

Grading to build student agency: A case-study

by

Cathy L. Phillips

B.S., Kansas State University, 1996

M.S., Kansas State University, 2010

AN ABSTRACT OF A DISSERTATION

submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree

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Abstract

Traditional grading practices remain common in secondary schools despite concerns that they may not adequately communicate student learning or support contemporary educational goals emphasizing mastery, growth, and student agency. Although alternative approaches to grading have received increasing attention, implementation can be complicated by teachers' beliefs about grading and learning, stakeholder expectations, existing school structures, and uncertainty regarding how nontraditional grading practices affect students. This qualitative case study examined how two high school teachers experienced and interpreted the implementation of a student-centered grading reform focused on standards-based mastery, academic growth, and student self-agency. The study also explored the changes teachers make to their instructional and assessment practices and their perceptions of the benefits and challenges of grading reform for student learning and student self-agency. Agency theory provided a conceptual framework for examining how the reform shaped teachers' professional decision-making and the opportunities created for students to exercise greater ownership of their learning. Data were collected through two semi-structured interviews with each participant and analysis of grading policies, communication documents, and course materials.

Findings indicated that both teachers viewed grading reform as an opportunity to better align grades with demonstrated learning and to shift classroom practices toward mastery, growth, and student ownership. Implementation required substantial changes to assessment and grading systems, feedback practices, reassessment opportunities, and structures supporting student reflection and self-monitoring. Participants perceived increased transparency of learning expectations and greater opportunities for students to understand their progress, reflect on feedback, and exercise agency in the learning process. However, they also described persistent

challenges associated with students' long-established focus on grades, differences in students' willingness to engage with agency-supportive structures, teacher workload, and traditional institutional expectations surrounding grading. Findings suggest that meaningful grading reform involves more than changing how grades are calculated; it requires changes in instructional practice, teacher decision-making, student beliefs and behaviors, and the broader systems within which grading occurs.

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Approved by:

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Dedication

To my husband, Marcus. Thank you for your unwavering belief in me and for standing by my side through every late night, postponed vacation, and missed dinner.

To my son, Elijah. You were the impetus for this exploration of grading. And, as you start your journey into public education, remember that teachers do make a difference.

Chapter 1 - Introduction

Personal Story: How I Decided Traditional Grading Wasn't Working for Me

My father was a career Army man. Because of that, I attended six schools across three states in my K-12 education. In kindergarten I attend school in Hawaii. We then moved to Kansas, where I attended 1st through 3rd grade. Then, we moved to Texas, where I finished elementary school and transitioned into middle school. For 9th grade, we moved again and I was back in Kansas, this time in a junior high school. My last transition was to a 10th -12th grade high school in Kansas. While all these schools were in different states with different requirements one thing was always the same: grading was done in the traditional way. Whether it was a diorama I created about the Kansas State Flower in 2nd grade, a test I took on the people who died in the Alamo in 5th grade in Texas, or an essay I wrote on the way Salinger developed Holden's character in *The Catcher in the Rye* for senior English, one thing remained consistent. I was assigned tasks, I completed tasks, and then I received a grade based on what I did correctly. Typically, those grades consisted of a percentage out of a hundred. More often than not, I focused on that numerical grade and not on what I could do to improve. Grades, specifically an A, were the end goal.

I have been teaching English Language Arts (ELA) for over twenty years. I have taught every grade from 6th through 12th and even teach multiple AP English Language classes. Writing is one of the key components of ELA classes no matter what level you are teaching, and it is inherently cyclical. Students draft, review and revise, and draft again, repeating the steps as necessary. I don't know anyone who doesn't need to use the writing process to create a good piece of writing. When you consider the writing process it is formative in nature. Each step allows students and teachers to reflect and make suggestions for improvement. Each step allows

additional practice on skills, ultimately building a stronger writer. And yet, for most of my 27 years in the classroom, I have graded my students the exact same way I had been graded—with traditional letter grades for each attempt. I recently found myself wondering why. After all, this traditional grading method did not accurately record the level at which my students were writing, and it wasn't encouraging them to take academic risks and become better writers. Times and expectations have changed—it was time for me to change as well.

When public education in the United States was started, the country needed workers for the Industrial Revolution. Schools were designed to prepare young people for jobs in factories. Education relied heavily on rote memorization of facts. Society needed people who could show up on time, be efficient at their job, and follow the rules. But times have changed and the needs of society in the 21st Century – and beyond—have also changed. A lot of the monotonous factory jobs have been taken over by machines. People don't have to memorize facts anymore because the majority of us are walking around with a smart phone that can connect to the internet allowing us to look up information anytime we need to.

The skills that schools were originally designed to build are no longer a priority (Schneider & Hutt, 2014). Now society needs innovative thinkers and collaborators (21st Century Knowledge and Skills In Educator Preparation, 2010). The American education system has started to shift these 21st Century skills and change the curriculum to meet the modern needs of society, but the institution as a whole is slow to change (Skills, 2008). When I began my teaching career in 1996, we were already talking about 21st Century skills and how our schools were going to need to change. Now, in 2025, curricular changes are commonplace. Learning focused on building skills in critical and creative thinking and collaboration are mainstream.

And, yet, for the most part, students are still being graded in the same old way (Marzano, 2000): individual assignments being assessed on correctness that are then averaged across the quarter or semester to build into a single grade at the end of the term. This traditional paradigm does not consider the way knowledge and skills are actually built (Guskey T. R., 2000; Marzano, 2000; O'Connor, 2009; Reeves, 2008)—that it takes time *and* practice to develop skills and that a student's first attempt and their last attempt will probably be vastly different. By averaging all the attempts the student is making, educators are often making it appear that the student knows and can perform a skill at a lower level. For example, if the student's first attempt shows she only knew 60% of the material and the final attempt shows she knew 90% of it, by averaging those two together on the report card, the student looks like she only knows 75% of the material, when in reality, by the end of the unit she in fact knew 90% of the material. Something needs to change.

Standards-based grading (SBG) is one of several grade reforms made over the last few decades. SBG was a response to traditional grading and the need to develop “higher-order thinking skills” that Bloom and his colleagues highlighted in *Taxonomy of Educational Objectives* (1956) . It emphasizes learning goals – standards – by acknowledging that learning is a process and develops over time (Iamarino, 2014; O'Connor, 2017; Spencer, 2012). According to an article “Why is a grading system touted as more accurate, equitable so hard to implement?” by Amanda Geduld (2024), standards-based grading is now prevalent in school districts in Wyoming, New Hampshire, Maine, Wisconsin, Connecticut, New Mexico, and Oregon with interest in the grading model growing around the country after the COVID19 pandemic.

Similarly, multiple universities across the country -- University of California, Santa Cruz, University of Pittsburgh, and University of Texas at Austin to name a few-- have implemented

un-grading initiatives for freshmen or within individual departments on campus (Marcus, 2023; Sung, 2023). Other universities, like Brown University and Columbia University in the City of New York, offer students a choice on the grading scale (Grades, 2024; Student Grades/ University Registrar, 2025). Lindsay C. Masland defines un-grading as “a philosophy of assessment that seeks to decenter grades in the learning process” (Masland, 2023). It is an assessment that focuses on qualitative feedback, process-orientated evaluation, and student self-assessment of learning that seeks to encourage intrinsic motivation for learning (Asaale, 2024; Butler & Nisan, 1986; Kohn & Blum, 2020; Williams H. , 2020).

These attempted changes have had mixed levels of success. They are also often met with skepticism and opposition from stakeholders who do not understand the new models or the reason they are being used (Geduld, 2024; Rainey, 2021). Because of this, many teachers (and districts) have stuck with what they (and other stakeholders) know and are comfortable with—the traditional grading model (Morris & Townsley, 2025).

In traditional grading, students, parents, and even teachers are still focused on how to earn enough points to get an A. I cannot even begin to count the number of times I have been asked, “How many points is this assignment worth?” or “How many points do I need to get an A in this class?” When the focus is the letter grade, we all lose sight of the learning.

In reality, I want students to develop the skills I’m trying to teach and to take those skills with them into the world beyond my classroom walls. Earning a certain number of points in my class will not matter years down the road but being able to read and analyze the message of a text or write a coherent and persuasive argument will matter. We need a grading system that supports the development of skills.

The adherence to the traditional way of grading and the lack of alignment with what we think is important in our modern education system prompted me to think about ways to change my personal grading and what impact it would have on my classroom and my students. I began by exploring why I was still using the traditional grading model and determined that part of the reason was because the school district I taught in required all “final” grades to be reported on the A-F scale. The other reason I was still using the traditional grading model was because that was what I had always used. I was comfortable with it. But that comfortableness did not align with what I (and my district for that matter) stated was our overall goal in educating students—to prepare them to be productive members of a democratic society.

I want students to understand how to read critically, think critically, and be able to express themselves clearly in writing and speaking. That meant students needed to focus on the *learning* of skills. I decided I wanted to try something different. I wanted to take the “grade grubbing” and “points hording” out of the equation of my classroom. I wanted to focus my students on the learning they were doing and the skills they were mastering instead of allowing them to continue focusing on just what they needed to do to get an A and move on.

I decided to change my grading. And, with the support of my school administrators, I embarked on a new grading system in the 2024-2025 school year for my AP Seminar and AP Research classes. I focused on the skills that College Board (2024) required and built my grades around how students learned and improved. Throughout the semester, formative feedback was given to students on every assignment. This entailed lots of written feedback and individual discussions with students. All those formative “scores” were reported in the gradebook so that parents/ caregivers and other stakeholders could also track student progress. Four times a semester, students were required to look back at their work and complete a self-evaluation. They

worked through a guided handout to help them reflect on where they thought they were in the learning process and what goals they had to improve. After they completed their self-evaluation and reflection, we would meet one-on-one and discuss what they thought and compare it to my evaluation of their learning. Together, we would determine their “grade” that would be reflected in the district-adopted gradebook.

None of the grades were averaged. This meant that if a student had a “D” at the midpoint but kept working to build skills and improve had a “B” by the end of the semester, then the semester grade was a “B” instead of a “C” that would occur in a traditional grading system.

Initially I was not sure this blend of standards-based grading, growth mindset, and student self-evaluation was going to be successful. It took months for students, and parents for that matter, to become comfortable with the system. But, by the end of the first semester, we were all invested. I saw students that were focused on improving instead of just getting a grade. They were willing to take academic risks and try new things to see if they could push themselves. They were able to have real conversations about what they could do well and what they still needed to work on. And a bonus effect that I had not even considered going into this—students were reporting less anxiety tied to getting “good grades.” They knew they had a say in their grades and that allowed them to actually focus on the *learning*.

I talked about these outcomes with anyone who would listen—my administrators, parents, other teachers. And the students were talking about it too! Before long, a small group of teachers began thinking about how they could do something similar in their classes, and we began a small collaboration team to read and discuss ideas.

Overview

When European settlers began immigrating to what is now the United States of America, they brought their idea of education with them. The structure of these first American schools and how grades are assigned mimicked the schools of Europe (Tocci, 2010). Students were ranked and competed against each other for top marks. While modern grading is less competitive than it was two hundred years ago, not much else has changed since then. The typical 21st century secondary school in America uses an A-F scale for reporting grades. This scale correlates to a 4-point GPA scale that stakeholders tout as being the determining factor for future success – getting into college and getting a respectable job. The focus for many stakeholders, especially students and parents, is the final grade on the transcript, not the learning being done on a daily basis.

Ranking students based on their performance began as early as 1785 at Yale (Schinkske & Tanner, 2014; Schneider & Hutt, 2014; Tocci, 2010). These early rankings transformed colleges and universities over the years and eventually, in the 1830s, took a form similar to what we use today (Tocci, 2010). During the Industrial Revolution, factories needed workers who could show up on time, take directions, and perform repeated tasks proficiently. Factories needed workers, not innovators or thinkers (Kliebard, 2004). Schools, and the grading system they used, were designed to provide these workers for the factories and support the needs of a fast-growing country. The skills needed in the 21st century are no longer supported by this type of education.

Many schools in the United States have shifted their curriculum and standards to support the modern needs of our country, however, we have not changed our grading system. Most public secondary schools in our country still use a form of the traditional grading system.

Because of this, grades are still used to rank students. This ranking encourages competition between students instead of the collaboration that modern life requires.

Traditional grading also averages performance on early attempts at a new skill with the performance that comes after practice and development of that skill. By doing this, stakeholders are losing sight of the learning process and the importance of learning from mistakes. Averaging is silently conveying that being perfect the first time is more important than learning.

As early as the 1990s Thomas Guskey, University of Kentucky professor known for his work on grading and assessment, was reporting that the traditional grading system was not working (Guskey T. R., 1994). Many researchers and leaders in education have made strides in changing what we grade and how we grade: standards-based grading (Guskey, 2000; Marsh 2023) and the implementation of Common Core Standards (Greer, 2018), differentiating between formative and summative grades (Marzano, 2003), embracing a growth-mindset in the classroom (Dweck, 2006), and implementing project-based learning (Boss, 2011). However, these decades of research have not moved the majority of teachers away from the traditional grading model.

Inaccuracies and Inequities of the Traditional Grading System

The traditional grading system also averages scores on assignments. Assignments that are given at the beginning of the learning cycle are mixed with assignments that are given at the end of the learning cycle, and a grade is determined by averaging those together. This grade is therefore an inaccurate reflection of what the student actually knows or can do. For example, during a writing unit Student A may not be able to correctly use and punctuate a subordinating conjunction. His first assignment showed this inability and his grade on that assignment was a 50%. The teacher gave him several opportunities to develop this skill, and his subsequent grades were a 58%, 63%, 75%, and 84%. On the final test of the skill, Student A scored a 95%. When

using the traditional grading system, Student A's average for this skill is a 71%. Yet, his final test of the skill showed a much higher percentage. Which of these grades is more accurate? I argue that it is the final test grade that shows where he is after the learning cycle.

Statement of the Problem

As stated previously, the skills students are expected to learn during their education have changed. Twenty-first century skills require critical thinking, adaptability, collaboration, and communication (Rotherham & Willingham, 2010; Thornhill-Miller, et al., 2023). The traditional grading system does a poor job of providing feedback and measuring these skills (Cain, et al., 2022; Alex, 2022). Unfortunately, many schools are still using traditional grading systems.

While there are many factors that lead to our continuing use of the traditional grading system, e.g., it is hard to change the system once it gets started, there are some similar perceptions about why non-traditional grading has been slow to implement.

Parents and students raise concerns about the possible impacts of non-traditional grading on the ability to get into college without traditional GPAs, to earn academic awards, and athletic eligibility (Franklin, et al., 2016; Peters & Buckmiller, 2014). And while some students appreciate the feedback that often accompanies non-traditional grading systems, many still felt more secure in the traditional system even with its inequities (Barry, 2022; Everson, 2023).

Teachers also have concerns that have slowed the adoption of non-traditional grading methods. Teachers know and understand the traditional grading system and what that means (Guskey T. R., 2021; Peters & Buckmiller, 2014). Guskey (2021) goes on to highlight how teachers are often given ambiguous guidance on how to implement non-traditional grading which causes uncertainty and even fear. This uncertainty about the non-traditional grading methods can leave teachers unsure of how to discuss student achievement with stakeholders. Teachers know

how to have conversations about students' achievement within the traditional system with the students, their parents/caregivers, and other teachers/school staff. Because of this, when a teacher tries something outside the traditional grading system there may be pushbacks from all stakeholders which can cause the teacher to seriously wonder about whether they are a *good teacher* or not.

Many teachers also struggle with the idea that students may somehow be negatively impacted by the use of this non-traditional grading system (Guskey T. R., 2021; Peters & Buckmiller, 2014). Will the lack of a grade hanging over their head somehow mean students will do less work and learning? Schools that want to move away from a traditional grading system often must deal with teachers long held beliefs about how students learn and the purpose of grades (Brookhart, 2011).

Teachers also have concerns about the practical application of non-traditional grading system in their classrooms (Guskey T. R., 2021; Townsley & Knight, 2020). Many of our schools are not set up to use non-traditional grading systems, especially at the secondary level. How can the teacher navigate these learning management systems and grade reporting methods that are developed for a traditional grading system? How can the teacher still communicate a student's progress to their caregivers when they are using a non-traditional grading system?

All of these concerns, and so many more not listed, have led the majority of teachers to continue using the traditional grading system even though we know it does not align with our modern educational goals (Hough, 2023; Townsley & Knight, 2020).

Research Questions

The purpose of this study is to examine if a student-centered grading model focused on academic growth and increasing student self-agency can be effectively implemented in a high

school setting. I want to determine if the use of a non-traditional grading model has negative or positive impacts on a teachers' professional practices and decision-making to create a culture of learning in order to promote student agency. I will conduct a case-study of two high school teachers implementing grading reform in their classrooms. The following questions guide this study:

1. How do two high school teachers experience and interpret grading reform initiatives focused on standards-based mastery and academic growth?
2. How do teachers describe the changes in practice they made to implement this grade reform?
3. How do teachers perceive the benefits and non-benefits of grade reform on student learning and student self-agency?

Definition of Terms

1. *Final Grade*: the grade that appears on the school transcript. In this particular educational setting, a final grade is placed on the transcript at the end of each semester.
2. *Culture of Learning*: the idea that learning is a process and takes both time and struggle, growth mind-set (Dweck, 2006).
3. *Student Achievement*: students achieving a “meets” or “exceeds” on classroom standards.
4. *Student Self-Agency*: the ability for students to act purposefully and constructively to direct their own learning (Brandt, 2024; Eisenhardt, 1989; Mameli, et al., 2023).

5. *Teacher Workload*: the amount of time and work that a teacher puts into designing, implementing, and assessing student learning.

Delimitations and Limitations

Delimitations

This study will be restricted to one educational environment. The school is a mid-sized school (approximately 930 students) that caters to military-connected students living in an overseas location. As this is a case study, the two teachers in the case-study participated in implementing non-traditional grading within their classrooms and monitoring their perceptions of the impact the new system has on student learning and agency. In this case, the non-traditional grading method included a combination of standards-based grading, specifications grading, and un-grading. Most assignments in each class were formative assignments. The teachers provided students with written feedback and rubrics that indicated both successes and areas that need improvement. Students used these feedback methods in order to improve their understanding and performance. After appropriate opportunities to receive feedback (determined by each teacher), the teachers assigned a summative assignment to assess the student's proficiency in the standards. Both teachers used a similar scale for both the formative and summative assignments: Beginning, Developing, Meeting, Exceeding. Since the teachers are required to continue using the electronic gradebook that is set up for traditional grades, the teachers also clearly described to students the specifications for the number of assignments that must be completed satisfactorily to receive each letter grade. The final element to this method entailed requiring students to participate in self-reflection about their learning and individual progress towards meeting the standards for the course. The teachers met individually with each student to discuss these reflections. This discussion also allowed the teacher and student to collaboratively determine

next steps in the learning process: to include setting learning goals, discussing support the student feels like they may need, and whether the letter grade indicated by the specifications is an accurate representation of the student's growth and learning.

Both teachers also monitored the effect the new system has on their own practice, as well as their perceptions of the impact the new system has on student learning and self-agency.

Camille S. implemented a non-traditional grading model within her classes. Bee B. implemented a non-traditional grading model within her classes.

Limitations

Both teachers continued to utilize the school systems learning management system. At the secondary level, this “gradebook” is set up for the use of traditional grades only. In other words, assignments are given points, teachers are meant to indicate the number of points students received on each assignment (i.e. 7 out of 10 points possible), the gradebook then converts that into a percentage, and then finally averages all grades into a final percentage and a corresponding letter grade. As discussed earlier, this traditional method of grading lumps all assignments together and doesn't consider the leaning process. Assignments at the beginning of the learning cycle and those at the end are grouped—and averaged—together.

This learning management system is used to not only communicate student grades with the parents, but also to report the grades so they appear on the transcript. In this particular district, the grades that appear on the transcript are used to find the GPA and determine eligibility for graduation. Because of this, the non-traditional grading model that the teachers implemented had to be reported within the confines of a traditional system. So, while they are actually using a non-traditional method within their classrooms, at the end of each quarter and each semester, they had to input a letter grade into the district adopted learning management

system. This required both teachers to develop a system of communication to keep concerned stakeholders informed about student progress and learning that is outside of the district adopted learning management system.

Significance of Study

This study builds upon a significant body of research addressing the need to use non-traditional grading models. Research shows that the traditional grading system no longer meets the needs of our modern education system in the United States of America (Cain, et al., 2021; Holder, 2025; Sorensen-Unruh, 2024). The priorities of our modern schooling model—collaboration, critical thinking, problem solving, and creativity—are not easily assessed in the traditional way of assigning an set of problems and looking for the one correct answer (Aghazadeh, 2019; Care, et al., 2018; Hurskaya, et al., 2024). However, the traditional grading model is used in the majority of the public schools across the country (Kilgore, 2017; Pinchak & Breland, 1973). This study aims to examine if a teacher using a non-traditional grading model in a secondary school can cultivate a culture of learning and increase student agency.

There has been a great deal of literature focused on the need for change in our assessment models to meet the needs of our modern education system (Docan, 2006; Guskey, 1994; Kjaergaard, et al., 2024; O'Connor, 2017; Peters & Buckmiller, 2014; Pinchak & Breland, 1973; Reeves, 2008). John Dewey (1899) argued for an education system centered on the growth of the individual student in order to cultivate reflective, ethical adults capable of participating in a rich democratic society. This idea of student-centered education has given rise to research on student self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997; Dweck, 2006; Marzano, 2003) and student agency (Eisenhardt, 1989; Kirk, 2024; Mameli, et al., 2023; Ng, 2024; Ryan & Deci, 2017; Vaughn, 2020; Vaughn, et al., 2024; Zeiser, et al., 2018). In recent years, there has been research on how student agency

and assessment can work together (Nicol & Kushwah, 2024; Nieminen, et al., 2022; Stanford, 2024; Storey, et al., 2021) to meet our modern educational needs. This case study is focused on a collaborative approach to grading. It will examine the teachers' perspectives on the impacts this collaborative grading has on changes to their practice, student learning, and student agency.

Methodology

This research was a case study of two teachers implementing a non-traditional grading process within their classrooms.

The case study consisted of two interviews with the teachers. The first interview occurred after the initial implementation of the grade reform, around the end of the first semester. This interview focused on teacher perceptions of the initial set-up of the reform. The second interview was held at the end of the school year. This interview focused on final teacher perceptions and reflections of the grade reform.

Along with the interviews, artifacts from the teachers were collected. These artifacts consisted of grading rubrics and assessment tools used before and after the reform, teacher-created feedback documents, and teacher-created descriptions of grading policies.

The data was qualitatively analyzed to see if there are patterns in the teachers' perceptions.

Organization of Study

- *Chapter One* introduces the proposed study examining teacher perceptions of the changes in teaching practices and student learning and self-agency that implementing a non-traditional grading model has. The opening personal account describes my reasoning for wanting to try a non-traditional grading model in my classroom. This chapter also includes an overview of why non-traditional grading

is needed in modern educational settings, the inaccuracies and inequities of traditional grading systems, a statement of the problem, research questions, definitions of terms, delimitations and limitations, the significance of the study, methodology, and organization of the study

- *Chapter Two* presents a literature review on a brief history of grading in the American education system, modern reform movements, student agency, and the theoretical framework of the study.
- *Chapter Three* describes the study's methodology, including: a review of the research questions, research methods, data collection and procedures, trustworthiness, and data analysis.
- *Chapter Four* presents the results of the study.
- *Chapter Five* discusses the findings, conclusions, and recommendations for future research.

Chapter 2 - Literature Review

Introduction

This chapter will begin with a look at the history of grading in the American educational system and the reasons for grading. Understanding where we started is a crucial step in determining the direction we as education professionals need to go. Then, this chapter will look

at some of the modern grade reform movements to include formative and summative assessments, standards-based grading, standards-based report cards, project-based learning, and “no zeros” policies. Then, this chapter will discuss student agency by defining the concept and examining the implications non-traditional grading models have on developing it. And finally, this chapter will discuss the theoretical framework that led me to case study research.

A Brief History of Grades in the American Education System

How Early Universities and Colleges Organized Public Schools

The evolution of American education reflects a centuries-long tension between learning for understanding and learning for status—a legacy rooted in European traditions and reinforced by early colonial institutions (Ris, 2015). From its inception in the 17th century, education in America was deeply influenced by elite European models, particularly English grammar schools and universities, which emphasized classical education, public ranking, and exclusivity. The founding of Boston Latin School in 1635 (the first public secondary school in what would become the United States of America) embodied this transatlantic influence. Modeled after English Grammar schools, it prioritized Latin and Greek instruction for boys destined for clerical or civic leadership, reinforcing the notion that education was a privilege of the elite (Cremin, 1970). This model established not only curricular priorities but also cultural norms of exclusivity, public ranking, and performative assessment, laying the groundwork for a system where academic achievement was closely tied to social status. This elitist framing extended beyond curriculum into assessment practices, where public student rankings served as the earliest grading system.

As institutions like Harvard and Yale emerged, they extended these traditions by embedding competitive assessment and public displays of student performance into their

academic culture (Tocci, 2010). Examinations in these colleges often involved public oral defense as well as written responses with rankings posted openly—an act that elevated academic status while entrenching grade-centered motivation. As students began to prioritize their public standing over genuine understanding, a culture of grade-chasing took root, one that still echoes throughout modern educational structures.

These practices became foundational to the structure of American schooling, influencing the development of the common school movement in the 19th century. Although reformers like Horace Mann championed the democratization of education, the common school retained many of the hierarchical and classical elements of its collegiate predecessors (Ris, 2015; Warder, 2023). Mann’s own educational background and admiration for European models led him to design public schools that mirrored elite institutions in both curriculum and pedagogy (Glenn, 1988; Kliebard, 2004; Warder, 2023).

Kliebard (2004) identifies this period as a critical juncture in the ideological struggle over curriculum. The humanist tradition, with its emphasis on classical subjects and moral cultivation, remained dominant in early public education, reinforcing the notion that schooling should reproduce cultural capital and social order. At the same time, the rise of the social efficiency movement introduced a competing vision—one that emphasized vocational preparation, standardized assessment, and measurable outcomes (Knoll, 2009). These principles echoed the ranking systems of early colleges and reinforced the idea that education was a mechanism for sorting individuals into economic roles.

Kober and Rentner (2020) note that while the common school movement expanded access to education, it also institutionalized many of the inequities embedded in earlier models. The replication of college-style examinations and grading systems in public schools helped

legitimize academic hierarchies and reinforced the notion of education as a pathway to social mobility governed by performance metrics. This alignment between early colleges and public schools created a feedback loop: colleges influenced the organization and values of common schools, while public schools prepared students to conform to collegiate expectations.

Teacher preparation programs, often housed within college environments, further transmitted these values into classrooms, perpetuating a culture of discipline, ranking and centralized authority (Gutek, 2009). Even the physical and organizational structures of schools—rows of desks, regimented schedules, and centralized governance—echoed the hierarchical design of college lecture halls. These elements were not merely logistical; they reflected deeper ideological commitments to order, control, and meritocratic sorting. The persistence of these structures reveals how deeply the ideals of elite education were embedded into the DNA of American public schooling (Kliebard, 2004; Kober & Rentner, 2020; Mondale & Patton, 2001).

Early American colleges did not simply coexist with public education; they actively shaped its trajectory. The ideals of classical rigor, public performance, and meritocratic ranking that defined elite institutions were not dismantled by the rise of the common school; they were repurposed. As Kliebard (2004) emphasizes, the curriculum itself became a site of ideological contestation, where visions of equity and efficiency clashed with traditions of exclusivity and cultural reproduction. The result was a system that expanded access while still privileging status over reflection, utility over inquiry, and conformity over creativity.

How American Education Changed in 18th and 19th centuries

By the late 18th century, attempts to recalibrate this approach surfaced. Early educational reforms attempted to address the competitiveness schools created, only to reinforce it in subtler ways. In 1785, Yale's president Ezra Stiles documented the college's adoption of a more

nuanced grading system that grouped students into four categories: Optimi, Second Optimi, Inferiors, and Pejores (Schinkske & Tanner, 2014; Schneider & Hutt, 2014; Tocci, 2010). This move to a structured hierarchy by Stiles suggested a desire for clearer standards because they moved beyond previous informal or purely qualitative assessments.

Rather than relying on subjective impressions or undifferentiated praise, the system created a taxonomy of achievement that allowed faculty to rank students with greater precision. As Schneider and Hutt (2014) argue, such early grading schemes were part of a broader movement toward standardization in American education, driven by the need to manage growing student populations and ensure comparability across cohorts. Schinske and Tanner (2014) further note that these systems laid the groundwork for modern grading by introducing performance categories that could be used to communicate expectations and outcomes more transparently.

However, the public nature of rankings merely recalibrated the scale of competition and reinforced what it sought to temper. The transition from oral examinations to a multi-day written exam format in 1790 only amplified this academic rivalry, with rankings issued both before and after each assessment (Schneider & Hutt, 2014).

As grading systems evolved, so did the pursuit of greater precision and efficiency. Yale's move to a numerical 1-4 scale in 1813 aligned with its descriptive categories, simplifying the evaluative process (Tocci, 2010). Harvard followed suit but quickly found the system too simple for distinguishing performance nuances. By the 1830s, Harvard had adopted the 1-100 scale, arguing it offered finer gradations of student achievement within similar performance bands. This change suggested a desire for more granularity, though it paradoxically reinforced the very hierarchies it aimed to refine.

The early 19th-century American education system did more than reflect collegiate ideals—it reinforced a broader social order built around public performance, standardized control, and academic hierarchy. Between 1826 and 1837, American education was shaped by two contrasting models that reflected divergent philosophies about pedagogy, access, and social purpose: elite college preparatory schools and the Lancasterian system. Preparatory schools modeled after elite institutions like Harvard and Yale, emphasized classical educations rooted in Latin, Greek, and moral philosophy. These schools were designed to cultivate intellectual refinement and social leadership among elite boys, often through individualized instruction and public academic ranking (Cremin, 1970; Glenn, 1988). Their structure mirrored collegiate traditions, reinforcing exclusivity and the notion that education was a privilege reserved for the upper class (Schneider & Hutt, 2014). The curriculum and assessment practices in these schools reflected a broader cultural commitment to hierarchy, decorum, and the reproduction of elite status (Kliebard, 2004; Ris, 2015).

In contrast, the Lancasterian Model—or monitorial model—represented a utilitarian and egalitarian approach to mass education (Schneider & Hutt, 2014; Upton, 1996). Developed by Joseph Lancaster and widely adopted in urban charity schools, this system relied on peer instruction, where older or more advanced students taught younger ones under the supervision of a single teacher. The model prioritized efficiency, moral discipline, and basic literacy, making it ideal for educating large numbers of poor children at minimal cost (Kliebard, 2004; Upton, 1996). While efficient in delivering content and maintaining order, the model physically codified academic ranking: students' desk positions were adjusted daily according to classroom performance, making academic status visible at a glance to peers, teachers, and visitors alike. In

this setup, educational achievement was not just tracked—it was staged (Schneider & Hutt, 2014; Upton, 1996).

Such methods revealed a deeper educational philosophy: competition was not just a byproduct of assessment; it was the system's driving force. Reformers at Harvard, as noted in their 1831 Annual Report, even argued that student rivalry was essential to academic motivation (Schneider & Hutt, 2014). Yet this embrace of competitive pressure soon grew criticism. Visionaries like Horace Mann began to question whether relentless ranking undermined deeper intellectual and moral development. Mann's advocacy for a graded structure based on private, descriptive evaluations marked a philosophical pivot. He attempted to reframe education not as a contest, but as a continuum of personal growth.

This shift gained momentum. By 1835, publications like the *American Annals of Education* were recommending weekly progress reports to parents (Woodbridge, 1835), reflecting growing support for feedback grounded in learning rather than public positioning. Reformers did not reject ranking altogether though. They acknowledged its organizational utility but sought to remove its public aspect. The real goal was to replace visibility with insight: to make student learning legible without reducing it to a single rank.

The Prussian model, introduced to American reformers through Calvin Stowe's influential 1837 report, offered a compelling example (Schneider & Hutt, 2014). Its system of stepped grades and individualized pacing provided a framework for tracking student progress while minimizing the social and psychological toll of constant competition. The appeal of maintaining oversight without public exposure would shape American reforms for decades.

By 1845, the Boston Public Schools adopted both written grades and early versions of standardized testing under Horace Mann's leadership (Schneider & Hutt, 2014; Tocci, 2010).

These changes reflected an evolving belief that system-wide fairness and objectivity required tools that could reduce teacher bias and individual variation between teachers—an idea that still influences accountability systems today.

By the late 19th century, American colleges increasingly adopted grading systems to manage growing student populations and formalize academic evaluation, yet consistency remained elusive. Institutions like Harvard experimented with various models—including numerical scores, quartile rankings, and early letter grades—before settling on the A-E scale (Schinkske & Tanner, 2014 ; Schneider & Hutt, 2014; Tocci, 2010). A significant milestone came in 1869 when Harvard formally separated behavioral assessments from academic performance, signaling a broader shift toward curriculum-based evaluation and laying the groundwork for merit-based distinctions such as *cum laude* and *summa cum laude*, which reinforced academic stratification (Schneider & Hutt, 2014).

The push toward standardization gained momentum with the innovations at Mount Holyoke College. In 1897, Mount Holyoke became the first recorded institution to implement a formal letter grading system, assigning marks for A to E to indicate levels of academic achievement (Kliebard, 2004; Schneider & Hutt, 2014). This system was designed to simplify evaluation and communicate performance more clearly across departments and institutions. Over time, the E grade was replaced by F to more explicitly denote failure, giving rise to the now-familiar A-F scale. Mount Holyoke's influence extended beyond its campus, as other colleges—to include Harvard—began to adopt similar systems, contributing to the national standardization of grading practices (Kliebard, 2004; Schneider & Hutt, 2014; Tocci, 2010). The letter grade system, with its clear hierarchy and replicable structure became a tool for sorting students and reinforcing meritocratic ideals in an increasingly bureaucratic educational landscape.

Taken together, the changes made during the 18th and 19th century illustrate a persistent educational paradox: the desire to support individual learning while still needing to sort, compare, and credential. Even reforms aimed at reducing competition ultimately refined it. The impulse to measure did not disappear—it simply evolved alongside shifting beliefs about what, exactly, education is meant to reward.

How American Education Changed in the 20th century

The rapid expansion of public education in the United States was driven by profound demographic shifts and a growing institutional desire to manage learning on a national scale. Between 1870 and 1900, the U.S. population nearly doubles, and urbanization intensified, prompting a surge in school enrollments and the proliferation of urban school districts (Kliebard, 2004; Kober & Rentner, 2020; Meyer, et al., 1979). This transformation was not merely logistical—it reflected a broader ideological project aimed at fostering civic unity, assimilating immigrant populations, and preparing students for participation in an industrial economy. Public school became instruments of nation-building, tasked with instilling shared values and standardized educational experiences across increasingly diverse communities reflected both a demographic shift and a growing institutional desire to manage learning on a national scale (Glenn, 1988; Goldin & Katz, 1997; Lackney, 2015).

As enrollments nearly tripled and urban districts expanded (Schinkske & Tanner, 2014; Schneider & Hutt, 2014; Tocci, 2010), the need for systematization became urgent. Educators like William Torrey Harris, a leading figure in the Common School movement and U.S. Commissioner of Education, viewed grading as a mechanism for coordinating expectations, streamlining curricular communication, and imposing uniformity on a decentralized educational landscape (Kliebard, 2004; Tocci, 2010). Harris and his contemporaries believed that

standardized grading could help manage the complexity of mass education by offering clear benchmarks for student performance and institutional accountability.

The push for consistency sparked widespread experimentation in grading formats. Schools adopted a variety of systems, including letter marks such as “S” for satisfactory and “U” for unsatisfactory, as well as categorical distinctions such as “Passed,” “Conditional,” and “Not Passed” (Schneider & Hutt, 2014). Over time, districts like Knox County, Tennessee began using the system developed by Mount Holyoke in 1897, aiding in the rise to the increasingly familiar A-F format with F explicitly signaling failure (Tocci, 2010).

But public schools were not alone in this quest for coherence. Higher education joined the push for quantifiable assessment—sometimes borrowing from scientific paradigms to justify new structures. In 1901, the University of Missouri applied the bell curve to grading, suggesting that academic outcomes should mirror natural distributions (Schneider & Hutt, 2014). In this view, grading became not just an evaluative act, but a statistical one, grounded in assumptions about human intelligence, capacity, and performance. That same year, the University of Georgia tried a simplified numerical scale, reinforcing the broader desire to distill learning into legible, portable numbers (Tocci, 2010).

Assessment became a tool of motivation, but often at the expense of genuine understanding and learning. In chasing increasingly granular ways to measure performance, schools reinforced extrinsic incentives—status, scores, rankings—rather than intrinsic curiosity or critical thinking (Harlen & Crick, 2003; Harlen, et al., 2002). These developments were not occurring in a vacuum. As intelligence testing gained traction during World War I, the logic of scientific measurement began to permeate classrooms, often justifying tracking and ability grouping. Both the curve and IQ testing reinforced an efficiency-driven vision of education—one

that sought to minimize subjectivity, expedite learning, and rationalize instruction (Feldman, 2023).

By the 1930s, this technocratic mindset had fully taken hold. School systems moved rapidly to standardized grading, shifting to five-point scales and cementing the A-F model by dropping the ambiguous “E” (Schinkske & Tanner, 2014; Schneider & Hutt, 2014). In 1937, Yale began using 1-4 ratings for individual courses, shifting the focus from final examinations to ongoing progress (Schneider & Hutt, 2014). Some rankings were even withheld from students, an attempt to curb relentless pursuit of top marks.

As national systems matured post-WWII, the alignment of letter grades to percentage bands—often still assigned via the bell curve—became the norm. By 1971, 67% of schools within the United States had adopted this model (Schinkske & Tanner, 2014), marking a significant consolidation of grading as both a bureaucratic and pedagogical standard.

Still, this system’s hold was never absolute. The cultural upheavals of the 1960s and 1970s generated pushbacks against grades as instruments of conformity and control. Inspired by the counterculture’s rejection of authoritarian norms, some universities adopted pass/fail or even “no grading” policies in an attempt to foster intrinsic motivation and reduce stigma (Tocci, 2010). Yale alone cycled through four distinct grading systems during this period, each reflecting broader tensions over the role of assessment in student identity (Schinkske & Tanner, 2014).

Ironically, just as anti-establishment movements were critiquing grades, geopolitical forces exerted even greater pressure on academic evaluations. The Vietnam War draft exemption for college students in good academic standing incentivized universities to inflate grades—effectively dismantling the bell curve and replacing it with a leniency grounded in politics rather than pedagogy. By 1975, a majority of grades in higher education were As and Bs (Schneider &

Hutt, 2014), revealing how external events can reconfigure educational policy in profound, if unspoken, ways.

The early 1980s marked yet another pivot. With the release of *A Nation at Risk* in 1983, the federal government declared that American schools were underperforming compared to global peers. The report reframed educational decline as a national emergency, naming low test scores, declining critical thinking skills, and inconsistent standards among its chief concerns (United States National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983). Among its prescriptions was a clear reaffirmation of achievement and preparation. The result was a recommitment to standardized grading practices—A-F letters, the 100-point scale, and 4-point GPA—solidifying their place as pillars of the modern school system (Tocci, 2010).

What emerges across these decades is a consistent tension between assessment as a tool for managing large systems and grading as a reflection of learning's purpose. Standardized grading promised fairness, consistency, and clarity, yet it often served broader agendas—from administrative efficiency to political expedience. Whether shaped by scientific ideals, wartime policies, or federal alarms, the grading systems we know today are not simply educational tools. They are cultural artifacts, shaped as much by societal forces as by classroom needs.

Although grading systems became increasingly sophisticated throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, many contemporary scholars argue that the fundamental purpose of grading remains unresolved. Researchers have noted that grades often communicate a combination of academic achievement, behavior, effort, and compliance, making it difficult to determine what a grade actually represents (Naceanceno, 2025). As a result, modern grading reform efforts have focused on improving the validity, consistency, and equity of grading practices.

Modern Reform Movements

Contemporary grading reform efforts continue a centuries-long effort to reconcile the dual imperatives of equity and rigor in American education. Where earlier grading systems focused on hierarchy and competition, modern reforms seek to focus on learning itself placing mastery, feedback, and growth at the heart of assessment. But as with earlier reform attempts, this shift is layered with complexity, revealing persistent tensions between pedagogy and practicality.

Formative and Summative Assessments

Formative and summative assessments serve as pivotal mechanisms in the broader educational reform movement aimed at aligning grading practices with authentic learning processes. Formative assessments, in particular, are designed to function as diagnostic checkpoints—low-stakes, feedback-rich opportunities that enable both students and educators to adjust instructional strategies and learning approaches in real time (Guskey T. R., 1994; Looney, 2011; Marzano, 2000). These assessments are not merely tools for evaluation but are integral to fostering metacognition, promoting student agency, and supporting differentiated instruction (Kramer, et al., 2025). In contrast, summative assessments are intended to capture demonstrations of mastery, providing a snapshot of student achievement after sufficient opportunities for practice, feedback, and growth (Dweck, 2015; Marsh, 2023; Marzano, 2000). When implemented cohesively, this progression reflects a developmental approach to learning that conceptualizes student growth as a continuum rather than a series of isolated events (Dweck, 2006). Within this framework, errors are not treated as final judgments but as formative steps in an ongoing learning process. This perspective encourages students to adopt a growth mindset, viewing challenges and mistakes as opportunities for reflection, adjustment, and improvement—

key components in building academic resilience and long-term mastery (Dweck, 2006; Guskey T. R., 2000; Marsh, 2023)

However, the practical implementation of these ideals is frequently hindered by systemic pressures. The pressures of rigid curriculum pacing, standardized testing mandates, and accountability frameworks often compel teachers to prioritize breadth over depth, undermining the formative assessment (Kramer, et al., 2025; Looney, 2011). In such environments, formative assessments risk being reduced to perfunctory compliance tasks—administered without sufficient time for reflection, feedback, or instructional recalibration. Even when teachers are philosophically aligned with growth-oriented assessment models, institutional structures may lack the flexibility or resources to support cycles of feedback and revision (O'Connor, 2017; Spencer, 2012; Townsley & Knight, 2020). This disconnect between assessment philosophy and classroom reality reveals a critical tension within contemporary educational reform: the aspiration to personalize learning and promote mastery is often at odds with the operational demands of traditional schooling systems.

Standards-Based Grading

Standards-Based Grading (SBG), also known as competency- or proficiency-based grading, emerged as a direct response to the inconsistencies and inequities of traditional grading. Traditional grades often combine academic achievement with behavior, effort, attendance, and compliance resulting in a hodgepodge of indicators that obscure what students actually know and can do (Cross & Frary, 1999). SBG seeks to untangle these variables by assessing students solely their ability to meet clearly defined academic standards. In doing so, SBG aims to return grades to their intended purpose: communicating what a student has actually learned (Marsh, 2023). Guskey (2000) explains that the appeal of SBG lies in its clarity of purpose—aligns instruction,

assessment, and reporting around shared expectations, offering both teachers and students a roadmap for progress. Recent evidence supports the potential benefits of integrating SBG principals into traditional grading systems. Naceanceno (2025) found that classrooms implementing standards-based principles increased the use of achievement-based assessments and demonstrated improved alignment between classroom grades and standardized achievement measures. These findings suggest that standards-based grading may strengthen the validity of grades as indicators of student learning by reducing the influence of nonacademic factors and increasing the focus on mastery of standards.

Yet this shift to SBG still brings new challenges. While it promises greater objectivity and transparency, the implementation of standards-aligned rubrics can inadvertently reintroduce hierarchies of performance. As Pippin (2014) notes, students may simply aim for a “4” instead of an “A”, suggesting that the underlying culture of competition and comparison can persist even within reformed systems. Moreover, the language of proficiency levels, though intended to be descriptive, can still be interpreted normatively, especially when tied to high-stakes decisions like promotion or honors. Marsh (2023) cautions that without careful attention to how feedback is framed and how students are supported in interpreting it, SBG can replicate the very inequities it seeks to dismantle. Therefore, while SBG represents a promising step toward more equitable and meaningful assessment, its success depends on a broader cultural shift in how we define success, value growth, and support diverse learning paths.

Standard-Based Report Cards

Concerns over clarity, equity and the communicative functions of grades also led reformers like Guskey (1994) to propose multidimensional report cards that divide grades into three domains: product (what a student knows), process (how they worked to learn it), and

progress (how much they've grown). This model aims to bring transparency to grading systems often clouded by hidden weighting and inconsistent criteria. More than a structural fix, it reflects a philosophical shift toward recognizing learning as a dynamic process rather than a static snapshot. This aligns closely with Carol Dweck's (2015) concept of growth mindset, which reframes ability as something that can be developed through effort, strategies, and feedback. In that sense, modern grading reform becomes not just a technical adjustment but a cultural reorientation—one that values development over performance and learning over labeling.

While SBG provides a framework for reporting student learning, successful implementation requires alignment between teachers' beliefs, grading practices, and institutional expectations. Wood (2024) found that teachers frequently experienced a disconnect between the reasons they graded, their grading practices, and their beliefs about grading. Findings further indicated that intentional planning and alignment were necessary to improve student achievement, engagement, and equity. These findings suggest that grading reform extends beyond technical changes to gradebooks and report cards and requires educators to develop shared understandings of the purpose of grading.

Grading Equity

Increasingly, researchers have framed grading reform as an issue of educational equity (Alex, 2022; Iamarino, 2014; Marzanno, 2000). Wood (2024) found that grading equity and student motivation were closely connected to school culture and teachers' grading decisions. Similarly, Mack (2025) argued that traditional grading practices often perpetuate inequities by rewarding compliance and penalizing students for factors unrelated to mastery. Both studies suggest that equitable grading practices require educators to focus grades on demonstrated learning while reducing the influence of nonacademic variables.

Regardless of where one stands, the debate reveals a deeper truth: grading reform is never just about numbers—it is about values. What do we believe grades should communicate? What behaviors do they incentivize? And whose success do they measure?

Taken together, these reform efforts underscore an enduring dilemma: how to make grades meaningful without reducing learning to numbers; how to encourage effort without applying pressure; and how to recognize student growth while still maintaining clear academic rigor. While contemporary reforms reject the competitive, compliance-driven foundations of historical grading practices, they remain entangled in its legacy. The history of grading is not merely a timeline of policy shifts—it is a reflection of our evolving beliefs about the purpose of education. As we continue to question the purpose and function of grading, we must recognize that reform is not a destination but a dialogue—an ongoing search for assessment systems that reflect our highest aspirations for equity, motivation, and communication with stakeholders.

Student Agency

Student agency in context

The concept of student agency has surged to the forefront of pedagogical reform in recent years. This move highlights a significant departure from traditional teacher-directed classrooms. Student agency refers to the capacity and autonomy of learners to take initiative, make choices, and direct their own educational experiences. It encompasses a sense of ownership over learning, where students are not passive recipients of knowledge but active participants in shaping their academic journey. It is not a fixed trait nor a single action. Instead, it is a complex combination of cognitive, emotional, relational, and contextual factors that shape how students engage with learning, with others, and with themselves.

Student agency is rooted in theories of motivation and self-perception. Albert Bandura's (1997) concept of self-efficacy—the belief in one's own ability to succeed at specific tasks—forms a foundational idea of student agency. Without self-efficacy students cannot build agency. Bandura emphasized that students with high self-efficacy are more likely to embrace challenges, persist through difficulties, and regulate their own learning. Because of this, students exercise their own personal agency in meaningful ways. Similarly, Carol Dweck's (2006, 2015) research on the belief that intelligence and abilities can be developed through effort—also known as Growth Mindset—demonstrates how students thrive when they are encouraged to embrace effort, take risks, learn from failure, and seek feedback. Self-efficacy and mindset are interwoven, both functioning as key levers that empower students to become agents in their own education.

In addition, Ryan & Deci (2017) propose that human motivation is guided by the fulfillment of three important needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. The Self-Determination Theory states that when these needs are met, learners are more likely to engage in learning for intrinsic reasons like curiosity, mastery, and purpose rather than external pressures, rewards, or grades. Agency, in this sense, is nurtured in environments that foster student choice, meaningful relationships, and develop a sense of efficacy and achievement. When considered together, Bandura, Dweck, and Ryan & Deci offer a psychology-based foundation for understanding the “why” behind student agency.

Recent studies have begun to explore agency across developmental stages, cultural contexts, and instructional models. Vaughn's extensive work (What is student agency and why is it needed now more than ever?, 2020; Where to from here: Fostering agency across landscapes, 2020; 2024) frames agency as multidimensional—encompassing dispositional traits (e.g.,

confidence), motivational states (e.g., interest), and positional factors (e.g., social power). Her cross-cultural research validates student agency across various primary settings, demonstrating that agency is both universally valuable and locally situated. Mameli and her colleagues (2023) similarly emphasizes that agency must be seen as contextual and interactive, con-constructed through relationships, and teacher-student dynamics.

Storey, Eckel-Sparrow, and Ransdell (2021) highlight how peer-to-peer teaching promotes responsibility and collaborative agency. By positioning students as both learners and teachers, this model validates the intellectual contributions of all students and expands classroom roles for students. In a comprehensive review of student agency in the middle-grade contexts, Schaefer and her colleagues (2024) identified a spectrum of different types of agency from passive acceptance to active leadership. They stressed the need for teachers to recognize and build upon the subtle, often overlooked forms of agency exhibited by students who may not conform to dominant norms of participation. Ng (2024) challenges schools to move students from passive to proactive roles by examining the institutional structures that limit voice and choice. Agency, he argues, cannot flourish in systems designed for control and standardization. Instead, it requires adaptive systems that honor diversity, creativity, and risk-taking. Others (Zeiser, et al., 2018) make the case for student agency as a predictor of long-term outcomes, including academic performance, career success, and civic engagement. Their research highlights that agency is not only a moral imperative but a practice one that is essential for preparing students to navigate uncertainty and complexity in a rapidly changing world.

Empowerment over evaluation

The movement away from teacher-directed instruction toward student-centered learning represents more than a pedagogical strategy—it signifies a philosophical shift in the role of

teachers, students, and the purpose of education itself. In traditional classrooms, the teacher has long been positioned as the “sage on stage” delivering content and managing behaviors through compliance. However, this approach often ignores student voice, limits autonomy, and centers assessment on performance rather than progress.

While early American educational reformists like John Dewey emphasized the importance of student interests in educational reforms, it was not until the 1960s with the rise of constructivist theories that the movement towards student-centered instruction began to have a broader impact on American education. These pedagogical shifts reflected a reorientation toward student voice and choice within the classroom.

Black and William (2010) renewed focus on formative assessment, revealing that students learn best when they are active participants in the assessment process. Effective formative assessment, they argued, is less about grading and more about creating feedback loops that inform instruction and support learning. This perspective helps build the foundations for more collaborative and student-centered classrooms in which assessment becomes a conversation instead of a final verdict. In 2006, Cook-Sather asserted that student voice must be a presence and a power within the classroom. She argues that students should be legitimate partners in shaping educational practice with the right to influence what and how they learn (Cook-Sather, 2006). Adie, Willis, and Van der Kleij (2018) argue that student agency is not merely about individual autonomy but is co-constructed within classroom contexts and shaped by institutional structures. Kirk (2024) furthers this by framing student voice as a form of transformative agency, highlighting how students can not only shape their own learning but also where learners engage in inquiry that leads to meaningful change in their communities.

Perhaps one of the most significant implications of the shift toward student-centered learning lies in how we conceptualize and practice assessment. Traditional grading systems—typically summative, comparative, and performance-oriented—often undermine agency by prioritizing external validation over self-regulation and growth (Adie, et al., 2018). Traditional systems incentivize students to aim for the “right answer,” reduce risk-taking, and foster a fear of failure.

Researchers argue that agency in assessment is most effective when students are invited into the design and interpretation of assessment practices (Adie, et al., 2018; Brandt, 2024; Zeiser, et al., 2018). This includes co-constructing success criteria, engaging in self- and peer-assessment, and participating in feedback dialogues. When students understand the “why” behind assessment and are trusted to evaluate their own progress, their sense of ownership of the learning deepens and their motivation shifts from extrinsic to intrinsic. Sharon Stanford further develops this idea of teacher-student partnership. She describes the co-creation of rubrics in an ungraded course as a way to center student agency in assessment (Stanford, 2024). Rather than being handed a fixed standard, students develop criteria in dialogue with the teacher, anchoring assessment in shared values and expectations. Nicol and Kushwah (2024) takes a slightly different approach by advocating for students to generate their own feedback before receiving external feedback from peers and teachers. This flipping of the feedback process enhances metacognitive engagement and reflective learning.

With all of this focus on formative assessment as a way to increase student agency, Lindsey Moses and her colleagues (2020) warn that educators’ own beliefs about agency can significantly impact the extent to which assessment practices support or hinder student voice. If educators view students as passive recipients rather than active agents, even formative

assessments can become procedural rather than empowering. Shifting this mindset requires professional development, systemic support, and a reevaluation of how success is defined and celebrated in schools.

Implications of student agency for grading

The growing emphasis on student agency calls for a fundamental rethinking of traditional grading practices. Standardized and summative assessments often prioritize accuracy and compliance, reducing learning to a numerical value and positioning students as passive recipients of judgment. In contrast, cultivating student agency demands that assessment evolve into a formative student-centered process that promotes reflection, dialogue, and growth. When learners are seen as agents of their own learning, grading must shift from ranking performance to supporting learning trajectories. The studies discussed above emphasize that empowering students can foster deeper engagement and motivation. These approaches require educators to view grades not as terminal judgments but as opportunities to coach, guide, and partner with students in meaningful learning.

Embracing student agency also compels a shift in teacher mindset—from gatekeepers to facilitators—and invites systemic transformation. Flexible grading practices, such as portfolio assessments, ungrading, mastery-based progression, and negotiated evaluation criteria, are increasingly seen as responsive to students’ diverse needs and voices. Such methods honor the relational and contextual nature of assessment described by Niemen (2022) and Mameli (2023) and their colleagues, recognizing that feedback and grading are not neutral transactions but socially embedded acts that shape identity and agency. Similarly, Wood (2024) identified feedback loops, clear communication, and opportunities for students to demonstrate learning as critical components of grading alignment. These practices provide students with greater

ownership over their learning process and create opportunities for continued growth rather than emphasizing performance on a single assessment. Ultimately, reimagining grading through the lens of student agency is not merely an instructional adjustment, it is an ethical commitment to cultivating learners who are empowered, reflective, and self-directed.

Theoretical Framework

This research is grounded in Agency Theory because it offers a conceptual framework for understanding how students, teachers, and institutions exercise autonomy and accountability within the structures of education. Originally developed in the context of economics and organizational behavior (Eisenhardt, 1989; Jensen & Meckling, 1976), Agency Theory was developed to address the principal-agent dilemma—how principals (e.g., stakeholders or policymakers) align the interests of agents (e.g., employees or implementers) in the presences of differing information and goals. Moe (1984) and other education policy scholars extended this model to examine institutional governance, highlighting how schools and educators interpret, mediate, and implement top-down directives within varied organizational constraints.

Summary

Grading in the United States has fluctuated throughout our history. However, even with the attempts to reform grading in the past few decades, the format of grading has changed very little. Most public secondary and post-secondary schools still use the A-F scale that is based on the 4-point GPA. While our schooling is shifting towards the needs of the modern, post-industrial revolution era world, our methods of reporting the skills and learning students are doing in our schools are still mired in the ways of the past. Shifting to a new way of grading will have impacts on not only student outcomes but how students and teachers work within the

classroom. Teachers who are moving away from traditional grading will have to navigate these changes.

Chapter 3 - Methodology

Introduction

The purpose of this study is to examine teacher perceptions of a student-centered grading model focused on academic growth and increasing student self-agency and whether the reform can be effectively implemented in a high school setting. I want to determine if the use of a non-traditional grading model has negative or positive impacts on teachers' professional practices and decision-making to create a culture of learning in order to promote student agency. This study is designed to determine the perceptions of two teachers involved in the implementation of a non-traditional grading model. It will focus on the teacher perceptions of 1) the changes in practice to their planning, teaching, and assessing; and 2) the impact of this grade reform on student learning and self-agency.

Suitability of Research

The grade reform study was conducted in two secondary classrooms. Currently the school system has some grading policies that do not align with its reported core values. The system has eight core values, but three of them—focuses on student centered education, individual potential, and lifelong learning as a process-- are in opposition to the current grading policies.

The school system currently uses the traditional A-F scale to report grades to stakeholders. It also uses the 4.0 unweighted GPA scale and offers a weighted Advanced Placement GPA scale for students who are participating in Advanced Placement courses. As discussed in the Literature Review, this traditional system of grading was aligned with the competitive nature of earlier American education and does not align with the cooperative nature of 21st century schooling and learning. These traditional letter grades and GPA scales require

mathematical averaging as a way of determining the end grade for a student, which has been shown to focus students on accumulating the *right* number of points instead of learning the skills and gaining knowledge (Barnes M. , 2018; Campbell, 2012). This grading policy competes with the stated values listed above.

Another grading policy that this school district currently implements is that there must be at least one grade per week input into the electronic gradebook. While the intent of this statement is to make sure that all stakeholders have up-to-date information about their student's progress toward meeting the class standards and goals, in reality, this policy defeats the growth mindset that their core value about individual potential is trying to instill. As educators, we understand that individual students do not learn and grow at the same pace. This policy potentially hampers student growth since a student could become disheartened by multiple low grades while they are early in the learning process. This policy potentially impacts both student motivation and the development of lifelong learning.

Because of these incongruities, it is time to examine grading policies and implement changes.

Research Questions

The aim of this study is to examine the perceptions of two teachers involved in implementing a non-traditional grading model in a high school setting. I want to examine their perceptions of any changes to their teaching that occur because of the non-traditional grading model and their perceptions of the impact on student learning and student agency within their classrooms because of the non-traditional grading model. To achieve these aims, the following questions guide this study:

1. How do two high school teachers experience and interpret grading reform initiatives focused on standards-based mastery and academic growth?
2. How do teachers describe the changes in practice they made to implement this grade reform?
3. How do teachers perceive the benefits and non-benefits of grade reform on student learning and student self-agency?

Research Design & Rationale

This study employs a qualitative case study approach to explore the perceptions of two high school teachers engaged in grading reform. The decision to use a case study methodology is grounded in the need to capture the complexity, depth, and contextual nuance of teacher experience as it unfolds within authentic classroom environments. Case study research is particularly well-suited for examining phenomena in real-life setting where the boundaries between the phenomenon and context are not clearly defined (Merriam, 1985; Yin, 2018). In this study, the phenomenon—grading reform aimed at promoting standards mastery and student self-agency—is deeply embedded in the instructional practices, beliefs, and inters that characterize each teacher’s classroom.

Previous studies have determined that the traditional grading system in America needs to change for the betterment of our students (Docan, 2006; Favero, 2025; Guskey, 1994; Kjaergaard, et al., 2024; Leslie, 2021). Despite this growing body of research, meaningful change has not taken root in the majority of American school settings. The persistence of traditional grading reflects a deeply ingrained cultural expectation; most Americans anticipate that students will receive letter grades at the end of a course, a practice that has defined schooling for decades. Teachers themselves are products of this system, which makes reform not only a

pedagogical challenge but also a cultural one. For lasting change to occur, educators must fundamentally shift how they think about and use grade in their classrooms.

In order to examine the process of this cultural shift and the impact it has on teacher perceptions, this study conducted a case-study of two teachers actively engaged in grade reform within their classrooms. A case study approach allows for a holistic examination of how teachers interpret and enact grading changes, and how they perceive the impact of these changes on student learning and agency. By focusing on two individual cases, this study can illuminate the diverse ways in which educators respond to reform initiatives, adapt their practices, and reflect on student outcomes. The use of multiple data sources, including interviews and classroom artifacts, supports triangulation and enhances the credibility of the findings.

The case study design was particularly appropriate for this research because it allowed the grading reform to be examined in depth within the real-world educational context in which it was implemented. Case study research focuses on the intensive examination of a bounded system and is especially useful when the phenomenon under investigation cannot be meaningfully separated from its context (Creswell, 2013; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Yin, 2018). In this study, teachers' experiences with grading reform were shaped by the particular conditions of their classrooms, including their subject areas, students, instructional practices, grading structures, and broader school expectations. Examining these experiences within their natural setting allowed the study to preserve the complexity of the reform process rather than isolating individual aspects of implementation from the educational context in which they occurred. This emphasis on context is particularly important in educational case study research, which can provide detailed and multilayered understandings of teaching and learning as they occur within school and classrooms (Hamilton & Corbett-Whittier, 2013).

In short, the case study methodology provided a framework for examining the intersection of teacher perceptions, instructional change, and student agency within a bounded, context-dependent instance of grading reform. By examining how the two teachers interpreted and enacted the reform within their particular classroom and school contexts, the study could develop a nuanced understanding of both the processes involved in implementation and the conditions that shaped those processes (Creswell, 2013; Yin, 2018). Such an approach supports the development of contextually grounded insights that may inform understanding of similar educational reforms while remaining attentive to the particular circumstances of the case (Priya, 2021).

Case Study Design

This study utilizes a qualitative case study design to investigate the perceptions of two high school teachers engaged in grading reform. A qualitative approach is essential for this inquiry because it prioritizes depth over breadth, allowing for a rich understanding of human experiences, beliefs, and interpretations. Unlike quantitative methods that seek to generalize through numerical data, qualitative research is concerned with meaning-making in context—particularly how individuals construct and express their understanding of complex phenomena (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

The phenomenon under investigation—grading reform aimed at promoting standards mastery and student self-agency—is deeply embedded in the instructional practices, reflections, interactions, and contextual conditions that characterize each teacher’s classroom. Case study research is particularly appropriate when a phenomenon is examined within real-life context in which it occurs and when the phenomenon and its context are closely interconnected (Creswell, 2013; Yin, 2018). Because grading reform involves changes not only to grading practices but

also to teachers' beliefs, instructional decisions, and interactions with students, understanding its implementation requires attention to how teachers experience and interpret those changes within their particular classroom contexts. A qualitative approach is well suited to this purpose because qualitative researchers seek to understand how individuals interpret their experiences, construct meaning, and make sense of the situations in which they participate (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Accordingly, this study seeks to understand not only what teachers do as they implement grading reform, but also how they interpret their practices, decisions, and experiences and the meaning they attribute to those experiences. This interpretive focus is central to the study's purpose and supports an in-depth examination of how grading reform is understood and enacted by the participating teachers.

Case study is a contextually grounded exploration of a bounded system—in this case, two individual teachers within a specific school setting. As Yin (2018) explains, case study research is ideal when the phenomenon and its context are intertwined and not easily separable. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) and Hamilton and Corbett-Whittier (2013) further emphasize that case studies are effective for capturing the complexity of human behavior and institutional dynamics, especially when the goal is to understand how individuals experience and respond to change. They argue that case studies allow researchers to engage with participant's lived experiences in a way that reveals the interplay between personal beliefs and institutional practices.

Stake (1995) advocates for case study research as a means of understanding the particular, arguing that knowledge is constructed experientially and socially. This interpretive stance aligns with the study's aim to explore how teachers make sense of grading reform within their own instructional contexts. Grauer (2012) adds that case studies are epistemologically in harmony with the reader's experience, making them especially powerful for generating insights

that resonate with practitioners and stakeholders. By focusing on two distinct cases, this study can illuminate both common themes and divergent experiences, offering insight into the varied ways educators respond to reform initiatives. The case study design thus supports a nuanced, interpretive teacher's journey while contributing to broader understanding of grading reform.

Researcher Positionality

As an English Language Arts (ELA) teacher with over two decades of classroom experience, my position as a researcher deeply informs the design, implementation, and interpretation of this case study. My professional identity is rooted in a pedagogical philosophy that values student voice, the learning process, and formative feedback. These principles have shaped both my teaching and my research lens.

This study explores teacher perceptions of changes in instructional practice and their observations of student self-agency and learning. My own classroom practice has long emphasized dialogic feedback (Yang & Carless, 2013), particularly through writing conferences, which serve as a space for students to reflect, revise, and take ownership over their learning. These experiences have cultivated a sensitivity to the nuanced ways in which students express their agency and how teachers adapt their methods to foster it. As such, I approach this research with an empathetic understanding of the complexities teachers face when navigating instructional shifts and assessing student growth beyond standardized metrics.

My insider status (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) as a fellow educator offers unique advantages: I share a common language with participants, understand the rhythms and constraints of the school environment, and can interpret subtle cues that may elude an external observer. However, I also recognize the potential for bias—particularly the risk projecting my own interpretations or values onto participants' experiences. To mitigate this, I will employ

reflective journaling by participants, an interview protocol, and will maintain a commitment to representing participants' voices authentically and respectfully.

Ultimately, my positionality is not a limitation but a lens—one that allows me to engage with the lived realities of teaching and learning. It is through this lens that I seek to illustrate the ways educators perceive and enact change, and how those changes resonate in the lives of their students.

Participant Selection

I selected two teachers that participated in the professional learning team focused on grade reform at the end of the 2024-2025 school year. Both teachers volunteered to participate in this case study and implemented non-traditional grading practices within their classes during the 2025-2026 school year. The selection of two cases was intentional because it allowed the study to examine the implementation of the same general grading reform across two distinct classroom contexts within the same school. Multiple-case study designs allow researchers to examine a phenomenon across more than one bounded case and to consider similarities and differences that emerge across both cases (Creswell, 2013; Creswell, 2003; Yin, 2018). One participant taught a world language course to 9th and 10th graders, while the other taught an AP English Language and Composition course to 11th and 12th graders. Two settings with different disciplinary expectations, instructional demands, and definitions of academic success. Selecting cases that differed in meaningful contextual ways provided an opportunity to examine whether implementation experiences converged or differed under those different conditions, consistent with Yin's (2018) rationale for using multiple cases to explore both similar and contrasting patterns.

Examining two cases within the same school also allowed broader organizational conditions to remain relatively consistent while providing an opportunity to explore variation in how individual teachers interpreted and enacted the reform. Following Yin's (2018) multiple-case logic, each case was examined as a distinct case before patterns of convergence and divergence were considered across the two cases. Limiting the study to two cases further supported the in-depth analysis central to qualitative cases study research allowing sufficient attention to the experiences, practices, and context of each teacher while still making cross-case comparison possible (Creswell, 2013; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Adding substantially more cases could have expanded the breadth of the study but would also have required balancing against the depth of examination possible within each individual case.

Research Site

This research occurred in a mid-sized (approximately 930 students) high school that caters to military-connected students living in an overseas location in western Germany. All students have at least one parent with a job as well as a place of residence. Military-connected students also have some unique characteristics. They often deal with parental deployments that can have an impact on their home-life stability. They move three times more often than non-military-connected students (Every Student Succeeds Act, 20 U.S.C. § 6301, 2015). Moving so often can have various educational impacts. Different schools can have different standards, especially if they are moving to another state, different graduation requirements, and different levels of rigor.

The school is a 21st Century School building arranged in a neighborhood configuration. Each neighborhood has six learning suites with collapsable walls, a common area, and several

small rooms to use for one-on-one or small group instruction. Class sizes are capped at thirty students at this school.

Data Collection

Each teacher completed an initial written survey. This survey (Appendix A) asked teachers to describe the non-traditional grading practices they are planning on implementing, their reasoning for making this change, and the concerns/worries they have about this change. The survey also asked each teacher to describe their perception of the level of student self-agency present before the implementation of the non-traditional grade reform.

To capture changes in perception over time, each teacher participated in two semi-structured interviews conducted separately. The first round of interviews took place in January 2026, after the initial implementation of the grading reform. These interviews explored teachers' motivations, initial experiences, and early observations of student response. The second round of interviews were conducted in May 2026, allowing for reflection and deeper insight into the perceived impact of the grading reform on student learning and student agency.

Interview questions were designed to elicit rich, descriptive responses and aligned with the study's research questions and theoretical framework. The full interview protocol, including guiding questions, can be found in Appendix B. Each interview was audio-recorded and transcribed for thematic analysis.

In addition to the interviews, the study incorporated a range of classroom artifacts (Appendix C) to support triangulation and enhance the credibility of findings. The following data sources will include:

- Grading rubrics and assessment tools used before and after the reform.
- Teacher-created feedback documents.

- Teacher-created descriptions of grading policies.
- Reflective journals entries maintained by the teachers during the process.

To explore how two high school teachers experience and interpret grading reform focused on standards-based mastery and academic growth, this study draws on four key data sources. Each source provides a distinct lens through which to examine the implementation and benefits/non-benefits of grading reform, and together offer a rich, triangulated understanding of teacher practice. Table 1 outlines how each of the data sources I will collect align to my research questions and help to inform my understanding.

Data	Alignment to Research Question	How Data Will Inform My Understanding
	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. How do two high school teachers experience and interpret grading reform initiatives focused on standards-based mastery and academic growth? 2. How do teachers describe the changes in practice they made to implement this grade reform? 3. How do teachers perceive the benefits and non-benefits of grade reform on student learning and student self-agency? 	
Interviews	Directly informs the three research questions by capturing reflections, contextual details, and emergent themes that may not surface in other data.	These interviews will provide a space for the teachers to articulate their experiences, clarify their thinking, and expand on ideas that may not be fully captured in written artifacts. Through open-ended questioning, interviews allow for deeper exploration of

		<p>how teachers interpret grading reform, describe changes in practice, and assess its benefits and non-benefits for students.</p>
<p>Grading rubrics and assessment tools used before and after the reform</p>	<p>Contributes to the R1 by illustrating how teachers interpret reform through the design of their evaluative tools.</p> <p>Directly informs R2 by revealing shifts in criteria, language, and emphasis of their evaluative tools.</p>	<p>These artifacts serve as concrete evidence of instructional shifts. By comparing pre-reform and post-reform rubrics and assessment tools, I can trace how teachers operationalized standards-based grading and academic growth in their classrooms.</p>
<p>Teacher-created feedback documents</p>	<p>Directly informs R2 by revealing changes in practices (e.g. amount of formative feedback, what the documents emphasize).</p> <p>Directly informs R3 by promoting student learning and self-agency as well as allowing teachers to assess the perceived benefits and non-benefits of those opportunities for students.</p>	<p>These documents provide insight into how the two teachers communicate expectations, guide, learning, and foster student agency. The materials show the pedagogical strategies the teachers uses to support mastery and growth, offering evidence of how grading reform influences day-to-day interactions with students.</p>

Teacher-created descriptions of grading policies	Directly informs the R1 by capturing the teachers' beliefs, intentions, and framing of the reform.	Narrative descriptions of grading policies offer a window into how teachers conceptualize and communicate the principles of their reform. This reflects the teachers' interpretations of standards-based grading and their rationale for implementing this reform.
Reflective journals entries maintained by the teachers during the process	Directly informs all three questions by revealing how teachers make sense of their changing roles, how they perceive student responses to the reform, and how they weigh the outcomes of the reform.	Journals provide the most direct access to teachers' internal experiences. These entries document their evolving thoughts, emotions, and insights throughout the reform process. They also offer nuanced accounts of tensions, successes, and challenges that may not surface in formal documents and interviews.

Table 1: Data alignment & understanding

Collection of this data will take place at different times through the study. Table 2 outlines when each of the data sources will be collected.

DATA	COLLECTION TIMELINE
Interviews	Round 1 – December 2025 Round 2 – April 2026
Grading rubrics and assessment tools used before and during the reform	Examples of grading rubrics and assessment tools used BEFORE the reform will be collected in a digital repository in December 2025. Participants will be asked to place examples of grading rubrics and assessment tools used DURING the reform in a digital repository that will be open the length of the study. The repository will be closed, and copies will be gathered by the researcher in April 2026.
Teacher-created feedback documents	Participants will be asked to place examples of their teacher-created feedback forms in a digital repository that will be open the length of the study. The repository will be closed, and copies will be gathered by the researcher in April 2026.
Teacher-created descriptions of grading policies	December 2025
Reflective journals entries maintained by the teachers during the process	Reflective journal entries will be collected once a month for the duration of the study (January 2026 – April 2026).

Table 2: Data Collection Timeline

A case study approach allows for a holistic examination of how teachers interpret and enact grading changes, and how they perceive the impact of these changes on student learning

and agency. The use of multiple data sources—including interviews, classroom artifacts, and reflective journals—support triangulation and enhances the credibility of the findings.

Moreover, the case study design allows me to study each practitioner’s inquiry, iterative reflection, and context-specific problem solving. Therefore, capturing the lived experiences of teachers through case study methods provides a rich and authentic account of the reform process. This approach also supports the study’s goal of generating insights that are both theoretically meaningful and practically relevant to educators seeking to implement similar grading reforms.

Data Analysis

Theoretical Framework for Analysis

Case study methodology offers a powerful framework for examining the experiences of teachers navigating grade reform, particularly when the goal is to understand both the process and the meaning teachers assign to it. This study draws on a blended tradition of case study theorists who emphasize the importance of context, complexity, and interpretation in qualitative inquiry. Rather than seeking generalizable truths, case study research prioritizes the interpretation of individual experiences. It values the co-constructions of meaning between researcher and participant, and it embraces the tensions, contradictions, and emergent themes that arise in practice (Hyett, et al., 2014; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Stahl & King, 2020; Stake, 1995). Case study research is about exploring a bounded system in depth and over time, using multiple sources of data to develop a rich understanding of a phenomenon (Creswell, 2003; Creswell, 2013; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Central to this approach is the recognition that phenomena such as grading reform cannot be meaningfully understood apart from the environments in which they occur (Priya, 2021; Yin, 2018).

The use of diverse data sources—interviews, rubrics and assessment tools, feedback documents, policy descriptions, and reflective journals—allows triangulation and narrative richness. These materials do more than document procedural changes; they reveal how teachers conceptualize reform, how they adapt their practices, and how they interpret the benefits and non-benefits for student learning and self-agency. By capturing both external expressions (e.g., rubrics and feedback) and internal reflections (e.g., journals and interviews), the study builds a holistic portrait of reform as experienced by teachers (Creswell, 2013; Schoch, 2020; Yin, 2018).

Additionally, the case study approach allows for interpretive flexibility, enabling the researcher to trace how teachers navigate the boundaries between policy and practice, intention and outcome. It supports a constructivist orientation, where understanding is shaped through dialogue, reflection, and contextual analysis (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Njie & Asimiran, 2014; Stake, 1995). This is particularly vital in educational research, where reforms are often mediated by personal beliefs, institutional constraints, and evolving pedagogical goals.

Analysis and Coding

To analyze the qualitative data that was collected through this research, this study employed a hybrid coding approach that begins with deductive coding and remained open to inductive insights. This method ensured alignment with the study's research questions while allowing for emergent themes that may not have been anticipated during the design phase.

Deductive Coding Framework

Initial coding was guided by a deductive framework derived from the study's conceptual underpinnings—namely, teacher experiences, instructional changes, and teacher perceptions of learning and student agency. Pre-established codes are based on the literature review and theoretical constructs. This approach ensured that the coding process remains focused on the

phenomena central to the research questions and allows for systemic comparison across cases (Saldana, 2016). Table 3 outlines these deductive codes structured around themes.

Theme 1: Teacher Experience and Interpretation	
Professional Identity	How teachers see themselves in relation to the reform.
Initial Attitudes Toward Reform	Skepticism, enthusiasm, resistance, etc.
Interpretation of Grade Reform	How they define or understand the reform.
Perceived Purpose of Reform	What they believe the reform is trying to achieve.
Emotional Response	Frustration, empowerment, confusion, etc.
Theme 2: Changes in Instructional Practice	
Assessment Design Changes	Shifts in how assessments are created and/or used.
Rubric Development	Creation or revision of rubrics for mastery.
Feedback Practices	How feedback is delivered and its intended purpose.
Grading Policy Adjustments	Changes in late work, retakes, averaging, etc.
Use of Formative vs. Summative Assessments	Emphasis and balance.
Instructional Planning	Alignments with standards or learning targets
Theme 3: Perceived Impact on Students	
Student Learning Outcomes	Observed changes in academic performance
Student Engagement	Perceived motivation, participation, or interest of students.
Student Self-Agency	Perceived student ownership of learning, goal-setting, and self-assessment.
Student Understanding of Grades	Perceived clarity and meaning of grades by students.
Theme 4: Barriers and Challenges	
Time and Workload	Planning, grading, and feedback demands.
Student Resistance	Pushback or confusion from students
Parent Communication	Explaining new grading to families.
System Constraints	Technology, policy, or scheduling issues.
Theme 5: Reflection and Evolution	
Shifts in Beliefs Over Time	Changes in mindset from initial to final interview.
Professional Learning	Role of PD, collaboration, or self-study.
Sustainability	Intentions or concerns about continuing the reform.
Adaption Strategies	How teachers modified the reform to fit their context.

Table 3: Deductive Coding

Inductive Openness

While initial coding was deductive, the analysis remained open to inductive coding to capture unexpected patterns, nuances, or contradictions that emerge from participants' narratives. Saldana (2016) explains that qualitative coding involves interpretive judgment rather than rote

procedure, requiring researchers to stay sensitive to the nuanced and layered nature of the data. Any data segments that did not fit within the pre-established codes were flagged for further review and, when warranted, new codes were created to reflect emergent patterns.

During repeated readings of interview transcripts and examination of classroom artifacts, several inductive codes emerged that were not fully represented within the original deductive coding structure. These codes reflected recurring participant experiences, concerns, and interpretations identified through the raw data. As coding progressed, the inductive codes were compared across participants and data sources, refined through memoing and recoding, and examined in relation to the broader deductive categories. Table 4 presents the primary inductive codes that emerged during analysis and illustrated how these codes contributed to the refinement and development of the study's final themes.

Inductive Code	Description of What Appeared in the Raw Data	Relationship to Later Themes
Grades as communication of learning	Participants described grades as information about what students currently knew and could do rather than as accumulated points or completed work.	Contributed to findings related to aligning grades with learning and redesigning grading systems.
Student grade orientation	Students continued to interpret learning through grades, points, GPA, and other traditional indicators of achievement.	Contributed to findings related to shifting student mindsets and challenges in transforming motivation and learning behaviors.
Instructional change extending beyond grading	Changes to grading prompted changes in assessment design, lesson planning, feedback, pacing and instructional decision-making.	Contributed to findings concerning changes in instructional practices and the mediating role of instruction.
Feedback as an instructional process	Feedback emerged as an ongoing instructional process students were expected to interpret and use rather than simply information attached to a grade.	Contributed to findings related to feedback-centered and responsive instructional practices.
Uneven student use of agency opportunities	Students varied in their use of reassessment, revision, reflection, goal setting, and feedback opportunities.	Contributed to findings related to student reflection, self-agency, and limitations of agency-focused structures.
Agency requires purposeful action	Opportunities for choice did not necessarily result in agency unless students understood goals, interpreted feedback, made	Contributed to refinement of the study's interpretation of student self-agency.

	decisions, and acted on those decisions.	
Transparency of learning expectations	Participants emphasized students' understanding of standards, proficiency levels, rubrics, learning targets, and criteria for success.	Contributed to findings related to transparency and assessment literacy.
Reform within traditional systems	Participants described tensions between grading reform and existing systems such as GPA, gradebooks, transcripts, AP expectations, and traditional stakeholder expectations.	Contributed to findings related to navigating reform within traditional grading structures.
Implementation workload and time demands	Participants described substantial time and workload associated with redesign, feedback, reassessment, and maintaining new grading practices.	Contributed to findings concerning implementation challenges and sustainability.
Subject-area constraints shaped implementation	The nature of the course and discipline influenced how grading reform was designed and implemented.	Supported cross-case findings regarding contextual differences in implementation.
Prior beliefs about grading influenced reform	Established student beliefs about points, grades, fairness, and academic success influenced how new grading practices were interpreted.	Contributed to findings related to student mindset, motivation, and agency.
Reform as cultural change	Participants described implementation as requiring shifts in classroom expectations, norms, learning behaviors, and beliefs rather than merely changes in grade calculation.	Contributed to the broader interpretation of grading reform as instructional and cultural change.

Table 4: Inductive Coding

This flexibility allowed the study to honor the lived experiences of the participants and to surface insights that extend beyond the original theoretical lens. The iterative process of coding, memoing, and recoding supported a deeper understanding of how teachers interpret and enact grading reform in context.

Coding Process

To illustrate how the analysis progressed from raw data to broader findings, Table 5 presents representative examples of the coding process used in this study. Deductive coding was guided by the study's research questions, conceptual framework, and relevant literature, while

inductive coding was used to capture patterns, tensions, and ideas that emerged from the data and were not fully represented by the pre-established codes. During repeated cycles of coding, comparison, memoing, and recoding, individual coded excerpts were examined alongside other similarly coded data sources and grouped into broader analytic patterns. These patterns were then compared across data sources and participants and contributed to the development of the study's final themes. The examples shown in Table 5 are intended to demonstrate this progression; however, no single excerpt or code independently produced a theme. Rather, themes were developed from recurring patterns across multiple coded excerpts, data sources, and cases. Therefore, the final column identifies the broader theme to which each example contributed rather than implying a direct one-to-one progression from an individual excerpt to a theme.

Representative Raw Data	Initial Code	Coding Approach	Broader Analytic Pattern	Theme to Which the Data Contributed
Teacher described wanting grades to communicate what students currently know and can do rather than how many assignments or points they accumulated.	Grades as evidence of learning/ proficiency	Deductive—aligned with the study's focus on standards-based mastery and teachers' interpretations of grading reform	Alignment between grades and demonstrated learning	RQ1 Theme 1: Teachers Grapple with the Alignment of Grades and Learning
Teacher describes students continuing to ask about point, percentages, or how an assignment will affect their grades despite the new grading system.	Persistent grade orientation	Inductive—repeated pattern that emerged through participant accounts	Tension between reform goals and students' established beliefs about grades	RQ1 Theme 2: Shifting Student Mindsets
Teacher describes tension between the new grading approach and existing expectations involving GPA, AP requirements, traditional grade reporting, or other school structures.	Traditional- system constraints	Inductive—emerged as teachers discussed barriers to implementation	Reform operating within established institutional structures	RQ1 Theme 3: Navigating Reform Within Traditional Grading Structures

Teacher describes replacing or revising point based assignments, rubrics, proficiency scales, or assessment procedures to better represent mastery.	Redesign of assessment and grading practices	Deductive—aligned with the research question addressing changes in teacher practice	Assessment and grading redesigned around proficiency	RQ2 Theme 1: Redesign of Assessment and Grading Systems to Emphasize Mastery/ Proficiency Over Points
Teacher describes increasing descriptive feedback, changing instruction based on student evidence, or using formative work to guide subsequent teaching.	Feedback-centered instructional decision-making	Deductive—aligned with changes in instructional practice	Instruction increasingly responsive to evidence of student learning	RQ2 Theme 2: Instructional Practices Became More Intentional, Feedback-Centered, and Responsive
Teacher describes adding reflection forms, self-assessment, goal-setting, reassessment planning, or other structures requiring students to monitor their own progress.	Structures for reflection and self-monitoring	Deductive—aligned with the conceptual framework of student agency	Opportunities for students to interpret evidence and make decisions about learning	RQ2 Theme 3: Structures Created to Promote Student Reflection, Self-Monitoring, and Ownership
Teacher describes students having a clearer understanding of expectations because rubrics, proficiency criteria, exemplars, or learning targets made success more visible.	Increased clarity of expectations	Deductive with additional Inductive refinement as transparency repeatedly emerged across data sources	Greater transparency and understanding of assessment criteria	RQ3 Theme 1: Increasing Transparency and Assessment Literacy
Teacher describes students using reflection or feedback to identify a weakness, decide what to improve, seek help, revise, or reassess.	Student action following reflection/ feedback	Inductive—emerged from examples of how students responded to reform structures	Reflection translated into purposeful student action	RQ3 Theme 2: Supporting Student Reflection and Self-Agency
Teacher reports that students had opportunities to revise or reassess but did not consistently use them, ignored feedback, or	Uneven uptake of feedback and reassessment	Inductive—recurring pattern across participant accounts	Reform structures did not automatically change student motivation or behavior	RQ3 Theme 3: Challenges in Transforming Student Motivation and Learning Behaviors

continued to focus primarily on grades or GPA.
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Table 5: Coding Process

Role of Researcher

I was both the researcher of this study and the mentor to the participants. Since I implemented a non-traditional grading system within my classes last school year, I am a mentor to these teachers. I have provided advice and guidance on getting started with the grading reform within their classrooms and will continue to be “on call” as the needs arise throughout the implementation. Because of this, I impacted the research and the outcomes.

Trustworthiness

Establishing trustworthiness is an important consideration in qualitative case study research because findings are developed through the researcher’s interpretation of participants’ experiences within a specific context. Rather than relying solely on traditional quantitative notions of validity and reliability, qualitative researchers use strategies designed to strengthen the credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability of the study (Ahmed, 2024; Stahl & King, 2020). In this study, trustworthiness was supported through triangulation, prolonged engagement, member checking, reflexivity, and careful documentation of the analytic process. Triangulation strengthened credibility by allowing evidence from multiple sources—including surveys, interviews, and classroom artifacts—to be compared for patterns of convergence, divergence, and consistency across the data (Creswell, 2013; Yin, 2018). Yin (2018) emphasizes the importance of using multiple sources of evidence in case study research because doing so allows findings to be supported through more than one form of data.

Prolonged engagement also contributed to credibility by providing repeated opportunities to interact with participants and develop a more contextualized understanding of their experiences over the course of implementation. Extended engagement can help researchers build rapport with participants and develop a deeper understanding of their perspectives, behaviors, and experiences (Ahmed, 2024). Member checking provided an additional opportunity to strengthen trustworthiness by allowing participants to review the representation of their experiences and identify areas requiring clarification or correction. Ahmed (2024) identifies member checking as a strategy for strengthening confirmability by giving participants an opportunity to verify whether their viewpoints and experiences have been represented accurately.

Because the researcher had an existing professional relationship with the participants and prior experience with grading reform, reflexivity was also important to the trustworthiness of the study. Reflexive practices require qualitative researchers to remain attentive to how their own experiences, assumptions, and positionality may influence data collections and interpretation (Creswell, 2013; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Reflective memoing throughout the analytic process provided a means of identifying these potential influences and distinguishing the researcher's interpretations from the perspectives expressed by participants. Finally, systemic documentation of coding decisions, revisions, analytic memos, and the progression from raw data to codes and themes contributed to the dependability and confirmability of the findings. Maintaining documentation or an audit trail allows the analytic process and the decisions made throughout the study to remain transparent and traceable (Ahmed, 2024; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Table 6 summarizes these trustworthiness strategies and describes how each was implemented in this study.

Strategy	Definition	Implementation
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Triangulation	Using multiple data sources and analytical techniques in order to develop a comprehensive understanding of the subject (Creswell, 2013; Yin, 2018).	Comparisons of responses on survey, interview A, and interview B. Comparisons of classroom artifacts before and during implementation. Teacher reflections.
Prolonged Engagement	“Building trust and rapport with participants over time allows researchers to gain nuanced insights into their experiences, behaviors, and beliefs.” (Ahmed, 2024)	Use of multiple contacts throughout the process.
Member Checking	“Allow participants to review and confirm the accuracy of the findings to enhance confirmability.” (Ahmed, 2024)	Sharing the results with the members of the case study to ensure their viewpoints and experiences are accurately represented.

Table 6: Trustworthiness

Summary

My case study examined the experiences with and perceptions of two teachers implementing a non-traditional grading system into their classrooms. The study used an initial survey and two interviews to determine the teachers’ perceptions of the changes in their practices and the impact of the grade reform on student learning and self-agency. I used case study

methodology to guide my analysis of the interviews, rubrics and assessment tools, feedback documents, policy descriptions, and teacher reflections.

Chapter 4 - Presentation of Data

Introduction

This chapter presents the findings from a case study examining the implementation of a student-centered grading model designed to emphasize academic growth and foster student self-agency in a high school setting. The study explored how two high school teachers experienced and interpreted grading reform initiatives focused on standards-based mastery and academic growth. Particular attention was given to the ways in which the implementation of a non-traditional grading model influenced teachers' instructional practices, professional decision-making, and efforts to create a culture of learning that promotes student agency.

The findings are organized around the study's three research questions:

1. How do two high school teachers experience and interpret grading reform initiatives focused on standards-based mastery and growth?
2. How do teachers describe the changes in practice they made to implement the grading reform?
3. How do teachers perceive the benefits and challenges of grading reform on student learning and student self-agency?

The themes and findings presented in this chapter are organized according to these research questions and are supported by interview data, classroom artifacts, and observational evidence collected throughout the study.

Participant Demographics

This study examined the experiences of two high school teachers implementing a student-centered grading model focused on standards-based mastery, academic growth, and student agency. To protect confidentiality, pseudonyms were assigned to each participant. Table 5

provides an overview of participant demographic and professional characteristics relevant to the study.

Pseudonym	Subject Area	Grade Level	Total Years Teaching	Years Teaching at This School	Highest Degree
Camille S.	German 3	9-10	30	25	M.A.
Bee B.	AP English Language & Composition	11-12	20	13	M.S.

Table 7: Participant Demographic Information

Camille S. (pseudonym) is a veteran educator who teaches two world languages, including the Advanced Placement courses for both subject areas. For the purpose of this study, Camille S. implemented the grading reform within two German 3 classes serving students in grades 9 and 10. Camille S. has 30 years of teaching experience, including 25 years at the current high school. In addition, Camille S. holds a Master of Arts degree in Special Education and has extensive experience navigating changes in instructional and assessment practices throughout her career. This breadth of professional experience provided a valuable perspective on the implementation of grading reform and its perceived influence on classroom instruction, student learning, and teacher decision-making.

Bee B. (pseudonym) teaches Advanced Placement (AP) English Language and Composition to students in grades 11 and 12. Bee has 20 years of teaching experience, including 13 years at the current high school. Bee B. holds a Master of Science degree in Education and has extensive experience teaching rigorous, college-level coursework within the secondary school setting. As a participant in the school's grading reform initiative, Bee B. implemented student-centered grading practices while maintaining the academic expectations associated with Advanced Placement instruction. This professional background contributed an informed

perspective on the implementation of grading reform and its perceived influence on instructional practices and student achievement.

While demographic and professional background information provides important context for understanding the participants, their experiences with grading reform were also shaped by their initial perceptions of and motivations for adopting the student-centered grading model. Prior experiences, beliefs about assessment, and concerns regarding implementation influenced how each teacher approached the reform process and interpreted its outcomes. As a result, understanding participants' initial attitudes toward grading reform, their reasons for engaging in the initiative and the concerns they held prior to implementation provide additional context for interpreting the findings presented in this study. Table 6 summarizes these characteristics and highlights each participant's starting point as they began implementing grading reform practices.

Participant	Initial Attitude Toward Reform	Motivation for Implementing Reform	Initial Concerns
Camille S.	Supportive	To orient students towards growth in language proficiency	Teacher workload; Students/parents misunderstanding what the grades mean
Bee B.	Supportive, but nervous	Desire to change students from grade-focus to learning-learning focus; Desire for students to take more academic risks while writing	Teacher workload

Table 8: Participant Initial Perceptions & Concerns

Camille S. entered the grading reform initiative with a generally supportive attitude toward the proposed changes. Her primary motivation for implementing the student-centered grading model was to shift students' attention toward the development of language proficiency and academic growth rather than the accumulation of points. Camille S. believed that a grading system focused on mastery could more accurately reflect students' progress in acquiring language skills over time. Despite this support, Camille S. expressed concerns regarding the

increased workload associated with implementing the new grading practices, particularly the time required to provide meaningful and ongoing feedback to document student growth. Additionally, Camille S. anticipated potential challenges related to students' and parents' understanding of grade reporting and the interpretation of achievement within a non-traditional grading system.

Bee B. approached grading reform with a supportive yet cautious perspective. A primary motivation for participating in the initiative was the desire to shift students' focus from grade attainment to learning and skill development. Bee B. believed that a student-centered grading model could encourage greater engagement with the learning process and promote a stronger emphasis on academic growth. Additionally, Bee B. hoped that revised grading practices would encourage students to take greater academic risks in their writing by reducing the emphasis on point deductions and supporting opportunities for revision and improvement. Despite support for the goals of the reform, Bee B. expressed concerns regarding the additional time and effort required to implement and sustain the new grading system while meeting the instructional demands associated with Advanced Placement coursework.

Descriptions of the Grade Reform Initiatives

Camille S. and the Initiative for German 3

Camille S. described her grading initiative as “predominately Performance-Based Grading” (*Grading for German 3* classroom artifact). The initiative is grounded in the proficiency guidelines established by the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) and the district's College and Career Readiness Standards for World Languages. Student performance is evaluated using ACTFL proficiency levels—Novice Low, Novice Mid, Novice High, Intermediate Low, Intermediate Mid, and Intermediate High—with

accompanying proficiency rubrics and performance descriptors provided to both students and parents. Because the school district uses an electronic gradebook (ASPEN), these proficiency levels are converted to point values for reporting purposes:

Proficiency Level	Points
Intermediate High (IH)	15
Intermediate Mid (IM) & Intermediate Low (IL)	13.5-14.5
Novice High (NH)	12-13
Novice Mid (NM)	10.5-11.5
Novice Low (NL)	9-10

The classroom artifact further distinguishes between practice and summative evidence of learning. Homework and other practice activities are described as “essential for skill development” but “will not directly impact the grade” (*Grading for German 3* classroom artifact). Instead, these activities function as formative learning opportunities designed to prepare students for subsequent proficiency assessments. This distinction between formative practice and summative evaluation reflects assessment practices commonly associated with contemporary grading reform.

The *Grading for German 3* classroom artifact also outline how semester grades are calculated across four performance categories.

Category	Weight	Grading Practice
Interpretive Communication – Listening & Reading	30% (30 points)	Most recent level of proficiency; Reassessment opportunities after additional practice or remediation to demonstrate improved mastery
Interpersonal Communication – Speaking & Writing	30% (30 points)	Most recent level of proficiency; Reassessment opportunities after additional practice or remediation to demonstrate improved mastery
Presentational Communication – Speaking & Writing	30% (30 points)	Most recent level of proficiency; Reassessment opportunities after additional practice or remediation to demonstrate improved mastery
Building Blocks (Grammar, Vocabulary, Pronunciation, Participation)	10% (10 pts)	Average score reported; limited reassessment opportunities

Table 9: German 3 Grade Calculation

The three communication categories collectively account for 90% of the overall course grade, while the Building Block category accounts for the remaining 10%. According to Camille S., this weighting reflects the priorities of contemporary world language instruction by emphasizing students' ability to communicate effectively in authentic contexts rather than their mastery of isolated grammatical structures. Unlike traditional grading systems that average all assessment scores, the communication categories report students' most recent level of proficiency, allowing grades to represent current performance rather than an accumulation of past attempts. Consequently, a student's reported proficiency reflects their demonstrated level of learning at the time of reporting rather than the mathematical average of earlier assessments.

The grading initiative also incorporates a reassessment policy intended to support continued learning and mastery. Students may reassess any standard after completing additional practice or remediation, provided they completed the required formative work prior to the original assessment. The classroom artifact specifies that the "most recent evidence of learning" is used to determine students' reported proficiency level, reinforcing the expectation that grades should represent current mastery rather than initial performance. This policy aligns with the initiative's emphasis on learning as an ongoing development process and provides students with structured opportunities to demonstrate growth over time.

Overall, the classroom artifact illustrates how Camille S. operationalized grading reform by aligning grading practice with proficiency-based learning principles. Through the use of performance-based proficiency scales, the separation of formative practice from summative evaluation, the prioritization of current evidence of learning, and opportunities for reassessment, the grading system was intentionally designed to ensure that reported grades reflected students'

current language proficiency rather than point accumulation. As stated in the communication provided to students and parents, the initiative was intended to “ensure grades accurately reflect language performance, promote continuous growth, and allow students to take ownership of their learning by focusing on proficiency rather than chasing points” (*Grading for German 3* classroom artifact).

Bee B. and the Initiative for AP Language and Composition

Bee B.’s grading initiative centered on a mastery-based grading system designed to prioritize students’ demonstration of learning, academic growth, and self-reflection rather than the accumulation of points. Across the course syllabus, beginning-of-year parent communication, and revised grading policy, Bee B. consistently emphasized that grades should communicate students’ current level of proficiency while encouraging continuous improvement through feedback, reassessment, and reflection.

The course syllabus introduced the grading system by explaining that students would no longer earn “points for every assignment” but instead be “assessed on [their] mastery of the core skills of AP” English (2025-26 AP Language and Composition Syllabus). The syllabus explains that final grades are determined by two components: students’ demonstrated mastery of four core skill areas—Writing, Reading, Speaking and Listening, and Language—and their completion of practice and preparation assignments. The document further states that the grading system “rewards growth, values preparation, and ensures [students] build the habits that lead to success on the AP Exam and in college-level work.”

Rather than assigning traditional percentage scores, Bee B. evaluated student learning using a four-level mastery scale consisting of Beginning (1), Developing (2), Proficient (3), and Mastery (4), with an additional designation of Exceptional (5) available when students

demonstrated the sophistication expected by the Advanced Placement English Language and Composition rubric. The syllabus describes mastery as students who “consistently meet or exceed expectations,” while proficiency indicates students who “meet expectations with minor gaps.”

The grading system also established explicit criteria linking mastery across the four skill domains to final course grades. Rather than averaging individual assignments, letter grades were determined by the combination of mastery demonstrated across all skill areas together with students’ completion of required preparation work. For example, students earning an A were expected to demonstrate proficiency (Level 3 or higher) in all four skill areas while completing at least 90% of required grammar practice, quizzes, and reading preparation assignments. Lower letter grades reflected progressively fewer demonstrated areas of proficiency and lower completion rates.

Although practice assignments contributed to students’ preparation, Bee B. distinguished formative learning from summative evidence of mastery. In the beginning-of-year letter to parents, formative assignments were described as “daily practice, feedback, and preparation,” while summative assessments consisted of “midterm and end-of term conferences assessing overall skills.” The letter further explained that formative scores “show progress but are not averaged into grades” and compared the grading system to athletics: “formative work is practice; summative assessments are the ‘big game’ where students show what they’ve learned.” This distinction reinforced the initiative’s emphasis that grades should represent students’ demonstrated learning rather than the accumulation of points earned throughout the instructional process.

Bee B.'s classroom artifacts also emphasized opportunities for reassessment and ongoing improvement. The syllabus describes "Redo Opportunities ('Fresh Attempts')" that allowed students to request a new assessment after receiving feedback. Students identified the specific skill they intended to improve, completed a reflection describing how they would apply teacher feedback, and, if the new work demonstrated higher mastery, their mastery tracker was updated. Students were originally permitted two redo opportunities per grading period for each skill area; however, this limit was lifted after Bee B. realized the positive instructional impact the policy had on students who were willing to do the extra work.

Consistent with the initiative's emphasis on student ownership, Bee B. incorporated regular opportunities for students to monitor and evaluate their own learning. The syllabus outlines eight student-led progress conferences conducted throughout the school year. Prior to each conference, students completed a reflection identifying their current mastery levels, evidence of growth, and future goals before leading a discussion of their progress with the teacher. As described in the syllabus, these meetings were intended to ensure that "your progress is measured by your understanding of your growth, not just [the teacher's] perspective."

The classroom artifacts further demonstrated that Bee B.'s grading initiative evolved throughout implementation. In the Semester 2 Grading Policy Clarification, Bee B. acknowledged that the grading system remained "a work in progress" and explained that revisions were made after considering student concerns and implementation challenges. The revised policy reaffirmed that grades should represent evidence of mastery rather than percentages, stating that "grades measure mastery, not points" and that "letter grades represent levels of skill mastery." The document also reiterated that the purpose of the grading system was to "reward learning, not point-chasing," "make skill expectations transparent," "allow

improvement without mathematical punishment,” and “prepare you for AP-level evaluation standards.”

The revised grading policy also provided substantially more explicit guidance regarding how mastery would be determined. Rather than relying solely on the most recent assessment, Bee B. introduced a structured decision process that prioritized evidence from major assessments while also considering performance trends across formative assessments when summative evidence was unavailable. Major assessments were designated as the strongest indicators of mastery because, as the document explains, a “‘Game Day’ performance overrides ‘Practice’ scores,” and when multiple major assessments were available, the most recent evidence was used to determine students’ mastery level.

Finally, the revised policy continued to emphasize that student growth should be supported by evidence rather than subjective judgment. The document explains that if students believed their reported mastery did not adequately represent their learning, they were expected to support their claims with concrete evidence demonstrating the application of teacher feedback and improved performance. As the policy states, students “cannot argue with words or feelings; you must argue with evidence.”

Taken together, Bee B.’s classroom artifacts illustrate a grading initiative that sought to replace traditional point accumulation with a comprehensive mastery-based system emphasizing proficiency, feedback, reassessment, and student reflection. Across all three documents, grades were intentionally designed to communicate students demonstrated mastery of disciplinary skills while encouraging continued growth through multiple opportunities to learn, revise, and provide evidence of improvement. Moreover, the progression from the initial syllabus and parent communication to the revised Semester 2 policy reflects an iterative implementation process in

which the grading initiative was refined in response to teacher experience and student feedback while maintaining its central commitment to mastery-based learning.

Findings Related to R1: How do two high school teachers experience and interpret grading reform initiatives focused on standards-based mastery and academic growth?

This section presents findings related to Research Question 1: How do two high school teachers experience and interpret grading reform initiatives focused on standards-based mastery and academic growth? Data from teacher interviews and supporting documents were analyzed using a common coding framework and then synthesized across data sources to identify patterns in participants' experiences and interpretations of grading reform. Initial coding produced five major thematic categories: Teacher Experience and Interpretation, Instructional Practice, Student Impact, Barriers and Challenges, and Reflection and Evolution. Through cross-source synthesis, these categories were further consolidated into three overarching themes: (1) Alignment of Grades and Learning, (2) Shifting Student Mindsets, and (3) Negotiating Reform Within Traditional Grading Structures.

Table 7 provides a summary of these findings, including representative excerpts, code-level frequencies, and overall theme frequencies across the dataset. Although frequency counts should not be interpreted as indicators of importance, they provide insight into the relative prevalence of ideas and experiences across participants and documents. The table serves as an overview of the findings that are examined in greater depth throughout the remainder of this chapter.

Findings	Representative Sentence-Level Coding Samples	Frequency Counts by Code Across Documents	Theme Total
Teacher Experience & Interpretation	"It was really difficult and I knew it was going to be difficult. I just didn't realize how difficult it was."	Professional Identity = 11 Initial Attitudes = 9 Interpretation of Reform = 37	107

	“I really thought students would stop thinking about grades.” “Grades measure mastery, not points.” “This systems rewards growth.”	Perceived Purpose = 35 Emotional Response = 15	
Instructional Practice	“I increased the frequency that I was assessing [students].” “I focused a lot on redoes this year rather than revision.” “Progress audits every two weeks.” “We will do student-led conferences multiple times a quarter.”	Assessment Desing Changes = 33 Rubric Development = 15 Feedback Practices = 29 Grading Policy Adjustments = 50 Formative vs. Summative = 25 Instructional Planning = 39	191
Student Impact	“Students could see that their grades were increasing.” “I was forcing them to be reflective.” “What skill am I not controlling?” “We want students to feel free to take [academic] risks.”	Student Learning Outcomes = 18 Student Engagement = 13 Student Self-Agency = 35 Student Understanding of Grades = 39	105
Barriers & Challenges	“It was time consuming.” “We have a schooling system that is obsessed with grades and GPA.” “There was confusion, not resistance.” “Students are still grade grubbers.”	Time and Workload = 23 Student Resistance = 15 Parent Communication = 13 System Constraints = 19	70
Reflection & Evolution	“You are going to have missteps.” “[This] is a work in progress.” “I don’t see myself changing away from it.” “The princple behind [the grade reform] is solid. [My] execution of it is not yet.”	Shifts in Beliefs Over Time = 16 Professional Learning = 10 Sustainability = 15 Adaptation Strategies = 23	64

Table 10: Research Question 1 Findings Summary

The findings summarized in Table 9 represented an intermediate stage of analysis rather than the final thematic organization of Research Question 1. The five findings categories—Teacher Experience and Interpretation, Instructional Practice, Student Impact, Barriers and Challenges, and Reflection and Evolution—were developed by grouping related codes and recurring patterns across interviews and supporting documents. Following this initial categorization, the data within and across these categories were examined again in relation to the specific focus of Research Question 1: how the teachers experienced and interpreted the implementation of grading reform. This process involved comparing coded excerpts across participants and data sources, examining areas of overlap among categories, and identifying broader patterns that captured how participants made sense of the reform over their course of

implementation. The categories were therefore not treated as discrete or mutually exclusive; instead, related findings from multiple categories contributed to the development of broader themes.

Through the cross-category synthesis, three overarching themes were identified. The first theme, alignment of grades and learning, developed primarily from participants' descriptions of the purpose and meaning of grading reform, including their efforts to make grades more representative of demonstrated proficiency, mastery, and academic growth. These findings drew particularly from the *Teacher Experience and Interpretation* category, while also incorporating relevant evidence from *Instructional Practice* and *Reflection and Evolution* categories as participants described how their understanding and implementation of the reform developed over time. The second theme, shifting student mindsets, brought together findings related to teachers' expectations for changes in students' understanding of grades, engagement with feedback, reflection, and ownership of learning, as well as their experiences with persistent grade-oriented student behaviors. Consequently, this theme incorporated evidence across *Student Impact*, *Teacher Experience and Interpretation*, and *Barriers and Challenges*. The third theme, negotiating reform within traditional grading structures, synthesized participants' experiences with the practical and systemic conditions surrounding implementation, including workload, existing gradebook structures, parent and student expectations, and broader educational norms related to grades and GPA. Findings within *Barriers and Challenges* were particularly central to this theme, while *Reflection and Evolution* captured how teachers adapted their practices in response to these tensions.

This second level of synthesis allowed the analysis to move beyond describing individual categories of experience toward identifying broader patterns that more directly addressed

Research Question 1. Rather than representing separate stages or isolated aspects of implementation, the three themes reflected interconnected dimensions of how the participants experienced and interpreted grading reform: what they believed grades should communicate about learning, and how they navigated the tension between reform-oriented practices and established grading structures. The following section examine each of these themes in greater detail.

Theme 1: Grading Reform Improves Alignment of Grades with Learning

A prominent theme that emerged across interviews, grading policies, course documents, and parent communications was the intentional alignment of grades with demonstrated learning. Both Camille S. and Bee B. consistently described grading reform as an effort to redefine what grades communicated within their classrooms. Rather than viewing grades as records of assignment completion, effort, or accumulated points, both participants described grades as indicators of students demonstrated proficiency or mastery that should accurately communicate what students knew and were able to do. Across data sources, the participants also described redesigning instructional and assessment practices—including the use of formative practice, feedback, reassessment, and the most recent evidence of learning—to ensure that reported grades reflected student learning rather than compliance with classroom tasks.

Although both teachers shared this overarching commitment to aligning grades with learning, they emphasized different aspects of the reform. Camille S. Primarily described alignment in terms of accurately representing students' current language proficiency through standards-based assessment and the use of the most recent evidence of learning. In contrast, Bee B. framed alignment through the language of mastery and skill development, emphasizing instructional practices that separated practice from assessment and positioned grades as evidence

of demonstrated learning rather than performance on individual assignments. Together, these findings illustrate how both participants experienced grading reform as a process of redefining the purpose of grades while adapting classroom practices to strengthen the relationship between grading and student learning.

Camille S.

Throughout both interviews and supporting classroom documents, Camille S. consistently described grading reform as an effort to ensure that grades accurately communicated students' demonstrated language proficiency rather than assignment completion or accumulated points. Across data sources, she repeatedly explained that grades should represent what students were currently able to do in the target language and should reflect their most recent demonstration of learning rather than mathematical averages or compliance with classroom tasks. For Camille, aligning grades with learning meant ensuring that grades communicated students' current level of proficiency rather than the history of their completed work (Camille S. interview, Feb 22, 2026; *Grading for German 3*).

When discussing why she adopted the grading reform initiative, Camille explained that the challenge did not stem from the assessments she was using but from the grading practices used to report student learning (Camille S. interview, Feb 22, 2026). She described having designed instruction and assessments around the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) proficiency expectations prior to participating in the district grading reform initiative; however, she believed that averaging assessment scores across a semester often failed to communicate students' actual level of language proficiency because students' skills continually developed while instructional expectations simultaneously became more rigorous (Camille S. interview, Feb 22, 2026). Reflecting on this concern, she explained:

The problem always came with the idea of averaging everything together when I know that as the year goes on, their skills get better, and in addition, the content gets more difficult, and the expectation of their level of proficiency is higher. I always felt like [traditional grades] just wasn't a good, accurate measurement of what they were actually able to do when you just do a pure average of scores. (Camille S. interview, Feb 22, 2026)

Rather than describing grades as cumulative records of completed assignments, Camille consistently described grades as representations of students' current proficiency (Camille S. interview, Feb 22, 2026; Camille S. interview, May 17, 2026). When asked to explain the purpose of the grading model, she stated that, in an ideal system, she would "actually be able to just grade them on their actual level of proficiency according to our national standards and our district standards" (Camille S. interview, Feb 22, 2026). Because district policy required teachers to report numerical grades, Camille explained that she developed a system that translated ACTFL proficiency levels into numerical values while preserving the meaning of those proficiency ratings (Camille S. interview, Feb 22, 2026). She emphasized that the numbers entered into the electronic gradebook functioned simply as "a numerical equivalent" of students' demonstrated proficiency rather than as points earned through completed work (Camille S. interview, Feb 22, 2026). She went on to explain that her goal was to "actually be able to just grade [students] on their actual level of proficiency according to our national standards and our district standards" (Camille S. interview, Feb 22, 2026).

This emphasis on communicating proficiency rather than accumulating points was also evident throughout Camille's written grading policy (*Grading for German 3*). The grading guide described German 3 as using "predominantly Performance-Based Grading," explaining that

assessment focused on students' "progress and growth in specific language skills rather than accumulation of points." The document further explained that homework served as practice rather than graded evidence of learning, reassessment was encouraged following additional practice, and "the most recent evidence of learning" determined students' reported grades (*Grading for German 3*). Collectively, these written policies reflected the same philosophy Camille described in her interviews: grades were intended "accurately reflect language performance" (*Grading for German 3*), encourage continuous growth, and shift students' attention from earning points to developing proficiency.

Camille further explained that aligning grades with learning required instructional practices that reflected the developmental nature of language acquisition (Camille S. interview, Feb 22, 2026; Camille S. interview, May 17, 2026). She described increasing the amount of formative practice students completed before graded assessments, explaining that language learners required repeated opportunities to develop proficiency before demonstrating their learning. Reflecting on the instructional changes she made, she explained, "I had to do a lot more frequent practices, a lot more. And that was because I wanted their...new score to be, of course, higher and higher and higher" (Camille S. interview, Feb 22, 2026).

Rather than viewing practice as evidence for grading, Camille described it as preparation for future demonstrations of proficiency. Her written grading policy similarly distinguished between practice and assessment, explaining that "Homework is considered practice and will not directly impact the grade," while emphasizing that feedback would be provided to guide students' improvement before graded assessments. Together, the interviews and grading policy described an instructional approach in which practice, feedback, and formative assessment supported learning before students completed graded demonstrations of proficiency

Camille also explained that aligning grades with learning required instructional pacing that responded to students' developing proficiency rather than following a fixed instructional calendar. She described moving away from a predetermined schedule and instead adjusting the pace of instruction according to students' demonstrated learning. Reflecting on this change, she explained:

My pacing is more, for lack of a better term, erratic than what it used to be...there are some things where we're cruising through them really fast and then others where we're down to a snail's pace...it's according to where their level of proficiency is right now. I view that as a positive thing. (Camille S. interview, Feb 22, 2026)

Camille further described reassessment and repeated demonstrations of learning as essential components of ensuring that grades accurately represented students' proficiency rather than their initial performance (Camille S. interview, Feb 22, 2026; *Grading for German 3*). Rather than averaging multiple performances together, she explained that language learning develops gradually and that students' most recent performance provided the best evidence of their current proficiency. Her grading guide reinforced this practice by stating that students could "reassess on any standard after additional practice or remediation to demonstrate improved mastery" and that "the most recent evidence of learning will be used in the final grade calculation" (*Grading for German 3*).

Camille explained that this approach reflected her belief that grades should communicate what students were currently able to do rather than preserve evidence from earlier stages of learning. During the initial interview, she described assessment scores as temporary indicators of students' current proficiency rather than permanent judgments of achievement, explaining:

Their scores are periodically going to drop because when we take a leap in level difficulty, the scores are naturally going to drop some because they're going to have to reach a little bit more. I had to change their mindset on that. Our scores are a snapshot of where we are right now. They're not where we're going to be forever. (Camille S. interview, Feb 22, 2026)

Because proficiency expectations increased throughout the year, Camille explained that assessment conversations focused on helping students interpret temporary decreases in scores within the context of continued learning rather than as evidence of failure. She described using individual conferences to compare students' current performance with previous demonstrations of learning while emphasizing future growth. As she explained:

Okay, yeah, you did horribly this time, but we moved up a level...Last time you were at exceeds; this time you're meeting, but it's still more difficult. So, what does that mean for next time?...With a little bit more practice, then maybe you're going to be back up at exceeds. (Camille S. interview, Feb 22, 2026)

By the conclusion of the implementation year, Camille continued to describe grades as indicators of students' developing proficiency rather than fixed measures of achievement (Camille S. interview, May 17, 2026). Reflecting on students' progress, she explained that they increasingly understood that proficiency develops over time and that temporary declines accompanied higher expectations rather than diminished learning:

They could see that their grades were increasing, which means that their level of proficiency was increasing as well...Every time we level up, you might fall back a little bit because it's going to be a bit of a jump...and that's all right. As long as we realize that

the end goal is not the end of the quarter...the end goal is getting up to the level that you need...and continuing to grow. (Camille S. interview, May 17, 2026)

Collectively, Camille's interviews and written grading policy described an instructional system in which practice, feedback, reassessment, differentiated pacing, and repeated demonstrations of learning worked together to ensure that grades communicated students' current language proficiency rather than assignment completion or accumulated points. This alignment between instructional practice and assessment allowed grades to function as ongoing indicators of demonstrated learning throughout the implementation process. (Camille S. interview, Feb 22, 2026; Camille S. interview, May 17, 2026; *Grading for German 3*)

This distinction was evident in both her interviews and her written grading policy. The *Grading for German 3* guide explained that homework functioned as practice designed to prepare students for future demonstrations of proficiency rather than as graded evidence of achievement. Likewise, Camille described formative classroom activities as opportunities for students to receive feedback, identify misconceptions, and refine their language skills before completing proficiency-based assessments (Camille S. interview, Feb 22, 2026; *Grading for German 3*). By reserving grades for demonstrations of learning rather than daily practice, Camille explained that grades more accurately represented students' language proficiency instead of their willingness to complete assignments (Camille S. interview, Feb 22, 2026).

Camille also described reassessment as an essential component of aligning grades with learning because language proficiency develops over time rather than during a single assessment (Camille S. interview, Feb 22, 2026; Camille S. interview, May 17, 2026; *Grading for German 3*). Rather than averaging multiple performances, she explained that more recent demonstrations of proficiency replaced earlier evidence because later performances provided a more accurate

representation of students' current abilities (Camille S. interview, Feb 22, 2026). Reflecting on this approach, Camille described language learning as a developmental process in which students continually refined their proficiency through additional practice and feedback. Consequently, she believed that grades should communicate students' present level of performance rather than preserve evidence from earlier stages of learning (Camille S. interview, Feb 22, 2026).

As implementation continued, Camille repeatedly described assessment scores as “snapshots” of learning rather than permanent indicators of achievement (Camille S. interview, Feb 22, 2026; Camille S. interview, May 17, 2026). She explained that students frequently became discouraged when proficiency scores temporarily declined as instructional expectations became more rigorous. Rather than allowing students to interpret those decreases as evidence of failure, she intentionally framed assessment results within the context of students' ongoing language development. She explained:

Their scores are periodically going to drop because when we take a leap in level difficulty, the scores are naturally going to drop some because they're going to have to reach a little bit more. I had to change their mindset on that. Our scores are a snapshot of where we are right now. They're not where we're going to be forever. (Camille S. interview, Feb 22, 2026)

Camille explained that these conversations became a routine part of discussing assessment results with students (Camille S. interview, Feb 22, 2026; Camille S. interview, May 17, 2026). Rather than focusing on whether a student's proficiency rating had increased or decreased, she described helping students interpret each assessment within the context of increasing proficiency expectations. During individual conferences, she compared students' current performances with previous demonstrations of learning while emphasizing that a

movement from *Exceeds* to *Meets* often reflected more challenging performance expectations rather than declining achievement (Camille S. interview, Feb 22, 2026). She recalled telling students, “Last time you were at exceeds; this time you're meeting, but [the expectations are] more difficult. So, what does that mean for next time?... With a little bit more practice, then maybe you're going to be back up at exceeds” (Camille S. interview, Feb 22, 2026).

As the implementation progressed, Camille explained that these conversations increasingly centered on helping students interpret grades as evidence of their current proficiency rather than fixed judgments of their ability (Camille S. interview, May 17, 2026). Reflecting on the implementation, she described regularly reminding students that “every time we level up, you might fall back a little bit because it's going to be a bit of a jump,” emphasizing that “the end goal is not the end of the quarter,” but continued language development (Camille S. interview, May 17, 2026). Through these conversations, Camille described using grades not as endpoints of learning but as indicators of students' current proficiency that informed the next stage of instruction and continued language development (Camille S. interview, May 17, 2026).

Bee B.

Throughout both interviews and supporting classroom documents, Bee B. consistently described grading reform as an effort to ensure that grades communicated students' demonstrated mastery of course skills rather than assignment completion, effort, or accumulated points. Across data sources, she repeatedly explained that grades should represent students' current learning while encouraging continued growth through feedback, revision, and reassessment. Rather than viewing grades as rewards for completing work, Bee described them as indicators of students' demonstrated proficiency that provided information about what students knew, what they still

needed to learn, and how they could continue developing their skills (Bee B. interview, Feb 22, 2026; Bee B. interview, May 17, 2026).

When discussing why she chose to participate in the grading reform initiative, Bee immediately connected her decision to the instructional context of Advanced Placement English. She described teaching students who had become highly successful within traditional grading systems yet often focused more on earning grades than on developing writing skills (Bee B. interview, Feb 22, 2026). Reflecting on those experiences, she explained:

With the nature of the class that we teach—the AP world—I feel like students, in my experience, focus so much on the letters and numbers they receive on assignments rather than actually learning a skill and growing in terms of learning and progressing. (Bee B. interview, Feb 22, 2026)

Rather than simply replacing one grading scale with another, Bee explained that she hoped grading reform would redefine what grades communicated. She described wanting students to experience grades as information about their learning rather than judgments of their performance. At the same time, she hoped that reducing the emphasis placed on individual grades would encourage students to take greater academic risks, engage with feedback, and recognize learning as an ongoing process rather than a series of graded performances (Bee B. interview, Feb 22, 2026). Reflecting on these goals, she stated:

I wanted to try a different approach in the hope that it would take some of the stress off of getting the right answers and getting an A, and focus more on this idea that we're a work in progress and we can continue to grow. You've got to put some effort in on your part. I've got to give you feedback in a timely manner so that you can focus on progressing

your skills rather than increasing the grade in the gradebook...because I really hoped that it would change the mindsets of my students. ((Bee B. interview, Feb 22, 2026)

Throughout both interviews, Bee consistently returned to the language of mastery rather than grades when describing the purpose of the grading system (Bee B. interview, Feb 22, 2026; Bee B. interview, May 17, 2026). She explained that the goal of mastery grading was not to calculate averages but to communicate students' demonstrated performance across essential course skills. Rather than asking students to monitor percentages or accumulated points, she wanted them to understand where they currently stood in relation to clearly defined learning expectations. Describing the purpose of the grading model, she explained, "The purpose [of] doing a mastery grading approach this year [is] we wanted students to see where they were skill-wise rather than where they were grade-wise" (Bee B. interview, Feb 22, 2026).

Bee explained that students demonstrated learning through proficiency ratings of *mastery, proficient, developing, or beginning*, using those ratings to identify areas requiring additional practice before quarter grades were determined (Bee B. interview, Feb 22, 2026). While district policy continued to require traditional letter grades, she described those grades as summaries of demonstrated mastery rather than averages of completed assignments (Bee B. interview, Feb 22, 2026).

This same philosophy was consistently reflected throughout Bee's written communication with students and families. The course syllabus described learning as a developmental process supported through practice, feedback, revision, and reassessment rather than one-time performances (Course Syllabus). Likewise, the beginning-of-year parent letter explained that the revised grading system was intended to reduce unnecessary stress, encourage academic risk-taking, and communicate demonstrated learning instead of rewarding point

accumulation (Parent Letter). Across these documents, grades were consistently presented as evidence of learning, while revision and reassessment were described as expected components of the learning process rather than exceptions (Course Syllabus; Parent Letter).

Bee explained that aligning grades with learning required changing not only how grades were calculated but also how instruction was organized (Bee B. interview, Feb 22, 2026; (Bee B. interview, May 17, 2026). Throughout both interviews, she distinguished between opportunities for students to practice writing and opportunities for students to demonstrate mastery, explaining that practice, feedback, revision, and reassessment allowed students to develop their skills before grades were assigned (Bee B. interview, Feb 22, 2026; Course Syllabus). Rather than treating every classroom activity as evidence for grading, Bee intentionally separated practice from assessment so that grades reflected demonstrated learning rather than students' initial attempts.

Reflecting on the early stages of implementation, Bee acknowledged that she initially continued thinking about instruction through the lens of a traditional gradebook (Bee B. interview, Feb 22, 2026). She described feeling obligated to assign mastery scores to nearly every classroom activity because she believed the grading system required continual evidence. Looking back, she explained that this approach increased both her workload and students' attention to grades rather than learning. She reflected:

Initially...it was a lot. I was exhausted. I was worn out. And I think what we were doing is we were still having our own mindset with a gradebook where we felt like we have to have enough in the gradebook to justify the scores...That's been a big mind shift for me. (Bee B. interview, Feb 22, 2026)

As implementation progressed, Bee described intentionally separating practice from graded demonstrations of learning (Bee B. interview, Feb 22, 2026). She explained that

removing grades from formative classroom activities encouraged students to experiment with their writing, receive feedback, revise their work, and develop proficiency before completing graded assessments. Describing these conversations with students, she explained:

This is practice. It's not going in the gradebook at all. You're not going to see it anywhere. I'm going to give you feedback, we're going to talk about it, and then when we're ready, we're going to do one that goes in the gradebook—and that's the one you can redo, and redo and redo if you need to. (Bee B. interview, Feb 22, 2026)

Bee explained that this distinction changed both her instructional planning and the relationship between grades and learning. Rather than feeling pressure to generate grades from every classroom activity, she described designing instruction around opportunities for students to practice, receive feedback, and refine their writing before demonstrating mastery. Reflecting on these changes, she explained, “It’s made my planning...more purposeful, and I’m not feeling like, ‘Oh, we have to get this done because we need X amount of grades in the gradebook’” (Bee B. interview, Feb 22, 2026).

Similarly, Bee described reassessment as an essential component of ensuring that grades reflected demonstrated learning rather than students’ first attempts (Bee B. interview, Feb 22, 2026.; Bee B. interview, May 17, 2026). Rather than limiting students to a single opportunity to demonstrate mastery, she explained that reassessment removed barriers to learning by allowing students to continue working toward proficiency after receiving feedback. Reflecting on how her thinking evolved during implementation, Bee explained that one idea from *Grading for Growth* (Clark & Talbert, 2023) particularly influenced her understanding of mastery-based assessment: “The line that stuck out to me more than anything was... ‘Revising makes for a better paper; redoing makes for a better writer’” (Bee B. interview, Feb 22, 2026).

This distinction shaped how Bee approached reassessment throughout the implementation year (Bee B. interview, Feb 22, 2026; Bee B. interview, May 17, 2026). She explained that rather than simply improving an existing assignment, reassessment asked students to demonstrate what they had learned through new performances after additional instruction and practice. As implementation progressed, Bee also removed limits on reassessment after recognizing that unrestricted opportunities better reflected the purpose of mastery learning. Recalling one student's surprise after an unsuccessful reassessment, she remembered responding, "Well, you can do it again...Because the idea is that we want to get this down. We want to know this" (Bee B. interview, Feb 22, 2026).

Across both interviews, Bee consistently described these instructional changes as mechanisms for ensuring that grades communicated demonstrated learning rather than assignment completion. By distinguishing practice from assessment, emphasizing feedback before grading, and allowing students multiple opportunities to demonstrate mastery, Bee explained that grades increasingly reflected what students ultimately learned instead of what they were able to do on a single attempt.

Cross- Case Analysis

Across both cases, Camille S. and Bee B. consistently described grading reform as an effort to strengthen the relationship between grades and student learning by shifting grades away from assignment completion, effort, and point accumulation toward demonstrated proficiency and mastery. Although the teachers worked in different content areas and emphasized different aspects of the reform, both described grades as forms of communications that should accurately represent what students knew and were able to do rather than the quantity of work students completed. Across interviews and classroom documents, each teacher rejected traditional grading

practices that relied on mathematical averages and instead described grading systems intended to communicate students' current learning through repeated demonstrations of proficiency and opportunities for continued growth.

Both participants described traditional grading as inaccurately representing student learning, although they articulated this concern in different ways. Camille consistently framed the issue in terms of language proficiency, explaining that averaging assessment scores failed to represent students' current level of performance because language proficiency develops over time while instructional expectations become increasingly rigorous. Reflecting on traditional grading practices, she wondered if the students “really [understood] on a deeper level what their grades actually mean” or are they just trying to get that A? (Camille S. interview, Feb 22, 2026)

Similarly, Bee described traditional grading as encouraging students to prioritize grades over learning. Teaching Advanced Placement English, she explained that students often became more concerned with “the letters and numbers they received on assignments rather than actually learning skills and growing in terms of learning and progressing” (Bee B. interview, Feb 22, 2026). Although their disciplinary contexts differed, both teachers described grading reform as an effort to ensure that grades communicated learning rather than performance.

Across both cases, participants also described redesigning instructional practices so that grades reflected demonstrated learning rather than students' initial attempts. Rather than treating every classroom activity as graded evidence, both teachers intentionally distinguished between practice and assessment. Camille described increasing opportunities for formative practice because she wanted students' “new scores to be, of course, higher and higher and higher” (Camille S. interview, Feb 22, 2026), explaining that repeated practice better prepared students to demonstrate proficiency during graded assessments. Likewise, her grading policy explicitly

stated that “Homework is considered practice and will not directly impact the grade” (*Grading for German 3*), while emphasizing that feedback would guide improvement before graded demonstrations of learning.

Bee described a similar distinction between practice and assessment, although she framed it as an instructional shift that required changing both her own thinking and students’ expectations. Reflecting on implementation, she explained that she intentionally told students:

This is practice. It’s not going in the gradebook at all...I’m going to give you feedback...and then when we’re ready, we’re going to do one that goes in the gradebook—and that’s the one you can redo, and redo, and redo if you to. (Bee B. interview, Feb 22, 2026)

Although the teachers described these practices somewhat differently, both consistently portrayed practice, feedback, and formative assessment as opportunities for learning that preceded rather than contributed directly to reported grades. Across both classrooms, grades were reserved for demonstrations of learning rather than daily practice activities.

A second point of convergence involved reassessment. Both teachers described reassessment as essential to ensuring that grades represented students’ current learning rather than preserving evidence from earlier stages of development. Camille explained that language proficiency develops gradually and therefore “the most recent evidence of learning” (*Grading for German 3*) provided the most accurate representation of students’ current abilities. Her grading guide stated that students could “reassess on any standard after additional practice or remediation” (*Grading for German 3*). Bee likewise rejected one-time demonstrations of learning, explaining that reassessment allowed students to continue working toward mastery after receiving feedback. Bee explained that students could request a “fresh prompt” that would let

them demonstrate their learning and improved skill mastery “in a new context” (Course Syllabus).

Although both participants emphasized alignment between grades and learning, the ways they interpreted that alignment reflected important differences. Camile consistently described grades as representations of students’ current proficiency in relation to ACTFL standards. Throughout both interviews, she repeatedly referred to grades as “snapshots” on learning and explained that temporary decreases in assessment scores reflected increasing proficiency expectations rather than declining achievement. She reminded students, “Our scores are a snapshot of where we are right now. They’re not where we’re going to be forever” (Camille S. interview, Feb 22, 2026). Her interpretation of grading reform therefore centered on improving the accuracy with which grades communicated students’ present level of language proficiency.

Bee, in contrast, consistently framed alignment through the language of mastery and skill development. Rather than emphasizing proficiency progression, she focused on helping students interpret grades as information about their learning rather than judgments of their performance. She explained that the purpose of mastery grading was for students “to see where they were skill-wise rather than where they were grade-wise,” while also expressing the hope that grading reform would “change the mindsets of my students” (Bee B. interview, Feb 22, 2026). Bee therefore interpreted alignment not only as improving the accuracy of grades but also as changing what grades communicated about learning itself.

Taken together, the two cases illustrate a shared understanding that grades should communicate demonstrated learning rather than compliance or accumulated points, while also revealing discipline-specific interpretations of what that communication should emphasize. Camille primarily interpreted grading reform as improving accuracy with which grades

represented students' current language proficiency, whereas Bee emphasized communicating mastery through instructional structures that prioritized practice, feedback, revision, and repeated demonstrations of learning. Across both cases, however, grading reform was consistently described as redefining grades from records of completed work into meaningful indicators of student learning.

Theme Summary

Dimension of Grading Reform	Cross-Case Finding
Purpose of grades	Both participants redefined grades as communication of demonstrated learning rather than records of completed work or point accumulation
Relationship between practice and grading	Both teachers distinguished learning opportunities from evaluation, reserving grades primarily for meaningful demonstrations of learning.
Use of reassessment	Both participants viewed reassessment as necessary for allowing grades to reflect what students ultimately learned rather than their initial performance.
Use of evidence in determining grades	Both participants became more intentional about what evidence counted toward grades and rejected the assumption that every classroom activity should be graded.
Instructional changes associated with grading reform	In both cases, aligning grades with learning required changes in instruction as well as grading practices.
Primary discipline emphasis	The shared philosophy was implemented differently according to the disciplinary expectations and learning demands of each classroom.
Overall interpretations of reform	Despite differences in terminology and implementation, both interpreted grading reform as a shift from recording performance to communicating learning.

Table 11: Summary of Question 1 Theme 1

As summarized in Table 11, the two cases demonstrated substantial convergence in the underlying purpose of grading reform while also revealing meaningful differences in implementation. Both participants redesigned grading and instructional practices so that grades more accurately communicated demonstrated learning, separated practice from evaluation, and provided opportunities for reassessment and continued growth. However, the meaning of demonstrated learning reflected the disciplinary context of each classroom. Camille emphasized students' developing language proficiency and the most recent evidence of performance, whereas Bee emphasized mastery of essential disciplinary skills and the distinction between practice and graded demonstrations of learning. These differences illustrate that the same underlying

principles of grading reform can be enacted differently across instructional contexts while maintaining a shared commitment to aligning grades with student learning.

Theme 2: Shifting Student Mindsets

A second theme that emerged across interviews and supporting documents concerned teachers' efforts to cultivate student ownership of learning by shifting students' attention away from grades and toward growth, proficiency, and self-reflection. Both Camille S. and Bee B. described grading reform as extending beyond changes to grade calculation; they viewed it as an opportunity to reshape how students understood learning, assessment, and their own role in the learning process. Across interviews, grading policies, course syllabus, and parent communications, both teachers described intentionally creating structures that encouraged students to engage with feedback, reflect on evidence of learning, monitor their progress over time, assume greater responsibility for demonstrating proficiency.

While both participants implemented similar practices—including student conferences, reassessment opportunities, proficiency-based feedback, and explicit discussions about growth—their experiences with students' responses differed. Camille described students gradually beginning to internalize these practices and engage in increasingly reflective conversations about their learning, whereas Bee more often described a continuing tension between students' growing understanding of proficiency and their persistent focus on grades, GPA, and final outcomes. The following sections describe how each teacher experienced these efforts to foster student ownership of learning and how they perceived students' responses throughout the implementation process.

Camille S.

Throughout the study, Camille S. described developing student ownership of learning as one of the central purposes of her grading reform initiative. Rather than viewing grades as the

primary goal, she wanted students to understand what their performance communicated about their language proficiency and to recognize that improvement resulted from their own effort, practice, and reflection. Early in the implementation, however, Camille described students as viewing grades largely as something that happened *to* them rather than something that reflected their own learning. Reflecting on the beginning of the school year, she explained, “At the beginning of the school year, it was very interesting to see how much of their learning they perceived to be outside of their control, which I found so weird” (Camille S. interview, Feb 22, 2026).

Through repeated conversations with students about proficiency and growth, Camille attempted to reposition assessment as evidence of learning rather than judgment. She explained that students were beginning to understand “that this type of proficiency just doesn’t happen in a day” and that “a score on one assessment does not mean that...you failed” (Camille S. interview, Feb 22, 2026). Instead, she wanted students to recognize that learning developed over time through repeated practice and increasing levels of challenge. Even while describing early signs of progress, however, Camille acknowledged that many students still interpreted grades as something beyond their control:

I feel like they do [have more ownership]. I don’t know if they feel like they do...I still think they have a little bit of this mentality of...their grades are happening to them and not because of them.... You’re starting to kind of see the shift a little bit, but they’re not seeing it yet.... I don’t think they’re self-aware enough just yet to see like, this is because of you, this wasn’t luck. (Camille S. interview, Feb 22, 2026)

Camille’s grading documents reflected this same emphasis on student responsibility for learning. Rather than describing grades as accumulated points, the German III grading guide

explained that student progress would be measured through performance-based grading focused on language proficiency and growth. Homework was identified as practice rather than a graded event, reassessment was available after additional practice or remediation, and “the most recent evidence of learning” (*Grading for German 3*) replaced earlier performances when determining proficiency. The document concluded by explaining that the grading system was intended to “promote continuous growth” and “allow students to take ownership of their learning by focusing on proficiency rather than chasing points”(*Grading for German 3*).

As the school year progressed, Camille began describing classroom conversations that differed noticeably from those she had experienced at the beginning of implementation. Rather than focusing exclusively on grades, students increasingly discussed where they were on the proficiency continuum and what they needed to do next. Camille explained that students could “see that their grades were increasing, which means that their level of proficiency was increasing as well” (Camille S. interview, May 17, 2026). When students became discouraged because a score dropped after moving to more challenging material, she reminded them, “Every time we level up, you might fall back a little bit because it’s going to be a bit of a jump and that’s all right. As long as we realize that the end goal is not the end of the quarter. The end goal is...getting up to the level that you need” (Camille S. interview, May 17, 2026). Looking back on the year, Camille believed students had begun to internalize this message, explaining that “they were getting that toward the end...about midway through quarter three” (Camille S. interview, May 17, 2026).

One of the clearest illustrations of this shift emerged during individual conferences following the STAMP proficiency assessment. Rather than reviewing scores for students, Camille asked them to evaluate their own performances. She described asking students to

examine their writing samples and explain what they noticed. Students responded with observations such as:

“I didn’t use any transitions here.”

“This seems like eight separate sentences instead of a paragraph.”

“I probably should have used this word here instead of this word.” (Camille S. interview, May 17, 2026)

When students listened to recordings of their speaking performances, Camille again asked them to identify what contributed to stronger responses. She recalled asking, “What’d you do right here?...Why was this the five?” (Camille S. interview, May 17, 2026). Students were able to explain what they had done successfully, identify what they wished they had done differently, and articulate why some responses demonstrated stronger proficiency than others. Camille noted that many students were “really quite honest with what they can and are unable to do at this point in time” (Camille S. interview, May 17, 2026). Several also recognized factors that had affected their performance, with one student explaining, “I’ve done way better when I’ve done presentations for you and written paragraphs for you. I think I just let the exam...mess with me” (Camille S. interview, May 17, 2026). Camille described enjoying these conversations because “[students] are thinking about it,” adding, “I definitely liked hearing their thoughts on [their performance]” (Camille S. interview, May 17, 2026).

Camille also observed changes in the kinds of feedback students provided to one another. Early in the year, discussions centered largely on grammar, spelling, and isolated language errors. By the second semester, students increasingly evaluated one another’s communication using the same criteria emphasized on the proficiency rubrics. Camille explained that students stopped focusing primarily on “grammar errors and spelling errors” (Camille S. interview, May

17, 2026) and instead commented on organization, clarity, and development of ideas. During peer review, she saw comments such as:

“I think you could have explained this a little bit more.”

“This is just a restatement. This isn’t an explanation.”

“I don’t understand where you’re going with this.” (Camille S. interview, May 17, 2026)

Seeing students independently focus on meaning rather than isolated mechanics was, in Camille’s words, “great,” and she described being “real happy to see that” because it reflected the kinds of thinking she had been encouraging throughout the year (Camille S. interview, May 17, 2026).

By the conclusion of the study, Camille continued to describe student ownership as a developing process rather than a completed outcome. She believed students had begun to understand the relationship between proficiency, feedback, and continued growth, explaining, “I feel like they can see the big picture better than they could before” (Camille S. interview, May 17, 2026). Instead of concentrating primarily on memorizing grammar or earning points, students were “focusing now on the right things” (Camille S. interview, May 17, 2026) Although formal goal setting still required teacher prompting, Camille observed that the grading reform was “forcing them to think about it a little bit more” (Camille S. interview, May 17, 2026), creating opportunities for students to evaluate their own progress, identify areas for improvement, and increasingly participate in conversations about their own learning.

Bee B.

Throughout the study, Bee B. described developing student ownership of learning as one of the primary goals of her grading reform initiative. She wanted students to move beyond viewing assignments as opportunities to accumulate points and instead see assessment as

evidence of developing proficiency. Reflecting on her motivations at the beginning of the school year, Bee explained that AP students often became preoccupied with grades rather than learning: “With the nature of the class that we teach...students, in my experience, focus so much on the letters and numbers they receive on assignments rather than actually learning a skill and growing in terms of learning and progressing” (Bee B. interview, Feb. 22, 2026). She hoped the new grading model would “take some of the stress off of getting the right answers and getting an A” by helping students recognize that “we’re a work in progress and we can continue to grow” (Bee B. interview, Feb. 22, 2026). Bee emphasized that this approach required effort from both students and teacher, explaining, “[Students have] got to put some effort in on [their] part. I’ve got to give [them] feedback in a timely manner so that [they] can focus on progressing [their] skills rather than increasing the grade in the gradebook” (Bee B. interview, Feb. 22, 2026). Ultimately, she explained, “I really hoped that it would change the mindsets of my students” (Bee B. interview, Feb. 22, 2026).

That same emphasis on ownership and growth was evident throughout Bee’s course documents. Rather than describing grades as the accumulation of points, the AP English syllabus explained that students would be evaluated on their “mastery of the core skills of AP” (*Course Syllabus*) together with their completion of practice and preparation work. The syllabus stated that the system would “reward growth, value preparation, and ensure you build the habits that lead to success on the AP Exam and in college-level work” (*Course Syllabus*). Students were encouraged to “be an advocate for your growth” (*Course Syllabus*), communicate their learning needs, and participate actively in the learning process. Structures such as fresh-attempt redo opportunities, reflection sheets, student-led progress conferences, and goal-setting conversations required students to examine evidence of their own learning, identify strengths and growth areas,

and explain their next steps. During conferences, students—not the teacher—were expected to “lead the discussion about strengths, growth areas, and goals,” emphasizing that progress would be measured “by your understanding of your growth, not just my perspective” (*Course Syllabus*).

Bee communicated these same ideas to parents before implementation began. In a letter sent home at the beginning of the year, she explained that the new grading philosophy “emphasizes growth and reduces stress” because she wanted students “to feel free to take risks and experiment with their writing” (*Parent Letter*). Rather than rewarding every assignment with points, the system focused on “what students can demonstrate by the end of the learning process, not just along the way” (*Parent Letter*). Parents were also told that formative scores represented progress and “are not averaged into quarter or semester grades” (*Parent Letter*), reinforcing the distinction between practice and demonstrations of mastery.

As the year progressed, Bee described intentionally changing the language she used with students. Instead of discussing percentages and letter grades, she increasingly framed classroom conversations around mastery, proficiency, and growth. Reflecting on this shift, she explained, “I’m talking a lot more in terms of mastery and proficiency...I think that’s a language that works really well to take away the grading side of it” (Bee B. interview, Feb. 22, 2026). Over time, Bee noticed students beginning to adopt this same language. Rather than asking only about grades, students increasingly talked about where they were in relation to proficiency. She recalled students saying, “Yeah, I’m proficient. Like I got it” (Bee B. interview, Feb. 22, 2026). Others began describing their own learning in terms of growth: “Yeah, you know, I could really see that I’m growing in this area” (Bee B. interview, Feb. 22, 2026). Still others expressed concern that they were “not progressing” or “not growing” (Bee B. interview, Feb. 22, 2026). Bee described using these conversations to redirect students toward evidence of learning rather than letter

grades. When students questioned their progress, she responded by showing them where growth had already occurred and explaining what still needed to develop before the rubric reflected the next level of proficiency: “Okay...you actually are growing here. We just got to get you here to show the shift on the rubric” (Bee B. interview, Feb. 22, 2026).

Bee also described conversations with students who were considering leaving the AP course because of concerns about their grades. Rather than discussing GPA or letter grades, she intentionally redirected the conversation toward learning. She recalled asking students, “Take grades out of it. Do you feel like you’re better than you were when you got here?” (Bee B. interview, Feb. 22, 2026). When students answered yes, Bee encouraged them to consider whether their performance reflected choices they had made during the course: “Did this grade happen because of what you’re doing or not doing? Or do you feel like...you put in the effort and the time that you can, and you’re still not growing?” (Bee B. interview, Feb. 22, 2026). Bee explained that many of these students had not taken advantage of opportunities for additional help or reassessment, making these conversations opportunities for students to consider their own role in the learning process rather than viewing grades as something determined by the teacher.

Although Bee observed examples of students beginning to reflect differently about their learning, she repeatedly described the overall mindset shift as more limited than she had anticipated. Looking back at the end of the implementation year, she admitted, “I really thought that I was gonna get kids that were so motivated about learning and about growing that they would stop thinking about grades.... I think it didn’t make a difference.... For the majority of them, it’s still that conversation about the grade” (Bee B. interview, May 17, 2026).

She described seeing the same pattern in students' use of reassessment opportunities: "So many of them didn't take advantage of redos or trying things differently because they didn't care about their growth. They just cared about could they improve their score so that it could improve their grade" (Bee B. interview, May 17, 2026). Rather than attributing this solely to students, Bee situated these responses within the broader educational context. She reflected, "We have a schooling system that is obsessed with grades and GPA when they get to a high school level" (Bee B. interview, May 17, 2026).

Although students understood "the concept behind what we were trying to do," she concluded that "the brain change isn't there" (Bee B. interview, May 17, 2026). Bee believed that students' orientation toward grades had developed over many years and could not be fully transformed within a single classroom. She suggested that meaningful change would require multiple teachers adopting similar practices and reinforcing similar messages across students' educational experiences. As she explained, "If culturally that could change in the mindsets of students and they're seeing that approach from many teachers, I think it could make a huge difference" (Bee B. interview, May 17, 2026).

At the same time, she found it encouraging that students increasingly recognized the intent behind her approach, recalling that many told her, "You really care about us growing and about us learning" (Bee B. interview, May 17, 2026).

By the conclusion of the study, Bee continued to describe student ownership of learning as an ongoing developmental process rather than an accomplished outcome. She observed that many students had begun speaking the language of mastery, proficiency, and growth and had become more reflective during conferences about their own progress. At the same time, she continued to encounter students whose decisions about reassessment and feedback were shaped

primarily by concerns about grades and GPA. Rather than viewing these observations as evidence that the grading reform had failed, Bee described them as illustrating the difficulty of changing long-established beliefs about achievement within a broader educational culture centered on grades.

Cross- Case Analysis

Across both cases, Camille and Bee described student ownership of learning as a central objective of their grading reform efforts. Both teachers sought to move students beyond viewing grades as the accumulation of points and instead encourage them to understand learning as an ongoing process of developing proficiency. Each teacher intentionally redesigned grading practices, classroom routines, and conversations with students to emphasize reflection, feedback, reassessment, and continued growth rather than performance on isolated assignments. Their course documents similarly framed grades as evidence of learning, emphasized opportunities for reassessment, and encouraged students to monitor their own progress over time rather than simply pursue higher grades.

Both participants also described deliberately changing the language they used when discussing student performance. Rather than centering conversations on percentages or letter grades, they increasingly referred to proficiency, mastery, growth, and evidence of learning. Camille described repeatedly reminding students that “this type of proficiency just doesn’t happen in a day” (Camille S. interview, Feb 22, 2026) and that “a score on one assessment does not mean that...you failed” (Camille S. interview, May 17, 2026). Instead, she emphasized that “the end goal is not the end of the quarter” (Camille S. interview, Feb 22, 2026), but continued growth as language learners. Likewise, Bee intentionally shifted her classroom language toward mastery and proficiency because, as she explained, “I think that’s a language that works really

well to take away the grading side of it” (Bee B. interview, Feb 22, 2026). By the end of the year, she observed students beginning to use that same language themselves, saying things such as, “Yeah, I’m proficient,” “I could really see that I’m growing in this area,” and “I’m worried that I’m not progressing” (Bee B. interview, Feb 22, 2026)..

Although both teachers described students becoming more reflective about their learning, the nature of those reflections differed somewhat across the two cases. Camille frequently described students independently analyzing their own performances during conferences. When reviewing writing and speaking samples, students identified specific aspects of their work they wanted to improve, commenting, “I didn’t use any transitions here,” “This seems like eight separate sentences instead of a paragraph,” and “I probably should have used this word here instead of this word” (Camille S. interview, May 17, 2026). Camille also observed students honestly evaluating their own performances after the STAMP assessment, noting that they were “really quite honest with what they can and are unable to do at this point in time” (Camille S. interview, May 17, 2026). Bee similarly described students engaging in more reflective conversations about their progress, but these reflections most often occurred during teacher-guided conferences in which she redirected students’ attention from grades to evidence of learning. Rather than discussing percentages, students increasingly talked about whether they were “growing,” “progressing,” or “proficient” (Bee B. interview, Feb 22, 2026), allowing Bee to discuss what additional evidence would demonstrate the next level of mastery.

Despite these similarities, the teachers differed in the extent to which they believed students had internalized this shift in thinking. By the conclusion of the study, Camille described students gradually recognizing that their learning was connected to their own actions. Although she acknowledged that students were “starting to kind of see the shift” (Camille S. interview, Feb

22, 2026), she believed many were beginning to understand that “this is because of you, this wasn’t luck” (Camille S. interview, May 17, 2026). She also observed students moving beyond isolated grammar corrections toward richer discussions of communication, organization, and meaning during peer feedback and conferences.

Bee, in contrast, continued to describe a persistent tension between students’ growing understanding of mastery and their continued concern with grades. Although she acknowledged that some students had begun talking differently about their learning and that “for the kids that really do value learning, I see an improvement, a change in their language,” she concluded that “for the majority of them, it’s still that conversation about the grade” (Bee B. interview, Feb 22, 2026). Similarly, she observed that many students approached reassessment not because “they cared about their growth,” but because they wanted “to improve their score so that it could improve their grade” (Bee B. interview, May 17, 2026).

Both participants ultimately attributed these continuing challenges to influences extending beyond their individual classrooms. Camille reflected that students often believed “their grades are happening to them and not because of them” (Camille S. interview, Feb 22, 2026) and tended to attribute success to factors outside their control rather than to their own developing proficiency. Bee similarly situated students’ grade orientation within the broader educational culture, arguing that “we have a schooling system that is obsessed with grades and GPA” (Bee B. interview, May 17, 2026). Although she believed students understood the purpose of the grading reform, she concluded that “the brain change isn’t there” because students had experienced traditional grading throughout their schooling. She suggested that meaningful changes in student ownership would require multiple teachers consistently emphasizing growth rather than grades across classrooms and over time.

Taken together, the two cases depict student ownership of learning as an evolving process rather than an immediate outcome of grading reform. Both teachers described creating classroom structures that encouraged students to reflect on their learning, discuss evidence of proficiency, and assume greater responsibility for monitoring their progress. Across both cases, students increasingly engaged in conversations about growth, proficiency, and next steps for learning. At the same time, both teachers described the enduring influence of traditional grading practices and students' longstanding beliefs about achievement, suggesting that while grading reform created opportunities for greater student ownership, changing deeply established orientations toward grades occurred more gradually and unevenly across students.

Theme Summary

Dimension of Grading Reform	Cross-Case Finding
Purpose of student ownership	Both participants viewed student ownership as a central goal of grading reform and sought to move students from passive recipients of grades toward more active participants in understanding, monitoring, and directing their own learning.
Language of learning	Both teachers intentionally shifter classroom conversations away from percentages and letter grades toward proficiency, mastery, growth, and evidence of learning. Student in both classrooms increasingly began using this language to describe their own progress.
Reflection on learning	Both participants created opportunities for students to reflect on evidence of learning and identify areas for improvement. Camille described increasingly independent student reflection, while Bee more often described reflection occurring through teacher-guided conversations that redirected attention from grades toward learning.
Feedback and reassessment	Feedback and reassessment were used as structures for encouraging students to recognize that learning could improve over time. Both teachers expected students to use these opportunities to evaluate progress and assume greater responsibility for continued learning.
Student role in assessment	Grading reform expanded students' role in the assessment process by asking them to interpret evidence, discuss strengths and needs, monitor progress, and consider next steps rather than relying exclusively on teacher evaluation.
Evidence of developing ownership	Both participants observed evidence that some students became more reflective and increasingly recognized the relationship between their own actions and academic growth. However, this development occurred gradually and was not consistent across all students.
Persistence of grade orientation	Despite increased use of the language of growth and proficiency, students continued to be influenced by traditional beliefs about grades. This tension was especially pronounced in Bee's AP classroom, where concerns about GPA and final grades remained highly influential.
Influence of prior educational experiences	Both participants perceived students' long-standing experiences with traditional grading as shaping how they interpreted the reform. Existing

beliefs about grades, achievement, and control over learning did not change simply because classroom grading practices changed.

Table 12: Summary of Question 1 Theme 2

Table 12 illustrates that the two cases converged strongly in the instructional conditions teachers created to promote student ownership, including reflection, feedback, reassessment, and explicit attention to growth and proficiency. The primary difference emerged in participants' perceptions of how students responded to those conditions. Camille described clearer evidence that students were beginning to internalize a more reflective and proficiency-oriented approach to learning, whereas Bee continued to observe a stronger tension between students' understanding of mastery and their persistent concern with grades. Across both cases, however, student ownership was understood as developmental rather than automatic, suggesting that grading reform created opportunities for greater agency without ensuring that students would immediately or uniformly adopt more self-directed orientations toward learning.

Theme 3: Negotiating Reform Within Traditional Grading Structures

The third theme that emerged across interviews and supporting documents concerned teachers' experiences implementing grading reform within educational environments historically shaped by traditional grading practices. Although both Camille S. and Bee B. expressed strong support for standards-based mastery and growth-oriented grading, neither described implementation as simply adopting a new grading system. Instead, both portrayed the first year as an ongoing process of designing assessments, revising instructional practices, communicating new grading expectations to students and families, and continually refining the grading model in response to classroom experience. Across interviews, course documents, grading policies, and parent communications, implementation was characterized as iterative rather than linear,

requiring teachers to reconsider long-established instructional and grading routines while simultaneously helping students navigate a fundamentally different approach to assessment.

Although the participants shared many implementation experiences—including increased workload, continual revision of instructional and grading practices, and the need to communicate the purposes of the reforms—they differed in how they ultimately framed the primary obstacles to sustained implementation. Camille primarily emphasized the instructional demands of creating and maintaining a proficiency-based grading system, whereas Bee increasingly situated implementation challenges within broader institutional and cultural expectations surrounding grades, GPA, and student achievement. The following sections describe each teacher’s implementation experience and the ways they navigated these challenges.

Camille S.

Although Camille S. consistently described grading reform as aligned with her beliefs about language learning, she portrayed implementation as considerably more demanding than she had anticipated. Throughout both interviews, she described the first year of implementation as an ongoing process of learning, revising, and adapting. Rather than questioning the philosophy of proficiency-based grading, Camille repeatedly returned to the practical work of designing assessments, creating instructional materials, communicating a different grading philosophy to students, and implementing the reform within school systems still organized around traditional grading practices.

Before implementation began, Camille anticipated that many of the challenges would be logistical rather than philosophical. She supported the shift toward proficiency-based grading but questioned how the new system would function within existing district expectations. Looking back on her initial concerns, she explained she had logistical concerns:

What would this look like on Aspen? How do I scale those rubric scores in a way that's fair to kids? And then, how on earth do I find enough material for German? Because for Spanish, you can have your pick and choose whatever you want. There are listening activities all over the place. There are reading activities all over the place. For German...there just isn't a lot of stuff out there. (Camille S. interview, Feb 22, 2026)

While those concerns centered initially on logistics, Camille explained that they quickly became everyday realities as implementation began. One of the earliest changes involved the amount of formative practice students needed before demonstrating proficiency. Rather than relying on a limited number of assessments, she found herself designing substantially more opportunities for students to practice, receive feedback, and demonstrate growth over time. Reflecting on this shift, she described how dramatically her instruction had changed: "I had to do a lot more frequent practices—a lot more" (Camille S. interview, Feb 22, 2026).

Providing those opportunities, however, required a corresponding increase in instructional materials. Camille explained that locating resources appropriate for German language learners became one of the most time-consuming aspects of implementation. She described searching for authentic listening passages, creating additional reading activities, adapting online resources, and experimenting with artificial intelligence tools to generate materials appropriate for students' proficiency levels. She explained, "Coming up with materials—that's something I've really, really, really had to change. I have to have a lot more than I would have had before" (Camille S. interview, Feb 22, 2026).

As she reflected on those first months of implementation, Camille acknowledged that the challenges extended beyond changing students' thinking. She also found herself reconsidering long-held instructional habits: "Changing the mindset of the kids, changing my mindset... [at

times] I really just wanted to throw in the towel because this was...a lot [at first]" (Camille S. interview, Feb 22, 2026).

Rather than abandoning the reform, Camille described gradually learning how to organize instruction around repeated opportunities for growth. She explained that proficiency-based grading required students to demonstrate increasing levels of performance over time, making multiple practice opportunities essential. At the same time, she recognized that students often became discouraged when proficiency scores temporarily declined after moving to more difficult material. She therefore found herself regularly explaining the relationship between challenge and growth: "Their scores are periodically going to drop because when we take a leap in level difficulty, the scores are naturally going to drop some.... They're a snapshot of where we are right now. They're not where we're going to be forever" (Camille S. interview, Feb 22, 2026).

Assessment design also changed substantially during implementation. Rather than creating a single assessment for every student, Camille increasingly differentiated assessments according to students' demonstrated proficiency. Students who had already mastered particular skills required more challenging tasks, while others needed modified prompts or additional scaffolds. Describing this shift, she explained, "Now I've got these kids that are just blowing everybody else out of the water, and I need to find a way to challenge them a little bit more.... I'll have three different versions of an assessment" (Camille S. interview, Feb 22, 2026).

Looking back after a full year of implementation, Camille identified differentiation as the instructional practice that had changed most significantly: "Differentiation was the area probably where I really made the most changes...which was super challenging. It's really...not easy.... Every single kid is just super unique" (Camille S. interview, May 17, 2026).

Although artificial intelligence helped generate modified questions and texts more efficiently, she emphasized that technology did not eliminate the instructional decisions required to match tasks with individual students' proficiency levels. Instead, she described continually revising assessments to provide appropriate levels of challenge for every learner.

While much of Camille's work occurred behind the scenes, the classroom artifacts presented the grading model as a coherent and well-defined system. The German III grading guide described proficiency scales, reassessment procedures, and the use of the most recent evidence of learning while emphasizing that the purpose of grading was to "promote continuous growth" and "allow students to take ownership of their learning by focusing on proficiency rather than chasing points" (*Grading for German 3*). Homework was identified as practice rather than graded work, and reassessment procedures outlined opportunities for students to demonstrate new evidence of proficiency.

Camille's interviews, however, revealed the continual planning and instructional decision-making required to sustain those structures throughout the year. Camille explained that enacting these principles described in the grading guide required far more preparation than the written policy suggested. Reflecting on the first months of implementation, she noted, "I had to do a lot more frequent practices—a lot more," adding that "coming up with materials...that's something I've really, really, really had to change. I have to have a lot more than I would have had before" (Camille S. interview, Feb 22, 2026).

Another challenge involved helping students understand a grading philosophy that differed substantially from the one they had experienced throughout their schooling. Camille emphasized that students were not resistant so much as uncertain about what the new grading practices meant: "Not resistance so much as confusion" (Camille S. interview, Feb 22, 2026).

She explained that many students initially interpreted proficiency-based grading through traditional assumptions about averaging and quarter grades. Some questioned how colleges would interpret their grades, while others worried that an early low proficiency score would permanently affect their final grade. Camille recalled repeatedly explaining, “We are building skills here.... Your most recent grade is your best grade.... There’s no averaging together because you’re building skills” (Camille S. interview, Feb 22, 2026).

Looking back, she realized that students needed to see the grading model in action before they fully understood it. She explained, “I had to kind of show them what it would look like, which I probably should have done to begin with.... There was a little bit of a misstep in messaging with the kids” (Camille S. interview, Feb 22, 2026).

Interestingly, Camille contrasted students’ responses with those of parents. Before implementation, she had anticipated greater concern from families than from students. Instead, she found that parents generally supported the grading changes once they understood the rationale. She reported, “The parents actually were quite on board with it.... At Parent Teacher Night...I was quite pleasantly surprised.... They really liked it.... The kids have been the challenging part” (Camille S. interview, Feb 22, 2026).

Camille also described ongoing frustrations with the district’s electronic gradebook. Although the grading reform emphasized student growth over time, Aspen continued organizing grades according to traditional numerical structures. She wished students could visualize their own progress more clearly rather than seeing isolated numerical entries.

I wish there were a way...they could see their progress in a more linear way.... They could look at it and go, ‘Okay, that’s my most recent one, so that's where I am right now, but look where I was before.’ (Camille S. interview, Feb 22, 2026)

By the end of the implementation year, however, Camille described many of the logistical challenges as becoming more manageable. Although the work remained demanding, she explained that organizing proficiency records and transferring information into Aspen had become easier than she originally expected. More importantly, she believed the first year had provided the experience necessary to continue refining the grading system. Reflecting on the year, she admitted, “I knew it was going to be difficult. I just didn’t realize how difficult it was” (Camille S. interview, May 17, 2026). At the same time, she expressed greater confidence moving forward: “Now that I have a year under my belt...I’ve got kind of a baseline. I know I can move on from there. Like I have a starting point” (Camille S. interview, May 17, 2026).

Looking back across the implementation process, Camille consistently framed grading reform as a process of continual reflection rather than perfect execution. Rather than encouraging teachers to avoid mistakes, she emphasized the importance of expecting revisions throughout implementation: “You’re going to have some missteps.... You need to recognize the missteps, be reflective about the missteps and find a way that you can make tweaks.... We’re allowed to screw something up...take a few steps back” (Camille S. interview, May 17, 2026). For Camille, the first year of grading reform was not characterized by arriving at a finished system but by developing a foundation that could continue to evolve through reflection, refinement, and continued experience.

Bee B.

Although Bee entered the implementation year with confidence in the philosophy underlying grading reform, she described the first year of implementation as far more iterative than she had anticipated. Across both interviews, she portrayed implementation as a continual process of trying new approaches, listening to students, revising procedures, and reconsidering

many of her own assumptions about assessment and grading. Rather than viewing the grading reform as a finished system introduced at the beginning of the year, Bee consistently described it as something that evolved alongside her teaching.

Before implementation began, Bee's greatest concerns centered on two issues: whether students would remain engaged when formative work no longer generated points, and whether providing continuous feedback would become unmanageable. Reflecting on those initial concerns, she explained:

Before I started it, I didn't think students would [stay engaged]...because a lot of the [benefits] of putting numbers in a gradebook is that it triggers students to get their act together.... My concern was that they wouldn't be looking at anything, they wouldn't care about anything, and they wouldn't be getting in [to class] to get their work made up.... I also was concerned...that it would increase my workload in terms of feedback and how I was giving feedback and what that would then mean for my own sanity. (Bee B. interview, Feb 22, 2026)

Although those concerns focused initially on grading, Bee explained that they quickly began reshaping her instructional planning. Wanting students to receive timely feedback before demonstrating mastery, she found herself breaking larger writing assignments into much smaller instructional pieces. Rather than assigning a complete essay, she increasingly asked students to focus first on thesis statements, then body paragraphs, then evidence, providing feedback throughout the process. Reflecting on those changes, she explained:

It turned a lot of the longer assignments...into shorter pieces...so that I'm giving feedback [more often].... Things are taking a lot longer than it used to, which isn't a bad thing

because it means it's making me see early on that we need more time in areas that maybe I didn't give enough time to before. (Bee B. interview, Feb 22, 2026)

As implementation continued, however, Bee realized that her own assumptions about grading were creating additional work. Because she believed every mastery category needed multiple scored assignments, she initially placed far more activities into the gradebook than she had in previous years. Looking back on those first months, she admitted, "It also meant that I felt like I had to grade everything or give feedback on every single thing, which initially was a lot. I was exhausted. I was worn out" (Bee B. interview, Feb 22, 2026).

She later realized that much of this workload resulted not from the grading reform itself but from her own thinking:

I think what we were doing is we were still having our own mindset with a gradebook where we felt like we have to have enough in the gradebook to justify the scores. And that's been a big mind shift for me, that it's like, 'No you don't.' (Bee B. interview, Feb 22, 2026)

This realization prompted Bee to reconsider instructional routines she had used successfully before the reform. Rather than assigning numerical mastery scores to every piece of student work, she returned to providing verbal feedback during practice activities without recording a score. She explained:

I can still give feedback the way I used to, which is walking around the room, telling them how to fix it, have them fix it, and then have them submit something.... I had to change my mindset, kind of back to what I used to do.... This is a practice. It's not going in the gradebook at all.... I'm going to give you feedback, we're going to talk about it, and then when we're ready, we're going to do one that goes in the gradebook.... That has

made a huge difference on them, and on me, because it's made my workload more reasonable. (Bee B. interview, Feb 22, 2026)

Rather than viewing these adjustments as abandoning the grading reform, Bee described them as helping her better align classroom instruction with its underlying philosophy.

Implementation also prompted Bee to reconsider many of the structural features of the grading system itself. Early in the year, she and her colleague limited the number of reassessment opportunities because they feared unlimited redos would become overwhelming.

Looking back, Bee laughed at that decision. "We were very concerned at the beginning of the year. We thought that offering them redos was going to kill us, so we limited how many redos they could do per quarter" (Bee B. interview, Feb 22, 2026). Students, however, began expressing concern that using one redo early in the semester would prevent them from improving later assignments. After discussing those concerns together, Bee and her colleague reconsidered the policy. "We talked about it, and I was like, 'You know, we used to always let them do redos for everything.... We've managed it before. We should be able to manage it now'" (Bee B. interview, Feb 22, 2026).

Beginning second semester, they removed the limitation. Bee recalled one student's surprise after an unsuccessful reassessment:

I said, 'Well, you can do it again.'

[The student said,] 'Wait...what?'

I said, 'You can do it again. Because the idea is that we want to get this down. We want to know this.' (Bee B. interview, Feb 22, 2026)

Looking back, Bee described the implementation year as one in which "it changed and then it changed back. Like a lot of things this year, we tried to implement new things and

realized what we were already doing actually fits a little bit better than the changes we thought we needed to make” (Bee B. interview, Feb 22, 2026).

This same process of revision was reflected throughout Bee’s instructional documents. At the beginning of the school year, the course syllabus described a mastery-based grading model built around proficiency levels, student-led conferences, reflection sheets, and limited redo opportunities. Students were encouraged to “be an advocate for your growth,” lead conferences discussing evidence of their own learning, and use reassessment to demonstrate increasing mastery (Course Syllabus). Similarly, Bee’s letter to parents explained that the new grading philosophy was intended to “emphasize growth and reduce stress,” encouraging students to “take risks and experiment with their writing.” Rather than averaging every assignment into a final grade, formative scores were described as communicating progress while summative conferences represented students’ demonstrated level of learning.

By the second semester, however, the written grading policies had evolved alongside Bee’s implementation experience. The revised policy began with the statement, “We said it would be a work in progress, and we meant it” (*Grading Policy Clarification*). The document explained that changes had been made after considering “student concerns as well as issues we had identified” and clarified that the focus would remain on “evidence-based grading” rather than negotiating grades. Additional guidance explained how mastery levels would be determined, how students should interpret letter grades, and how bi-weekly progress audits would help students monitor their own learning” (*Grading Policy Clarification*).

Bee described this willingness to revise as one of the defining characteristics of implementation. Rather than presenting herself as having all the answers, she intentionally involved students in the process. She explained, “I was very transparent and honest with them. I

was like, ‘I don’t really even know how this is gonna work. We’re gonna figure it out.’ And then I’d say, ‘Okay, that didn’t work. We’re gonna try this one this time’” (Bee B. interview, May 17, 2026). She added, “They probably thought I was crazy” (Bee B. interview, May 17, 2026). For Bee, however, openly acknowledging uncertainty modeled the same growth-oriented mindset she hoped students would adopt.

Despite these instructional revisions, Bee consistently described the greatest implementation challenges as extending beyond her classroom. By the end of the study, she questioned whether a single teacher could fundamentally change students’ orientation toward grades when the broader educational system continued emphasizing GPA, class rank, percentages, and college admissions. Reflecting on the year, she admitted:

I really thought that I was gonna get kids that were so motivated about learning and about growing that they would stop thinking about grades.... I think it didn’t make a difference.... For the majority of them, it’s still that conversation about the grade. (Bee B. interview, May 17, 2026)

Rather than blaming students, Bee situated those responses within the educational system itself: “We have a schooling system that is obsessed with grades and GPA.... Grades have been calculated the same way their whole lives.... They understood the concept behind what we were trying to do, but the brain change isn’t there” (Bee B. interview, May 17, 2026). She believed meaningful change would require multiple teachers reinforcing similar ideas across students’ educational experiences: “If culturally that could change...and they’re seeing that approach from many teachers, I think it could make a huge difference. But I can’t see teachers putting in the same amount of work that we’ve put in this year to make this happen” (Bee B. interview, May 17, 2026).

Even after a year of continual revision, Bee did not describe herself as abandoning mastery-based grading. Instead, she distinguished between changing the mechanics of implementation and preserving the philosophy that had motivated the reform from the beginning. Looking back, she reflected, “I learned that pretty much the only thing I really needed to change about my system was how the grades went in the gradebook—not how I taught” (Bee B. interview, May 17, 2026). She added, “I do like the concept of mastery, proficient, developing.... I don’t want to go back to the language of grades.... When they see that, they started really processing that this is where I am” (Bee B. interview, May 17, 2026).

For Bee, the first year of implementation was not the story of perfecting a grading system but of continually refining it. Through repeated adjustments, conversations with students, and reflection on her own instructional practice, she described implementation as an evolving process that remained unfinished at the conclusion of the study.

Cross- Case Analysis

Across both cases, Camille and Bee described implementing grading reform as considerably more complex than they had anticipated. Although both teachers entered the initiative with strong philosophical support for standards-based mastery and academic growth, neither portrayed implementation as simply adopting a new grading policy. Instead, both described the first year as an ongoing process of designing assessments, revising instructional practices, responding to student questions, and continually refining the grading system. Throughout both interviews, implementation emerged as iterative rather than linear, with each teacher emphasizing that many aspects of the reform evolved through reflection and experience rather than following a predetermined plan.

Both teachers entered the implementation year anticipating that the greatest challenges would be logistical. Camille's concerns centered on translating proficiency-based assessment into the district's electronic gradebook, locating appropriate German language resources, and converting proficiency levels into numerical grades. She recalled wondering, "What would this look like on Aspen?... How do I scale those rubric scores in a way that's fair to kids?... How on earth do I find enough material for German?" (Camille S. interview, Feb 22, 2026). Similarly, Bee anticipated that removing points from formative work would reduce student engagement while dramatically increasing the amount of feedback she would need to provide. Looking back, she explained that her primary concerns were that "they wouldn't care about anything" and that implementation "would increase my workload in terms of feedback...and what that would then mean for my own sanity" (Bee B. interview, Feb 22, 2026). Although the specific concerns differed, both participants entered implementation expecting substantial organizational and instructional adjustments before the grading model could function effectively.

As implementation progressed, both teachers described making extensive changes to their instructional planning, although the nature of those changes reflected differences in their instructional contexts. Camille's interviews centered on the continual creation of assessments and instructional resources needed to support proficiency-based language learning. She explained, "I had to do a lot more frequent practices—a lot more," because students required repeated opportunities to demonstrate growth, while also acknowledging that "coming up with materials...that's something I've really, really, really had to change" (Camille S. interview, Feb 22, 2026). Bee, in contrast, described restructuring existing instruction into smaller learning experiences that allowed students to receive more frequent feedback. She explained that longer writing assignments became shorter instructional pieces and that "things are taking a lot longer

than they used to,” but added that the slower pace helped her recognize “we need more time in areas that maybe I didn’t give enough time to before” (Bee B. interview, Feb 22, 2026). Across both cases, grading reform extended beyond changing grade calculations to reshaping day-to-day instructional planning.

Both teachers also described implementation as requiring significant changes in their own thinking about grading and assessment. Rather than presenting themselves as experts from the outset, each participant acknowledged learning alongside the implementation process. Camille reflected that the reform required not only “changing the mindset of the kids,” but also “changing my mindset because I really just wanted to throw in the towel because this was...a lot” (Camille S. interview, Feb 22, 2026). Bee similarly described recognizing that many of the implementation challenges stemmed from her own assumptions about grading. She recalled initially believing that every assignment required a recorded mastery score before realizing, “No you don’t,” explaining that she and her teaching partner “were still having our own mindset with a gradebook” (Bee B. interview, Feb 22, 2026). In both cases, implementation involved teachers reconsidering long-established instructional and grading practices alongside helping students adjust to new expectations.

The teachers also described responding to implementation challenges through continual refinement rather than rigid adherence to their original plans. Camille emphasized making ongoing adjustments to assessment design, particularly through increased differentiation. She explained that students’ varying proficiency levels often required “three different versions of an assessment” (Camille S. interview, Feb 22, 2026) and later reflected that “differentiation was the area probably where I really made the most changes...which was super challenging” (Camille S. interview, May 17, 2026). Bee similarly portrayed implementation as a process of revision,

describing numerous policy changes made in response to both teacher observations and student feedback. She openly acknowledged telling students, “I don’t really even know how this is gonna work. We’re gonna figure it out,” before later saying, “Okay, that didn’t work. We’re gonna try this one this time” (Bee B. interview, Feb 22, 2026). The semester two grading policy reflected this same philosophy, opening with the statement, “We said it would be a work in progress, and we meant it,” before explaining that revisions had been made in response to “student concerns as well as issues we had identified” (*Grading Policy Clarification*). Together, these descriptions portray implementation as an evolving process of reflection and adaptation rather than the application of a fixed grading model.

Despite these common experiences, the two teachers differed in how they ultimately characterized the primary obstacles to successful implementation. Camille’s narrative remained focused primarily on the instructional demands of creating and sustaining a proficiency-based system. She emphasized the considerable work involved in developing resources, differentiating assessments, and communicating the grading philosophy to students, while expressing confidence that these challenges would become more manageable with experience. Reflecting on the end of the year, she explained, “I knew it was going to be difficult. I just didn’t realize how difficult it was,” but added that “now that I have a year under my belt...I’ve got kind of a baseline. I know I can move on from there” (Camille S. interview, May 17, 2026).

Bee, by contrast, increasingly framed the challenges of implementation as systemic rather than instructional. While she also revised classroom procedures throughout the year, she questioned whether changes within a single classroom could substantially alter students’ orientations toward learning when the broader educational system continued emphasizing grades, GPA, and college admissions. She concluded that “we have a schooling system that is obsessed

with grades and GPA” and that although students understood the purpose of the grading reform, “the brain change isn’t there” (Bee B. interview, May 17, 2026). Whereas Camille looked toward refining her own instructional practices in subsequent years, Bee more frequently described the need for broader institutional change if mastery-based grading were to achieve its intended outcomes.

Across both cases, implementation was ultimately portrayed as a process of professional learning rather than simple procedural change. Both teachers entered the reform believing in its underlying philosophy, but each described modifying instructional routines, grading procedures, and communication strategies as implementation unfolded. Their experiences suggest that grading reform required ongoing reflection not only about how students learned but also about how teachers designed instruction, communicated expectations, and navigated educational systems that continued to privilege traditional grading practices. Rather than viewing the first year as the completion of implementation, both participants described it as establishing a foundation for continued refinement in future years. I think this synthesis more accurately reflects the experiences both teachers described and captures the iterative nature of grading reform that emerged consistently across interviews, classroom artifacts, and policy documents.

Theme Summary

Dimension of Grading Reform	Cross-Case Finding
Nature of implementation	Both participants experienced grading reform as an iterative and evolving process rather than the implementation of a fixed model. Policies, instructional practices, and communication strategies were continually revised in response to classroom experience.
Initial implementation concerns	Both teachers anticipated substantial logistical and instructional challenges before implementation. Camille focused on gradebook compatibility, resource development, and proficiency scaling, while Bee anticipated concerns related to student engagement, feedback demands, and workload.
Impact on instructional planning	Grading reform reshaped day-to-day instructional planning in both classrooms, Camille increased formative practice, resource development, and differentiated assessment, while Bee broke larger assignments into smaller learning experiences that allowed for more frequent feedback and instructional response.

Teacher mindset and professional learning	Both participants described needing to reconsider their own long-established assumptions about grading and assessment. Implementation involved professional learning for the teachers themselves, not simply changing student expectations or grading procedures.
Workload and implementation demands	Both teachers experienced increased workload during early implementation. The additional demands were tied to assessment redesign, feedback, instructional materials, differentiation, policy revision, and communication rather than to grade calculation alone.
Continual refinement of practice	Both teachers responded to implementation challenges through reflection and adaptation rather than rigid adherence to their initial plans. Changes to reassessment procedures, assessment design, formative practice, and grading policies were treated as necessary refinements rather than evidence of failure.
Communication of the reform	Both participants found that students needed repeated explanation and experience to understand grading practices that differed from traditional systems. Written policies alone were insufficient: teachers continually clarified the purposes of proficiency, mastery, reassessment, and growth throughout implementation.
Interaction with traditional grading structures	Both teachers implemented student-centered grading within systems that continued to rely on numerical grades, traditional reporting practices, and established expectations about academic achievement. These structures sometimes created tension between the philosophy of reform and the systems in which it operated.
Differences in perceived barriers	Camille ultimately viewed the primary challenge as instructional and logistical and believed they would become increasingly manageable with experience. Bee increasingly interpreted the most significant barriers as systemic and cultural, particularly students' continued concern with grades, GPA, and external measures of achievement.

Table 13: Summary of Question 1 Theme 3

As summarized in Table 13, both participants experienced grading reform as substantially more complex than adopting a new grading system. Implementation required continual changes in instructional planning, assessment practices, communication, and teachers' own thinking about grading. Both responded to challenges through reflection and revision, reinforcing the finding that implementation was iterative rather than linear. However, the cases diverged in how participants ultimately understood the primary barriers to sustained reform. Camille S. increasingly viewed the instructional and logistical challenges as manageable through experience and continued refinement, whereas Bee B. More strongly emphasized systemic and cultural constraints associated with traditional grading expectations. Together, the cases suggest that grading reform requires teachers to navigate both the practical demands of classroom implementation and the broader educational structures within which reform occurs.

Findings Related to R2: How do teachers describe the changes in practice they made to implement this grading reform?

This section presents findings related to Research Question 2: How do teachers describe the changes in practice they made to implement the grading reform? Analysis of interview transcripts, grading policies, communication documents, and course materials revealed that grading reform prompted changes extending well beyond the calculation of grades. Participants described modifying assessment systems, instructional practices, and student engagement structures in order to align classroom practices with principles of mastery, growth, and proficiency-based learning.

To provide an overview of these findings, Table 8 presents a synthesis of the coded data across participants and supporting documents. The table includes representative examples, related codes, and frequency counts associated with the major practice changes described by teachers during implementation. While frequency counts do not indicate importance independently, they provide insight into the relative prominence of particular changes across the dataset and help identify areas of practice most affected by grading.

Practice Change Theme	Representative Sentence-Level Coding Samples	Frequency Counts by Code Across Documents	Theme Total
Assessment Design & Grading Structures	“I Increased the frequency what I was assessing them.” “I was adding in assignments that I wouldn’t normally add in.” “Students may reassess to demonstrate improved mastery.” “Grades will always show the most recent level [of proficiency].”	Assessment Design Changes = 33 Grading Policy Adjustments = 50 Formative vs. Summative = 25	108
Feedback & Reassessment Practices	“I focused a lot on redos this year rather than revision.” “Feedback will be provided to guide improvement.” “Redo opportunities (‘Fresh Attempts’) are provided.” “Progress audits every two weeks.”	Feedback Practices = 29 Assessment Design Changes = 33 Students Self-Agency = 35	97

Instructional Planning & Differentiation	“Differentiation was the area where I really made the most changes.” “More time spent on skill development and feedback cycles.” “I had to get creative with materials.”	Instructional Planning = 39 Student Learning Outcomes = 18	57
Use of Rubrics & Proficiency Measures	“How do I scale rubric scores fairly?” “Expansion of the same rubric use across assignments [not just the summative essay].” “[Students were] assessed on a rubric based on a proficiency scale.”	Rubric Development = 15 Student Understanding Grades = 39	54
Communication & Student Reflection Structures	“Student-led conferences” “Bi-quarterly progress audits” “Students could explain their proficiency levels.” “[Students should ask]: What skill as I not controlling yet?”	Student Understanding Grades = 39 Student Self-Agency = 35 Parent Communication = 13	87
Ongoing Refinement & System Adaptation	“We said it would be a work in progress.” “You are going to have missteps.” “The skill bands were too broad.” “I need to move toward a simpler system.”	Adaptation Strategies = 23 Shifts in Beliefs = 16 Sustainability = 15	54

Table 14: Research Question 2 Findings Summary

The findings summarized in the Research Question 2 Findings Summary table represented an intermediate stage of analysis rather than the final thematic organization of Research Question 2. The findings categories in the table reflected recurring changes in practice identified across participant interviews and supporting documents, including changes in assessment design, grading policies, feedback practices, instructional planning, reassessment, and structures intended to increase student involvement in learning. Following the initial categorization, the data within and across these findings categories were examined again in relation to the specific focus of Research Question 2: how teachers described the changes in practice they made to implement grading reform. This process involved comparing coded excerpts across participants and data sources, examining where individual practices overlapped or served similar purposes, and identifying broader patterns that captured the primary ways participants altered their classroom practices during implementation. The findings categories

were therefore not treated as separate or mutually exclusive. Instead, related practices from multiple categories contributed to the development of broader themes.

Through this cross-category synthesis, three overarching themes were identified. The first theme, redesigning assessment and grading systems, developed from findings related to changes in how teachers gathered, evaluated, and reported evidence of student learning. Codes and findings related to assessment design, rubric development, grading policy adjustments, distinctions between formative and summative assessment, and reassessment practices converged around a broader pattern of redesigning assessment and grading to place greater emphasis on mastery and academic growth. Although these practices appeared across several findings categories--*Assessment Design and Grading Structures*, *Use of Rubrics and Proficiency Measures*, *Ongoing Refinement and System Adaptation*, and *Feedback and Reassessment Practices*—they were grouped together because each represented a change in how teachers determined and communicated evidence of student proficiency.

The second theme, making instruction more intention, feedback-centered, and responsive, emerged as findings related to instructional planning and feedback were compared with changes in assessment practices. The analysis showed that modifications to grading did not remain isolated within the gradebook or assessment system. Instead, teachers described adjusting learning activities, the timing and use of feedback, progress monitoring, and instructional decisions in response to evidence of student learning. These related findings were synthesized into a broader theme because they reflected a common shift toward using learning goals and evidence of proficiency more deliberately to guide instruction.

The third theme, creating structures to promote student reflection, self-monitoring, and ownership, developed from findings associated with student reflection, progress monitoring, goal

setting, reassessment, and opportunities for students to engage with feedback and evidence of their own learning. Some of these practices also appeared within assessment and feedback categories, however, during the second level of analysis, they were distinguished by their shared purpose of increasing students' active participation in monitoring and directing their learning. Grouping these findings together revealed a broader pattern in which participants altered classroom structures not only to assess learning differently, but also to position students more actively within the learning and assessment process.

This second level of synthesis allowed the analysis to move beyond a list of individual changes in teacher practice toward a more integrated explanation of how grading reform influences classroom practice. The three themes reflected interconnected dimensions of implementation: changes in how teachers assessed and graded learning, changes in how they used evidence and feedback to guide instruction, and changes in how they structured opportunities for students to participate in monitoring and directing their learning. Taken together, these findings suggest that grading reform functioned not simply as a change in how grade were calculated or reported, but as a catalyst for broader changes in classroom practice. The following sections examine each of these themes in greater detail through evidence from Camille S. and Bee B. and cross-case analysis of their experiences..

Theme 1: Redesigning Assessment and Grading Systems

One of the most substantial changes described by both participants involved redesigning their assessment and grading systems to better align classroom grading with the principles of standards-based mastery and academic growth. Rather than viewing grading reform as simply changing how grades were calculated, both teachers described reconsidering how learning was assessed, how evidence of proficiency was collected and communicated, how reassessment was

incorporated into instruction, and how grades represented students' current levels of learning. Across interviews and classroom artifacts, participants described replacing grading practices centered on point accumulation, averaging, and task completion with systems that emphasized demonstrated proficiency, multiple opportunities to show learning, and the use of students' most recent mastery.

Although both teachers shared a commitment to these principles, they redesigned their systems in different ways. Camille S. focused primarily on strengthening the assessment process by increasing formative practice, redesigning proficiency assessments, differentiating assessment tasks, and aligning grading more closely with students' demonstrated language proficiency. Bee B. concentrated on redesigning the grading architecture itself, revising gradebook structures, mastery categories, assessment sequences, reassessment procedures, and grade calculations as implementation unfolded. Together, their experiences illustrate that implementing grading reform involved sustained redesign of interconnected assessment and grading practices rather than isolated changes to grading policies.

Camille S.

Camille described redesigning the structure of her grading and assessment system to more closely align grades with students' demonstrated language proficiency rather than the accumulation and averaging of points. Although she explained that her instruction and assessments had long been aligned with the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) proficiency standards, grading reform prompted her to reconsider whether her grading practices accurately represented what students knew and were able to do as their proficiency developed throughout the year. Reflecting on this transition, she explained:

When we first started reading *Grading for Growth*, I mean, I already, in some aspects, was already doing standards-based grading. I have a standards-based rubric. What I grade them on and how I assess them is based off of the standards. The problem always came with the idea of averaging everything together when I know that as the year goes on, their skills get better, and in addition, the content gets more difficult, and the expectation of their level of proficiency is higher. I always felt like that just wasn't a good, accurate measurement of what they were actually able to do when you just do a pure average of scores. (Camille S. interview, Feb 22, 2026)

Camille explained that redesigning the grading system required her to distinguish between the foundational knowledge that supports language learning and the language proficiency she ultimately wanted grades to communicate. As she reconsidered how grades should represent student learning, she questioned, "What do I do with those building blocks of learning language that are not technically part of the standards, but without them, you can't do the standards?...How do I get kids to really understand on a deeper level what their grade actually means? What is this reflecting?" (Camille S. interview, Feb 22, 2026).

Rather than allowing grades to represent an average of students' performance across the semester, Camille redesigned her grading system to communicate students' current level of language proficiency. She explained that her goal was for grades to represent students' demonstrated proficiency according to nationally recognized language standards, while acknowledging the practical constraints of working within the district's grading system.

In an ideal world, I would actually be able to just grade them on their actual level of proficiency according to our national standards and our district standards. That's not the world we live in. So right now what I have is a numerical equivalent...a way to put a

numerical measurement, because that's what fits in our system, into levels of proficiency in world language standards. (Camille S. interview, Feb 22, 2026)

This redesigned grading structure was reflected throughout Camille's German 3 grading guide. The document described the course as using “predominantly Performance-Based Grading,” emphasizing “progress and growth in specific language skills rather than accumulation of points.” Student learning was organized around ACTFL proficiency levels and the district's College and Career Readiness Standards for World Languages. The grading guide further explained that “Grades will always show the most recent level of proficiency,” that students would have opportunities to reassess after additional practice, and that “the most recent evidence of learning will be used in the final grade calculation.” Homework was identified as practice intended to support learning rather than contribute directly to students' grades, reinforcing the distinction between practicing language skills and demonstrating proficiency.

Implementing this grading philosophy required Camille to redesign how assessment evidence was collected throughout the year. Rather than relying on relatively few assessments, she substantially increased the amount of formative practice and the frequency of proficiency assessments so students could demonstrate new learning more regularly. She explained:

One of my main concerns was knowing whether or not I was going to have enough formative practice before they take the listening and the reading assessments...What I had to do was really get creative with the types of source materials I was using...YouTube videos...I took an article and used AI to create an audio of it...I had to do a lot more frequent practices, a lot more...Coming up with materials—that's something I've really, really, really had to change. I have to have a lot more than I would have had before.

(Camille S. interview, Feb 22, 2026)

As implementation progressed, Camille continued refining the assessment schedule after realizing that students needed more frequent opportunities to demonstrate their developing proficiency. Looking back on the first semester, she explained:

I was realizing that they were doing practices, but I don't think the actual summative assessments were happening often enough for them to see their growth quickly enough. I needed them to start really seeing it. So, I increased the frequency that I was assessing them for reading, listening, writing, and speaking. I just needed them to be able to see that they were growing. When they're too spaced out, I felt like the kids just weren't tracking it. (Camille S. interview, May 17, 2026)

Increasing assessment opportunities also required Camille to reconsider the pace of instruction. Rather than progressing through course content according to a fixed timeline, she adjusted pacing in response to students' demonstrated proficiency and readiness for more advanced language tasks. She reflected,

My pacing is more, for lack of a better term, erratic than what it used to be. There are some things where we're cruising through them really fast and then others where we're down to a snail's pace...it's according to where their level of proficiency is right now. I view that as a positive thing. (Camille S. interview, Feb 22, 2026)

By the end of the school year, Camille explained that redesigning the grading system had become less about managing grades and more about continually refining assessment itself.

Reflecting on the implementation process, she explained:

I have been grading the same way for a long time. That actually has become less in the forefront of my thought about the grading system...I realized that I was having a difficult time leveling my prompts...Now that I have a year under my belt and have some prompts

that I can pull from, I think I can focus a little bit more on that...I knew it was going to be difficult. I just didn't realize how difficult it was. At the same time, now that I've got kind of a baseline, I know I can move on from there. Like I have a starting point.

(Camille S. interview, May 17, 2026)

As Camille implemented the redesigned grading system, she found that aligning grades with standards-based mastery required substantial changes to the design of classroom assessments. Rather than administering the same assessment to every student, she increasingly differentiated assessment tasks to better match students' demonstrated levels of language proficiency while maintaining alignment with the same learning standards. Reflecting on this change, she explained:

I feel like I'm looking at them more closely now than I used to. I always looked at them closely, but I feel like I'm really going under the microscope with them. When you have some of these kids that are acing every single one of the assessments—they're getting fifteen out of fifteen every single time—you have to find creative ways to increase that level of difficulty for them. It does mean that I wind up having, for one class, three different versions of an assessment. Whereas before I would have just worried about the students with special needs needing a modified assessment, now I've got these kids that are blowing everyone out of the water and I need to find a way to challenge them a little bit more. What I do now is I change the level of the questions that are being asked.

(Camille S. interview, Feb 22, 2026)

By the conclusion of the school year, Camille identified assessment differentiation as the most significant instructional change resulting from grading reform. Although she had always differentiated instruction for students requiring accommodations, implementing proficiency-

based grading expanded differentiation to include students' varying levels of language proficiency across the classroom. She reflected:

Standards alignment I've always done, but I think probably the most significant change might have been the differentiation because this year I had vastly different levels of abilities...I always differentiate, especially when you have students with special needs, but this time I was differentiating even more—not just on that—but also on their language level in general. (Camille S. interview, May 17, 2026)

Camille explained that redesigning differentiated assessments required new planning strategies as well as new instructional tools. Rather than creating entirely separate assessments, she increasingly modified the complexity of prompts while maintaining the same learning targets. She described artificial intelligence as becoming an important support for this work.

This area of differentiation...AI helped a lot. Being able to put the questions that I planned on using into AI and saying, 'Can you raise the level or lower the level of these questions for a student who's not as high in reading?' helped a ton. Doing the exams digitally also made my life a lot easier because I'm not holding pieces of paper wondering which version belongs to which student. I can put two different Google Forms out and they're none the wiser...I think differentiation was the area where I really made the most changes, which was super challenging. (Camille S. interview, May 17, 2026)

Camille also redesigned reassessment procedures to align grading with students' most recent demonstrations of proficiency rather than their initial performances. Consistent with the German 3 grading guide, students were provided opportunities to demonstrate improved proficiency after additional instruction and practice, with the most recent evidence replacing earlier demonstrations of learning in grade calculations.

Implementing reassessment also changed how Camille conducted assessment conferences with students. Rather than reviewing only individual assignment scores, she increasingly used conferences to examine patterns of performance across multiple assessments and to determine students' current levels of proficiency. She explained:

It's helpful for me to sit down with them and say, 'Okay, yeah, you did horribly this time, but we moved up a level. Last time you were at exceeds; this time you're meeting—but it's still more difficult. So, what does that mean for next time? With a little bit more practice maybe you're going to be back up at exceeds.' It's kind of helpful to be able to have those conversations with them. (Camille S. interview, Feb 22, 2026)

Although these conversations became an important component of assessment, Camille explained that she continued refining how proficiency information was organized and communicated to students. She reflected:

I wish I could figure out a way to make that more visible to them...I wish there were a way that everything could be grouped together so they could look at it and say, 'Okay, that's my most recent one, so that's where I am right now—but look where I was before.' I feel like that would be helpful. (Camille S. interview, Feb 22, 2026)

Camille also described changing the nature of assessment feedback throughout implementation. Rather than centering assessment conversations on isolated grammatical errors, she increasingly structured feedback around the proficiency criteria represented in the assessment rubrics. She explained:

At the beginning of the school year, the discussions were always very centered around grammar, spelling—all these things that are part of language but aren't language. It took a very long time for those to switch to talking about answering the question, writing in

paragraph form, connecting your thoughts and ideas, speaking in more complicated sentence structures. (Camille S. interview, May 17, 2026)

This shift also influenced how peer-review activities were structured. Camille described students increasingly evaluating written work using the same proficiency language embedded within the classroom rubrics rather than focusing primarily on editing conventions.

She recalled reading comments such as:

‘Does this answer the question?’

‘I think you could explain this a little bit more.’

‘This is just a restatement. This isn’t an explanation.’

‘I don’t think you’re being very clear here.’

‘You need to add extra details here.’ (Camille S. interview, May 17, 2026)

Camille went on to say, “It was pretty neat to see those comments” (Camille S. interview, May 17, 2026) because it showed how the students had grown and developed.

Another aspect of Camille’s assessment redesign involved changing how she used external assessment data. Rather than simply communicating students’ STAMP proficiency scores, she incorporated structured conferences in which students analyzed writing and speaking performances using the same proficiency criteria emphasized throughout the course.

She explained:

I had them listen to one of the writing prompts...I said, ‘What would you do differently here?’...Then I had them listen to one of the speaking prompts...I asked, ‘What did you do right here? Why was this a five?’ They were able to articulate what they did and what they wished they had done. (Camille S. interview, May 17, 2026)

Looking back across the first year of implementation, Camille described redesigning assessment and grading as an ongoing process of refinement rather than the adoption of a finished system. Although she reported making relatively few changes to the overall grading structure, she continued refining assessment frequency, differentiated assessments, assessment conferences, and feedback practices as she learned from implementation. She anticipated making additional revisions as she adapted the grading model for other German courses.

Reflecting on the experience, she explained:

There's no doubt that it's beneficial to the kids, but it's also beneficial to you as a teacher...because by nature you have to look very closely at what you're doing and how often you're doing it. I think it makes you a better teacher...It forces you to engage in conversations with your kids about learning the language...I think it makes you think about your teaching a little bit more. (Camille S. interview, May 17, 2026)

Bee B.

Bee B. described redesigning her assessment and grading system as an ongoing process of aligning classroom grading practices with the principles of mastery learning while adapting those practices to the unique demands of Advanced Placement English Language and Composition. Across both interviews, she emphasized that implementation was not a single change to grading, but a continual process of revising grade calculations, assessment structures, reassessment procedures, rubrics, and gradebook organization as she evaluated what best represented students' demonstrated mastery of course skills.

At the beginning of implementation, Bee replaced a traditional percentage-based grading system with one organized around mastery of disciplinary skills. Rather than accumulating points toward a final average, students received ratings of Mastery, Proficient, Developing, or

Beginning on assessments aligned with the major skills of the course. Explaining the purpose of the redesigned system, she stated:

We're doing a mastery grading approach this year. We wanted students to see where they were skill-wise rather than where they were grade-wise...Every assignment we give them, they get one of those numbers, but it doesn't count for or against them in the gradebook. The idea is that they can then redo, they can see where they are...get feedback and have tutoring...to improve their mastery level. Twice during the quarter, we take a look at what those mastery levels mean in terms of a grade because we live in a world where we have to give letter grades. (Bee B. interview, Feb 22, 2026)

This grading philosophy was reflected throughout Bee's AP Language and Composition course documents. The syllabus explained that students would "no longer earn points for every assignment" (Course Syllabus) but instead would be evaluated according to their mastery of the core skills of the course. Learning was organized around four proficiency levels and four broad skill categories, while practice work, Fresh Attempts (reassessments), and student conferences were intended to support students' continued development rather than simply accumulate points. The syllabus also distinguished between formative practice and summative demonstrations of mastery, emphasizing that grades represented demonstrated proficiency rather than compliance or task completion.

Implementing this grading model required Bee to redesign how assessments were structured throughout a unit of instruction. Rather than assigning lengthy writing tasks that were graded only after completion, she broke major assignments into smaller components so students could receive timely feedback before completing larger assessments.

Reflecting on this change, she explained:

[There were] Tons of changes. It meant, because I wanted students to be able to get quick feedback from me, it turned a lot of the longer assignments that I would give, the writing assignments, into shorter pieces...or more group things...so that I'm giving feedback to a group versus individual. It turned me looking into thesis statements, giving feedback just on thesis statements, then body paragraphs, then this and then that...things are taking a lot longer than they used to, which isn't a bad thing because it's making me see early on that we need more time in areas that maybe I didn't give enough time to before. (Bee B. interview, Feb 22, 2026)

Bee explained that this redesign also changed how she viewed practice assignments. Rather than assigning grades to every activity, she increasingly separated opportunities for practice from demonstrations of mastery. She reflected:

I had to change my mindset...kind of back to what I used to do, which is not put a score on everything. Instead giving some feedback and then when we're ready letting them know this is a practice...it's not going in the gradebook at all...I'm going to give you feedback...and then when we're ready we're going to do one that goes in the gradebook...that's the one you can redo. (Bee B. interview, Feb 22, 2026)

Looking back on the year, Bee concluded that redesigning assessment also changed how she planned instruction. Rather than feeling pressure to generate assignments simply to populate the gradebook, she increasingly focused on designing assessments that provided meaningful evidence of student learning. As she explained, "It's just made my planning... a bit more purposeful, and I'm not feeling like, 'Oh, we have to get this done because we need X amount of grades in the gradebook'" (Bee B. interview, Feb 22, 2026).

By the second interview, however, Bee also reflected critically on aspects of her initial implementation. She realized that organizing the gradebook around numerous required assessment categories had unintentionally influenced her instructional planning. She explained:

I was adding in assignments that I wouldn't normally add in to the grade book because I felt like, 'Oh my gosh, I need to have something in this category.'...There are certain units that I just didn't do this year because I was so consumed with making sure they got assessed in X, Y, and Z...I learned that pretty much the only thing I really needed to change about my system was how the grades went in the grade book and not how I taught. (Bee B. interview, May 17, 2026)

Bee also redesigned the assessment tools used to evaluate student work. Existing AP rubrics were revised to align with the mastery scale, while additional classroom activities were converted to rubric-based assessments to improve consistency across grading decisions. She explained:

We had to adjust that rubric to fit our mastery...which I actually really quite like...Everything that normally I would just kind of eyeball...I've had to convert into the four-three-two-one. This made me use rubrics for pretty much every single thing I teach...Now I like it. It makes it easier and the kids can see exactly why they're proficient or not. (Bee B. interview, Feb 22, 2026)

Throughout implementation, Bee continued revising reassessment procedures to better align with mastery learning. Initial limits on reassessment opportunities were removed after she concluded that restricting additional attempts conflicted with the philosophy of allowing students multiple opportunities to demonstrate learning. She explained, "We originally limited students to doing only like two redos per quarter...We've always had unlimited redos. So why are we

limiting it now?...It's never been overwhelming...still you're only gonna have a handful of kids that actually do the redos" (Bee B. interview, Feb 22, 2026).

Although reassessment remained central to the grading model, Bee also recognized that the assessment process itself required revision. Looking back, she distinguished between providing opportunities to redo work and creating opportunities for students to revise their thinking during instruction. She reflected, "We focused a lot on redos this year rather than revision...I don't think skill development was as strong this year because of that...I need to bring that back...More conferences, more process" (Bee B. interview, May 17, 2026).

Perhaps the most extensive redesign involved the organization of the gradebook itself. Bee described repeatedly revising how skills were categorized, how grades were calculated, and how proficiency was communicated as implementation unfolded. One of the earliest changes involved reducing the number of skill categories from six to four. She explained, "We originally had six skills that we were grading them on. And almost immediately we were like, 'Oh my God, that's too many.'...So we went to the four skill bands. Then halfway through the year, we realized we probably needed more than four skill bands" (Bee B. interview, May 17, 2026).

Additional revisions followed as Bee and her colleague modified completion expectations, expanded reassessment opportunities, redesigned grade calculations, and developed a flowchart to support consistent determination of mastery levels. She reported, "We changed our completion aspect...We changed the redos...We changed how to calculate the grades...We put that flow chart together...for us looking at it, it made sense. But for them, it wasn't so easy" (Bee B. interview, May 17, 2026).

Bee also introduced a student grade audit to help students examine their own mastery evidence throughout the quarter. She described the process: "We made them get into their grades

and calculate their grade to see where they were...That audit thing would have been a great thing to do all year because then it lessened the shock value” (Bee B. interview, May 17, 2026).

By the end of the school year, Bee viewed implementation as a process of continual refinement rather than completion. Looking ahead, she planned to further differentiate skill categories, simplify grade calculations, and organize assessments around recurring skill-specific mastery scores that would replace previous evidence as students demonstrated new learning.

She explained:

I want to have the skills be things like thesis statement...commentary...evidence...Every time we do an argument...it just replaces each time...They’ll have different scores depending on the different essays...The machine’s gonna do it all for us. They’ll be able to see that rise and fall as it's happening. (Bee B. interview, May 17, 2026)

Reflecting on the first year of implementation, Bee concluded that while the principles of mastery-based grading remained sound, the grading system itself required continued revision. As she explained, “I think the principle behind it is. The execution of it is not sustainable...With some adaptations, I think it is” (Bee B. interview, May 17, 2026). She ultimately summarized her experience by distinguishing between changes that proved essential and those she later recognized were unnecessary.

The only thing that we needed to change was how the grades were entered in the book. But because we changed the way the grades were entered in the book, we felt like we had to change other practices that we were doing, which we didn’t need to...It ended up being a lot more work than I think it needed to be. (Bee B. interview, May 17, 2026)

Cross-Case Analysis

Across both cases, the teachers described redesigning assessment and grading systems as far more comprehensive than changing how final grades were calculated. Rather than viewing grading reform as the adoption of a new grading scale, both Camille and Bee described restructuring multiple components of their instructional practice, including assessment design, grading procedures, reassessment policies, feedback processes, and the organization of evidence used to determine students' levels of mastery. Both teachers emphasized that implementation required continuous refinement as they worked to align classroom assessment with the principles of standards-based mastery and academic growth.

One area of convergence involved redesigning grading systems so that grades communicated students' current levels of proficiency or mastery rather than averages of accumulated points. Camille questioned whether traditional averaging accurately represented students' language development as instructional expectations increased throughout the year, explaining:

The problem always came with the idea of averaging everything together when I know that as the year goes on, their skills get better, and in addition, the content gets more difficult, and the expectation of their level of proficiency is higher. I always felt like that just wasn't a good, accurate measurement of what they were actually able to do when you just do a pure average of scores. (Camille S. interview, Feb 22, 2026)

She further explained that her goal was to create a grading system that reflected "their actual level of proficiency according to our national standards and our district standards" rather than a mathematical average of prior performances (Camille S. interview, Feb 22, 2026).

Likewise, Bee described replacing traditional percentage grading with a mastery-based system because "we wanted students to see where they were skill-wise rather than where they were

grade-wise” (Bee B. interview, Feb 22, 2026). Both teachers therefore redesigned grading systems so that grades represented students’ current demonstrations of learning rather than accumulated points. These changes were reflected in both teachers’ course documents, which emphasized proficiency or mastery, the use of the most recent evidence of learning, and opportunities for reassessment (*Grading for German 3; Course Syllabus; Grading Policy Clarification*).

Although both teachers reorganized grading around mastery, they redesigned assessment in different ways. Camille focused primarily on improving the quality and precision of assessment evidence. She described creating substantially more formative practice opportunities, increasing the frequency of proficiency assessments, differentiating assessment prompts according to students’ language proficiency, and developing multiple versions of assessments aligned to the same learning standards. Reflecting on these changes, she explained,

I feel like I’m looking at them more closely now than I used to...When you have some of these kids that are acing every single one of the assessments...you have to find creative ways to increase that level of difficulty for them...I wind up having, for one class, three different versions of an assessment. (Camille S. interview, Feb 22, 2026)

By contrast, Bee emphasized restructuring the organization of assessment throughout instructional units. Rather than relying on lengthy, end-of-unit writing assignments, she redesigned instruction around shorter assessment opportunities that allowed students to receive feedback before completing larger tasks. She explained:

It turned a lot of the longer assignments that I would give...into shorter pieces...It turned into me looking into thesis statements, giving feedback just on thesis statements, then body paragraphs...things are taking a lot longer than they used to, which isn’t a bad thing

because it's making me see early on that we need more time in areas that maybe I didn't give enough time to before. (Bee B. interview, Feb 22, 2026)

Although their approaches differed, both teachers redesigned assessments to generate more meaningful evidence of student learning while creating additional opportunities for students to demonstrate mastery over time.

Another area of convergence involved separating practice from demonstrations of learning. Camille's grading guide identified homework as practice designed to prepare students for proficiency assessments rather than contribute directly to grades (*Grading for German 3*). Similarly, Bee described intentionally changing how practice activities were used within her classroom. She explained:

I had to change my mindset...not put a score on everything. Instead giving some feedback...letting them know this is a practice...it's not going in the gradebook at all...I'm going to give you feedback...and then when we're ready, we're going to do one that goes in the gradebook. (Bee B. interview, Feb 22, 2026)

Across both classrooms, practice activities became opportunities to develop skills, while grades were reserved for evidence demonstrating students' current levels of proficiency or mastery.

Both teachers also redesigned reassessment procedures so that grades reflected students' most recent demonstrations of learning. Camille's grading guide specified that reassessment opportunities would allow students to replace previous evidence with more recent demonstrations of proficiency (*Grading for German 3*). Bee similarly described revising reassessment procedures during implementation after concluding that limiting redo opportunities conflicted with the philosophy of mastery learning. Reflecting on this change, she explained,

“We’ve always had unlimited redos. So why are we limiting it?...We’ve managed it before, we should be able to manage it now” (Bee B. interview, Feb 22, 2026).

Although the specific procedures differed, both teachers redesigned reassessment as an integral component of the grading system rather than an exception to traditional grading practices.

Finally, both participants described implementation as a process of continual refinement rather than the adoption of a finished grading system. Camille explained that after the first year she had developed “kind of a baseline” and now had “a starting point” for continuing to refine assessment design, assessment frequency, and differentiated assessment practices (Camille S. interview, Feb 22, 2026). Bee likewise described repeatedly revising the grading architecture throughout implementation, including the organization of skill categories, reassessment procedures, grade calculations, and gradebook structures. Looking back across the year, she reflected, “A lot of things this year, we tried to implement new things and realized what we were already doing actually fits a little bit better than the changes we thought we needed to make” (Bee B. interview, May 17, 2026). Later in the interview, she summarized the experience by explaining,

“The only thing that we needed to change was how the grades were entered in the book. But because we changed the way the grades were entered in the book, we felt like we had to change other practices that we were doing, which we didn’t need to” (Bee B. interview, May 17, 2026).

Despite these shared patterns, the two cases differed in the primary focus of redesign. Camille’s implementation centered on redesigning the collection and interpretation of assessment evidence. Her interviews emphasized increasing assessment opportunities, differentiating assessments according to students’ proficiency levels, and refining assessment tasks so that they

more accurately measured language proficiency. Bee’s implementation, by comparison, centered on redesigning the grading architecture itself. Across both interviews, she described repeatedly revising skill bands, gradebook organization, grade calculations, reassessment structures, and grading policies as she worked toward a system that consistently communicated students’ mastery of disciplinary skills.

Taken together, the two cases demonstrate that implementing standards-based mastery and academic growth required substantially more than replacing traditional grading scales. Both teachers described redesigning interconnected assessment and grading systems in which assessment design, feedback, reassessment, grading procedures, and the organization of evidence were continually revised to ensure that grades more accurately communicated students’ current learning. Although Camille’s redesign focused primarily on strengthening assessment practices and Bee’s centered on refining the grading architecture, both cases illustrate that implementing grading reform involved sustained, iterative changes to classroom assessment and grading systems rather than isolated modifications to grade calculations.

Theme Summary

Dimension of Grading Reform	Cross-Case Finding
Purpose of redesign	Both participants redesigned assessment and grading systems so that grades more accurately communicated students’ current levels of proficiency or mastery rather than averages of accumulated points, task completion, or earlier performance.
Use of assessment evidence	Both teachers became intentional about what counted as evidence of learning. Camille emphasized the quality, frequency, and differentiation of proficiency evidence, while Bee emphasized how mastery evidence was organized and represented within the grading system.
Separation of practice and evaluation	In both classrooms, formative practice was increasingly separated from graded demonstrations of learning. Practice became an opportunity to develop skills and receive feedback, while grades were reserved for evidence of demonstrated proficiency or mastery.
Reassessment and most recent evidence	Both participants incorporated reassessment as a routine component of the grading system so students could demonstrate improved learning after additional practice and feedback. More recent evidence was treated as more representative of students’ current learning than earlier performance.
Assessment design	Both teachers redesigned assessments to generate more meaningful evidence of learning over time. Camille increased assessment frequency and differentiated tasks according to proficiency, while Bee broke larger

	assessments into smaller components that allowed for earlier feedback and skill development.
Alignment of grading with learning goals	Both grading systems were reorganized around clearly defined standards or disciplinary skills rather than individual assignments. This strengthened the connection among learning goals, assessment evidence, and reported grades.
Instructional implications of redesign	Assessment redesign influenced instructional planning in both classrooms. Decisions about pacing, practice, feedback, task design, and readiness for assessment became more closely connected to evidence of student learning.
Continual refinement	Neither teacher viewed the redesigned system as complete. Both continually revised assessment procedures, reassessment structures, and grading practices in response to implementation experience and student needs.
Primary focus of redesign	Camille's redesign centered primarily on strengthening the collection and interpretation of assessment evidence, particularly through increased frequency and differentiation. Bee's redesign centered more heavily on refining the grading architecture, including skill categories, gradebook organization, calculations, and reassessment structures.

Table 15: Summary of Question 2 Theme 1

As summarized in Table 15, both participants redesigned assessment and grading around a shared commitment to making grades more representative of current learning. Across both classrooms, this involved separating practice from evaluation, incorporating reassessment, using more intentional evidence of learning, and continually refining assessment structures throughout implementation. The primary difference between the cases concerned the focus of redesign: Camille concentrated more heavily on improving the quality, frequency, and differentiation of assessment evidence, whereas Bee devoted greater attention to restructuring the grading architecture through revisions to skill categories, grade calculations, and gradebook organization. Despite these differences, both cases demonstrate that implementing standards-based mastery required coordinated changes across multiple components of assessment and grading rather than isolated changes to grade calculation.

Theme 2: Developing More Intentional and Feedback-Centered Instruction

Implementation of grading reform influenced far more than how grades were calculated. Across both cases, the initiative prompted participants to reconsider how instruction, assessment, and feedback worked together to support student learning. As they implemented mastery-based

grading practices, both teachers described becoming increasingly deliberate in how they planned instruction, used formative evidence to guide instructional decisions, and engaged students in conversations about learning. Assessment became more closely integrated with instruction, serving not only as a measure of learning but also as a source of information that shaped pacing, instructional adjustments, feedback, and opportunities for continued growth.

Although both participants emphasized greater intentionality in their instructional decision making, they experienced the process in different ways. Camille S. described the grading reform as fundamentally reshaping how she designed instruction, differentiated learning experiences, and responded to evidence of student proficiency throughout the learning process. Bee B., by contrast, described the grading reform as an opportunity to critically examine her existing instructional practices, ultimately concluding that many of the strategies she had previously used—particularly conferencing, revision, and formative feedback—already reflected the principles of mastery learning and needed to be strengthened rather than replaced. Together, these findings suggest that grading reform functioned not simply as change in grading procedures but as a catalyst for ongoing reflection about the relationship among instruction, assessment, feedback, and student learning.

Camille S.

Beyond redesigning her assessment and grading system, Camille S. described grading reform as fundamentally changing the way she planned instruction and responded to students during the learning process. Across both interviews, she repeatedly explained that implementing standards-based mastery and academic growth required her to think differently about instructional planning, formative assessment, differentiation, and the ongoing collection of evidence about student learning. Rather than describing these changes as separate instructional

strategies, Camille portrayed them as interconnected practices that continually informed one another. As she implemented the grading reform, assessment increasingly became embedded within instruction, and instructional decisions were guided by students' demonstrated levels of language proficiency rather than predetermined pacing or routines.

One of the most significant instructional changes Camille described involved becoming increasingly intentional about planning instruction around proficiency expectations. Although she explained that she had always aligned assessments to world language standards, grading reform required her to think much more carefully about how instructional experiences prepared students to demonstrate those standards.

During the initial interview, Camille explained that one of her greatest concerns was ensuring that students had sufficient opportunities to practice before they were expected to demonstrate proficiency.

My main concern...was knowing whether or not I was going to have enough formative practice before they take the listening and the reading assessments...I had to do a lot more frequent practices, a lot more. And that was because I wanted their new score to be, of course, higher and higher and higher. (Camille S. interview, Feb 22, 2026)

She described finding or creating appropriate instructional materials as one of the most time-consuming aspects of implementation. Unlike teachers of more commonly taught languages, she explained that relatively few proficiency-aligned German resources were readily available: "I had to really get creative with the types of source materials I was using. So, YouTube videos where I just don't show them the video—I do audio recordings. I've also done it where I took an article and used AI to create an audio of it...That's been kind of helpful" (Camille S. interview, Feb 22, 2026).

As she spoke about these changes, Camille repeatedly returned to the relationship between instructional practice and assessment. Rather than viewing formative practice as preparation for a test at the end of a unit, she described creating numerous learning opportunities that allowed students to develop proficiency before completing communicative assessments. This emphasis was also reflected in her Grading for German 3 document, which identified homework as practice intended to develop language skills rather than contribute directly to students' grades. The document explained that homework was "considered practice and will not directly impact the grade," while feedback provided during practice was intended to "guide improvement" before students demonstrated proficiency on summative assessments. This grading guide further emphasized that grades reflected students' "most recent level of demonstrated proficiency," reinforcing the instructional purpose of ongoing practice rather than point accumulation.

As implementation continued, Camille found that instructional planning became increasingly responsive to students' demonstrated learning. Rather than progressing through units according to a predetermined schedule, she explained that pacing became more dependent upon the evidence she collected during instruction. Reflecting on this change, she explained:

My pacing is more...erratic than what it used to be. I tended to keep things to a bit of a schedule and now there are some things where we're cruising through them really fast and then others where we're down to a snail's pace...it's a little bit more natural because it's according to where their level of proficiency is right now. (Camille S. interview, Feb 22, 2026)

Rather than describing this change as a loss of organization, Camille characterized it as allowing instruction to respond more directly to students' current learning needs. She acknowledged that

the changing pace could be “a bit annoying,” but immediately added, “I view that as a positive thing” (Camille S. interview, Feb 22, 2026).

Camille also described becoming much more attentive to the evidence students produced during formative and summative assessments. Although she noted that assessment had always been part of her teaching, grading reform prompted her to examine student work with greater precision in order to determine what instructional adjustments were needed. She explained, “I feel like I’m looking at them more closely now than I used to. I always looked at them closely, but I feel like I’m really going under the microscope with them” (Camille S. interview, Feb 22, 2026).

She went on to describe how this closer examination influenced instructional decision-making. She explained, “When you have some of these kids that are acing every single one of the assessments...you have to find creative ways to increase that level of difficulty for them...I wind up having, for one class, three different versions of an assessment” (Camille S. interview, Feb 22, 2026).

Rather than relying on a single assessment for all learners, Camille increasingly adjusted both instructional activities and assessment tasks according to students’ demonstrated proficiency. She explained that while differentiation had previously focused primarily on accommodations for students with identified learning needs, grading reform expanded differentiation to include students across the full range of language proficiency.

This instructional shift became even more pronounced by the end of the school year. Looking back during the second interview, Camille identified differentiation as perhaps the most significant instructional change she had made. She reflected, “Probably the most significant change might have been the differentiation...I was differentiating even more—not just on

[special needs], but also on their language level in general” (Camille S. interview, May 17, 2026). She described simultaneously supporting students who required additional scaffolds while extending learning for students who consistently demonstrated proficiency beyond grade-level expectations: “I had other students who are just kind of naturally good test takers...finding ways to add another layer of challenge for them—that was where maybe I didn’t do as well. I think that’s an area where I definitely have some work to do” (Camille S. interview, May 17, 2026).

Throughout both interviews, Camille portrayed differentiation as an ongoing instructional challenge rather than a completed practice. Instead of describing a fixed strategy, she explained that differentiation required continual refinement because students progressed through language development at different rates.

Artificial intelligence became an important instructional resource that supported this work. Camille explained that AI significantly reduced the time required to create differentiated instructional materials while allowing her to maintain common learning objectives across multiple versions of an activity. She explained, “This area of differentiation...AI helped a lot. Because being able to put the questions that I planned on using into AI and saying, ‘Can you raise the level or lower the level of these questions for a student who’s not as high in reading?’ It helped a ton” (Camille S. interview, May 17, 2026).

Digital assessment platforms further supported these instructional changes by allowing her to distribute different versions of assessments without drawing attention to modifications. As she explained, “I can put two different Google Forms out and they’re none the wiser. No one has any idea that this kid has a modified test and this one doesn’t” (Camille S. interview, May 17, 2026). Rather than emphasizing technology itself, Camille consistently described these tools

as supporting more responsive instruction by allowing her to better match instructional tasks to students' current levels of proficiency.

As the year progressed, Camille also became increasingly aware of how assessment data could inform instructional priorities. One of the most significant turning points she described occurred midway through the third quarter when she realized that students' receptive language skills were developing more rapidly than their expressive language skills. Reflecting on this realization, she explained:

I was realizing that because it was so much easier for me to focus on some of the aspects of language, like listening and reading, the kids were really making strides in those two areas. But the writing and the speaking require so much front loading...I knew I needed to zone in a little bit more on their expressive language and find a way that I could get them to that point of being ready a little faster. (Camille S. interview, May 17, 2026)

Rather than interpreting this difference as a weakness in student performance, Camille described it as information that prompted changes in her instructional emphasis. She intentionally increased instructional attention to speaking and writing while continuing to support students' growth in listening and reading.

Similarly, she explained that she adjusted the frequency of assessments after recognizing that students needed more opportunities to see evidence of their own growth. She reflected, "I increased the frequency that I was assessing them...I needed them to be able to see that they were growing. When they're too spaced out, I felt like the kids just weren't tracking it" (Camille S. interview, May 17, 2026).

Across both interviews, Camille consistently portrayed instructional planning as becoming increasingly responsive to students' demonstrated proficiency rather than

predetermined instructional routines. Assessment information shaped decisions about pacing, differentiation, instructional emphasis, and the design of learning experiences. Rather than describing grading reform as changing only how students were evaluated, Camille repeatedly emphasized that it changed how she planned instruction, what evidence she attended to during teaching, and how she responded to students' learning as it unfolded. The instructional changes she described positioned assessment not as the conclusion of instruction but as an ongoing source of information that continually guided instructional decisions.

As Camille's instructional practices evolved throughout the year, she described feedback as becoming an increasingly central component of instruction rather than simply an explanation of grades. Across both interviews, she explained that grading reform created more opportunities to engage students in conversations about their learning, helping them understand how language proficiency develops over time and encouraging them to think beyond individual assignments or isolated scores.

During the initial interview, Camille explained that one of the most noticeable changes involved the conversations she had with students following assessments. Rather than simply reporting scores, she found herself helping students interpret what their proficiency levels represented and how those scores reflected their current stage of learning. She described these conversations by explaining:

It's helpful for me to be able to sit down with them and say, 'Okay, yeah, you did horribly this time, but we moved up a level. Look at last time. Last time you were at exceeds. This time you're meeting, but it's still more difficult. So what does that mean for next time? What could that mean for next time? With a little bit more practice, maybe you're going to be back up at exceeds.' (Camille S. interview, Feb 22, 2026)

Rather than treating lower scores as evidence of failure, Camille reframed them as expected points within the progression of language development. She repeatedly reminded students that each assessment represented only “a snapshot of where we are right now,” (Camille S. interview, Feb 22, 2026) emphasizing that proficiency develops gradually as students encounter increasingly challenging language tasks.

These conversations also prompted Camille to think about how students visualized their own learning. Reflecting on the limitations of the district gradebook, she explained that she wished students could more easily see their progression across time rather than viewing isolated grades. She reflected, “I wish there were a way that it could be grouped...so they could see their progress more in a linear way...they could look at it and go, ‘Okay, that’s my most recent one, so that’s where I am right now, but look where I was before’” (Camille S. interview, Feb 22, 2026).

Although the technology did not fully support that vision, Camille continued creating opportunities for students to review their previous performances and discuss their growth during individual conferences.

By the end of the school year, these instructional conversations had become substantially more reflective. Camille described using students’ STAMP proficiency assessments not simply to communicate results but as opportunities for collaborative analysis of their own language use.

She explained that after receiving STAMP results, she met individually with every student:

“I’m going to call you out here. We’re going to sit down and we’re going to talk about your scores” (Camille S. interview, May 17, 2026).

During these conferences, students revisited their own writing and speaking performances rather than simply reviewing numerical proficiency levels.

Camille described asking students, “Now that you’re looking at it, what would you do differently here?” (Camille S. interview, May 17, 2026).

She recalled being surprised by their responses. “It was very interesting how they parroted back all the things that I’ve been telling them all year... ‘I didn’t use any transitions here.’ ‘This seems like eight separate sentences instead of a paragraph.’ ‘I probably should have used this word instead of this word’” (Camille S. interview, May 17, 2026).

Rather than correcting students herself, Camille increasingly invited them to identify strengths, weaknesses, and next steps in their own work. She explained that these conversations demonstrated a growing understanding of language learning because students were beginning to analyze their own performances using the same proficiency criteria that guided instruction throughout the year.

The same shift became evident in students’ discussions of speaking performance. Camille described asking students to listen to recordings of their strongest STAMP responses and reflect on why those performances earned higher proficiency ratings. She explained, “I had them listen to the five and I said, ‘What did you do right here? Why was this the five?’ They were able to articulate what they did, what they wish they had done, and how they wished they had done it” (Camille S. interview, May 17, 2026). Rather than focusing primarily on scores, these conversations emphasized students’ own explanations of their learning. Camille used the conferences to normalize continued growth, reminding students that language proficiency develops gradually over time. She explained, “I made sure every single one of them understood...intermediate is very difficult to break out of...We’re all intermediate...Eventually you’ll get there, but it’s going to take some time” (Camille S. interview, May 17, 2026).

Reflecting on these conferences, Camille concluded that students were beginning to understand not only their current proficiency but also the broader process of language acquisition. “I do feel like they understand language better in general and understand language learning better...It can be very discouraging when you don’t feel like you’re making progress, but when you really understand what that four actually means...it makes a difference” (Camille S. interview, May 17, 2026).

Camille also described noticeable changes in the nature of classroom feedback itself. Early in the school year, students concentrated primarily on grammatical correctness and isolated language errors. As instruction increasingly emphasized proficiency, she observed that classroom discussions shifted toward communication, organization, and meaning. Reflecting on this transition, she explained, “At the beginning of the school year, the discussions...were always very centered around grammar, spelling, all these things that are part of language, but aren’t language” (Camille S. interview, May 17, 2026). By the second semester, however, students approached feedback differently. She explained, “They stopped telling me about grammar errors and spelling errors...They started telling me, ‘I probably need to use transition words to make this flow a little bit better’” (Camille S. interview, May 17, 2026).

Rather than focusing exclusively on correctness, students increasingly discussed how effectively they communicated ideas. Camille described regularly redirecting conversations back to the proficiency rubric, encouraging students to determine for themselves what mattered most. She recalled asking students, “‘Show me where that is on the rubric.’...They showed it to me and I said, ‘Where else do you see it?’...Content will always beat out grammar. Content’s always going to beat out grammar” (Camille S. interview, May 17, 2026).

This instructional emphasis also became visible during peer review activities. Camille explained that students gradually began providing feedback similar to the conversations she had modeled throughout the year. She reflected, “Their peer feedback became less, ‘I’m marking every spelling error you made,’ and much more, ‘Does this answer the question?’... ‘I think you could have explained this a little bit more’” (Camille S. interview, May 17, 2026). Reviewing students’ peer feedback forms, she described seeing comments such as, “‘I don’t think you’re being very clear here.’” and “‘You need to add extra details here.’” (Camille S. interview, May 17, 2026). For Camille, these comments represented more than improved peer editing. They demonstrated that students were beginning to evaluate language using the same proficiency-oriented criteria that framed instruction throughout the year.

Looking back across the implementation process, Camille repeatedly described grading reform as prompting ongoing reflection about her own instructional decisions. Rather than viewing the initiative primarily as a change in grading procedures, she explained that it required continual examination of instructional choices, assessment design, and opportunities for student learning.

Near the conclusion of the second interview, she reflected, “There’s no doubt that it’s beneficial to the kids...but it’s also beneficial to you as a teacher” (Camille S. interview, May 17, 2026). When asked to explain why, she emphasized that grading reform demanded continual instructional reflection. “By nature, you have to look very closely at what you’re doing and how often you’re doing it. There’s no way around that...I think that’s just so good for all of us as teachers” (Camille S. interview, May 17, 2026). She continued by describing how the experience changed the questions she asked herself during planning and instruction.

I think it makes you a better teacher. It forces you to engage in conversations with your kids about learning the language...It forces you to talk about the bigger picture, and it forces you to let them answer what they think went well or didn't go well and what they would do differently. (Camille S. interview, May 17, 2026)

She concluded simply, "I just think it makes you think about your teaching a little bit more" (Camille S. interview, May 17, 2026).

Across both interviews, Camille consistently portrayed grading reform as extending well beyond changes in assessment or grade calculation. She described becoming more intentional in planning instruction, more responsive to evidence of student learning, and more reflective about the instructional decisions she made throughout the learning process. Feedback became an ongoing dialogue rather than a justification of grades, assessment conferences became opportunities for students to analyze their own learning, and classroom conversations increasingly centered on communication, proficiency, and growth rather than isolated language errors. Collectively, Camille's experiences suggest that implementing grading reform reshaped not only how she evaluated learning but also how she designed instruction, interacted with students, and understood her role as a teacher.

Bee B.

Although Bee entered the grading reform initiative hoping to move students away from point accumulation and toward growth, she explained that implementation initially prompted her to make far more instructional changes than ultimately proved necessary. Across both interviews, Bee described redesigning writing instruction, restructuring formative practice, increasing opportunities for feedback, and reorganizing classroom activities to align with mastery grading. As the year progressed, however, she began questioning whether some of those instructional

changes actually supported student learning. Looking back, Bee repeatedly reflected that grading reform did not require her to reinvent her teaching. Instead, it prompted her to reconsider which instructional practices most effectively supported student learning and which changes had been driven primarily by the mechanics of the new grading system.

From the beginning of implementation, Bee described instructional planning becoming more deliberate because she wanted students to receive meaningful feedback before demonstrating mastery. Rather than assigning longer writing tasks that were graded at the end of the process, she intentionally divided assignments into smaller instructional experiences that allowed students to receive feedback throughout the writing process. Reflecting on those early changes, Bee explained:

Because I wanted students to be able to get quick feedback from me, it turned a lot of the longer assignments that I would give—the writing assignments—into shorter pieces...I'd focus on thesis statements, giving feedback just on the thesis statement, and then going to body paragraphs, and then doing this and then doing that. (Bee B. interview, Feb 22, 2026)

She acknowledged that this redesign substantially slowed instruction. “Things are taking a lot longer than they used to, which isn’t a bad thing because it means that it’s making me see early on that we need more time in areas that maybe I didn’t give enough time to before” (Bee B. interview, Feb 22, 2026).

Rather than viewing the slower pace negatively, Bee initially interpreted it as evidence that instruction was becoming more responsive to students’ learning needs. Breaking writing into smaller components allowed her to identify misunderstandings earlier and provide targeted feedback before students completed larger writing tasks.

The emphasis on growth and feedback was also reflected in the AP Language and Composition course syllabus distributed to students and parents. Rather than emphasizing points earned on individual assignments, the syllabus explained that students would be assessed according to “their mastery of the core skills of AP” while practice assignments were intended to support learning and preparation. Students were informed that the grading system was designed to “reward growth,” “value preparation,” and ensure that progress reflected demonstrated mastery rather than accumulated points (Course Syllabus).

Similarly, Bee’s beginning-of-the-year letter to parents described formative assignments as opportunities for “daily practice, feedback, and preparation,” while emphasizing that students would ultimately be evaluated on demonstrations of learning rather than the accumulation of practice points. Using a sports metaphor, Bee explained that formative work represented “practice,” whereas summative assessments were the “big game” in which students demonstrated what they had learned (Parent Letter).

Although Bee initially embraced these instructional changes, she quickly realized that her own thinking remained influenced by traditional grading practices. She explained that she began attaching mastery scores to nearly every learning activity because she believed students needed continual evidence in the gradebook. Reflecting on those first months, she admitted, “It also meant that I felt like I had to grade everything...or give feedback on every single thing...Initially it was a lot. I was exhausted. I was worn out” (Bee B. interview, Feb 22, 2026).

As she continued talking, Bee paused and reconsidered that assumption. “I think what we were still having our own mindset with a gradebook where we felt like we have to have enough in the gradebook to justify the scores. And that’s been a big mind shift for me...No, you don’t”

(Bee B. interview, Feb 22, 2026). She explained that many of the instructional activities she had begun scoring were actually intended to be practice opportunities.

A lot of these things are practice things that shouldn't just go in the gradebook anyway...I can still give feedback the way I used to, which is walking around the room, telling them how to fix it, have them fix it, and then have them submit something that I give a 4-3-2-1. (Bee B. interview, Feb 22, 2026)

This realization became one of the first major turning points in Bee's implementation. Rather than assigning mastery levels to every activity, she intentionally separated instructional practice from demonstrations of learning. She explained:

I've gone back to my old ways where I'm like, 'Okay, this is a practice. It's not going in the gradebook at all. You're not going to see it anywhere. I'm going to give you feedback. We're going to talk about it. And then when we're ready, we're going to do one that goes in the gradebook.' (Bee B. interview, Feb 22, 2026)

She immediately reflected on the effect this change had on both students and herself:

"That has made a huge difference on them and on me because it's made my workload more reasonable" (Bee B. interview, Feb 22, 2026).

Bee described this shift as more than simply reducing the number of graded assignments. Separating practice from evaluation allowed students to take greater academic risks because they no longer expected every attempt to become part of their permanent record. As she explained, "This is a practice, so I want you to take a risk" (Bee B. interview, Feb 22, 2026). She believed students were more willing to experiment with their writing when practice remained formative rather than evaluative.

Looking back at the end of the school year, Bee realized that many of the instructional adjustments she had initially made were driven less by student learning than by the organization of the gradebook itself. She reflected, “I felt like this year, because of the way we set up this grading, I was adding in assignments that I wouldn’t normally add in to the gradebook because I felt like, ‘Oh my gosh, I need to have something in this category...I need enough for them to be able to show growth’” (Bee B. interview, May 17, 2026).

As she continued reflecting, she contrasted that approach with her previous instructional practices. She shared, “Having done things the way I did in the past, there would have been enough to show growth if we hadn’t set the gradebook up the way we’d set the gradebook up” (Bee B. interview, May 17, 2026).

Rather than describing grading reform as requiring entirely new instructional strategies, Bee increasingly concluded that the grading architecture—not the instruction itself—had prompted unnecessary changes. Those changes also affected how she used instructional time. Because students were expected to monitor grades, calculate mastery levels, and participate in conferences, Bee found herself devoting increasing portions of class time to grading-related activities rather than direct instruction. She explained:

It took away from my instructional time...We lost time because we wanted the kids to do their grades and go through it [with us]...You can’t conference with all these kids...there’s thirty kids in a class...[when you’re conferencing] You’re not instructing. (Bee B. interview, May 17, 2026)

She described creating independent activities simply to occupy the remainder of the class while she met individually with students. Reflecting on those experiences, she concluded,

“The way we did it meant that we were having to put more class time in for grades, taking away from instruction” (Bee B. interview, May 17, 2026).

Despite these frustrations, Bee consistently distinguished between the philosophy of grading reform and the particular implementation decisions she and her colleague had made. She remained supportive of emphasizing mastery, proficiency, and growth but increasingly questioned instructional decisions that were driven primarily by documenting evidence for the gradebook rather than supporting student learning.

By the conclusion of the year, Bee described instructional planning as becoming less focused on generating assessable evidence and more focused on identifying meaningful opportunities for students to practice, receive feedback, and improve before demonstrating proficiency. Rather than abandoning the principles of grading reform, she increasingly refined her implementation by recovering instructional practices that she believed had always supported student learning while retaining the mastery-oriented language and assessment structures that helped students understand their progress. The instructional adjustments she described reflected an evolving effort to balance authentic writing instruction with a grading system designed to emphasize growth over point accumulation.

As Bee reflected on the implementation process, she increasingly concluded that the most meaningful instructional changes were not found in creating additional assessments or documenting more evidence of student learning, but in strengthening opportunities for students to receive feedback, revise their thinking, and engage in conversations about their writing. Although she initially believed grading reform required substantial changes to her instructional routines, she ultimately determined that many of her previous instructional practices—including conferences, revision, and ongoing dialogue with students—already aligned closely with the

goals of mastery learning. Rather than abandoning those practices, Bee described wanting to intentionally restore them while retaining the growth-oriented language and proficiency framework introduced through the grading reform.

Throughout both interviews, Bee emphasized that conferencing had long been one of the most valuable components of her writing instruction. During the first interview, she explained that her feedback interactions with students had changed very little because individualized conversations had always been central to her teaching. Reflecting on those interactions, she explained, “It hasn’t changed my feedback interactions. I always gave a lot of feedback and I always tried to arrange for conferencing and tutoring and that kind of thing. I feel like that’s the same. When I talk to them one-on-one, I don’t talk in terms of mastery. I just talk in terms of ways we can make this better” (Bee B. interview, Feb 22, 2026).

Although her conversations with individual students remained largely unchanged, Bee explained that the language surrounding classroom assessment gradually shifted. Rather than discussing grades or percentages, she increasingly framed student performance in terms of mastery and proficiency. She reflected, “It’s changed my language. I’m talking a lot more in terms of mastery and proficiency...I like that. I think that’s a language that works really well to take away the grading side of it” (Bee B. interview, Feb 22, 2026).

Bee believed this change in language helped many students begin thinking differently about their own learning. Instead of viewing an assessment as a numerical judgment, students increasingly interpreted mastery levels as descriptions of where they currently stood within the learning progression. She explained:

When they see a three on their paper, they’re like, ‘Yeah, I’m proficient. I got it.’...I think an A represents proficiency. You can do it and you can do it consistently. That takes off

pressure from some of these kids who always felt like they had to be perfect in order to get that A. (Bee B. interview, Feb 22, 2026)

These conversations also allowed Bee to redirect students' attention away from task completion and toward the development of writing skills. She described telling students, "You sit in classes that you get A's in because you turn all your work in on time—not because you actually know what you're doing...That's not where we are here. You may have turned it in, but if you're not there yet, you're not there. We need to figure out how to get you there" (Bee B. interview, Feb 22, 2026).

Rather than simply explaining how grades were calculated, Bee used these conversations to help students interpret assessment as evidence of learning rather than evidence of compliance. As implementation continued, Bee began noticing subtle changes in the language some students used when discussing their own progress. Although she acknowledged that not every student embraced the mastery approach, she described hearing more students talk about growth rather than simply asking about grades. Reflecting on these conversations, she explained, "I've had conversations where they're like, 'Yeah, I could really see that I'm growing in this area.' Or, 'I know my scores stayed the same, but I really feel like I was better here'" (Bee B. interview, Feb 22, 2026).

Rather than responding by defending the rubric or the score, Bee described extending those conversations. "I'm like, 'You were better there. Let me show you where you need to go next time for that one'" (Bee B. interview, Feb 22, 2026).

She also described students beginning to recognize areas where they still needed additional growth. "I've had kids that'll say, 'I'm worried that I'm not progressing. I'm worried

that I'm not growing.'...And I'm like, 'You actually are growing here. We've just got one more thing we've got to progress before you can get here'"(Bee B. interview, Feb 22, 2026).

Although Bee acknowledged that these conversations occurred with only some students, she viewed them as meaningful because they reflected students thinking about improvement rather than simply negotiating grades.

At the same time, Bee became increasingly convinced that revision deserved a much larger role within her instructional practice. Early in implementation, influenced in part by *Grading for Growth*, she shifted away from revision and toward repeated opportunities to redo entire writing tasks. Reflecting on that decision, she explained:

When we read *Grading for Growth*, the line that stuck out to me more than anything was... 'Revising makes for a better paper. Redoing makes for a better writer.' I was like, 'Maybe I don't need to worry about revisions anymore. Let's just redo, redo, redo.' (Bee B. interview, Feb 22, 2026)

However, after the start of second semester, she questioned that instructional shift. She explained, "In hindsight, I think I should incorporate a bit more revision than I have. I think there needs to be more of a balance moving forward" (Bee B. interview, Feb 22, 2026).

During the second interview, Bee expanded considerably on this realization. She explained that the emphasis on redos unintentionally reduced opportunities for students to think deeply about their own writing. Reflecting on the year, she admitted, "We focused a lot on redos this year rather than revision...I don't think skill development was as strong this year because of that. I didn't take more time to say, 'Let's look back at what you've done here and how we can revise it and make it better'" (Bee B. interview, May 17, 2026). Instead, writing conferences often became brief logistical meetings held outside of class. "It ended up being short little

conferences outside of class that weren't really helpful, I don't think, in the grand scheme of things" (Bee B. interview, May 17, 2026).

As Bee considered how she wanted instruction to look in the future, she repeatedly returned to the importance of slowing down and creating more opportunities for students to revise their thinking rather than simply producing additional pieces of writing. She reflected, "I want to bring [revision] back next year. More conferences. More process" (Bee B. interview, May 17, 2026). She continued by describing the balance she hoped to achieve. "I was so concerned with exposing them to so many prompts...Maybe we should have dug in a little bit deeper with this prompt...I've got to find the balance—not getting stuck with a prompt, but also not rushing through the prompt" (Bee B. interview, May 17, 2026).

Bee also emphasized that meaningful conferences required teacher involvement. Although she valued peer tutoring and the Writing Center, she believed teacher-guided conversations remained essential for helping students understand feedback. She explained, "They would go to the Writing Center and that's fine. You have a peer tutoring you. But I still think they need the teacher there to sit down with them...and talk through why this would make more sense" (Bee B. interview, May 17, 2026). Rather than replacing teacher feedback, Bee viewed these conversations as an essential component of students' development as writers.

Looking back across the entire implementation process, Bee ultimately concluded that grading reform changed her understanding of what actually needed to change in her classroom. Rather than requiring entirely new instructional practices, she realized that many of the changes she had made during the year were responses to the mechanics of the grading system rather than the philosophy of mastery learning itself. Reflecting on that realization, she stated, "I learned that pretty much the only thing I really needed to change about my system was how the grades went

in the gradebook and not how I taught” (Bee B. interview, May 17, 2026). She immediately explained what that meant for the following year. “My plan is to go back to how I usually teach, bringing in some of these elements I took out...I do like the concept of mastery, proficient, developing. I like that language a lot, and I’m going to keep that language. I don’t want to go back to the language of grades” (Bee B. interview, May 17, 2026).

Although Bee planned to restore many of her previous instructional routines, she emphasized that the experience of participating in a grade reform fundamentally changed how she thought about communicating learning. She reflected, “When they see that language, they started really processing that this is where I am. The letter grade then meant something to them versus just being a letter or a number in the gradebook” (Bee B. interview, May 17, 2026).

The revisions to Bee’s classroom documents reflected these evolving beliefs. The AP Language and Composition syllabus described learning as centered on mastery of core skills, opportunities for fresh attempts, and student-led progress conferences in which students reviewed evidence of growth and established future goals. The Semester 2 Grading Policy similarly emphasized that grades should be based on “evidence of mastery,” that reassessment existed to support learning rather than negotiation, and that students should “argue with evidence” rather than feelings when discussing growth. These revisions mirrored Bee’s growing conviction that assessment conversations should focus on demonstrated learning rather than mathematical calculations or point accumulation.

Across both interviews, Bee consistently portrayed grading reform as an opportunity to examine her instructional priorities rather than replace them. She described rediscovering the importance of practice without grades, purposeful revision, extended conferences, and sustained feedback while retaining the language of mastery and proficiency that helped students interpret

their progress. Unlike her initial expectation that grading reform would require a fundamentally different approach to teaching, Bee ultimately concluded that the most meaningful change involved aligning the grading system with instructional practices she already believed supported learning. In doing so, she described moving beyond changing how grades were recorded toward clarifying how instruction, feedback, and assessment could work together to support students' development as writers.

Cross-Case Analysis

Across both cases, grading reform prompted participants to examine instructional practice more deliberately and to strengthen the relationship between instruction, assessment, and feedback. Although both teachers implemented grading systems intended to emphasize mastery and academic growth, their experiences revealed different pathways toward more intentional instruction. Camille described grading reform as fundamentally reshaping how she planned instruction, monitored student learning, and responded to evidence of proficiency throughout the learning process. Bee, by contrast, described grading reform as an opportunity to distinguish between instructional changes that genuinely supported learning and those that had been driven primarily by the mechanics of the grading system. Despite these different experiences, both participants ultimately described becoming more purposeful in their instructional decision making and more focused on using assessment as a tool to support learning rather than simply measure it.

Both teachers described instructional planning becoming increasingly responsive to evidence of student learning. Rather than viewing assessment as something that occurred after instruction, both participants explained that assessment became integrated within daily teaching and guided subsequent instructional decisions. Camille described continually adjusting pacing,

instructional materials, and assessment opportunities based on students' demonstrated proficiency. Reflecting on these changes, she explained that instruction became "a little bit more natural because it's according to where their level of proficiency is right now" (Camille S. interview, Feb 22, 2026). She further explained that grading reform required her to examine student work much more closely than she had previously, stating, "I always looked at them closely, but I feel like I'm really going under the microscope with them" (Camille S. interview, Feb 22, 2026).

Bee similarly described instructional planning becoming more intentional, although her experience emphasized purposeful refinement rather than continual redesign. Initially, she restructured writing instruction into smaller learning experiences to provide more frequent feedback, but she later recognized that she had begun creating instructional activities largely to satisfy the organizational demands of the gradebook. Reflecting on this realization, she explained, "I felt like I had to grade everything...and that's been a big mind shift for me. No, you don't" (Bee B. interview, Feb 22, 2026). Instead, she returned to separating practice from graded demonstrations of learning, explaining, "This is a practice. It's not going in the gradebook...I'm going to give you feedback, we're going to talk about it, and then when we're ready, we're going to do one that goes in the gradebook" (Bee B. interview, Feb 22, 2026). For both participants, planning became increasingly organized around opportunities for students to develop proficiency before being evaluated.

A second point of convergence involved differentiation and instructional responsiveness. Both participants described becoming more attentive to individual differences in student learning, although they operationalized this responsiveness differently. Camille focused on adapting instructional materials and assessment tasks according to student' demonstrated

language proficiency. She described creating multiple versions of assessments, adjusting the complexity of questions, and using artificial intelligence to modify reading prompts for learners at different proficiency levels. Looking back across the year, she identified differentiation as “probably the most significant change” she had made, explaining that she was “differentiating even more—not just on [special needs], but also on their language level in general” (Camille S. interview, May 17, 2026).

Bee’s instructional responsiveness centered less on differentiated assessments and more on adjusting instructional processes. As implementation progressed, she concluded that students benefited more from opportunities to revise, conference, and receive feedback than from simply completing additional graded tasks. She reflected that “we focused a lot on redos this year rather than revision,” but later concluded that “I don’t think skill development was as strong this year because of that” (Bee B. interview, May 17, 2026). Rather than continuing to add assessments, she planned to “bring that back next year. More conferences. More process” (Bee B. interview, May 17, 2026). Although the instructional strategies differed, both teachers increasingly adapted instruction to meet students’ learning needs rather than expecting students to adapt to fixed instructional routines.

The participants also shared a growing emphasis on feedback as an instructional practice rather than a justification of grades. Across both cases, teacher-student conversations shifted away from discussing points and toward examining evidence of learning. Camille described helping students interpret changes in proficiency over time rather than viewing individual assessments as successes or failures. She explained that she would remind students, “You did horribly this time, but we moved up a level...What does that mean for next time?” (Camille S. interview, Feb 22, 2026). By the end of the year, these conversations had become increasingly reflective as students

analyzed their own STAMP performances, identified strengths and weaknesses, and discussed future growth using proficiency language.

Bee similarly described feedback conversations becoming centered on learning rather than grades. Although she noted that her conferencing practices remained largely unchanged, she intentionally shifted the language surrounding those conversations. Rather than discussing percentages, she increasingly framed student performance in terms of proficiency, explaining, “I’m talking a lot more in terms of mastery and proficiency...I like that language because it takes away the grading side of it” (Bee B. interview, Feb 22, 2026). She also observed students beginning to describe their own progress differently. Instead of asking only about grades, students increasingly commented, “I could really see that I’m growing in this area,” or acknowledged, “I’m worried that I’m not progressing,” creating opportunities for instructional conversations focused on improvement rather than point accumulation (Bee B. interview, Feb 22, 2026). In both classrooms, feedback evolved into an ongoing dialogue that helped students interpret their learning rather than simply receive evaluative judgments.

The strongest distinction between the two cases emerged in participants’ reflections on how grading reform influenced their own teaching. Camille consistently portrayed grading reform as transforming her instructional practice. Throughout the implementation process, she described becoming more intentional in planning instruction, differentiating assessments, analyzing student work, and engaging students in conversations about proficiency. Summarizing her experience, she concluded, “I think it makes you a better teacher...You have to look very closely at what you’re doing and how often you’re doing it...It forces you to think about your teaching a little bit more” (Camille S. interview, May 17, 2026). For Camille, grading reform

prompted ongoing instructional reflection that extended well beyond grading practices themselves.

Bee reached a different, though equally significant, conclusion. Rather than describing grading reform as fundamentally changing her teaching, she ultimately recognized that many of her long-standing instructional practices already embodied the principles of mastery learning. Reflecting on the year, she explained, “I learned that pretty much the only thing I really needed to change about my system was how the grades went in the gradebook and not how I taught” (Bee B. interview, May 17, 2026). Even so, she emphasized that the experience influenced how she communicated learning, adding, “I do like the concept of mastery, proficient, developing. I like that language a lot, and I’m going to keep that language. I don’t want to go back to the language of grades” (Bee B. interview, May 17, 2026). Whereas Camille experienced grading reform as a catalyst for instructional transformation, Bee experienced it as a process of instructional clarification and refinement.

Collectively, these cases suggest that grading reform influenced instructional practice not by prescribing a single model of teaching but by encouraging teachers to critically examine the relationship among instruction, assessment, and feedback. Although Camille S. and Bee B. implemented different instructional changes and interpreted their experiences differently, both described becoming more intentional about aligning instructional decisions with evidence of student learning, using assessment to inform rather than conclude instruction, and engaging students in conversations focused on proficiency, growth, and the learning process itself. Together, their experiences indicate that grading reform extended beyond changes in grade calculation to become a catalyst for sustained reflection about effective instruction and the role of assessment in supporting student learning.

Theme Summary

Dimension of Grading Reform	Cross-Case Finding
Instructional intentionality	Both participants described becoming more deliberate about how instruction, assessment, and feedback worked together to support learning. Instructional decisions were increasingly organized around evidence of student learning rather than around completing assignments or generating grades.
Assessment as part of instruction	In both classrooms, assessment became more integrated into the instructional process. Rather than functioning primarily as an endpoint, assessment evidence was used to determine what students understood, what they still needed, and what should happen next instructionally.
Responsive instructional planning	Both teachers adjusted instruction in response to student learning, although in different ways. Camille modified pacing, materials, and assessment opportunities according to students' demonstrated proficiency, while Bee refined instructional processes by emphasizing practice, revision, conferencing, and feedback before evaluation.
Separation of practice and evaluation	Both participants increasingly distinguished opportunities for learning from opportunities for formal evaluation. Practice was used to develop skills, take risks, receive feedback, and make improvements before students were expected to demonstrate mastery or proficiency.
Differentiation and responsiveness to student needs	Both teachers became more responsive to variation in student learning. Camille emphasized differentiated materials and assessments based of proficiency levels, while Bee emphasized adjusting instructional processes and increasing opportunities for revision, conferencing, and targeted support.
Role of feedback	Feedback became increasingly central to instruction in both classrooms. Teacher-student conversations focused less on explaining grades and more on helping students interpret evidence of learning, identify strengths and needs, and understand possible next steps.
Language of learning	Both participants intentionally shifted classroom conversations away from points and percentages toward mastery, proficiency, growth, and evidence of learning creating a shared language for discussing student progress.
Teacher reflection and professional learning	Grading reform prompted both teachers to critically examine their own instructional practices. Each participant reconsidered which practices genuinely supported learning and which practices were driven primarily by traditional grading habits or gradebook structures.
Different pathways to instructional change	Camille experienced grading reform as a substantial transformation of instructional practice, particularly in planning, differentiation, assessment analysis, and responsiveness. Bee experienced it more as a clarification and refinement, ultimately recognizing that many of her existing practices already aligned with mastery learning and needed to be strengthened rather than replaced.

Table 16: Summary of Question 2 Theme 3

As summarized in Table 16, both participants described grading reform as influencing instructional practice well beyond changes to grade calculation. Across the two cases, assessment became more integrated with daily instruction, feedback became increasingly focused on supporting future learning, and instructional decisions became more responsive to evidence of

student understanding. The primary difference concerned the nature of that instructional change. Camille experienced the reform as substantially transforming how she planned, differentiated, assessed, and responded to student learning, whereas Bee increasingly recognized that many of her established instructional practices already reflected the principles of mastery learning and required refinement rather than replacement. Despite these different pathways, both cases demonstrate that grading reform encouraged sustained reflection of the relationship among instruction, assessment, feedback, and student learning.

Theme 3: Promoting Student Reflection and Ownership of Learning

A third area of change involved redesigning classroom routines to make student learning and self-monitoring an intentional part of the learning process. Across both cases, grading reform prompted participants to move beyond simply communicating grades and toward creating instructional structures that required students to examine evidence of their learning, interpret assessment results, and participate actively in conversations about their progress. Reflection became embedded within conferences, reassessment procedures, feedback discussions, peer review, and progress-monitoring activities, positioning students as participants in the evaluation process rather than passive recipients of teacher judgements.

Although both teachers sought to increase students' responsibility for monitoring their own learning, they implemented these changes in different ways. Camille S. primarily incorporated teacher-guided reflection through individual assessment conferences and discussions centered on language proficiency, while Bee B. developed organizational structures—including progress audits, student-led conferences, structured reassessment procedures, and evidence-based reflection—that required students to monitor their own progress throughout the grading period. Together, these findings illustrate that implementing grading

reform required participants to intentionally redesign classroom interactions and assessment routines so that reflection and ownership became integral components of everyday instructional practice rather than activities occurring only after grades were assigned.

Camille S.

Throughout both interviews, Camille S. described intentionally redesigning classroom routines so that students assumed a more active role in evaluating their own learning. Rather than positioning herself as the primary interpreter of assessment results, she increasingly created opportunities for students to examine evidence of their performance, interpret proficiency ratings, identify strengths and weaknesses, and articulate their own next steps for improvement. Across the implementation process, she explained that reflection became less of an isolated activity following an assessment and more of an instructional practice embedded within classroom conversations, assessment conferences, peer feedback, and discussions about language proficiency.

Camille explained that one of her original motivations for redesigning her grading system was helping students better understand what their grades actually represented. Reflecting on her thinking before implementation, she explained that she had long questioned whether traditional averaging accurately communicated student learning because students' proficiency naturally develops over time. More importantly, she wanted students to understand what their grades reflected rather than simply accepting them as numbers in the gradebook. She explained, "How do I get kids to really understand on a deeper level what their grade actually means? What is this reflecting?" (Camille S. interview, Feb 22, 2026).

Rather than answering those questions through teacher explanations alone, Camille gradually incorporated regular conversations that required students to interpret assessment results for themselves. Instead of simply returning an assessment and recording a score, she increasingly

used each assessment as an opportunity for students to think about where they currently were along the proficiency continuum and what additional learning would be required before reaching the next level. She described these conversations by saying:

It's helpful for me to be able to sit down with them and say, 'Okay, yeah, you did horribly this time, but we moved up a level. Look at last time. Last time you were at exceeds. This time you're meeting, but it's still more difficult. So what does that mean for next time? What could that mean for next time? With a little bit more practice then maybe you're going to be back up at exceeds. (Camille S. interview, Feb 22, 2026)

Rather than emphasizing the immediate score, Camille deliberately redirected students' attention toward their trajectory of learning. Throughout the first interview, she repeatedly referred to assessment scores as "a snapshot of where we are right now" (Camille S. interview, Feb 22, 2026), reminding students that a single assessment represented only their current stage of proficiency rather than a permanent judgment of their abilities. She explained, "Our scores are a snapshot of where we are right now. They're not where we're going to be for forever" (Camille S. interview, Feb 22, 2026).

As implementation continued, these conversations became increasingly centered on students' own interpretations rather than Camille's explanations. One of the most significant examples occurred after students completed the STAMP proficiency assessment. Rather than reviewing the reports herself and telling students how they had performed, Camille met individually with each student and intentionally asked them to analyze their own work. Describing those conferences, she explained, "I had them look at the highest-rated writing prompt and I said, 'Now that you're looking at it, what would you do differently here?'" (Camille S. interview, May 17, 2026).

She paused before describing what happened next. “It was very interesting how they parroted back all the things that I’d been telling them all year” (Camille S. interview, May 17, 2026). Students immediately began identifying their own areas for improvement. As Camille recalled, ““Oh, I didn’t use any transitions here. This seems like eight separate sentences instead of a paragraph.”” Another student commented, ““I probably should have used this word here instead of this word.”” (Camille S. interview, May 17, 2026).

Rather than correcting students herself, Camille described watching them apply the same language of proficiency and communication that had been emphasized throughout the year. The reflective conversations continued during students’ speaking assessments. Camille asked students to listen to recordings of their highest-rated speaking responses before asking a simple question. She recalled asking, ““What did you do right here? Why was this the five?”” (Camille S. interview, May 17, 2026). Again, rather than providing the evaluation herself, Camille encouraged students to identify the characteristics of successful communication. Reflecting on those conversations, she explained, “They were able to articulate what they did, what they wished they had done, how they wished they had done it” (Camille S. interview, May 17, 2026).

For Camille, these conferences represented an important shift in instructional practice. Students were no longer passive recipients of teacher feedback; instead, they were expected to interpret evidence of their own learning and explain why particular performances demonstrated higher levels of proficiency.

These conversations also extended beyond individual assessments to broader discussions about how language develops over time. Camille explained that many students initially became discouraged when expressive language skills developed more slowly than receptive language skills. During conferences, she intentionally reframed those experiences by helping students

understand that language proficiency develops unevenly and that periods of slower growth are expected. She explained, “I made sure that every single one of them understood that you guys are intermediate level, and intermediate is very difficult to break out of. ... You may be here for a little bit. It’s okay. Eventually you’ll get there, but it’s just going to take some time” (Camille S. interview, May 17, 2026).

She further explained that helping students understand language development was becoming just as important as teaching the language itself. Reflecting on those conversations, she stated:

I do feel like they understand language better in general and language learning better... It can be very discouraging when you don’t feel like you’re making progress because you’ve got a four on the speaking instead of a five. But then when you really understand what that four actually means... it makes a difference. (Camille S. interview, May 17, 2026)

Camille also intentionally shifted students’ attention away from isolated grammatical errors and toward broader indicators of communication. Early in the implementation, students frequently evaluated their work by counting spelling mistakes, verb conjugation errors, or missing grammatical forms. Rather than dismissing those concerns, Camille redirected students back to the proficiency rubric. She described asking them, “‘Show me where that is on the rubric.’” Students would locate grammar on the rubric, after which Camille would continue, “‘Okay, where else do you see it on the rubric?’” When students recognized that grammar appeared only once, she asked, “‘What does that tell you about its importance?’” She summarized the lesson she hoped students would learn by telling them, “Content will always

beat out grammar. Content's always going to beat out grammar.” (Camille S. interview, May 17, 2026).

By the second semester, Camille observed that students had begun changing the language they used when evaluating both their own work and the work of their classmates. She reflected, “They stopped telling me about grammar errors and spelling errors... Then they started telling me, ‘I probably need to use transition words to make this flow a little bit better’” (Camille S. interview, May 17, 2026).

The same shift became evident during peer feedback activities. Rather than marking spelling mistakes, students increasingly commented, “I think you could have explained this a little bit more.” Others wrote, “This is just a restatement. This isn’t an explanation” (Camille S. interview, May 17, 2026).

Later in the year, Camille described students providing feedback such as, “I don’t think you’re being very clear here. I don’t understand where you’re going with this.” Others encouraged classmates to “add extra details” or explain ideas more fully (Camille S. interview, May 17, 2026). Reflecting on those comments, Camille recalled, “I was real happy to see that” (Camille S. interview, May 17, 2026).

For Camille, these peer discussions represented students using the same language of proficiency and communication that had become central to classroom instruction. Although Camille acknowledged that students did not naturally engage in reflection independently, she intentionally incorporated prompts that required them to evaluate their own learning.

When asked whether students had begun setting goals or reflecting more deeply, she replied, “They’re not goal setting [alone], but with me prompting them, yeah. I think it’s forcing them to think about it a little bit more” (Camille S. interview, May 17, 2026).

Looking back at the STAMP conferences, she explained that students were often surprisingly honest about both their strengths and limitations. She recalled, “A lot of them were really quite honest with what they can and are unable to do at this point in time” (Camille S. interview, May 17, 2026). Some students also recognized that their assessment results reflected more than content knowledge alone. She remembered one student explaining, “I’ve done way better when I’ve done presentations for you and written paragraphs for you. I think I just let the exam—the fact that it was an exam—mess with me” (Camille S. interview, May 17, 2026). For Camille, comments like these demonstrated that students were beginning to analyze their own performances rather than simply accepting scores at face value.

The instructional routines Camille described throughout both interviews were reflected in the *Grading for German 3* document provided to students and parents. The guide explains that grades represent students’ “most recent level of demonstrated proficiency,” emphasizes that homework serves as practice rather than graded performance, and states that reassessment exists to demonstrate “improved mastery” following additional practice. The document concludes by explaining that the grading system is intended to “allow students to take ownership of their learning by focusing on proficiency rather than chasing points.”

Looking back across the implementation process, Camille concluded that promoting student reflection required intentionally creating opportunities for students to analyze their own learning rather than relying solely on teacher evaluation. She acknowledged that many students—particularly younger learners—needed consistent prompting before reflection became meaningful. Even so, she viewed those conversations as an increasingly important part of her instructional practice. Reflecting on the experience, she explained, “It forces you to let them answer what they think went well or didn’t go well and what they would do differently.” She

then added, “I think it makes you think about your teaching a little bit more” (Camille S. interview, May 17, 2026).

Across both interviews, Camille consistently described promoting student reflection and ownership of learning as a deliberate instructional practice embedded within conferences, assessment discussions, peer feedback, and proficiency conversations. Rather than simply communicating scores, she intentionally created opportunities for students to interpret evidence of their own learning, explain their reasoning, and identify future goals. In doing so, she described gradually shifting part of the evaluative process from teacher to student while continuing to guide students’ understanding of language learning and proficiency development.

Bee B.

Throughout both interviews, Bee B. described intentionally redesigning classroom routines so that students assumed greater responsibility for monitoring their own learning. Rather than relying on periodic teacher updates about grades, she developed structures that required students to review evidence of their performance, calculate their own progress, establish goals, participate in conferences, and determine when additional feedback or reassessment was needed. Across the implementation process, Bee consistently described these routines as attempts to shift responsibility for monitoring learning from the teacher to the students themselves.

When Bee began implementing the mastery grading system, one of her primary goals was helping students think differently about assessment. She explained that students in Advanced Placement courses often became preoccupied with accumulating points and protecting their grade point averages instead of focusing on improving their writing. Reflecting on her motivation for implementing grading reform, she explained:

Students focus so much on the letters and numbers they receive on assignments rather than actually learning a skill and growing... I wanted to try a different approach in the hope that it would take some of the stress off of getting the right answers and getting an A and focus more on this idea that we're a work in progress and we can continue to grow. (Bee B. interview, Feb 22, 2026)

Rather than expecting students simply to trust the new grading system, Bee intentionally developed classroom routines that required them to examine their own evidence of learning throughout the quarter. She explained that students no longer received grades intended to average together over time. Instead, "We wanted students to see where they were skill-wise rather than where they were grade-wise" (Bee B. interview, Feb 22, 2026). She continued:

Every assignment we give them, they get one of those numbers... The idea is that they can then redo, they can see where they are. If they're in developing and they don't want to be in developing... they can do redos and get feedback and have tutoring and all of that to improve their mastery level. (Bee B. interview, Feb 22, 2026)

For Bee, understanding one's current level of proficiency became the starting point for student decision making rather than the end of the grading process.

As implementation progressed, however, Bee realized that simply providing mastery scores did not automatically encourage students to monitor their own learning. Reflecting on the first semester, she described students ignoring their scores until quarter grades had to be determined. She recalled:

The vast majority [of students] don't ever look at their grades or the scores... and then when it's time to calculate them for an actual real grade, all of a sudden now we're

panicked and emotions are involved because it turns out you have a C instead of the B that you wanted. (Bee B. interview, Feb 22, 2026)

Rather than abandoning the goal of student ownership, Bee responded by creating additional structures that intentionally required students to review their own progress. One of the most significant additions was a bi-quarterly progress audit. She explained, “We implemented this semester a bi-quarterly audit where we’re making it an assignment... we’re making them go in and look at their scores and fill out a document that’s basically like, ‘This is where I am right now’” (Bee B. interview, Feb 22, 2026). Students were then expected to determine their next steps. Bee continued explaining what they wanted students to ask themselves, “‘Where am I right now? Am I proficient? Great, then I’m going to keep on keeping on. Or maybe try to do some better, but don’t do any worse. And then if I’m in the danger zone, what do I need to do?’ [Then the students are] supposed to set a goal for themselves and all that” (Bee B. interview, Feb 22, 2026). Rather than waiting for the teacher to explain quarter grades, students were expected to examine their own evidence of learning, identify areas requiring improvement, and establish goals before the next grading checkpoint.

Although Bee acknowledged that consistently implementing the audits proved challenging because of instructional time, she continued to view them as one of the strongest additions to the grading system. Reflecting during the final interview, she explained, “We added an assignment... where we made them get into Aspen and calculate their grade to see where they were right now and what they needed to do between now and the mid-quarter mark or the end-of-quarter mark.” Looking back, she concluded, “In theory, I liked that a lot because it forced them to look [at their progress]” (Bee B. interview, May 17, 2026).

Bee also redesigned reassessment procedures to require greater student responsibility. Rather than allowing students simply to request another opportunity to improve a score, she increasingly structured reassessment as a reflective process requiring preparation, feedback, and evidence of learning. Describing her expectations, she explained, “If they want to redo it, they have to have a conference. They go to the Writing Center. They talk with me... and then they redo it” (Bee B. interview, May 17, 2026).

During the first interview, she explained that she had also removed limits on the number of redo opportunities after realizing those restrictions discouraged students from taking academic risks. She recalled telling one student, “Well, you can do it again.” The student responded, “Wait... what?” Bee remembered answering, “You can do it again. Because the idea is that we want to get this down. We want to know this” (Bee B. interview, Feb 22, 2026). Rather than viewing reassessment as grade recovery, Bee increasingly presented it as another opportunity to demonstrate learning.

Throughout both interviews, Bee also described intentionally changing the language she used during classroom conversations. Although she emphasized that her feedback practices had changed very little, she deliberately replaced discussions about percentages and points with conversations centered on mastery, proficiency, and growth. Reflecting on this shift, she explained, “It’s changed my language. I’m talking a lot more in terms of mastery and proficiency... I like that. I think that’s a language that works really well to take away the grading side of it” (Bee B. interview, Feb 22, 2026).

Rather than asking students whether they were satisfied with a grade, Bee increasingly encouraged them to interpret what their current proficiency level revealed about their learning.

She described students saying, “‘Yeah, I could really see that I’m growing in this area.’” Others would tell her, “‘I know my scores stayed the same, but I really feel like I was better here.’” (Bee B. interview, Feb 22, 2026). Instead of agreeing or disagreeing, Bee extended the conversation. She explained, “I’m like, ‘You were better there. Let me show you where you need to go next time for that one’” (Bee B. interview, Feb 22, 2026).

Other students expressed concern that they were not progressing. Bee recalled them saying, “‘I’m worried that I’m not progressing. I’m worried that I’m not growing.’” Again, she redirected the discussion toward evidence. “‘You actually are growing here. We’ve just got one more thing we’ve got to progress before you can get [to this part of the rubric]’” (Bee B. interview, Feb 22, 2026).

Rather than positioning herself as the final evaluator of learning, Bee increasingly encouraged students to examine evidence of their own performance and determine where additional growth was needed. These instructional routines were reflected throughout Bee’s classroom documents. The AP Language and Composition syllabus explains that students are expected to “be an advocate for your growth” and identifies student responsibility as a central expectation of the course. Students participate in eight student-led progress conferences each year. Before each conference, they complete a reflection identifying current mastery levels, evidence of growth, and goals. During the conference, students—not the teacher—lead the discussion while the teacher asks clarifying questions and helps refine their learning plan. Students and parents also acknowledge that students share responsibility for monitoring their progress throughout the course (*Course Syllabus*).

Bee’s communication with parents reinforced the same philosophy. Describing the grading model, she explained that formative work represented “practice,” while conferences

functioned as the “big game” where students demonstrated what they had learned (*Parent Letter*). She emphasized that the purpose of the grading system was to “reward growth, value preparation, and build the habits students need for success,” encouraging students to focus on learning throughout the process rather than simply on the final grade (*Parent Letter*).

As implementation continued into the second semester, Bee refined these expectations even further. The revised grading policy required students to complete a bi-quarterly progress audit by reviewing mastery scores and completion percentages every two weeks. The document explained that these audits were intended to ensure students “will not be surprised” during quarter grade conferences. It further instructed students that if they wished to challenge a calculated mastery level, they could not “argue with words or feelings”; instead, they were expected to “argue with evidence” by bringing assignments demonstrating how they had applied feedback and developed their writing over time (*Grading Policy Clarification*).

Looking back across the implementation process, Bee consistently portrayed student ownership as something that required carefully designed classroom structures rather than encouragement alone. Progress audits, student-led conferences, structured reassessment procedures, evidence-based conversations, and mastery-focused language all represented deliberate changes intended to help students assume greater responsibility for monitoring their own learning. Although Bee ultimately concluded that “the only thing I really needed to change about my system was how the grades went in the gradebook and not how I taught” (Bee B. interview, May 17, 2026), she also explained that one aspect of the reform would remain central to her classroom. Reflecting on the language of mastery learning, she stated, “I do like the concept of mastery, proficient, developing. I like that language a lot, and I’m going to keep that language. I don’t want to go back to the language of grades” (Bee B. interview, May 17, 2026).

She concluded that when students encountered the language of proficiency, “They started really processing that this is where I am. And the letter grade then meant something to them versus just being a letter or a number in the gradebook” (Bee B. interview, May 17, 2026).

Across both interviews, Bee consistently described promoting student reflection and ownership of learning as an intentional redesign of classroom routines. Rather than expecting students to become self-directed learners independently, she deliberately created structures that required them to examine evidence of learning, monitor progress, articulate goals, participate in conferences, and use feedback to guide future performance. Together, these changes reflected Bee’s efforts to shift responsibility for monitoring learning from the teacher to the students while maintaining instructional support throughout the learning process.

Cross-Case Analysis

Across both cases, grading reform prompted participants to intentionally redesign classroom routines so that students assumed a more active role in monitoring and interpreting their own learning. Rather than positioning themselves as the sole evaluators of student performance, both teachers described creating opportunities for students to examine assessment evidence, participate in reflective conversations, identify strengths and weaknesses, and determine next steps for continued growth. Although Camille and Bee implemented different instructional structures, both portrayed student reflection and ownership as practices that required deliberate teacher guidance rather than skills students developed independently. Both participants described moving beyond simply communicating grades toward engaging students in conversations about evidence of learning. Rather than treating assessment as the conclusion of instruction, both teachers increasingly used assessment results as opportunities for students to analyze their own performance and participate in discussions about future growth.

Camille consistently framed assessment results as temporary indicators of learning rather than permanent judgments of ability. She explained that she reminded students, “Our scores are a snapshot of where we are right now. They’re not where we’re going to be for forever” (Camille S. interview, Feb 22, 2026). Instead of explaining assessment results herself, she increasingly asked students questions such as, “What does that mean for next time?” and “What would you do differently here?” allowing students to interpret their own evidence before receiving teacher feedback (Camille S. interview, Feb 22, 2026).

Bee described a similar shift, although it emerged through different classroom routines. Rather than expecting students to wait until report cards or teacher conferences to learn how they were performing, she intentionally required them to monitor their own progress throughout the grading period. Reflecting on the purpose of the grading model, she explained, “We wanted students to see where they were skill-wise rather than where they were grade-wise” (Bee B. interview, Feb 22, 2026). She further explained that students were expected to determine for themselves whether they had reached proficiency or whether additional conferences, tutoring, or reassessment were needed.

In both classrooms, assessment increasingly became a shared conversation about learning rather than information communicated solely by the teacher. Both teachers also described intentionally creating routines that required students to interpret evidence rather than simply receiving feedback. Camille’s reflective practice centered primarily on individual conferences following proficiency assessments. During STAMP conferences, she asked students to analyze their own writing and speaking performances before she offered any evaluation. Reflecting on one of these conferences, she recalled asking students, “Now that you’re looking at it, what would you do differently here?” She was struck by the responses, explaining, “It was very

interesting how they parroted back all the things that I'd been telling them all year" (Camille S. interview, May 17, 2026). Rather than relying on teacher explanations, students identified missing transitions, limited explanations, and weaknesses in organization using the language of proficiency that had become part of classroom instruction.

Bee likewise described designing routines that required students to interpret evidence independently, although her approach relied more heavily on structured self-monitoring than on teacher-guided conferences. After recognizing that many students ignored their mastery scores until grades were due, she implemented bi-quarterly progress audits requiring students to review their mastery levels, calculate their own standing, and establish goals before meeting with her. She explained that students were expected to determine, "Where am I right now?... If I'm in the danger zone, what do I need to do?" before setting goals for improvement (Bee B. interview, Feb 22, 2026). Reflecting later on the effectiveness of these audits, she explained, "In theory, I liked that a lot because it forced them to look" (Bee B. interview, May 17, 2026). Although their instructional strategies differed, both participants intentionally shifted responsibility for interpreting assessment evidence from teacher to student.

A second point of convergence involved the language teachers used to frame learning. Across both cases, participants described intentionally replacing conversations centered on grades with discussions centered on proficiency, growth, and evidence of learning. Camille consistently redirected students away from isolated grammatical mistakes and toward broader indicators of communication and proficiency. Rather than allowing students to focus on spelling or verb errors, she repeatedly asked them to locate those concerns within the proficiency rubric by asking, "Show me where that is on the rubric" (Camille S. interview, May 17, 2026). When students realized grammar represented only one component of proficiency, she reminded them,

“Content will always beat out grammar” (Camille S. interview, May 17, 2026) By the end of the year, she observed students using similar language during peer review, commenting that classmates needed “more explanation,” “transition words,” or additional details rather than simply identifying grammatical mistakes (Camille S. interview, May 17, 2026).

Bee similarly described changing the language that framed classroom conversations. Although she emphasized that her feedback practices themselves changed very little, she intentionally replaced discussions about percentages with conversations centered on mastery and proficiency. Reflecting on this shift, she explained, “I’m talking a lot more in terms of mastery and proficiency... I like that language. I think that’s a language that works really well to take away the grading side of it” (Bee B. interview, Feb 22, 2026). She also described students beginning to adopt that language themselves, explaining that some would tell her, “I could really see that I’m growing in this area,” while others acknowledged, “I’m worried that I’m not progressing” (Bee B. interview, Feb 22, 2026). Rather than responding with grades, Bee redirected students toward evidence of learning, explaining, “You actually are growing here. We’ve just got one more thing we’ve got to progress before you can get here” (Bee B. interview, Feb 22, 2026).

The strongest distinction between the two cases involved how participants structured opportunities for reflection. Camille’s instructional changes centered on teacher-guided dialogue. Reflection most often occurred through individual conferences, assessment discussions, proficiency reviews, and conversations in which she prompted students to explain their own thinking. She acknowledged that students rarely reflected independently, explaining, “They’re not goal setting, but with me prompting them... I think it’s forcing them to think about it a little

bit more” (Camille S. interview, May 17, 2026). For Camille, reflection developed through ongoing dialogue between teacher and student.

Bee, in contrast, emphasized creating organizational systems that embedded reflection into the structure of the course itself. Progress audits, student-led conferences, structured redo procedures, mastery trackers, and evidence-based conferences all required students to monitor their own learning before meeting with the teacher. Her revised grading policy reflected this philosophy by requiring students to review mastery levels every two weeks and, if challenging a calculated grade, to “argue with evidence” rather than emotions by bringing assignments demonstrating application of feedback and growth over time. Rather than relying primarily on teacher questioning, Bee sought to make reflection an expected routine within the grading system itself.

Despite these differences, both participants ultimately described promoting student ownership as requiring intentional changes in teacher practice rather than expecting students to become reflective on their own. Camille explained that implementation “forces you to let them answer what they think went well or didn’t go well and what they would do differently” (Camille S. interview, May 17, 2026), while Bee concluded that students needed carefully designed opportunities to examine their own progress because simply providing mastery scores was insufficient. As she reflected on the implementation, “We wanted students to see where they were skill-wise rather than where they were grade-wise” (Bee B. interview, Feb 22, 2026), but accomplishing that goal required structures that continually directed students back to evidence of learning.

Collectively, these findings suggest that promoting student reflection and ownership involved substantially more than encouraging students to become self-directed learners. Across

both cases, teachers intentionally redesigned classroom interactions, assessment conferences, feedback conversations, and progress-monitoring routines so that students participated more actively in interpreting evidence of learning and identifying future goals. While Camille emphasized reflective dialogue centered on language proficiency and Bee emphasized systems that embedded self-monitoring within the grading process, both described implementation as shifting part of the evaluative process from teacher to student. Together, these cases suggest that fostering student ownership required teachers to explicitly teach, model, and structure reflection as an integral component of everyday classroom practice rather than assuming it would emerge naturally from grading reform alone.

Theme Summary

Dimension of Grading Reform	Cross-Case Finding
Purpose of reflection and ownership	Both participants intentionally redesigned classroom routines so that students became more active participants in interpreting assessment evidence, monitoring their progress, and identifying next steps rather than <u>relying exclusively on teachers to evaluate their learning.</u>
Student interpretation of assessment evidence	Both teachers moved beyond simply communicating assessment results and increasingly asked students to examine what their performance revealed about current learning and future growth. Assessment became a <u>starting point for reflection rather than an endpoint.</u>
Reflection as an instructional routine	Reflection was embedded within regular classroom practices rather than treated as an isolated activity. Conferences, assessment discussions, peer feedback, reassessment procedures, and progress-monitoring activities all became opportunities for students to examine their own learning.
Self-monitoring of progress	Both participants created opportunities for students to recognize where they currently stood in relation to proficiency or mastery. Camille emphasized interpreting progress across proficiency levels, while Bee used formal progress audits and mastery reviews to require students to <u>monitor their standing throughout the grading period.</u>
Use of evidence in student decision-making	Students were increasingly expected to use evidence of learning to identify strengths, areas for improvement, and appropriate next steps. Both teachers attempted to shift conversations away from feelings about grades and towards <u>evidence of demonstrated learning.</u>
Language of proficiency and growth	Both teachers intentionally framed reflection through the language of proficiency, mastery, growth, and evidence of learning rather than percentages or points. Over time, students in both classrooms increasingly began using this language when discussing their own progress.
Goal setting and next steps	Reflection was connected to future action. Students were encouraged to determine what they needed to improve, whether additional practice, feedback, tutoring, revision, or reassessment was necessary, and what they should do next to demonstrate greater proficiency.

Shift in evaluative responsibility	Both teachers shifted part of the evaluative process from teacher to student. Rather than teachers being the sole interpreters of student performance, students were increasingly expected to analyze their own work, explain their learning, and participate in decisions about continued growth.
Different structures for developing reflection	Camille relied primarily on teacher-guided dialogue, including individual assessment conferences, proficiency discussions, and reflective questioning. Bee relied more heavily on formalized self-monitoring structures, including progress audits, student-led conferences, structured reassessment, and evidence-based grade discussions.
Need for teacher scaffolding	Neither participant viewed ownership as something students developed automatically. Both found that meaningful reflection required explicit prompts, repeated routines, modeling, and instructional support before students could assume greater responsibility for monitoring their own learning.

Table 17: Summary of Question 2 Theme 3

As summarized in Table 17, both participants intentionally redesigned classroom routines to increase students' participation in interpreting and monitoring their own learning. Although Camille relied primarily on teacher-guided reflection through conferences and proficiency discussions and Bee embedded self-monitoring more formally through progress audits, student-led conferences, and evidence-based reflection, both approaches shifted part of the evaluative process from teacher to student. Importantly, neither participant describes ownership as developing automatically because students were given greater opportunities or flexibility within the grading system. Instead, both found that students required repeated opportunities, explicit prompts, and teacher support to learn how to interpret evidence, identify needs, and determine appropriate next steps. Across the two cases, reflection and ownership therefore emerged as instructional capacities that teachers deliberately cultivated rather than outcomes produced by grading reform alone.

Findings Related to R3: How do teachers perceive the benefits and non-benefits of grade reform on student learning and student self-agency?

This section presents findings related to Research Question 3: How do teachers perceive the benefits and non-benefits of grade reform on student learning and student self-agency?

Analysis of interview transcripts, grading policies, communication documents, and course materials revealed that participants perceived both benefits and challenges associated with grading reform's impact on student learning and student self-agency. Across data sources, the teachers described increased transparency regarding learning expectations, greater opportunities for student reflection and ownership of learning, and improved understanding of proficiency and mastery. At the same time, participants reported ongoing difficulties associated with shifting long-established student beliefs about grades, motivating students to engage fully with agency-focused learning structures and sustaining growth-oriented learning behaviors.

To provide an overview of these findings, Table 9 presents a synthesis of the coded data across participants and supporting documents. The table includes representative examples, related codes, and frequency counts associated with the perceived benefits and challenges of grading reform for student learning and student self-agency. While frequency counts do not indicate importance independently, they provide insight into the relative prominence of particular perceptions and experiences across the dataset and help identify patterns that emerged across multiple sources of evidence.

Analysis of the data resulted in three overarching themes. First, teachers perceived grading reform as increasing transparency and helping students better understand learning expectations, performance criteria, and academic progress. Second, participants viewed grading reform as creating opportunities for student reflection, self-monitoring, and self-agency. Third, teachers identified persistent challenges associated with shifting student motivation, beliefs about achievement, and grade-oriented learning behaviors. Collectively, these findings suggest that grading reform was perceived as successful in increasing assessment transparency and creating structures that supported student agency, while producing less consistent changes in student

motivation and learning behaviors. The findings summary table is followed by a details examination of each theme, including evidence from Camille S. and Bee B. and a cross-case analysis of their experiences.

Benefit/ Challenge Theme	Representative Sentence-Level Coding Samples	Frequency Counts by Code Across Documents	Theme Total
Increased Transparency & Understanding of Learning	<p>“Students could see that their grades were increasing.”</p> <p>“Students developed a clearer understanding of mastery and proficiency.”</p> <p>“Each score represents progress toward learning targets.”</p> <p>“These scores communicate progress.”</p>	<p>Student Understanding of Grades = 39</p> <p>Interpretation of Reform = 37</p> <p>Perceived Purpose = 35</p>	111
Growth in Student Reflection & Self-Agency	<p>“A lot of them were really quite honest with what they can and are unable to do.”</p> <p>“I was forcing them to be reflective.”</p> <p>“Student-led conferences will be held.”</p>	<p>Student Self-Agency = 35</p> <p>Student Understanding of Grades = 39</p> <p>Feedback Practices = 29</p>	103
Perceived Benefits for Student Learning & Academic Growth	<p>“Students take practice more seriously now.”</p> <p>“Some students recognized growth and used proficiency language.”</p> <p>“Completion [of assignments] is essential for skill development.”</p>	<p>Student Learning Outcomes = 18</p> <p>Student Engagement = 13</p> <p>Student Understanding of Grades = 39</p>	70
Challenges in Transforming Student Motivations & Learning Behaviors	<p>“[Students are] still focused on the end grade.”</p> <p>“[Students are] sill grade grubbers.”</p> <p>“Students wanted higher grades rather than greater proficiency.”</p>	<p>Student Resistance = 15</p> <p>Student Self-Agency = 35</p> <p>Student Engagement = 13</p>	63
Tensions Between Reform Goals & Traditional Educational Systems	<p>“We have a schooling system that is obsessed with grades and GPA.”</p> <p>“The gradebook system doesn’t support this well.”</p> <p>“Students receive conflicting messages.”</p>	<p>System Constraints = 19</p> <p>Student Resistance = 15</p> <p>Parent Communication = 13</p>	47

Table 18: Research Question 3 Findings Summary

The findings summarized in Table 11 represented an intermediate stage of analysis rather than the final thematic organization of Research Question 3. The five findings categories—*Increased Transparency and Understanding of Learning, Growth in Student Reflection and Self-*

Agency, Perceived Benefits for Student Learning and Academic Growth, challenges in transforming student motivation and learning behaviors, and tensions between reform goals and traditional educational systems—captured recurring patterns in how participants described the benefits and non-benefits of grading reform. Following this initial categorization, the data within and across these findings were examined again in relation to the specific focus of Research Question 3: how teachers perceived the benefits and non-benefits of grading reform on student learning and student self-agency. This process involved comparing coded excerpts across participants and data sources, examining areas of overlap among the five findings categories, and identifying broader patterns in how teachers perceived the reform as influencing students’ understanding, actions, and learning behaviors. The findings categories were therefore not treated as discrete or mutually exclusive. Instead, related findings from multiple categories contributed to the development of three broader themes.

The first theme, increasing transparency and assessment literacy, developed primarily from findings related to *Increased Transparency and Understanding of Learning*, while also incorporating evidence from the *Perceived Benefits for Student Learning and Academic Growth* category. Participants frequently connected students’ increases understanding of proficiency, learning expectations, assessment criteria, and academic progress with perceived improvements in how students understood their own learning. Findings indicating that students recognized growth, used proficiency language, or more clearly understood what their grades represented were therefore synthesized with findings related to transparency. Examining these findings together revealed a broader pattern in which participants perceived greater access to meaningful information about learning as an important benefit of grading reform for both student learning and students’ ability to interpret evidence of their progress.

The second theme, supporting student reflection and self-agency, emerged from findings related to *Growth in Student Reflection and Self-Agency*, but also incorporated evidence concerning *Perceived Benefits for Student Learning and Academic Growth*, feedback practices, and students' understanding of grades. Across these categories, participants described students reflecting on their performance, identifying areas of strength and need, monitoring progress, responding to feedback, and, in some instances, making decisions about next steps in their learning. Although these behaviors appeared within several findings categories in Table 11, they shared a common emphasis on students moving from simply receiving information about their performance toward actively interpreting and using that information. These related findings were therefore synthesized into a broader theme focused on participants' perceptions that grading reform created conditions and opportunities that could support greater student reflection and self-agency.

The third theme, challenges in transforming student motivation and learning behaviors, developed from the intersection of findings related to persistent grade-oriented behaviors and tensions between grading reform and traditional educational systems. Participants described students who continued to focus on final grades, GPA, and obtaining higher marks even when classroom structures emphasized mastery, growth, reflection, and reassessment. At the same time, participants situated these behaviors within a broader educational environment in which traditional grade, GPA, gradebook structures, and established expectations continued to communicate the importance of grades as measures of academic success. Rather than treating these systemic tensions as a separate theme, they were incorporated into the analysis of student motivation and learning behaviors because participants frequently described them as part of the context within which students interpreted and responded to grading reform. This synthesis

revealed that participants perceived changes in students' beliefs and behaviors as less consistent than changes in transparency or opportunities for reflections and that the influence of traditional grading expectations could complicate efforts to develop more learning- and agency-oriented behaviors.

This second level of synthesis allowed the analysis to move beyond identifying individual benefits and challenges toward a more integrated understanding of how participants perceived grading reform as influencing student learning and self-agency. The three themes reflected interconnected dimensions of those perceptions: greater understanding of learning and assessment, increased opportunities for students to reflect on and participate in their learning, and persistent difficulty translating those opportunities into sustained changes in motivation and learning behavior. Taken together, the findings indicate that participants perceived grading reform as creating important conditions that could support student learning and agency, while also recognizing that providing those conditions did not necessarily result in immediate or consistent changes in how students approached learning. The following sections examine each theme in greater detail through evidence from both participants and cross-case analysis of their experiences.

Theme 1: Increasing Transparency and Assessment Literacy

Across both cases, participants described grading reform as creating greater transparency in how learning was assessed, communicated, and understood. Rather than emphasizing grades as accumulated points or percentages, both teachers intentionally shifted classroom conversations toward proficiency, mastery, feedback, and evidence of learning. Throughout the interviews, they described helping students understand what grades represented, how proficiency developed over time, how mastery was determined, and what actions students could take to

continue improving. Achieving this transparency, however, extended beyond implementing a new grading system. Both participants described repeatedly explaining the purpose of the reform, revising grading procedures and communication documents, conferencing with students, and using assessment evidence to help students interpret their own learning.

Although the participants shared this common goal, they emphasized different aspects of transparency. Camille S. focused on helping students understand language proficiency as a developmental process, using proficiency rubrics and ongoing conversations to help students recognize their growth over time. Bee B. emphasized helping students understand how mastery was evaluated and how grades reflected demonstrated learning rather than accumulated points. Across both cases, these instructional and communication practices helped students move beyond viewing grades solely as numerical outcomes toward understanding grades as evidence of learning and progress. Collectively, the findings suggest that grading reform supported the development of students' assessment literacy by making the relationship among learning expectations, assessment evidence, proficiency, and grades increasingly visible throughout the school year.

Camille S.

Across both interviews, Camille consistently described increased transparency as one of the most meaningful outcomes of implementing proficiency-based grading. Rather than viewing transparency simply as making grades easier to understand, she repeatedly discussed helping students recognize what their grades represented, how language proficiency develops over time, and how assessment evidence reflected their current level of performance rather than an accumulation of points. Throughout the school year, Camille described students gradually learning to interpret grades through the language of proficiency, allowing assessment

conversations to shift from points and percentages toward evidence of learning and continued growth.

Camille explained that her interest in grading reform originated from longstanding concerns that traditional grading practices failed to communicate students' actual learning. Reflecting on her previous grading system, she described watching students' language proficiency improve throughout the year while earlier assessment scores continued to lower their averages. She stated:

The problem always came with the idea of averaging everything together when I know that as the year goes on, their skills get better, and in addition, the content gets more difficult, and the expectation of their level of proficiency is higher. I always felt like that just wasn't a good, accurate measurement of what they were actually able to do... The other problem was...how do I get kids to really understand on a deeper level what their grade actually means? What is this reflecting? (Camille S. interview, Feb 22, 2026)

For Camille, the purpose of grading reform extended beyond changing grade calculations. Instead, she described wanting grades to communicate students' current proficiency according to nationally recognized language standards. As she explained, "In an ideal world, I would actually be able to just grade them on their actual level of proficiency according to our national standards and our district standards... What I have is a numerical equivalent...into levels of proficiency in world language standards" (Camille S. interview, Feb 22, 2026).

This emphasis on making learning expectations visible was reflected throughout Camille's *Grading for German 3* document. The document informed students that "student progress is measured using predominantly Performance-Based Grading," explaining that the system focused on "progress and growth in specific language skills rather than accumulation of

points.” Students received descriptions of each proficiency level, were informed that “grades will always show the most recent level of proficiency,” and learned that reassessments would use “the most recent evidence of learning” when determining grades (*Grading for German 3*).

Homework was identified as practice rather than graded achievement, while the grading guide concluded by explaining that the system was designed to “allow students to take ownership of their learning by focusing on proficiency rather than chasing points” (*Grading for German 3*).

Although Camille entered the year with a clear plan for communicating the new grading system, she described realizing early in the implementation that explanation alone was insufficient. Students continued interpreting the system through the assumptions of traditional grading. Reflecting on those first weeks, she recalled, “I had a handout. I had a whole script planned on how I was going to present this to their parents...I had a plan that felt like it was a good, well-thought-out plan. And then the kids came and asked me questions...questions that led me to believe...yeah, they don’t get this” (Camille S. interview, Feb 22, 2026).

Rather than continuing to explain the grading system verbally, Camille recognized that students needed to experience it visually and concretely: “I think they just...needed to see it” (Camille S. interview, Feb 22, 2026). She continued, “I had to kind of show them what it would look like, which I probably should have done to begin with” (Camille S. interview, Feb 22, 2026).

Helping students understand how proficiency-based grading worked became an ongoing part of classroom conversations. Camille recalled repeatedly explaining that language learning was cumulative rather than mathematical. She recounted, “I said, ‘We are building skills here...your most recent grade is your best grade. That’s the one that describes your skill level the

best. The only thing that's getting averaged are those building block scores'" (Camille S. interview, Feb 22, 2026).

As students began receiving proficiency scores, Camille described intentionally reframing assessment conversations around growth rather than success or failure. Individual conferences became opportunities to help students interpret changing scores within the context of increasing expectations. She explained,

It's helpful for me to sit down with them and say, 'Okay...yeah, you did horribly this time, but we moved up a level. Last time you were at exceeds. This time you're meeting, but it's still more difficult. So, what does that mean for next time?...With a little bit more practice, then maybe you're going to be back up at exceeds.' (Camille S. interview, Feb 22, 2026)

Throughout these conversations, Camille emphasized that assessment scores represented students' current level of performance rather than a permanent judgment of ability. "Their scores are a snapshot of where we are right now. They're not where we're going to be forever" (Camille S. interview, Feb 22, 2026).

She also expressed a desire for students to see their progress more clearly over time, explaining, "I wish there were a way...they could see their progress in a more linear way...they could look at it and go, 'Okay, that's my most recent one, so that's where I am right now, but look where I was before'" (Camille S. interview, Feb 22, 2026).

By the second interview, Camille described noticeable changes in how students interpreted both grades and proficiency. Rather than seeing rubric scores as isolated grades, she observed students connecting assessment results with their own language development.

I think seeing that they were going...that their grades were getting higher and higher and higher...with the rubric that I use, because it's tied directly to level of proficiency, they could see it. They could see that their grades were increasing, which means that their level of proficiency was increasing as well. (Camille S. interview, May 17, 2026)

Even when students experienced temporary declines after moving to more rigorous proficiency expectations, Camille described framing those moments as part of the learning progression: "Every time we level up, you might fall back a little bit because it's going to be a bit of a jump...that's all right. As long as we realize that the end goal is not the end of the quarter. The end goal is getting up to the level that you need" (Camille S. interview, May 17, 2026).

As students became more familiar with the proficiency rubrics, Camille also described changes in the language students used to evaluate their own work. Early in the year, assessment conversations centered on grammar, spelling, and isolated language errors. "At the beginning of the school year, [they] were always very centered around grammar, spelling...all these things that are part of language, but aren't language" (Camille S. interview, May 17, 2026).

Over time, however, students increasingly discussed the broader communicative qualities emphasized within the proficiency rubrics. "They stopped telling me about grammar errors and spelling errors...then started telling me, 'Oh, I probably need to use transition words to make this flow a little bit better'" (Camille S. interview, May 17, 2026).

Camille observed similar shifts during peer feedback activities. Rather than identifying isolated mechanical errors, students commented, "I think you could have explained this a little bit more." Others wrote, "I don't know what this means. What are you talking about? Where are you going with this?" (Camille S. interview, May 17, 2026). For Camille, these conversations

reflected students' increasing attention to communication, organization, and explanation rather than simply correctness.

She described seeing this same assessment literacy emerge after students received their STAMP proficiency results. Unlike previous years, when few students asked about the assessment, Camille recalled, "Before the kids never asked me for their STAMP scores...of course there's some kids who will always care, but everyone cared. Every single student cared about their scores" (Camille S. interview, May 17, 2026).

During individual conferences, students listened to recordings of their speaking performances, reviewed their writing samples, and discussed what they would change. Camille explained that students "parroted back all the things that I've been telling them all year," identifying missing transitions, limited explanations, and organizational weaknesses using the same language they had encountered throughout the year in the proficiency rubrics (Camille S. interview, May 17, 2026).

Reflecting on those conversations, Camille described students as developing a broader understanding of both language learning and assessment. She stated:

I do feel like they understand language better in general and language learning better...when you really understand what that four actually means, what intermediate low is, and what intermediate mid is, because you've been learning it all year, or it's been right in front of you on your rubrics all year...it makes a difference. (Camille S. interview, May 17, 2026).

By the conclusion of the study, Camille repeatedly returned to the idea that students had begun seeing beyond individual assignment grades to the broader purpose of language learning.

She reflected, “I feel like they can see the big picture better than they could before” (Camille S. interview, May 17, 2026).

Contrasting the new system with traditional grading, she explained, “When you have tons and tons and tons and tons of grades in the gradebook...you can’t see the forest for the trees” (Camille S. interview, May 17, 2026). Instead, she believed students increasingly understood where individual assignments fit within the larger goal of developing communicative proficiency. Grammar and vocabulary activities became, in her words, “just this little teeny tiny part” of language learning rather than the primary focus of achievement (Camille S. interview, May 17, 2026). Looking back across the year, Camille concluded, “I definitely feel like they understand a lot better where we’re going, like what the point of the whole thing is” (Camille S. interview, May 17, 2026).

Bee B.

Across both interviews, Bee B. consistently described increasing transparency as one of the central purposes of the grading reform. Rather than emphasizing changes in how grades were calculated, she repeatedly discussed helping students understand what grades represented, how mastery was determined, and how assessment evidence communicated learning. Throughout the implementation, Bee described intentionally shifting classroom conversations away from points and percentages and toward proficiency, feedback, and growth.

At the beginning of the school year, Bee explained that her motivation for adopting mastery-based grading stemmed from years of watching students equate academic success with grades rather than learning. Reflecting on why she wanted to change her grading practices, she explained:

With the nature of the class that we teach...students, in my experience, focus so much on the letters and numbers they receive on assignments rather than actually learning a skill and growing in terms of learning and progressing. So, I wanted to try a different approach in the hope that it would take some of the stress off of getting the right answers and getting an A and focus more on this idea that we're a work in progress and we can continue to grow. You've got to put some effort in on your part. I've got to give you feedback in a timely manner so that you can focus on progressing your skills rather than increasing the grade in the grade book. (Bee B. interview, Feb 22, 2026)

Bee explained that the purpose of the grading model was to make students' current level of learning more visible. Rather than asking students to accumulate points, she wanted them to understand where they were in relation to clearly defined skills and what evidence they needed to demonstrate before advancing.

We wanted students to see where they were skill-wise rather than where they were grade-wise. We have that four-point system...mastery, proficient, developing, and beginning.... Every assignment we give them, they get one of those numbers...The idea is that they can then redo, they can see where they are. If they're in developing...they can do redos and get feedback and have tutoring...to improve their mastery level. (Bee B. interview, Feb 22, 2026)

This emphasis on making expectations explicit was reflected throughout Bee's classroom documents. Her course syllabus explained that "instead of earning points for every assignment, you will be assessed on your mastery of the core skills of AP," while clearly defining the four mastery levels and explaining how mastery evidence and completion combined to determine course grades (*Course Syllabus*). Similarly, parent communication distinguished formative

practice from summative demonstrations of learning and explained that the grading model emphasized growth, preparation, and mastery rather than accumulated points.

Although Bee believed the grading philosophy was straightforward, she quickly realized that students continued interpreting the new system through the assumptions of traditional grading. Looking back on the beginning of implementation, she recalled:

We were still having our own mindset with a gradebook...where we felt like we have to have enough in the gradebook to justify the scores.... They were still thinking in the old traditional way, and thinking all of it was going to average together, when in fact it doesn't actually average together. (Bee B. interview, Feb 22, 2026)

As a result, Bee described intentionally changing the language she used during instruction. Rather than assigning scores to every activity, she began explicitly distinguishing practice from demonstrations of learning. She stated:

I've gone back to my old ways, where I'm like, 'Okay, this is a practice. It's not going in the gradebook at all. You're not going to see it anywhere. I'm going to give you feedback. We're going to talk about it. And then when we're ready, we're going to do one that goes in the gradebook, and that's the one you can redo...and redo if you need to.' (Bee B. interview, Feb 22, 2026)

She explained that these changes also altered the language of classroom assessment: "It's changed my language. I'm talking a lot more in terms of mastery and proficiency...I like that. I think that's a language that works really well to take away the grading side of it" (Bee B. interview, Feb 22, 2026). As students became more familiar with that language, Bee described changes in how they interpreted assessment results. Rather than asking primarily about points or percentages, students increasingly discussed proficiency and growth.

When they see a three on their paper, they're like, 'Yeah, I'm proficient. Like I got it.' I know many of the kids want to be masters, but I think an A represents proficiency.... I think that takes off pressure from some of these kids who always felt like they had to be perfect in order to get that A. (Bee B. interview, Feb 22, 2026)

Bee also described using assessment conversations to challenge students' assumptions about grades and achievement. She recalled telling students, "You sit in classes that you get A's in because you turn all your work in on time...not because you actually know what you're doing.... You may have turned it in, but if you're not there yet, you're not there. We need to figure out how to get you there" (Bee B. interview, Feb 22, 2026).

Over time, Bee observed students beginning to use the language of the proficiency rubrics when discussing their own learning. She described conversations in which students recognized their own growth, questioned their progress, and discussed what they needed to improve. "I've had conversations where they're like, 'Yeah...I could really see that I'm growing in this area.'" Others told her, "I'm worried that I'm not progressing. I'm worried that I'm not growing'" (Bee B. interview, Feb 22, 2026). Bee explained that these conversations allowed her to respond, "You actually are growing here. We've just got one more thing before you can get here...you are making progress'" (Bee B. interview, Feb 22, 2026).

Although Bee acknowledged that not every student embraced this way of thinking, she believed these conversations reflected a gradual shift in how some students understood assessment. "I do think that it's changing their mindset...For the kids that really do value learning, I see an improvement, a change in their language" (Bee B. interview, Feb 22, 2026).

By the second interview, Bee described continuing to refine the grading model in order to make expectations and grade determination more transparent. Reflecting on the challenges that

emerged during first semester, she explained that students often argued from effort rather than evidence. She stated, “The kids were very much, ‘Well, I’ve been trying very hard.’...We had to keep reminding ourselves...the trying hard isn’t what we’re trying to assess here. We’re assessing the skills” (Bee B. interview, May 17, 2026).

To reduce confusion, Bee and her colleague redesigned the process students used to determine mastery levels. She reported, “After the semester, when we put together that flow chart and it was very kind of black and white, it made it much easier for all of us. There was less questioning” (Bee B. interview, May 17, 2026). Those revisions were reflected in the Semester 2 Grading Policy Clarification, which stated that “Grades Measure Mastery, Not Points,” instructed students that “grades improve through better evidence of mastery, not negotiation,” and explained that the purpose of the system was to “reward learning, not point-chasing,” “make skill expectations transparent,” and “allow improvement without mathematical punishment” (*Grading Policy Clarification*). Students were also asked to complete bi-quarterly progress audits to review their mastery levels, monitor their progress, and identify goals before quarter grades were finalized.

Looking back on the implementation, Bee described noticing a difference after those revisions were introduced. She explained that once the grading process was revisited and explicitly explained, students demonstrated a clearer understanding of how the system worked. “The kids that didn’t get it to begin with...when we implemented changes [after the start of semester two], they really got it. And so many of the kids I heard say, ‘You really care about us growing and about us learning’” (Bee B. interview, May 17, 2026).

She also recalled that by the middle of the second semester, “I broke it down again...then it was fine. Since then, we haven’t really had anybody question the process. They get it and it’s been okay” (Bee B. interview, May 17, 2026).

Although Bee ultimately concluded that many students remained strongly motivated by grades, she nevertheless described transparency as one of the lasting strengths of the grading reform. Reflecting on the changes she intended to carry forward, she explained,

I do like the concept of mastery, proficient, developing. I like that language a lot, and I’m going to keep that language.... When they see that, they started really processing that this is where I am. And the letter grade then meant something to them versus just being a letter or a number in the grade book. (Bee B. interview, May 17, 2026)

Cross-Case Analysis

Across both cases, transparency emerged as a central feature of grading reform; however, the participants described transparency in different but complementary ways. Both teachers sought to move students beyond viewing grades as points or percentages and toward understanding grades as evidence of learning. Rather than simply changing grading procedures, both participants described intentionally changing how they talked about learning, how they communicated expectations, and how students interpreted assessment evidence. In both classrooms, transparency became an instructional practice that required repeated explanation, consistent feedback, and opportunities for students to make sense of their own learning. Although they shared this common goal, the teachers emphasized different aspects of transparency. Camille S. focused primarily on helping students understand language proficiency and the developmental nature of learning a world language. Her descriptions consistently focused on making students’ progress visible over time. Reflecting on traditional grading, she

questioned, “How do I get kids to really understand on a deeper level what their grade actually means? What is this reflecting?” (Camille S. interview, Feb 22, 2026). Throughout the implementation, she described helping students understand that assessment represented their current level of proficiency rather than an accumulation of past performance, reminding them that “their scores are a snapshot of where we are right now. They’re not where we’re going to be forever” (Camille S. interview, Feb 22, 2026). By the conclusion of the study, Camille believed students had begun seeing beyond individual assignments and instead understood the larger purpose of language learning. As she reflected, “I definitely feel like they understand a lot better where we’re going, like what the point of the whole thing is” (Camille S. interview, May 17, 2026).

Bee B., in contrast, emphasized transparency as helping students understand how mastery was determined and what grades actually communicated about their skills. Rather than focusing primarily on the progression of language learning, Bee repeatedly described making assessment criteria and grading decisions more explicit. She explained that the purpose of the grading model was for “students to see where they were skill-wise rather than where they were grade-wise” (Bee B. interview, Feb 22, 2026). Throughout both interviews, Bee described intentionally replacing traditional grading language with the language of mastery and proficiency because, as she explained, “I think that’s a language that works really well to take away the grading side of it” (Bee B. interview, Feb 22, 2026). By reframing assessment conversations around proficiency rather than percentages, Bee observed students beginning to interpret their own performance differently. She recalled students saying, “Yeah, I’m proficient. Like I got it,” while others recognized, “I could really see that I’m growing in this area” (Bee B. interview, Feb 22, 2026).

Both teachers also described transparency as an evolving process rather than something accomplished through a single explanation at the beginning of the school year. Each participant entered the implementation believing that carefully designed grading policies would be sufficient to communicate the new system. Instead, both found that students initially continued interpreting the reform through the assumptions of traditional grading. Camille reflected that despite having prepared handouts and parent communication, “the kids came and asked me questions...questions that led me to believe...yeah, they don’t get this” (Camille S. interview, Feb 22, 2026). Similarly, Bee observed that students “were still thinking in the old traditional way...thinking all of it was going to average together, when in fact it doesn’t actually average together” (Bee B. interview, Feb 22, 2026). These early experiences prompted both teachers to revise their communication strategies throughout the year, repeatedly reteaching the grading model and providing additional examples to help students understand how learning would be evaluated.

As implementation progressed, both participants increasingly viewed transparency as something students needed to experience, not simply hear explained. Camille concluded that “they just needed to see it” (Camille S. interview, Feb 22, 2026), leading her to use proficiency rubrics, conferences, and repeated discussions to help students recognize their own growth over time. Bee reached a similar conclusion after redesigning the semester grading process, explaining that once the grading flowchart made expectations “very kind of black and white,” “there was less questioning” (Bee B. interview, May 17, 2026). Later, she reflected that after revisiting the grading process, “the kids that didn’t get it to begin with... [but eventually they] really got it,” with many students commenting, “You really care about us growing and about us learning” (Bee B. interview, May 17, 2026). Although the instructional strategies differed, both teachers

described transparency as developing through ongoing dialogue and visible evidence rather than written policies alone.

The classroom artifacts further reinforced these shared commitments. Both participants redesigned grading documents to explicitly distinguish practice from demonstrated learning, define proficiency or mastery levels, explain reassessment opportunities, and clarify that grades represented evidence of learning rather than accumulated points. Camille's grading guide emphasized that "student progress is measured using predominantly Performance-Based Grading" and that grades reflected "the most recent level of proficiency" (*Grading for German* 3), while Bee's revised policy similarly stated that "Grades Measure Mastery, Not Points" and encouraged students to ask, "What skill am I not fully controlling yet?" rather than "How many points do I need?" (*Grading Policy Clarification*). Together, these artifacts demonstrated that transparency extended beyond classroom conversations into the written structures that organized assessment throughout the year.

Taken together, the two cases suggest that increasing transparency involved more than making grading procedures visible. Instead, both teachers described helping students develop assessment literacy by understanding what assessment evidence represented, how learning progressed, and what actions could improve future performance. While Camille emphasized students' growing understanding of language proficiency and long-term development, Bee emphasized students' growing understanding of mastery criteria and evidence of learning. Collectively, their experiences suggest that transparency was achieved not simply by redesigning grades but by consistently teaching students how to interpret those grades as meaningful representations of learning rather than numerical outcomes.

Theme Summary

Dimension of Grading Reform	Cross-Case Finding
Purpose of transparency	Both participants sought to help students understand what grades actually represented by shifting attention away from points and percentages and toward proficiency, mastery, growth, and evidence of learning.
Making learning expectations visible	Both teachers used grading documents, rubrics, conferences, and classroom conversations to make learning expectations and assessment criteria more explicit. Students were given clearer information about what counted as proficiency or mastery and how achievement was determined.
Interpreting assessment evidence	Transparency extended beyond knowing how grades were calculated. Both teachers worked to help students understand what assessment evidence revealed about their current learning and what that evidence meant for continued improvement.
Development of assessment literacy	Across both classrooms, students increasingly learned to interpret rubrics, proficiency levels, mastery rating, and assessment results as information about learning rather than simply as numerical outcomes.
Language of proficiency and mastery	Both participants intentionally replaced traditional grade-centered language with terminology focused on proficiency, mastery, growth, and skill development. Over time, students increasingly used this same language when discussing their own performance.
Understanding learning as developmental	Both teachers emphasized that assessment represented students' current stage of learning rather than a permanent judgment. Camille especially emphasized proficiency as developing over time, while Bee emphasized that mastery could improve through additional evidence, feedback, and reassessment.
Repeated communication and explanation	Neither participant found that a single explanation of the grading system was sufficient. Students initially interpreted the reform through traditional assumptions, requiring both teachers to repeatedly clarify grading practices and revisit the purpose of the system throughout the implementation.
Transparency through experience	Both teachers concluded that students needed to see and experience the grading system in practice before they fully understood it. Written policies became more meaningful when paired with concrete examples, assessment evidence, conferences, and repeated opportunities to observe growth.
Roles of classroom documents	Written grading policies reinforced classroom instruction by distinguishing practice from demonstrated learning, defining proficiency or mastery levels, explaining reassessment, and clarifying how evidence contributed to grades.
Different emphases in transparency	Camille emphasized helping students understand language proficiency and long-term developmental growth, while Bee emphasized helping students understand mastery criteria, grade determination, and the evidence required to demonstrate learning.

Table 19: Summary of Question 3 Theme 1

As summarized in Table 19, both participants perceived increased transparency as extending well beyond clearer grading procedures. Through rubrics, revised grading documents, conferences, repeated explanations, and proficiency-focused conversations, both teachers worked to make that relationship among learning expectations, assessment evidence, and reported grades increasingly visible to students. Although Camille emphasized helping students understand the

developmental nature of language proficiency and Bee focused more heavily on clarifying mastery criteria and grade determination, both participants found that transparency had to be intentionally taught and repeatedly reinforced. Across the two cases, students gradually developed greater assessment literacy as they learned not only what their grades were, but what those grades represented, how they were supported by evidence, and what that evidences suggested about future learning.

Theme 2: Supporting Student Reflection and Self-Agency

A second perceived benefit of grading reform involved its potential to foster student reflection, self-monitoring, and ownership of learning by shifting students' attention away from grades and toward growth, proficiency, and evidence of learning. Across both cases, grading reform was described as extending beyond changes to grade calculation. Instead, both participants viewed the reform as an opportunity to reshape how students understood learning, assessment, and their own role in the learning process. Rather than positioning students as passive recipients of teacher-assigned grades, Camille S. and Bee B. intentionally designed instructional and assessment practices that required students to evaluate evidence of their learning, reflect on their progress, and participate in conversations about how to continue improving.

Across interviews and supporting documents, both teachers described implementing structures intended to make students more active participants in monitoring and directing their own learning. These structures included proficiency-based feedback, reassessment opportunities, student conferences, reflection activities, progress-monitoring tools, and explicit discussions about growth over time. Collectively, these practices were intended to help students interpret assessment as evidence of learning rather than simply a measure of performance, encouraging

students to identify strengths, recognize areas for improvement, and assume greater responsibility for demonstrating proficiency.

Although both participants identified student self-agency as a central goal of grading reform, their experiences revealed that developing student ownership was neither immediate nor uniform. Both teachers described students entering their classrooms with deeply established beliefs about grades that then conflicted with the principles of standards-based mastery and academic growth. Consequently, fostering student self-agency required more than implementing new grading procedures; it involved creating sustained opportunities for students to engage with feedback, examine evidence of learning, articulate their thinking, and reconsider what academic success represented. While both teachers observed students beginning to engage in these processes, they differed in their perceptions of the extent to which students embraced these opportunities and internalized a growth-oriented approach to learning. The following sections describe how each participant experienced these efforts to cultivate student reflection and ownership of learning throughout the implementation of grading reform.

Camille S.

Throughout both interviews, Camille S. described one of the most meaningful outcomes of grading reform as changing the conversations students had about their own learning. Rather than simply asking students to accept a score or rely on teacher feedback, she intentionally created opportunities for students to interpret assessment evidence, evaluate their own performance, and explain what they needed to do to continue developing their language proficiency. Although she acknowledged that many students initially struggled to think about learning in this way, she described a gradual shift over the course of the school year as students became increasingly able to articulate their strengths, identify areas for improvement, and connect assessment results to their own learning.

Looking back on the beginning of implementation, Camille explained that one of her earliest observations was how little ownership students believed they had over their own success. Rather than viewing achievement as something they influenced through practice and improvement, many students attributed their grades to external factors or isolated performances. Reflecting on those early months, she explained:

I think at the beginning of the school year, it was very interesting to see how much of their learning they perceived to be outside of their control, which I found so weird...they have a little bit of this mentality of their grades are happening to them and not because of them...they attribute an awful lot of things to things that are outside of their control.

(Camille S. interview, Feb 22, 2026)

Changing that mindset became one of the central purposes of her instructional conversations. Rather than discussing assessments as isolated events, Camille consistently framed proficiency as something that developed gradually over time. She explained that students needed to understand that assessment represented only a temporary picture of their learning rather than a permanent judgment of their ability. As she described, “This type of proficiency just doesn’t happen in a day...a score on one assessment does not mean that you failed...our scores are a snapshot of where we are right now. They’re not where we’re going to be forever...eventually you have to be patient. We’re not done yet” (Camille S. interview, Feb 22, 2026).

Those conversations became especially important when students encountered increasingly difficult assessments and temporarily earned lower proficiency ratings. Rather than allowing students to interpret those scores as failure, Camille intentionally redirected their attention toward growth. She explained, “Yeah, you did horribly this time, but we moved up a

level...last time you were at exceeds; this time you're meeting, but [the content is] still more difficult. So what does that mean for next time?...With a little bit more practice, then maybe you're going to be back up at exceeds" (Camille S. interview, Feb 22, 2026).

Although Camille believed these conversations were beginning to change students' thinking, she acknowledged that students often failed to recognize their own growth. She reflected, "I feel like they do. I don't know if they feel like they do...you're starting to kind of see the shift a little bit, but they're not seeing it yet. I don't think they're self-aware enough just yet to see, 'This is because of you. This wasn't luck'" (Camille S. interview, Feb 22, 2026).

By the second interview, however, Camille described moments when students began demonstrating that self-awareness themselves. One of those moments occurred after students completed the STAMP proficiency assessment. Instead of reviewing results for students, she asked them to evaluate their own writing before she offered any feedback. Remembering those conferences, she explained:

I had them look at the writing prompt and I said, 'What would you do differently here?' It was very interesting how they parroted back all the things that I've been telling them all year. 'I didn't use any transitions here.' 'This seems like eight separate sentences instead of a paragraph.' 'I probably should have used this word here instead of this word.'

(Camille S. interview, May 17, 2026)

For Camille, those conversations represented much more than students repeating classroom vocabulary. Throughout the year she had intentionally shifted students' attention away from isolated grammar mistakes and toward communicating meaning effectively. Hearing students independently identify weaknesses in organization, transitions, and explanation convinced her

that they were beginning to evaluate their own work using the proficiency expectations that had guided instruction throughout the year.

She described seeing the same pattern when students reviewed recordings of their speaking assessments. Rather than asking why they earned a particular score, she asked students to explain why they believed one response demonstrated stronger proficiency than another. She recalled:

I made them listen to one of the speaking parts...I said, 'What did you do right here? Why was this the five?' They were able to articulate what they did, what they wished they had done, how they wished they had done this in all three of the prompts...Some of them were also very honest and saying, 'I've done way better when I've done presentations for you...I think I just let the fact that it was an exam mess with me.' (Camille S. interview, May 17, 2026)

Camille viewed these discussions as evidence that students were beginning to understand not only their own performances but also the broader process of language learning. Reflecting on those conferences, she explained:

I do feel like they understand language better in general and language learning better...It can be very discouraging when you don't feel like you're making progress because you've got a four on the speaking instead of a five. But then when you really understand what that four actually means...because it's been right in front of you on your rubrics all year...it makes a difference, at the very least mentally. (Camille S. interview, May 17, 2026)

Camille also described changes in the language students used during classroom discussions and peer review. Early in the year, students concentrated primarily on grammar, spelling, and

isolated language errors. As the year progressed, however, they increasingly evaluated communication, explanation, and organization. She explained:

The discussions...at the beginning of the school year were always very centered around grammar, spelling, all these things that are part of language, but aren't language. It took a very long time for those to switch to talking about answering the question, writing in paragraph form, connecting your thoughts and ideas...instead of focusing on the minutia [of grammar]. (Camille S. interview, May 17, 2026)

That same shift became visible in students' peer feedback. Rather than marking isolated errors, students increasingly responded to one another's ideas using the language of the proficiency rubrics. Camille recalled reading comments such as, "'Does this answer the question?'... 'I think you could have explained this a little bit more.'...One of them wrote, 'This is just a restatement. This isn't an explanation'" (Interview 2—Camille S.). Reviewing a later peer feedback activity near the end of the school year, she noticed students writing, "'I don't think you're being very clear here. I don't understand where you're going with this.'...Quite a few of them were saying, 'You need to add extra details here' and 'You need to explain this'" (Camille S. interview, May 17, 2026).

For Camille, these comments illustrated that students were beginning to use the same criteria she had modeled throughout the year when evaluating both their own work and the work of their classmates.

These opportunities for reflection were reinforced through Camille's grading system itself. Her grading guide emphasized that homework functioned as practice rather than graded performance, reassessment was available following additional learning, grades reflected students' "most recent evidence of learning," and the overall purpose of the grading system was

to “allow students to take ownership of their learning by focusing on proficiency rather than chasing points” (*Grading for German 3*).

Although Camille acknowledged that students still required teacher prompting to engage in meaningful self-reflection, she believed the quality of those reflections had changed substantially by the end of the year. She explained:

With me prompting them...yeah. I think it's forcing them to think about it a little bit more...especially when we talked about their STAMP scores, I could see them really thinking back on what they did...a lot of them were really quite honest with what they can and are unable to do at this point in time...Some of them were also very honest in saying, 'I've done way better when I've done presentations for you...I think I just let the fact that it was an exam mess with me,' which is a fair point, and it shows that they are thinking about it...I definitely liked hearing their thoughts on it. (Camille S. interview, May 17, 2026)

Looking back across the implementation, Camille concluded that one of the greatest changes was not simply how she graded students, but how grading reform changed the conversations she had with them about learning. As she reflected:

I think it makes you a better teacher...It forces you to engage in conversations with your kids about learning the language and not about, 'Hey, you made all these mistakes'...It forces you to talk a little bit about the bigger picture, and it forces you to let them answer what they think went well or didn't go well and what they would do differently. I just think it makes you think about your teaching a little bit more. (Camille S. interview, May 17, 2026)

Bee B.

Throughout both interviews, Bee B. described grading reform as an effort to fundamentally change how students viewed learning. Rather than encouraging students to pursue points, percentages, or letter grades, she hoped the revised grading system would help students understand that learning developed over time through practice, feedback, and reflection. She envisioned students becoming active participants in monitoring their own progress, seeking additional support when needed, and viewing assessment as evidence of skill development rather than simply a measure of academic performance. Although Bee remained committed to those goals throughout the implementation, she described learning that changing students' beliefs about learning proved far more difficult than redesigning a grading system.

Reflecting on her motivations at the beginning of the school year, Bee explained that years of teaching Advanced Placement English had convinced her that students frequently equated success with earning high grades rather than developing stronger reading and writing skills. She wanted to interrupt that pattern by shifting students' attention toward growth. As she explained:

With the nature of the class that we teach, the AP world, I feel like students, in my experience, focus so much on the letters and numbers they receive on assignments rather than actually learning a skill and growing in terms of learning and progressing. And so, I wanted to try a different approach in the hope that it would take some of the stress off of getting the right answers and getting an A and focus more on this idea that we're a work in progress and we can continue to grow. You've got to put some effort in on your part. I've got to give you feedback in a timely manner so that you can focus on progressing your skills rather than increasing the grade in the grade book. That was why I wanted to

change because I really hoped that it would change the mindsets of my students. (Bee B. interview, Feb 22, 2026)

Bee described the grading reform as more than a different way of calculating grades. Instead, she viewed it as a way of helping students understand what grades were intended to represent. Rather than accumulating points throughout the semester, students received mastery ratings that reflected their current level of performance and could revise or redo work after acting on feedback. She explained:

The purpose [of] doing a mastery grading approach this year. We wanted students to see where they were skill-wise rather than where they were grade-wise...Every assignment we give them, they get one of those numbers, but it doesn't count for or against them in the grade book. The idea is that they can then redo, they can see where they are. If they're *developing* and they don't want to be *developing*...they can do redos and get feedback and have tutoring and all of that to improve their mastery level. (Bee B. interview, Feb 22, 2026)

Throughout the implementation, Bee intentionally built classroom structures that required students to monitor and discuss their own learning. Rather than relying solely on teacher evaluation, students were expected to examine evidence of their progress, participate in individual conferences, reflect on feedback, and identify goals for continued improvement. These expectations were embedded throughout Bee's course documents. Her course syllabus explained that grades would be determined by students' mastery of four core skill areas rather than the accumulation of points and described mastery levels ranging from *Beginning* to *Mastery*. The syllabus further emphasized that students could request "Fresh Attempts" to demonstrate improved learning after applying feedback and that eight student-led conferences

would occur throughout the school year (*Course Syllabus*). Before each conference, students were expected to complete a reflection identifying their current mastery levels, evidence of growth, and goals, while the conference itself was designed so that “you lead the discussion about strengths, growth areas, and goals” (*Course Syllabus*).

Bee also communicated these expectations to families before implementation began. In her beginning-of-the-year letter to parents, she explained that the revised grading philosophy emphasized “growth and reduces stress,” encouraging students to “feel free to take risks and experiment with their writing” (*Parent Letter*). Rather than averaging formative assignments into final grades, she explained that formative scores would simply communicate progress during the learning process while summative conferences would focus on students’ overall development across the core skills. Using a sports analogy, she described formative work as “practice” and summative assessment as “the big game” where students demonstrated what they had learned (*Parent Letter*).

Although Bee entered the year believing these structures would naturally encourage greater ownership, she quickly realized that changing students’ thinking required more than redesigning the gradebook. During the first months of implementation, she found herself trying to assign mastery scores to nearly every activity because she believed students needed continuous evidence of progress. Looking back, however, she recognized that this approach unintentionally reinforced the very mindset she hoped to change. She reflected:

I felt like I had to grade everything or give feedback on every single thing...We were still having our own mindset with a gradebook where we felt like we have to have enough in the gradebook to justify the scores. That’s been a big mind shift for me. No, you don’t [have to give a grade to every assignment], because a lot of these things are practice things

that shouldn't just go in the gradebook anyway...I had to change my mindset, kind of back to what I used to do, which is not put a score on everything, instead giving some feedback, and then when we're ready, letting them know this is a practice, so I want you to take a risk. Because that was the other big thing—we wanted students to take risks, and they don't take risks if they think they're going to get a grade on it. (Bee B. interview, Feb 22, 2026)

This realization prompted Bee to reconsider not only how she graded but also how she organized instruction. Rather than attempting to document every incremental step of learning, she returned to a greater emphasis on practice, feedback, and revision before formal assessment. Looking back across the year, she concluded that many of the instructional practices she had used previously already aligned with the principles of mastery learning; the greatest change needed to occur in how evidence of learning was communicated rather than in the instructional process itself. She explained:

I learned that pretty much the only thing I really needed to change about my system was how the grades went in the grade book and not how I taught...Some of the things that were good though...there were a lot of opportunities for looking at different prompts and having different approaches...I do like the concept of mastery, proficient, developing. I like that language a lot, and I'm going to keep that language. I don't want to go back to the language of grades. (Bee B. interview, May 17, 2026)

As Bee increasingly adopted the language of mastery and proficiency, she also began noticing subtle changes in the language students used to describe their own learning. Instead of immediately asking about grades, some students began discussing their progress in relation to specific skills. Reflecting on those conversations, Bee explained:

I think when they see a three on their paper, they're like, 'Yeah, I'm proficient. Like I got it.' ...I think that takes off pressure from some of these kids who always felt like they had to be perfect in order to get that A... The conversations I've been having with students lately are things like, 'Yeah, you know, I could really see that I'm growing in this area.' Or I've had a conversation where they're like, 'I know my scores stayed the same, but I really feel like I was better here.' And I'm like, 'You were better there. Let me show you where you need to go next time.' On the other side, I've had kids that'll say, 'I'm worried that I'm not progressing. I'm worried that I'm not growing.' Which is also great because then it's like, okay, well, you actually are growing here. We just got one more thing we have to progress before you can get here. So, I do think that it's changing their mindset—some of them, not all of them. (Bee B. interview, Feb 22, 2026)

For Bee, these conversations represented important evidence that at least some students were beginning to evaluate themselves using the language of proficiency rather than percentages. Instead of asking only how to improve a grade, these students increasingly discussed where they were growing, where they remained challenged, and what evidence demonstrated that growth. While Bee acknowledged that this shift was far from universal, she viewed these early conversations as signs that some students were beginning to assume a more active role in understanding and monitoring their own learning.

As the school year progressed, Bee observed that some students began responding to feedback differently than they had at the beginning of the course. Rather than accepting initial performance as final, these students increasingly sought additional support, pursued opportunities to improve their work, and demonstrated greater initiative in monitoring their own

progress. Although Bee emphasized that these behaviors were not universal, she viewed them as evidence that some students were beginning to assume greater responsibility for their learning.

Reflecting on the students who chose to remain in the course after the first semester, Bee described noticeable differences in how they approached improvement. Rather than relying solely on classroom instruction, many of these students began seeking additional learning opportunities on their own. She explained, “I’ve seen a difference. I’ve seen more engagement. I’ve seen them seeking me out more often to try to get help. I’ve seen them going to the Writing Center. I’ve seen them wanting to do redos, asking me questions—not all of them, but most of them” (Bee B. interview, Feb 22, 2026).

Bee believed these changes occurred because students increasingly understood that improvement required action on their part rather than simply waiting for another opportunity to earn points. During individual conversations, she encouraged students to examine whether they had taken advantage of the supports available to them. Recalling those discussions, she explained:

I said, ‘Take grades out of it. Do you feel like you’re better than you were when you got here?’ Most of them said yes. Then I asked them, ‘Did this grade happen because of what you’re doing or not doing? Or do you feel like you’ve put in the effort and the time that you can, and you’re still not growing?’ For most of them, they hadn’t done any redos. They never wanted extra help. They weren’t putting in any more time. I said, ‘In this class, you can’t just rest on what you’ve always done. With this grading system, unless you’re putting in something on your side, it’s not going to magically happen.’ (Bee B. interview, Feb 22, 2026)

For Bee, these conversations reflected an important shift in responsibility. Rather than positioning herself as the person responsible for improving students' writing, she increasingly encouraged students to recognize the role they played in their own development. Learning became something students actively participated in rather than something teachers delivered.

To support that shift, Bee continued refining structures intended to help students regularly monitor their own progress. During the second semester, she introduced a bi-quarterly progress audit requiring students to enter the gradebook, examine evidence within each skill category, determine their current level of mastery, and identify goals for continued growth. Rather than waiting until progress reports or the end of the quarter to discover their standing, students were expected to routinely examine evidence of their own learning. The revised grading policy explained that these audits were intended to ensure students “will not be surprised by the mid-quarter progress check nor the end-of-quarter grade determination” and reinforced that students should argue for growth through evidence rather than emotion (*Grading Policy Clarification*).

Bee viewed this addition as one of the most valuable refinements made during implementation because it required students to become active participants in understanding their own progress. She explained:

We implemented this semester a bi-quarterly audit...we're making them go in and look at their scores and fill out a document that's basically like, 'This is where I am right now.' And setting a goal. Am I proficient? Great, then my goal is to keep on keeping on. Or maybe try to do some better, but don't do any worse. And then if I'm in the danger zone, what do I need to do? They're supposed to set a goal for themselves and go through that process. (Bee B. interview, Feb 22, 2026)

Although Bee believed these structures successfully encouraged reflection for some students, she repeatedly emphasized that implementation revealed clear limits to what grading reform alone could accomplish. Throughout both interviews, she distinguished between the relatively small group of students who embraced the opportunities for reflection and revision and the much larger group who continued approaching learning primarily through the lens of grades. Reflecting on student agency near the end of the implementation, Bee acknowledged:

A handful [took advantage of revision opportunities]. It hasn't made as big of a difference as I thought it would. I really expected students to be more engaged in that learning process and to want to have the conversations and ask questions. I have a handful that definitely set goals for themselves because we talk about it and I know what they want to do. But the vast majority don't ever look at their grades or the scores [on their own] ...Only a handful of them are actually executing that. I've had several that sign up for redos and appointments at the Writing Center, but they never follow through with actually completing the redo. (Bee B. interview, Feb 22, 2026)

By the conclusion of the study, Bee described becoming increasingly convinced that students' longstanding beliefs about grades were much more deeply rooted than she had initially anticipated. While she remained committed to mastery-based grading, she no longer believed that redesigning the grading system by itself would fundamentally change students' orientation toward learning.

Looking back over the implementation, she reflected:

I really thought that I was gonna get kids that were so motivated about learning and about growing that they would stop thinking about grades. I think it didn't make a difference....So many of them didn't take advantage of redos or trying things differently

because they didn't care about their growth. They just cared about could they improve their score so that it could improve their grade. I was a little bit disheartened because I felt like I was putting in all this work and trying to make all this effort for kids to want to learn. And it really ended up being kind of the same amount of kids as normal that took it that way. (Bee B. interview, May 17, 2026)

Rather than concluding that the grading reform had failed, however, Bee interpreted these experiences as evidence that broader educational expectations continued shaping how students understood achievement. She explained that years of traditional grading practices and the emphasis placed on GPA made it difficult for students to fully embrace a different conception of learning within a single classroom. She reflected:

I think the issue is that we have a schooling system that is obsessed with grades and GPA when they get to a high school level. Grades have been calculated the same way their whole lives. They understood the concept behind what we were trying to do, but the brain change isn't there. If it were in multiple classes and multiple teachers stressed the importance of growth...I think it could make a huge difference. (Bee B. interview, May 17, 2026)

Despite those challenges, Bee described several moments that reaffirmed her belief in the value of the reform. During the second semester, after refining the grading system and increasing transparency, she began hearing students describe the classroom differently than they had earlier in the year. Recalling those conversations, she explained, "The kids that didn't get it to begin with, in second semester when we implemented changes, they really got it. So many of the kids I heard say, 'You really care about us growing and about us learning.'" (Bee B. interview, May 17, 2026).

For Bee, those comments represented the clearest evidence that at least some students had begun to understand the purpose behind the grading reform. Although many students continued to prioritize grades, others recognized that the emphasis on revision, conferences, feedback, and repeated opportunities to demonstrate learning reflected a genuine investment in their academic growth rather than simply the assignment of letter grades.

Looking back across the implementation, Bee ultimately concluded that mastery-based grading remained worthwhile, but not because it immediately transformed student motivation. Instead, she believed its greatest value lay in creating repeated opportunities for conversations about learning that traditional grading often failed to encourage. She recognized that meaningful student ownership developed gradually, required intentional instructional structures, and depended on students choosing to engage with those opportunities. For Bee, the experience demonstrated that changing grading practices was only one step in a much larger process of helping students reconceptualize what it means to learn.

Cross-Case Analysis

Across both cases, Camille S. and Bee B. described grading reform as an intentional effort to shift students from passive recipients of grades toward active participants in their own learning. Although they taught different subjects and implemented somewhat different grading systems, both teachers described creating instructional structures that required students to interpret evidence of learning, reflect on their progress, and participate in conversations about improvement rather than simply receiving grades. Together, their experiences suggest that grading reform extended beyond changing how achievement was reported; it required changing how students understood learning itself.

At the beginning of implementation, both teachers described students entering their classrooms with deeply ingrained beliefs about grades. Camille observed that many students viewed academic success as something that happened to them rather than something they could influence. As she reflected, “their learning they perceived to be outside of their control,” explaining that students often believed “their grades are happening to them and not because of them” (Camille S. interview, Feb 22, 2026). Likewise, Bee described students who had learned to equate success with earning points and letter grades rather than developing proficiency. She explained that students “focus so much on the letters and numbers they receive on assignments rather than actually learning a skill and growing,” motivating her to redesign grading so students would “focus on progressing [their] skills rather than increasing the grade in the grade book” (Bee B. interview, Feb 22, 2026).

Rather than attempting to change these beliefs through grading alone, both teachers intentionally created repeated opportunities for students to examine and reflect on evidence of their own learning. Conferences became central to that work. Camille routinely asked students to evaluate their own performances before she offered feedback, recalling how students began responding to prompts such as, “What would you do differently here?” with increasingly detailed explanations: “I didn’t use any transitions here,” “This seems like eight separate sentences instead of a paragraph,” and “I probably should have used this word here instead of this word” (Camille S. interview, May 17, 2026). Similarly, Bee designed student-led conferences, progress audits, and reflection activities that required students to identify their current level of mastery, examine evidence of growth, and establish goals before meeting with her. Rather than asking students what grade they wanted, Bee encouraged them to ask, “What skill am I not fully controlling yet?” and “What feedback do I need to act on?” (*Grading Policy Clarification*).

Both teachers also described intentionally changing the language they used when discussing learning. Rather than emphasizing percentages or accumulated points, conversations increasingly centered on proficiency, mastery, growth, and evidence. Camille explained that assessment scores represented only “a snapshot of where we are right now” and reminded students, “We’re not done yet” (Camille S. interview, Feb 22, 2026). Likewise, Bee described replacing traditional grading language with mastery terminology because “I do like the concept of mastery, proficient, developing. I like that language a lot, and I’m going to keep that language. I don’t want to go back to the language of grades” (Bee B. interview, May 17, 2026). Both participants believed this shift in language gradually helped students think differently about assessment by emphasizing learning as an ongoing process rather than a series of completed tasks.

Despite these similarities, the two teachers experienced the development of student self-agency somewhat differently. Camille described progressively hearing students adopt the language of proficiency independently. During STAMP conferences and peer-review activities, students increasingly identified strengths and weaknesses without teacher explanation, commenting, “I’ve done way better,” “This is just a restatement,” and “You need to explain this” (Camille S. interview, May 17, 2026). By the conclusion of the study, Camille viewed these conversations as evidence that students were becoming more capable of evaluating and explaining their own learning. Reflecting on this change, she explained that grading reform “forces you to engage in conversations with your kids about learning...It forces you to let them answer what they think went well or didn’t go well and what they would do differently” (Camille S. interview, May 17, 2026).

Bee also described students becoming more reflective, but her account emphasized that this development remained uneven. She observed some students beginning to say, “I could really see that I’m growing in this area,” while others admitted, “I’m worried that I’m not progressing” (Bee B. interview, Feb 22, 2026). She also noticed more students seeking assistance, explaining that they were “seeking me out more often to try to get help,” “going to the Writing Center,” and “wanting to do redos” (Bee B. interview, Feb 22, 2026). Nevertheless, Bee repeatedly emphasized that these behaviors characterized only a portion of her students. Reflecting on implementation, she acknowledged, “A handful [of students sought help]. [The reform] hasn’t made as big of a difference as I thought it would” (Bee B. interview, Feb 22, 2026).

The greatest contrast between the two cases emerged in how each teacher interpreted the limits of grading reform. While Camille primarily described increasingly productive conversations about learning within her classroom, Bee situated students’ responses within the broader educational context. She concluded that many students continued prioritizing grades because “we have a schooling system that is obsessed with grades and GPA,” explaining that although students understood the purpose of mastery grading, “the brain change isn’t there” (Bee B. interview, May 17, 2026). Rather than viewing this as evidence that the reform was unsuccessful, Bee suggested that meaningful changes in student agency would require consistent reinforcement across classrooms and throughout students’ educational experiences. Taken together, these cases suggest that grading reform supported student self-agency not simply by changing grading procedures, but by creating sustained opportunities for students to participate in conversations about their own learning. Across both classrooms, agency developed through repeated cycles of reflection, feedback, reassessment, and discussion rather than through the grading system itself. At the same time, both cases indicate that changing students’

orientation toward learning required more than new grading policies. As Camille observed, students gradually began recognizing that learning was “because of [them]” rather than “luck” (Camille S. interview, Feb 22, 2026), while Bee concluded that students needed more than one classroom to fully replace longstanding beliefs about grades with a focus on growth and mastery. Together, these findings suggest that grading reform can create important conditions for student self-agency, but that developing enduring changes in students’ beliefs about learning is an incremental process shaped by both classroom practices and the broader educational culture.

Theme Summary

Dimension of Grading Reform	Cross-Case Finding
Purpose of student self-agency	Both participants sought to move students from passive recipients of grades toward more active participants who could interpret evidence of learning, reflect of progress, and make decisions about continued improvement.
Reflection of learning	Both teachers created repeated opportunities for students to analyze their own performance rather than relying solely on teacher evaluation. Reflection occurred through conferences, peer review, progress audits, reassessment, and discussions of evidence.
Use of feedback and reassessment	Feedback and reassessment became mechanisms through which students could respond to evidence of learning, identify areas for improvement, and take action toward greater proficiency or mastery.
Student self-monitoring	Students were increasingly expected to recognize where they currently stood in relation to learning goals and monitor their progress over time. Camille emphasized reflection on proficiency development, while Bee used more formal progress-monitoring structures.
Language of growth and proficiency	Both teachers intentionally shifted classroom language away from points and percentages toward growth, proficiency, mastery, and evidence of learning. Some students gradually began using this language independently when discussing their own progress.
Student responsibility and purposeful action	Both participants encouraged students to recognize that improvement depended partly on their own actions, including seeking help, engaging with feedback, revising work, reassessing, and making decisions about next steps.
Evidence of developing self-agency	Both teachers observed students becoming more reflective about their strengths, needs, and progress. Camille described increasingly independent analysis of student work, while Bee observed some students seeking help, pursuing redos, and monitoring their own growth more actively.
Uneven development of agency	Neither participant perceived self-agency as developing uniformly across students. Some students embraced reflection and responsibility, while others continued to rely heavily on teacher direction or remained primarily concerned with grades.
Influence of prior beliefs about grades	Both teachers described students entering the reform with deeply established beliefs about grades and achievement. These prior experiences shaped how students interpreted new opportunities for reflection, feedback, and ownership.
Different perceptions of student response	Camille perceived a more gradual but visible movement toward independent reflection and proficiency-oriented thinking. Bee observed some similar

	changes but emphasized that they remained limited to a portion of students and were less widespread than she had anticipated.
Broader educational influences	Bee especially emphasized that students' continued focus on GPA and grades reflected a broader educational culture, while both cases suggested that classroom reform alone could not immediately replace beliefs developed through years of traditional grading.

Table 20: Summary of Question 3 Theme 2

As summarized in Table 20, both participants perceived grading reform as creating stronger opportunities for students to reflect on, monitor, and participate in directing their own learning. Across both classrooms, students were increasingly asked to interpret assessment evidence, engage with feedback, identify areas for growth, and determine appropriate next steps. Although Camille described clearer evidence of students gradually internalizing these practices and Bee observed more uneven participation, both cases indicate that self-agency developed through sustained instructional experiences rather than through changes to grading procedures alone. Grading reform therefore appeared to create conditions in which agency could develop, while students' prior beliefs, willingness to engage, and broader educational experiences influenced whether and how those opportunities were exercised.

Theme 3: Challenges in Transforming Student Motivation and Learning Behaviors

Despite identifying several benefits associated with grading reform, both participants described ongoing challenges in helping students shift long-established beliefs about grades, achievement, and learning. Although their grading systems emphasized standards-based mastery, academic growth, reassessment, and student reflection, both teachers found that many students continued to interpret learning through traditional expectations centered on points, letter grades, and grade point averages. Throughout the interviews and supporting classroom documents, Camille S. and Bee B. described the considerable effort required to help students understand proficiency as a developmental process, engage meaningfully with feedback, and assume greater responsibility for their own learning. While each participant approached these challenges

differently and perceived varying degrees of student growth over time, both characterized transforming student motivation and learning behaviors as a gradual process that extended well beyond changes to grading practices alone. The following sections describe how each participant experienced these challenges during the implementation of their grade reform.

Camille S.

Throughout both interviews, Camille S. repeatedly returned to what she viewed as the greatest challenge of implementing grading reform: helping students rethink what grades represented and recognize that proficiency developed through their own actions rather than through fixed ability or teacher judgment. Although her grading policy emphasized continuous growth, reassessment, and students' most recent evidence of learning, she explained that many students entered the course carrying deeply established beliefs about grades that had been reinforced throughout their previous schooling. As outlined in her *Grading for German 3* policy document, students were expected to view proficiency as an evolving process, with reassessment opportunities allowing "the most recent evidence of learning" to determine their grade so that students could "take ownership of their learning by focusing on proficiency rather than chasing points." Yet Camille discovered that helping students adopt this perspective required far more than changing how grades were calculated. It required changing how students understood learning itself.

Reflecting on the beginning of the school year, Camille explained that one of the first patterns she noticed was students' tendency to view their performance as something largely outside of their own control. Rather than seeing proficiency as something that developed through sustained practice, many students interpreted individual assessment scores as permanent judgments about their ability. Looking back, she described how these assumptions shaped many of her early conversations with students.

I think at the beginning of the school year, it was very interesting to see how much of their learning they perceived to be outside of their control, which I found so weird. And now I think they realize by our conversations that we've had that this type of proficiency just doesn't happen in a day. A score on one assessment does not mean that you failed. Hopefully some of them are finally convinced that a B is not, in fact, an F. I think some of them—their grades have really just gone up—and I think that's helped them realize, like, this will get you there. Eventually. You have to be patient. We're not done yet. (Camille S. interview, Feb 22, 2026)

For Camille, these conversations represented a gradual effort to replace students' assumptions about grades with a different understanding of proficiency. Rather than expecting continuous increases in assessment scores, she repeatedly reminded students that learning a language naturally involved periods of apparent regression as expectations became more demanding. Earlier in the year, she described intentionally preparing students for those moments. She explained:

What I've noticed is...what I have to get the kids used to is the fact that their scores are periodically going to drop because when we take a leap in level difficulty, the scores are naturally going to drop some because they're going to have to reach a little bit more. And so, changing their mindset on that—like our scores are a snapshot of where we are right now. They're not where we're going to be forever. (Camille S. interview, Feb 22, 2026)

By the second interview, Camille described seeing students gradually begin to understand that temporary decreases in performance did not represent failure but were part of the progression toward higher levels of proficiency. Rather than interpreting lower scores as evidence that they were incapable, students increasingly understood that advancing to more

challenging tasks often required moving through periods of struggle. Reflecting on these conversations, she explained:

I do feel like they were getting that toward the end...probably midway through third quarter. Every time we level up, you might fall back a little bit because it's going to be a bit of a jump, and that's all right, as long as we realize that the end goal is not the end of the quarter. The end goal is getting up to the level that you need at the end of Level 3 German in order to be successful in Level 4 and continuing to grow as a speaker and as a writer. (Camille S. interview, May 17, 2026)

Although Camille believed these conversations helped students begin viewing learning differently, she also recognized that many students still struggled to recognize the role they themselves played in their own growth. When asked whether students had developed greater ownership of their learning, she paused before explaining that she believed she could already see evidence of change—even when students themselves could not. She reflected:

I feel like they do. I don't know if they feel like they do. I still think they have a little bit of this mentality of their grades are happening to them and not because of them. So, I'm not sure if they're there yet, but you're starting to kind of see the shift a little bit. They're not seeing it yet. I don't think they're self-aware enough just yet to see, 'This is because of you. This wasn't luck.' They attribute an awful lot of things to things that are outside of their control. It's very interesting what they attribute their grades to—either the teacher is nice or they're giving them a break or something along those lines. And I'm just like, that's not at all what that is. That's skill. (Camille S. interview, Feb 22, 2026)

As Camille reflected on these early experiences, she increasingly viewed the grading reform as creating opportunities for conversations that rarely occurred under traditional grading systems.

Rather than discussing individual assignments simply in terms of correct and incorrect answers, the reform encouraged students to think about why they were progressing, what proficiency looked like, and how their own decisions contributed to that progress. Looking back on the implementation, she described these conversations as one of the most significant outcomes of the reform.

I think it bears mentioning that there's no doubt that it's beneficial to the kids, but it's also beneficial to you as a teacher...It forces you to look very closely at what you're doing and how often you're doing it. I think it makes you a better teacher. It forces you to engage in conversations with your kids about learning the language and not about, 'Hey, you made all these mistakes,' or 'This isn't a great paragraph.' It forces you to talk about the bigger picture, and it forces you to let them answer what they think went well or didn't go well and what they would do differently. (Camille S. interview, May 17, 2026)

For Camille, these conversations became the foundation upon which students gradually began reconsidering their understanding of grades, proficiency, and learning. Yet even as students started recognizing that proficiency developed over time, she soon realized that many still misunderstood the grading system itself. The questions students raised during the first grading period revealed that changing how grades were calculated was only one part of the reform; helping students understand what those grades actually represented would become another significant challenge.

Although Camille believed students were beginning to recognize that proficiency developed gradually, she soon realized that many still interpreted the new grading system through assumptions formed by years of traditional grading. As the first quarter came to an end, student questions revealed that they continued to think about grades in terms of averaging points

rather than demonstrating growth over time. Looking back, Camille described this realization as one of the first major turning points in the implementation process because it forced her to reconsider how she communicated the purpose of the grading reform.

Recalling those first months, she explained that she had entered the year confident that she had carefully prepared students and parents for the transition.

I think a lot of that had to do with my...the way I was wording things. I think they just needed to see it. At the beginning, I had a handout. I had a whole script planned on how I was going to present this to their parents. I had a plan that felt like it was a good, well-thought-out plan. Then the kids came and asked me questions—questions that led me to believe...yeah, they don't get this. (Camille S. interview, Feb 22, 2026)

Rather than questioning the grading philosophy itself, students' questions revealed that they were still trying to interpret the new system using the logic of traditional grading. Camille laughed as she recalled the conversations that repeatedly emerged near the end of the first quarter.

Especially at the end of first quarter where they were so concerned. I was like, 'Okay, but what is this quarter grade going to do? Like who sees this?' They said, 'Well...colleges...' And I said, They don't. They don't see your quarter grade. They see your semester grade. Your quarter grade is only for you and your parents and the school. [The quarter grade is] just for us.' They said, 'Well, then it gets averaged together.' And I said, 'No, it does not. We are building skills here. Your grade at the end of quarter two is your grade for semester one. There's no averaging together because you're building skills. Your most recent grade is your best grade, and that's the one that describes your skill level the best.

The only thing that's getting averaged are those building block scores.' (Camille S. interview, Feb 22, 2026)

Although Camille believed these explanations made sense, she quickly recognized that explanation alone was not enough. Students continued asking the same questions, leading her to realize that they needed to experience the system rather than simply hear about it. She reflected:

That took me a little bit to kind of get through to them. They didn't quite one hundred percent understand that, so I had to kind of show them what it would look like, which I probably should have done to begin with. I have to remember...I teach lots of freshmen. They're not quite there yet and they're not used to it. So yeah, there was a little bit of a misstep in messaging with the kids. (Camille S. interview, Feb 22, 2026)

While students struggled to understand the grading model, Camille was surprised that parents responded quite differently. Instead of questioning the new approach, she found that most parents readily understood the emphasis on proficiency and growth. She recalled:

The parents actually were quite on board with it. I was surprised. I thought maybe there would be a few that would be like, 'Wait, what are you talking about?' But at parent-teacher night, it was great. I felt like what I was telling them was really just hitting the mark with them. I half expected some of our conversations to go a little pear-shaped because I wasn't quite sure if they were really going to get what I was saying. I was wrong in that regard. They really liked it. The kids have been the challenging part. And that's just a lot of helping them understand. (Camille S. interview, Feb 22, 2026)

These experiences led Camille to rethink not only how she communicated the grading system but also how frequently students needed opportunities to see evidence of their own progress. As the year continued, she realized that students were completing plenty of practice

activities, but the summative demonstrations of proficiency were occurring too infrequently for students to recognize their own growth. Looking back, she explained:

Just before semester...I was realizing that they were doing practices, but I don't think the actual summative assessments were happening often enough for them to see their growth quickly enough. I needed them to start really seeing it. So, I increased the frequency that I was assessing them for reading, listening, writing, and speaking. I needed them to be able to see that they were growing. When they're too spaced out, I felt like the kids just weren't tracking it. (Camille S. interview, May 17, 2026)

Increasing the frequency of assessment also changed the conversations Camille had with students about their performance. Rather than discussing isolated grades, she found herself helping students interpret patterns across multiple demonstrations of learning and understand how proficiency evolved over time. She explained:

It's helpful for me to be able to sit down with them and say, 'Okay, yeah, you did horribly this time, but we moved up a level. Look at last time. Last time you were at exceeds. This time you're meeting, but it's still more difficult. So, what does that mean for next time? What could that mean for next time? With a little bit more practice, maybe you're going to be back up at exceeds.' (Camille S. interview, May 17, 2026)

Over time, Camille began to notice that these repeated conversations gradually changed what students paid attention to. Rather than focusing exclusively on quarter grades or numerical scores, students increasingly became interested in their proficiency levels and how those levels connected to future learning. Reflecting on the end of the year, she described one example that stood out to her.

I actually found that they cared a lot more about their STAMP scores when they came back. Before, the kids never asked me for their STAMP scores, which I thought was weird. You just took this big high-stakes test—why wouldn't you want to know how you did? Of course there's some kids who will always care, but everyone cared. Every single student cared about their scores [this time]. (Camille S. interview, May 17, 2026)

Rather than simply handing students their results, Camille used each student's STAMP report as another opportunity for reflection. Sitting with students individually, she asked them to examine their writing and speaking samples and explain what they noticed about their own performance. She recalled, "They were able to articulate what they did, what they wished they had done, and how they wished they had done it" (Camille S. interview, May 17, 2026).

For Camille, these conversations demonstrated that students were beginning to interpret assessment results differently than they had earlier in the year. Rather than asking only what grade they earned, students increasingly discussed why they had performed as they did and what they could do differently the next time. Yet although students were beginning to understand proficiency as a developmental process, Camille noticed that many still judged the quality of their language primarily through grammar and isolated errors. Helping students rethink what counted as evidence of proficiency became the next challenge she encountered during implementation.

As students became more comfortable with the structure of the grading system, Camille noticed another challenge emerging during classroom conversations about assessment. Although students were beginning to understand that grades reflected proficiency rather than accumulated points, many still judged their own performance almost exclusively by grammatical accuracy, spelling, and isolated language errors. Throughout the second interview, Camille described how

helping students redefine what counted as successful communication became another significant part of implementing the grading reform.

Looking back on the beginning of the school year, she explained that students naturally gravitated toward the smallest details of language rather than the broader communicative goals represented in the proficiency rubrics.

At the beginning of the school year, our discussions were always very centered around grammar, spelling—all these things that are part of language but aren't *language*. It took a very long time for those to switch to talking about answering the question, writing in paragraph form, connecting your thoughts and ideas, speaking and writing in more complicated sentence structures...instead of focusing on the minutia of, 'I conjugated this verb wrong.' Well, that's not what kept you from getting a higher score. (Camille S. interview, May 17, 2026)

Rather than correcting students' misconceptions directly, Camille described repeatedly returning students to the proficiency rubric during conferences and asking them to determine for themselves what the rubric emphasized. These conversations became less about individual mistakes and more about helping students understand the relationship between specific language skills and overall communication. She recalled:

I'd say, 'Show me where [grammar] is on the rubric.' So they'd show it to me, and I'd say, 'Okay...where else do you see it on the rubric?' 'Nowhere.' 'What does that tell you about its importance?' 'Well...it's on there.' And I was like, 'Yeah, that means it's important, but it's not everything.' I said, 'Content will always beat out grammar. Content's always going to beat out grammar.' (Camille S. interview, May 17, 2026)

As these conversations continued throughout the year, Camille began noticing subtle but important changes in the way students talked about one another's work. Early peer feedback focused almost entirely on correcting spelling and grammar. By the second semester, however, students increasingly commented on organization, clarity, explanation, and the communication of ideas—the same qualities emphasized in the proficiency rubrics. Reflecting on these changes, she described reading students' peer feedback.

By after the semester, that's when they stopped telling me about grammar errors and spelling errors. Their peer feedback became less, 'I'm marking every spelling error that you made,' and much more, 'Does this answer the question?' or, 'Do you think you could explain that a little bit more?' I loved reading that. One of them wrote, 'This is just a restatement. This isn't an explanation.' I was real happy to see that. (Camille S. interview, May 17, 2026)

Camille explained that these changes continued to become more apparent as students completed additional writing tasks near the end of the school year. She reflected:

The last one that we just did... A lot of them were putting things like, 'I don't think you're being very clear here. I don't understand where you're going with this.' There were quite a few of them saying, 'You need to add extra details here,' and, 'You need to explain this.' It was pretty neat seeing some of their comments. (Camille S. interview, May 17, 2026)

These conversations also changed how students interpreted their own assessment results. Camille described using each student's STAMP performance as an opportunity for guided reflection, asking students to identify what they had done well and where they still wanted to improve. Rather than immediately focusing on their scores, many students began discussing the

strategies they had used and the specific aspects of communication they wanted to strengthen.

She explained:

A lot of them were really quite honest with what they can and are unable to do at this point in time. Some of them were also very honest in saying, 'I've done way better when I've done presentations for you and written paragraphs for you. I think I just let the exam—the fact that it was an exam—mess with me,' which is a fair point. It shows that they are thinking about it, which is cool. I definitely liked hearing their thoughts on it. You never know what they're going to say. (Camille S. interview, May 17, 2026)

As the year came to a close, Camille believed students were beginning to understand not only the grading system but also the larger purpose behind language learning itself. Rather than viewing grammar as the ultimate goal, students increasingly recognized grammar as one component of broader communicative proficiency. Reflecting on the overall impact of the grading reform, she explained:

I feel like they can see the big picture better than they could before. When you have tons and tons and tons of grades in the gradebook, you can't see the forest for the trees. Based off my discussions with the kids, I think they get it a little bit better now. They understand a lot better where we're going—what the point of the whole thing is. Because I have all the grammar topics grouped together and those grades are such a small part of their overall grade, it's like a bright neon light saying, 'See? It's just this little teeny tiny part of what we're doing.' We know where it lands now. We understand that's not language. It's just this part of language. They're focusing now on the right things instead of focusing on, 'I have to memorize every past participle,' or, 'I have to run around and conjugate these verbs.' (Camille S. interview, May 17, 2026)

Although Camille acknowledged that not every student embraced this shift equally, she believed many had begun thinking differently about learning by the end of the year. She reflected:

I think they were growing more because they stopped thinking about all of these little things that are actually getting in the way of their proficiency. If you're thinking about your grammar while you're talking, it interrupts your grammar. Of course it does. I can't say it was across the board. I still have one or two kids who just love their grammar so much that they think about it all the time. I think with those kids it's just going to take a little bit more work to pull them away from that because it does impede your growth as a speaker and a writer. (Camille S. interview, May 17, 2026)

Looking back across the implementation, Camille ultimately concluded that the greatest impact of the grading reform extended beyond changes in grades or assessment practices. For her, the reform fundamentally changed the kinds of conversations she had with students about learning. She reflected:

I think it bears mentioning that there's no doubt that it's beneficial to the kids, but it's also beneficial to you as a teacher. It forces you to look very closely at what you're doing and how often you're doing it. I think it makes you a better teacher. It forces you to engage in conversations with your kids about learning the language and not about, 'Hey, you made all these mistakes,' or, 'This isn't a great paragraph.' It forces you to talk about the bigger picture, and it forces you to let them answer what they think went well or didn't go well and what they would do differently. I just think it makes you think about your teaching a little bit more. (Camille S. interview, May 17, 2026)

Camille concluded with admitting that while transforming students' motivation and changing their behaviors "is a lot of work" and that it "takes time," she thinks it will "become easier and easier every year" and she doesn't "see [herself] changing away from it" (Camille S. interview, Feb 22, 2026).

Bee B.

From the beginning of the grading reform, Bee B. viewed the initiative as an opportunity to change how students thought about learning. Rather than simply modifying the way grades were calculated, she hoped the reform would move students beyond their preoccupation with points and letter grades and toward a greater focus on developing the skills required for success in Advanced Placement English. Throughout the course syllabus, grading documents, and parent communications, this philosophy remained consistent. Students and parents were told that the course would "prioritize growth and feedback over scores," that mastery rather than point accumulation would determine grades, and that students shared responsibility for monitoring their own progress and growth (*Course Syllabus*). Student-led conferences, opportunities for reassessment, and repeated reflection on evidence of learning were intentionally incorporated into the grading system to reinforce these expectations (*Parent Letter*).

Looking back on her initial motivation for adopting the grading reform, Bee explained that her primary goal was never simply to create a different grading scale. Instead, she wanted students to stop defining success by the numbers they earned on individual assignments and begin viewing learning as an ongoing process of improvement. She stated:

With the nature of the class that we teach, the AP world, I feel like students focus so much on the letters and numbers they receive on assignments rather than actually learning a skill and growing in terms of learning and progressing. So, I wanted to try a

different approach in the hope that it would take some of the stress off getting the right answers and getting an A and focus more on this idea that we're a work in progress and we can continue to grow. You've got to put some effort in on your part. I've got to give you feedback in a timely manner so that you can focus on progressing your skills rather than increasing the grade in the grade book. That was why I wanted to change because I really hoped that it would change the mindsets of my students. (Bee B. interview, Feb 22, 2026)

Bee believed that shifting students' attention away from grades also required changing the language used in the classroom. Rather than talking about percentages and points, she intentionally framed learning in terms of mastery, proficiency, development, and growth. She explained that these conversations gradually encouraged some students to think differently about their own learning. She reflected:

It's changed my language. I'm talking a lot more in terms of mastery and proficiency and all that kind of stuff, which I like. I think that's a language that works really well to take away the grading side of it. I think when they see a three on their paper, they're like, 'Yeah, I'm proficient. I got it.' I think an A represents proficiency. You can do it and you can do it consistently. I think that takes off pressure from some of these kids who always felt like they had to be perfect in order to get an A. (Bee B. interview, Feb 22, 2026)

As Bee described these conversations, she repeatedly emphasized that mastery was intended to communicate students' current level of performance rather than reward task completion. She routinely challenged students to distinguish between completing work and demonstrating learning. She explained,

I had that conversation with them. I said, ‘You sit in classes that you get As in because you turn all your work in on time—not because you actually know what you’re doing. You’ve memorized the information to pass the test the next day and then you’ve lost it right after that. Or you’ve turned in all these assignments and your teacher is proud of you for turning them in. That’s not where we are here. You may have turned it in, but if you’re not there yet, you’re not there. We need to figure out how to get you there.’ (Bee B. interview, Feb 22, 2026)

These conversations led Bee to observe that some students gradually adopted the same language she had intentionally introduced throughout the year. She recalled, “There are definitely some students ... it’s helped them understand the importance of growth and ... that skills are what really matter and that cushion grades aren’t demonstrative of your skill” (Bee B. interview, May 17, 2026).

Although Bee was encouraged by these individual examples, she acknowledged during the first interview that the broader shift she had hoped to see was still emerging. When asked about students’ ownership of learning, she described only a small number of students consistently engaging in self-reflection, setting goals, and acting on feedback. She explained that a “handful” of students were fully engaged while for most there wasn’t a difference.

It hasn’t made as big of a difference as I thought it would. I really expected students to be more engaged in that learning process and to want to have the conversations and ask questions. I have a handful that definitely set goals for themselves because we talk about it and I know what they want to do. But the vast majority don’t ever look at their grades or the scores until it’s time to calculate an actual grade. Then all of a sudden [they’re] panicked and emotions are involved because it turns out [they] have a C instead of the B

that [they] wanted. We implemented a bi-quarterly audit where we're making them go in and look at their scores, set goals, and think about what they need to do next. Again, only a handful of them are actually executing that. I've had several sign up for redos and appointments at the Writing Center, but they never follow through with actually completing the redo. So, [for some of the students it made a difference], but not the amount that I thought it would be. (Bee B. interview, Feb 22, 2026)

By the conclusion of the first interview, Bee remained hopeful that students' thinking would continue to evolve as they became more familiar with the grading model. However, when reflecting on the implementation several months later, she acknowledged that the changes in student mindset she had envisioned had not occurred as broadly as she had anticipated. That realization became one of the defining reflections of her experience with grading reform.

By the end of the school year, Bee found herself reassessing one of the central assumptions that had motivated her to adopt grading reform. Although she continued to believe in the principles of mastery-based grading, she no longer believed that changing the grading system alone was sufficient to transform students' attitudes toward learning. Reflecting on the year as a whole, she acknowledged that many students continued to approach learning through the same grade-oriented mindset that had existed before the reform. She reflected candidly:

[Students mindsets] actually haven't changed for the positive like I thought they would. I really thought that I was gonna get kids that were so motivated about learning and about growing that they would stop thinking about grades. And I think it didn't make a difference. Granted, for some of the kids, they're just neurotic and that's just who they are, so nothing would make a difference. But for the majority of them, it's still that conversation about the grade. So many of them didn't take advantage of redos or trying

things differently because they didn't care about their growth. They just cared about, 'Could they improve their score so that it could improve their grade?' I was a little bit disheartened because I felt like I was putting in all this work and trying to make all this effort for kids to want to learn. It really ended up being kind of the same amount of kids as normal that took it that way. (Bee B. interview, May 17, 2026)

Bee contrasted these reflections with the optimism she had expressed at the beginning of the year. Initially, she believed that giving students opportunities for reassessment, emphasizing mastery rather than percentages, and providing continuous feedback would naturally encourage greater ownership of learning. Instead, she found that many students viewed these opportunities primarily as ways to improve grades rather than deepen their understanding. Looking back, she explained,

Before I started it, I didn't think students would really look at anything because all of those scores were going in as formative grades. My concern was that they wouldn't care about anything, they wouldn't be getting work made up, and they wouldn't be getting in for help. I also was concerned that it would increase my workload (Bee B. interview, Feb 22, 2026).

Although Bee observed examples of students using the language of mastery and growth, she found that these conversations often disappeared once letter grades became part of the discussion. Students who spoke confidently about proficiency during instruction frequently returned to concerns about numerical grades whenever reporting periods approached. She described the pattern this way:

The vast majority don't ever look at their grades or the scores until it's time to calculate them for an actual real grade. Then all of a sudden we're panicked and emotions are involved because it turns out you have a C instead of the B that you wanted—or that

your parents want from you. That was rough. I was at the point of breaking at the semester where I was just like, ‘Forget it. We’re just going back to the old way or something.’ I was ready to throw in the towel. (Bee B. interview, Feb 22, 2026)

Rather than abandoning the reform, Bee responded by modifying several components of the grading system during the second semester. One of the most significant changes involved introducing bi-quarterly progress audits that required students to calculate their current mastery levels, review their completion record, and establish goals for the remainder of the grading period. These revisions shifted the emphasis away from negotiating grades and toward examining evidence of learning. The revised grading guidance explained that “grades measure mastery, not points,” encouraged students to identify the specific skills they had not yet mastered, and required regular progress audits so students would not be surprised by end-of-quarter grade determinations (*Grading Policy Clarification*).

Reflecting on these adjustments, Bee explained that they emerged directly from what she and her teaching partner learned during the first semester.

We changed how to calculate the grades. We put that flow chart together to help them figure out where they were because, for us, looking at it made sense. For them, it wasn’t so easy. We also added a bi-quarterly audit where they had to go into Aspen [the electronic gradebook] and calculate their grades to see where they were and what they needed to do next. In theory, it was great because it forced them to look. It lessened the shock value when they actually went in at mid-quarter or at the end of the quarter. (Bee B. interview, May 17, 2026)

Even with these changes, however, Bee found that many students continued to engage with the system only when grades became immediately consequential. Some students scheduled

conferences, signed up for Writing Center appointments, or requested redo opportunities, but many failed to complete the work necessary to demonstrate additional learning. She explained:

I've had several that sign up for redos and appointments at the Writing Center, but they never follow through with actually completing the redo. On one hand, there are some that have embraced this and are really wanting to see that growth. On the other hand, there are students who just accept what's in the book or get upset because their emotions get involved. (Bee B. interview, Feb 22, 2026)

As Bee reflected on these experiences, she increasingly concluded that the challenge extended beyond the design of the grading system itself. Although the reform changed how learning was assessed within her classroom, it existed alongside years of educational experiences that continued to reinforce traditional definitions of academic success. By the end of the year, she no longer viewed student resistance as evidence that the grading reform had failed. Instead, she viewed it as evidence of how deeply students' beliefs about grades had become embedded through previous schooling.

That realization led Bee to broaden her perspective beyond her own classroom. Rather than asking why students had not fully embraced the reform, she began questioning whether meaningful changes in student mindset could occur when mastery-based grading existed in only one class within a larger educational culture that continued to emphasize grades and grade point averages. That reflection became one of the most significant conclusions she drew from the implementation experience and set the stage for her broader observations about educational culture and grading reform.

Although Bee acknowledged that the grading reform did not produce the widespread shift in student mindset she had originally anticipated, she did not conclude that the approach itself

was ineffective. Instead, by the end of the school year she increasingly viewed students' responses as evidence of the broader educational culture in which they had learned to equate achievement with grades and grade point averages. Rather than attributing students' continued focus on grades to shortcomings in the grading model, she came to believe that meaningful changes in student thinking would require a much broader shift extending beyond a single classroom. Reflecting on this realization, she explained:

I think the issue is that we have a schooling system that is obsessed with grades and GPA when they get to a high school level. Grades have been calculated the same way their whole lives. I think [students] understood the concept behind what we were trying to do, but the brain change isn't there. (Bee B. interview, May 17, 2026)

As Bee continued reflecting on the implementation, she described how her thinking expanded beyond her own classroom. Rather than questioning whether mastery-based grading could work, she questioned whether any individual teacher could realistically expect students to abandon years of grade-centered thinking while every other aspect of schooling continued to reinforce those same beliefs. She stated:

If [grade reform] were in multiple classes and multiple teachers stressed the importance of growth...and even more so than that, if somehow colleges above us could change their approach from the numerical GPA thing—which they're not going to do—but yes, if culturally that could change in the mindsets of students and they're seeing that approach from many teachers, I think it could make a huge difference. (Bee B. interview, May 17, 2026)

Although Bee believed the larger educational system limited the overall impact of the reform, she also recognized moments that suggested students were beginning to understand its

purpose. Following the revisions made during the second semester, she heard students describe the grading system in ways that differed noticeably from earlier conversations about grades. She recalled, "The kids that didn't get it to begin with [but], when we implemented changes—they really got it. So many of the kids I heard say, 'You really care about us growing and about us learning'" (Bee B. interview, May 17, 2026).

For Bee, these comments affirmed that students recognized the intentions behind the grading reform even if many continued to struggle to change their own learning behaviors. She concluded that students increasingly understood that the classroom emphasized improvement rather than simple point accumulation, even when they found it difficult to fully embrace that perspective themselves.

Despite the challenges she encountered, Bee remained committed to the language of mastery and proficiency that had become central to her classroom throughout the year. She explained that these conversations helped students understand that grades represented demonstrated learning rather than accumulated points and that this shift in language was one aspect of the reform she intended to continue. She reflected:

I do like the concept of mastery, proficient, developing. I like that language a lot, and I'm going to keep that. I don't want to go back to the language of grades. When [students] see that, they started really processing that this is where I am. The letter grade then meant something to them versus just being a letter or a number in the grade book. (Bee B. interview, May 17, 2026)

Ultimately, Bee concluded that the greatest challenge of the grading reform was not redesigning the grading system itself but transforming the deeply rooted beliefs that shaped how students approached learning. Although some students gradually began using the language of

growth, proficiency, and mastery, many continued to evaluate their success primarily through the lens of letter grades and grade point averages. Even with opportunities for reassessment, conferences, and reflection, she found that many students remained reluctant to engage fully in the learning behaviors the reform was designed to encourage, often waiting until grades became a concern before seeking feedback or acting on opportunities for improvement. Bee's experience suggested that while grading reform created structures intended to promote greater student ownership and sustained engagement with learning, changing students' motivation and long-established grade-oriented habits proved to be a much slower and more complex process than she had originally anticipated.

Cross-Case Analysis

Across both cases, the findings suggest that transforming student motivation and learning behaviors was considerably more complex than redesigning grading practices. Although Camille and Bee implemented grading systems grounded in standards-based mastery, reassessment, and academic growth, both found that students entered their classrooms with deeply established beliefs about grades that had been shaped through years of traditional schooling. As a result, changing how grades were calculated did not immediately change how students understood learning, success, or their own role in the learning process. Instead, both participants described implementation as an ongoing effort to help students reconstruct long-standing assumptions about achievement, proficiency, and academic growth.

Both teachers discovered that while the mechanics of grading could be redesigned relatively quickly, students' underlying beliefs about learning proved much more resistant to change. Students frequently interpreted the new grading systems through traditional assumptions about points, averages, and letter grades rather than through the intended focus on mastery and

continuous growth. Camille observed that many students initially viewed learning as something largely beyond their control, explaining that students perceived “their learning...to be outside of their control” and believed that “their grades are happening to them and not because of them” (Camille S. interview, Feb 22, 2026). Rather than recognizing proficiency as something developed through sustained practice, students often attributed success to external factors instead of their own developing skills. Similarly, Bee found that students continued approaching learning through a grade-centered perspective despite the redesigned grading system. Reflecting at the end of the implementation, she explained that “it’s still that conversation about the grade” because many students “didn’t care about their growth. They just cared about, ‘Could they improve their score so that it could improve their grade?’” (Bee B. interview, May 17, 2026). Together, these experiences suggest that changing the grading system was only the first step; helping students reinterpret the meaning of grades and learning proved to be a much longer process.

Beyond students’ beliefs about grades, both participants described the persistence of long-established learning behaviors. Even when reassessment, reflection, and feedback were intentionally embedded within the grading system, many students continued engaging with learning in ways that reflected traditional grade-oriented habits. Camille described students initially focusing on isolated assessment scores, grammatical errors, and quarter grades rather than recognizing broader patterns of proficiency development. Over time, she worked to help students understand that “a score on one assessment does not mean that you failed” and that proficiency required patience because “we’re not done yet” (Camille S. interview, Feb 22, 2026). By the end of the year, she believed many students had begun “focusing now on the right things” instead of emphasizing isolated grammar topics or memorization (Camille S. interview, May 17,

2026). Bee encountered similar challenges but perceived less overall change in students' learning behaviors. She explained that only "a handful" consistently established goals, pursued feedback, or completed reassessment opportunities (Bee B. interview, Feb 22, 2026). Instead, "the vast majority don't ever look at their grades...until it's time to calculate an actual grade," at which point "all of a sudden [they're] panicked" (Bee B. interview, Feb 22, 2026). Even after implementing progress audits and additional supports, she continued observing students who requested redo opportunities but "never follow through with actually completing the redo" (Bee B. interview, Feb 22, 2026). Although the degree of perceived student growth differed between the two teachers, both cases indicate that changing students' motivation involved much more than providing opportunities for reassessment or reflection. Long-established habits surrounding grades remained difficult to disrupt.

As both teachers attempted to challenge these deeply rooted habits, they found that changing student motivation depended less on the grading system itself than on the conversations that surrounded it. Rather than assuming that revised grading practices would naturally promote greater ownership, both participants emphasized the importance of continually helping students interpret assessment results, understand proficiency, and recognize their own role in the learning process. Camille explained that grading reform "forces you to engage in conversations with your kids about learning...It forces you to talk about the bigger picture" (Camille S. interview, May 17, 2026). Likewise, Bee described intentionally changing the language of her classroom from points and percentages to mastery and proficiency while reminding students, "You may have turned it in, but if you're not there yet, you're not there. We need to figure out how to get you there" (Bee B. interview, Feb 22, 2026). Across both classrooms, these conversations shifted

teacher-student interactions away from discussions centered on individual grades and toward conversations about learning processes, evidence of proficiency, and future growth.

Although Camille and Bee described many of the same implementation challenges, they differed in the extent to which they believed students ultimately transformed their motivation and learning behaviors. Camille described gradual but meaningful changes throughout the school year. Through repeated assessment, reflection, and discussion, she observed students beginning to understand that proficiency developed over time rather than through isolated performances. By the end of implementation, she believed students “can see the big picture better,” had become more reflective about their learning, and increasingly focused on communication rather than isolated grammatical accuracy (Camille S. interview, May 17, 2026). At the same time, she acknowledged that “I can’t say it was across the board,” recognizing that some students continued struggling to move beyond traditional ways of thinking about language learning (Camille S. interview, May 17, 2026). Bee, in contrast, concluded that widespread changes in student motivation had not occurred to the extent she originally anticipated. Although she identified individual students who embraced the language of mastery and growth, she described feeling “a little bit disheartened” because implementation “ended up being kind of the same amount of kids as normal” who genuinely focused on learning rather than grades (Bee B. interview, May 17, 2026). She ultimately concluded that “the brain change isn’t there” for many students because their previous educational experiences continued to shape how they interpreted academic success (Bee B. interview, May 17, 2026). These contrasting perspectives suggest that while both teachers encountered similar barriers, they perceived different degrees of student change during the implementation process.

Taken together, the two cases indicate that transforming student motivation and learning behaviors was not an immediate outcome of grading reform but rather a gradual developmental process requiring sustained effort. Both teachers concluded that students needed repeated experiences with growth, continual opportunities for reflection, and ongoing conversations about learning before deeply rooted beliefs about grades began to shift. Camille reflected that changing students' thinking "is a lot of work" and "takes time," but she remained confident that the process would "become easier and easier every year" and that she did not "see [herself] changing away from it" (Camille S. interview, May 17, 2026). Bee likewise remained committed to mastery-based grading and intended to continue using the language of proficiency, but she concluded that changing students' motivation was more difficult than redesigning the grading system itself because students had spent years learning to define success through grades and grade point averages. Collectively, these findings suggest that grading reform created conditions that supported greater student reflection, ownership, and engagement with learning, but neither participant viewed those outcomes as automatic consequences of changing grading practices. Instead, both cases indicate that transforming student motivation requires sustained instructional dialogue, repeated opportunities for students to experience growth, and sufficient time for students to reconstruct long-held beliefs about learning, achievement, and academic success.

Theme Summary

Dimension of Grading Reform	Cross-Case Finding
Persistence of traditional grading beliefs	Both participants found that students entered the reform with deeply established beliefs about grades, points, averages, and academic success. These beliefs continued to shape how students interpreted mastery-based grading even after classroom grading practices changed.
Student understanding of control over learning	Both teachers encountered students who initially viewed grades as something that happened to them rather than something influenced by their own actions. Helping students recognize the connection between effort, practice, feedback, and growth became ongoing instructional challenge.
Resistance of mindset structural change	The mechanics of grading could be redesigned relatively quickly, but students' underlying beliefs about learning changed much more slowly.

	Neither teacher found that new grading structures automatically produced a growth-oriented mindset.
Persistence of grade-oriented behaviors	Even with opportunities for feedback, reassessment, reflection, and goal setting, many students continued to engage most actively when grades became immediately consequential. Traditional habits surrounding grades remained difficult to disrupt.
Use of reassessment and feedback	Both teachers provided opportunities for students to act on feedback and demonstrate improved learning, but student use of those opportunities was uneven. Some students engaged meaningfully, while others used reassessment primarily as a way to improve a grade or failed to follow through.
Role of instructional dialogue	Both participants found that changing students' thinking required continual conversations about proficiency, growth, evidence of learning, and the purposes of assessment. Revised grading procedures alone were insufficient without sustained teacher-student dialogue.
Redefining what counts as success	Both teachers worked to shift students' attention away from traditional indicators of success toward evidence of growth and proficiency. Camille especially emphasized broader communicative proficiency, while Bee emphasized skill mastery rather than task completion or point accumulation.
Evidence of changing learning behaviors	Both participants observe some movement toward more reflective and learning-oriented behaviors. Camille reported increasingly visible changes in students' thinking and attention to proficiency, while Bee observed meaningful change among some students but much less widespread change than she anticipated.
Uneven student response	Neither teacher perceived changes in motivations or learning behaviors as consistent across students. Some students embraced reflections, feedback, and growth, while others remained strongly oriented toward grades and external outcomes.
Influence of broader educational culture	Both cases suggested that students' responses were shaped by years of prior experience with traditional grading. Bee especially emphasized the influence of GPA and schoolwide expectations, concluding that one classroom could not easily overturn messages reinforced throughout students' educational experiences.
Time required for change	Both participants ultimately viewed changes in student motivations as developmental and gradual. Students required repeated experiences with reflection, feedback, reassessment, and visible growth before long-established beliefs began to shift.

Table 21: Summary of Question 3 Theme 3

As summarized in Table 21, both participants found that transforming student motivation and learning behaviors was considerably more difficult than redesigning grading practices. Students frequently interpreted mastery-based grading through long-established assumptions about points, averages, letter grades, and academic success, and many continued to engage most actively when grades became immediately consequential. Although both teachers observed evidence of growth, particularly through reflections, feedback, and conversations about proficiency, those changes were uneven and developed slowly. Camille perceived more visible

movement toward growth-oriented thinking over the course of the implementation, whereas Bee remained more cautious about the extent of student change and emphasized the continuing influence of GPA and broader educational expectations. Across both cases, the findings indicate that grading reform can create stronger conditions for changes in motivation and learning behaviors, but those changes require sustained instructional dialogue, repeated experiences with growth, and time rather than emerging automatically from changes to the grading system itself.

Summary

This chapter presented the findings of a qualitative case study examining how two high school teachers experienced and interpreted the implementation of a student-centered grading model focused on standards-based mastery, academic growth, and student self-agency. Findings were organized around the study's three research questions and were informed by interview transcripts, grading policies, communication documents, and classroom artifacts.

Across the data sources, both participants described grading reform as an effort to strengthen the relationship between grades and learning by emphasizing proficiency, growth, and meaningful feedback over the accumulation of points. Although Camille S. and Bee B. shared a commitment to the philosophical goals of the reform, their experiences illustrated different perspectives on its implementation. Camille increasingly described the grading model as an effective means of communicating student learning and supporting academic growth, whereas Bee remained supportive of the reform while expressing greater concern about students' continued attachment to traditional grading practices and the systemic conditions that limited the reform's effectiveness.

Findings related to Research Question 2 demonstrated that implementing the grading reform required substantial changes in instructional practice. Both teachers redesigned

assessment and grading systems, clarified learning targets and proficiency expectations, expanded opportunities for feedback and reassessment, and intentionally created structures that encouraged students to monitor their own progress and participate more actively in the learning process. Collectively, these findings indicate that the grading reform extended beyond changes to grading procedures and influenced assessment design, instructional planning, classroom routines, and teacher decision-making.

Findings related to Research Question 3 showed that participants perceived both meaningful benefits and persistent challenges associated with grading reform. Teachers described increased transparency in learning expectations, stronger alignment between grades and demonstrated proficiency, and greater opportunities for student reflection and self-monitoring. At the same time, participants consistently reported that deeply rooted beliefs about grades, achievement, and academic success continued to shape how students engaged with learning. Both participants emphasized that while instructional practices could be redesigned, changes in student motivation, ownership of learning, and agency developed more gradually and remained influenced by broader educational expectations surrounding grades and accountability.

Taken together, these findings portray grading reform as a complex instructional change that affected not only grading practices but also assessment design, classroom learning structures, teacher-student interactions, and students' experiences of learning. While participants described meaningful progress toward creating more transparent, learning-centered classrooms, they also identified enduring tensions associated with implementing reform within educational systems historically organized around traditional grading practices. These findings provide the foundation for the discussion presented in Chapter 5, where they are interpreted in relation to the

existing literature, the study's conceptual framework, and implications for policy, practice, and future research.

Chapter 5 - Chapter 5 - Discussion

Introduction

This chapter interprets the findings presented in Chapter 4 and considers their significance in relation to the purpose of the student, the research questions, the conceptual framework, and the existing body of literature on grading reform. The purpose of this qualitative case study was to examine how a student-centered grading model focused on standards-based mastery, academic growth, and student self-agency was implemented within a high school setting through the experiences of two participating teachers. Specifically, the study explored how teachers experienced and interpreted the implementation of the grading reform, the instructional and assessment practices they adopted, and their perceptions of the reform's influence on student learning, student self-agency, and their own professional practice and instructional decision-making.

Whereas Chapter 4 presented a descriptive account of the findings derived from interviews and supporting artifacts, this chapter moves beyond description to interpret the broader meaning of those findings. The discussion considers how participants' experiences relate to existing research on grading reform, formative assessment, standards-based grading, and student agency while examining the ways in which the findings support, extend, or challenge previous scholarship. Particular attention is given to the opportunities and tensions teachers encountered as they sought to create classroom cultures that emphasized learning, growth, and student ownership rather than traditional point accumulation.

The discussion is organized around the study's central research question and two supporting research sub-questions. First, the chapter examines how participants experienced and interpreted grading reform as an effort to align grades more closely with student learning while

navigating the complexities of implementation. Next, the discussion considers the instructional changes participants described making to support grading reform, followed by an examination of their perceptions of the reforms' benefits and challenges for student learning and student self-agency. Throughout the chapter, the findings are interpreted through the study's conceptual framework and are situated within the broader literature to illuminate the contributions of this study to understanding student-centered grading practices in secondary education.

The chapter concludes by discussing the implications of the findings for teachers, school leaders, and educational policymakers, identifying limitations of the study, offering recommendations for future research, and summarizing the study's contributions to the growing body of research on grading reform and student-centered assessment.

Overview of Major Findings

Grading Reform as a Shift in Instructional Philosophy

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to examine how two high school teachers experienced and interpreted the implementation of a student-centered grading model designed to emphasize standards-based mastery, academic growth, and student self-agency. Analysis of interview data, classroom artifacts, grading policies, parent communications, and instructional documents revealed that grading reform was experienced as considerably more than a modification to grading procedures. Rather, participants described the reform as a fundamental shift in instructional philosophy that required rethinking the purpose of grades, redesigning classroom assessment practices, and redefining both teacher and student roles within the learning process. Although both teachers strongly supported the underlying principles of the reform, they also described implementation as a complex and evolving process that required continual

reflection, adaptation, and negotiation within educational structures historically grounded in traditional grading practices.

Redefining the Relationship Between Grades and Learning

Across the study, the findings suggest that grading reform was interpreted primarily as an effort to improve the relationship between grades and learning. Rather than viewing grades as records of assignment completion, effort, or accumulated points, both participants consistently described grades as indicators of students' demonstrated proficiency that should accurately communicate what students know and are able to do. While the two teachers implemented grading reform within different grading structures, both intentionally designed systems that prioritized current evidence of learning, separated formative practice from summative assessment, emphasized feedback and reassessment, and encouraged students to view learning as an ongoing developmental process rather than a series of isolated performances. Collectively, these findings suggest that grading reform represented a philosophical redefinition of grading from a system of point accumulation to a system of communicating student learning.

Instructional Practice as a Site of Reform

The findings also demonstrate that implementing this philosophical shift required substantial changes in teachers' professional practice. Participants described redesigning assessments, developing new proficiency scales and rubrics, increasing opportunities for formative practice, expanding the use of descriptive feedback, providing multiple opportunities for reassessment, and modifying instructional pacing to better support student learning. These changes extended well beyond altering grade calculations and instead required participants to reconsider long-established instructional routines, classroom, expectations, and approaches to assessment. Both teachers portrayed implementation as an iterative process characterized by

continuous refinement than the adoption of a fixed grading model. As their understanding of student-centered grading evolved, they regularly adjusted policies, instructional strategies, and communication practices in response to classroom experience and student needs. These findings suggest that successful implementation of grading reform depends not only on changing grading policies but also on transforming instructional decision-making and everyday classroom practice.

Creating Conditions for Student Self-Agency

Participants further described grading reform as creating new opportunities to promote student learning and student self-agency. Across interviews and supporting documents, both teachers perceived that increased transparency regarding learning expectations enabled students to better understand what constituted quality performance and how proficiency developed over time. Students were provided multiple opportunities to practice, receive feedback, revise their work, monitor their progress, and reflect upon evidence of their learning. Although the extent to which students embraced these opportunities varied across the two classrooms, both participants described students becoming increasingly familiar with the language of proficiency, mastery growth, and evidence-based reflection. Rather than relying exclusively on teacher evaluation, students were encouraged to analyze their own work, identify strengths and areas for improvement, and participate more actively in conversations about their learning. These findings suggest that student-centered grading has the potential to foster greater assessment literacy and create structures that support increases student ownership of learning.

Persistent Student Mindsets About Grades and Achievement

At the same time, the findings demonstrate that changing grading practices alone was insufficient to transform deeply established beliefs about grades and achievement. Both participants described persistent challenges associated with students' longstanding orientation

toward grades, GPA, and external measures of success. The teachers reported that while students gradually demonstrated greater understanding of proficiency-based learning, many continued to interpret classroom experiences through traditional assumptions regarding grading and academic performance. Bee B. described this tension most directly, noting that although students increasingly understood the purpose of the grading system, many remained primarily concerned with improving grades rather than improving learning. Similarly, Camille S. observed that students often viewed grades as something that happened to them rather than something that reflected their own learning and effort. Together, these findings suggest that changes in student mindset may occur more gradually than changes in instructional practice because they are shaped by years of educational experiences extending beyond a single classroom.

Implementation Challenges and Organizational Constraints

The findings also reveal that implementation challenges extended beyond students themselves. Both teachers described increased workload, the demands of designing new assessments, communicating unfamiliar grading practices to students and parents, and working within school systems that continued to rely on traditional reporting structures. Although these challenges complicated implementation, neither participant questioned the philosophical value of grading reform. Instead, both viewed the difficulties as evidence that meaningful grading reform requires sustained professional learning, ongoing refinement, and organizational support rather than a one-time change in grading procedures. Their reflections suggest that grading reform should be understood as an organizational and instructional change process rather than simply the adoption of an alternative grading system.

Synthesis of Findings

Taken together, the findings tell a consistent and coherent story about the implementation of student-centered grading. Both participants viewed grading reform as an opportunity to create more accurate, transparent, and learning-centered approaches to assessment while simultaneously encouraging greater student ownership of learning. Achieving these goals, however, required substantial changes in instructional practice and continual adaptation throughout implementation. Moreover, the findings indicate that although teachers can redesign assessment systems relatively quickly, transforming long-established beliefs about grades, achievement, and learning represents a more gradual and complex process. These broader patterns provide the foundation for the discussion that follows. The remainder of this chapter interprets these findings in relation to the study's research questions, conceptual framework, and existing literature while considering their implications for educational practice, policy, and future research.

Discussion of R1: How do two high school teachers experience and interpret grading reform initiatives focused on standards-based mastery and academic growth?

The purpose of Research Question 1 was to examine how two high school teachers experienced and interpreted the implementation of a student-centered grading model focused on standards-based mastery and academic growth. While Chapter 4 described participants' experiences through three interrelated themes, the discussion moves beyond description to interpret what those experiences reveal about the nature of grading reform in secondary education. Collectively, the findings suggest that grading reform was experienced not as the adoption of a new grading system but as a broader instructional and philosophical transformation. Participants described redefining the purpose of grades, restructuring classroom

practices to better align assessment with learning, and attempting to shift students' understanding of achievement toward growth and proficiency. At the same time, they encountered significant challenges associated with implementing these changes within educational environments that continue to be shaped by traditional grading structures and long-established beliefs about academic success. The discussion that follows examines these findings in relation to the existing literature and considers their implications for understanding grading reform as a process of instructional, cultural, and organizational change.

Theme 1: Teachers Grapple with the Alignment Between Grades and Learning

Reframing the Purpose of Grades

The first major finding for this research question revealed that both participants experienced grading reform as a fundamental redefinition of the purpose of grades. Rather than viewing grades as records of assignment completion, effort, or accumulated points, Camille S. and Bee B. consistently described grades as communication tools intended to accurately represent students' current levels of proficiency and learning. Although the participants implemented different grading models that reflected the disciplinary expectations of world language and Advanced Placement English instruction, both interpreted grading reform as an effort to strengthen the relationship between grades and demonstrated learning. Thus, their experiences and interpretations of grading reform were grounded not simply in the adoption of new grading practices, but in a reconsideration of what grades should represent and how grading decisions should support learning. Their experiences suggest that grading reform extended well beyond changing how grades were calculated; instead, it represented a philosophical shift in how assessment, instruction, and student achievement were understood within their classrooms. Viewed through the lens of Agency Theory, this shift is significant because students' ability to

exercise agency depends, in part, on having access to meaningful information about their current performance, learning needs, and opportunities for growth. By interpreting grades as indicators of proficiency rather than accumulated points, both participants described grading systems intended to provide students with clearer information from which to understand and act upon their own learning.

This finding reinforces a central argument within the grading reform literature that the primary purpose of grades should be to communicate student learning rather than reward behaviors such as compliance, effort, or task completion. Guskey (2000, 2021) has long argued that traditional grading practices, particularly those based on averaging scores across time, frequently distort the accuracy of grades because they combine evidence collected at different stages of learning into a single mark. Likewise, Marzano (2000) contended that grades should communicate students' current level of achievement rather than mathematically summarize their instructional history. More recently, Feldman (2023) argued that traditional grading systems often measure a combination of academic achievement and nonacademic behaviors, thereby reducing the validity of grades as indicators of learning. The experiences of both participants strongly support these perspectives. Rather than describing grading reform as an alternative method of assigning points, both teachers viewed the reform as an opportunity to ensure that grades more accurately reflected what students knew and were able to do at a particular point in time. From an agency perspective, the accuracy of this information is consequential because students cannot make informed decisions about their learning when grades obscure the distinction between demonstrated understanding, behavior, effort, and task completion. The participants' interpretations suggest that aligning grades more closely with learning was intended

to give students a clearer understanding of their academic standing and, consequently, a stronger basis for determining what they needed to do next.

Although this philosophical commitment was shared across both cases, participants interpreted its application in ways that reflected their disciplinary contexts. Camille S. consistently described grades as “snapshots” of students’ developing language proficiency, emphasizing that proficiency develops over time and therefore should be represented by the most recent evidence of learning rather than mathematical averages. Bee B., in contrast, described grades as indicators of students’ demonstrated mastery across essential disciplinary skills, emphasizing that grades should communicate where students were “skill-wise rather than grade-wise.” While these interpretations differed in language and implementation, both reflected a common belief that grades should communicate learning rather than simply record completed work. Both interpretations also positioned the grade as information that students could potentially use to locate themselves within an ongoing learning process. Camille’s emphasis on developing proficiency allowed students to view performance as changeable over time, while Bee’s emphasis on specific disciplinary skills directed students toward identifiable areas of strength and needed improvement. Through the lens of Agency Theory, these approaches may support student agency by making progress more visible and giving students more specific information for monitoring, evaluating, and directing their learning. This consistency across two distinct instructional settings strengthens the credibility of the findings and suggests that the underlying philosophy of grading reform may transcend individual content areas even when grading practices differ.

Grading Reform as Instructional Reform

An important contribution of this study, however, extends beyond confirming previous scholarship regarding the purpose of grades. The findings suggest that teachers did not experience grading reform primarily as an assessment reform; rather, they experienced it as an instructional reform. As participants attempted to make grades more representative of student learning, they also described reconsidering how students encountered learning goals, practiced skills, received feedback, and demonstrated subsequent growth. Neither participant described the reform as simply requiring the adoption of a new grading scale or a different method of calculating grades. Instead, both experienced changes to grading as requiring corresponding changes in the instructional opportunities available to students before and after assessment. In other words, changes in grading required corresponding changes in teaching. This finding suggests that the relationship between instruction and assessment is more reciprocal than is often implied within discussions of grading reform. Grades could not become more accurate representations of learning until classroom instruction itself was reorganized to prioritize opportunities for learning before opportunities for evaluation. This connection is important to Agency Theory because student agency is not created through grading structures alone. Students also require opportunities to use information about their performance—to practice, respond to feedback, make adjustments, and demonstrate further learning. The participants' experiences therefore suggest that the potential for grading reform to support agency depended on whether the broader instructional environment enabled students to act on the information communicated through assessment.

This interpretation aligns with research emphasizing the close relationship between formative assessment and student learning. Black and Wiliam (2010) argued that assessment practices are most effective when they are embedded within instruction and used to support

learning rather than merely evaluate performance. Similarly, Looney (2011) emphasized that meaningful assessment systems require the integration of formative and summative assessment into coherent instructional processes rather than treating grading as a separate activity that occurs after instruction. The participants' experiences illustrate these principles in practice. Both teachers intentionally distinguished formative practice from summative demonstrations of learning, provided frequent feedback before assigning grades, and incorporated reassessment opportunities that allowed students to demonstrate improved understanding. Rather than functioning as isolated grading policies, these practices became central components of daily instruction designed to improve student learning before achievement was formally reported. These practices also created conditions through which students could potentially exercise greater agency. Feedback provided students with information about the gap between current and desired performance, while reassessment created an opportunity to respond to that information through further effort, strategy use, revision, and renewed demonstration of learning. In this sense, the participants experienced grading reform as creating a more active role for students within the assessment process rather than positioning them solely as recipients of grades.

The findings also reinforce literature suggesting that standards-based and mastery-oriented grading require teachers to rethink long-established instructional routines. Marsh (2023) argued that successful grading reform depends upon aligning curriculum, assessment, and grading practices around clearly defined learning expectations. Similarly, Brookhart (2011) emphasized that meaningful grading reform requires teachers to clarify learning goals, develop high-quality assessment criteria, and communicate achievement expectations transparently. The experiences of Camille S. and Bee B. demonstrate how these recommendations are enacted within the classroom practice. Both teachers described moving away from grading every

assignment toward intentionally designing learning experiences that prepared students for demonstrations of proficiency and mastery. Their descriptions illustrate that grading reform requires teachers to reconsider not only how learning is measured but also how learning is organized, supported, and communicated throughout instruction. The emphasis on clearly defined learning expectations is particularly relevant to student agency. When students understand the standards or skills toward which they are working and receive information about their progress toward those goals, they are better positioned to monitor their learning and make purposeful decisions about subsequent actions. The participants' interpretations of grading reform therefore suggest that transparency was not merely a feature of more accurate grading; it also represented an important condition for increasing students' capacity to participate actively in the learning process.

Grading Reform and the Conditions for Student Agency

Perhaps the most significant implication of this finding is that it reframes grading reform as a process that changes the role students are expected to assume in relation to assessment and learning. Throughout the implementation process, both participants described continually revising their instructional practices, refining grading policies, and adapting assessment structures in response to student learning and classroom experience. Neither teacher portrayed the reform as a finished product or a predetermined model to be implemented with fidelity. Instead, grading reform was experienced as an iterative process requiring continual reflection, experimentation, and professional judgment. This finding aligns with Guskey's (2021) observation that grading reforms are rarely successful when educators simply adopt new policies without simultaneously developing a deeper understanding of the instructional principles that support them. At the same time, the systems the participants developed increasingly positioned

students as participants who were expected to understand criteria, interpret feedback, monitor progress, and make use of additional opportunities to demonstrate learning. Through Agency Theory, these expectations can be understood as efforts to increase students' capacity to act intentionally within the learning process. Rather than grades functioning primarily as final judgements imposed upon students, the reform sought to make assessment information part of an ongoing process through which students could recognize where they were, identify where they needed to go, and take actions intended to move their learning forward.

Importantly, however, the existence of these structures does not necessarily mean that students consistently exercised greater agency. Agency depends not only on being provided with choices, feedback, and opportunities for reassessment, but also on students' willingness and capacity to use those opportunities purposefully. The participants' interpretations of grading reform therefore point to an important distinction between creating conditions that support student agency and producing agency as an automatic outcome of reform. This distinction becomes especially relevant to later findings concerning persistent grade-oriented behaviors and students' uneven engagement with reflection, feedback, and reassessment.

Synthesis: Grades, Instruction, and Agency

Taken together, these findings suggest that the most significant transformation experienced by participants was not the adoption of new grading procedures but the adoption of a new philosophy of assessment. Grades were no longer viewed as mechanisms for sorting students or documenting completed work but as tools for communicating learning and guiding continued growth. This shift fundamentally altered how participants understood the relationship between assessment and instruction, leading them to redesign classroom practices in ways intended to improve the accuracy, transparency, and educational value of grades. In direct

response to the study's first research question, both teachers experienced grading reform as a substantial instructional and philosophical change and interpreted its central purpose as creating a more meaningful alignment between grades and demonstrated student learning. Agency Theory extends this interpretation by highlighting the potential importance of that alignment for students when grades provide clearer information about current proficiency, students may be better positioned to understand their progress, respond to feedback, make learning-related decisions, and take greater ownership of subsequent improvement. Consequently, this study contributes to the growing body of grading reform literature by demonstrating that teachers experience grading reform not simply as change in grading policy but as a broader instructional and philosophical transformation that reshapes the purpose of teaching, assessment, and learning. It further suggests that one of the potential mechanisms through which this transformation may support student agency is by shifting assessment from a system that primarily reports outcomes to one that provides students with information and opportunities they can use to direct continued learning.

Theme 2: Teachers Struggle with Shifting Student Mindsets

Grading Reform as a Support for Student Agency

The second major finding for this research question revealed that both participants viewed grading reform as extending beyond changes to grading practices; they experienced it as an effort to transform how students understood learning, achievement, and their own role within the learning process. Although both teachers implemented grading systems designed to increase student ownership through opportunities for reflection, feedback, reassessment, and self-monitoring, they consistently described these structures as vehicles for changing student thinking rather than ends in themselves. In both classrooms, grading reform sought to move students away

from viewing grades as the primary purpose of schooling and toward understanding learning as a developmental process characterized by growth, reflection, and continuous improvement. In this way, both participants interpreted grading reform as an attempt to change not only how students were assessed but also how students understood their capacity to influence their own learning. The findings therefore suggest that grading reform was interpreted not only as an assessment reform but also as an intentional effort to cultivate greater student agency. Through the lens of Agency Theory, this distinction is important because agency requires more than participation in student-centered structures; it involves students recognizing themselves as capable of making purposeful choices and taking actions that influence their learning and academic progress.

This finding aligns with a growing body of literature that positions student agency as a central outcome of student-centered assessment practices. Adie et al. (2018) argued that assessment can promote agency when students become active participants in understanding and evaluating their own learning rather than passive recipients of teacher judgments. Similarly, Fletcher (2018) described classroom assessment as a reciprocal process in which students develop agency by engaging with feedback, monitoring their progress, and making informed decisions about future learning. More recently, Mameli et al. (2023) conceptualized student agency as students' capacity to intentionally direct their own learning through self-regulation, goal setting, and reflective decision-making. The instructional practices described by both participants closely reflected these principles. Student conferences, opportunities for reassessment, proficiency-based feedback, and structured reflection were not implemented simply to improve grades but to encourage students to become more active participants in the learning process. Both participants experienced these practices as mechanisms for shifting some responsibility for monitoring and responding to learning from the teacher to the student. From an

Agency Theory perspective, these structures provided students with opportunities to interpret information, make choices, and take purposeful action rather than simply receive an externally determined evaluation of their performance.

Transparency as a Condition for Agency

The findings also reinforce research emphasizing the importance of transparency in supporting student agency. Brookhart (2011) argued that students are better able to regulate their learning when assessment criteria and expectations are clearly communicated, while Brandt (2024) identified assessment literacy as an essential component of students' ability to take ownership of their learning. Throughout this study, both participants intentionally increased transparency by clarifying proficiency expectations, providing detailed performance criteria, and engaging students in conversations about evidence of learning. Rather than asking students to focus on accumulating points, both teachers encouraged them to examine where they currently stood in relation to clearly defined learning goals and to identify specific areas for continued growth. These instructional changes created conditions that supported greater understanding of learning expectations and encouraged students to become more reflective about their academic progress. Agency Theory helps illuminate why this transparency matters. Students' capacity to act intentionally is limited when they do not understand the goals toward which they are working, the quality of their current performance, or the actions available to improve that performance. By making learning expectations and evidence of progress more visible, the grading systems described by Camille and Bee were intended to give students information they could use to make more informed decisions about their learning.

Creating Opportunities for Agency Does Not Guarantee Agency

While these findings support previous scholarship regarding student agency, they also extend the literature by demonstrating that creating opportunities for agency does not automatically produce changes in student mindset. Throughout the implementation process, both participants described students who increasingly understood the language of proficiency, mastery and growth while simultaneously continuing to interpret learning through traditional beliefs about grades and academic success. This tension was particularly evident in Bee B.'s reflections, as she described students who understood the purpose of mastery-based grading yet remained primarily concerned with GPA, letter grades, and college admissions. Likewise, Camille S. observed that many students initially perceived grades as something that happened to them rather than something they influenced through their own learning and effort. Although both teachers experienced grading reform as creating greater opportunities for students to exercise agency, they did not necessarily interpret increased opportunities as evidence that students had fully developed more agentic orientations toward learning. These findings suggest that although instructional structures supporting agency can be implemented relatively quickly, the beliefs students bring to those structures may be considerably more resistant to change. This distinction is central to an Agency Theory interpretation of the findings: opportunities for choice, reflection, or action may create conditions for agency, but students must also perceive themselves capable of acting purposefully within those conditions and believe that their actions can meaningfully influence their learning.

This finding may help explain why grading reform often produces inconsistent results across classrooms and schools. Previous studies have documented positive relationships between standards-based grading and student ownership of learning (Barry 2022; Everson 2023), yet the participants in this study described agency as developing gradually through repeated experiences

rather than emerging immediately following implementation. Students did not simply become more self-directed because grading policies changed. Instead, they required ongoing conversations about learning, repeated opportunities to reflect upon evidence of their progress, and continual reinforcement that mistakes represented opportunities for growth rather than permanent judgments of ability. Both participants therefore experienced the development of student agency as an evolving process rather than an immediate consequence of reform. They interpreted changes in student thinking and behavior as something that had to be developed through repeated participation in learning structures that asked students to reflect, choose, respond, and act. The findings therefore suggest that agency develops through sustained participation in new learning experiences rather than through changes to grading policies alone. From an Agency Theory perspective, repeated experiences may be particularly important because they allow students to develop a stronger sense that their decisions and actions have consequences for their subsequent learning, thereby strengthening their capacity to act intentionally rather than simply respond to external grading demands.

The participants' experiences also illustrate the close relationship between grading reform and growth mindset. Dweck (2006; 2015) argued that students who understand intelligence and ability as malleable are more likely to embrace challenges, persist through difficulty, and view mistakes as opportunities for improvement. Both teachers intentionally designed grading practices that reflected these principles. Opportunities for reassessment, descriptive feedback, and the use of current evidence of learning communicated that achievement was not fixed but could improve through continued practice and effort. Camille's repeated descriptions of assessment scores as "snapshots" of learning rather than permanent evaluations illustrate this perspective particularly well. Likewise, Bee's emphasis on repeated demonstrations of mastery

reinforced the belief that students could continue developing their skills rather than being defined by a single assessment. Together, these instructional practices created assessment environments that encouraged students to view learning as an ongoing developmental process rather than a sequence of isolated performances. This orientation also has implications for student agency. When students perceive performance as changeable rather than fixed, their subsequent actions—such as revising work, seeking feedback, reassessing, or adjusting learning strategies—have greater perceived purpose. In this sense, the participants interpreted growth-oriented grading practices as supporting students’ understanding that they could act upon their present performance rather than simply accept it as a final judgment.

Prior Beliefs and Student Mindset as Mediating Conditions

At the same time, the findings suggest that deeply ingrained beliefs about grades often competed with these new understandings of learning. Students entered participants’ classrooms after years of experience within traditional grading systems that rewarded point accumulation, emphasized performance over improvement, and frequently equated grades with personal success. Consequently, many students continued to interpret opportunities for reassessment, reflection, and feedback through familiar assumptions about improving grades rather than improving learning. This observation represents an important contribution of the present study because it suggests that student agency is influenced not only by classroom assessment practices but also by students’ prior educational experiences. Teachers may successfully redesign assessment systems while simultaneously encountering students whose existing beliefs remain grounded in traditional conceptions of grading and achievement. Through the lens of Agency Theory, these findings highlight the interaction between individual capacity and context: students may be provided with opportunities to make choices and direct their learning, yet the ways they

interpret and use those opportunities remain shaped by the educational structures, expectations, and experiences they have encountered over time. Agency, therefore, cannot be understood solely as an individual student characteristic; it is exercised within conditions that can either support or constrain students' willingness and perceived ability to act.

Taken together, these findings suggest that the relationship between grading reform and student agency is more complex than it is sometimes portrayed within the literature. Rather than viewing agency as an automatic outcome of standards-based or mastery-based grading, this study indicates that agency develops through a gradual process in which students learn to reinterpret the purpose of grades, assessment, and feedback. Grading reform created the instructional conditions necessary for greater ownership of learning, but students' willingness and ability to assume that ownership evolved more slowly than the structural changes implemented by their teachers. In direct relation to the first research question, Camille S. and Bee B. experienced grading reform as an effort to reshape students' relationships with grades and learning, but they interpreted the success of that effort as uneven and developmental rather than immediate. Their experiences revealed a persistent tension between creating opportunities for students to exercise agency and changing the beliefs and behaviors necessary for students to make meaningful use of those opportunities. Consequently, this study extends the existing literature by suggesting that successful grading reform depends not only on redesigning assessment systems but also on intentionally supporting students as they reconstruct long-established beliefs about learning, achievement, and academic success. Agency Theory provides a useful lens for understanding this process because it highlights that student agency emerges through the interaction of opportunity, perceived capacity, intentional decision-making, and action. The findings suggest that grading reform can create conditions that make greater agency possible, but the development of

meaningful student agency requires students to gradually recognize and exercise their capacity to influence their own learning. This interpretation positions student mindset as a critical mediator between grading reform and the development of meaningful student agency, highlighting the importance of sustained instructional support as schools seek to implement more student-centered approaches to assessment.

Theme 3: Teachers Encounter Tensions Between Grading Reform and Traditional Grading Structures

Grading Reform Within Traditional Education Structures

The third major finding for this research question revealed that participants experienced grading reform as an ongoing process of negotiating tensions between the philosophical principles of student-centered assessment and the realities of educational systems historically organized around traditional grading practices. Although both Camille S. and Bee B. remained committed to the goals of standards-based mastery, academic growth, and student agency throughout the implementation process, they consistently described challenges associated with sustaining these practices within broader institutional structures that continued to emphasize letter grades, grade point averages, and conventional measures of academic achievement. Both participants therefore experienced grading reform not as an isolated change within their individual classrooms, but as a reform that frequently came into conflict with established expectations surrounding grades, achievement, and academic success. Their experiences suggest that grading reform is not simply a classroom-level instructional initiative but a broader process of organizational and cultural change that requires teachers to reconcile competing expectations about the purpose of grades and assessment. Through the lens of Agency Theory, these tensions are particularly significant because students' capacity to exercise agency does not develop

independently of the educational structures in which they participate. Although the participants created classroom conditions intended to increase student choice, reflection, and ownership, students continued to operate within systems that often communicated that external outcomes such as GPA and letter grades remained the most consequential measures of success.

This finding aligns with previous research describing grading reform as a complex and often difficult process of educational change. Marsh (2023) argued that implementing standards-based grading requires schools to move beyond modifying grading policies and instead align curriculum, assessment, reporting practices, and professional learning around a shared understanding of student learning. Similarly, Guskey (2021) observed that many grading reforms fail not because educators reject the philosophy underlying reform but because implementation occurs within educational systems that continue to reinforce traditional grading practices. More recent work by Morris and Townsley (2025) likewise suggests that tensions frequently emerge when modern grading practices are implemented within schools whose organizational structures and stakeholder expectations remain grounded in traditional grading systems. The experiences of both participants closely reflect these observations, illustrating that implementing grading reform required continuous negotiation between reform ideals and existing educational norms. For Camille and Bee, this negotiation shaped how they interpreted both the possibilities and limitations of the reform. While each teacher could redesign assessment and grading within her own classroom, neither could fully remove students from the broader systems through which grades continued to carry consequences beyond learning itself.

Perhaps the most significant tension identified by participants involved the persistence of traditional grading structures outside the classroom. Although both teachers intentionally redesigned assessment systems to emphasize mastery, growth, and proficiency, students

continued to participate in educational environments in which grade point averages, class rankings, transcripts, scholarship eligibility, and college admissions remained closely associated with traditional letter grades. Consequently, students often interpreted mastery-based practices through familiar assumptions about earning grades rather than developing learning. Bee B. described this challenge most explicitly, observing that many students continued to focus on grades despite understanding the philosophical purpose of the reform. Similarly, Camille S. described the ongoing work required to help students understand that temporary fluctuations in proficiency represented normal stages of learning rather than evidence of failure. Both teachers therefore experienced a disconnect between the learning-oriented messages communicated by their classroom grading systems and the performance-oriented messages students continued to receive from the larger educational systems. These findings suggest that classroom grading reforms cannot be fully separated from the broader educational systems in which students have developed their beliefs about achievement. From an Agency Theory perspective, this finding illustrates how student agency is shaped by context. Students may be given opportunities to make choices, respond to feedback, reassess, and monitor their own growth, yet their decisions remain influenced by institutional incentives that continue to privilege grades as outcomes. In this sense, students' continued attention to GPA or letter grades should not necessarily be interpreted as an absence of agency; rather, it may reflect purposeful action within a system in which those measures continue to carry substantial consequences.

This interpretation adds an important dimension to the relationship between grading reform and student agency. Agency does not necessarily mean that students will choose learning over grades when the broader educational environment continues to reward grade attainment. Instead, Agency Theory suggests that purposeful action occurs within particular social and

institutional conditions. The participants' experiences demonstrated that students were often being asked to adopt growth-oriented and mastery-oriented approaches to learning while simultaneously navigating structures that continued to make traditional grades consequential. Thus, the reform created new possibilities for student agency while the surrounding educational system sometimes constrained how students understood and exercised that agency.

Professional Adaptation and the Demands of Implementation

The findings also demonstrate that implementing grading reform required substantial professional adaptation on the part of teachers. Throughout the implementation process, both participants described increased workload associated with redesigning assessments, developing proficiency scales, providing timely feedback, communicating new grading practices to students and parents, and continually refining instructional approaches. Importantly, however, participants did not portray these challenges as reasons to abandon grading reform. Instead, they viewed them as expected aspects of meaningful instructional change. Their interpretations of these challenges suggest that the difficulty of implementation was tied to the extent of the philosophical and instructional transformation they were attempting to achieve. Creating grading systems that emphasized growth and student ownership required more than altering grade calculations; it required developing classroom structures through which students could understand expectations, receive meaningful feedback, and make use of opportunities to improve. This distinction is noteworthy because it suggests that workload functioned less as a barrier to reform than as evidence of the complexity involved in changing long-established instructional practices. Rather than resisting the additional demands of implementation, both teachers demonstrated a willingness to continue refining their approaches in pursuit of more meaningful assessment practices.

This interpretation extends previous research describing teacher workload as a common challenge associated with grading reform. Franklin et al. (2016) identified communication with parents as a significant concern during implementation, while Geduld (2024) noted that teachers frequently report increased time demands related to redesigning assessments and explaining unfamiliar grading practices to stakeholders. The experiences of participants in the present study support these observations but also suggest a more nuanced understanding of implementation challenges. Teachers were not simply learning new grading procedures; they were reconstructing deeply established instructional routines while simultaneously helping students and parents interpret fundamentally different conceptions of learning and achievement. The complexity of implementation therefore stemmed not only from adopting new practices but from managing the cultural transition accompanying those practices. This cultural transition was particularly relevant to student agency because students were being asked to assume a different role within the assessment process. Rather than primarily completing assignments and receiving grades, they were increasingly expected to interpret feedback, monitor progress, make decisions about next steps, and take responsibility for demonstrating continued learning. The participants' experiences suggest that supporting this shift required sustained explanation and reinforcement because it challenged students' established understandings of both grading and their own responsibilities within the learning process.

Grading Reform as an Iterative Process

Another important finding emerging from this study was participants' descriptions of grading reform as an iterative process rather than a completed initiative. Throughout both interviews, Camille S. and Bee B. consistently described refining policies, adjusting reassessment procedures, modifying communication strategies, and responding to student

feedback as implementation progressed. Bee's revisions to her grading policy during the school year provide a particularly clear example of this ongoing process. Rather than viewing these modifications as evidence that the grading reform was unsuccessful, she interpreted them as necessary refinements that strengthened alignment between the philosophy of mastery learning and classroom practice. Similarly, Camille described continually adjusting instructional pacing, formative assessment opportunities, and conversations with students as her understanding of implementation evolved. Both participants therefore experienced grading reform as something they came to understand through implementation rather than as a fixed model whose effectiveness could be determined in advance. Their interpretations evolved as they observed how students responded to the structures intended to promote mastery, growth, and ownership of learning. These findings suggest that fidelity to grading reform may be less important than teachers' willingness to engage in continual reflection and adaptation as they learn how student-centered grading functions within their own instructional contexts.

This iterative process also has implications for Agency Theory because the conditions that support student agency may need to be adjusted as teachers observe how students actually respond to them. Providing reassessment, reflection, or choice does not guarantee that students will use those opportunities in ways that increase ownership of learning. Camille's and Bee's ongoing revisions suggest that fostering agency required attention not only to whether opportunities existed but also to how students interpreted and engaged with those opportunities. Their experiences therefore reinforce the idea that agency is relational and contextual: it emerges through the interaction between students and the structures, expectations, and supports present within their learning environments.

This interpretation is consistent with scholarship emphasizing educational reform as a process of continuous professional learning. Mertler (2024) argued that meaningful instructional improvement requires educators to engage in ongoing cycles of implementation, reflection, and revision rather than viewing innovation as a one-time event. Likewise, Clark et al. (2020) described practitioner inquiry as an essential mechanism for refining instructional practice in response to classroom evidence. Although this study was not designed as an action research project, participants' descriptions of implementation closely resembled these iterative processes of professional learning. Rather than seeking to perfectly implement a predetermined grading model, both teachers continually evaluated the effectiveness of their instructional decisions and modified their practices to better support student learning. In relation to the research question, this finding demonstrates that participants experienced and interpreted grading reform as evolving rather than static. Their understandings of what worked, what remained difficult, and what students needed changed as they encountered the realities of implementation. This finding suggests that sustainable grading reform depends not only on adopting new assessment strategies but also on cultivating professional dispositions that support reflection, flexibility, and continuous improvement. It further suggests that efforts to increase student agency may require similar flexibility, particularly when students' responses reveal tensions between the intended purposes of the reform and the beliefs or behaviors they bring from prior grading experiences.

Organizational and Cultural Transformation

Collectively, these findings suggest that grading reform should be understood as a process of organizational and cultural transformation rather than simply the implementation of alternative grading procedures. While both participants successfully redesigned many aspects of classroom assessment, they simultaneously navigated institutional expectations, stakeholder

beliefs, and student assumptions rooted in traditional grading systems. The greatest challenge, therefore, was not learning how to implement standards-based or mastery-based grading practices but sustaining those practices within educational environments that continued to communicate different messages about the meaning and purpose of grades. In direct response to the study's first research question, Camille and Bee experienced grading reform as a continual negotiation between the learning-centered principles they sought to enact and the traditional structures and expectations that remained influential within and beyond their classrooms. They interpreted implementation not as a straightforward transition from one grading system to another, but as an ongoing effort to reconcile competing understandings of learning, achievement, and academic success.

Agency Theory further illuminates this tension by demonstrating that students' capacity to exercise meaningful agency is shaped by the contexts in which choices and actions occur. The grading reforms implemented by both participants created new opportunities for students to monitor learning, respond to feedback, make decisions, and demonstrate growth. However, students continued to function within institutional systems that attached significant consequences to conventional grades and achievement measures. As a result, the development of student agency was simultaneously supported by classroom-level reform and constrained by broader educational structures. This interpretation represents an important contribution of the present study because it shifts attention from viewing implementation challenges as isolated obstacles to understanding them as inherent tensions within broader systems of educational change. Successful grading reform, therefore, requires more than changes in classroom practice; it also depends upon organizational support, sustained professional learning, and a collective willingness among educators, students, parents, and school leaders to reconsider long-established

assumptions about grading, learning, and academic success. More specifically, if grading reform is intended to promote student agency, broader educational structures must increasingly reinforce rather than contradict classroom messages that position students as active participants in monitoring, directly, and improving their own learning.

Discussion of R2: How do teachers describe the changes in practice they made to implement this grade reform?

Research Question 2 examined how teachers described the changes in practice they made to implement the student-centered grading reform. While Research Question 1 focused on how participants experienced and interpreted the reform, this question shifts attention to the instructional, assessment, and pedagogical changes teachers enacted to translate the philosophical principles of standards-based mastery, academic growth, and student agency into everyday classroom practice. Across interviews and supporting artifacts, participants described implementation as requiring substantially more than modifications to grade calculation procedures. Instead, grading reform prompted comprehensive changes to assessment design, instructional planning, feedback practices, classroom routines, and teacher-student interactions. These changes reflected participants' efforts to create learning environments in which assessment functioned as a tool for supporting growth rather than simply measuring performance.

The findings presented in Chapter 4 demonstrated that the instructional changes made by participants were closely interconnected. Redesigning assessment systems required corresponding changes in feedback practices, reassessment opportunities, instructional pacing, and the teacher's role during the learning process. Rather than implementing isolated instructional strategies, participants described reconstructing multiple aspects of classroom

practice to better align with the philosophical goals of grading reform. This finding suggests that grading reform is best understood as a comprehensive instructional transformation rather than the adoption of a series of independent grading practices.

The discussion that follows is organized around three themes that emerged from the analysis. The first theme examines how participants redesigned assessment and grading systems to better align grades with demonstrated learning. The second theme explores how participants expanded the use of feedback, reflection, and formative assessment to support student learning throughout the instructional process. The final theme considers how grading reform reshaped teachers' professional roles as participants shifted from primarily evaluating student performance toward facilitating student learning, growth, and self-agency. Collectively, these themes illustrate that implementing grading reform required teachers to fundamentally reconsider how assessment, instruction, and classroom interactions worked together to support student learning.

Theme 1: Teachers Redesign Assessment Practices to Emphasize Mastery and Growth

Redesigning Assessment Around Evidence of Learning

The first major theme related to Research Question 2 revealed that implementing grading reform required participants to fundamentally redesign their assessment and grading systems to better align grades with demonstrated learning. Rather than modifying isolated grading procedures, both participants described reconstructing multiple components of their assessment systems, including grading scales, assessment design, grade calculation, reassessment policies, and the distinction between formative and summative assessment. Although Camille S. and Bee B. implemented different grading models that reflected the unique demands of their respective disciplines, both described redesigning assessment systems to ensure that grades communicated

students' current levels of proficiency rather than accumulated points or completed assignments. In direct relation to the research question, the changes in practice described by both participants reflected a movement away from traditional systems organized around point accumulation and toward assessment structures organized around evidence of learning, growth, and proficiency. These findings suggest that successful grading reform requires teachers to rethink the structure and purpose of classroom assessment rather than simply adopting alternative methods for calculating grades. Through the lens of Agency Theory, these structural changes are also important because they altered the conditions within which students interacted with assessment. By making proficiency, progress, and opportunities for improvement more visible, the redesigned systems created greater potential for students to understand their learning and take purposeful action in response to it.

This finding reinforces a central principle within the standards-based and mastery-based grading literature that assessment systems should be intentionally aligned with clearly defined learning outcomes. Guskey (2000) argued that grading practices should accurately communicate student achievement by reporting learning relative to standards rather than combining multiple academic and behavioral factors into a single grade. Likewise, Marzano (2000) emphasized that effective grading systems begin with clearly articulated learning goals and assessments specifically designed to measure student proficiency. More recently, Marsh (2023) described standards-based grading as requiring a comprehensive redesign of assessment systems so that grading practices consistently reflect evidence of learning rather than instructional compliance. The experiences of both participants closely support these recommendations. Rather than simply changing how grades were calculated, participants redesigned assessment systems to better align grading practices with the instructional purposes of standards-based mastery and academic

growth. Their descriptions of these changes demonstrate that implementation involved making learning goals and evidence of proficiency more central to everyday assessment practice. From an agency perspective, this alignment also gave students clearer information about what they were expected to learn and how their performance related to those expectations, providing a stronger foundation for monitoring and directing their own learning.

Separating Practice for Evaluation

An important aspect of this redesign involved redefining the relationship between formative and summative assessment. Both participants intentionally distinguished opportunities for learning from opportunities to evaluate learning, ensuring that formative practice functioned as preparation for future demonstrations of proficiency rather than as graded evidence contributing directly to final course grades. Homework, guided practice, classroom activities, and teacher feedback were repositioned as instructional supports intended to improve learning before students completed summative assessments. Thus, one of the most significant changes in practice described by participants was the deliberate creation of spaces in which students could practice, make mistakes, receive feedback, and improve without those early attempts permanently influencing reported achievement. This finding is consistent with Black and William's (2010) argument that formative assessment is most effective when it functions as an integral component of instruction rather than simply another source of grades. Similarly, Looney (2011) emphasized that assessment systems should integrate formative and summative assessment in ways that support learning while maintaining the validity of reported achievement. By separating practice from evaluation, both participants created assessment systems that prioritized learning before accountability, allowing grades to represent demonstrated understanding rather than students' earliest attempts at mastering new content. The separation

also supported conditions for student agency by giving students opportunities to act on feedback, alter strategies, and make decisions about their learning before performance became summatively evaluated. Rather than treating an initial attempt as a fixed outcome, the redesigned systems positioned learning as something students could influence through subsequent action.

The findings further suggest that redesigning assessment systems required participants to reconsider traditional assumptions regarding the collection and reporting of evidence. Rather than accumulating numerous grades throughout a grading period, participants intentionally limited graded assessments to demonstrations that provided meaningful evidence of student learning. Bee B. described moving away from feeling obligated to “have enough grades in the gradebook,” while Camille S. focused on collecting evidence that accurately represented students’ current proficiency rather than averaging performances across the semester. Both participants therefore described becoming more intentional about what counted as evidence of learning and when that evidence should contribute to a student’s grade. These findings support Brookhart’s (2011) assertion that high-quality grading depends not upon the quantity of assessment evidence collected but upon the quality and appropriateness of the evidence used to communicate student achievement. Together, the participants’ experiences suggest that grading reform encourages teachers to become more selective and intentional about the assessment evidence that contributes to reported grades. This change also has implications for student agency because grades based on clearer and more relevant evidence may provide students with more meaningful information about their current learning. When students can more readily connect an assessment result to a specific skill or standard, they may be better positioned to identify areas for growth and decide how to respond.

Reassessment and Responsive Instruction

Another significant instructional change involved the incorporation of reassessment as a routine component of classroom assessment rather than an exception to traditional grading practice. Both participants redesigned their grading systems to allow students multiple opportunities to demonstrate learning after receiving additional instruction and feedback. Rather than viewing reassessment as an accommodation for struggling students, participants described it as an expected feature of learning that acknowledged that mastery develops over time. In describing this change, both teachers positioned reassessment as a purposeful part of the learning process rather than simply a mechanism for increasing a grade. This finding aligns with Feldman's (2023) argument that grades should communicate students' current level of achievement rather than preserve evidence from earlier stages of learning. Likewise, Kramer et al. (2025) found that assessment systems emphasizing feedback and reassessment improved opportunities for students to demonstrate learning while strengthening the relationship between grades and achievement. The present study extends these findings by illustrating how teachers operationalized reassessment within everyday classroom practice. Participants described reassessment not as repeating the same task until students earned a higher score, but as creating additional opportunities for students to demonstrate improved understanding after engaging in further learning. From an Agency Theory perspective, reassessment is particularly significant because it provides students with an opportunity to respond intentionally to evidence about their performance. Students are not simply informed of an outcome; they are given the possibility of using feedback, engaging in additional learning, and choosing to demonstrate growth. In this way, reassessment can shift students from passive recipients of grades toward more active participants in determining subsequent learning actions.

The redesign of assessment systems also required participants to rethink how instructional decisions were made throughout the learning process. Camille S. described adjusting instructional pacing according to students' demonstrated proficiency rather than adhering to predetermined instructional timelines, while Bee B. explained that separating practice from graded assessment allowed instructional planning to become more purposeful and responsive to student learning. These descriptions demonstrate that the changes teachers made to implement grading reform extended into decisions about pacing, sequencing, and the timing of assessment. These findings suggest that redesigning assessment systems influenced instructional planning as much as grading itself. Assessment no longer functioned primarily as an endpoint following instruction; instead, assessment became a mechanism for informing instructional decisions and determining when students were prepared to demonstrate mastery. This interpretation supports Black and William's (2010) assertion that assessment should serve as an ongoing component of teaching rather than a discrete event occurring after instruction has concluded. This more responsive approach also created conditions in which student progress could influence what happened next in the classroom. From an agency perspective, such responsiveness matters because students' demonstrated learning and subsequent actions become part of the instructional process rather than being treated only as outcomes measured after instruction is complete.

Assessment Redesign as a System of Interconnected Practices

Perhaps the most significant contribution of this finding is that it illustrates the systemic nature of assessment redesign. Although grading reform is often discussed in terms of grading policies or reporting practices, participants experienced implementation as requiring coordinated changes across multiple dimensions of classroom practices. Altering grading scales necessitated

changes in assessment design, which in turn required changes in feedback practices, reassessment procedures, instructional planning, and classroom communication. None of these practices functioned independently. Instead, participants consistently described redesigning interconnected assessment systems in which each component supported the broader goal of ensuring that grades accurately reflected student learning. In relation to the second research question, this finding demonstrates that participants described implementation not as a single change in grading technique but as a network of interdependent changes to classroom practice. This finding extends existing scholarship by demonstrating that assessment redesign is not a collection of isolated instructional strategies but a coherent system of practice grounded in a shared philosophy of learning. Agency Theory further strengthens this interpretation by highlighting that opportunities for student agency are likewise embedded within systems rather than produced by a single practice. Transparency, formative feedback, reassessment, and clear evidence of proficiency work together to create an environment in which students have greater access to information and opportunities to make purposeful decisions about their learning.

Collectively, these findings indicate that implementing grading reform required teachers to fundamentally reconsider how assessment functioned within their classrooms. Rather than serving primarily as a mechanism for assigning grades, assessment became an integrated component of the instructional process that guided learning, informed teaching, and provided meaningful evidence of student proficiency. Camille S. and Bee B. described implementing grading reform through substantial changes to assessment design, the separation of practice and evaluation, the selection of evidence used for grades, reassessment procedures, and instructional decision-making. Together, these changes shifted assessment from a system primarily designed to record performance toward one intended to support and communicate learning. This study

therefore contributes to the growing body of research on grading reform by demonstrating that redesigning assessment systems is not simply a procedural adjustment but a comprehensive instructional transformation that reshapes the relationship between teaching, assessment, and learning. Viewed through Agency Theory, this transformation also created conditions more supportive of student agency by providing students with clearer information about their learning, opportunities to respond to feedback, and meaningful chances to make decisions and take action toward continued growth. Importantly, these structures do not guarantee that students will exercise greater agency, but they expand the opportunities available for students to participate more actively in monitoring and directing their learning.

Theme 2: Teachers Reorient Instruction Around Responsive Feedback and Student Learning

Repositioning Feedback as Part of Instruction

The second major finding related to Research Question 2 revealed that grading reform prompted participants to develop more intentional, feedback-centered approaches to instruction that emphasized supporting learning throughout the instructional process rather than simply evaluating learning at its conclusion. Both Camille S. and Bee B. described shifting their instructional practices to include more purposeful formative assessment, ongoing descriptive feedback, structured opportunities for student reflection, and instructional adjustments based on evidence of student learning. Rather than viewing feedback as an activity that followed assessment, participants integrated feedback throughout instruction to help students understand learning expectations, monitor their progress, and prepare for demonstrations of proficiency. In direct relation to the research question, both teachers described changes in practice that repositioned feedback from something provided after learning had been evaluated to something

used continuously to support learning as it developed. These findings suggest that implementing grading reform required teachers to fundamentally reconsider not only how they assessed learning but also how they used instruction to promote learning before grades were assigned. Viewed through the lens of Agency Theory, this shift is also significant because meaningful student agency depends, in part, on students having access to information that allows them to understand their current performance, identify possible next steps, and take purposeful action to improve their learning.

This finding aligns closely with the formative assessment literature, which emphasizes feedback as a central mechanism for improving student learning. Harlen and Crick (2003) argued that formative assessment is most effective when evidence of student understanding is continuously gathered and used to inform both instructional decisions and students' understanding of their own progress. Similarly, Looney (2011) emphasized that meaningful assessment systems integrate formative assessment into everyday classroom practice, allowing teachers to respond to student learning while helping students better understand expectations for success. The instructional changes described by both participants closely reflected these principles. Rather than relying primarily on summative assessments to evaluate learning, both teachers intentionally incorporated frequent opportunities for students to receive feedback, practice targeted skills, and refine their understanding before demonstrating proficiency. Their descriptions therefore indicate that one of the central changes in practice involved creating a more continuous cycle of practice, feedback, response, and improvement. From an agency perspective, this cycle provided students with repeated opportunities not merely to receive information about their learning but to use that information to influence what happened next.

Descriptive Feedback and Responsive Instruction

The findings also reinforce Brookhart's (2011) assertion that effective grading systems depend upon clear communication of learning expectations and meaningful feedback that helps students understand their progress toward those expectations. Throughout the implementation process, both participants described making learning targets more explicit and using feedback to guide students toward mastery rather than simply informing them of earned scores. Feedback became increasingly descriptive, focusing on specific strengths, areas for improvement, and next steps for continued learning. Rather than serving primarily to justify grades, feedback functioned as an instructional tool that helped students recognize what they had learned and what they still needed to develop. Thus, the changes participants described were not limited to providing more feedback; they involved changing the content and purpose of that feedback so that it communicated actionable information about learning. This instructional shift reflected participants' broader efforts to align assessment practices with the philosophical goals of standards-based mastery and academic growth. Agency Theory helps explain the importance of this change because students are more capable of exercising agency when feedback provides information they can interpret and act upon. Descriptive feedback can make the relationship between present performance and future learning more visible, thereby giving students a clearer basis for deciding how to proceed.

An important aspect of this instructional transformation involved intentionally designing learning experiences that supported students before summative assessment occurred. Participants described using formative checks for understanding, classroom discussions, guided practice, and individual conferences to identify misconceptions and provide targeted support throughout the learning process. Instruction became increasingly responsive to evidence of student learning rather than following a predetermined sequence of lessons regardless of student understanding.

Both participants therefore described changing practice in ways that made instruction more responsive to students' demonstrated needs and progress. This finding aligns with Looney's (2011) argument that assessment and instruction should function as integrated components of the learning process rather than as separate instructional events. The participants' experiences suggest that grading reform encouraged teachers to view assessment not as the conclusion of instruction but as an ongoing source of information that informed daily instructional decisions. This responsiveness also created a more dynamic context for student agency. When evidence of student learning influenced subsequent instruction, students' progress, questions, and responses became consequential within the learning process rather than merely recorded at its conclusion.

Aligning Learning Activities With Goals and Student Action

The findings further demonstrate that developing more intentional instruction required participants to become increasingly deliberate about aligning classroom activities with clearly defined learning goals. Rather than organizing instruction around the completion of assignments or the accumulation of grades, both teachers described designing instructional experiences that prepared students to demonstrate proficiency on identified learning standards. Formative learning activities, feedback opportunities, and classroom discussions were intentionally connected to the knowledge and skills students would eventually be expected to demonstrate independently. In describing these changes, participants emphasized a shift from completing instructional tasks toward engaging students in activities with a clearer relationship to specific learning goals. This finding supports Marsh's (2023) assertion that effective grading reform requires coherent alignment among learning objectives, instruction, assessment, and grading practices. Participants' descriptions illustrate that this alignment extended well beyond grading policies and became a guiding principle for instructional planning. For student agency, this

alignment is consequential because students can more effectively monitor and direct their learning when they understand not only what they are doing but why they are doing it and how an activity contributes to a larger learning goal. Clear alignment therefore provides students with a stronger frame of reference for interpreting feedback and making purposeful learning decisions.

The participants' experiences also suggest that feedback-centered instruction encouraged students to become more active participants in the learning process. Opportunities for reflection, classroom dialogue, and ongoing feedback helped students better understand learning expectations and recognize their own progress toward mastery. These instructional practices closely parallel Adie et al.'s (2018) description of assessment environments that promote student agency by engaging learners in understanding and monitoring their own learning. Likewise, Fletcher (2018) argued that student agency develops when assessment practices encourage students to actively engage with feedback and use it to guide future learning. Rather than positioning students as passive recipients of grades, participants described creating instructional routines that encouraged students to interpret feedback, reflect on their progress, and make decisions about subsequent learning. From an Agency Theory perspective, this represents an important shift in students' role within instruction. Feedback-centered practices did not simply give students more information; they increasingly expected students to engage with that information, evaluate their own progress, and determine how they might respond. In this sense, the changes in practice described by the participants created greater opportunities for students to exercise intentionality and take an active role in directing their learning.

At the same time, the presence of feedback and reflection opportunities should not be interpreted as evidence that students automatically exercised greater agency. Agency requires

students to do something with the information available to them—to interpret it, make decisions, and take purposeful action. The participants’ descriptions therefore suggest that feedback-centered instruction created conditions that could support student agency, while the extent to which students made use of those conditions varied. This distinction is important because it positions agency as an active process rather than an automatic consequence of providing feedback.

Feedback as a Bridge Between Grading Reform and Agency

Perhaps the most significant contribution of this finding is that it demonstrates how grading reform fundamentally changed the instructional purpose of feedback. Within traditional grading systems, feedback often serves to explain or justify grades after learning has been evaluated. In contrast, both participants described feedback as an instructional strategy designed to improve learning before achievement was formally reported. Feedback became embedded throughout daily instruction, shaping classroom conversations, formative assessment, instructional planning, and opportunities for revision. In response to the second research question, this represents a substantial change in practice: participants shifted from using feedback primarily as a response to completed performance toward using it as an ongoing instructional resource intended to shape future performance. This finding extends the existing grading reform literature by suggesting that the value of feedback lies not simply in providing students with more information, but in repositioning feedback as an essential mechanism through which learning is supported, monitored, and continuously improved. Agency Theory extends this interpretation by highlighting that feedback becomes particularly powerful when students can use it as a resource for action. In that role, feedback can help student identify possibilities for

improvement, choose among next steps, and see themselves as capable of influencing subsequent learning outcomes.

Collectively, these findings indicate that implementing grading reform required teachers to move beyond simply increasing the amount of feedback they provided toward creating instructional environments in which feedback became central to the learning process. Formative assessment, descriptive feedback, instructional responsiveness, and student reflection worked together to support continuous learning rather than isolated evaluation. In direct response to Research Question 2, Camille S. and Bee B. described changing their practice by embedding formative assessment more consistently within instruction, providing more descriptive and actionable feedback, aligning instructional activities more deliberately with learning goals, responding to evidence of student understanding, and creating opportunities for students to reflect on and respond to feedback before summative evaluation. This study therefore contributes to the growing body of research on grading reform by demonstrating that feedback-centered instruction is not merely an effective teaching strategy but a foundational component of implementing student-centered grading. As participants redesigned their grading systems, they simultaneously transformed daily instructional practice so that feedback consistently guided learning before grades were assigned, strengthening the alignment among instruction, assessment, and student learning. Viewed through Agency Theory, these changes also created conditions more supportive of student agency by giving students clearer information about their progress and more opportunities to interpret that information, make decisions, and take purposeful action toward improvement. The findings therefore suggest that feedback-centered instruction can serve as an important bridge between grading reform and student agency when

feedback is designed not simply to inform students about learning, but to enable them to participate actively in determining what comes next.

Theme 3: Teachers Create Structures for Student Reflection and Ownership of Learning

Creating Structures for Reflection and Ownership

The third major finding related to Research Question 2 revealed that implementing grading reform required participants to intentionally create instructional opportunities that promoted student reflection and ownership of learning. Rather than positioning students as passive recipients of grades, both Camille S. and Bee B. described developing classroom routines that encouraged students to actively engage with feedback, monitor their own progress, reflect on their learning, and take greater responsibility for demonstrating proficiency. Reflection was not implemented as an isolated instructional strategy but as an integral component of the learning process that supported students in understanding where they were in relation to learning expectations and what steps were necessary for continued growth. In direct relation to the research question, both teachers described changing their practice by deliberately creating structures through which students were expected to participate more actively in understanding, evaluating, and responding to their own learning. These findings suggest that grading reform reshaped not only teachers' instructional practices but also students' roles within the assessment process. Viewed through the lens of Agency Theory, these changes are particularly significant because they were intended to develop students' capacity to act purposefully within the learning process rather than remain dependent upon teachers to interpret performance and determine subsequent actions.

This finding is consistent with literature emphasizing student involvement as an essential component of effective assessment practice. Adie et al. (2018) argued that assessment becomes more meaningful when students actively participate in understanding learning goals, interpreting evidence of their own learning, and using feedback to guide future improvement. Likewise, Fletcher (2018) described student agency as developing through instructional practices that encourage learners to reflect on their progress and assume greater responsibility for directing their own learning. Throughout this study, both participants intentionally incorporated opportunities for students to examine their learning, engage in conversations about proficiency, and use assessment information to make decisions about continued improvement. These practices reflected participants' efforts to position students as active participants in assessment rather than passive recipients of grades. From an Agency Theory perspective, this shift moved students toward a more agentic role by providing opportunities to interpret information about their learning, consider possible courses of action, and make purposeful decisions about how to proceed. Thus, the changes in practice described by participants were not simply intended to increase student participation; they were designed to increase students' capacity to influence the direction of their own learning.

Transparency as a Foundation for Student Reflection

The findings also reinforce Brookhart's (2011) assertion that students are better able to take ownership of learning when assessment expectations are transparent and clearly communicated. Both participants consistently described making learning goals, proficiency expectations, and success criteria explicit so that students could evaluate their own progress with greater confidence. Rather than relying exclusively on teacher judgments, students were encouraged to compare their work against clearly defined learning expectations and identify

areas requiring additional growth. By increasing transparency surrounding assessment, participants created conditions that supported more meaningful student reflection and greater understanding of what successful learning looked like within their classrooms. In terms of the changes teachers made to implement the reform, transparency became a necessary foundation for transferring greater responsibility to students. Students could not meaningfully monitor or direct their learning without first understanding the goals, criteria, and evidence against which that learning was evaluated. Agency Theory therefore helps explain why transparency mattered: access to clear information increased students' ability to make informed judgments about their own performance and identify purposeful next steps.

An important instructional change involved embedding reflection throughout the learning process rather than reserving it for the conclusion of instruction. Participants described using conferences, classroom discussions, formative assessment activities, and opportunities for reassessment to encourage students to regularly consider their progress toward mastery. Reflection became an ongoing instructional practice that accompanied learning rather than a final evaluation of completed work. Both teachers described making reflection a recurring classroom routine rather than an occasional activity. This finding aligns with Looney's (2011) argument that assessment systems are most effective when they support continuous learning through ongoing dialogue between teachers and students. Rather than functioning solely as evaluators of student performance, participants increasingly used instructional interactions to help students recognize their strengths, identify areas for improvement, and develop strategies for continued learning. Through the lens of Agency Theory, repeated reflection provided students with opportunities to develop the self-awareness necessary for intentional action. By repeatedly asking students to consider what they understood, where difficulties remained, and what they might do

next, the participants created structures intended to strengthen students' ability to regulate and direct their own learning over time.

Shifting Responsibility From Teacher to Student

The findings further suggest that promoting ownership of learning required participants to gradually shift responsibility from teacher to student. Rather than providing all direction regarding learning, both teachers described encouraging students to monitor their own progress, seek clarification when needed, revise work following feedback, and demonstrate readiness for reassessment. Students were expected to become increasingly engaged in decisions about their learning rather than waiting for teachers to determine each subsequent step. This gradual transfer of responsibility represents one of the clearest changes in practice described by participants. Rather than teachers retaining primary control over interpreting learning and determining what should happen next, students were increasingly expected to assume responsibility for recognizing needs and initiating appropriate responses. This instructional shift reflects Marsh's (2023) description of student-centered grading systems as learning environments that encourage students to actively engage with evidence of learning instead of focusing primarily on accumulated grades. The participants' experiences suggest that ownership of learning developed through repeated opportunities for students to participate in assessment processes that previously had been controlled almost exclusively by teachers. Agency Theory provides a particularly useful lens for interpreting this shift because agency involves the capacity to make intentional choices and act upon them. The participants' changes in practice expanded the opportunities available for students to exercise this capacity by asking them not only to understand teacher feedback but also to decide how they would respond to it.

The instructional practices described by participants also illustrated the close relationship between reflection and academic growth. Rather than viewing mistakes as indicators of failure, both teachers intentionally used reflection to help students interpret errors as opportunities for continued learning. Feedback, reassessment, and classroom discussions consistently emphasized improvement over performance, encouraging students to view learning as an ongoing developmental process. This finding is consistent with Dweck's (2006, 2015) work on growth mindset, which suggests that students become more willing to embrace challenges and persist through difficulty when they understand learning as something that develops over time rather than as a fixed measure of ability. Although the purpose of this study was not to examine growth mindset directly, participants' descriptions suggest that reflective instructional practices reinforced many of the same principles by encouraging students to focus on progress rather than perfection. This orientation also supported the development of student agency by helping students recognize that their present level of performance did not represent a fixed endpoint. When students understood that additional effort, strategy changes, revision, or reassessment could influence future performance, they were given a stronger basis for viewing their own actions as consequential to learning. In this way, reflection connected awareness of current performance with the possibility of purposeful future action.

Ownership as a Capacity That Must Be Developed

Perhaps the most significant contribution of this finding is that it demonstrates how grading reform redefined the instructional relationship between teachers and students. Rather than positioning teachers as the sole authority responsible for evaluating learning, participants described creating classrooms in which students assumed greater responsibility for understanding expectations, interpreting feedback, and monitoring their own progress. Ownership of learning

was therefore not treated as an outcome that emerged automatically from changes in grading policy but as an instructional capacity that required intentional development through repeated opportunities for reflection, dialogue, and self-assessment. In relation to the second research question, the participants described accomplishing this shift through concrete changes in practice that redistributed portions of the assessment process from teacher to student. Students were increasingly expected to examine evidence, evaluate progress, identify needs, and determine appropriate next steps. This finding extends the existing literature by suggesting that student ownership is cultivated through daily instructional interactions that consistently reinforce students' active participation in the learning process. Agency Theory deepens this interpretation by suggesting that these routines functioned as opportunities for students to practice agency. Rather than assuming that students would become self-directed simply because a grading system was labeled student-centered, participants created repeated experiences through which students could develop the knowledge, confidence, and decision-making capacity necessary to take a more active role in their learning.

Importantly, however, creating these opportunities did not ensure that all students would exercise agency consistently or in the ways teachers intended. The participants' descriptions suggest the student agency remained developmental: students varied in their willingness and ability to reflect meaningfully, respond to feedback, initiate reassessment, or assume responsibility for next steps. This distinction reinforces the idea that teachers can design conditions that support agency, but agency ultimately requires students to interpret those opportunities and choose to act within them. Thus, the changes in practice identified in this theme represent efforts to cultivate student agency rather than evidence that agency emerged automatically from grading reform.

Collectively, these findings indicate that implementing grading reform required teachers to intentionally design classroom experiences that encouraged students to become reflective, self-directed learners. Opportunities for self-assessment, ongoing feedback, transparent learning expectations, and structured reflection worked together to increase students' participation in understanding and directing their own learning. Camille S. and Bee B. described changing their practice by embedding reflection throughout instruction, making learning expectations more transparent, creating opportunities for students to monitor their progress, and gradually transferring greater responsibility for interpreting and responding to learning from teacher to student. This study therefore contributes to the growing body of research on grading reform by demonstrating that promoting student ownership is not simply an instructional strategy accompanying student-centered grading but a fundamental component of its successful implementation. As participants redesigned assessment systems and instructional practices, they simultaneously redefined students' roles within the learning process, creating classroom environments in which reflection and ownership became essential elements of academic growth. Viewed through Agency Theory, these changes can be understood as deliberate efforts to create the conditions through which students could develop and exercise greater agency. By providing students with information about their learning, opportunities to evaluate their progress, and increasing responsibility for determining subsequent actions, participants sought to move students from recipients of teacher-directed assessment toward more intentional participants in their own learning.

Discussion of R3: How do teachers perceive the benefits and non-benefits of grade reform on student learning and student self-agency?

Research Question 3 examined how teachers perceived the benefits and non-benefits of grading reform on student learning and student self-agency. While Question 2 focused on the instructional and assessment changes participants implemented, this question shifts attention to how participants interpreted the effects of those changes on students. Across interviews and supporting classroom artifacts, both Camille S. and Bee B. described grading reform as having meaningful implications for students' understanding of learning, engagement with feedback, and opportunities to assume greater ownership of their academic progress. At the same time, participants recognized that not all intended outcomes were realized equally. While they perceived improvements in students' understanding of learning expectations and increased opportunities for reflection and self-monitoring, they also described persistent challenges associated with changing long-established beliefs about grades, achievement, and academic success. These findings suggest that although instructional practices may change relatively quickly, corresponding changes in students' attitudes, motivations, and learning behaviors often develop more gradually.

Collectively, the findings indicate that participants viewed the effects of grading reform as both instructional and developmental. They consistently described benefits that extended beyond improvements in grading practices to include greater transparency, more meaningful learning conversations, increased opportunities for student reflection, and stronger alignment between grades and learning. However, participants also emphasized that the success of these changes depended on students' willingness to engage with new expectations about learning and assessment. In many cases, students continued to interpret classroom experiences through

traditional understandings of grades, requiring teachers to continually reinforce the purposes and principles of the reform. These findings suggest that the perceived impact of grading reform cannot be understood solely through changes in assessment systems but must also be considered in relation to the ways students interpret and respond to those changes.

The discussion that follows is organized around the three themes that emerged from the analysis. The first theme examines participants' perceptions that grading reform increased transparency and students' understanding of learning expectations. The second theme explores how participants believed grading reform supported student reflection and the development of self-agency. The final theme considers participants' perceptions of the ongoing challenges associated with transforming student motivation and learning behaviors within educational contexts that continue to be influenced by traditional grading practices. Together, these themes illustrate that participants viewed grading reform as creating important opportunities for improving student learning while also recognizing that meaningful changes in student beliefs and behaviors require sustained instructional support and time to develop.

Theme 1: Teacher Perceive Greater Transparency as Supporting Student Learning and Agency

Transparency as a Benefit of Grading Reform

The first major finding related to Research Question 3 revealed that both participants perceived grading reform as increasing transparency surrounding learning expectations, assessment criteria, and the purpose of grades. Rather than relying on traditional grading practices that often emphasized point accumulation and assignment completion, Camille S. and Bee B. described intentionally making learning objectives, proficiency expectations, and assessment criteria more explicit for students. Participants believed that these changes helped

students better understand what they were expected to learn, how their performance would be evaluated, and what constituted successful demonstration of learning. In direct relation to the research question, both teachers perceived this increases clarity as a benefit of grading reform for student learning because it gave students more precise information about learning goals, current performance, and expectations for improvement. They also perceived transparency as potentially beneficial to student self-agency because students had greater access to the information needed to monitor and make decisions about their own learning. These findings suggest that one of the most immediately perceived benefits of grading reform was the development of greater assessment literacy, allowing students to interpret grades and assessment information as meaningful indicators of learning rather than simply measures of academic performance. Through the lens of Agency Theory, this benefit is significant because students' capacity to act purposefully within the learning process depends, in part, on their ability to understand the conditions, expectations, and information that shape the choices available to them.

This finding is consistent with literature emphasizing transparency as a foundational principle of effective assessment. Brookhart (2011) argued that students are better able to engage with learning when assessment expectations and grading criteria are clearly communicated, enabling them to understand how their work relates to established learning goals. Similarly, Looney (2011) emphasized that assessment systems should provide meaningful information that helps students interpret evidence of their learning and use that information to support continued growth. Throughout this study, both participants described intentionally increasing the transparency of their grading systems by clearly communicating proficiency expectations, sharing performance criteria, and helping students understand how grades reflected demonstrated learning rather than accumulated points. Participants perceived that these practices reduced

uncertainty surrounding assessment and encouraged students to focus more directly on learning objectives. From an Agency Theory perspective, reducing this uncertainty may strengthen students' capacity for intentional action because students are better positioned to make meaningful learning decisions when they understand both the goals towards which they are working and the evidence used to judge their progress. Thus, participants perceived transparency not merely as clearer communication from teacher to student, but as providing students with information that could support more active participation in learning.

Developing Student Assessment Literacy

The findings also support scholarship suggesting that assessment literacy extends beyond teachers to include students themselves. Marsh (2023) argued that standards-based grading is most effective when students understand the relationship among learning standards, assessment evidence, and reported achievement. Participants consistently described helping students interpret proficiency scales, understand assessment rubrics, and recognize how individual assessments contributed to broader learning goals. Rather than viewing grades as isolated outcomes, students were encouraged to understand how assessment evidence reflected their current level of proficiency and identified areas for continued development. Participants perceived that this increased understanding helped students become more informed participants in the assessment process. This perceived benefit is particularly relevant to student self-agency because agency requires more than being given opportunities to make choices; students must also possess sufficient information to make those choices purposefully. By developing students' assessment literacy, the participants believed grading reform gave students a clearer basis for evaluating where they were in their learning and considering what actions might move them forward.

An important aspect of transparency involved clarifying the distinction between learning and grading. Both participants described intentionally communicating that formative practice, feedback, and classroom activities existed to support learning rather than simply generate points. Students were encouraged to view mistakes as opportunities to improve understanding before completing summative assessments that demonstrated proficiency. This finding aligns with Guskey's (2000, 2001) argument that grading systems should accurately communicate learning by separating the process of learning from the reporting of achievement. Participants believed that clearly communicating this distinction helped students better understand why classroom activities, feedback, and reassessment opportunities were structured differently from traditional grading systems. As students developed greater understanding of the purpose of formative assessment, participants perceived that they became more willing to engage in learning activities that emphasized improvement rather than immediate performance. In relation to student agency, this distinction may be especially consequential because it reframes mistakes and formative performance as information students can act upon rather than as fixed judgments. Participants perceived that when students understood that early performance did not permanently determine achievement, they had greater reason to use feedback, adjust strategies, seek help, and continue working toward mastery.

Transparency as a Necessary but Insufficient Condition for Agency

At the same time, the participants' perceptions also point to an important limitation of transparency as a benefit of grading reform. Greater clarity did not necessarily mean that students consistently used assessment information to direct their learning. Understanding a rubric, proficiency level, or learning target created the possibility for more informed action, but it did not guarantee that students would respond to that information in agentic ways. From an

Agency Theory perspective, transparency can therefore be understood as a condition that supports agency rather than as evidence that agency has been achieved. This distinction is important to the research question because the perceived benefit of greater assessment literacy existed alongside the non-benefit that clearer information was insufficient to transform all students' learning behaviors or orientations towards grades.

The findings further suggest that increased transparency strengthened communication between teachers and students regarding learning expectations. Participants described more frequent conversations with students about proficiency, mastery, and evidence of learning than they had experienced under previous grading systems. These discussions extended beyond explaining assignment requirements and increasingly focused on helping students interpret assessment evidence, identify strengths, and recognize areas requiring additional growth. This observation is consistent with Adie et al. (2018), who argued that assessment practices become more meaningful when students actively engage in understanding the evidence of their own learning rather than simply receiving evaluative judgments from teachers. Participants perceived that greater transparency encouraged these conversations by providing students with a clearer framework for discussing their academic progress. Agency Theory helps illuminate the importance of these interactions because agency can be supported through dialogue in which students are not merely told how they performed but are invited to interpret evidence, articulate needs, and participate in decisions about continued learning. In this sense, participants perceived transparency as changing students' role within assessment conversations from recipient toward participant.

The findings also indicate that transparency supported greater consistency in students' understanding of classroom expectations. Because learning targets, assessment criteria, and

proficiency expectations were communicated more explicitly, participants believed students were better able to anticipate what successful performance required. Rather than attempting to determine how to earn points or maximize grades, students increasingly focused on demonstrating the knowledge and skills identified within learning standards. Participants viewed this increased clarity as reducing confusion surrounding grading practices while helping students better understand the relationship between classroom learning activities and summative assessment. These perceptions reinforce Brookhart's (2011) assertion that transparent assessment practices enable students to more effectively connect instructional experiences with expected learning outcomes. For student learning, participants perceived this alignment as beneficial because students could direct attention toward identifiable knowledge and skills rather than toward the less transparent task of accumulating points. For student self-agency, the benefit lay in students having a clearer frame of reference for judging their own progress and determining where additional effort or learning was needed.

Assessment Literacy as an Enabling Condition for Agency

Perhaps the most significant contribution of this finding is that it illustrates how grading reform influenced students' understanding of assessment itself. Previous literature has emphasized the importance of transparency for improving communication about grading (Brookhart, 2011; Looney, 2011; Marsh, 2023). The findings of this study extend that scholarship by suggesting that transparency also promotes students' assessment literacy—their ability to interpret learning expectations, understand evidence of proficiency, and recognize the relationship between assessment and learning. Participants perceived that students were not simply receiving clearer grading information; they were developing a more sophisticated understanding of why assessments were conducted, how learning was evaluated, and what

evidence demonstrated meaningful academic progress. This represents a shift from viewing assessment as a mechanism for assigning grades to understanding assessment as a source of information that supports learning. Through the lens of Agency Theory, this shift is important because assessment information becomes a potential resource for student action. When students understand what assessment evidence means, they are better positioned to use that evidence to evaluate progress, identify needs, and make purposeful decisions about subsequent learning.

However, the findings also suggest that the perceived benefits of transparency should not be overstated. Both participants escribed increased understanding of expectations, but greater understanding did not always translate into greater ownership or self-directed learning. Students could become more assessment-literate while continuing to prioritize grades, GPA, or other external outcomes. This tension highlights a key non-benefit identified through the broader findings: grading reform could make learning more visible without necessarily changing the motivations that shaped how students responded to that visibility. Agency Theory helps explain this distinction by separating access to information from the intentional use of that information. Transparency expanded students' capacity to make informed choices, but the extent to which students exercised that capacity remained variable.

Collectively, these findings indicate that participants perceived increased transparency as one of the most immediate and visible benefits of grading reform. By making learning expectations, proficiency criteria, and assessment purposes more explicit, teachers believed students developed a clearer understanding of what they were learning, how learning would be assessed, and what successful performance required. In direct response to Research Question 3, Camille S. and Bee B. perceived these changes as beneficial to student learning because they reduced ambiguity and strengthened students' understanding of learning goals, evidence of

proficiency, and opportunities for improvement. They also perceived transparency as supportive of student self-agency because it provided students with information they could use to monitor progress and make more informed decisions about their learning. At the same time, they did not perceive transparency alone as sufficient to produce greater agency, since students varied in whether and how they acted on the information available to them. This study therefore contributes to the growing body of grading reform literature by demonstrating that transparency does more than improve communication about grades; it enhances students' understanding of assessment itself, creating conditions that better support informed engagement with learning and more meaningful interpretation of academic progress. Viewed through Agency Theory, transparency and assessment literacy can therefore be understood as enabling conditions for student agency: they increase students' capacity to understand and navigate their learning, while meaningful agency ultimately depends on whether students use that understanding to make intentional choices and take purposeful action.

Theme 2: Teachers Perceive Reflective Learning Practices as Supporting Student Agency

Reflection and Self-Agency as Perceived Benefits

The second major finding related to this question revealed that participants perceived grading reform as creating meaningful opportunities for student reflection and the development of self-agency. Both Camille S. and Bee B. described instructional environments in which students were encouraged to engage more actively with feedback, monitor their progress toward proficiency, reflect on their learning, and assume greater responsibility for demonstrating mastery. Rather than viewing learning as a process directed exclusively by the teacher, participants believed grading reform encouraged students to become more intentional

participants in evaluating their own progress and making decisions about continued learning. In direct relation to the research question, both teachers perceived these opportunities as a benefit of grading reform for student learning and student self-agency because they encouraged students to take a more active role in understanding and influencing their academic progress. These findings suggest that teachers perceived one of the most significant benefits of grading reform to be its ability to reposition students as active participants in the learning process rather than passive recipients of grades. Through the lens of Agency Theory, this repositioning is significant because student agency involves more than participation; it requires students to recognize their capacity to make purposeful choices and take actions that can influence their learning.

This finding is consistent with scholarship that identifies student agency as a central outcome of student-centered assessment practices. Adie et al. (2018) argued that assessment promotes agency when students are actively involved in understanding learning expectations, interpreting evidence of their own learning, and making informed decisions about future improvement. Similarly, Fletcher (2018) contended that assessment practices become more meaningful when students use feedback to regulate learning rather than simply receiving judgments about completed work. Throughout this study, participants described creating opportunities for students to engage in these processes through reflection, feedback, reassessment, and ongoing conversations about proficiency. Teachers perceived that these experiences helped students become more aware of their own learning and increasingly responsible for monitoring their academic progress. From an Agency Theory perspective, these experiences provided students with opportunities to connect awareness of their current performance with intentional decisions about what to do next. Participants therefore perceived

the benefit of these practices not simply as increased student involvement, but as movement toward students becoming more capable of directing aspects of their own learning.

Reflection and Reassessment as Mechanisms for Agency

The findings also reinforce Mameli et al.'s (2023) conceptualization of student agency as students' capacity to intentionally direct and regulate their own learning. Participants consistently described students becoming more engaged in identifying learning goals, interpreting assessment evidence, and recognizing areas requiring additional growth. Rather than asking teachers solely how to improve grades, participants observed that many students increasingly discussed how to improve their understanding or demonstrate greater proficiency. These observations suggest that grading reform encouraged students to think differently about their role in learning by emphasizing personal growth and continuous improvement rather than simply earning points. Teachers perceived that this shift represented an important movement toward greater learner autonomy and responsibility. In relation to Agency Theory, these perceptions suggest that some students were beginning to move beyond responding primarily to external outcomes and toward using information about learning to make more purposeful decisions. In this sense, participants perceived increased self-agency when students demonstrated greater intentionality in identifying needs, evaluating progress, and determining possible next steps.

An important aspect of this finding involved the role of reflection in supporting student learning. Participants described reflection not as an isolated classroom activity but as an ongoing instructional practice that encouraged students to examine their progress, interpret feedback, and identify next steps for improvement. This observation aligns with Harlen and Crick's (2003) assertion that formative assessment is most effective when students actively use assessment

information to improve subsequent learning rather than simply receiving evaluative information from teachers. Reflection became a mechanism through which students connected assessment evidence with future learning, allowing them to better understand both what they had accomplished and what remained to be learned. Participants perceived that these reflective opportunities helped students become more thoughtful learners who were increasingly capable of evaluating their own progress. Agency Theory helps explain why reflection may support self-agency: purposeful action depends upon students first being able to interpret their current circumstances, recognize possible areas for change, and consider the actions available to them. Reflection therefore served as a bridge between receiving information about learning and using that information to direct subsequent learning.

The findings further suggest that opportunities for reassessment contributed to students' developing sense of ownership over learning. Rather than treating assessment as a single opportunity to earn a grade, participants described reassessment as encouraging students to revisit feedback, continue practicing essential skills, and demonstrate improved understanding over time. This finding supports Moses et al.'s (2020) argument that assessment systems emphasizing growth and self-regulation encourage students to become more active participants in directing their own learning. Participants perceived that reassessment shifted students' attention away from viewing achievement as fixed and toward understanding that learning develops through continued effort, practice, and reflection. In this way, reassessment became not only a grading practice, but also an instructional structure that reinforced students' responsibility for their own learning. From an Agency Theory perspective, reassessment provided a particularly visible opportunity for students to exercise agency because it required them to respond to evidence of performance, decide whether and how to continue learning, and take action toward

improvement. Participants therefore perceived reassessment as beneficial not merely because it allowed grades to change, but because it created opportunities for students to experience their own actions as consequential to future learning outcomes.

Growth-Oriented Learning and the Limits of Agency

Participants also perceived that grading reform fostered learning environments that encouraged students to view mistakes differently. Rather than interpreting errors as evidence of failure, both teachers described helping students understand mistakes as valuable sources of feedback that informed future learning. This perception closely aligns with Dweck's (2006) work on growth mindset, which emphasizes that students are more likely to embrace challenge and persist through difficulty when they believe learning develops through effort and continued practice. Although participants acknowledged that not all students immediately adopted this perspective, they believed that repeated opportunities for reflection, revision, and reassessment gradually helped many students become more comfortable viewing learning as an ongoing developmental process. These instructional experiences supported students in recognizing that assessment was intended to promote growth rather than simply evaluate performance. This perceived shift also has implications for student agency because students are more likely to act purposefully when they believe that future performance can be influenced by their decisions and efforts. When mistakes are interpreted as information rather than final judgments, students may be more willing to revise, seek assistance, adjust strategies, or reengage with challenging learning.

At the same time, participants did not perceive these benefits as consistent across all students. Their accounts indicated that some students engaged meaningfully with reflection, feedback, and reassessment, while others continued to approach these opportunities primarily

through the lens of grades or remained reluctant to assume greater responsibility for learning. This represents an important non-benefit of grading reform in relation to student self-agency: providing structures that invite student participation did not necessarily result in all students becoming more self-directed. Agency Theory helps illuminate this distinction because agency depends not only on the availability of opportunities but also on students' willingness and perceived capacity to act within those opportunities. The reform could expand possibilities for agency without guaranteeing that students would use those possibilities in the ways teachers intended.

Self-Agency as a Developmental Capacity

Perhaps the most significant contribution of this finding is that it suggests student self-agency developed through sustained participation in reflective learning processes rather than through grading reform alone. Existing literature frequently identifies student agency as a desired outcome of standards-based or mastery-based grading systems (Adie et al, 2018; Fletcher, 2018; Mameli et al., 2023). The findings of this study extend that literature by illustrating how teachers perceived agency developing through repeated instructional experiences that encouraged students to interpret feedback, monitor progress, revise learning, and assume increasing responsibility for demonstrating proficiency. Participants did not describe agency as emerging automatically because grading practices changed. Instead, they viewed it as developing gradually through consistent opportunities for reflection, dialogue, and active engagement with assessment information. In direct relation to the research questions, this distinction is important because teachers perceived both a benefit and a limitation of the reform: grading reform created stronger conditions for students to develop self-agency, but it did not produce uniformly agentic behavior. This distinction suggests that instructional practices, rather than grading policies alone, play a

critical role in cultivating meaningful student ownership of learning. Through the lens of Agency Theory, agency can therefore be understood as developmental and enacted rather than simply granted. Students became more agentic when they learned to use the opportunities available to them to interpret their learning, make intentional decisions, and take purposeful action.

Collectively, these findings indicate that participants perceived grading reform as supporting student reflection and self-agency by creating classroom environments in which students became more actively engaged in understanding, monitoring, and directing their own learning. Reflection, feedback, reassessment, and ongoing conversations about proficiency worked together to encourage students to become increasingly responsible for their academic growth. Camille S. and Bee B. perceived these changes as beneficial to student learning because they helped students develop greater awareness of their progress and identify meaningful next steps. They also perceived them as beneficial to student self-agency because students were given more opportunities to interpret evidence, make decisions, and take responsibility for continued learning. At the same time, both teachers recognized that these benefits were uneven: opportunities for reflection and ownership did not automatically lead all students to become more self-directed or less grade-oriented. This study therefore contributes to the growing body of grading reform literature by suggesting that the benefits of grading reform extend beyond improving grading accuracy to fostering instructional conditions that support the gradual development of reflective, self-directed learners. Rather than viewing self-agency as a direct product of alternative grading systems, participants perceived it as an instructional capacity that developed through intentional opportunities for students to engage meaningfully with their own learning throughout the assessment process. Agency Theory further clarifies this finding by distinguishing between creating opportunities for agency and students actually exercising

agency. The participants perceived grading reform as expanding students' capacity to act intentionally within the learning process, while recognizing that meaningful self-agency developed gradually and depended upon students choosing to engage with and act upon those opportunities.

Theme 3: Teachers Perceive Long-Established Grading Beliefs as Limiting Student Agency

Persistent Grade Orientation as a Limitation of Reform

The third major finding related to Question 3 revealed that although participants perceived numerous instructional benefits associated with grading reform, they also described persistent challenges in transforming students' motivation and long-established learning behaviors. Both Camille S. and Bee B. believed that the instructional structures created through standards-based grading—including formative assessment, descriptive feedback, reassessment, and opportunities for reflection—provided students with greater opportunities to focus on learning rather than grades. However, participants consistently observed that many students continued to interpret these experiences through traditional understandings of academic success, emphasizing grades, grade point averages, and external indicators of achievement over mastery and personal growth. Both teachers perceived an important non-benefit of grading reform: although the reform created stronger conditions for student learning and self-agency, those conditions did not consistently translate into changes in students' motivation or learning behaviors. These findings suggest that changing assessment practices alone did not immediately change how students understood learning or why they are engaged in it. Through the lens of Agency Theory, this distinction is particularly significant because providing students with

opportunities to make choices, reflect, reassess, or respond to feedback does not ensure that students will exercise those opportunities in ways that reflect greater self-agency.

This finding aligns with Dweck's (2006) work on mindset, which argues that students develop beliefs about learning through repeated educational experiences that influence how they respond to challenge, feedback, and assessment. Students who have spent years in environments emphasizing performance, competition, and grades often learn to equate achievement with external evaluation rather than intellectual growth. Throughout this study, participants described students entering their classrooms with these deeply established beliefs, making it difficult for them to immediately embrace grading practices centered on mastery and continuous improvement. Although the teachers intentionally communicated that mistakes represented opportunities for learning and that proficiency could develop over time, participants perceived that many students initially continued to interpret assessment through the familiar lens of earning grades rather than developing understanding. Thus, teachers perceived that one limitation of grading reform was its inability to quickly disrupt students' established beliefs about what constituted academic success. From an Agency Theory perspective, these prior beliefs shaped how students interpreted the choices and opportunities available within the new grading system, influencing whether they used those opportunities primarily to improve learning or to pursue familiar external outcomes.

Prior Grading Experiences and the Development of Agency

The findings also reinforce scholarship suggesting that student agency develops gradually rather than emerging automatically from changes in assessment practices. Fletcher (2018) argued that assessment can support agency by providing students with opportunities to engage in reflection, self-monitoring, and informed decision-making; however, these opportunities must be

accompanied by sustained instructional experiences that help students learn how to assume greater responsibility for their learning. Similarly, Mameli et al. (2023) emphasized that agency is a developmental process requiring students to gradually acquire the skills and dispositions necessary for self-directed learning. The experiences of participants closely reflected these perspectives. Although both teachers intentionally created structures designed to encourage ownership of learning, they consistently described agency as developing unevenly across students. Some students embraced opportunities for reflection and reassessment, while others remained primarily focused on earning higher grades with little change in their underlying approach to learning. In relation to the third research question, participants therefore perceived grading reform as beneficial in expanding opportunities for student self-agency but limited in producing consistent changes in how students actually exercised that agency. Agency Theory helps clarify this distinction by separating the availability of agentic opportunities from students' willingness and capacity to act purposefully within them.

An important finding emerging from this study is that participants viewed students' prior experiences with traditional grading as one of the greatest influences on implementation. Rather than entering grading reform with neutral expectations, students brought years of educational experiences that had shaped their understanding of achievement, motivation, and success. Participants described students who often expected grades to function as rewards for completing work, viewed mistakes as failures rather than opportunities for growth, and interpreted feedback primarily as justification for earned scores instead of guidance for future learning. These observations extend Adie et al.'s (2018) discussion of assessment cultures by illustrating how students' previous experiences within traditional grading systems continued to influence how they interpreted new assessment practices. Participants perceived that implementing grading

reform therefore required changing not only classroom structures but also students' underlying assumptions about the purpose of assessment itself. Viewed through Agency Theory, these findings suggest that student agency is shaped by prior experiences as well as present opportunities. Students' capacity to act intentionally within a new grading system was influenced by the expectations and habits they had developed within earlier systems, meaning that new opportunities for ownership were often interpreted through familiar grade-oriented beliefs.

Motivation Within Broader Educational Structures

The findings further suggest that teachers perceived student motivation to be more resistant to change than instructional practice. Throughout the implementation process, participants described redesigning assessment systems, modifying instructional routines, and increasing opportunities for feedback relatively quickly. In contrast, changes in students' attitudes toward learning occurred gradually and inconsistently. This observation is supported by Barry (2022), who found that although grading reform can improve transparency and support learning, students often require substantial time to adjust to assessment systems that emphasize mastery over performance. Similarly, Everson (2023) reported that students frequently continue to prioritize grades even after the implementation of standards-based grading because traditional definitions of academic success remain deeply embedded within school culture. The experiences of participants in the present study reinforce these conclusions, suggesting that meaningful changes in student motivation require sustained exposure to new assessment experiences rather than isolated changes in grading policy. For both teachers, this represented a significant non-benefit of reform: structural and instructional changes could be implemented more readily than changes in the beliefs students brought to those structures. This finding reinforces the idea that self-agency is developmental. Students may need repeated opportunities to experience the

relationship between their choices, actions, and learning outcomes before they begin to view themselves as capable of directing learning in ways that extend beyond pursuing grades.

Participants also perceived that external educational structures complicated students' willingness to fully embrace the principles of grading reform. Although classroom assessment emphasized growth and proficiency, students continued to navigate educational systems that valued grade point averages, class rank, scholarship eligibility, and college admissions decisions. Consequently, many students struggled to reconcile classroom messages emphasizing learning with broader institutional messages emphasizing grades. Cain et al. (2022) argued that grading reform is often implemented within educational environments that continue to reward traditional indicators of achievement, creating tensions between reform goals and institutional expectations. Likewise, Guskey (2021) noted that grading reform requires changes in educational beliefs as well as grading policies if reforms are to achieve their intended purposes. The findings of this study strongly support these perspectives. Participants perceived that students' motivation was shaped not only by classroom assessment practices but also by the broader educational context in which those practices were embedded. This finding is especially relevant to Agency Theory because agency is exercised within social and institutional contexts rather than in isolation. Students who continued to prioritize GPA, letter grades, or college admissions were not necessarily failing to act agentically; in many cases, they may have been making purposeful choices in response to external structures that continued to make those outcomes consequential. Thus, participants perceived a tension between the kind of learning-oriented agency the reform sought to promote, and the forms of strategic action students perceived as necessary within the broader educational system.

This tension complicates a simple interpretation of grade-oriented behavior as evidence that grading reform was unsuccessful. From an Agency Theory perspective, students' decisions must be understood in relation to the contexts in which those decisions occur. A student who chooses to reassess primarily to improve a course grade may still be exercising agency, even if the motivation differs from the learning-centered orientation intended by the reform. The participants' perceptions therefore suggest that one non-benefit of grading reform was not an absence of student action, but rather the persistence of external incentives that shaped the purposes towards which students directed that action.

Transforming Motivation as a Developmental Process

Perhaps the most significant contribution of this finding is that it suggests transforming student motivation represents one of the most complex and time-intensive aspects of grading reform. Existing literature frequently identifies student agency, ownership, and growth as desired outcomes of standards-based assessment (Adie et al., 2018; Fletcher, 2018; Mameli et al., 2023). The findings of this study extend that scholarship by illustrating that these outcomes should be understood as developmental processes rather than immediate consequences of grading reform. Participants consistently perceived that changes in student motivation occurred more slowly than changes in instructional practice because they required students to reconstruct beliefs about learning that had developed across many years of traditional educational experiences. In direct relation to Research Question 3, this distinction highlights both a benefit and a non-benefit of grading reform. The reform provided students with more opportunities to reflect, respond to feedback, make decisions, and demonstrate growth, but participants perceived that these opportunities did not immediately or uniformly change the motivations that guided students' choices. This distinction is particularly important because it shifts attention from asking whether

grading reform “works” to considering how long meaningful changes in student learning behaviors may require and what forms of instructional support are necessary to facilitate those changes. Agency Theory further suggests that the development of self-agency should be understood not simply as increasing students’ freedom to act, but as helping students gradually develop the capacity and dispositions to direct those actions toward learning-oriented goals.

Collectively, these findings indicate that participants perceived the greatest challenge associated with grading reform not to be redesigning grading systems but transforming students’ long-established beliefs about learning, achievement, and academic success. While teachers believed grading reform created conditions that better supported reflection, agency, and mastery, they also recognized that students required time, repeated experiences, and consistent instructional support to reinterpret the meaning of grades and learning. Camille S. And Bee B. perceived grading reform as beneficial in creating greater opportunities for student learning and self-agency, but they also identified a significant non-benefit: those opportunities did not consistently produce corresponding changes in student motivation, grade orientation, or self-directed learning behaviors. This study therefore contributes to the growing body of grading reform literature by demonstrating that meaningful changes in student motivation cannot be achieved through structural changes to grading systems alone. Instead, participants perceived that lasting improvements in student learning behaviors depend on sustained efforts to reshape students’ beliefs about assessment, encourage reflective engagement with learning, and align classroom practices with broader educational cultures that value growth as much as performance. These findings demonstrate that grading reform can expand conditions under which students may exercise agency, but the nature of that agency remains shaped by students’ prior beliefs, perceived purposes, and the institutional contexts in which their choices occur. Meaningful

student self-agency, therefore, appears to develop not merely when students are given more control, but when they increasingly learn to use that control intentionally in ways that support their own learning and growth.

Integration with the Conceptual Framework

This study was guided by a conceptual framework integrating the principles of standards-based grading with theories of student agency to examine how teachers experienced and implemented grading reform focused on standards-based mastery, academic growth, and student self-agency. Standards-based grading provided the theoretical foundation for understanding how assessment and grading practices could be redesigned to more accurately communicate student learning, while student agency theory provided a framework for examining how these instructional changes were intended to support students' ownership of learning through reflection, self-monitoring, and active engagement in the assessment process. Collectively, the findings suggest that the conceptual relationship between these two perspectives is more dynamic and interconnected than originally conceptualized.

The findings strongly support the central assumptions of standards-based grading theory. Across all three research questions, participants consistently described redesigning assessment systems to ensure that grades more accurately reflected demonstrated learning rather than assignment completion, effort, or accumulated points. Teachers intentionally separated formative and summative assessment, incorporated opportunities for reassessment, emphasized descriptive feedback, and aligned grading practices with clearly articulated learning standards. These instructional changes closely reflect the principles described by Guskey (2000, 2021), Brookhart (2011), and Marsh (2023), suggesting that participants implemented grading reform in ways that were philosophically consistent with the theoretical foundations of standards-based grading.

Likewise, the findings generally support the assumptions underlying student agency theory. Participants consistently described creating instructional environments intended to increase students' responsibility for learning through opportunities for reflection, self-assessment, feedback, and goal-directed improvement. Teachers perceived that greater transparency surrounding learning expectations, increases opportunities for formative feedback, and reassessment encouraged students to become more engaged in understanding and monitoring their own learning. These findings align with theoretical perspectives presented by Adie et al. (2018), Fletcher (2018), and Mameli et al. (2023), which emphasize that agency develops when students actively participate in understanding learning expectations, interpreting evidence of learning, and making informed decisions about future improvement.

However, the findings also extend the conceptual framework by demonstrating that the relationship between standards-based grading and student agency is neither immediate nor automatic. Although the grading reform created instructional conditions intended to promote student ownership of learning, participants consistently perceived that students varied considerably in their willingness and ability to engage with these opportunities. Many students continued to approach learning through traditional beliefs about grades, academic performance, and external measures of success despite changes in classroom assessment practices. These findings suggest that simply implementing standards-based grading does not, by itself, produce greater student agency. Instead, agency appeared to develop gradually through repeated opportunities for reflection, feedback, reassessment, and ongoing conversations about learning.

The findings further indicate that teachers' instructional practices functioned as a critical mechanism connecting grading reform with the development of student agency. Participants did not describe grading reform as a set of isolated grading policies; rather, they described

redesigning assessment systems, instructional routines, feedback practices, and classroom interactions in ways that consistently reinforced the philosophical goals of the reform. Opportunities for student reflection and ownership emerged not solely because grading policies changed but because teachers intentionally embedded those opportunities throughout daily instruction. This finding suggests that instructional practice mediates the relationship between standards-based grading and student agency. In other words, grading reform creates the structural conditions that make agency possible, but it is teachers' instructional decisions that transform those structures into meaningful learning experiences for students.

An additional contribution of this study is the recognition that students' preexisting beliefs about learning also influence this relationship. Throughout the study, participants described students entering their classrooms with deeply established understandings of grading that had developed through years of traditional educational experiences. These beliefs shaped how students interpreted feedback, reassessment, reflection, and opportunities for self-directed learning. Consequently, the findings suggest that student agency is influenced not only by instructional structures but also by students' prior experiences and beliefs about the purpose of grades and assessment. This observation adds an important contextual dimension to the conceptual framework by indicating that grading reform occurs within broader educational cultures that continue to shape students' motivation and learning behaviors.

Taken together, the findings suggest a more iterative relationship between standards-based grading and student agency than originally represented within the conceptual framework. Rather than a linear progression in which redesigned grading practices lead directly to greater student ownership of learning, the findings indicated that grading reform initiates an ongoing instructional process through which teachers repeatedly support students in developing new

understandings of learning, assessment, and achievement. Student agency emerged not as an immediate outcome of grading reform but as a developmental process influenced by transparent assessment practices, intentional instructional support, opportunities for reflection, and students' willingness to reconstruct long-established beliefs about learning.

Accordingly, this study refines the original conceptual framework by proposing that teacher instructional practice serves as the mediating mechanism between standards-based grading and student agency, while students' prior beliefs about grading and learning act as contextual influences that shape how agency develops over time. This refinement offers a more comprehensive explanation of how grading reform functions with classroom settings and helps explain why teachers may successfully implement student-centered grading practices while observing more gradual changes in students' motivation, reflection, and ownership of learning. Rather than viewing standards-based grading and student agency as directly connected, the findings suggest that their relationship is best understood as an ongoing process of instructional and cultural change in which teachers and students jointly reconstruct the meaning and purpose of grades.

Implications

Implications for Educational Practices

The findings of this study suggest that successful implementation of grading reform requires substantially more than changes to grading policies or reporting practices. Across both cases, participants consistently described grading reform as prompting comprehensive changes to assessment design, instructional planning, feedback practices, and classroom interactions. These findings are consistent with scholarship suggesting that meaningful grading reform requires alignment among learning goals, assessment, instruction, and grading practices rather than

isolated changes to grade calculation (Guskey T. R., 2021; Marsh, 2023). Teachers implementing standards-based or mastery-based grading should therefore view grading reform as an instructional transformation rather than a procedural modification. Simply adopting proficiency scales, reassessment opportunities, or alternative grading calculations is unlikely to produce meaningful changes in student learning unless practices are supported by corresponding changes in classroom instruction. This implication is consistent with Black and William's (2010) and Looney's (2011) emphasis on integrating assessment with instruction so that evidence of learning is used to shape teaching and support continued learning.

The findings further suggest that transparency should be considered a foundational component of grading reform. Participants consistently perceived that students benefited when learning expectations, assessment criteria, and proficiency standards were communicated clearly and consistently. Brookhart (2011) emphasized the importance of clearly articulated learning goals and criteria for helping students understand both expectations and their progress toward those expectations, while Marsh (2023) similarly connected standards-based grading with clearly defined learning outcomes and evidence of proficiency. Increasing transparency appeared to help students better understand what they were expected to learn, how learning would be assessed, and what evidence demonstrated proficiency. Teachers implementing grading reform should therefore prioritize the development of clear learning targets, explicit success criteria, and ongoing conversations about the purposes of assessment rather than assuming students will naturally understand revised grading practices. Such transparency may also support student agency by providing students with the information necessary to interpret their performance and make more informed decisions about subsequent learning (Adie, et al., 2018; Fletcher, 2018).

The study also highlights the importance of embedding formative assessment and descriptive feedback throughout instruction. Participants perceived that feedback was most effective when it functioned as an ongoing instructional resource rather than simply an explanation of earned grades. This interpretation aligns with Black and Wiliam (2010), who positioned formative assessment as part of the instructional process through which evidence of learning informs subsequent teaching and learning, and with Looney (2011), who emphasized integrating formative assessment, feedback, and instructional decision-making. Brookhart (2011) likewise emphasized the importance of feedback that communicates meaningful information about students' progress toward learning goals. Opportunities for reflection, reassessment, and revision enabled students to use assessment information to improve learning before achievement was formally reported. Teachers should therefore intentionally design classroom routines in which feedback is integrated throughout the learning process, allowing assessment to guide instruction and student decision-making rather than merely documenting performance.

These practices also have implications for the development of student self-agency. Research on student-centered assessment suggests that agency is supported when students actively interpret evidence of their learning, monitor progress, engage with feedback, and make informed decisions about subsequent actions (Adie, et al., 2018; Fletcher, 2018; Mameli, et al., 2023). Consequently, reflection, reassessment, and self-monitoring should not be treated simply as components of a grading system but as instructional opportunities through which students can practice greater responsibility for their learning. Teachers implementing grading reform should intentionally teach students how to interpret assessment evidence, identify areas for growth, select appropriate next steps, and act upon feedback rather than assuming that providing these opportunities will automatically result in greater ownership.

Finally, the findings suggest that teachers should anticipate that changes in student motivation and learning behaviors may occur more gradually than changes in instructional practice. Although participants perceived increased transparency and improved opportunities for student reflection, they also consistently described students who continued to approach learning through traditional beliefs about grades and academic success. Dweck's (2006, 2015) work suggests that beliefs about ability, challenge, mistakes, and improvement develop through repeated experiences and can shape how students respond to learning opportunities. Similarly, the agency literature emphasizes that agency develops through students' ongoing engagement with opportunities to make decisions, regulate learning, and act purposefully rather than simply through the provision of choice (Fletcher, 2018; Mameli, et al., 2023). Consequently, teachers implementing grading reform should recognize that fostering student ownership of learning requires sustained instructional support, repeated opportunities for reflection, and continual reinforcement of the purposes of mastery-based assessment. Developing student agency should be viewed as an ongoing instructional goal rather than an immediate outcome of grading reform.

Implications for School Leadership and Policy

The findings also have important implications for school leaders responsible for supporting grading reform initiatives. Participants consistently described implementation as extending beyond individual classroom practices, requiring them to navigate educational systems that continued to reinforce traditional understandings of grading and achievement. Existing scholarship similarly suggests that grading reform involves more than individual teacher practices and requires attention to the broader structures, expectations, and beliefs surrounding assessment and reporting (Guskey T. R., 2021; Marsh, 2023). This suggests that grading reform is unlikely to be sustained through local policy changes alone. Instead, school leaders should

recognize grading reform as an organizational change initiative requiring alignment among instructional expectations, assessment practices, communication systems, and professional learning.

One implication concerns the importance of developing a shared understanding of the purposes of grading reform among teachers, administrators, students, and families. Participants frequently described the need to explain revised grading practices, particularly the purposes of formative assessment, reassessment, and standards-based reporting. Research has identified stakeholder understanding and communication as important challenges in the implementation of alternative grading practices, particularly when students and families remain accustomed to traditional grading systems (Franklin, et al., 2016; Guskey, 2021). Without consistent communication across stakeholders, traditional assumptions about grades may continue to shape expectations and undermine reform efforts. School leaders should therefore prioritize ongoing communication that clearly explains the philosophical goals of grading reform and demonstrates how revised practices support student learning.

The findings also underscore the importance of providing teachers with sufficient time and resources to redesign curriculum, assessments, and instructional materials. Both participants described implementation as requiring extensive planning, continual refinement, and ongoing reflection. Marsh (2023) emphasized that standards-based grading requires alignment among curriculum, assessment, grading, and instructional practice, suggesting that implementation necessarily involves work extending beyond revision of grading policies alone. The experiences of participants in this study similarly suggest that grading reform should not be viewed as an initiative that can be implemented quickly or through isolated professional development sessions. Instead, school leaders should provide collaborative planning time, opportunities for professional

dialogue, and instructional coaching that supports teachers as they redesign classroom practices over time.

School leaders should also recognize that implementation may require sustained support for teachers as they navigate unfamiliar practices and stakeholder expectations. Research on grading reform has identified concerns related to teacher workload, communication, and the practical demands associated with implementing nontraditional grading systems (Franklin, et al., 2016; Marsh, 2023). The experiences of the participants in this study suggest that these challenges should not necessarily be interpreted as resistance to reform; rather, they may reflect the complexity of redesigning interconnected instructional and assessment practices. Providing time for collaboration and refinement may therefore be important not only for initial implementation but also for the long-term sustainability of grading reform.

Finally, the findings suggest that grading reform efforts may be strengthened when schools consider broader organizational structures that continue to emphasize traditional indicators of academic success. Participants consistently observed that students remained influenced by concerns regarding grade point averages, college admissions, and other external measures of achievement. Research has similarly identified tensions between alternative grading approaches and educational systems that continue to rely heavily on traditional indicators of academic performance (Cain, et al., 2022; Franklin, et al., 2016; Guskey, 2021). Although school leaders may not be able to eliminate these broader structures, they can work to create greater coherence between classroom assessment practices and schoolwide messages about learning, growth, and achievement. Fostering a school culture that values growth, reflection, revision, and continuous learning alongside academic performance may reduce contradictory messages and provide stronger support for both grading reform and the development of student agency.

Implications Summary

Collectively, the implications of this study suggest that grading reform should be understood as a comprehensive instructional and organizational change process rather than simply the adoption of alternative grading practices. This interpretation is consistent with literature emphasizing the need to align grading with learning goals, assessment, instruction, feedback, and opportunities for continued growth (Guskey T. R., 2021; Looney, 2011; Marsh, 2023). Although redesigning grading systems represents an important first step, meaningful reform also requires changes in instructional practice, sustained professional learning, organizational support, and intentional efforts to help students reconstruct long-established beliefs and learning and achievement. Moreover, because student agency develops through opportunities to understand learning, interpret evidence, make decisions, and act purposely, grading reform should create not only different assessment structures but also instructional environments that help students learn how to use those structures (Adie, et al., 2018; Fletcher, 2018; Mameli, et al., 2023). By recognizing grading reform as both a pedagogical and cultural transformation, educators and school leaders may be better positioned to create learning environments that support meaningful student learning, reflection, and self-agency.

Limitations

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings of this study. These limitations do not diminish the value of the findings; rather, they define the scope within which the findings should be understood and interpreted. In qualitative case study research, findings are developed within the particular contexts in which the phenomenon is examined, making careful attention to the boundaries and conditions of the case important when

considering the meaning and potential applicability of the findings (Creswell, 2013; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Yin, 2018).

The first limitation concerns the timeframe of the study. Data were collected during a single academic year through two rounds of interviews conducted while participants were actively implementing the grading reform. As participants frequently noted, both their instructional practices and students' responses continued to evolve throughout implementation. Consequently, the study provides a snapshot of teachers' experiences during an important stage of the reform process rather than documenting how perceptions and instructional practices may continue to develop over multiple years. The findings of this study further suggest that implementation was iterative, with participants continually refining assessment practices, instructional routines, and approaches to supporting student agency as they gained experience with the reform. A longer period of study may therefore have revealed additional changes in teachers' practices, student responses, and participants' interpretations as implementation matured. The findings should consequently be understood as representing the participants' experiences during this particular stage of the reform rather than as representing a completed or stable endpoint of implementation.

Second, another limitation of this study relates to the researcher's positionality and prior relationship with the participants. Qualitative researchers necessarily bring their own experiences, assumptions, and perspectives to the research process, making reflexivity particularly important when considering how the researcher's position may influence data collection and interpretation (Creswell, 2013; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). As a colleague of the participants, the researcher had established personal and professional relationships with both teachers prior to the study. In addition, the researcher played a significant role in initiating the

grading reform examined in this case study, having implemented standards-based grading practices in her own classroom several years before the study and subsequently helping to promote broader consideration of grading reform within the school. This positioning placed the researcher in an insider role within both the organizational setting and the reform initiative, creating advantages in contextual understanding while also introducing the possibility that existing relationships and prior commitments could influence the research process. Research addressing the dual role of researchers who are also involved in the setting or initiative under study similarly emphasizes the need to recognize how such overlapping roles may shape relationships with participants and the interpretation of data (Trondsen & Sandaunet, 2008).

These overlapping roles may have influenced how participants described and interpreted their experiences during the interviews. Participants' awareness of the researcher's prior commitment to and advocacy for grading reform may have affected their willingness to express criticism, emphasize challenges, or question the underlying principles of the reform. Similarly, the existing relationships between the researcher and participants may have contributed to assumptions of shared understandings or encouraged participants to frame their responses in ways they believed would align with the researcher's perspectives or expectations. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) emphasize the importance of researcher reflexivity in qualitative inquiry because the researcher is directly involved in the collection and interpretation of data rather than functioning as a neutral instrument separate from the research setting. Although participants did describe challenges, tensions, and limitations associated with implementation, it cannot be assumed that their interview responses would have been identical if the interviews had been conducted by a researcher without an established relationship with the participants or prior involvement in the reform initiative. Consequently, the findings should be understood as

participants' accounts produced within a particular relational and organizational context with the researcher's positionality considered as a potential influence on the data collected and the interpretation developed from those data.

A final limitation concerns the contextual boundaries of the case. This study examined a specific model of student-centered grading focused on standards-based mastery, academic growth, and student self-agency within one high school setting. Case study research is intentionally context dependent, with the phenomenon examined in relation to the real-world conditions in which it occurs (Creswell, 2013; Yin, 2018). Although many of the findings may be relevant to broader conversations regarding grading reform, different grading models, educational contexts, grade levels, and subject areas may present distinct implementation experiences and challenges. The participants in this study taught world language and Advanced Placement English courses within the same secondary school and implemented grading reform under shared district expectations. Teachers working in other disciplines, elementary settings, schools with different organizational structures, or districts implementing alternative grading models may encounter different opportunities and challenges than those described in this study. Consequently, the findings should not be interpreted as universally representative of grading reform implementation. Rather, the detailed description of the cases and their contexts allows readers to consider the extent to which the findings may be relevant to transferable to other educational settings (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Despite these limitations, several features strengthen the trustworthiness of the findings. Data were collected from multiple sources, including two semi-structured interviews with each participant, classroom artifacts, grading policies, instructional materials, and communication documents. The use of multiple sources of evidence is an important feature of case study

research because it allows interpretations to be examined across different forms of data rather than relying upon a single source (Creswell, 2013; Yin, 2018). Triangulation across these sources, together with systematic qualitative analysis and cross-case comparison, provided a rich and contextualized understanding of teachers' experiences with grading reform. Rather than seeking broad statistical generalization, this study offers analytical insights that may inform educators, school leaders, and researchers seeking to understand the instructional, organizational, and cultural complexities associated with implementing student-centered grading reforms. This distinction is consistent with Yin's (2018) characterization of case study research as supporting analytic rather than statistical generalization and with qualitative approaches that emphasize sufficient contextual description to allow readers to judge the potential transferability of findings to other settings (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Recommendations for Future Research

The findings of this study contribute to the growing body of literature examining standards-based grading and student-centered assessment; however, they also identify several opportunities for future research. As grading reform continues to gain attention in K-12 education, additional studies are needed to deepen understanding of how these initiatives influence teaching, learning, and educational systems over time.

The first recommendation is to examine grading reform from students' perspectives. Because this study focused on teachers' experiences and interpretations, participants' perceptions of changes in student learning, motivation, and self-agency were derived from their observations and interactions with students. Future qualitative research that includes student interviews or focus groups would provide valuable insight into how students themselves experience standards-based grading, interpret feedback, engage in reassessment, and develop ownership of their

learning. Such studies could determine whether students perceive the same benefits and challenges identified by teachers while also exploring how students make sense of changing expectations regarding assessment and achievement.

Second, longitudinal research is needed to examine how grading reform evolves over time. Participants in this study consistently described implementation as an ongoing process characterized by continual refinement of instructional practices and gradual changes in student learning behaviors. Future studies following teachers and students across multiple years could provide important insights into the sustainability of grading reform, the evolution of teachers' instructional practices, and the extent to which students' motivation, assessment literacy, and self-agency continue to develop with prolonged exposure to mastery-oriented assessment systems. Longitudinal research may also help identify critical stages in implementation and the supports most needed as grading reforms mature.

A third recommendation is to examine grading reform across a broader range of educational contexts. This study focused on two secondary teachers implementing a shared grading initiative within one high school. Future research should explore how grading reform is experienced in elementary and middle schools, across different content areas, and within schools serving diverse student populations. Comparative case studies involving multiple schools or districts could provide a deeper understanding of how organizational context, school culture, leadership support, and community expectations influence implementation. Such research would help identify both context-specific challenges and common principles that support successful grading reform across educational settings.

Future research should also examine the role of school leadership and organizational systems in supporting grading reform. Although this study centered on classroom teachers,

participants frequently described the influence of broader institutional structures, including grading policies, communication with families, and traditional expectations regarding academic achievement. Additional research exploring administrators' perspectives and leadership practices could enhance understanding of how school leaders facilitate, support, and sustain grading reform initiatives. Investigating leadership decisions related to professional learning, stakeholder communication, policy development, and organizational change may provide valuable guidance for schools seeking to implement grading reform successfully.

Finally, future research should investigate the relationship between grading reform and student outcomes using mixed-methods research designs. The present study explored teachers' perceptions of grading reform's influence on student learning and self-agency but did not directly measure changes in academic performance, motivation, assessment literacy, or self-regulated learning. Combining qualitative investigations with quantitative measures of student achievement, engagement, motivation, or agency would provide a more comprehensive understanding of how grading reform influences student outcomes. Mixed-methods studies could also examine the relationships among instructional practices, student perceptions, and measurable indicators of learning, offering stronger evidence regarding the long-term effectiveness of student-centered grading initiatives.

Overall, future research should move beyond examining whether grading reform "works" and instead investigate the conditions under which grading reform is most likely to support meaningful changes in teaching, student learning, and student agency. The findings of this study suggest that successful implementation depends not only on redesigning grading systems but also on supporting teachers, students, and school communities as they reconstruct long-established beliefs about learning, assessment, and academic success. Continued investigation of these

processes will further advance understanding of grading reform as a comprehensive educational change initiative rather than simply an alternative approach to assigning grades.

Conclusion

This study began with a question about grading, but the findings ultimately revealed a much broader story about teaching, learning, and student agency. For both participants, grading reform was not experienced simply as a change in how grades were calculated or reported. As they worked to make grades more accurately communicate student learning, they also reconsidered assessment design, instructional planning, feedback, reassessment, classroom communication, and the role students were expected to assume within the learning process. In this way, grading became an instructional and philosophical transformation rather than a technical adjustment to an existing grading system.

One of the clearest conclusions emerging from this study is that changing grading structures alone is not sufficient to produce meaningful changes in student learning or self-agency. Standards-based grading, proficiency scales, reassessment opportunities, and descriptive feedback can create conditions that make student agency more possible, but those structures do not automatically cause students to become reflective, self-directed learners. The findings suggest that teacher instructional practice mediates the relationship between grading reform and student agency. It is through the ways teachers clarify learning goals, design meaningful practice, provide feedback, create opportunities for reflection, and support students in determining next steps that grading reform becomes more than a reporting system. The potential of grading reform lies not simply in what the grading system allows, but in what teachers and students are able to do within that system.

The findings also demonstrate that student agency develops gradually. Both teachers created opportunities for students to interpret evidence of learning, respond to feedback, reassess, reflect, and make decisions about their progress. Yet students did not enter these classrooms without prior beliefs about what grades meant or what academic success required. Years of experience with points, percentages, GPA, and performance-oriented definitions of achievement continued to shape how many students interpreted the new opportunities available to them. Thus, the study suggests that students' prior beliefs about grading and learning influence how they engage with the conditions created by reform. Teachers may be able to change classroom structures relatively quickly, but changing students' relationships with grades, achievement, and learning requires sustained experiences that repeatedly demonstrate that their decisions and actions can influence their own growth.

This distinction is particularly important when considering student self-agency. Agency should not be understood simply as giving students more choices or greater control. Rather, meaningful agency involves students understanding where they are in their learning, recognizing where they need to go, deciding what actions may help them move forward, and then acting purposefully on that information. From this perspective, the most important contribution of grading reform may not be the grade itself. Its greater value may lie in creating an instructional environment in which assessment information becomes usable—information students can interpret, respond to, and use to direct continued learning.

The experiences of Camille S. and Bee B. also demonstrate that grading reform does not occur within the boundaries of an individual classroom alone. Teachers and students continue to operate within educational systems shaped by traditional grades, GPA, transcripts, college admissions, and long-established expectations about academic success. These structures can

reinforce messages that compete with the learning-centered purposes of grading reform.

Sustainable reform therefore requires more than individual teachers adopting new practices. It requires professional learning, organizational support, consistent communication with students and families, and broader conversations about what grades are intended to communicate and what schools ultimately value about learning.

For these reasons, the most productive question may not be simply, does grading reform work? A more useful question is, under what conditions does grading reform support meaningful changes in teaching, learning, and student agency? The findings of this study suggest that those conditions include transparent learning expectations, assessment aligned with demonstrated proficiency, meaningful formative practice, descriptive feedback, opportunities for revision and reassessment, intentional reflection, and sustained instructional support as students learn to assume greater responsibility for their learning. They also require teachers and school leaders to recognize that reform is developmental, iterative, and deeply influenced by the educational cultures in which it occurs.

Ultimately, this study suggests that grading reform can create meaningful conditions for student agency when it is implemented as sustained instructional and cultural change—not simply as a new way to calculate grades. When grades become information about learning rather than the endpoint of learning, assessment can serve a different purpose. It can help students understand what they know, identify what they still need to learn, and recognize that their choices and actions can influence what happens next. In that shift—from receiving a grade to understanding and acting upon evidence of learning—lies the potential for grading reform to contribute not only to more meaningful assessment, but also to the development of students who are increasingly able to direct their own learning.

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Appendix A - Initial Teacher Survey

Name:

How many years have you been teaching in total?

How many years have you been teaching at this school?

Which classes are you using grade reform with? (Include name, age level of students, class size)

Describe the reform you are using.

What made you want to try grade reform with these classes?

What concerns/worries did you have prior to the implementation of the grade reform?

Student Self-Agency is defined as the ability for students to act purposefully and constructively to direct their own learning. Describe your perception of student self-agency in your classes before you implemented a grade reform.

Appendix B - Interview Questions & Protocol

Interview 1: February 2026

Introduction Script (Read Aloud)

Thank you for taking the time to participate in this interview. The purpose of this study is to understand your experiences implementing a non-traditional, student-centered grading model in your classroom. I am interested in your perceptions of how this grading approach has influenced your instructional practices, your decision-making, and your students' learning and self-agency. This interview will last approximately 45–60 minutes. With your permission, I will audio-record the session so I can accurately capture your responses. You may skip any question or stop the interview at any time. Your identity will be kept confidential, and the information you share will be used for research purposes only.

Do you have any questions before we begin?

Do I have your consent to record this interview?

Focus: Early implementation, initial perceptions, emerging changes

Section A: Background and Initial Mindset

1. **Can you describe your initial thoughts or motivations for adopting a non-traditional grading model this year?**

Probes:

- What appealed to you?
- What concerns did you have before starting?

2. **How would you describe your understanding of the grading model you are implementing?**

Probes:

- How do you define its purpose?
- How does it differ from your previous grading approach?

Section B: Early Implementation Experiences

3. **What changes, if any, have you made to your instructional planning since beginning this grading reform?**

Probes:

- Planning for standards or mastery
- Adjustments to pacing or lesson design

4. **How has your approach to assessment changed so far?**

Probes:

- Design and use of rubrics
- Use of formative vs. summative assessments
- Revisions, retakes, or feedback procedures

5. **How has this grading practice influenced your day-to-day teaching?**

Probes:

- Classroom routines
- Feedback interactions
- How you talk with students about learning

Section C: Early Perceptions of Student Response

6. **What changes have you noticed in student learning behaviors since implementing the new grading model?**

Probes:

- Engagement or motivation
- Students' use of feedback
- Evidence of growth-focused thinking

7. **How would you describe the level of student self-agency at this point in the implementation?**

Probes:

- Goal-setting
 - Self-assessment
 - Ownership of the learning process
-

Section D: Early Challenges and Supports

8. What challenges have you experienced during the initial stages of this reform?

Probes:

- Time demands
- Student confusion/resistance
- Parent concerns
- Policy or system constraints

9. What has helped you navigate these early challenges?

Probes:

- Collaboration
- Professional development
- Mentorship
- Adaptations you made

Closing

10. Is there anything else about your early experience with this grading model that you think is important to share?

Thank you for your time. Your insights are extremely valuable.

Interview 2: May 2026

Introduction Script (Read Aloud)

Thank you for taking the time to participate in this interview. The purpose of this study is to understand your experiences implementing a non-traditional, student-centered grading model in your classroom. I am interested in your perceptions of how this grading approach has influenced your instructional practices, your decision-making, and your students' learning and self-agency. This interview will last approximately 45–60 minutes. With your permission, I will audio-record the session so I can accurately capture your responses. You may skip any question or stop the interview at any time. Your identity will be kept confidential, and the information you share will be used for research purposes only.

Do you have any questions before we begin?

Do I have your consent to record this interview?

Focus: Reflection, development over time, perceived impacts

Section A: Evolving Perceptions

1. **How have your views of the grading reform changed since the beginning of the school year?**

Probes:

- Shifts in mindset
- Surprises or new understandings

2. **Looking back, what aspects of the implementation process stand out most to you?**

Probes:

- Turning points
- Key learning moments

Section B: Instructional Practice Over Time

3. **What changes in your instructional planning or teaching have become most significant over time?**

Probes:

- Standards alignment
- Differentiation
- Classroom routines

4. **How has your assessment practice evolved throughout the year?**

Probes:

- Rubric use
- Feedback practices
- How you determine proficiency or mastery

5. **What changes, if any, have you made to your grading policies since the start of the reform?**

Probes:

- Retakes

- Late work
 - Weighting and averaging
-

Section C: Perceived Impact on Students

6. What impact do you feel this grading model has had on student learning?

Probes:

- Evidence of mastery or growth
- Changes in effort, performance, or persistence

7. How has student self-agency changed, from your perspective, over the course of the year?

Probes:

- Ownership
- Self-reflection
- Goal-setting

8. Have you noticed differences among students in how they respond to this grading approach?

Probes:

- Students who thrive
 - Students who struggle
 - Factors that contribute to these differences
-

Section D: Challenges, Adaptations, and Future Outlook

9. What challenges have persisted throughout the year?

Probes:

- Structural or policy-based obstacles
- Time/workload
- Student or parent responses

10. What adaptations have you made to address these challenges or make the grading model work better for your context?

11. Do you believe this grading model is sustainable for you moving forward? Why or why not?

Probes:

- Needed supports
- Potential improvements
- Future intentions

Closing

12. Is there anything else about your experience with this grading reform that you believe should be included in this study?

Thank you again for contributing your time and insight.

Appendix C - Classroom Artifacts

Course Syllabus (Bee B.)

Advancement Placement Language and Composition Classroom B311

Instructor: Teacher B

Office Hours by appointment:

- Seminar & 3-4PM Daily (unless I have a meeting). Google Meets are also an option if needed.
 - Please schedule during class and/or via email

COURSE DESCRIPTION

The AP English Language and Composition course focuses on the development and revision of evidence-based analytical and argumentative writing, the rhetorical analysis of nonfiction texts, and the decisions writers make as they compose and revise. Students evaluate, synthesize, and cite research to support their arguments. Additionally, they read and analyze rhetorical elements and their effects in nonfiction texts--including images as forms of text--from a range of disciplines and historical periods. Though the system has an open enrollment policy, students should understand this is the equivalent of an introductory college-level composition class with college-level requirements--this means it is taught at a fast pace and performance is assessed at the analysis and synthesis levels.

AP Expectations:

- Participation in reading, writing, and critical analysis at the college level.
- A significant time reading, writing, and studying at home. Students sign up for the course understanding the time commitment involved in taking a college course while in high school.
- Participation in an active, engaged learning environment. Be an advocate for your growth and work hard to develop and sharpen language, composition, and critical thinking skills.
- Students are expected to advocate for themselves and communicate needs and concerns with their instructor.

****Readings in class will include both short and longer texts on various topics. The longer texts include, but are not limited to, *The Great Gatsby* & *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass***

CONTROVERSIAL TEXTUAL CONTENT

"Issues that might, from particular social, historical, or cultural viewpoints, be considered controversial, including references to ethnicities, nationalities, religions, races, dialects, gender, or class, may be addressed in texts that are appropriate for the AP English Language and Composition course. Fair representation of issues and peoples may occasionally include controversial material. Since AP students have chosen a program that directly involves them in college-level work, participation in this course depends on a level of maturity consistent with the age of high school students who have engaged in thoughtful analyses of a variety of texts. The best response to controversial language or ideas in a text might well be a question about the larger meaning, purpose, or overall effect of the language or idea in context. AP students should have the maturity, skill, and will to seek the larger meaning of a text or issue through thoughtful research" (College Board 2019).

MATERIALS

- Pens (blue or black ink only), pencils, and highlighters (preferably 3-4 colors)
- Loose-leaf paper
- School-issued Laptops

DIGITAL TOOLS:

AP Lang and Comp Exam = Wednesday, May 13, 2026 @ 8AM

GOOGLE CLASSROOM--MAIN platform with the following with course handouts, assignments, agendas and information:

AP CLASSROOM--Exam preparation platform

- Create an account if you don't already have one--use your school email and password to make it easier on yourself
- Join the correct class using the code provided by me

SCHOLOGY--May be used in addition to Google Classroom for specific assignments.

POLICIES:

Homework: Homework will include independent reading of texts, writing activities, and online grammar practices. Each week, you can expect to complete a grammar exercise and quiz in addition to other required assignments.

Absences:

- Excused:
 - Contact teacher (if physically able to do so) via email
 - If absent the day an ONLINE assignment is due, it must be turned in by the original due date
 - If absent the day an IN PERSON/HARD COPY assignment is due, it must be turned in the day the student returns to class
 - If absent when an assignment is given, the student has 1 class period per day of absence to make up work (unless otherwise coordinated with the teacher)--specific deadlines will be noted in ASPEN.
- Unexcused:
 - Contact teacher (if physically able to do so) via email
 - If absent the day an ONLINE assignment is due, it must be turned in by the original due date
 - If absent on the day an IN PERSON/HARD COPY assignment is due, it must be turned in when the student returns to SCHOOL, not class (this means the next calendar day, so it is your responsibility to bring it or scan it to me by 1500).
 - If absent when an assignment is given, the student has 1 SCHOOL DAY (not class period) to make up work (unless otherwise communicated/coordinated with the teacher)-- specific deadlines will be noted in ASPEN.

Make-up Work.

- Before returning to school, check the Daily Agenda slide on Google Classroom for the day of absence as well as any assignments or materials linked
 - If you have no questions about the assignments, you can complete and submit them
- If you have questions you can do one of two things:
 - Email me to receive clarification
 - Ask me your questions when you return to school

AP Lang and Comp Exam = Wednesday, May 13, 2026 @ 8AM

Grading and Feedback

Instead of earning points for every assignment, you will be assessed on your mastery of the core skills of AP. Your final grade reflects two things:

1. **Your mastery of AP English skills** (based on our 4-level mastery scale)
2. **Your completion of required practice and preparation assignments** (grammar work, quizzes, and reading/annotation prep)

This system rewards growth, values preparation, and ensures you build the habits that lead to success on the AP Exam and in college-level work.

Core Skill Areas AP English Language & Composition

1. **Writing** – Making a clear, defensible claim. Selecting and integrating strong, relevant, and sufficient evidence. Explaining how evidence supports your argument. Synthesizing sources in purposeful, meaningful ways.
2. **Reading** –Comprehending complex literary and informational texts to understand both literal and implied meaning.
3. **Speaking & Listening**- Participate thoughtfully in formal and informal discussions (e.g., Socratic seminars, Harkness). Cite textual evidence verbally, respond to others' ideas, and build collaborative dialogue.
4. **Language** – Grammar, mechanics, and style (using precise and rhetorically accurate diction, and purposeful, varied syntax. Writing in a formal, academic tone appropriate for task).

Core Skill Areas AP English Literature & Composition

1. **Writing** -Develop clear, defensible claims about literary texts. Select and integrate meaningful textual evidence. Explain how evidence supports claims through reasoning and commentary. Write in a formal, academic tone with purposeful voice and style.
2. **Reading** -Comprehend complex literary and informational texts, understanding both literal and implied meaning. Notice how literary devices, techniques, and structures contribute to meaning or effect.
3. **Speaking & Listening**- Participate thoughtfully in formal and informal discussions (e.g., Socratic seminars, Harkness). Cite textual evidence verbally, respond to others' ideas, and build collaborative dialogue.
4. **Language** -Demonstrate control of grammar, mechanics, and usage. Use precise diction, varied syntax, and rhetorical choices that strengthen clarity and effect.

AP Lang and Comp Exam = Wednesday, May 13, 2026 @ 8AM



Mastery Levels

<u>Level</u>	<u>Description</u>
4 – Mastery	Consistently meets or exceeds expectations.
3 – Proficient	Meets expectations with minor gaps.
2 – Developing	Partially meets expectations; needs targeted practice.
1 – Beginning	Limited success; needs significant support.
NYA	Not yet assessed.
*5 -Exceptional	A student may potentially earn a 5 on an essay attempt if it earns the elusive sophistication point on the AP rubric (structuring writing in a consistently logical, cohesive, and fully-developed way while avoiding repetition or fragmentation).

How Your Final Grade Is Determined

At the end of each quarter, your letter grade is based on **both** your mastery levels and your completion record for practice and preparation work.

Grade	Mastery Requirement	Completion Requirement
A	All 4 skill areas at level 3 or higher; none below 2	90–100% of grammar practices/quizzes and reading/annotation prep completed
B	At least 3 skill areas at level 3 or higher; none below 2	75–89% of grammar practices/quizzes and reading/annotation prep completed
C	At least 2 skill areas at level 2 or higher	60–74% of grammar practices/quizzes and reading/annotation prep completed
D	At least 1 skill area at level 2 or higher but does not meet C-level standards	40–59% of grammar practices/quizzes and reading/annotation prep completed
F	No skill areas at level 2 or higher	Less than 40% completion of grammar practices/quizzes and reading/annotation prep May also result from multiple missing major assignments that prevent mastery from being assessed

AP Lang and Comp Exam = Wednesday, May 13, 2026 @ 8AM



Redo Opportunities (“Fresh Attempts”)

If you want to raise your mastery level in a skill, you may request a **fresh prompt** that lets you apply feedback in a new context.

How it works:

- Target a specific skill you want to improve.
- Fill out a short redo request form explaining which skill and what feedback you’ll apply.
- Complete the new prompt within one week.
- If the new work shows higher mastery, your tracker will update.
- Up to **two redo attempts per grading period per skill area** (tokens can add more—see below).

Student-Led Progress Conferences

Eight times during the year, we will meet one-on-one to review your progress.

Before the conference:

- Fill out a reflection sheet with your current mastery levels, evidence of growth, and goals.

During the conference:

- **You lead** the discussion about strengths, growth areas, and goals.
- I’ll ask clarifying questions, share observations, and help refine your plan.

These meetings ensure your progress is measured by *your* understanding of your growth, not just my perspective.

Tokens: Your Flexibility Currency

Each student receives **3 tokens per quarter**. Tokens give you flexibility while keeping the system fair.

You can use a token for:

- **Late Work Pass:** Submit an assignment up to 48 hours late without affecting your completion percentage. (1 token)
- **Extra Redo Opportunity:** Add an additional redo prompt beyond the usual 2 per grading period. (1 token)
- **Redo Time Extension:** Extend a redo deadline from 1 week to 2 weeks after feedback. (1 token)

Tokens cannot be used for:

- Major final projects/essays after the grading period closes
- Group deadlines or presentations
- Retroactively excusing zeroes for missed in-class activities

How to use a token:

Submit the Token Request Form before the original deadline. Tokens cannot be saved across quarters or transferred to another student.

AP Lang and Comp Exam = Wednesday, May 13, 2026 @ 8AM



Preparation and Accountability

- **Grammar Practice & Quizzes:** Practice assignments are marked Complete/Incomplete; quizzes update your Conventions mastery.
- **Reading/Annotation Prep:** Must be completed before class — checked through quick in-class tasks, submission of annotations, or participation in group work

Plagiarism:

- Plagiarism is the downloading of material in part or whole, cutting and pasting from online sources, or copying material from other sources (to include other students) ***without giving credit to the source.***
- Any student participating in this action will receive a ZERO on the assignment and will be turned over to the administration for appropriate action.

AP EXAM INFORMATION

- Wednesday, May 13, 2026 @8AM

AP Lang and Comp Exam = Wednesday, May 13, 2026 @ 8AM



Please sign and return **THIS PAGE ONLY** by 8/25 (B) & 8/26 (R)

Student PRINTED Name _____:

- I understand that the grading policy is to prioritize growth and feedback over scores.
- I understand that I have a shared responsibility to monitor my progress and growth.
- I agree to organize my time and effort to complete the AP course successfully.
- I will notify the teacher immediately if I fall behind with assignments and/or need additional help.
- I will communicate with the teacher if I am absent and/or unable to complete an assignment due to extenuating circumstances.
- I will check ASPEN and Google Classroom regularly to stay up to date on assignments and due dates
- I understand that this course is a college-level course and is, therefore, more rigorous than a high school English class.
- I understand the makeup work policy.
- I agree to prepare for and take the AP Exam in May.

Student Signature: _____

Guardian:

- I agree to be familiar with the AP course requirements and to help my student organize study time in support of class assignments.
- I understand that this course is a college-level course and is, therefore, more rigorous than a high school English class.
- I will make sure that my student is prepared to take the AP exam in May.
- I understand that the grading policy is to prioritize growth and feedback over scores.
- I understand that my student has a shared responsibility to monitor their progress and growth.
- I will notify the teacher immediately of any concerns relating to the class or to my student's progress.

Parent Signature: _____

Plagiarism Statement:

I understand that without giving credit to the source by citing it properly, all of the following are examples of plagiarism:

- Downloading material in part or whole
- Cutting and pasting sections from online sources,
- Copying material from other sources (*to include other students*)
- Using a paper that a friend/family member wrote in the past
- Paraphrasing thoughts/ideas that are not yours
- Work "inspired" by fellow classmates' work
- A paid for essay from an app or website
- Anything written by a program/website (AI) that is claimed to be original
- FYI: "If you use someone else's words, you must put them within quotation marks unless directed otherwise by your instructor. If you re-phrase someone else's words, you should change the wording substantially and cite the original source. Small changes are not enough to make someone else's words or ideas your own" (Penn State).

By signing below I understand that my actions have consequences and turning in any work that is not my own will result in parent contact and will be turned over to administration for appropriate action.

Student Signature: _____

Guardian Signature: _____

AP Lang and Comp Exam = Wednesday, May 13, 2026 @ 8AM

Grading for German 3 (Camille S.)

Grading for German 3

In this course, student progress is measured using predominantly Performance-Based Grading, which focuses on the students' progress and growth in specific language skills rather than accumulation of points. The goal is to provide clear feedback in the key areas of world language learning: Interpretive Listening & Reading, Interpersonal Speaking & Writing, and Presentational Speaking & Writing, as outlined by the ACTFL (American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages) proficiency guidelines and the College and Career Readiness Standards for World Languages by DoDEA.

Description of the grading system:

Levels: You will be assessed on a rubric based on the proficiency scale (*Novice Low, Novice Mid, Novice High, Intermediate Low, Intermediate Mid and Intermediate High (NL, NM, NH, IL, IM, IH)*). Each score represents progress toward the course learning targets:

While interpretive reading and listening will be based on a point system, interpersonal speaking & writing and presentational speaking & writing will be based on standards based rubric. Grading will be less difficult semester 1 than semester 2:

SEMESTER 1			SEMESTER 2		
Grade description	Point Value	Letter Grade	Grade description	Point Value	Letter Grade
Exceeds	15	A+	Exceeds	13.5-15	A
Meets	13.5-14.5	A	Meets	12-13	B
Approaching	12-13	B	Approaching	10.5-11.5	C
Emerging	10.5-11.5	C	Emerging	9-10	D
Beginning	9-10	D	Beginning	7.5-8.5	F

Students will not receive less than a 60% unless they did not attempt the assessment for semester 1.

Final Grades will be comprised of:

Interpretive Communication – Listening & Reading (30% or 30 points)	Grades will always show the most recent level of proficiency. Reassessment Policy: Students may reassess on any standard <u>after additional practice or remediation to demonstrate improved mastery, as long as they completed the homework prior to the assessment.</u> The most recent evidence of learning will be used in the final grade calculation.
Interpersonal Communication – Speaking & Writing (30% or 30 points)	
Presentational Communication – Speaking & Writing (30% or 30 points)	
Building Blocks (Grammar, Vocabulary, Pronunciation, Participation) (10% or 10 pts)	Grades will be averaged. <u>Re-takes will only be allowed on quizzes if the formative practice was completed before the quiz.</u>

- Homework & Practice: Homework is considered practice and will not directly impact the grade, but completion is essential for skill development. You will not be allowed to re-take communicative assessments if you did not complete the homework practice for that quiz. Feedback will be provided to guide improvement.
- Final Grade Calculation: The overall grade will reflect the student's most recent level of demonstrated proficiency, 10% of that building blocks for language (quizzes, participation, etc.)

This system ensures grades accurately reflect language performance, promotes continuous growth, and allows students to take ownership of their learning by focusing on proficiency rather than chasing points.

I am completely open to helping you understand this grading system. Please feel free to email me with any questions.

Parent Letter (Bee B.)

Dear Parents & Guardians,

We've had a great start in AP English Language & Composition, and I'd like to share a few details with you that will help you support your student this year

First text: *The Great Gatsby*

The first longer work we will study this year is F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*. Students will read the novel outside of class; however, they will be given guidelines for how to read each chapter. As our class focuses on language more so than content, this approach to reading may be a bit different from what students are used to. Each section of reading will be three chapters--students will be given approximately one week to read each section in order to be prepared to participate during in-class discussions and activities.

We do have classroom copies of the novel for all students. However, students often benefit from owning their own copy so they can annotate directly in the text. If purchasing, I recommend Amazon--any edition is acceptable as long as it's not abridged.

Grading Philosophy

We are implementing a new grading philosophy in AP English that emphasizes growth and reduces stress. Ms. Kretz and I want students to feel free to take risks and experiment with their writing. Our focus is on what students can demonstrate by the end of the learning process, not just along the way.

What this means for your student:

- **Formative assignments (0%)** – daily practice, feedback, and preparation
- **Summative assessments (100%)** – midterm and end-of-term conferences assessing overall skills
- Formative scores (1–4) – show progress but are not averaged into grades

To use a sports metaphor: formative work is practice; summative assessments are the “big game” where students show what they've learned. Until midterm, all work is coded as formative. After the mid-term conference, a summative score is entered for each skill area. The process repeats at the end of the term.

This system rewards growth, values preparation, and builds the habits students need for success on the AP Exam and in college-level work. Formative assignments are scored on the following scale:

- 4 – Mastery (Consistently meets or exceeds expectations)
- 3 – Proficient (Meets expectations with minor gaps)
- 2 – Developing (Partially meets expectations; needs targeted practice)
- 1 – Beginning (Limited success; needs significant support)

These scores are a way to communicate progress during the learning process; they are not averaged into quarter or semester grades.

Open House

To learn more about our grading system, please join us for a short informational session at **Open House on Thursday, September 4, 2025, during session 3 (4:45-5:05 pm) in room B311 on the 3rd floor.** Both Ms. K and I will be on hand to answer questions.

My Open House Schedule

3:30-3:45	Welcome & Introductions – Great Hall
3:45-3:55	Meet & Greet/Open Time for Parents
3:55-4:15	Session 1 Education I, II, & III Rm B311
4:20-4:40	Session 2 AP English Language & Composition Rm B311
4:45-5:05	Session 3 AP GRADING Rm B311
5:10-5:30	Session 4 Q&A Rm B311

I look forward to partnering with you this year to help your student grow as a reader, writer, and thinker. Please don't hesitate to reach out with any questions.

If you have any questions, please reach out.

Thank you,

Grading Policy Clarification (Bee B.)

Semester 2: AP Grading Policy Clarification, Updates, & FAQs

We said it would be a work in progress, and we meant it. We took into consideration student concerns as well as issues we had identified. We heard you. Rather than *negotiating* grades or determining grades on *perceived* improvement, we are re-iterating the focus on **evidence-based grading**.

How Grades Work in This Class

1. Grades Measure Mastery, Not Points. This course does not use traditional percentage grading.

- Letter grades represent levels of skill mastery
- A higher letter means a qualitatively different level of control
- Being “close” is not the same as demonstrating mastery

An A and a B+ are not nearby scores — they are different mastery tiers.

2. What Each Letter Means

A (Mastery)

- Skill is consistently controlled
- Reasoning is clear, defensible, and sustained
- Evidence is purposeful and well-explained
- Errors are minor and do not weaken meaning

B+ (Proficient)

- Skill is mostly present but inconsistent
- Reasoning may break down or simplify
- Evidence may be relevant but under-explained
- Control is emerging, not yet reliable

Key difference:

An A shows control.

A B+ shows progress, but not full command *yet*.

3. Why Grade Differences Are Intentional

This grading system is non-linear on purpose.

- Mastery levels are not evenly spaced
- Moving up a letter means demonstrating something *new*
- If letter grades were close together, they wouldn't mean anything

A visible gap between grades reflects a visible difference in skills.

4. How to Improve Your Grade

Grades improve through better *evidence* of mastery, *not negotiation*.

Ask:

- What skill am I not fully controlling yet?
- Where does my reasoning weaken?
- What feedback do I need to act on?

Reassessment and revision exist for this reason.

5. What This System Is Designed to Do

- Reward learning, not point-chasing
- Make skill expectations transparent
- Allow improvement without mathematical punishment
- Prepare you for AP-level evaluation standards

If you are earning a B+, you are doing solid work — and you are not “almost an A.” You are on the way to one.

POINTS OF CLARIFICATION

Mastery is about proficiency, NOT percentages. To get an A, you must have evidence of proficiency in all areas. If you meet MOST but you are not yet proficient in one area, you are **not there yet**. This course requires all of the areas, not just some of them.

The “Safety Net”: If a single “bad day” results in a score that drops your level significantly, you may use a **Redo Opportunity** to provide new evidence and overwrite that score immediately (within one week).

UPDATES

The Completion Modifier

Completion Does *Not* Determine Mastery

Your base letter grade comes from mastery assessments only. Completion affects the grade after mastery is determined.

- Completion can support a grade, but it cannot replace mastery.
- Completing work helps you learn.
- Completing work alone does not prove you learned.

Completion %	Effect on Base Grade
90–100% → +	Add “+” to base grade (e.g., B → B+)
75–89% → no change	Base grade stays
51–74% → –	Subtract “–” (e.g., B → B–)

≤50% → drop one full letter grade e.g., A → B+, B → C+

Bi-quarterly Progress Audit

To keep your progress at the forefront of your mind, we are requiring you to go into Aspen and review your scores in each skill area every two weeks. You will also be asked to review your completion percentage at this point as well. This means you will not be surprised by the mid-quarter progress check nor the end-of-quarter grade determination.

Revised Grade Determination Chart

STEP 1: The Hierarchy Check

Look at the assignments in the first skill category. Do you have any assignments labeled major assignments?

Smaller assignment examples	MAJOR assignment examples
NRI Quiz Reading quiz Literary term "zero draft"	NRI Test Multiple Choice Question sets Literary Term Entry -revised draft FRQs Exams/Tests

YES, I have a Major/Test Score. **STOP**.

- **The Rule:** A "Game Day" performance overrides "Practice" scores.
- **Your Mastery Level is:** The score of that test or AP Assignment.
 - If you have multiple major assignments in that category, use the most recent score.
 - **(Example:** You got 4s on all grammar quizzes, but a 2 on the Grammar Test. Your Level is 2. You did not retain the skill.)

NO, I only have smaller assignments. **CONTINUE**.

- Move to STEP 2 below to calculate your trend.

STEP 2: The Trend Logic

Since you have no test or other major assignment score yet, look at your formative scores. Count how many you have and choose the correct path.

Path 1: I have 1 or 2 Scores.

- Do you have 2 different scores? (e.g., 2 and 3)
 - Look at the 2nd (newest) score.
 - Is it Higher? (2 → 3) = Level 3 (Growth).
 - Is it Lower? (3 → 2) = Level 2 (Regression).

Path 2: I have 3 Scores

- Is your Last Score lower than the previous two? (e.g., 3, 3, 2).
 - YES: You did not hold the level. Mastery level = 2.
 - NO: Go to the next step.
- Do you have two scores that are the same?
 - YES: That is your Level. (e.g., 2, 3, 3 = Level 3).
 - NO: (All different? 1, 2, 3). Use the Last Score (Level 3).

Path 3: I have 4+ Scores

- Look at your last TWO scores.
 - Are they both lower than your best scores? (e.g., 4, 4, 3, 3).
 - YES: You are not a 4, YET. Level = 3.
 - NO: Move to the next step.
- Do at least 50% of your scores match your highest level?
 - YES: (e.g., 2, 3, 3, 3). Level = 3.
 - NO: (e.g., 2, 2, 2, 3). Level = 2 (The 3 potentially indicates growth, but the evidence is not conclusive, YET).
- If you have an even split (two 2s, two 3s). Look at the ORDER:
 - 2, 3, 2, 3 (Flickering/Inconsistent) → Level 2.
 - 2, 2, 3, 3 (Growth/Locked In) → Level 3.

****IF YOU HAVE A ZERO/NTI FOR ANY ASSIGNMENT, DROP YOUR MASTERY LEVEL BY 1** (1 is the lowest mastery you should have for any skill)**

Find your exact pattern below to verify your score.

Scores (oldest to newest)	Final Level	Logic Rule
4 (quiz), 4 (quiz), 4 (quiz), 2 (TEST)	2	Hierarchy: The test outweighs the quizzes.
2 (quiz), 2 (quiz), 2 (quiz), 4 (TEST)	4	Hierarchy: You mastered it by the end.
2, 3, 2, 3 (no major assignments)	2	Inconsistent: No stable trend to indicate you are at the proficient level yet.
3, 3, 3, 2 (no major assignments)	2	Regression: most recent attempt indicates you have not reached proficiency yet. Recommendation: do the re-do to prove you are indeed proficient.
2, 2, 3, 3 (no major assignments)	3	Growth. You improved and sustained it.
3, 3, 2, 2 (no major assignments)	2	Regression: Current performance indicates you are developing.
4, 4, 4, 1 (no major assignments)	1	Crash: Major gap in current performance. You need a re-do to prove that the recent attempt was an outlier.

Base Grade from Skills:

- A = All 4 skills at level 3+ (To receive an A+, you must have 4s in each category)
- B = At least 3 skills at level 3+, none below 2
- C = At least 2 skills at level 2+
- D = At least 1 skill at level 2+
- F = No skills at level 2+

GROWTH MATTERS. Showing growth over the grading period is important and can be your argument for increasing the grade that goes in ASPEN. However, If your calculated grade does not reflect your progress, you cannot argue with **words or feelings**; you **must** argue with **evidence**. Follow these steps to make a growth argument:

- Step 1: Accept the current level (write down the lower score).
- Step 2: Request a conference with your teacher, and come prepared with any of the following **evidence** to support your argument for growth:
 - Assignments that illustrate the **application** of feedback.
 - Evidence from re-do attempts that **substantiate growth** in writing skills despite no score change:
 - ❖ Let's say you wrote an argument essay and received a score of 3/6 (you relied on summary rather than argumentation). Before your Writing Center appointment, you completed the "Decode My Feedback" assignment and realized what you needed to do to improve your essay: you re-wrote the topic sentences for your body paragraphs to be arguable assertions rather than summary or paraphrasing. Your tutor agreed with your assessment, and you talked through the changes that would have yielded a higher score. On your fresh attempt, you incorporated that feedback by writing arguable claims to open each paragraph. But, let's say on this attempt you misread the prompt, so you did not earn the thesis point. This means you grew as a writer by incorporating the needed skill, but that your score did not change due to the new issue. The first draft, your Writing Center conference pre-work, and the successive attempt work together to provide **concrete evidence of growth**.

FAQ

Why can't I get an A if I have 4s in all but one area?

So, if Sully has a 3 in Writing, a 3 in Reading, a 3 in Language, and a 3 in Speaking & Listening = proficient everywhere = A

And if Rudolpho has 4, 4, 4, 2 = one skill area is *not yet proficient* = B

Even though Rudy has higher highs, Sully has no gaps. A 2 **isn't a failure**. It's **a signal**. It tells you exactly where to focus so that you can move to an A.

I earned an 85% on NoRedInk, but in Aspen it says 75%

Mastery is about **proficiency, NOT percentages**. We are not using the percentages that Aspen calculates automatically. Look at your mastery levels in each area (4,3,2,1); that is the evidence that matters.

Why can't I re-do as many times as I want?

Update: You can. However, there is still a process:

1. Complete writing conference prep work prior to the redo
2. Go to the Writing Center WITH your completed prep work
3. Meet with your teacher to ask clarifying questions and schedule the redo.

******These steps must be completed within ONE week of your assignment being returned to you (expiration dates for these steps will be noted in Aspen). This time is limited because if the work stretches too far, you are likely to forget the feedback you received or get too overwhelmed with other assignments.