



## How Should We Evaluate Student Teachers?

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### **Introduction**

Possibly the most written about component of teacher preparation is student teaching. A cursory examination of literature databases identified some 4000 articles on this topic spanning the last three decades. Virtually every aspect of student teaching has been examined, including peer coaching (Pierce & Miller, 1994); mentoring (Sudzina, et al., 1997; Herndon & Fauske, 1996); the role of the cooperating teacher (Ganser, 1996); and the relationship between the university supervisor and the student teacher (Cole & Knowles, 1995). In recent years Professional Development Schools (PDS) have been studied from almost every angle imaginable (Hopkins, et al., 1997; Sandoval, 1996). An issue often related to PDSs that is attracting increasing interest is action research in the student teaching experience (McEwan, et al., 1997; Stanulis & Jeffers, 1995).

In addition to the development of PDSs and emphasis on action research, how student teachers are evaluated has attracted the attention of researchers. Rath's and Lyman's (2003) investigation reinforced what many believe -- that the difficulty of evaluating student teachers often leads to rather subjective assessment and allows incompetent student teachers to be recommended for licensure. On the other hand, some researchers are developing a teacher work sample methodology to be used in evaluating student teachers and claim this method can be used to improve both program direction and classroom instruction (Henning and Robinson, 2004). This work seems to be a continuation of the research conducted by Chance and Rakes (1994). They looked at the "Practice Teacher Portfolio" as a component of an authentic assessment approach to student teacher evaluation. Benjamin (2002) suggests an evaluation instrument based on teacher responsibilities shown to improve student learning. This "framework for teaching" was first developed by Danielson (1996) and had led to portfolios becoming a common feature of many teacher education programs.

Not all of the articles on any single aspect of student teaching are positive nor are all negative. This lack of consensus is one of the reasons student teaching continues to attract the interest of educational researchers. Ralph (1994) is concerned about the supervision of student teachers. He warns that decisions by supervisors should be based upon universally accepted human values. In a related issue, Baillie (1994) claims that reflection or self-examination as a component of field experiences is not "a self-evident good." According to Baillie, supervisors and student teachers alike need to focus their attention on what they mean by reflection/self-examination and what they mean by teaching.

Even the concept of increasing the amount of time pre-service teachers spend in field experiences has been criticized. Williams (1994) found that while students valued school-based work, they were not supportive of school-based courses. Likewise, Sumpter (1995) found drawbacks to increasing the amount of field experience in teacher education programs. At least a portion of the concern over field experiences involves the atmosphere in which student teachers find

themselves. A common complaint of student teachers is one of a feeling of alienation (Thomson & Wendt, 1995). They often report the environment in schools to be non-supportive for pre-service teachers. Some student teachers, according to Miller (1997) and Bruckerhoff and Carlson (1995), claim that schools are worse than non-supportive. These authors found that many female student teachers are sexually harassed by aggressive and at times drunken students.

Finally, the issue of classroom management is still of primary importance for student teachers. Pilarski (1994) asserts that too many student teachers are not prepared for the discipline problems they face in schools, and teacher education programs need to better prepare their pre-service teachers for the realities of the classroom. Koziol (1996) takes the opposite position and argues that too much time is spent on classroom management in teacher education programs at the expense of substantive teaching.

While many of these issues are important and deserve to be investigated, too little attention has been paid to the evaluation of student teachers. After talking with numerous public school officials it is clear that the single most important grade a prospective teacher receives during four years of college is the one he/she receives in student teaching. Those who receive an "A" have a realistic expectation of securing a teaching position upon graduation. A "B" grade in student teaching, on the other hand, reduces dramatically an individual's job prospects. Usually, except in rare cases, a grade of "C" in student teaching removes one from serious consideration for most teaching positions. A complication in evaluating student teachers is the most common method is a letter grade supported by a letter of recommendation. Unfortunately, there is reason to question the accuracy and honesty of a letter grade and the accompanying letter of recommendation in communicating the student teacher's skills and knowledge base. Often a hiring official is left in the dark as to the strengths and weaknesses a candidate brings with them.

Such an emphasis on "The Grade" is unfortunate for several reasons. For the student teacher, of course, it turns the weeks of student teaching into a race for a grade, won by pleasing the cooperating teacher and college supervisor, when in fact that time should be spent learning by experimenting and risk taking. Equally unfortunate is the effect that the emphasis on the final grade in student teaching has on the assessment of student teachers. As research has shown, cooperating supervisors, knowing the importance attached to the student teaching grade, find it difficult to evaluate the student teacher's performance fairly and accurately, and thus fall victim to the Halo and Leniency effects (Phelps, et al., 1986). The authors of this study found that many cooperating teachers tend to overstate a student teacher's skills, while understating the areas in which he or she needs to improve. Consequently, Southall (1988) found that a disproportionate number of student teachers receive a grade of "A" or "B" -- in excess of 95% of all student teachers in his study were assigned an "A" or "B". Unfortunately, neither the negatives associated with the Halo and Leniency effects nor the accompanying grade inflation is corrected for in letters of recommendation. Most letters of recommendation, whether written by college supervisors or cooperating teachers, say very little about the weaknesses of a student teacher. In short then, the traditional method of evaluating student teachers needs to be reevaluated. Not only does the reliance on a letter grade make a game of the student teaching experience as the student teacher tried to figure out how best to please the cooperating teacher and college supervisor, but also neither an individual's grade in student teaching nor the letters of recommendation in his/her placement file are useful tools to hiring officials.

The purpose of this investigation was to look into the accuracy of the evaluation process for student teachers. The two questions which guided this research were: 1) How valid are letter

grades assigned to student teachers? and, 2) How accurately does a letter of recommendation identify a student teacher's strengths and weaknesses?

### Method Subjects/Procedure

To test the validity of letter grades assigned in student teaching and their relationship to letters of recommendation written for student teachers, thirty elementary, thirty middle/junior high, and thirty high school principals were selected to participate in this study. Each principal was asked to read and assign a grade to two letters of recommendation and indicate their willingness to interview the person for whom the letter was written. One half of the elementary, one half of the middle/junior high, and one half of the high school principals were given letters written by cooperating teachers who had not had a course in supervising student teachers which included skills in how to write a fair and accurate letter of recommendation. The remaining principals were given letters written by cooperating teachers who had a course in supervising student teachers which included skills in how to write a fair and accurate letter of recommendation. Furthermore, the principals were asked to answer questions concerning student teaching, including the importance and value of a letter grade. The results of this study and the disproportionate number of student teachers who are assigned an "A" call into question the entire grading process for student teachers.

### Results and Discussion

The fact that an overwhelming number of principals -- 87% -- consider the interview the most important factor in the hiring process should not come as a surprise. Moreover, one should not be surprised that 73% of the principals believe letters of recommendation are helpful in the hiring process, or that 53% believe the letters are accurate, honest, and specific (Table One). Unfortunately, since in excess of 90% of all student teachers are assigned an "A" or a "B", the letter grade isn't much help to a principal in deciding who to interview. The results of Southall's five-year study were confirmed by this author's informal examination of a Midwestern college's student teaching grade distribution for the past five years.

#### Letters of Recommendation are Accurate, Honest, Specific and Helpful in the Hiring Process

	Elementary Principals	Middle School/Junior High Principals	Senior High Principals	Average
Letters of Evaluation are helpful in the hiring process	73%	56%	90%	<b>73%</b>
Letters of Recommendation are accurate, honest, specific	55%	44%	60%	<b>53%</b>
Interview is the most important factor in hiring	91%	89%	81%	<b>87%</b>

**Table One**

As Table Two illustrates, letters of recommendation are not as accurate as most principals believe. Most principals say that they find letters of recommendation helpful and they believe them to be accurate. However, when asked to read a letter of recommendation and then correctly assign a letter grade to the person for whom the letter was written, many principals had a difficult time accurately assigning the correct letter grade. Fully 77% of the letters written by members of a graduate class on the supervision and evaluation of student teachers which emphasized writing accurate letters of recommendation were assigned the correct letter grade by the principal, while only 24% of the letters taken from college placement files and written by cooperating teachers without a course in the supervision and evaluation of student teachers (SEST) were assigned the correct letter grade by principals.

**Percentage of Letters of Recommendation to Which Principals Assigned Correct Letter Grade.**

	Elementary Principals	Middle School/Junior High Principals	Senior High Principals	Average
Supervisors with training in letter writing	78%	78%	75%	77%
Supervisors without training in letter writing	30%	9%	33%	24%

**Table Two**

To further underscore the misleading nature of letters of recommendation, 26% of those letters written by cooperating teachers without a course in SEST were graded incorrectly by the principal by at least two letter grades. This is in contrast to those letters written by cooperating teachers who had a course in SEST. An examination of Table Three reveals that no letter written by those from the SEST group was graded incorrectly by two letter grades. A primary reason for the principal’s difficulty in assigning grades based on a letter of recommendation is suggested in Table Four. Only 37% of the principals in this study have had a course in the supervision and evaluation of student teachers, and 31% were aware of any of their faculty having had such a course. Unfortunately, no principal or teacher in this study had a course which included writing accurate and helpful letters of recommendation.

**Percentage of Letters of Recommendation Which Principals Incorrectly Identified by More than One Letter Grade.**

	Elementary Principals	Middle School/Junior High Principals	Senior High Principals	Average
Supervisors with training in letter writing	0%	0%	0%	0%
Supervisors without training in letter writing	23%	21%	34%	26%

**Table Three**

**Principals and Cooperating Teachers who Completed a Course in Supervision with and Without Training in Letter Writing.**

	Elementary Principals	Middle School/Junior High Principals	Senior High Principals	Average
Principal who completed a course in supervision	18%	53%	40%	<b>37%</b>
At least one of your faculty members has completed a course in supervision	0%	43%	50%	<b>31%</b>
Principals with training in writing letters of recommendations	0%	0%	0%	<b>0%</b>
At least one of your faculty members with training in writing letters of recommendation	0%	0%	0%	<b>0%</b>

**Table Four**

### Conclusion

It is clear from this research that letters of recommendation written by individuals who have been trained in writing letters of recommendation as a component of a course in the supervision and evaluation of student teachers offer a more accurate assessment of the student teacher than does a traditional letter grade. Little assistance, however, is being offered to college/university supervisors and cooperating teachers to help them learn how to identify and articulate the skills and knowledge base of an “A” student teachers versus those of a “B” student teacher, and a “B” student teacher from those of a “C” student teacher.

Almost twenty years ago, Southall conducted a study to determine what information personnel directors wanted in letters of recommendation. Not surprisingly, personnel directors want to know if the applicant is sensitive to student needs, has a command of their subject and a variety instructional methods and techniques, demonstrates professionalism in their attitude, possesses integrity, and has the potential to become a teacher who can make significant contributions to the district. The current system of grading student teachers, which includes a letter grade and a written letter of recommendation, provides personnel directors little help. The lack of training for cooperating teachers and the questionable value of most letters of recommendation stems from how cooperating teachers are selected. Rikard & Veal (1996) found that most cooperating teachers had no formal training in supervision, and simply drew upon their own memories and experiences. This lack of preparation was also found by Blocker & Swetnam (1995). Their study showed that most cooperating teachers are selected based upon a principal’s recommendation.

With upwards of 95% of all student teachers receiving an “A” or “B” in student teaching, and the typical letter of recommendation not accurately reflecting the student’s strengths and weaknesses, the evaluation process is neither meaningful for the student, nor helpful for the principal during the hiring process, and probably supports a call for teacher preparation programs to do a better job of selecting and training cooperating teachers.

Based on this research, the author has come to the conclusion that teacher education institutions should do away with the traditional letter grade as the method of evaluating the student teacher and adopt a pass/fail system supported by letters of recommendation written by cooperating teachers who have been trained to write letters that are clear and specific as to the student teacher's strengths and weaknesses. The emphasis on a letter grade not only makes student teaching an unduly stressful experience for the student, but also leads to grade inflation. Both university supervisors and site-based cooperating teachers succumb to the Halo and Leniency effects. This phenomenon is more serious than might be apparent. It seems obvious that too many student teachers receive an "A" in student teaching, and this inflated grade is not balanced by honest and accurate letters of recommendation. Too many teacher educators see the pre-service teacher as "part of our program", and "we need to help get a job". They act as if their responsibility is to the pre-service teacher; hence, they overlook problems and overstate skills. Teacher educators must realize that their primary responsibility is not to the pre-service teacher but to the students their graduates will influence for good or bad during a career spanning thirty years and more.

This unreliable evaluation of the student teacher is only made worse by letters of recommendation which say little, if anything, about the student teacher as a teacher. Everyone involved in the student teaching experience would benefit from a pass/fail system buttressed by clear, precise letters of recommendation written by cooperating teachers and college supervisors trained in the supervision and evaluation of student teachers. It would make the weeks of student teaching more enjoyable and profitable for the student teacher, who would no longer have to spend the time analyzing how best to assure himself/herself an "A". The job of the cooperating teacher and college supervisor, likewise, would be made less stressful because the training they received in the supervision and evaluation of student teachers would better enable them to guide and assess the progress of those pre-service teachers with whom they work. No longer would they worry that an ambiguous letter grade which they assign might keep a student from finding a job. They would better understand that the reliable evaluation of the student teacher provides more useful information for hiring officials, and would reduce the pressure to succumb to grade inflation. On a personal note, I believe this system would help put to rest the misguided notion that teaching is scientific, and the falls notion that we can evaluate it as we would a math assignment. While I can say with confidence that two and two are four, I cannot, with as much confidence, say what the fine line is between an "A" and a "B" student teacher. I can, however, say what the broad general categories of pass/fail mean, and I can say specifically what I think a student teacher's strengths and weaknesses are. I can write in a letter of recommendation what I actually observed in the classroom during my visits. Finally, while a pass/fail system supported by letters of recommendation is not perfect; it is, however, far superior to assigning letter grades supported by demonstrably inaccurate letters of recommendation

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