices and policies published for students and parents?

Mark only one oval.

- ☐ Yes, the grading practices are highly publicized in two or more publications (school website, student-parent handbook, syllabi)
- ☐ Yes, individual teachers share a course syllabus only
- ☐ No, individual teachers decide the best way to communicate grading practices
- ☐ Other: _____

5. Does your school offer variable credit?

Mark only one oval.

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No
- ☐ Other: _____

6. 6. When grading, what is your initial approach?

Mark only one oval.

- ☐ We are a variable credit school; calculate the number of credits completed for the class.
- ☐ We are a variable credit school; calculate the letter grade followed by the credits.
- ☐ We do not offer variable credits; we calculate the letter grade.
- ☐ Other: _____

7. 7. If your site awards variable credit, please check all that apply. A student is awarded the number of credits based on the following criteria:

Check all that apply.

- ☐ Mastery of the standards, academic progress (evidence of learning)
- ☐ Date of enrollment, amount of time a student is enrolled in the course
- ☐ Productivity, number of completed assignments
- ☐ Deadlines, credits reduced for late submission of work
- ☐ Attendance
- ☐ Citizenship and behavior
- ☐ Other: _____

8. Are students allowed to submit late assignments?

Mark only one oval.

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No
- ☐ Other: _____

9. 9. Assessment. Do you allow students to retake assessments (tests, projects) when students have a low grade?

Mark only one oval.

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No
- ☐ Other: _____

10. 10. How do you provide updates on academic progress?

Mark only one oval.

- ☐ Grades are posted in a student grading program, and students receive frequent updates. n 1
- ☐ Students receive updates during the school/district grading periods for progress reports and progress reports.
- ☐ Other: _____

11. Do you assign homework?

Mark only one oval.

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No
- ☐ Varies, Students are allowed and encouraged to complete assignments outside of class, but it is not required.
- ☐ Other: _____

12. 12. Are you familiar with equitable grading? If you practice equitable grading strategies, please share?

Mark only one oval.

- ☐ Yes, I am familiar and practice equitable grading strategies
- ☐ Yes, I am familiar but I have not adopted equitable grading strategies
- ☐ No, I am unfamiliar with equitable grading
- ☐ Other: _____

13. If you practice equitable grading strategies, please provide a brief overview of your practice?

14. Open comments. Do you have additional comments?

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Google Forms

APPENDIX C: PARTICIPANT INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Part II: PARTICIPANT INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Thank you for participating. There are no wrong answers; this is not a test. I am only seeking your honest response; your identity is protected. There are times when I will ask questions that sound repetitive; that's just my way of approaching grading from different angles.

The goal of the study is to add the voices of alternative education teachers to the research on grading. Currently, there is little grading research specific to continuation schools.

1. In your survey, you indicated that your site has a common/individual approach to grading. Please expand.
2. Do you consider your grading practices to be standards-based or traditional? Based on your answer, what makes it standards-based and what makes it traditional?
3. How do you measure student learning? What assessments do you use to determine student learning and progress? How do students know what mastery looks like?
4. If you use variable credits, please explain your system for determining the number of credits a student earns at the end of the grading period.
5. When grading students, what is the most important criteria?
6. Given that most students enroll in a continuation school due to a lack of academic credits, how does your grading reflect the students' needs and challenges?
7. Have you taught at a comprehensive high school? Does your grading practice differ? How?
8. Does student attendance, effort, and behavior affect their grade? How?
9. What is your practice regarding late assignments? Homework? Why?

10. How are students able to monitor their grades? What happens when a student has questions or concerns about their grade or progress?
11. Have you received professional development or training on grading practices? Please share.
12. Did the Covid-19 pandemic and distance learning affect your grading practice? How?
13. What is your knowledge of equitable grading? Do you implement this practice in your grading?
14. What message do you hope to impart to your students through grading?
15. Do you have anything else you would like to share?

Thank you for your support.

APPENDIX D: RESEARCH SUBJECTS CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH



BENERD COLLEGE
RESEARCH SUBJECT'S CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH

A Qualitative Study of Alternative Teachers' Practices and Perspectives on Grading

Name of Lead Researcher: Tobi Page

Name of Faculty Advisors: Dr. Anne Zeman & Dr. Laura Hallberg

You are invited to participate in a research study, and your participation is entirely voluntary.

A. **Purpose of Research.** The purpose of this research is:

To gain an understanding of grading practices in alternative education schools, specifically continuation schools.

B. **Duration of Participation.** The expected duration of participation in this study will be one online survey for approximately 10-15 minutes and a one-on-one interview lasting between 20-30 minutes.

C. **Research Procedures.** If you decide to participate, you will be asked to complete a pre-survey and participate in one one-on-one interview (s).

D. **Foreseeable Risks.** There are some risks involved for participants. The possible risks are:

Participants may experience anxiety and discomfort while reflecting upon and responding to questions regarding their personal and professional history and practice.

E. **Benefits.** There is no direct benefit to participating; however, participants may benefit from the following:

- Participants may benefit from critically reflecting on their professional grading practice.
- There is limited research on the experiences and perspectives of educators who work in alternative education schools. Your contribution will be added to the limited body of research, which will benefit present and future students, teachers, and all members of the alternative education community.

F. **Alternative Procedures.** There are no alternative research procedures for this study.

I. CONFIDENTIALITY

We will take reasonable steps to keep confidential any information obtained in connection with this research study that can be identified with you.

Measures to protect your confidentiality are: All participants will be given pseudonyms, and your names will not be in any reports. All records will be kept in a secured location, and the researcher will only have access.

Upon conclusion of the research study, the data obtained will be maintained in a safe, locked or otherwise secured location, and will be destroyed after a period of three years after the research is completed.

II. PARTICIPATION

You are selected as a possible participant in this study because:

1. You are a teacher in an alternative education school, specifically a continuation school

We expect to have 5 participants take part in this study. Please feel free to ask any questions you may have.

Your decision whether or not to participate will involve no penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. If you decide to participate, you are free to discontinue participation at any time without penalty or loss of benefit to which you are otherwise entitled.

III. UNIVERSITY CONTACT INFORMATION

I am the lead researcher in this study, and I am a doctoral candidate in Benerd College at the University of the Pacific.

If you have any questions about the research at any time, please contact me at 916-252-6465 or by email at t_page5@u.pacific.edu, or Dr. Anne Zeman by email at azeman@pacific.edu

If you have any questions about your rights as a participant in a research project or wish to speak with an independent contact, please contact the Office of Research & Sponsored Programs, University of the Pacific (209) 946-3903 or by email at IRB@pacific.edu

IV. ACKNOWLEDGEMENT AND SIGNATURE

I hereby consent: (Indicate Yes or No)

To be audio/video recording during this study

☐ Yes ☐ No

For audio/video records resulting from this study to be used for transcription and data analysis.

☐ Yes ☐ No

You will be given a copy of this form to keep.

Your signature below indicates that you have read and understand the information provided above, that you have been afforded the opportunity to ask, and have answered, any questions that you may have, that your participation is entirely voluntary and that you understand that you may withdraw your consent and discontinue participation at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled, that you will receive a copy of this form and that you are not waiving any legal claims, rights or remedies.

Signed: _____ Date: _____

Research Study Participant (Print Name) _____

Researcher Who Obtained Consent (Print Name): _____