Teacher-Stress and Present Day Grading Practices

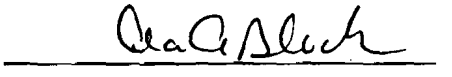
By

Jennifer Lyn Behrend

A Research Paper
Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Master of Science Degree
With a Major in

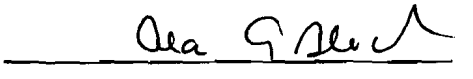
Education

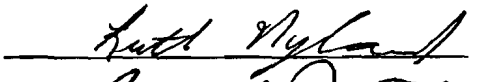
Approved: Six Semester Credits

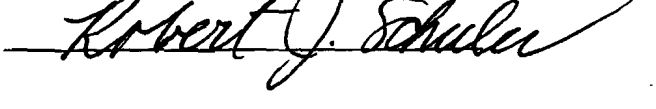


Alan A. Block

Committee Members:







The Graduate School
University of Wisconsin-Stout
August, 2007

The Graduate School
University of Wisconsin – Stout
Menomonie, WI

Author: **Behrend, Jennifer L.**

Title: ***Teacher-Stress and Present Day Grading Practices***

Graduate Degree/Major: **MS Education**

Research Adviser: **Alan A. Block**

Month/Year: **August, 2007**

Number of Pages: **49**

Style Manual Used: American Psychological Association, 5th edition

ABSTRACT

Teachers experience a great deal of job-related stress. Specific stressors include working in the public sector and participating in high-stakes performance assessments. Teachers engage in both the giving and the receiving of the latter, and are consequently judged by students, parents, and the communities they serve. Grading is yet another stressful aspect of a career in teaching. This qualitative study seeks to understand the origins of formal schooling first, and the development of quantifying student achievement with grades later. From the earliest tests of survival in ancient civilizations to the internet-based grading programs widely used today, this thesis will attempt to reveal how and why the grading pendulum has swung across the centuries. Ultimately, this study attempts to offer hope for the present day teacher experiencing grade-related stress.

The Graduate School

University of Wisconsin – Stout

Menomonie, WI

Acknowledgments

First and foremost, this study is dedicated to all of the people with whom I have ever discussed grading. From colleagues and students to friends and family, the insights I have gained from each exchange – whether cordial or impassioned – have enlightened me and encouraged me to learn more about this topic that is so central to my profession.

The task of completing my thesis this summer was feasible only through the expertise, flexibility, and support of many individuals. I am thankful to Dr. Ruth Nyland and Dr. Robert Schuler for their willingness to be on my Committee and to Dr. Alan Block for serving as Committee Chair. The advisement I received from each of these scholars involved a careful balance of both asking and answering critical questions.

I am likewise appreciative of the friends and family who opened their homes to my four children and thereby enabled me to spend countless hours at the library this summer. Annie, Holly, Cece, and Charlie proved remarkably resilient throughout this journey and their daily cries of "*Are you done yet*?" provided determination and kept me focused.

And finally, I am grateful for the love and encouragement I have received from my husband, Tom, a man who has logged more hours of hearing about grades than he probably ever thought possible. Throughout my career, he has always advised me to stay true to myself and has reminded me that good ideas rarely grow along the path of least resistance.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter I: Introduction

Though in some way, shape, or form the effects of stress are felt by every single human being (Motzer & Hertig, 2004) – and presumably have been since we first graced the planet, it seems somewhat curious that it took the backdrop of the late twentieth century to put it in the spotlight (Iwasaki, 2006). Defined as a "constraining force or influence: as . . . one of bodily or mental tension resulting from factors that tend to alter an existent equilibrium" (Merriam-Webster's, 2006, pg. 1235), stress was first acknowledged by scholars over two hundred years ago:

> Since the first half of the 19th century, the concepts of stress and of life stresses have been applied to both biological and social systems, providing an explanation for the non-specific effects of biological agents, and for the occurrence of illness as a response to an individual's social environment. (Jepson & Forrest, 2006, pg. 183)

Despite its lineage, stress has never before had the notoriety it now enjoys. Today, it is difficult to pass a newsstand without reading a headline on its ills, such as "Deep Stress Could Signal Cry For Help" (Elias, 2007), if not one on its supposed antidotes, like "Stressed? Eat Veggies" (Leitzell, 2007). With the phrase *stressed-out* even garnering its own spot in the dictionary (Merriam-Webster's, 2006), it is hardly surprising that Americans have gotten themselves in a position where "everybody experiences stress" and "47 percent . . . say that they are concerned with the amount of stress in their lives" (Stambor, 2006, p.28). There is admittedly such a thing as good stress (Jepson & Forrest, 2006), but the fact that those who Stambor reported on were "concerned" suggests they were likely not alluding to that variety. And unfortunately, despite what appears to be increased awareness of this issue – for sufferers as well the health-care professionals

trained to treat them – people "are dealing with that stress in an unhealthy way" (Stambor, 2006, p.28). It is understandable, therefore, why the topic of stress has captured the attention of more and more researchers, especially throughout the past two decades (Iwasaki, 2006).

The work of many recent researchers (Hannigan, Edwards, & Burnard, 2004; Epson & Forrest, 2006; Stambor, 2006) has revealed stress to be an equal-opportunist; it attacks its victims both physically and mentally. "Defined as something in the environment that acts as a stimulus that can be physical, psychological, or behavioural in nature" (Epson & Forrest, 2006, pg. 184) – a *stressor* may be good or bad, acute or chronic. A recent study from the University of Pennsylvania's School of Medicine measured effects on the prefrontal cortex, the part of the brain associated with both good stress, like that used for focusing on goals or encountering threats, and bad stress such as the type related to mental illness (Wagner, 2006). After engaging in quick, controlled – albeit challenging – mental activities, the prefrontal cortex in the subjects' brains experienced "increased cerebral blood flow [that] persisted longer than expected" (Wagner, 2006, pg. 28). The study's principal investigator (assistant professor of radiology Jiongjiong Wang) says this study is significant for highlighting the double-edge sword phenomenon associated with stress. "While [it] may be useful in increasing focus, chronic stress could also be detrimental for mental health (Wagner, 2006, pg. 28). The good news, therefore, is that when only intermittently agitated by isolated stressors (i.e. a job interview, a job change, or even a job dismissal), the human brain may actually respond in a way that is beneficial, helping to rally, persevere, and even triumph.

Unfortunately, though, not all stress is acute stress – a point supported by continuing with the job analogy. It is entirely possible to secure employment without even interviewing, and though not common, there are some who work a whole career without a single transfer, promotion, or pink slip. Evading these particular acute stressors, however, does not mean that such a worker is off the hook where the other end of the spectrum is concerned. After all, anyone employed in the same capacity for any length of time will eventually find that months and years and decades on the job will assuredly produce stress. In fact, within the previously cited dictionary definition of *stress*, the phrase "<job-related ~>" is utilized for a clarification tool, presumably for it is so readily identifiable for most people (Merriam-Webster's, 2006, pg. 1235). According to The American Public Health Association (2001), hours spent on the job now account for more and more of our lives each year, robbing us of personal time and responsible for the United States' position of top-workaholic among the world's developed nations. The same APHA report suggests that more American workers feel stressed now than they did in the late twentieth century and that the reasons for this lay largely in increased workloads, more job insecurity, and an eroded sense of on-the-job autonomy (2001). Alone, any *one* of these reasons can feasibly present a healthy dose of acute stress, but researchers (Hannigan, Edwards, & Burnard, 2004) say that the real risks come when stressors pile up and linger. "Occupational stress is a major problem for individuals and organizations. Stress can cause burnout, ill-health, high workforce turnover, absenteeism, lowered morale and reduced efficiency and performance" (pg. 235).

Naturally, the distinction of being the world's most stressed out nation calls for not only an examination of the American workplace, but also a look at today's American

worker. In his quest to better understand these same entities over thirty years ago, author Studs Terkel interviewed a group of over one hundred workers from all walks of life and all regions of the country. The result – still widely read today – was his 1974 bestseller, *Working: People Talk About What They Do All Day and How They Feel About What They Do*. Terkel's book contains in-the-trenches tales of everyone from store clerks and sky caps to parking lot attendants and prostitutes, ultimately revealing that "even for the lowliest laborers . . . work [is] a search, sometimes successful, sometimes not, 'for daily meaning as well as daily bread'" (as cited in Cohen, 2004, par. 2). Merely three decades later, with unprecedented job dissatisfaction among American workers – a growing percentage of whom are "being supervised with methods known as 'management by stress'" (Cohen, 2004, par. 9), Terkel's beautifully nuanced appraisal of the daily grind sounds not only quaint, but also outdated and outlandish.

A stress-free workplace – extending independence, security, and purpose to its employees – is clearly a fantasy, but it comes closer to matching the experience of some workers more than others. To examine all possibilities would assuredly fill a book more substantial than Terkel's 640 page tome, so a reasonable starting point is an examination of where Americans report to work. The *private sector* is defined as "the part of the national economy that is not under direct government control" while the definition of *public sector* is just the opposite: "the part of the economy that is controlled by the government" (New Oxford, 2005, pp.1349 & 1369). It turns out that government affiliation is not the only difference among these two entities; their respective employees appear to differ as well. Research based on results from the National Opinion Research

Center's General Social Survey (Houston, 2000) suggests that individuals' attraction to one sector over the other is largely based on what they see as the personal payoff:

> Private sector workers are more likely to place a higher value on such extrinsic reward motivators as high income and short work hours and public employees are more likely to place a higher value on the intrinsic reward of work that is important and provides a feeling of accomplishment." (pg. 713)

Unfortunately, though, for many public servants the rush that comes from working for the greater good comes at a price. One researcher (Turney, 2000) claims that the potential for personal satisfaction in government work is often compromised by a feeling of "being in a fish bowl" (sect. 3).

This sense that someone is always watching, as well as the previously cited concept of "management by stress" (Cohen, 2004, par. 9) are assuredly not features unique to government work. In the private sector, those doing the hovering include supervisors, managers, bosses, and boards as well as other employees. After all, one worker's foibles could translate into money lost and "corporations exist to provide a financial return to the people who own them: they are in business to make a profit" (Kohn, 1999, pg. 15). The role of the general public in such a scenario is as large or small as they desire it to be; people have a choice on whether or not they want to financially support a business. For those working in the public sector, the bottom line may not consist of dollars, but the supervision is no less stringent. In fact, when working for the taxpayers, the potential for "management by stress" seems considerably greater:

> The extensive accountability alone could give government employees the feeling everyone was looking over their shoulders. But, if they ever had any doubts, the so-

> called sunshine laws passed during the 1960s and `70s [*sic*] would have put them to rest. The combination of laws that give citizens access to government records and documents and those that require that all policy- making decisions be done in open, public meetings have opened all levels to government to intense public scrutiny. (Turney, 2000, sect. 3)

Among all accessible information, that which hits taxpayers in the pocketbook is likely to draw the most attention, and paying government workers tops the list. From the person sitting in the Oval Office to the one cutting grass at the city park, no one making a living on tax dollars is exempt from sharing their wages with the world online. These figures, however, are not always easily discernible, since they are sometimes imbedded deep within budgetary documents. Such is not the case with public school teachers whose salary schedules – complete with self-explanatory "steps" and to-the-penny earnings – have been widely used for nearly a century (Blair, 2001) and are now readily available with a click of the mouse. In a decade of working in the public sector as a high school English teacher, my experience has shown that some people opt to forego such research in favor of simply asking me to my face: *How much do you make?* This inquiry has come from my students and their parents, as well as my friends and family. Recently (and most peculiarly), I fielded this question from a mere acquaintance: a construction worker hired to work on my home. It seems that with school board elections and talk of referenda perennially putting district budgets in the headlines, everyone – even those likely to shudder at the prospect of publicly discussing their *own* earnings – feels justified in not just looking in on, but also weighing in on, what teachers make.

Moulthrop, Calegari, & Eggers (2005) suggest that the following sentiments express two commonly held beliefs on the issue of teacher salaries:

1. Teachers are paid well – perhaps too well. Their workdays end at 3 p.m. and they have summers off, so they should be happy for what they get.
2. Though their job is difficult, teachers are paid adequately, and the profession inherently involves a certain amount of sacrifice – much like, say, the clergy. (pg. 1)

Unfortunately, adjectives like *well* and *adequate* seem dreadfully inappropriate for describing the wages of the professionals in question. According to a study conducted by the American Federation of Teachers (2005), the potential for teachers to experience chronic stress due to financial issues is high: "Only one teacher in 10 is very satisfied with his or her salary" – a sum that does not even "keep pace with inflation, growth in the economy, or the earnings of other workers in the private or public sectors" (pg. 3).

Sadly, for those who are dedicated enough to endure the poor compensation and remain in teaching, what awaits them at the close of their careers might be even more public scrutiny. Since the baby boomers have begun arriving at retirement age, more and more people have taken note of the disparity in savings between those Americans with government-sponsored pensions and those without (Cauchon, 2007). At least half a dozen states are already reeling from what some attribute to exorbitant benefits for public servants, and the situation is even more precarious at the federal level, where the amount owed to Social Security recipients has been surpassed by the amount owed to government retirees whose payouts they now cover (Cauchon, 2007). According to Richard Ferlauto, director of pension and benefit policy for the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees, taxpayers employed in the private sector are now frustrated and

asking their public sector counterparts why they should be entitled to greater financial security (as cited in Cauchon, 2007). Therefore, the ramifications for teachers, whose wages are already publicized and widely discussed, seem particularly dire. "A destructive 'us versus them' mentality [is] seeping into the collective consciousness. Maintaining public support for public schools has never been more challenging – or more critical" Carr, 2006).

While heretofore mentioned to highlight one unsavory facet of working a taxpayer-funded job, financial woes do not account for all the stress associated with a career in the public schools. Teaching at the K-12 level – for better or for worse – is a job unlike any other, as indicated in the following reflection:

> There are virtually no other positions in which one person is responsible for not only the safety of, but the inspiration for, up to thirty-six individuals at once. . . . Most occupations allow workers to drift off in thought, to surf the Web, to get coffee any time they wish – to control their own destinies on a minute-to-minute basis. . . . Add to that the continuing education required of teachers and the myriad extracurricular responsibilities – from coaching the wrestling team to helping students with personal problems. (Moulthrop, Calegari, & Eggers, 2005, pg. 11)

With so much responsibility, it comes as no surprise that studies (NEA, 2001 as cited in Moulthrop, Calegari, & Eggers, 2005; CompassLearning as cited in "High Stress," 2006) show that teachers work far more than 40 hours per week and repeatedly cite time-constraints as a significant stressor.

Upon learning that someone is teacher, many feel compelled to elicit this response: "Oh, *good for you*" (Moulthrop, Calegari, & Eggers, 2005, pp. 5). The use of

italics likely denotes a patronizing tone, a sense of wonder, or plain old incredulity about the fact that someone would work so hard for so little pay. Here then, we see the issue come full circle in a rather ironic way; if not chastised for making too much money, teachers inadvertently raise eyebrows for making too little.

Fortunately, though, not all ways in which teachers themselves are scrutinized are as seemingly unwarranted as those previously mentioned. For example, teachers must endure periodic classroom observations. According to the master contract of the Wisconsin school district in which I am employed, this is done because "the parties recognize the importance and value of assisting and evaluating the progress and success of both newly employed and experienced personnel for the purpose of improving instruction" (School District, 2004). In seven years of fulltime employment with said district, I have been observed by my building principal only twice, for a combined total of less than one hour. Regrettably, this type of assessment – rich with acute stress and seemingly void of what my contract calls "improving instruction" – is not the only variety teachers must contend with. Others tend to be more chronic and elicit more teacher disapproval.

When the circle of observers widens to include not just school administrators, but also community, state, and federal agencies or bureaus, teachers' stress levels are likely to soar (Brimblecombe & Ormstom, 1995). Anyone familiar with the world of education knows that the proverbial pendulum swings at what seems a dizzying rate, making it difficult to stay abreast of new trends and accompanying buzzwords (Gardner, 1991; Kohn, 1999). The present decade has been largely devoted to one such jargon-tinged concept in particular: quality assurance (Jones & Olkin, 2004). As a sort of guideline for

curing the supposed ills of education, one researcher (Wise, 2001) targeted seven items worthy of particular concern when assuring a school's quality. They include: "advanced certification . . . licensing standards . . . curriculum standards . . . alignment . . . accreditation . . . professional development schools . . . [and] state standards boards" (pp. 18-19).

Two experiences in particular have shown my employer to support a belief that become more widespread among educational organizations throughout the United States: test scores provide the greatest sense of quality assurance (Kohn, 1999; Lemann, 1999; Jones & Olkin, 2004). Alfie Kohn (1999) suggests there is danger in educators relying too heavily on numbers when assessing quality, a practice he believes spilled over from the private sector:

> There is good reason to oppose the disproportionate role that corporate executives have been granted in shaping our country's educational agenda. It isn't just a matter of whether they know enough but of what they're looking for. Ultimately, the goals business are not the same as those of educators and parents. (pg.15)

For the past three years, I have earned a nominal stipend for my help in readying sophomores for the language arts and writing portions of the Wisconsin Knowledge and Concepts Exam. Similarly, students earning a certain level of proficiency have been awarded open campus privileges. We will never know if these goods-for-profits concepts have been the reason, but our students' WKCE scores have improved in recent years, and for that the faculty has been praised.

Likewise, in the past two years, more of my Advanced Placement English students have registered to take both the Language & Composition and the Literature &

Composition exams than ever before. In that time, an unprecedented number of registrants have also "passed" these exams, meaning they achieved the score of 3, 4, or 5 necessary for achieving credit and/or advanced standing at most colleges and universities. These numbers have encouraged administrators – some of whom have never before set foot in my classroom – to take notice of the bragging rights inherent in AP English. Despite having never watched me teach, these same individuals have congratulated me for my fine teaching abilities and led the crusade to "Save AP English!" when a recent budget crisis spurred the school board's decision to cut the class from three terms (27 weeks) to two (18 weeks). Failing to note that our school has run AP English as a two-term class before, and that the reduction would simply translate into the same amount of English credit for all MHS seniors, this issue became central to a proposed referendum. In my role as inadvertent spokesperson for AP, I fielded many questions about the need for the third term and I often responded with silence rather than answers that would have been unpopular with administrators and others working to pass the referendum. The third term, after all, is essentially a test prep course, much like those that students pay to attend (on their own time) for such tests as the ACT or SAT. The referendum did not pass.

Even though this experience involved a favorable assessment of my teaching – or at least the numbers my teaching was thought to have created – the public scrutiny and pressure to believe in the district's stance were both overwhelming. The prospect of living through the experience without any support, however misguided, seems positively intolerable. But sometimes the mission for quality assurance can be invasive and alienating, leaving a teacher at odds with administration and seemingly stripped of her dignity (Brimblecombe & Ormstom, 1995). The following is one teacher's summary of

what it felt like to have her school, her classroom, and her curriculum judged by an accreditation agency and held to impossible standards:

> It was a traumatic experience. At the end I felt I had been ripped apart and didn't know whether I could ever regain confidence and self esteem . . . Can anyone work out the loss to the profession because of this inspection system? (pg. 53)

Unfortunately, this is not an isolated incident. Other teachers, including educational consultant Bobby Ann Starnes, have also been left reeling from scrutiny. The following reflection supports her belief that those in today's public schools are imprisoned by legislation responsible for ushering in one of the bleakest chapters in the history of American education:

> Teaching is stressful. It just is. It doesn't matter whether we're teaching preschoolers or doctoral students. Years ago, I embraced the stress as a natural part of the work. But the stress I felt . . . was almost surreal. . . . As I studied it, I began to believe that the new and elusive stress was being generated by *No Child Left Behind.* Many teachers were worried about the law's vague but omnipresent threats. They created a sense of doom that hung over us like a dark cloud. *NCLB* had changed the educational climate. (Starnes, 2004, pg. 639)

The already grim situation that Starnes depicts becomes even more lamentable when the data obtained through the course of such assessments are skewed by the teacher-stress they themselves are responsible for generating (Brimblecombe & Ormstom, 1995). This can prompt the need for even further inspection, thereby creating a vicious cycle. Because they are so mired in this dilemma, it is no wonder that many researchers (Manthei & Gilmore, 1996; Wilhelm, Dewhurst-Savellis, & Parker, 2000)

have found teachers' job-related stress levels to far exceed those of other workers. As the following definitions reveal, stress is endemic to two phenomena which plague the teaching profession: "'Wearout,' wherein an individual gives up, feeling depleted in confronting stress" and "'Classic' burnout, wherein an individual works increasingly hard in the face of stress" (Farber, 2000, pg. 275). Whatever the moniker, there is no denying that stress has presented some dire consequences where teacher retention is concerned. Approximately 1/3 of new teachers drop out of the profession after only one year and nearly 1/2 fail to make it more than five (Wilhelm, Dewhurst-Savellis, & Parker, 2000; Moulthrop, Calegari, & Eggers, 2005).

Fortunately, despite what seems to be a very difficult time in education, plenty of people are willing to try their hand at the teaching profession (Wilhelm, Dewhurst-Savellis, & Parker, 2000). One NEA study found the top three reasons teachers were drawn to teaching "turned out to be (a) teachers enjoy working with young people; (b) they feel education is important; and (c) they have a deep interest in their subject matter" (as cited in Moulthrop, Calegari, & Eggers, 2005, pg. 141). Among these reasons – none of which are terribly surprising – the second one needs the most clarification. Whereas "young people" and "subject matter" are fairly straightforward referents, the very idea of "education" is littered with nuance. *Education* is the noun-form of *educate*, a verb meaning "to develop mentally or morally esp. by instruction" (Merriam-Webster's, 2006, pg. 396). This definition naturally begs the further questions of *What is development?* and *What is morality?,* the answers to which are largely a matter of personal philosophy. This plethora of subjectivity suggests that there are, in fact, far more than just three

reasons for which people go into teaching, and it is very likely that none of them is because they are looking for stress.

Unfortunately, though, stress abounds in teachers' lives, not only because of bureaucratic issues, but also due to matters of conscience (Brown, 1970; Walvoord & Anderson, 1998). In a profession where most of the practitioners agree that "education is important" (NEA as cited in Moulthrop, Calegari, & Eggers, 2005, pg. 141), the question always remains as to how we know if – and to what extent – education has truly taken place, because the evidence is so elusive (Brown, 1970; Allen, 1998; Kohn, 1999). I do not know that my students who scored the highest on WKCE or the AP exams were truly the most educated, and it sickens me to know that they are judged as such. The quest to assure quality via test scores alone can place an inordinate amount of stress on teachers (Gardner, 1991; Kohn, 1999; Huhn, 2005).

Unfortunately, the other most widely used tool in the appraisal of learning is also only good for offering "approximations of learning" (Allen, 1998, pg. 1). Grades are a fact of life for teachers and students in nearly every school in this America. A survey conducted by the College Board (1997) found that over 90% of the nation's high schools utilized both traditional grades and grade point averages, while more than 80% made use of that information for determining class rank (as cited in Boston, 2003). Since it is not a precise science (Allen, 1998), the ubiquity of grading is puzzling, a quandary eloquently broached by a California public school teacher in these words: "Did Socrates quibble over B+'s and A-'s and confer with parents over a student's GPA?" (Ickes, 2004, pg.7). Though she likely asked it with a bit of whimsy – and doubtfully expected it to surface in a Wisconsin teacher's thesis – Ickes' question is crucial to address if we are to rectify

why letters, plusses, and minuses litter the landscape of American education today. Surprisingly, "although student assessment has been a part of teaching and learning for centuries, grading and reporting are relatively recent phenomena" (Guskey, 1996, pg. 14).

If the old adage is true – that experience is the best teacher – then human beings have been students for as long as they have been in existence, well before Socrates' time. Though a far cry from the highly regulated entity that is education in America today, teaching and learning were also vitally important in the lives of the earliest humans, but grades were not. For our prehistoric predecessors, most instruction occurred at home (Kirschenbaum, Napier, & Simon, 1970). Information transfer took place between parent and child and the final exam was of a high-stakes variety that is unimaginable for many students today: survival. Our earliest ancestors had very basic methods of communication, no written documents, and a concern not with if you were an excellent hunter or a below-average gatherer; but rather with if you lived or died. If there had been letter grades, though: "To be an *A* hunter you killed the most game" (pg. 47).

Vastly more sophisticated were the ancient Greeks whose civilization gave us not only esteemed works like *The Illiad* and thinkers like Socrates, but also the Olympic Games, an event in which the "athletes . . . were admired and idealized. Winners were regarded as having attained the excellence of gods and goddesses" (pg. 9). The spirit of the latter pervaded their society and certainly their schools. "Ancient Greece is widely viewed, and rightly so, as the birthplace of systematic state-sponsored physical education programs . . . to be unfit was unacceptable"(Wooyeal, P. & Bell, D.A., 2004, pg. 9). While men were judged for their physical prowess throughout all of ancient Greece, it was of particular importance to the Spartans whose babies were judged at birth on how

favorable seemed their prospects for becoming a warrior. (Kirschenbaum, Napier, & Simon, 1970; Wooyeal, P. & Bell, D.A., 2004). Athenians also valued physical conditioning, but they saw merit in the training of the mind as well, and for both pursuits, children needed to transcend the boundaries of family and home:

> At the age of seven. . . The male children of citizens were educated in two educational institutions—the *Didaskaleion* for intellectual disciplines such as literature, rhetoric, poetry, music, and mathematics, and the *Palaistra* for physical education. . . At approximately sixteen years old, young boys moved to the gymnasium for further physical education and intellectual disciplines such as philosophy and social communication. (Wooyeal, P. & Bell, D.A., 2004, pg. 10)

These students were most commonly assessed orally, and in a formative way; formal examinations were not used (Schachner, 162). A student's deficiencies were simply viewed by as a reflection of his teacher's deficiencies, so naturally it behooved the latter to improve the performance of the former (Guskey, 1996). Ultimately, though, for every young Greek – in a race, a battle, or a debate – that for which you were judged most carefully was the way you conducted yourself in public (Kirschenbaum, Simon, and Napier, 1971).

Though it also had formal schools like ancient Greece before it, early "Rome had nothing to offer by way of literacy, aesthetic, or creative written production" (Gwynne-Thomas, 1981, pg. 25). It was not until nearly a half-millennium after its founding that Romans encountered Greeks and first beheld "architectural monuments of such advanced design and noble proportions as to have excited [them] with insuppressible emotions of

astonishment and wonder" (pg. 25). The architectural tradition of ancient Greece was not the only source of intrigue for the Romans; the oral tradition influenced them as well:

> Since, as in Athens, the Romans had established a citizen Assembly, it was imperative that participants in discussion and debate of major political issues be competent in the arts or articulation, presentation, and persuasion, so that their respective points of view could be understood and appreciated by their colleagues. (pg. 26)

In a society that would go on to boast the likes of Cato and Cicero, capturing and convincing an audience of peers was the reward that inspired the budding Roman rhetorician. The priorities were much different, however, for the many charged with the duty of spreading the Roman influence far and wide. They led an austere, nomadic lifestyle and were "preoccupied by problems of survival and security" (pg.25). Their sharp learning curve likely placed them on par with our earliest ancestors with respect to passing or failing.

The Roman Empire spread well into northern Europe, but its influence did not last beyond the sixth century A.D. by which time "the night of the Dark Ages had commenced" (Schachner, 1962, pg. 5). Referred to as the "thousand years of darkness," the period between 500 – 1500 have been characterized by "religiosity and rigidity . . . [and] a medieval fixation on similarity and resemblance" (Sluhovsky, 2006, pg. 174). Such a description hardly sounds like a backdrop for enlightenment, but strangely, the era witnessed the birth of the first university sometime in the 12th (Schachner, 1962, pg. 3):

> There was nothing like them in the ancient world. Greece and Rome, it is true, knew of the higher education, but it was not organized; there was no body of licensed

> Masters, there were no formal examinations, and no degrees blazoning to the world that their possessors had achieved a modicum of learning . . .(Schachner, 1962, pg. 4)

So here, approximately one thousand years ago, we see the first diploma and, thus, a token of learning independent of the learner himself.

The university concept caught on and helped to spread the spirit of learning across Europe. This broadened to also include a reemergence of classical arts which became known as the Renaissance . . . "a time of Humanism, secularism, individualism, innovation, and rational thinking" (Sluhovsky, 2006, pg. 171). The period also ushered in a widely acknowledged belief in inquiry over recitation, when "people (natural philosophers) labored, for the first time, to discern differences and to account for them" (pg. 175). English philosopher John Locke was one such discerning mind of the time, and much of his focus was on education:

> He proposed that children should not simply read books but should also interact with the environment, using their five senses to accumulate and test ideas. Teachers should tailor instruction to the individual aptitudes and interests of each child; they should encourage curiosity and questions . . . (McNergney & Herbert, pg. 44)

Despite the development of universities and modern educational philosophy, only the privileged few regularly attended formal schools; the majority of children were educated within the family or with an apprentice (Kirschenbaum, Simon, and Napier, 1971). And as for assessment:

> In the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, there was no need for grades either. In the homes, mothers passed their knowledge on to their daughters; the fathers, to the sons. If a boy wanted to learn a trade and join a guild, he studied with a

> Master until he was deemed ready to join what he had to do to pass was clear . . . . Either you could do it, or you couldn't. (pp. 48-49)

As many Europeans left their homes to settle in the New World beginning in the early 17th century, "education both reflected and shaped people's values as they established their settlements along the eastern coast of America" (McNergney & Herbert, 1998). Both grammar schools as well colleges showed up shortly after the Puritans' in the Massachusetts Bay Colony, though throughout the seventeenth century, many children were schooled by parents and/or church organizations (Butler, 1969; McNergney & Herbert, 1998). Transcending the family home for the purposes of education was considered a luxury:

> Frequently . . . rich children had their own private tutors or else went to schools for children like themselves. The purposes of their tutoring and of these schools was to prepare for entrance into the famous colleges, like Harvard, William and Mary, and Yale. (Kirschenbaum, Simon, & Napier, 1971, pg. 49)

Such preparation for the precursors to today's SAT and ACT exams was no small feat, as shown by this excerpt from a bulletin intended for Harvard-hopefuls in 1770: "Candidates for Admission will for the future be examined in Any Part of the following Books. – The Greek Testament, Virgil's Aeneid, and Cicero's Select Orations" (As cited in Butler, 1969, pg. 22). Those lucky enough to matriculate at Harvard and other colleges at this time would discover that each school had its unique method for reporting student progress. It is within these methods that we see the origins of numbers-based grading. "In 1780, Yale began using . . . a four-point scale . . . Harvard University's first

numerical scale was initiated in 1830 . . . [and] William and Mary began using a numerical scale in about 1850" (Marzano, 2000, pg. 11).

For many Americans in the early 19th century, however, when "the number of farms increased from about 5 million to 15 million" (McNergney & Herbert, 1998, pg. 51) post-secondary education was not the top concern: working the land was. On the heels of Thomas Jefferson's *Bill for the General Diffusion of Knowledge*, however, common schools became accessible for all students throughout America; and the overwhelming response dictated that teachers do the unthinkable: accommodate multi-aged/multi-level students from various ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds in the *same* room (Kirschenbaum, Simon, & Napier, 1971; Guskey, 1996; McNergney & Herbert, 1998). Some of this burden was alleviated by the development of separate high schools in 1920 and the educational reform of 1830 that promoted differentiation between grade levels (McNergney Herbert, 1998).

After the 1830s, American education was once again at the mercy of economical forces. The increased complexity of factories helped the United States became less agrarian and more industrialized and this "led to an increasing emphasis on practical rather than theoretical learning" (McNergney Herbert, 1998, pg.54). By the mid1800s, when compulsory education laws were finally starting to be enforced, fewer families needed their children to stay home and help out with farm work and more of them deemed it essential that their kids not just go to school, but also that they show evidence of learning something (Kirschenbaum, Simon, & Napier, 1971). "Generally, the students showed their competencies by reading, writing, and reciting. Progress evaluations were mostly descriptive, that is, the teacher would write down which skills

the student could or couldn't do (pp.51). Quite obviously, for a teacher contending with increasing enrollment and trying to stay abreast of day to day lesson planning, such a method was cumbersome; alternatives were needed.

Two potential remedies – pioneered in the world of higher education – were actually amendments to the numbers-based evaluations mentioned earlier. In 1877, Harvard developed this concept:

Division 1: 90 or more on a scale of 100

Division 2: 75-90

Division 3: 60-74

Division 4: 50-59

Division 5: 40-49

Division 6: below 40 (Marzano, 2000, pg.11)

Two decades later, Mount Holyoke College introduced this one:

A: Excellent = equivalent to percents 95-100

B: Good = equivalent to percents 85-94

C: Fair = equivalent to percents 76-84

D: Passed = barely equivalent to percent 75

F: Failed = below 75 (Marzano, 2000, pg.11)

While both methods still utilized numbers in the form of percentages, the latter involved not just the label and a numerical equivalent, but also a third step: a value judgment. Unlike the evaluations practiced in ancient Greece – where feedback was done largely for the instructor – those that emerged in the late nineteenth century were "done primarily for the student's benefit, since they were not permitted to move on to the next level until they

demonstrated their mastery of the current one" (Guskey, 1996, pg. 14). With the exception of those for whom "the next level" meant college, however, most students still did not come into contact with grade-related letters, numbers, or other labels: they simply passed or failed (Guskey, 1996). Change was imminent though.

Immigrants continued to pour into America through the late 19th century and the swelling population provided some staggering numbers with regard to education: "Between 1870 and 1910, the number of public high schools increased from 500 to 10,000; the total number of pupils in public elementary and high schools rose from 6,817,000 to 17,813,000" (Kirschenbaum, Simon, & Napier, 1971, pg. 51). In an attempt to make the evaluation of so many students more efficient, K-12 teachers – for the first time – experimented with the use of percentages in grading, but for no defined purpose:

> Grading then was used basically to let students know how their own level of performance compared with the others' in the class. Usually an employer looked at a person's graduation certificate and considered the recommendations from teachers or other adults who were familiar with the student's abilities and character. The grades were not important. (pg. 52).

That concluding statement invites further investigation into when grades began to matter, and how, and why that change occurred. Since job-related stress is cause for societal concern and the stressful practice of using grades permeates the vast majority of schools, the present study seeks to better understand the connection between teacher-stress and present-day grading practices.

Chapter II: Literature Review

From the beginning, grading has been an inarguably precarious practice (Karmel and Karmel, 1978) and to fully appreciate its volatility, it is essential to continue exploring the timeline of its evolution. Around the turn of the 20th century, the earlier referenced belief that "grades were not important" (Kirschenbaum, Simon, and Napier, 1971, pg. 52) had curiously made "the shift to percentage grading [and] few American educators questioned it" (Guskey, 1996, pg. 14). The starting point for the present review of literature, therefore, is a closer look at the society which executed this change in perspective.

In what was still a young nation at the time – just over 100 years old – Americans were still trying to figure out the nuances of their country's collective character (Cullen, 2003). The simple ideas about this land, such as those promoted in "What is an American?" by Michel-Guillaume Jean de Crevecoeur, were more than a century out of date Through these and other observations, the French surveyor answered the question posed in his essay's title:

> He is either a European or the descendant of a European . . . incorporated into one of the finest systems of population which has ever appeared . . . The rewards of his industry follow with equal steps the progress of his labor . . . He must, therefore, entertain new ideas and form new opinions. From involuntary idleness, servile dependence, penury, and useless labor he has passed to toils of a very different nature, rewarded by ample subsistence. (1782, as cited in The Language of Literature, 1997, pg. 224)

Ever since the first settlers arrived here, the concept of the American Dream has been afloat across this land and has evoked many visions, nearly all of them predicated on personal freedom or personal wealth (Cullen, 2003). The latter was clearly the impetus for many early European immigrants' decision to make their way across the Atlantic, as indicated in Crevecoueur's description of the grim conditions they left behind (1782). But as the 1800s drew to a close, more Americans turned their attention to the other component of the American Dream, personal wealth (Cullen, 2003). In a century that watched a largely agrarian society turn to one more rooted in industry, many late 19th century Americans had grown restless with simply surviving in the land of the free; they also wanted to thrive (McNergney & Herbert, 1998; Cullen, 2003). Farm work largely gave way to factory work and the effects were felt not just in the nation's economy, but in its educational arena as well:

> As more and more students graduated from high school and wanted to get into college, and as more and more families could afford to send their children to college, the need to distinguish between all the high school graduates increased. (Kirschenbaum, Simon, & Napier, 1971, pg. 52)

Prior to this era, employers' preference for teacher recommendations over transcripts had rendered grading a topic of little interest to society. This changed, however, as grades became a valuable tool with which college admissions officers could efficiently sort through potential students' applications (Kirschenbaum, Simon, & Napier, 1971).

In the early 20th century, percentage-based grading reigned supreme and drastically changed the tenor of education for college-hopefuls. As with many others in society, students were also looking to embrace both the wealth *and* the freedom endemic

to the American Dream, and a step toward getting them there came in the form of an extrinsic reward: numbers (Cullen, 2003; Kohn, 1993). The plural-form of that word is important here, for this is also the era in which students' educational records began to tell not just one, but many tales of their educational experiences. "Subject areas in [America's] high schools became increasingly specific" and "teachers began to employ percentages and other similar markings to certify students' accomplishments in different subject areas" (Guskey, 1996, pg. 14).

Even at the height of grading with percentages, one of the first matters of public concern to surface was one that continues to plague the use of grades today: "a student's [success] was determined by the whim of the teacher in the classroom" (Kirschenbaum, Simon, & Napier, 1971). It did not take long, however, for researchers (Starch & Elliot) to follow up on this scrutiny of teachers with a study in 1912. The groundbreaking work of these men was the first to confirm what many Americans already suspected, that there was indeed a high degree of subjectivity among teachers' grading practices. Their study involved 142 separate English teachers' evaluations of the same essay. With a range of more than 40 points among the scores given, the results raised many eyebrows. Even though they were aware of many society members' suspicions of subjectivity, Starch & Elliot wanted to put to rest any ideas that the same outcome would not hold true in a different subject area, one thought to lend itself to objectivity more than English. Consequently, they conducted a similar study with math teachers the following year and the outcome was even far more riveting, courtesy of a 67 point range in scores across 138 independently scored versions of the exact same geometry paper (Starch & Elliot, 1912-1913, as cited in Guskey, 1996).

Nearly a century later, there is still data to support the findings of Starch & Elliot. In an era where a great deal of teacher control has been compromised to pave the way for standardization (Lemann, 1999; Jones & Olkin, 2004), most instructors still enjoy a substantial amount of individual control with respect to grading. "Nearly 85 percent of high schools surveyed [by the College Board, 1997] reported that teachers 'may award any distribution of grades they desire depending on student performance . . .'" (Boston, 2003, pg. 2).

Largely because researchers' findings proved to be true what had already infiltrated public consciousness, grading based purely on numbers did not enjoy continued popularity (Guskey, 1996). "Educators began moving away from the 100-point scale to those scales which had fewer and larger categories" (Kirschenbaum, Simon, and Napier, 1971, pg. 570). Even though the methods touted by Harvard University and Mount Holyoke College at the end of the previous century both made use of percentages in some capacity – to define divisions and letters, respectively – both schools' models provided a starting point for many teachers who desired change (Kirschenbaum, Simon, and Napier, 1971; Guskey, 1996).

Though the issue of teacher subjectivity continued to plague the concept of grading, in the 1920s there was not yet an agreed-upon method to replace the percentage-based variety that were dethroned on the heels of Starch & Elliot's findings. In fact, researchers (Crawford, 1930; Dexter, 1935; Rosenthal & Jacobsen, 1969, as cited in (Kirschenbaum, Simon, and Napier, 1971) discovered that throughout that decade, nearly 50 different grading systems were in use and "there was mounting evidence that academic grades often reflected both arbitrary criteria and what was targeted as the

peculiar value systems of the individual teacher" (pg.61). One researcher (Brown) later reflected on what he viewed as the subtext in the failure to arrive at a workable system for reporting student achievements:

> The assigning of grades or marks . . . is like a game. The students, who lack control over the system, must play the game according to rules that the teachers establish. . . . A modification of this game is played in every classroom in every school throughout this country, and probably throughout the world, whenever grades have to be assigned. (1970, pg. 103)

And grades did indeed have to be assigned in the early to mid 20th society, at least according to the player in the grading game that seemed to value them most: colleges. Secondary school teachers were merely acquiescing to the wishes the next level of education and in the process, inciting both the ire and mistrust of a nation (Kirschenbaum, Simon, and Napier, 1971).

The next phase of the game ushered in the concept of grading on a curve, a method in which "students were simply rank-ordered according to some measure of their performance or proficiency" (Guskey, 1996, pg. 15). The very premise of the curve precluded the possibility for all students to attain the same grade (either good or bad), and in its most extreme form, teachers "specified precise percentages of students that should be assigned each grade" (pg. 15). "One advocate suggested that 2% of the students should qualify for an A grade, 23% for a B, 50% for a C, 23% for a D, and 2% should fail" (Kirschenbaum, Simon, and Napier, 1971, pg. 57) while another (Davis, 1930 as cited in Guskey, 1996) suggested a 6-22-44-22-6 model. Obviously, the potential for

teacher mistrust was still significant since every student had to be pigeonholed, albeit with what seemed to be a regimented, objective breakdown method, and that meant that judgments still had to be made. If grading on a curve seemed an unlikely antidote to the aforementioned struggles educators were having with grading, it was accepted in its time because it mirrored the natural curve of intelligence test results which were a widely accepted barometer of a child's academic potential in the early to mid 1900s (Middleton, 1933 as cited in Guskey,1996).

The testing movement that gave rise to the IQ test – and consequently to grading on a curve – actually had its roots in the World War I era when the Military Intelligence Test was first issued (Lemann, 1999; Jones & Olkin, 2004):

> Educators were placing great stress on the acquisition of knowledge and methods of measuring and learning. Advances in science and technology and measurement led to the rapid development of the standardized test. Many saw [it] as one answer to many of America's education problems, and they tried to bring testing and measurement into more and more facets of the school's operation." (Kirschenbaum, Simon, and Napier, 1971, pg. 61)

Testing continued into the World War II era and beyond. When droves of WW II veterans returned home to a shortage of employment opportunities, the federal government developed the GI Bill which included a list of benefits intended to ease their reintegration into American life of the 1940s. However, as one researcher (Lemann, 1999) noted, "college was not supposed to be the main item on the list; nobody had any inkling of how many veterans would use the GI Bill to educate themselves" (pg. 59). The abundance of veterans on college campuses drew critics, therefore, and one of particular

note was Harvard University president James Conant Bryant who already believed the government needed "a procedure for weeding out college freshmen at the end of their first year and allowing only the most able to continue" (Lemann, 1999, pg. 59). Conant's career was marked by efforts to preclude not just WWII veterans – but anyone he deemed unworthy – the opportunity to matriculate at America's institutions of higher learning. Alongside his friend Henry Chauncey, head of Educational Testing Service, Conant watched as the Scholastic Aptitude Test transcended the Ivy League and, like grades, became a critical part of college admissions decisions across the country (Lemann, 1999). With standardized tests came increased talk of standards and the need for grading practices to effectively assess them (Jones & Olkin, 2004). As the latter half of the 20th century commenced, teachers continued to ask questions about grading; they "argued back and forth, tried new systems and tried old systems, but history kept repeating itself. No one seemed to have the answer" (Kirschenbaum, Simon, & Napier, 1971, pg. 68).

As the vacillation between using letter grades and numbers – independently and in various combinations – the search for a solution went on, albeit in a backward direction. Some instructors experimented with credit/no-credit or pass/fail methods (like those of the ancients) for reporting student achievement; but this was primarily on liberal college campuses (Kirschenbaum, Simon, & Napier, 1971). Many of their K-12 counterparts had likewise grown tired of the trends in grading and testing that categorized students "so rigidly that they [could] barely escape" (Silberman, 1970, pg. 138) and they reduced their dependence on labels in favor of written comments like those used in the previous century.

In 1958, a study examined the value of teacher-feedback of the written variety. The researcher (Page) utilized 74seventy-four teachers, three different grading methods, and just one test. After initially assigning conventional numbers and corresponding letter grades, the participants then divided the tests into three stacks. The first of these remained untouched while the second group received these grade-based comments: "A: Excellent! Keep it up., B: Good work. Keep at it., C: Perhaps try to do still better? D: Let's bring this up., and F: Let's raise this grade!" (as cited in Guskey, 1999, pg. 16). Finally, the third group of papers also received written comments, but of a personalized, unlimited variety: not the stock comments reserved for stack two. When the students took their next test, their performance was evaluated with respect to the amount of feedback given to them on the original three-stack assessment. The study results showed a significantly higher test score among those students who had been given the written feedback in addition to a grade (Guskey, 1999).

Page's suggestion that increased human interaction (via written comments) could lead to improved student performance positively flew in the face of the decades-long quest for efficiency and objectivity. Another example to suggest that the 20th century's grading emphases were askew came in the form of a personal testimonial. After being honored for having achieved unprecedented academic excellence at the University of California – Berkley, the recipient summarized his educational experience in this way:

> I became subject to a paralyzing mental machinery. . . . I pushed myself to maintain my quotas until I was more enchained than a Russian factory worker in the 1930s. . . Instead of encouraging me to form human bonds with my fellow students, the grade-oriented system of the University of California made it possible and sometimes

> comfortable for me to become caught up in the prison of my mind (McGuire, 1968, pg. 28)

McGuire's words indicated that he felt his personhood was robbed by what others deemed enviable achievements. While his transcript was marked by success, he actually felt like a failure.

Throughout the rest of the last century and into the present, the practice of grading has followed the pendulum's swing and it has been the bane of many teachers' existence:

> Grading makes us so uncomfortable. . . . In the halls, over coffee, and in endless meetings, we lament our situation and discuss the need for higher standards and tougher grading policies; but year after year, in most cases and most places, the confusion and discomfort continue unabated (Walvoord & Anderson, 1998, pg. xii).

And, ironically, in time where decreased on-the-job autonomy is thought to be associated with decreased stress (APHA, 2001), teachers who have been proven to have a great deal of independence with regard to how they evaluate students (College Board, 1997 as cited in Boston, 2003), are consequently left to express these sentiments in isolation: "Every grading period I agonize over assigning grades." (Jongsma, 1991, pg. 318).

This teacher's use of the word "assigning" prior to grades suggests that her disdain for the practice stems from the system itself – one for which teachers have been repeatedly judged for more than a century – and not simply the grades themselves, however imperfect, that are "a deeply entrenched mode of evaluating student leaning" (Walvoord & Anderson, 1998, pg. xv). Furthermore, courtesy of the word "every," her lamentation suggests the assigning of grades to be periodic – a clear indicator that she wrote these words in a time long gone – the late 20th century to be exact – before the

development of a new player that has turned the grading game into an all-day, every-day event: family-access online grading.

Computers have changed the lives of nearly every American in ways most could have never imagined; and they have assuredly changed the face of education (Migliorino, N.J., & Maiden, J., 2004). It is difficult for most teachers today to imagine practicing their craft without the use of computers for research, word processing, and perhaps most notably, for grading:

> Electronic grade books are capable of performing many different functions. . . . They tabulate percentages based on weights entered by the educator. They also assign alpha grades . . . which are determined at the time the software is set up These programs also provide progress reports, grade cards, student information sheets, class averages, statistical measurements of classes, and . . . all of these tasks can be accomplished by pushing a few buttons on the computer. Once it is entered, the information stays in the program and does not have to be reentered over and over every quarter, semester, or whenever grade reports are needed. (Migliorino, N.J., & Maiden, J., 2004, pg.195)

While the world of education still has a few professionals who claim to suffer from "technophobia," most teachers are appreciative of the time savings and stress reduction they experience with electronic grading systems (Migliorino, N.J., & Maiden, J., 2004, pg.194).

Family-access online programs boast many of the same capabilities as those just detailed, as well as the power to make said information available via the internet for students and/or parents who log on with an identification number provided by the school

(Napolitano, 2005). As with many new technologies, the concept comes with a healthy price tag: "in the range of $4,000 to $10,000 per school, plus hundreds of dollars in annual support costs" (Curriculum Review, 2003, pg. 5). Several companies offer family- access online programs, and one of the most widely used is Edline for whose "schools pay about $2 per student" (Weeks, 2007).

Another cause for concern with any form of information technology is the potential for compromised security. In addition to the grades, missing assignments, tardies, and absences likely to be contained in such a system, plenty of private student information is housed there as well; and much of it needs to be kept out of the public eye for legal reasons (Migliorino, N.J., & Maiden, J., 2004). A suburban high school near Chicago found out just how vulnerable its system was:

> Three students hacked their way into the district's computer to change their grades. The boys helped themselves to the grade book for three weeks . . . before a teacher caught them. Students elsewhere have taken an even simpler route: copying their teacher's user identification and password – sometimes left on sticky notes right on the computer screen--and logging on. (Napolitano, 2005)

Family-access online programs are also steeped in security concerns of another variety: personal privacy. One MIT professor (Turkle) likens the practice of allowing parents real-time information about their children to "the panopticon, an 18th-century idea for a specially designed building that would enable jailers to watch prisoners without the prisoners knowing they were being observed. The panopticon has become a metaphor for Big Brother (as cited in Weeks, 2007).

Not surprisingly, students tend to agree with Turkle's assessment of this service far more than parents (Napolitano, 2005; Weeks, 2007). Numerous *Face Book* groups have recently sprung up for the express purpose of venting frustration about online grade programs and seeking commiseration with other teens subjected to parent-scrutiny. The titles of two such sites are: "Edline Is Hazardous to My Health" and "Edline Is Ruining My Life" (Weeks, 2007). There is a high level of parent support for systems like Edline, though, with improved communication between home and school routinely cited as a main perk. A mother whose student attends an Edline school stated: "'Rather than having to call the teacher and make an appointment, it's an easier way for us to communicate with each other'" (as cited in Napolitano, 2005). When coupled with the aforementioned issue of subjectivity, however, this supposed convenience measure could prove devastating for a teacher. Neither Napolitano (2005) or Weeks (2007) quantified that devastation, however, since teachers were hardly referenced in either of their articles. Without actually mentioning the professionals who administer grades, Turkle does hint at a significant issue facing anyone who believes grades – online or otherwise – serve as a valid substitute for human interaction: "'When you just see a grade as a number, it's not necessarily opening the possibility of dialogue. Potentially it's closing down dialogue'" (as cited in Weeks, 2007).

While assumptions can be made about the impact that decreased contact with parents and students can have on teachers, the fact remains that little information is available about the role of the teacher in the grading practices that define the present day. There is something in education referred to as the "back-lash effect of grades," the phenomenon of numbers and letters coming back to haunt those responsible for handing

them out (Ickes-Dunbar, 2004, pg. 3). With today's new technology, however, the delay is gone and the back-lash can start long before a teacher even feels it. Now, instead of hovering around the teacher's desk to find out their grade, a student (and their parents) can access that information from the comfort of their own living room – at every stage of the game. In fact, one journal article on the subject – written long before online family access was even offered by most schools – was aptly, if not sarcastically titled "Let's Pop Some Corn and Watch Your Report Card" (Greenwood, 1995).

Chapter III: Summary, Analysis, and Recommendations

It was the intent of this qualitative study to examine the relationship between teacher-stress and present day grading methods. The physical and psychological effects of stress were acknowledged as was job-related stress and the delineations between the experiences of private and public sector employees. Within the latter, some contributors to teacher-stress were covered, particularly those involving assessment: both the kinds endured by and administered by classroom practitioners in America's public education system. The introduction of the study's principal focus – grading – necessitated a cursory exploration of the origins of this practice.

The timeline offered an assemblage of periods, populations, and concepts, the traditions of which were influential in laying the foundations for grading as we recognize it in 2007. Significant highlights along the timeline included the following: prehistoric humans, ancient Greeks, the Roman Empire, the Medieval University, the Renaissance, early American settlers, early American universities, common schools, industrialization, high schools, the American Dream, college admissions, numbers-based grading, letter-based grading, the grading curve, standardized tests, teacher subjectivity, electronic grade books, and family-access online programs.

Throughout my research, I found an abundance of literature about assessment, evaluations, grading, and the like; unfortunately I cannot say the same for the teacher-stress that it produces and that I believed I would also find to be plentiful. As tacitly related to scrutiny, subjectivity, and time constraints, frustration for graders *was* hinted at, but conducting a search with the phrase "grade-related stress" hardly yielded hit. Similarly, the coming and going of trends in grading – and the societal expectation to

keep up – also hinted at stress for teachers, but, admittedly, not to the extent which I had hoped to discover on this journey.

I am not discouraged, however, because I am a teacher. I impart my experiences to my students and I listen to them when they share theirs. Throughout the past decade I have often felt myself at odds with colleagues who acquiesce to the grading game without question, or at least appear to. All I do is question. With respect to grading, I push the envelope as much as I can within the rigid parameters of my workplace. But I wish I could do more. Throughout my research I read numerous passages that suggested grading to simply be a cross to bear for those entwined with the world of education: students, teachers, parents, and society at large. I do not mean to suggest that I read the work of researchers who were weak minded or unable to recognize the flaws in the system. To do so, of course, would be to promote my own inklings as superior to the work of esteemed scholars. I did, however, get the distinct sense that, with respect to grading, I was being told to get over it; it is here to stay. The following are a few such examples:

> Few topics in education are more controversial than grading, reporting, and communicating student learning. Teachers, students, administrators, parents, and community member all agree that we need better reporting systems. They point out that inadequacies in our present system too often lead to confusion and misinterpretation. But these same groups rarely agree on the form those new systems should take (Guskey, 1996, pg.1)

> Americans have a basic trust in the message that grades convey – so much so that grades have gone without challenge and are, in fact, highly resistant to any challenge . . . The use of grades 'is one of the most sacred traditions in American education . . . The truth is that grades have acquired an almost cult-like importance in American schools . . .' (Olson, 1995 as cited in Marzano, 2000, pg. 1)

> Despite all its problems, grading is still a deeply entrenched mode of evaluating student learning in higher education. It is the basis of a college or university's decision about who graduates. It is the most universal form of communication to employers or graduate schools about the quality of a student's learning. Grading systems implemented in classrooms powerfully shape students' expectations and experiences. (Walvoord & Anderson, 1998, pg. xv)

Along with their same basic messages, there is another commonality shared among these three passages, and its evidence resides within the citations. Each of the aforementioned nods to the tenuousness of grading comes from one of the very first – if not the first – paragraphs of the book from which it is taken. And consequently, all three publications which are titled *Transforming Classroom Grading, Communicating Student Learning,* and *Effective Grading* respectively, spend the ensuing chapters telling how teachers to assess their students and ultimately provide them with letter grades. They are good books, but they are books that settle. And throughout my research the clear sense I got was that I should settle too.

Before I do that, however, I want to walk my reader through the basics of the backwards (and seemingly blindfolded) process that teachers, according to my research, are almost universally expected to follow when assigning grades. At the time of determining final grades, a teacher will "usually bring together and average the grades or points the student has earned in a number of class activities" (Brown, 1970, pg. 114). This requires deciding – before they ever even take place – exactly which activities will factor into the letter that will ultimately represent each student's experience in class. As out of order as it seems, teachers routinely make decisions about what "counts" well in advance of even meeting the students. One reason for this failure to do what *appears* to be the right thing is a logistical one: teachers do not have the time.

Already stressed out and putting in far more hours than their contracts require, most teachers simply do not have the luxury of waiting to see how a class unfolds before tailoring grades to match individual needs (Moulthrop, Calegari, & Eggers, 2005). In addition to being tedious, such a grade-as-you-go policy would assuredly invite cries of "foul-play" from students and their parents. In my own department, my colleagues and I must outline grading formulas on the syllabi we distribute a each student and also submit to the main office. There, it is approved by the principal(s) and remains on file in case of a grade-related discrepancy. Some teachers even require students and/or parents to sign the syllabus, thereby creating a sort of contract that states exactly what the term in question will consist of.

Within this accountability-laden process, when it comes time to assign midterm or final grades, there is a high risk for overlooking students who have actually *been* educated – that is to say they have been "developed mentally or morally . . ." (Merriam-

Webster's, 2006, pg. 396) – albeit in ways not recognized or appreciated per the on-file document. While taught in their professional training to accommodate and value all learners, the grading conundrum makes hypocrites out of many teachers. This can fuel, within the students, an epidemic of disinterest in everything except that which has been deemed important enough to grade. This predicament prompts many educators to experience an epiphany similar to this one at some point in their career:

> It dawned on me that the manner in which I was using grades conflicted with my deeper purposes as an educator. Again and again, students met my passion for a subject with their pragmatic concern for their grade. I wanted my economics students to wrestle with issues of equity or debate the costs and benefits of a minimum wage; they wondered whether the upcoming test would be essay or multiple-choice. I wanted my sociology students to consider the powerful role that group attachments play in personal decisions about religion or romance; they cared more about how many pages they would need to write for the essay. (Winger, 2005, pg. 61)

In addition to deciding *what* will be graded, teachers "must also determine the relative importance of each assignment" (Brown, 1970, pg. 114). The most common method for achieving this is assigning each activity a numeric-value. Numbers are easy to work with. They can be added, subtracted, multiplied, and divided - as well as converted to percentages and rounded up or down. These capabilities combine to make numbers appear strong and meaningful and place them at the heart of "students' myopic focus on grades" (Huhn, 2005, pg.18). Students want to know if an assignment is valued at 5, 10, or 25 points and they likewise judge teacher-rigor on whether 100 or 1,000 cumulative points can be racked up in a term. Our capitalistic society – that looks more

favorably on quantity than quality – has likely fed into students' widespread concern with not *what* or *how* they are learning, but rather with how many points that learning is worth (Huhn, 2005).

There is no denying that for a student whose grade, GPA, class rank, and future plans are based hinge on them, numbers are dreadfully important. "After years of getting the message that success means collecting more points, it's not surprising that students play the 'school game'" (Huhn, 2005, pg. 19). In the final and most widely recognized play of the grading game, teachers most commonly report their students' achievements, or lack thereof, with one of five little letters (*A, B, C, D, F*). Beyond the coincidence of the word *fail* beginning with the letter *F*, these labels are not acronymic nor do they have any universally agreed upon correlates (Guskey, 1999). Nonetheless, these labels mean plenty to those caught in the throes of the grading frenzy. When he asked a group of high school students about what defines a *good student*, William Glasser found nearly unanimous support for the belief that good students get good grades and anything less than a *B* is not good (1990). Add to this one self-help book's suggestion that "you may want good grades because they show you've learned something, or because they stand for success" (Marshall & Ford, 1994), and the impetus for chasing these numbers seems clear.

But looks can be deceiving – grading remains quite unclear. Nonetheless, in a rather cart-before-the-horse fashion, school districts now offer family-access online grading and invite everyone to behold the wonders of this imprecise practice. From the on-the-bubble type – waiting to see if the extra credit assignment they submitted in the eleventh hour will push them into the passing zone – to the honor roll leader – waiting to

see if her valedictorian hopes are still alive – teachers are accustomed to kids who habitually wait on the edge of their seats to watch the final bit of arithmetic that will determine their fate. No longer in need of standing beside the teacher's desk, students may now look over teachers' shoulders and into their grade books anytime they please.

Grading is stressful enough for an organized teacher, but what about the *disorganized* bookkeeper? What about the teacher who gives timely, written feedback on students' papers, but – for whatever reason – opts to save the punching of numbers until the night before grades are due? It seems that in the 21st century, such a teacher is looking for trouble. There is simply no place for the procrastinator, the scatterbrain, or the otherwise sloppy bookkeeper today. Where I used to make sure my desk was presentable for parent teacher conferences four times a year, now I must worry about my grade book looking perfect every single day. Since the implementation of the online family access program at the school where I work, I have had more emails (which take a tremendous amount of time to respond to) and fewer face-to-face conferences. Furthermore, if I choose to spend the evening playing with my kids or cleaning my house, instead of punching numbers into the computer, I can count on being greeted the next morning by angry students who watched my unused grade book all night long.

Of course, the option is always there to simply say *no* to this stress by refusing to play the game, but the ramifications are harsh. I am required to use the family-access online program and that program dictates that I use numbers to arrive at percentages which ultimately become letters. Simply put, if I want to remain in my teaching post, I must bow to this system. Teachers are public servants, after all, and the expectation is that they will serve – even if the fare is not always palatable.

So what can a teacher do to rectify this situation that feels so beyond her control? First of all, she must recognize that there are options other than quietly maintaining the status quo and inciting a full-blown assault on a time-honored tradition. Discovering the gray area – the glimmers of hope – involves reaching out and learning. And even if the information she suspects to find is not there, she must continue her search for likeminded educators who believe in a better way. Grading must not be allowed to rank as just one more cross to bear in the admittedly stressful occupation of teaching. To turn a blind eye to low pay or public scrutiny is one thing, but to acquiesce to a practice which history suggests is potentially crippling for students is not ethical. The "how to" guides of the aforementioned scholars are starting places, to be sure, but they are likely to be just that for they provide more answers than questions. The evolution of grading suggests that change is imminent, and I desire to be an envelope-pusher who ensures it is the right kind of change. I will continue to ask scholars, students, parents, and colleagues about their beliefs on this important facet of education and I welcome others to ask me about mine.

Sadly, some research suggests that "teaching is currently viewed as a stressful profession with teachers reporting that their rewards are diminishing" (Wilhelm & Savellis, 2000, pg. 291). Because I continue to experience the rewards of learning alongside my students, in spite of the stress that grading presents, I am convinced that I am in the right profession.

References

Allen, D. (1998). *Assessing student learning*. New York: Teacher College Press.

American Federation of Teachers. (2005). Executive summary – America's teachers need a raise. *Survey and Analysis of Teacher Salary Trends 2005.* Retrieved on July 20, 2007, from http://www.aft.org/salary/2005/download/AFT2005SalarySurvey.pdf

American Public Health Association (2001). Public health impacts of job stress [Electronic version]. *American Journal of Public Health, (91)*3, 502-503.

Blair, J. (2001). Teacher performer-pay plan modified in Cincinnati [Electronic version]. *Education Week (21)*3, 3.

Boston, C. (2003). High school report cards. *ERIC Clearinghouse on Asssesssment and Evaluation*, 2-5. Retrieved July 27, 2007, from ERIC Digest.

Brimblecombe, N., & Ormston, M. (1995). Teachers' perceptions of school inspection: A stressful experience. [Electronic version]. *Cambridge Journal of Education, (25)*1, 53-62.

Brown, D.J. (1970). *Appraisal procedures in the secondary schools*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc.

Butler, V.M. (1969). *Education as revealed by New England newspapers prior to 1850.* New York: Arno Press, Inc.

Carr, N. (2006). New rules of engagement [Electronic version]. *American School Board Journal (193)*4, 66-68.

Cauchon, D. (2007, February 21). Pension gap divides public and private workers. *USA Today*. Retrieved on July 18, 2007, from http://www.usatoday.com/news/nation/-2007-02-20-ensions-cover_x.htm

Clemmitt, M. (2007). Students under stress [Electronic version]. *CQ Researcher (17)*25, 577-586.

Cohen, A. (2004, May 31). What Studs Terkel's 'Working' says about worker malaise today. *The New York Times*. Retrieved on July 18, 2007, from http://www.common dreams.org/views04/0531-03.htm

Cullen, J. (2003). *The American dream: a short history of an idea that shaped a nation.* New York: Oxford University Press.

Elias, M. (2007, April 24). Deep stress could signal cry for help. *USA Today.* Retrieved on July 31, 2007, from http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct= true&db= mih&AN=J0E060945595507&site=ehost-live

Falk, B. (2000). *The heart of the matter: using standards and assessment to learn.* Portsmouth NH: Heinemann.

Farber, B.A. (2000). Treatment strategies for different types of teacher burnout [Electronic version]. *Journal of Clinical Psychology (56)*5, 675-689.

Gardner, H. (1991). *The unschooled mind: How children think and how schools should teach.* United States: Basic Books.

Glasser, W. (1990). *The quality school: managing students without coercion.* New York: Harper & Row Publishers.

Greenwood, T.W. (1995). Let's pop some corn and watch your report card [Electronic version]. *The Journal (22)*7, 76-79.

Guskey, T.R. (Ed.). (1996). *Communicating student learning.* Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

Gwynne-Thomas, E.H. (1981). *A concise history of education to 1900A.D.* Lanham, MD: University Press of America.

Hannigan, B., Edwards, D., & Burnard, P. (2004). Stress and stress management in clinical psychology: Findings from a systematic review [Electronic version]. *Journal of Mental Health, 13*, 235-245.

High stress for teachers [Electronic version] (2006). *District Administration (42)*10, 18.

Houston, D.J. (2000). Public-service motivation: A multivariate test [Electronic version]. *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory, 10*(4), 713-728.

Huhn, C. (2005). How many points is this worth? [Electronic version]. *Educational Leadership (63)*3, 81-82.

Ickes-Dunbar, A. (2004). Beyond the dunce cap:"What's my grade?" [Electronic version]. *Phi Kappa Phi Forum (84)*4, 3-7.

Iwasaki, Y. (2006). Counteracting stress through leisure coping: A prospective health Study [Electronic version]. *Psychology, Health & Medicine, 11*(2), 209-220.

Jepson, E., & Forrest, S. (2006). Individual contributory factors in teacher stress: The role of achievement striving and occupational commitment [Electronic version]. *British Journal of Educational Psychology, 76*(1), 183-197.

Jones, L.V., & Olkin, I. (2004). *The nation's report card.* Bloomington, IN: Phi Delta Kappa Educational Foundation.

Jongsma. K. S. (1991). Rethinking grading practices [Electronic version]. *Reading Teacher (45)*4, 318-321.

Kirschenbaum, H., Simon, S.B., & Napier, R.W. (1971). *Wad-ja-get? The grading game in American education.* New York, NY: Hart Publishing Co., Inc.

Kohn, A. (1993). *Punished by rewards*. Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Company.

Kohn, A. (1999). *The schools our children deserve*. Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Company.

The Language of literature: American literature. (1997). Evanston, IL: McDougall, Littell, Inc.

Leitzell, K. Stressed? Eat veggies [Electronic version]. U.S. News & World Report (143)2, 56.

Lemann, N. (1999). *The big test*. New York: Farrar, Sraus and Giroux.

Manthei, R., & Gilmore, A. (1996). Teacher stress in intermediate schools [Electronic version]. *Educational Research (38)*1, 3-20.

Marshall, B., & Ford, W. (1994). *The secrets of getting better grades.* Indianapolis, IN: Park Avenue Publications.

Marzano, R.J. (2000). *Transforming classroom grading*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

McNergney, R.F., & Herbert, J.M. (1998). *Foundations of education. The challenge of professional practice.* Boston, MA: Allyn and Bacon.

Merriam-Webster's collegiate dictionary (11th ed.). (2006). Springfield, MA: Merriam-Webster.

Migliorino, N.J., & Maiden, J. (2004). Educator attitudes toward electronic grading software [Electronic version]. *Journal of Research on Technology in Education (36)*3, 193-212.

Motzer, S. A., & Hertig, V. (2004). Stress, stress response and health [Electronic version]. *Nursing Clinics of North America, 39*,1-17.

Moulthrop, D., Calegari, N.C., & Eggers, D. (2005) *Teachers have it easy. The big sacrifices and small salaries of America's teachers.* New York: The New Press.

Napolitano, J. (2005, November 20). Online grades leave students nowhere to hide. *The Chicago Tribune Web Edition.* Retrieved on July 20, 2007, from, http://www.chicago-tribune.com/business/content/education/chi-0511200327nov20,0, 6954898.- story?-chicagotribune.com

The new Oxford American dictionary (2nd ed.). (2005). New York: Oxford University Press.

Schachner, N. (1962). *The mediaeval universities.* New York: A.S. Barnes & Company, Inc.

School District of the Menomonie Area and West Central Education Association-Menomonie Unit (2004). *Agreement for the 2003-04 & 2004-05 school years.* Menomonie, WI: Author.

Silberman, C. E. (1970). *Crisis in the classroom: the remaking of American education.* New York: Random House.

Sluhovsky, M. (2006). Discernment of difference, the introspective subject, and the birth of modernity [Electronic version]. *Journal of Medieval & Early Modern Studies (36)*1, 169-199.

Stambor, Z. (2006). Stressed out nation [Electronic version]. *Monitor on Psychology. 37*(4), 28.

Starnes, B.A. (2004). Out loud and in public [Electronic version]. *Phi Delta Kappan (85)*8, 639-640.

Turney, M. (2000). Working in government is like being in a fishbowl. *Unique characteristics of government employment.* Retrieved July 18, 2007, from http://www. nku.edu/~turney/prclass/govt2.htm

Wagner, C. (2006). Stress and the brain [Electronic version]. *Futurist. 40*(2), 12-13.

Walvoord, B.E. & Anderson, V.J. (1998). *Effective grading: A tool for learning and assessment.* San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass Publishers.

Weeks, L. (2007, April 30). How'd you do in school today? With Edline Online, the report card goes 24/7 and every test is an open book, *Washington Post.* Retrieved on July 13, 2007, from, http://www.washingtonpost.com/wpdyn/content/article/-2007/- 04/29/AR20070-42901391.html

Wilhelm, K., Dewhurst-Savellis, J., & Parker, G. (2000). Teacher stress? An analysis of why teachers leave and why they stay [Electronic version]. *Teachers & Teaching (6)*3, 291-304.

Winger, T. (2005). Grading to communicate [Electronic version]. *Educational Leadership (63)*3, 61-65.

Wise, A.E. (2001). Creating a high-quality teaching force [Electronic version]. *Educational Leadership (58)*4, 18-22.

Wooyeal, P. & Bell, D.A. (2004) Citizenship and state-sponsored physical education: Ancient Greece and Ancient China [Electronic version]. *Review of Politics (66)*1, 7-34.