Book Review: *Going Gradeless, Grades 6-12: Shifting the Focus to Student Learning*

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Keywords

book review, assessment, feedback, student-centered learning, equity, K-12 education

Burns, E., & Frangiosa, D. (2021). *Going gradeless, Grades 6-12: Shifting the focus to student learning.* Corwin. ISBN: 9781071837511

How to effectively assess student learning using grades is a contested debate with widespread criticism. Despite grading reform emphasizing the need to use various strategies to monitor and provide feedback, the practice of assigning grades continues to be the norm for assessing what students have learned (Guskey, 2019). The book *Going Gradeless, Grades 6-12: Shifting the Focus to Student Learning* by E. Burns and D. Frangiosa (2021) provides an alternative pedagogical method to assessment that uses a "gradeless" approach to learning for purposes of removing the stress and negative impacts of traditional grading practices while maintaining accountability with equity in mind. Unlike other books that focus on theoretical approaches to assessment, this book offers a practical perspective intended to bridge theory into practice and provides teachers, administrators, families, and other educational stakeholders with resources from first-hand experiences. In this review, we describe the foundational underpinnings that frame the book and serve as a reference for those wishing to try a gradeless approach to learning in school settings. We provide an overview of the chapters situated in four major takeaways guiding this work: (a) rethinking meaningful assessment, (b) fitting a new gradeless approach into a traditional framework, (c) giving student choice to promote student-centered learning, and (d) strengthening

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curriculum planning with learning progression checkpoints. We also note the challenges to implementing such a model and provide our own critique through our lens as administrators, teacher educators, and educational researchers. We hope this review serves to stimulate conversations about assessment, including what it is and whom it serves in today's diverse classrooms.

Defining "Gradeless"

Burns and Frangiosa (2021) define "gradeless" according to what it is not (see Chapter 1). Going gradeless is not about removing rigor and high expectations for student learning. It is not about having consequences for poor achievement. More importantly, it is not about removing assessment and feedback responsibilities that hold teachers and students accountable. Instead, it is about providing "a learning environment that allows for students to grow as learners without the constant fear of a single assessment having a devastating impact on their grade" (p. 1). As noted in Chapters 1 and 2, a gradeless approach to learning cultivates norms where students access learning without being penalized for incorrect responses. This approach contributes to the teaching of all students, regardless of skill or ability, and recognizes the systemic inequities of assessments impacting students who have been historically marginalized. Therefore, students of all cultures, ethnicities, economic backgrounds, and ability can be encouraged to participate and monitor their learning, particularly with a lens that is "learning-oriented" rather than "grade-oriented." Helping students refocus their learning goals enables more creativity and risk-taking since students are not stressed about being penalized for making mistakes on their learning journey. A gradeless approach also proposes an assessment strategy focused on continuous learning and progress rather than static achievement as a determinant of end goal performance. Students and teachers engage in cycles of frequent feedback based on student work that inspires reaching learning goals instead of a target grade. Timely, goal-oriented, and frequent feedback is also recognized as a critical component for assessment to guide student learning (Hattie & Timperley, 2007).

Foundational Underpinnings

Burns and Frangiosa (2021) based their research on both literature and theoretical ideas that support their rationale for a "gradeless" approach to learning. The literature recognizes various studies reporting on assessment practices and feedback that have had positive impacts on student academic outcomes. For instance, Burns and Frangiosa reference a meta-analysis conducted by Black and William (2010) to examine different types of formative assessments and the associated perspectives from teachers and students detailing effective assessment practices that inform student learning. Similarly, Hattie and Timperley (2007) examine assessment in terms of types of feedback and how specific feedback strategies can benefit teaching and learning. As another point of reference, Franklin et al. (2016) provide insight into parents' negative perceptions of standard-based grading. Data from this study indicated a need for better communication and assessment plans that can be used to support students' work habits and learning dispositions in preparation for success in college and careers.

Burns and Frangiosa (2021) also identify three well-known theories that guide their work (see Chapter 3). The first theory refers to Butler's (1987) review of task-involving evaluation, which looks at feedback directed at how work can be improved rather than an alternative ego-involving evaluation that passes judgment on the quality of work submitted. With task-involving evaluation, conversations

shift from a specific judgment on the student to an assessment of the work itself. Secondly, Burns and Frangiosa (2021) reference Bloom's (1956) taxonomy to develop rubrics aligned to targeted standards in which students apply specific content knowledge and skills. Bloom's (1956) taxonomy promotes the creation of a learning progression, which is one of the core principles of this gradeless approach.

The other theoretical framework the authors used was Sweller's (1994) cognitive load theory. Cognitive load relates to the amount of working memory that the brain engages over a particular time, which can be categorized as intrinsic load, extraneous load, and germane load. While intrinsic load refers to the task's difficulty, which might differ based on the person and experience, extraneous load relates to how the information is presented, including considerations for how content should be organized and scaffolded to prevent students from spending working memory on the task and becoming discouraged from engaging in intellectually challenging work. Ultimately, educators should plan to reduce students' intrinsic and extraneous load and focus on the germane load, which refers to the brain's work to store information in long-term memory. These theories from Butler (1987), Bloom (1956), and Sweller (1994), interwoven together, influenced the authors' model as they modified curriculum and instructional strategies to scaffold learning for students to build schema and the foundational skills needed to engage with content.

The Proposed Gradeless Model

In Chapter 4, Burns and Frangiosa (2021) provide an overview of their gradeless approach, including the history of how it evolved from 2015-2020. In the first phase of the model, they developed performance-based rubrics with "I can" statements to measure students' mastery of the content and skills. Students received a rubric with specific criteria consisting of a 4-point scale (1-4), which was later converted to decaying averages. For example, a score of 4 was converted to a score of 90%, 3 to a score of 80%, 2 to a score of 70%, and 1 to a score of 60%. The final attempt counted for 80% of the overall grade, and students had an opportunity to select from a variety of assessments (e.g., a written test, a project, an oral exam) to demonstrate their mastery based on their strengths and interests, a benefit to assessments that prioritize student choice. After implementation of this model, there were several reflections noted: (a) student performance on all three assessments was similar, (b) the teachers were unable to provide students timely feedback due to the number of different assessments, (c) some students were not receptive to feedback, (d) students and parents thought the grading expectations were unclear, and (e) the large number of learning objectives made it challenging to manage.

After analyzing the student work and reviewing students' feedback in 2016-2017, Burns and Frangiosa began revising the model. They visited school districts in Chicago and Connecticut that successfully established competency-based diplomas to gather ideas. The authors also increased communication with students and parents to build support and explain the rationale for the model. As a result, in 2017-2018, they revised their model to reduce the number of "I can" statements and increase focus on criteria objectives through learning progression checkpoints. For example, "I can" statements were aligned to nine content standards and six process standards. The success criteria changed to more objective statements based on what students can do or what they should know. Furthermore, a variety of assessments were offered to monitor student learning, such as three end-of-unit mastery assessments (i.e., project, unit test, and oral presentation), cumulative exams, and portfolios. The authors created a grading scale aligned to the different benchmarks, and grades were translated and adjusted depending on the needs of the class. Students were allowed to accumulate scores for a given number of practices at

a determined performance level and then work toward a minimum score goal for all remaining practices. For instance, if a student achieved four of the nine skills at level 3 and the remaining five skills were at a minimum of a level 2, the student would then earn a letter grade of B. If another student had similar scores except for one skill at a level 1, they earned a letter grade of C. Ultimately, the authors created a benchmark for each letter grade and associated performance level goals that were modified based on students' practice skills. Revisions also included strategic checkpoints for following up with missing and incomplete work. Additionally, conferences were held to report on students' progress regarding habits of scholarship (e.g., behaviors that support academic achievement like punctuality, participation, and completion of assignments).

In 2018-2019, the model was further refined as the grading scale was changed to a 5-point scale to include a 0 for students who did not complete a sufficient number of assignments. The revision also distinguished between content knowledge and performance-based skills to apply content in practice. Additionally, the language of the standards was revised to help define the learning progression checkpoints and to ensure that the standards and skills could be assessed independently of the content across all units. The final revision included a numeric grade translation and a list of minimum requirements for students to receive credit. This overview of the model's evolution shows the need for continuous reflection year after year to not only track its impact but also promote strategic revisions to advance its use in professional practice.

Key Takeaways

Burns and Frangiosa's (2021) work highlights the need for a gradeless approach and how such a model, or one similar in nature, can be successfully integrated into the classroom. In the following, we examine four key takeaways that result from their work.

Rethinking Meaningful Assessments

In Chapter 6, Burns and Frangiosa (2021) provide an overview of the advantages of a gradeless approach that recognizes the need to rethink assessment criteria based on specific standards. To guide their work, the authors first identified their concerns with a traditional grading system: (a) student obsession with grades and lack of intrinsic motivation (Boaler, 2016; Dweck, 2006); (b) student stress related to making mistakes and unwillingness to take risks (Bloom, 1968; Schimmer, 2016); (c) feedback not aligned to skills or content knowledge (Hattie & Timperley, 2007); (d) time spent assigning grades to students that have no meaning (Guskey, 2014); and (e) educational inequities linked to grades (Brown, 2015; Link & Guskey, 2019). Rather than rely on assessments to produce numeric grades to cast a picture of one's learning performance, they began rethinking how teachers can use a meaningful approach to assessment that communicates specific expectations and progress, including what students did well and what students need to improve. In the authors' model, students have multiple opportunities for feedback and can achieve mastery of learning goals since they can retake assessments and participate in peer review. The authors designed purposeful and structured assessments with targeted criteria and emphasized the criteria throughout all units. The criteria required students to demonstrate different ways of meeting the learning goals, which gave students more opportunities to communicate and track their content knowledge. As a result, many students initially

earned a level of "developing" on a standard, and by the following unit, they earned a level of "advanced."

Fitting a New Gradeless Approach into a Traditional Framework

In Chapter 7, Burns and Frangiosa (2021) offer practical suggestions for those wishing to implement a new gradeless approach within a traditional framework. The authors described how the total standards that students met were given a number and translated to a grade. They also established minimum requirements for students to earn a passing grade. This model allowed for students to set goals based on specific learning standards. Moreover, the work reflected students' outcomes and identified specific strengths and areas for improvement. The authors determined the benchmarks and grade translations by asking themselves questions such as: "Would we have time enough to practice enough to master the skills? Would students be overwhelmed with too much to do at once?" (p. 66). Furthermore, the authors created progress reports to document student progress and communicate feedback to inform next steps. Given the detailed steps and reflection by the authors regarding this new approach to assessment, those who are interested in using similar strategies have a foundational framework to use as guidance and a rationale for the decision-making and implementation process.

Giving Student Choice to Promote Student-Centered Learning

In addition to communicating expectations for grading, a gradeless approach promotes student-centered learning. Burns and Frangiosa (2021) made sure to place students at the center of their planning by offering student choice in assessment decisions (Vatterot, 2010). Another aspect of this approach that contributes to student-centered learning is the implementation of progress checkpoints and conferencing. These two strategies encouraged students to engage in self-assessment as they monitored their own learning. During the conferences, students reflected on their growth, identified areas of strength, and noted specific strategies for improvement. These strategies can contribute to building students' confidence as they embark on their learning journey. As witnessed first-hand, the authors' students intrinsically valued learning when using this approach, especially when they did not worry about their grades. Thus, learning that is focused on the needs and interests of the students can intrinsically motivate students in the classroom. Additionally, "I can" statements can help empower students in seeing the inherent value of learning by referencing oneself in the act of learning. Furthermore, this approach supports students' social and emotional learning by encouraging a growth mindset (Dweck, 2006). Using the suggested "I can" statements can make learning more student-friendly and help students establish specific assessment criteria for them to self-monitor (Boaler, 2016). When students have choice and see personal value in learning, they can demonstrate mastery of standards in ways that are meaningful and influential to one's next learning goal.

Strengthening Curriculum Planning with Learning Progression Checkpoints

This gradeless model offers opportunities to strengthen curriculum planning (Chapter 9). To implement this approach, Burns and Frangiosa (2021) took several measures to rethink curriculum planning to ensure alignment to a gradeless model. Some of the planning included backwards design in which they reflected on the goals of the course. They considered what students should be able to do when they left

the class, the state and national standards, the design of varied assessments, and how to rewrite "I can" statements using student-friendly language. The authors discussed how implementing a gradeless approach encouraged them to carefully review the curriculum to identify specific learning standards and revise the scope of what they wanted students to master. As they created assessments, they analyzed the data and studied student work to make necessary adjustments. The learning progression checkpoints enabled them to assess student progress and gauge skill development. At the same time, they used opportunities to facilitate formal and informal conversations with students to provide detailed feedback and set goals for students' next steps. This model recognizes the benefits of planning with assessment in mind and using learning progression checklists to encourage the active involvement of students in the learning process.

Overcoming the Implementation Challenges of a Gradeless Model

In Chapters 5, 6, and 7, Burns and Frangiosa (2021) discuss three major challenges that teachers will face implementing a gradeless approach to assessment. From personal experience, they identify the first challenge as the need to shift the mindset of students and families to support a process with no grades. Students and families are familiar with a traditional, grade-based system and can be hesitant to diverge from what has been normalized in school. To be proactive in avoiding confusion and misunderstandings, the authors suggest increasing communication with families when they provide verbal and written feedback to students. In turn, this gradeless approach can increase teacher-student-family communication, which the authors noted was well-received by those participating in the implementation. The second major challenge pertains to increasing student accountability in a system with no grades. In the beginning, the authors noticed that some students were not completing the assignments because they were not receiving a grade. Eventually, after the authors created a protocol to hold students accountable, students became more engaged. A final challenge is aligning student learning progress with a traditional grading system. There will be concerns for how the alignment will translate and what amount of work students will need to complete to receive credit. It will be important to plan for situations and the procedures needed in a gradeless approach, such as how to handle extra or missing work. For a gradeless approach to be effective, students must buy-in and comply with the expectations of completing work to receive feedback.

Conclusion

This book offers an overview of a gradeless approach to assessment with teachers as the primary audience. Burns and Frangiosa (2021) provide details about the planning process and include samples of lessons, assessments, student work, and rubrics to serve as templates to guide implementation. We found these resources to be informative and relevant in offering practical guides to assist with learning how a gradeless approach may be adapted to meet the needs of teachers considering it for use in their own classrooms. Beyond these resources, this book encourages conversations that rethink assessment. The authors' first-hand experiences provide evidence that a gradeless approach may be one model to improve assessments that focus on the needs of students and set clear expectations aligned with learning goals. As administrators, teacher educators, and educational researchers, we have had many conversations with teachers, students, and families about developing a grading system that is meaningful to support student learning. Our conversations prompt us to rethink assessment strategies that

encourage students to work towards improvement and provide opportunities for all students to demonstrate their content knowledge. This book is a must-read as it contributes to this conversation by offering a practical and equitable model to not only meet students' diverse academic and social-emotional needs but also increase students' motivation and love for learning.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

Funding

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