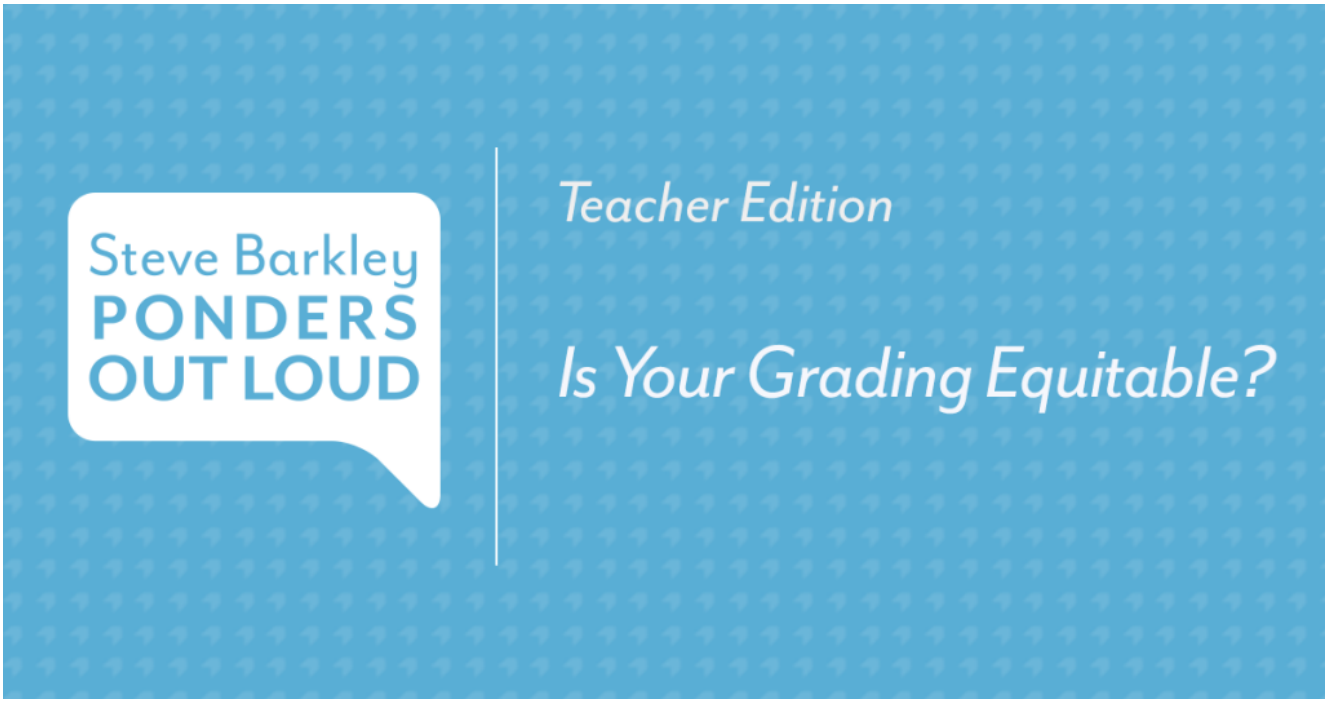
Podcast: Is Your Grading Equitable?



The author of, *"I Used to Think I Was a Fair Grader. Now I look Back and Cringe,"* Sarah Morris, shares the unconscious grading decisions she made as a teacher. As she learned about the impact of inequitable practices, she found changes she could implement that did not need any change in system policy. As an education policy researcher, she provides the needs for change and the possible alternatives.

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Podcast Transcript:

[00:00:00.250] – Steve [Intro]

Hello, and welcome to the Teacher Edition of Steve Barkley Ponders Out Loud. The complexity of teaching is both challenging and rewarding, and my curiosity is piqued whenever

I explore with teachers, the multiple pathways for facilitating student engagement in the exciting world of learning. This podcast looks to serve teachers as they motivate and support their learners. Thanks for listening. I'm delighted that you're here.

[00:00:32.690] – Steve

Is your grading equitable? Sarah Morris, experienced teacher and current doctoral candidate in education policy, wrote an article connecting her experiences as a teacher with the research on grading practices. Her article titled, "I Used to Think I Was a Fair Grader. Now I look back and Cringe," provides us much to reflect upon and I'm excited that she's joining us to share her insights.

[00:01:03.760] – Steve

Welcome, Sarah.

[00:01:06.160] – Sarah

Hi, Steve. Thanks for having me. It's nice to be back.

[00:01:08.990] – Steve

I'm wondering if we could start with a little bit of your teaching background and what are the issues that arose as you look back and bring that sense of cringe to you?

[00:01:23.510] – Sarah

I hope this doesn't feel like a confessional to you because every time I talk about this with people, I'm like oh man, I'm catching myself in the confessional. But I used to be a teacher. I taught for five years eigth grade math, and I was in a strong teacher prep program at a small private university and my favorite class was actually assessment and evaluation.

[00:01:54.400] – Sarah

I loved that professor and he really made me reflect about

what is a grade, what's good assessment, things like that. And then I actually got paired with a mentor for my student teaching placement who really made me think about the idea of a zero and a 50 and I took that armor and I headed into my first year of teaching job and I was like, man, I am the best grader in this whole school. I don't use any 0's, I only use 50's. I am so fair to these students and oh my goodness. Now, cringe is the right word because that's how I feel about it.

[00:02:40.300] – Sarah

I used to do so not cool things that did not accurately measure students knowledge at all at all. I think my worst offense was that I called them summarizers – their summarizers, which was basically their tool for if they were engaged in the class or not. Students either got a check, check minus or zero was 20% of the students final grade participation for if they were paying attention in class was 20% in their final grade. And I still wore that as a badge of honor.

[00:03:20.370] – Steve

I was like, if students behave with every single thing that I am saying, they are going to get an A. I even had new kids throughout the year, come into my class and my students would look at the new kid and be like, do everything she has to say and you'll make an A. That's what my class was. My class was just behave and appease the teacher and listen to everything the teacher says, and you'll get a good grade.

[00:03:50.270] – Sarah

Your mark of Eigth grade mathematics will be an A if you are a good behavior or people pleaser. Like how bad was that? I hate that for me, I hate that for my students. But that makes you think how many other teachers across the country are maybe having similar experiences? And I know that nowhere in my teacher prep program was I told that 20% of a final grade

should be participation.

[00:04:21.870] – Sarah

I know I wasn't told that, but I also know that professional development is a good thing and maybe if I had experienced some sort of professional development on any type of grading practices, I could have took in some information and been persuaded in a different way, but nothing. I got nothing.

[00:04:47.460] – Steve

I think back through undergraduate and Masters, and that was never a topic, even, I don't think, in my preparation to teach.

[00:05:01.270] – Steve

As I was listening to you walk through your confessional there, it dawned on me that it's almost like we did the grading to get the right environment. And if we got the right environment, if we got the right student behaviors, then the teacher could teach the content and it was actually more focused on teaching than it really ended up being focused on learning.

[00:05:30.290] – Sarah

Yeah. And it's hard for me to give a response to that because I still also had high marks in my growth and my achievement for my students, even though I still utilize that grade as a tool or as a weapon. But I also know and gosh, your listeners are going to hear this and roll their eyes too. But I also know that I tried really hard to build student relationships and try and get them to see the value of learning our material and persevering through hard things. And I always tried to reflect back that math was not necessarily about math.

[00:06:07.380] – Sarah

It could be an opportunity to struggle through something you

did not want to struggle through. And how many times in life did we need the opportunity to work through something that we didn't want to work through? And I hope that influenced some of my students, and my scores seemed to reflect that they were okay with that lesson.

[00:06:32.070] – Steve

I hop this is okay to say – relationships allows you to cover up a lot of mistakes – for all of us.

[00:06:39.820] – Sarah

Yeah, I would say that times ten in my case.

[00:06:45.690] – Steve

Well, relationships go a long way for the learning, and actually increasing effectiveness in grading probably helps me build even stronger relationships.

[00:06:58.990] – Sarah

Yeah.

[00:07:00.590] – Sarah

And how many relationships did I burn because little Johnny didn't appease me as a teacher that day and I gave him a bad grade and Johnny disconnected from learning completely.

[00:07:11.890] – Steve

We wouldn't know it. In your article, you listed five things that you implemented that you saw making a big impact around grading and so I'm just going to label them one at a time and if you'd respond on it a little bit. The first one you mentioned was engaging your students in understanding the overarching purpose of your math classes and seeing the objectives and state math standards. Kind of sounds like you laid out what was going to happen and where we were going.

[00:07:54.270] – Sarah

Yeah, and I think teachers across the vountry are already doing a really good job of that. I don't think I ever had my state standard on the board. I might have always gotten marked for that on my evaluation just because I was purposefully, probably being spiteful, but I did have really great conversations with my students. Like, I would read the standard verbatim and then be like, the heck does that mean guys? And why do we need to learn that? And I'd try and break it down for them as much as I could for where they were going to see it in their future.

[00:08:33.070] – Sarah

I know in 8th grade math, one of the hardest topics that we do is something called systems of equations that not a lot of them are going to do by hand. But honestly, we just talked through real life examples as much as we could and just bringing everything back down to earth and bringing it back down digestible to them, help them be like, okay, do I get that? No. Okay. That's probably why I need to we called it tokens. That's probably why I need to spend a token and redo this assignment.

[00:09:08.500] – Sarah

Or I probably need some time to reflect on why I don't really see where this is taking us, those sorts of things.

[00:09:14.490] – Steve

I think you kind of walked into the second one, which was providing multiple opportunities for students to demonstrate mastery.

[00:09:23.280] – Sarah

Yeah. So I listed my gradebook by standards and this is not talked about whenever people reference my research with these students. With this specific project. But what we specifically

did is called specifications grading, meaning something to specifications, like if it was a pass fail type of situation and students had tokens that they could spend to redo an assignment, or if students didn't even have tokens, they could just redo the assignment. Because I wanted them to be able to have the opportunity to meet that mastery level and it never accounted for their prior score or it didn't average in with the prior score, it was just their current level of understanding.

[00:10:09.550] – Steve

Actually, you've hit the third one there that you identified, which was not averaging back to when I didn't know it, with the fact that I do know it now and that you took the score at the time that the student showed mastery.

[00:10:32.130] – Sarah

Yeah, now that I'm a little older, I really have a beef with that one because you mentioned growth mindset, that, if we want students to have a growth mindset set, that they are allowed to make mistakes and that they are allowed to struggle. We should not ever average in that struggle at the beginning versus their final landing destination. Like, that breaks my heart. In Joe Feldman's book, he refers to people or students who don't have enrichment opportunities that work with their parents and don't have places where they might have learned outside contact knowledge. So then they get to the class and they start off maybe behind and not as advanced, but then by the end of the class, they know all the material.

[00:11:20.710] – Sarah

Why should we average in their beginning of the year misfortunate circumstances that have nothing to do with their learning? Why should we average that in with their final knowledge?

[00:11:33.040] – Sarah

I have some real beef with that one.

[00:11:36.230] – Steve

Yeah. It'd be kind of like averaging the two drivers tests that you failed with the one that you passed.

[00:11:45.450] – Sarah

Yeah.

[00:11:48.490] – Steve

The fourth item that you listed was moving from the 100 scale to a 0-4.

[00:11:56.590] – Sarah

Yeah, and I'm always back and forth on this one. I know in my classroom I did that zero to four and the proficiency levels of whatever translates to zero to four properly but whenever I'm speaking to schools and teachers, I'm like, honestly, readjust that zero to 100 fairly for what makes sense to you. I know in some schools that means capping it at a 50 and then just doing ten points per letter grade for that.

[00:12:27.020] – Sarah

And people who are purists and only believe in the zero to four are like, no, you can't do that because of how many levels of variability allowed. And yeah, I can see that. But at the same time, we're talking about super traditional schools that have always used the zero to 100.

[00:12:45.870] – Sarah

I think rethinking beyond the 59 or 60 points allowed for an F is just a great place to start. Like, if you could just move past that thinking, that is a better place to start.

[00:12:57.970] – Steve

And the last item you mentioned was that you had one on one sessions with your students to talk about personal growth.

[00:13:07.970] – Sarah

So my last one is something that I've received a little bit of flack for because teachers do not see how I conducted these monthly meetings with my students at my desk and I totally get that. But the expectation and classroom management in my classroom was that we were going to have these and we were going to have good, intense conversations about where you were not only academically, but also behaviorally. Like, how were you being a good student? How are you contributing to your school? What kinds of things were you doing in your life that prepped you to be a better human for your coming years?

[00:13:56.150] – Sarah

Those types of things without pointing to a C and being like, hey, you got a C because you didn't turn in any of your homework, even though I know that you know what's going on, Johnny, but, man, you didn't please me this unit so this is why you're going to get a C and you're going to keep getting a C until you learn the rules of school and you learn to act how I want you to act. So those types of things.

[00:14:17.370] – Steve

I'm wondering if you could give some questions that teachers could ask themselves about their grading practices. I think change is going to come about from teachers reflecting, and I'm wondering if you can pose that to us as some questions.

[00:14:37.950] – Sarah

Well, the most uncomfortable conversation or question you could have with yourself is starting with the big kahuna. How many times do you think in your head when you're looking at your grade book, "well, I know this student tried." How many

times does that go through your head? And when I was in this fifth year, I had to do some major reflecting. I had to be like, ooh, that 87…that's kind of a long way. But this is a straight A student and I know that they tried really hard, but it's coming across as an 87. That's how I had always thought in those first four years before that fifth year of transforming my grading practices. And it's a comment that I hear a lot in professional developments with these teachers, is they're like, well, I mean, I know that student tried, but the nore that we put in subjective thoughts like that and subjective measures of what we believe is trying, the more we allow for inequitable final measures of students.

[00:15:37.650] – Sarah

Because that student who maybe has an F, because they are super out of order in my classroom, they could know way more than that student that has a B but because they're super all over the place and not great for my classroom management, I might not think things about them like, oh, I know they tried, even though showing up to school for them every day could be them trying.

[00:16:18.600] – Sarah

Like, I just have that bias. And whenever we start introducing that bias and start spiraling down those subjective thoughts, that's not a great place to be. So I know you wanted a list of questions, but honestly, just thinking how many times you sit in front of your grades and think, well, I know they tried. How many times do you think that that's a good place to start?

[00:16:40.890] – Steve

Or I know they didn't try.

[00:16:42.840] – Sarah

Yeah, oh, this person didn't pick up their pencil at all. Well, hang on, that's a different conversation.

[00:16:51.290] – Sarah

People, when they find out that I'm a grading reform researcher, they're like, oh, you want everyone to get an A? I'm like, oh, there's going to be kids that always get F because they refuse to pick up their pencil to show demonstration of content knowledge. Yes, that kid is probably going to get an F because they're not showing any content knowledge at all. I get that.

[00:17:11.830] – Sarah

But there are kids who are going to display that they know the content and they are also going to display that they are pains in our tuchuses at the same time, but that doesn't mean that they should be graded any lower because of that reason.

[00:17:28.790] – Steve

Got you. It sounds, from what you're saying, that while there's a lot of problems in the policies and structures that exist in grading in a school, it sounds, from what you're saying, that there are things that a teacher can do on his or her own to move their grading into a more equitable alignment without having to bring major change to what's happening in the system.

[00:18:00.290] – Steve

Am I correct on that?

[00:18:02.050] – Sarah

Yeah, you're definitely correct. We did not have major grading policies across my old school building, and everyone handled things a little bit differently because everyone had that own autonomy in their classroom. I know that one teacher took off. 20 points late every single day for an assignment, and then a teacher right across the hall only took off five points a day for late assignments. There's not a policy on that. So I believe, and better believe, that a teacher can also decide to

not. Take off late points for assignments that are late. Like, we all have our own personal decisions and autonomy and how we teach and how we conduct things.

[00:18:47.940] – Sarah

So I do believe that teachers have some power and they don't have to sit around and wait for a grading policy to trickle down the line. But if a teacher is ever hesitant I had really great conversations with my principals at the beginning of the year. I'd be like, hey, this is what I'm doing. This is what I believe pedagogically at the moment, and this is how I want to grade my kids. And it was always fine.

[00:19:12.570] – Steve

So I'm laughing to myself. While you started defining going to confession about the grading process, I think I'll switch it to reflection, and it strikes me as an area where a teacher can be in continuous opportunities to look back and reflect and those changes can emerge rather slowly as I'm learning from my reflection.

[00:19:46.840] – Sarah

Yeah, and that's the best part about being a teacher and reflecting is you're always learning and grading reform researchers aren't insisting that teachers need to change everything all at once. Like, take a gulp, change a little something here and then take a breath. And then when you're ready, take a gulp, change a little something here and then take a breath. This is going to be an ongoing process for teachers and something that in the up policy world, we need to extend more grace to teachers on because they already have a thousand things thrown at them at once.

[00:20:25.400] – Sarah

But just one little small thought I'll be remissed if I don't say it – something that I get teachers to reflect on when

they’re utilizing that zero as a weapon is okay, think about Johnny, who had to take care of his sister the night before because sister is sick and both of his parents work a second job. Johnny didn’t get the opportunity to do his homework. Johnny comes in, he makes a zero. The next night, Johnny can do his homework and he knows all of the content, so he makes a 100. A zero and a 100 average together is a 50.

[00:20:58.960] – Sarah

But if you were to make letter grades out of the zero and the 100, that would be an F and an A. An F, and an A average together is a C, and a C is not a 50. And if you were with me and had a pulse through any of that explanation, you should think like, oh, that’s not right. Yeah, there are years of not rightness about our traditional grading scale and just taking a second to be like, oh, that’s why I bottom out my grading at a 50 and not a zero.

[00:21:38.420] – Sarah

And it’s really hard for teachers to. Hear that because they see it as, oh, I’m giving them points for nothing and it’s really hard for them to get around it but if you just think about it as addressing a mismatch in a scale, the 50 is still truly a zero. And that’s why Douglas Reeves, who, he wrote that big using zero as a weapon article a long time ago. He was like even after conversations with teachers and principals, I got tired of listening to people whine about 50 points for nothing. So that’s why I suggest using zero to four, because you still get to use your zero points for zero work. I hope that makes you happy, but it’s more standardized.

[00:22:25.430] – Steve

Yeah. Well, thank you so much for getting me into a reflective mode. I’ll put the link to your article into the lead-in to the podcast and want to share with folks how they can follow up with you.

[00:22:42.170] – Sarah

Yeah, I'm a really great emailer. If you shoot me an email at srm041@uark.edu, I'll be sure to shoot you an email back.

[00:22:59.520] – Steve

Thank you. I'll put that in the podcast, lead-in too, so those folks who are out walking and couldn't write it down will be able to get back to you. Thanks so much for joining us.

[00:23:12.340] – Sarah

Yeah, thanks so much for having me.

[00:23:17.810] – Steve [Outro]

Thanks for listening, folks. I'd love to hear what you're pondering. You can find me on Twitter or LinkedIn @stevebarkley or send me your questions and find my videos and blogs at barkleypd.com.