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Jung, L.A. & Guskey, T.R. (2010). Grading exceptional learners. Educational Leadership (February) 31-35.

Jung and Guskey wrote this article with the intent of informing teachers how it is possible to grade exceptional learners in a way that is both fair and accurate. It shows the five steps to take to modify a pre-existing grading standard into a model that gives clear and accurate grades to students' whose standards have had to be modified.

The article begins by stating the problem that many teachers have when educating exceptional learners. "Students with disabilities and English language learners often differ from their classmates in the ways they engage in and contribute to learning activities." (p. 31) Because of this, it is often hard for teachers to know how to assign an accurate or fair grade. It seems unfair to fail a student if they are unable to work at grade-level because of a disability or language difference. Yet on the flipside it also gives an inaccurate representation of the student's abilities if they are given a passing grade but cannot meet the performance criteria.

The solution to this conundrum starts first with an effective grading system based on clear standards. These systems contain three types of learning criteria, which are reported separately. Product criteria relates to specific achievements or level of proficiency by focusing on what a student knows or can do at a particular point in time. Process criteria concentrate on the student's journey to their current level of achievement. This is seen in things such as effort, class participation, and work habits. Progress criteria looks at how much a student has improved or gained from learning experiences.

Once the grading system is in place, the first step towards ensuring fair and accurate grades is to assess whether or not the standards are appropriate without adaptations. Some exceptional students may not be able to achieve grade-level standards without the use of special supports and services. If this is the case, the next step is to determine what kind of adaptation is needed. Either an accommodation (keeping the content of the standard but changing the method of demonstrating mastery) or a modification (changing the standard) may be needed. Deciding on one or the other depends on the circumstances of its use. If an accommodation is used, then the original grading system still remains; if a modification, the standards must be changed.

The third step is determining the appropriate new standard. It should be what the instructional team believes is achievable by the student at the end of the academic year. The next step is then to base grades on this new standard, and not the grade-level standard. The final step is to communicate the meaning of the grade, so that families can see what was actually measured.

The authors conclude by asserting that if followed, the model provided in the article "offers a fair, accurate, and legal way to adapt the grading process for exceptional learners." (p. 34) It provides the parents and instructional teams the information they need to effectively make placement decisions for English language learners and students with disabilities.

This article was especially helpful in demonstrating how it is possible to give grades to exceptional students without padding their grades or failing them for not learning at the same grade-level as their peers. It is a question that almost every teacher will face, and having knowledge of how to determine a fair and accurate grade is invaluable information.