

From Fragmented to Aligned: A Standards-Based Grading Continuum in Teacher Preparation

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ABSTRACT

Standards-based grading (SBG) has gained traction across PK–12 education as a more transparent and mastery-oriented approach to assessing student learning. However, considerably less is known about how undergraduate teacher education programs (TEPs) prepare pre-service teachers to enter schools where SBG is practiced. This qualitative multiple-case study examined how three undergraduate TEPs in a Midwestern state integrated instruction on grading and assessment into their curricula. Drawing on interviews with teacher education faculty and analysis of programmatic documents, cross-case analysis revealed patterned variation in how grading instruction was embedded across coursework and field experiences. From these findings, this study inductively developed a Continuum of Grading Approach Integration, which illustrates three approaches to teacher preparation: fragmented passive exposure, emerging integration, and an aligned programmatic approach. The continuum serves as a heuristic for understanding how TEPs vary in their support of candidates' readiness to engage in SBG practices that are increasingly present in PK–12 schools. Implications are discussed for teacher education faculty, program leaders, and educational leadership seeking to align teacher preparation with evolving grading reforms.

Keywords: standards-based grading, teacher preparation, teacher education, grading reform, qualitative case study, educational leadership

Across PK–12 education, grading practices have become a central focus of reform as educators, families, and policymakers question whether traditional percentage- and letter-based systems accurately communicate student learning (Brookhart, 2015; Guskey, 2013; Townsley & Buckmiller, 2020). Longstanding critiques have documented how conventional grading practices often conflate academic achievement with non-cognitive factors such as behavior, compliance, and effort, resulting in distorted representations of student mastery and inequitable outcomes (Link, 2019). In response, standards-based grading (SBG) has gained traction as an alternative approach that emphasizes transparency, criterion-referenced assessment, and communication of learning relative to clearly defined standards (Guskey & Jung, 2013; Schimmer et al., 2018; Townsley & Buckmiller, 2020).

As SBG continues to expand across PK–12 educational contexts, attention has increasingly turned to questions of implementation, coherence, and sustainability (Guskey, 2015; Townsley, 2020). Research has documented both the promise and complexity of grading reform, noting that shifts toward standards-based systems require changes not only in technical grading practices but also in professional beliefs, instructional coordination, and organizational structures (Brookhart et al., 2016; Guskey, 2001; Tierney et al., 2011; Townsley et al., 2019). While this literature has contributed important insights into how practicing teachers and school leaders navigate grading reform, considerably less attention has been paid to how teacher preparation programs equip pre-service teachers to interpret and enact grading practices prior to entering the profession (Battistone et al., 2019; Brookhart, 2017).

Teacher education programs (TEPs) play a critical role in shaping how novice teachers understand assessment, grading, and their purposes within teaching and learning (Brookhart, 2017; Guskey, 2015). Yet existing research suggests that

preparation related to grading and assessment is often fragmented, inconsistently emphasized, or left to practicum experiences rather than addressed coherently across coursework (Barnes, 1985; Battistone et al., 2019). As a result, pre-service teachers may enter PK–12 schools implementing SBG without a clear understanding of its underlying principles or how grading practices align with instructional decision-making (Tierney et al., 2011). This disconnect raises questions about how TEPs are positioned to support grading reforms unfolding in contemporary PK–12 settings (Guskey, 2015; Townsley, 2020).

To address this gap, this qualitative multiple-case study explored how undergraduate TEPs integrate instruction related to grading and assessment within their respective curricula in contexts where SBG is increasingly present in PK–12 schools (Battistone et al., 2019; Guskey & Jung, 2013). Through cross-case analysis of interview data and programmatic documents, this study examined how teacher preparation programs structure grading-related learning opportunities, identifying patterned variation in how instruction is emphasized, coordinated, and enacted across coursework and field experiences (Saldaña, 2016; Stake, 2006).

From these findings, the study inductively developed a Continuum of Grading Approach Integration that illustrates three approaches to teacher preparation: fragmented passive exposure, emerging integration, and aligned programmatic approach (Miles et al., 2020). The continuum is offered as a heuristic for understanding how TEPs may differentially support pre-service teachers' readiness to engage in SBG practices, rather than as an evaluative scale or prescriptive model. By centering the preparation pipeline, this study extends existing grading reform literature beyond PK–12 implementation to illuminate how TEPs may shape the future enactment of grading practices in schools.

Research Questions

Guided by this focus, this study applied the following research question: *How are undergraduate teacher education programs (TEPs) integrating instruction related to grading and assessment practices within their curricula?* This question centers on programmatic integration across coursework and field experiences, illuminating variation in how teacher preparation programs structure grading-related learning opportunities.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Grading has long occupied a contested position in educational systems, functioning simultaneously as a mechanism for measuring student learning, communicating achievement, and regulating behavior within a single, often ambiguous evaluative signal (Barnes, 1985; Brookhart, 2011; Guskey, 2015). Foundational scholarship has consistently critiqued traditional grading practices for conflating academic achievement with non-academic factors such as effort, compliance, and behavior, thereby undermining the validity and interpretability of grades as indicators of learning and weakening their usefulness for instructional decision-making (Guskey, 2001; Kohn, 2011). From a measurement perspective, such practices obscure what grades represent, limiting their instructional usefulness and complicating decision-making for students, families, and educators by masking what students actually know and are able to do (Brookhart, 2017). Despite these longstanding debates, relatively little attention has been given to how these tensions are addressed within teacher preparation programs.

At the same time, grades operate as institutional signals that carry high-stakes consequences related to promotion, placement, and postsecondary access despite their inconsistent meaning across contexts (Guskey, 2015). Tierney et al. (2011) described this dual role as a persistent source of tension within grading systems, noting that grades are often expected to serve multiple, and sometimes competing, purposes without clear articulation of priorities or shared agreement about what grades are intended to communicate. This ambiguity contributes to wide variation in grading practices across classrooms and schools and raises important questions about how pre-service teachers are prepared to navigate these inconsistencies (Brookhart, 2011; Guskey, 2015).

Standards-Based Grading and the Challenge of Coherent Implementation

SBG has emerged as a prominent reform-oriented response to longstanding critiques of traditional grading systems, yet most research has focused on its implementation in PK–12 settings rather than how educators are prepared to enact these practices (Guskey & Jung, 2013; Marsh, 2023). At its core, SBG emphasizes clearly articulated learning standards, criterion-referenced assessment, and grading practices intended to communicate student learning more accurately by separating academic achievement from non-cognitive factors (Guskey & Jung, 2013; Schimmer et al., 2018). Proponents have argued that by centering grades on evidence of learning rather than point accumulation, SBG can enhance transparency and support

instructional decision-making for both teachers and students (Brookhart, 2011; Guskey, 2001; Marsh, 2023). However, these expectations assume that teachers enter the profession with a clear understanding of how to implement such practices, an assumption that has received limited attention in teacher preparation research.

Despite its conceptual clarity, research has consistently demonstrated that SBG is difficult to implement cohesively across classrooms, schools, and systems, raising questions about how educators are prepared to interpret and enact grading practices prior to entering the profession (Guskey, 2015). Studies of school- and district-level reform described persistent variation in how grading principles revealed in policy are interpreted and enacted in practice, even when formal policies are in place (Townsend, 2020). Recent work reinforced this finding, emphasizing that implementation challenges often stem from limited shared understanding among educators rather than from technical features of grading systems themselves (Townsend & Wilcox, 2024; Zhang, 2024). Additionally, misunderstandings about the purposes and mechanics of SBG continue to shape inconsistent enactment, particularly when professional learning is fragmented or disconnected from daily instructional practice (Zhang, 2024).

Together, this body of scholarship suggested that grading reform is not merely a technical change in reporting practices but a broader organizational and cultural shift that requires consistency across instructional systems and sustained professional learning structures (Schimmer et al., 2018; Tierney et al., 2011). Without such coherence, reform efforts risk becoming superficial or unevenly applied, underscoring the importance of examining how teachers are prepared to engage with grading practices before entering PK–12 classrooms (Guskey, 2015).

Equity-Oriented Perspectives and Contemporary Debate

Equity has become an increasingly central lens for grading scholarship, with researchers arguing that traditional grading practices may reproduce inequities by privileging students who are more familiar with dominant cultural norms and school expectations embedded in behavioral compliance and hidden-curriculum structures (Brookhart, 2011; Feldman, 2019). From this perspective, equity-oriented grading emphasizes transparency, consistent criteria, and opportunities for students to demonstrate learning over time, aligning closely with standards-based approaches that prioritize mastery rather than sorting (Schimmer et al., 2018). These concerns further highlight the need to examine how teacher preparation programs introduce and frame equity-oriented grading practices for pre-service teachers.

However, both foundational and recent literature cautions against assuming that reform language alone produces equitable outcomes. Kohn (2011) critiqued grading reforms that retain hierarchical structures while rebranding practices as more equitable, arguing that such approaches may obscure deeper systemic issues related to competition, ranking, and compliance-driven schooling (Kohn, 2011). Empirical studies similarly highlight variation in teacher support for equity-oriented grading practices, suggesting beliefs about fairness, rigor, and accountability remain contested even among educators committed to reform principles (Morris et al., 2023).

Recent policy-oriented analyses echo this tension, documenting skepticism and concern among educators regarding the implementation and consequences of equitable grading initiatives, particularly when reforms are perceived as externally imposed (Fordham Institute, 2025; Link & Guskey, 2022; Morris et al., 2023). This body of research suggests that equity in grading is contingent on shared understanding, consistency across practice, and sustained professional learning across instructional systems. Guskey (2015) emphasizes that without consistent interpretation and application of grading principles, reform efforts may exacerbate confusion rather than mitigate inequities for both educators and students. This insight underscores the importance of examining how educators are prepared to engage with grading practices before they enter PK–12 classrooms. Taken together, this scholarship positions equity not as a fixed outcome of grading reform but as contingent on shared understanding and consistent practice, raising questions about how these concepts are introduced and developed within teacher preparation programs.

Teacher Preparation, Assessment Literacy, and the Preparation Gap

Despite extensive research on grading reform in PK–12 contexts, comparatively little scholarship has examined how teacher preparation programs explicitly address grading and assessment practices as a coherent component of professional preparation (Battistone et al., 2019; Brookhart, 2017). Brookhart (2017) noted that preservice education often emphasizes assessment broadly while devoting limited attention to grading decision-making, reporting practices, and the purposes grades are intended to serve, a pattern that mirrors longstanding ambiguity in the field regarding the instructional and communicative functions of grades (Guskey, 2015; Tierney et al., 2011). As a result, pre-service teachers may enter classrooms without a coherent framework for interpreting grading practices, particularly in contexts where SBG challenges

traditional assumptions about assessment, feedback, and accountability (Battistone et al., 2019; Schimmer et al., 2018; Townsley & Buckmiller, 2020).

Research on grading reform has suggested that teachers' understandings of grading are shaped through a combination of coursework, clinical experiences, and professional socialization across multiple stages of their preparation and induction into the profession (Battistone et al., 2019; Guskey et al., 2020; Townsley & Buckmiller, 2020). When preparation programs do not provide coherent frameworks for interpreting grading practices, preservice teachers may rely heavily on mentor teachers' practices during field placements, which vary widely in alignment with reform-oriented principles and often reflect localized norms rather than research-informed grading approaches (Brookhart et al., 2016; Tierney et al., 2011). Recent studies have reinforced this concern, indicating that without intentional support, preservice teachers often experience grading as situational and context-dependent rather than as an integrated component of instructional decision-making linked to standards, assessment design, and feedback practices (Lewis, 2022; Zhang, 2024).

Emerging research has also suggested that variation in preparation may shape how educators later respond to grading reform initiatives as they assume roles with increased responsibility for instructional and assessment leadership (Guskey, 2015; Link, 2019; Morris et al., 2025; Townsley, 2020). Morris et al. (2025) found that administrators' perceptions of SBG were influenced by prior experiences and preparation, highlighting the long-term implications of how grading is learned within professional pathways. Taken together, this literature positions teacher preparation as a critical, yet underexamined site for understanding how grading practices are interpreted, normalized, and enacted over time, particularly as grading reforms continue to evolve across PK–12 systems (Brookhart, 2017; Schimmer et al., 2018).

Toward a Programmatic Lens on Grading Preparation

Across the grading reform literature, coherence repeatedly emerges as a necessary condition for meaningful change and sustainable implementation (Guskey, 2015; Schimmer et al., 2018). While scholars have examined coherence at the classroom, school, and district levels, far less attention has been given to how coherence is cultivated within teacher preparation programs as organizational systems. Existing research suggests that fragmented or inconsistent preparation may shape how novice teachers make sense of grading practices, yet the structure and integration of grading instruction across preparation curricula remains largely unexplored in empirical research.

Addressing this gap requires a programmatic lens that examines how grading and assessment instruction is intentionally structured, coordinated, and reinforced across coursework and field experiences within teacher preparation programs. Despite its importance, limited research has examined how teacher preparation programs organize and coordinate grading instruction at the program level. By examining variation in how undergraduate TEPs approach grading preparation, this study extends grading reform scholarship upstream to the preparation pipeline. In doing so, it responds to longstanding critiques in the literature regarding coherence, equity, and implementation, while offering a framework for understanding how preparation contexts may shape the future enactment of grading practices in PK–12 schools through newly licensed teachers.

Conceptual Framework

This study is informed by key tenets associated with SBG, including an emphasis on clearly articulated learning standards, criterion-referenced assessment, the separation of academic achievement from non-cognitive factors, and opportunities for students to demonstrate mastery over time (Guskey et al., 2020; Tierney et al., 2011). Rather than focusing on isolated courses or individual instructional strategies, this perspective emphasizes how programs create coherence in grading-related learning experiences throughout teacher preparation. In this study, programmatic integration refers to the extent to which grading and assessment instruction are intentionally structured, coordinated, and reinforced across coursework, faculty practices, and field experiences within a teacher preparation program. In keeping with a constructivist qualitative approach (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), the conceptual framework provided an analytic orientation for interpreting variation across cases, while allowing patterns, themes, and relationships to emerge inductively from participant perspectives and programmatic documents.

METHODS

This study employed a qualitative multiple-case study design (Stake, 2006) to examine how undergraduate teacher education programs integrate instruction on grading and assessment into their curricula. The design supported cross-case comparison of programmatic approaches. Consistent with a constructivist epistemological stance (Crotty, 1998/2015), the study centered

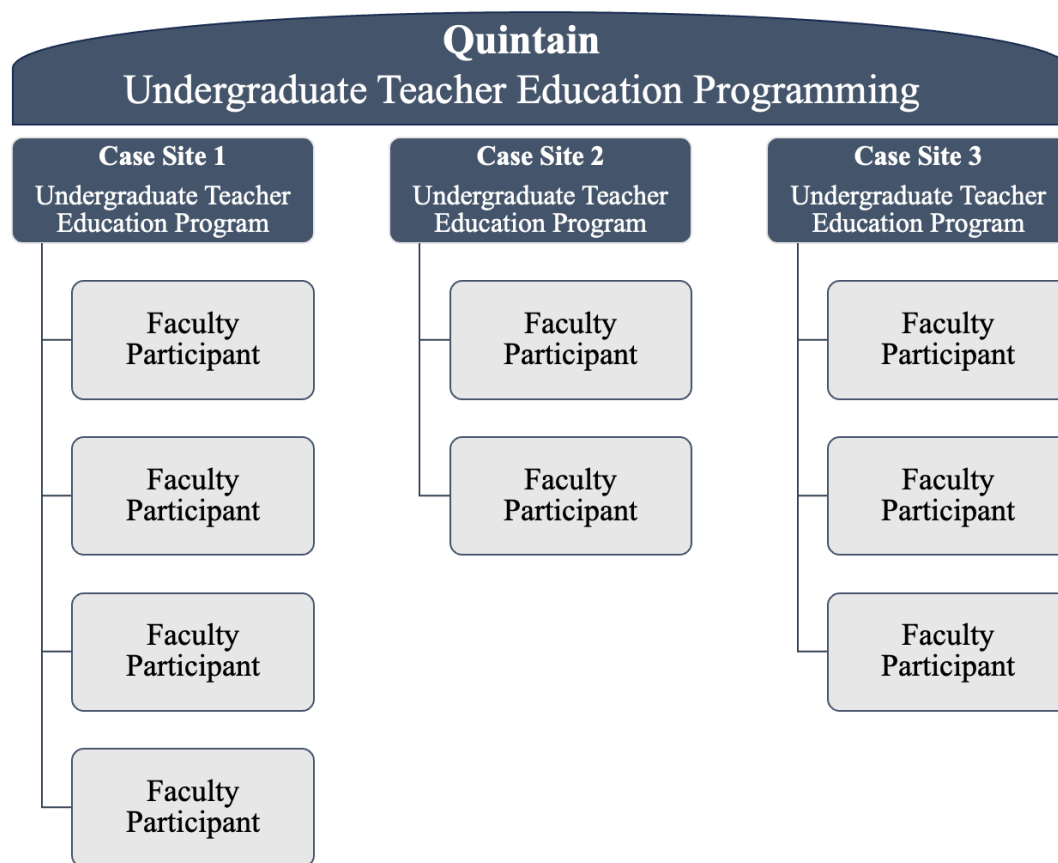
on participants' interpretations and programmatic contexts in understanding how grading-related instruction is organized and enacted.

The Quintain

The study was organized around a central quintain: how undergraduate teacher education programs prepare pre-service teachers for SBG environments. This concept guided case selection and cross-case analysis (Stake, 2006).

Figure 1

The Quintain: Undergraduate Teacher Education Programming



Data Collection

Data collection incorporated three primary sources: interview data, programmatic documents, and analytic memos (Merriam, 1988; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Stake, 2006; Yin, 2018). Using a modified version of Seidman's (2019) three-interview protocol, nine faculty participants each engaged in two semi-structured interviews. The first interview focused on faculty roles and experiences, while the second examined instructional practice, institutional context, and perceptions of grading (Seidman, 2019). Interviews were conducted via Zoom or in person, ranged from 45–90 minutes, and were audio-recorded and transcribed for analysis in NVivo (Version 14). Programmatic documents analyzed to triangulate findings included course syllabi, student teaching handbooks, and programmatic frameworks (Merriam, 1988; Stake, 2006; Yin, 2018), and analytic memoing was used to document reflections and support thematic development (Saldaña, 2016).

Trustworthiness, Ethics, and Positionality

Trustworthiness was supported through triangulation across data sources, member checking, and analytic memos documenting interpretations. An audit trail and peer debriefing were also used to support analytic rigor (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Stake, 2006). All research activities were approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at the researcher's home institution and by the site-based IRB at the individual case sites prior to data collection. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, who were advised of the study's purpose, their right to withdraw, and confidentiality protections. Pseudonyms were used, identifying details were removed, and job titles were generalized to protect anonymity. Data were securely stored on encrypted devices and in locked storage accessible only to the researcher.

The researcher brought a background in higher education and an interest in equitable grading practices within teacher preparation contexts. While this positionality informed an understanding of curriculum and faculty decision-making, it also introduced potential bias. To mitigate this, the researcher engaged in reflexive memoing throughout data collection and analysis and used peer debriefing to examine assumptions and interpretations. Transparency was further maintained by keeping a detailed research journal that provided an audit trail of the design decisions and personal reflections throughout the study. Through these methods, the study was purposefully designed to foreground participant perspectives and institutional contexts, ensuring the findings remained grounded in the data.

Participants and Case Sites

Case sites (see Table 1) and participants (see Table 2) were selected using purposeful sampling to capture variation in how SBG concepts are addressed within teacher preparation programs (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Sites were selected to reflect shared institutional characteristics (e.g., private, liberal arts, licensure-granting programs) while varying in program structure, faculty organization, and approaches to grading and assessment instruction. This approach supported cross-case comparison of how program design shapes candidates' opportunities to engage with grading practices.

Case Site Overview

The three institutions included in this study, referred to by the pseudonyms Cottonwood University, Sumac College, and Hackberry College, shared common features such as private liberal arts status, religious affiliation, and teacher licensure pathways, while also reflecting meaningful differences in faculty size, curricular structures, and institutional cultures (see Table 1). Institutional characteristics, including undergraduate enrollment and faculty composition, were drawn from publicly available data reported through the College Navigator database (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2022). Student-to-faculty ratios were calculated using full-time faculty counts only, as reported by the source, and do not include part-time faculty. This balance supported both within-case depth and cross-case comparison.

Table 1

Institutional Data by Case Site

Institution Pseudonym	Undergraduate Enrollment	Full-Time Faculty	Part-Time Faculty	Student-to-Faculty Ratio
Cottonwood University	1,404	47	79	18:1
Sumac College	1,153	77	123	15:1
Hackberry College	1,169	91	8	13:1

Participant Overview

The study included nine full-time faculty members across three small, private liberal arts colleges in a Midwestern state. Participant pseudonyms were self-selected, and job titles were generalized to ensure anonymity (see Table 2). The sample reflected variation in teaching experience, academic rank, and disciplinary specialization. Collectively, participants offered

insight into how individual beliefs, departmental norms, and institutional contexts shaped their approaches to grading and assessment within the preparation of future teachers.

Cottonwood University employed four participants representing diverse academic and professional backgrounds, including Social Studies education, literacy, and technology integration. Sumac College contributed two participants, both of whom held leadership roles in program coordination and assessment. Hackberry College included three participants with specializations in early childhood, mathematics education, and educational psychology.

Table 2

Faculty Participant Profiles by Institution

Cottonwood University Faculty Profile					
Pseudonym	Gender	Title	Highest Degree	Years in TEP	Years in PK–12
Arthur	Male	Associate Professor	Doctorate	10	5
Lynn	Female	Assistant Professor	Master's	8	16
Bob	Male	Assistant Professor	Master's	10	12
Anna	Female	Assistant Professor	Master's	18	11
Sumac College Faculty Profile					
Pseudonym	Gender	Title	Highest Degree	Years in TEP	Years in PK–12
Neice	Female	Assistant Professor	Doctorate	4	15
Lew	Male	Assistant Professor	Doctorate	9	16
Hackberry College Faculty Profile					
Pseudonym	Gender	Title	Highest Degree	Years in TEP	Years in PK–12
Emily	Female	Assistant Professor	Doctorate	4	15
Patricia	Female	Lecturer	Master's	2	6
Jane	Female	Associate Professor	Doctorate	11	5

Case Site 1: Cottonwood University

Cottonwood University is a Christian liberal arts college with a teacher education program housed within its School of Education and Human Services. The program offers a range of licensure areas and emphasizes clinical partnerships with local PK–12 districts. Cottonwood contributed four participants to the study. These faculty members represented various content areas, including literacy education, social studies education, educational technology, and secondary methods. Participants varied in academic rank and appointment status. Cottonwood's program demonstrated a strong emphasis on developmental coursework and included multiple practicum experiences prior to student teaching.

Case Site 2: Sumac College

Sumac College is a small Christian liberal arts college with a tight-knit education department and a cohort-based licensure pathway. The program is known for its emphasis on moral and civic education, which is integrated into coursework and field experiences. Two faculty members from Sumac participated in the study. Both held leadership roles within the program, one serving as a field experience coordinator and the other as an assessment coordinator, and both were involved in course design and program evaluation. The small faculty size at Sumac created conditions for alignment across courses, though formal grading frameworks were not explicitly embedded in all program documents.

Case Site 3: Hackberry College

Hackberry College is also a Christian liberal arts institution, yet it has a larger education department relative to its institutional size. Its teacher preparation program emphasizes early field experiences and differentiated instruction. Three faculty members from Hackberry participated in the study, each representing different areas of expertise: mathematics education, early childhood education, and educational psychology. Participants varied in academic rank and professional

experience, including prior PK–12 teaching and administrative roles. While faculty expressed support for equitable assessment practices, Hackberry demonstrated variability in how and where grading instruction appeared in the curriculum.

Data Analysis

Data analysis occurred concurrently with data collection and followed an iterative, inductive process consistent with qualitative multiple-case study methodology (Stake, 2006). Interview data (transcripts and notes) and programmatic documents were first reviewed within each case to develop a contextual understanding of how grading and assessment instruction was described and enacted within individual TEPs. Initial coding (Saldaña, 2016) was used to identify segments of data related to grading practices, assessment purposes, curricular emphasis, and connections across coursework and field experiences. These codes were then refined and grouped into broader categories within each case.

Comparisons across participants within institutions were used to examine consistency and variation in how grading-related instruction was positioned programmatically. Analytic memos supported the development of interpretations and identification of emerging themes (Stake, 2006). Cross-case analysis then compared these categories across the three institutional cases to identify patterns in grading preparation. Through constant comparison, three distinct approaches to programmatic integration emerged, reflecting variation in how grading and assessment instruction was coordinated across coursework, modeled by faculty, and reinforced through field experiences. The Continuum of Grading Approach Integration was developed as an analytic synthesis of these patterns, representing a data-grounded heuristic rather than a prescriptive framework.

Throughout the analysis, distinctions were maintained between descriptive findings grounded in participant data and interpretive claims developed through cross-case comparison. This approach enhanced transparency in how analytic claims were derived and allows the continuum to remain anchored in interview data and programmatic documents rather than imposed theoretical categories (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Stake, 2006).

FINDINGS

Analysis across the three institutional cases revealed patterned variation in how grading and assessment instruction was integrated within undergraduate teacher education programs. While faculty across all cases acknowledged the growing prevalence of SBG in PK–12 contexts, they differed substantially in how intentionally they coordinated grading-related instruction across coursework, modeled it, and connected it to field experiences. These differences shaped how pre-service teachers encountered, interpreted, and applied grading practices during their preparation, reflecting variation in program-level expectations, faculty coordination, and the extent to which grading was positioned as a shared instructional responsibility.

Within-case analysis first identified variation in how grading was discussed, emphasized, and enacted inside individual programs. Subsequent cross-case analysis revealed recurring patterns related to programmatic coherence, faculty coordination, and connections between coursework and clinical experiences. Analysis identified three distinct approaches to grading preparation across cases.

These approaches are presented as three themes representing distinct configurations of how grading and assessment instruction was structured within programs: fragmented passive exposure, emerging integration, and aligned programmatic approach. Together, these themes informed the development of the Continuum of Grading Approach Integration, which is presented in the cross-case synthesis. The following sections present each theme in turn, supported by faculty perspectives and programmatic artifacts, and then return to the continuum as a cross-case synthesis illustrating how these approaches relate to one another.

Theme 1: Fragmented Passive Exposure

Programs situated at the *fragmented passive exposure level* of the continuum addressed grading in ways that were incidental, unstructured, and largely dependent on individual faculty members' initiative rather than on programmatic design. This pattern reflects the absence of shared program expectations, coordinated curriculum planning, and explicit responsibility for grading instruction across faculty. In this context, programmatic integration was minimal, with grading instruction occurring inconsistently across courses and without coordination among faculty or alignment with field experiences. In these contexts, grading was not positioned as a central component of teacher preparation nor explicitly connected to the philosophical tenets of SBG. Instead, exposure to grading practices occurred sporadically, often emerging only when prompted by student questions or field-based experiences. As a result, candidates encountered grading as a

peripheral topic rather than as a core instructional and ethical responsibility because no programmatic structures positioned grading as a shared focus across coursework.

Faculty participants frequently described relying on traditional grading practices (e.g., letter- and percentage-based grades) shaped by their own experiences in PK–12 or higher education, rather than by contemporary assessment research. In these contexts, grading was not positioned as a program-level priority, which limited opportunities for faculty collaboration or intentional integration across coursework. One faculty member at Hackberry College characterized grading instruction as incidental, explaining that it was “a quick aside” during a lesson planning unit and noting, “It’s something we talk about when students ask, but I wouldn’t say it’s a focus.” This reactive approach to grading instruction suggests that, in the absence of programmatic structures, grading becomes contingent on individual faculty decisions rather than on coordinated curricular intent. Overall, this framing reflects a reactive approach to grading instruction, in which assessment literacy is treated as secondary to other pedagogical priorities.

Across cases, the lack of intentional curricular attention to grading was often justified by an assumption that assessment knowledge would be acquired during student teaching. Faculty deferred responsibility to cooperating teachers, despite recognizing inconsistencies in field-based practices. A reliance on field placements appeared to function as an implicit substitute for programmatic instruction, despite acknowledged inconsistencies across clinical contexts. As Lew, a faculty member from Sumac College, acknowledged, “We kind of assume they’ll see grading during student teaching, but whether that aligns with anything we’ve talked about is another story.” Such comments illustrated how grading preparation was displaced from coursework to clinical contexts without guarantees of coherence or alignment.

The absence of shared language, coordinated faculty development, or institutional expectations around grading also resulted in fragmented learning experiences for teacher candidates. Although faculty expressed concern about inequitable grading practices in PK–12 schools, these concerns were not translated into systematic preparation. At this level of the continuum, grading remained disconnected from broader conversations about equity, mastery, and instructional decision-making. This reflects an absence of structures that would otherwise position grading as a shared programmatic responsibility. Consequently, it limits candidates’ opportunities to critically examine how assessment practices shape student outcomes.

Theme 2: Emerging Integration

Programs classified at the *emerging integration level* demonstrated growing awareness of the importance of grading and assessment preparation, with evidence of faculty experimentation and limited curricular integration of SBG principles. Unlike fragmented contexts, these programs addressed grading more explicitly; however, integration remained partial, uneven, and highly dependent on individual faculty members, reflecting limited program-level structures to support coordination across courses. In this context, programmatic integration was partial, with grading instruction appearing in multiple courses but lacking consistent coordination, shared expectations, or systematic reinforcement across the program.

In these settings, grading instruction often appeared in isolated courses, seminars, or assignments. Faculty described introducing elements of SBG, such as rubric-based assessment, standards-referenced feedback, or reassessment opportunities, but without sustained scaffolding across the program. One participant, Anna from Cottonwood University, described how conversations about assessment had begun to surface at the departmental level, stating, “We’ve started talking more about assessment at department meetings, but it’s still not something we’ve structured as a faculty.” This sentiment reflected growing recognition of assessment’s importance without corresponding institutional mechanisms to support coherence, resulting in uneven implementation across coursework and field experiences.

Faculty participants also articulated tensions between theoretical instruction and practical realities, particularly in field placements. While coursework emphasized equity and mastery, candidates often observed traditional grading practices during student teaching. Jane from Hackberry College captured this disconnect, noting, “We talk about equity and mastery in class, but then they go into a school that still uses traditional grading, and it confuses them.” These disconnects complicated candidates’ efforts to reconcile coursework with practice, highlighting how inconsistent program structures and field experiences shaped their understanding of grading.

Despite these challenges, emerging programs displayed notable potential for future alignment. Faculty were reflective and increasingly attuned to the ethical and instructional implications of grading. Participants frequently expressed enthusiasm for SBG’s capacity to provide meaningful feedback and reduce subjectivity. As Lew from Sumac College explained, “Standards-based grading is far more specific than just slapping a B on a paper and handing it to a student . . . there’s context there.” Such perspectives suggest that while integration was incomplete, foundational beliefs necessary for systemic change were beginning to coalesce.

Theme 3: Aligned Programmatic Approach

Programs situated at the *aligned programmatic approach* level of the continuum demonstrated intentional, cohesive integration of SBG across coursework, clinical experiences, and faculty practice. In these contexts, grading was treated as a pedagogical and philosophical priority rather than as a discrete instructional topic because program structures intentionally reinforced shared expectations across coursework and field experiences. In this context, programmatic integration was intentional and sustained, with grading instruction coordinated across coursework, reinforced by faculty, and aligned with field experiences. Faculty shared a common language, curricular structures reinforced consistent expectations, and candidates encountered SBG as an integrated framework for thinking about teaching, learning, and equity.

A defining feature of aligned programs was explicit curricular scaffolding. SBG concepts were introduced in foundational coursework, expanded in methods classes, and applied during practicum and student teaching. Faculty described modeling grading practices using shared rubrics, performance scales, and transparent feedback systems. Neice from Sumac College emphasized the importance of consistency, stating, “This scale is the same across all the courses in the teacher education program.” Such alignment ensured that candidates repeatedly engaged with common assessment principles, which strengthened their ability to interpret and apply grading practices consistently across contexts.

Aligned programs also benefited from institutional structures that supported a unified approach. Faculty collaboration shared philosophical commitments, and program-wide conversations about grading were common. Arthur from Cottonwood University described a program-level effort to strengthen alignment, explaining that the goal was to evidence candidate growth toward mastery of professional standards and to provide opportunities for reflection and revision. Arthur emphasized, “How are you evidencing that your pre-service teachers are moving toward proficiency and mastery of the standards, and how are they having the opportunity to come back and talk about their growth?” This focus positioned grading as integral to professional learning rather than as a terminal judgment.

Connections between coursework and field experiences were particularly strong in aligned programs. Faculty worked intentionally with clinical partners to ensure candidates observed and practiced grading approaches consistent with program values. When discrepancies arose, they were addressed through reflective dialogue rather than ignored. This integration helped candidates navigate real-world constraints while maintaining a commitment to equitable assessment, as program structures provided consistent frameworks for interpreting grading practices. As Patricia from Hackberry College noted when discussing rubric-based grading, “Here are my expectations. This is a way to meet it. But if you want to go above and beyond, here’s how.” Such practices reinforced grading as a communicative and instructional tool, preparing candidates to enact SBG principles within diverse PK–12 contexts.

Cross-Case Synthesis: Continuum of Grading Approach Integration

Synthesizing findings across the three themes, the Continuum of Grading Approach Integration (see Figure 2) was developed to represent patterned variation in how undergraduate TEPs prepared pre-service teachers for SBG. The continuum reflects cross-case patterns in the degree of programmatic integration, ranging from minimal and fragmented to intentional and sustained coordination across teacher preparation programs. Each position on the continuum captures a qualitatively distinct approach to grading instruction, as observed across cases and grounded in participant perspectives and programmatic artifacts.

At one end of the continuum, fragmented passive exposure represents programs in which grading instruction was present but inconsistently integrated, leaving candidates to navigate grading practices largely through individual courses or practicum experiences. Emerging integration reflects increased intentionality and faculty awareness of grading reform, with grading instruction embedded across multiple courses but lacking formalized program-wide coordination. At the other end of the continuum, an aligned programmatic approach represents contexts in which grading and assessment instruction was systematically coordinated across coursework and field experiences, supported by shared language, modeling of practices, and structured reflection.

The continuum is not intended to suggest a linear progression or developmental sequence that programs must follow, nor does it function as an evaluative rubric. Instead, it serves as an analytic heuristic for understanding variation across teacher-preparation contexts and for supporting reflection among teacher-education faculty and program leaders. Programs may exhibit characteristics of multiple positions on the continuum simultaneously, and placement may shift over time in response to institutional, policy, or personnel changes. As such, the continuum offers a flexible framework for interpreting how grading-related instruction is structured within TEPs rather than a prescriptive model for reform.

Figure 2

A Continuum of Grading Approach Integration in Undergraduate Teacher Education Programs

Programmatic Integration of Grading Instruction		
Fragmented Passive Exposure	Emerging Integration	Aligned Programmatic Approach
- Grading instruction appears inconsistently across coursework - Limited coordination among faculty regarding grading practices - Exposure to standards-based grading depends largely on practicum placements - Traditional grading practices dominate teacher education coursework	- Grading instruction embedded across multiple courses - Growing attention to standards-based grading principles - Informal faculty collaboration around grading and assessment - Limited program-level coordination or shared expectations	- Grading and assessment instruction coordinated across coursework - Shared faculty language and expectations related to grading - Coursework models standards-aligned assessment and feedback - Field experiences intentionally connected to programmatic frameworks
Grading Practices Addressed Across Coursework and Field Experiences		

Note. The continuum represents analytically distinct approaches to programmatic integration of grading instruction observed across cases and does not imply a linear progression or evaluative hierarchy. Programs may exhibit characteristics of multiple positions simultaneously.

DISCUSSION

This study shifts attention from individual grading practices to the organizational conditions that shape how grading is learned within teacher preparation programs. Rather than functioning as a discrete instructional topic, grading emerged as a program-level structure shaped by the degree of coordination across coursework, faculty practices, and field experiences. These findings suggest that pre-service teachers' understanding of grading is less a function of isolated instructional exposure and more a product of how programs structure opportunities to engage with assessment as part of instructional decision-making. These findings suggest that grading practices are not simply adopted by individual teachers but are socially and structurally constructed through the organization of teacher preparation programs, extending existing conceptions of grading as an individual instructional practice to a programmatic and organizational phenomenon.

These findings extend prior research on grading reform, which has largely focused on implementation challenges in PK–12 contexts (Brookhart et al., 2016; Townsley & Buckmiller, 2020), by demonstrating that coherence in grading practices is shaped well before teachers enter the classroom. While existing literature emphasizes the role of teacher beliefs and professional learning, the findings in this study highlight the importance of programmatic structures in shaping how those beliefs are formed and enacted. In this way, grading reform can be understood not only as a school-based initiative but as a function of how preparation programs organize learning opportunities across the teacher development pipeline. This reframing positions teacher preparation as a critical, yet under-theorized, site of grading reform, suggesting that coherence in grading practices is not only enacted in schools but also constructed through the design of preparation programs.

The Continuum of Grading Approach Integration offers a conceptual contribution by theorizing variation in grading preparation as differences in the findings rather than differences in individual exposure. By conceptualizing grading preparation along a continuum, the study advances a framework for understanding how organizational structures within teacher education shape candidates' opportunities to learn, interpret, and enact grading practices.

Collectively, this study contributes to grading reform scholarship by extending theoretical attention from classroom practice to the organizational structures of teacher preparation. While existing literature has emphasized the role of teacher beliefs, policy contexts, and professional learning, the findings suggest that programmatic integration is a key mechanism through which grading practices are learned and normalized. By foregrounding coherence across coursework, faculty practice, and field experiences, this study offers a theoretical lens for understanding how preparation environments shape the future enactment of grading practices in PK–12 education.

IMPLICATIONS

Together, the findings suggest that preparation for SBG is shaped less by isolated instructional choices and more by how grading and assessment instruction is positioned across teacher education programs as a whole. Viewing grading preparation through a programmatic lens foregrounds the importance of alignment and intentional design in shaping pre-service teachers' readiness to engage with grading reform. The following implications consider how teacher education programs may respond to these findings to support sustained, context-sensitive preparation for evolving PK–12 grading practices.

Implications for Teacher Education

The findings of this study suggest how grading and assessment instruction structured within TEPs may shape pre-service teachers' readiness to engage in SBG practices encountered in PK–12 schools. Rather than emphasizing individual faculty adoption of specific grading strategies, the Continuum of Grading Approach Integration (see Figure 2) highlights the importance of a coherent programmatic structure in how grading principles are introduced, reinforced, and modeled across coursework and field experiences. For TEPs, this suggests that grading preparation may be strengthened by attending to coordination across courses and instructional contexts rather than relying on isolated or course-specific exposure.

One implication for teacher education faculty is the importance of shared language and expectations regarding grading and assessment. Participants in programs characterized as having stronger alignment described faculty collaboration on how grading concepts were framed, which supported candidates in developing a more coherent understanding of grading as part of instructional decision-making. While institutional constraints may limit the extent to which SBG can be fully implemented within university courses, modeling key principles such as transparent success criteria, standards-aligned assessment design, and formative feedback may help bridge the gap between theory and practice for pre-service teachers.

The findings also point to the role of structured reflection in connecting coursework and field experiences. In aligned programmatic contexts, faculty intentionally supported candidates in analyzing grading practices observed in PK–12 placements using shared frameworks and program-level language. This approach appeared to support candidates in navigating variation across school contexts while maintaining conceptual alignment. TEPs may benefit from designing reflective opportunities that explicitly connect grading practices encountered in practicum settings to concepts introduced in coursework.

Finally, the continuum may serve as a reflective tool for TEPs seeking to examine how grading-related instruction is currently positioned within their curricula. Rather than functioning as a prescriptive model, the continuum offers faculty and program leaders a way to consider questions of coherence and intentionality in grading preparation. Used in this way, the continuum may support program-level dialogue about how teacher preparation can respond to ongoing grading reforms in PK–12 education while remaining responsive to institutional context and constraints.

Implications for Educational Leadership

The findings of this study emphasize the role of educational leadership in shaping the conditions under which grading reform is understood, supported, and sustained across the teacher preparation pipeline. As SBG continues to expand in PK–12 contexts, school and system leaders increasingly rely on newly licensed teachers to enter classrooms with a foundational understanding of grading principles and practices. The Continuum of Grading Approach Integration (see Figure 2) suggests that variation in teacher preparation may influence how novice teachers engage with grading reform initiatives upon entering the profession.

For educational leaders working in PK–12 systems, these findings highlight the importance of communication and partnership with teacher preparation programs. District leaders implementing or refining SBG practices may benefit from articulating expectations for grading and assessment to inform clinical partnerships, student teaching placements, and mentoring structures. While TEPs operate independently of PK–12 districts, intentional collaboration may help ensure greater consistency between how grading is discussed in preparation programs and how it is implemented in schools.

At the postsecondary level, academic leaders and program administrators play a critical role in fostering conditions for programmatic alignment. The findings suggest that grading preparation is influenced not only by individual faculty expertise but also by institutional structures such as curriculum design processes, program review cycles, and faculty collaboration norms. Educational leaders within higher education may use the continuum as a reflective tool to examine how grading-related instruction is positioned across programs and to support dialogue around modeling and alignment without prescribing uniform practices.

Limitations

As with all qualitative case study research, the findings of this study should be interpreted considering several limitations. First, the study examined three small private undergraduate TEPs within a single Midwestern state. While this shared regional and policy context supported analytic comparison, the findings are not intended to be statistically generalizable to all teacher preparation programs. Instead, the study offers analytic insights into how grading and assessment instruction may be structured within similar institutional contexts.

Second, the study focused on interview data and programmatic documents rather than direct observation of coursework or analysis of pre-service teachers' instructional practices. Although faculty interviews and document analysis provided insight into how grading instruction was positioned and coordinated within programs, future research could extend these findings by examining how pre-service teachers experience and enact grading practices during coursework and clinical placements.

Third, the study centered on teacher preparation rather than on PK–12 implementation of SBG. While the findings are situated within broader grading reform efforts, the study does not evaluate the effectiveness of SBG practices in schools or the extent to which preparation experiences translate into classroom practice. As such, claims regarding PK–12 outcomes are necessarily limited.

Finally, institutional constraints within higher education, including grading policies and program requirements, may have shaped how faculty described and enacted grading practices. These contextual factors are an important consideration when interpreting findings and underscore the need to view grading preparation within the broader organizational environments in which TEPs operate.

Future Research

The findings of this study suggest several directions for future research on grading reform and teacher preparation. First, additional studies could examine how pre-service teachers interpret and apply grading-related instruction as they transition from coursework to clinical placements and early-career teaching. Longitudinal research following candidates from preparation programs into PK–12 classrooms would help illuminate how programmatic coherence in grading preparation influences novice teachers' grading practices over time.

Future research could also extend this work by examining a broader range of institutional contexts. Studies that include public universities, alternative licensure pathways, or institutions operating in different policy environments may provide additional insight into how grading preparation is shaped by organizational structures, accreditation requirements, and state-level mandates. Comparative studies across regions or states could further clarify how local grading reform efforts intersect with teacher preparation practices.

In addition, research incorporating multiple stakeholder perspectives would strengthen understanding of grading preparation as a system-level phenomenon. Including pre-service teachers, mentor teachers, and PK–12 administrators alongside teacher education faculty could offer a more comprehensive view of how grading expectations are communicated, reinforced, and negotiated across preparation and induction contexts. Mixed-methods approaches may be particularly useful in examining how perceptions of grading preparation align with observed practices.

Finally, future scholarship could explore how the Continuum of Grading Approach Integration (see Figure 2) functions as a reflective or analytic tool within TEPs. Research examining how faculty and program leaders use the continuum to guide curriculum review, professional dialogue, or program redesign could help clarify its utility and limitations. Such work would contribute to a growing body of research focused on integration and sustainability in grading reform across educational systems.

CONCLUSION

As SBG continues to shape assessment practices in PK–12 education, questions of how teachers are prepared to engage with these systems remain central to the sustainability of grading reform. This study contributes to that conversation by examining how undergraduate TEPs integrate grading and assessment instruction within their curricula. Through cross-case analysis, the study highlights patterned variation in how grading preparation is structured and coordinated, shifting attention from individual instructional practices to programmatic alignment.

The Continuum of Grading Approach Integration (see Figure 2) offers a conceptual contribution that captures this variation and provides a language for discussing how teacher preparation programs may differ in their approaches to grading instruction. Rather than positioning grading reform as a technical skill to be mastered in isolation, the findings suggest that

consistency across coursework, faculty practices, and field experiences plays a meaningful role in how pre-service teachers make sense of grading as part of instructional decision-making.

By centering teacher preparation within broader grading reform efforts, this study underscores the importance of alignment across educational systems. As PK–12 schools continue to reconsider how grading communicates learning, TEPs and educational leaders alike are positioned to reflect on how preparation structures support or constrain coherence across teacher preparation programming. Viewed in this way, moving from fragmented to aligned approaches to grading preparation becomes not a prescriptive pathway, but an ongoing, context-sensitive process that shapes the future enactment of grading practices in schools.

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