

Transforming Teacher Education: The Case for “Going Gradeless”

Kathryn Hibbert, Western University

Mary Ott, York University

Jasmine Sidhu, Fielding Graduate University

Teenu Sanjeevan, Hilary and Galen Weston Foundation

ABSTRACT

In teacher education, grading practices not only evaluate learning but also shape emerging professional identities. Traditional numerical systems tend to constrain reflection, collaboration, and ethical judgement; the very qualities professional programs aim to cultivate. This study examines a teacher education program's transition to a pass/fail (gradeless) model designed to align assessment with formative, dialogic approaches to learning that align with assessment in professional practice. Using critical narrative research informed by Ricoeur's threefold mimesis, we analyzed interview data from teacher candidates to explore how they experienced assessment without grades. Findings show that ungrading reduced performance anxiety, encouraged openness to feedback, and supported a release of control that enabled candidates to take up more exploratory, risk-tolerant stances toward learning. Candidates described feeling “like explorers,” navigating unfamiliar terrain where feedback, not ranking, guided their progress. At the same time, the shift surfaced tensions around consistency, fairness, and institutional accountability. The study contributes empirical evidence to limited research on ungrading in professional programs and provides insight into how assessment reform can support reflective judgement and professional becoming within Canadian teacher education.

Keywords: Teacher education; ungrading; pass/fail assessment; formative assessment; professional identity formation; reflective judgement; Canadian teacher education

RÉSUMÉ

Dans la formation à l'enseignement, les pratiques d'évaluation ne servent pas seulement à mesurer les apprentissages ; elles façonnent également l'identité professionnelle émergente des futurs enseignants. Les systèmes de notes numériques tendent à restreindre la réflexion, la collaboration et le jugement éthique. Cette étude examine la transition d'un programme de formation à l'enseignement vers un modèle réussite/échec (sans notes chiffrées) visant à harmoniser l'évaluation avec des approches formatives et dialogiques. À l'aide d'une recherche narrative critique éclairée par la théorie de la triple mimesis de Ricoeur, nous avons analysé des entrevues afin de comprendre l'expérience des étudiants dans un système sans notes. Les résultats montrent que cette approche réduit l'anxiété liée à la performance, favorise l'ouverture à la rétroaction et permet une forme de « lâcher-prise » qui encourage les étudiants à adopter une posture exploratoire et à prendre des risques intellectuels. Plusieurs se sont décrits comme des « explorateurs » apprenant dans un paysage nouveau où la rétroaction, plutôt que le classement, guide le progrès. L'étude apporte des données empiriques à un champ encore peu exploré et éclaire la manière dont la réforme de l'évaluation peut soutenir le développement professionnel dans la formation des enseignants au Canada.

Mots-clés : Formation des enseignants, suppression des notes, évaluation formative, construction de l'identité professionnelle, jugement réflexif, formation des enseignants au Canada

INTRODUCTION

Teacher education is an enterprise perpetually caught between accountability and authenticity. Universities demand quantifiable evidence of learning, while the profession demands teachers capable of ethical judgement in uncertain contexts. Grades, long presumed to represent fairness and rigour, have become the language through which this tension is managed. But grades have also become a language that can flatten complexity and obscure meaning.

In 2021, our initial teacher education program replaced conventional grading with a pass/fail assessment model. This policy shift emerged from a conviction that numerical grading was misaligned with the program's purpose: to cultivate educators whose practice is informed by reflection, collaboration, and responsibility. The change required an epistemic shift in how we understand learning evidence and professional readiness (Hibbert et al., 2022).

This study investigates that shift from the perspective of those most affected by it: the

teacher candidates. Specifically, we examine how they experienced, interpreted, and narrated their learning within a gradeless system. To guide this inquiry, two research questions shaped our focus:

1. How do teacher candidates understand and articulate their learning in the absence of numerical grades?
2. How does participation in a pass/fail system shape their developing sense of professional responsibility?

We approached these questions through critical narrative research (CNR), drawing on Ricoeur's (1984) theory of mimesis to analyze how participants' stories move between inherited cultural scripts, lived experiences, and newly imagined futures. Our analysis foregrounds the sense-making this shift provoked. In doing so, the study demonstrates how critical narrative research can surface the ethical and epistemic implications of assessment change in professional education.

While “ungrading” has attracted increasing attention in higher education (Blum, 2020), little empirical work has examined how it operates in professional programs constrained by external accreditation and public trust, and virtually none within teacher education. The purpose of this article is to extend the conversation by situating assessment reform within the distinctive accountability ecology of teacher education. In this respect, we align with Lingard’s (2009) methodological stance: treating data not as proof, but as provocation for rethinking professional practice.

RESEARCHERS’ POSITIONALITY

As teacher educators who helped design and implement the assessment reform, we were participants in the very story we sought to understand. Within a CNR frame, this insider perspective is not a limitation, but a resource. It situates interpretation within our lived responsibility to professional practice. Interviews were conducted by team members who were not direct instructors of participants, and analytic memos were used to document moments of resonance and discomfort, serving as mirrors of our interpretive stance. We approached the data with humility, aware that our readings are partial, situated, and accountable.

Two of the authors (KH and MO) came to this work as experienced Ontario teachers and teacher educators who have witnessed students both flourish and struggle under various assessment regimes across four decades. The other two authors, TS and JS (project manager and research assistant, respectively), conducted all interviews, organized the data, and supported the literature review. Our concerns were not merely technical, but deeply ethical: What kinds of professionals are we cultivating? What kinds of care, judgement, and accountability are we enabling or constraining within our program? If professional knowledge is treated as a fixed set of competencies to be demonstrated in predictable environments, assessment risks becoming an instrument of control and compliance (Ball, 2003; Biesta, 2010; Sachs, 2005). If, however, knowledge is understood as situated, relational, and evolving, as many in education and in teacher education argue (Biesta, 2022;

Greene, 1973; hooks, 1994), then assessment must create space for reflection, contradiction, and becoming.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Framing Assessment and the Case for Ungrading

Assessment, at its core, refers to “the process of eliciting, interpreting, and using evidence of student learning” (William, 2011, p. 7). This definition reframes assessment as a process for generating insights that inform both teaching and future learning. However, the educational potential of assessment is often compromised when formative purposes are subordinated to summative ones, particularly when accountability metrics dominate (Jerrim & Sims, 2022; Tóth & Csapó, 2022). In such contexts, the emphasis shifts from understanding and supporting learning to measuring and comparing performance.

This article takes up that concern by exploring how an ungrading approach in teacher education seeks to reclaim the formative, learning-centred purpose of assessment (Broadfoot, 2007; Darling-Hammond, 2001, 2010, 2020). Here, “assessment” refers broadly to the processes of gathering, interpreting, and using information about student learning for a range of purposes (Brookhart, 2010). We distinguish between summative assessment, used for certification or grading, and formative assessment, intended to improve learning. The ungrading movement (Blum, 2020), which foregrounds learner agency and self-determination, aligns with a conception of professional responsibility rooted in trust, dialogue, and reflection. Responsibility, in this view, is cultivated through responsiveness to others and the willingness to engage with uncertainty, reflecting a shared inquiry into what matters in the work of teaching.

Despite assessment’s intended contribution to learning, its potential is too often overshadowed by the demands of accountability systems that privilege quantifiable results (William, 2011). The long-standing practice of applying numerical grades has subtly but profoundly shaped the experiences of teacher candidates (TCs) in initial teacher education programs. While

grades play a central role in admissions decisions and academic progression (Childs et al., 2016; DeLuca et al., 2013; Hibbert et al., 2026; Salingré & MacMath, 2021), they also reinforce a culture of comparison. Against this backdrop, the limitations of numerical grading become especially evident, inviting a closer examination of how traditional numerical grades function and why they often fail to support deep learning.

The Legacy and Limits of Numerical Grading

Grading practices have evolved far from their original intent to represent learning achievement. Brookhart et al. (2016) describe grades in K–12 schools as multidimensional indicators that reflect achievement, effort, and compliance, rather than a pure measure of learning. Their review concluded that grades are inconsistent across educators and contexts, undermining claims to fairness and precision. The practice of grading has become a “tool used exclusively to compare students to each other” (Eyler, 2024, p. 7). Similarly, Feldman (2024) argues that traditional transcripts (documenting grades received throughout one’s education) often misrepresent what students actually know and can do, masking potential under layers of compliance and inconsistency. His analysis of grading equity underscores that conventional marks frequently reward behavioural conformity and resource access more than demonstrated learning, calling into question whether grades can validly serve as indicators of merit or readiness. Numerical grades, then, have become unreliable instruments of evaluation due to institutional variability and the performative weight attached to numerical distinctions (Eyler, 2024).

Traditional grading systems are also seen to emphasize attainment over understanding, contributing to stress, competition, and surface learning (Boud & Falchikov, 2006; Butler & Nisan, 1986). Pulfrey et al. (2011) found that grades encourage performance-avoidance goals and decrease intrinsic motivation. McMorran et al. (2017) determined that standardized scales fail to accommodate diverse learning trajectories and raised equity concerns. Although advocates of traditional grading point to its utility in ensuring accountability and comparability

(Guskey, 2015), even well-intentioned systems can undermine intrinsic motivation (Deci et al., 1991) and distort feedback functions (Brookhart, 2017). Given these longstanding limitations of numerical grading, educators have increasingly turned to alternative models that foreground learning, rather than ranking. Gradeless assessment (or ungrading) is an approach that has been gaining traction (Fox, 2024).

Gradeless Assessment and Ungrading: Emerging Evidence

Gradeless assessment models often draw inspiration from educational theories such as constructivism and formative assessment (Brookhart, 2013). These systems align more closely with the principles of authentic learning, emphasizing the importance of continuous feedback, self-assessment, and student engagement (Nilson & Packowski, 2026). The term *ungrading* gained prominence through Blum’s (2020) edited collection, which documents instructors reimagining feedback and evaluation in ways that foreground learning over ranking. Yet most ungrading scholarship arises from general higher-education contexts where faculty possess considerably more autonomy and academic freedom to redesign assessment practices than teachers working in K–12 systems (Boud & Falchikov, 2006; Horn & Little, 2010; von Renesse & Wegner, 2023).

Ungrading aims to improve learning by fostering a mastery orientation. Early empirical evidence supports this claim: In gradeless settings, students often take intellectual risks and seek out feedback more readily, resulting in deeper comprehension (Schinske & Tanner, 2014). Research links ungrading to stress reduction and improved well-being (McMorran et al., 2017; McMorran & Ragupathi, 2019). In higher education settings, ungrading has been associated with stronger mastery orientation and enhanced self-assessment (Clark & Talbot, 2023; Schinske & Tanner, 2014; Kjærgaard et al., 2023). Hasinoff et al. (2024) found that university students perceived ungrading as deepening their understanding and motivation by shifting attention from point accumulation to authentic learning and iterative feedback. Self-determination theory (SDT) argues that individuals are

most motivated when their basic psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness are met (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

Gradeless systems can foster internalized motivation and greater engagement. When assessment focuses on dialogue and feedback, rather than external evaluation, learners are more likely to experience a sense of agency and authentic purpose in their work (Hall & Meinking, 2022). This shift is particularly consequential in professional programs, where accountability, ethical judgement, and reflective practice are central to competence. Building on this emerging evidence, recent scholarship has turned toward examining both the theoretical foundations and the practical complexities, particularly their tensions with long-standing grading traditions. For example, Asaale (2024) situates ungrading as a response to the historical entrenchment of competitive assessment systems that prioritize standardization and compliance over authentic learning. Drawing on self-determination and constructivist theories, Asaale demonstrates that alternative assessment models can foster intrinsic motivation and learner autonomy by centring feedback, dialogue, and self-evaluation. This perspective aligns with research emphasizing assessment as a relational practice that constructs, rather than merely measures, professional identity (Blum, 2020; Brookhart, 2017).

Asaale (2024) also highlights the institutional barriers that complicate such reforms, including deeply embedded assumptions about merit, objectivity, and fairness. Reforming assessment, therefore, is not simply a technical adjustment, but an epistemic shift. We move from assessment *of* learning toward assessment *as* and *for* learning (Earl, 2013). In teacher education, assessment systems are constrained by external standards such as accreditation requirements and professional regulations (Campbell, 2023; Jang & Sinclair, 2018). Adopting a gradeless model in this context then, entails both pedagogical redesign and institutional negotiation.

Although assessment reform is widely discussed in higher education, little empirical research examines how ungrading or pass/fail systems function in professional programs. Much of the existing work is conceptual or anecdotal, emphasizing pedagogy and instructor experience (Blum, 2020; Stommel, 2024; Asaale,

2024). Systematic and comparative studies remain rare, particularly those exploring how candidates in regulated professions experience reform within accountability constraints. In a pilot study examining ungrading across general education undergraduate courses, Korson et al. (2023) found that removing grades increased students’ intrinsic motivation, engagement, and self-direction, though it also surfaced challenges around transparency and consistency. Such findings illustrate both the promise and the complexity of implementing ungrading in large programs. Clear communication, guidance, and continuous research are essential to ensure that gradeless systems achieve their intended benefits without creating additional sources of stress or undermining educational objectives.

In fields such as law, medicine, and nursing, scholars have debated grading practices and proposed narrative or formative alternatives for many years, but few have documented learner perspectives. For example, over 50 years ago, Carr (1973) reported early experiments with pass/fail evaluation in legal education. A couple of decades later, Brustin and Chavkin (1997) also critiqued conventional grading models used in legal education, yet neither offered empirical insight into candidate experiences. Similarly, in the health professions, assessment debates have often focused on whether one system is “better” than another, rather than on how assessment design might reshape professional learning (Jham et al., 2018). These gaps underscore the need for empirical accounts of how teacher candidates interpret and live the experience of gradeless assessment.

Removing traditional grades introduces its own challenges, which may partly explain why professional programs have been slow to embrace alternative assessment models. Some studies note decreased motivation among students unaccustomed to alternative models (Lingard, 2009) or uncertainty about expectations (Bartell et al., 2018). Faculty also shared concerns about maintaining rigour, ensuring fairness, and preventing strategic exploitation of flexible systems (Ryan & Deci, 2017; Bowers, 2010; Bowers & Sprott, 2012). We understood that reform would require cultural as well as procedural change. Planning carefully to introduce change would be critical.

At the outset of this project, we consulted colleagues at the University of Prince Edward Island (UPEI) and the University of British Columbia (UBC), two Canadian institutions experimenting with ungrading in teacher education for years: UPEI since 2002 and UBC since 2009. While both offered helpful insights, their experiences remained undocumented in the research literature. The absence of relevant literature motivated us to systematically study the assessment reform within teacher education.

Assessment and Professional Formation in Teacher Education

Assessment has long been regarded as the communicative heart of education (Boud & Falchikov, 2006), yet in professional programs it must also function as an instrument of regulation. In teacher education, assessment practices both support learning and attest to professional readiness within public accountability systems (Childs et al., 2016; Ingvarson & Rowley, 2017). Developing the capacity for dual-purpose assessment requires explicit attention to teachers’ assessment literacy: the knowledge, skills, and dispositions needed to design, interpret, and use evidence of learning effectively (Brookhart, 2011). For teacher candidates, whose professional identities are *in formation*, the experience of being graded can reinforce compliance and performance anxiety, rather than curiosity and ethical discernment (Gorichanaz, 2024).

Our efforts were buoyed by recent scholarship calling for the alignment of assessment with the long-term learning goals of professional practice (Boud & Falchikov, 2006; Ball et al., 2014). In teacher education, feedback, reflection, and judgement are not peripheral to professionalism—they are central to it. The move toward gradeless or pass/fail systems represented our attempt to realign assessment with this understanding. In this sense, assessment in professional education is both pedagogical and political: it defines what counts as knowledge, who is authorized to judge, and how competence is recognized (Apple, 2003; Ball, 2003; Biesta, 2009). In teacher education, this dual function is magnified by accountability to both the public and the profession (Childs et al., 2016).

Similarly, research on self-regulated learning (Endedijk et al., 2012; Regehr et al., 1996) and feedback processes (Chan & Luo, 2022) provides a foundation for aligning assessment with professional formation. Developing faculty capacity to assess for growth rather than compliance is also critical (Ball et al., 2014; Baume & Yorke, 2002). Within our Faculty of Education, we were finding that grading increasingly served organizational, rather than pedagogical, purposes (Schneider & Hutt, 2014), a pattern consistent with wider trends in data-driven accountability that privilege what can be measured over the relational dimensions of professional practice (Lewis & Holloway, 2019).

These patterns echo Barad’s (2003) argument that measurement is performative: What is measured becomes what matters. Goodhart’s Law (Elton, 2004) reinforces this point by cautioning against treating measures as proxies for educational quality. In our context, grades had increasingly come to signal compliance rather than learning, shaping candidates’ sense of professional worth in ways aligned with institutional metrics, rather than pedagogical purpose. Recognizing how such measurement practices produce particular forms of professionalism is therefore essential. As Billet (2016) and others argue, assessment must reflect the relational and evolving nature of professional knowledge, rather than reducing it to technical competence.

These critiques also intersect with broader conversations about whose knowledge and values are centred in assessment. Grading systems have historically privileged Euro-Western notions of merit, control, and individual competition, marginalizing relational and community-based ways of knowing (Kovach, 2021; Tuck & Yang, 2012). Recent work by Louie and Prince (2023) situates assessment reform within decolonial praxis, showing that measures such as GPA or completion rates inadequately capture success in Indigenous and equity-seeking student populations. Integrating these insights broadens the moral and political stakes of assessment reform. Ungrading can thus be understood as both a pedagogical and an ethical intervention that reconfigures how value, competence, and trust are enacted within professional education. By challenging hierarchical value systems and emphasizing learning as relational

and situated, ungrading aligns with emerging movements in Canadian teacher education to make assessment more equitable, reflective, and responsive to diverse ways of knowing (Hibbert et al., 2022).

Bartell et al. (2018) argue that accountability in teacher education must balance the demonstration of competence with the cultivation of professional responsiveness and ethical capacity. A pass/fail model supports this by fostering autonomy, intrinsic motivation, and reflective engagement (Brown, 2019). However, as Goldhaber (2019) observes, much US research continues to equate teacher quality with student test outcomes, a logic that overlooks the relational and developmental dimensions of teaching. This contrast highlights how different accountability regimes privilege different understandings of professionalism. In contrast, Ontario’s evaluation framework for practising teachers emphasizes growth through classroom observation and professional learning plans, rather than reliance on standardized metrics. Campbell (2023) contends that policy logics inevitably shape program expectations in teacher education. When professionalism is reduced to externally defined standards, assessment risks reinforcing compliance rather than judgement. The Ontario model, emphasizing qualitative growth, offers an alternative. Ensuring coherence between the assessment experiences of teacher candidates and the evaluative frameworks they encounter as professionals remains essential, especially as K–12 systems themselves undergo grading reform (Whitmell, 2020).

In teacher education discourse, the framework of assessment *of*, *for*, and *as* learning (Earl, 2013) remains foundational. Assessment *of* learning verifies competence, assessment *for* learning guides instruction, and assessment *as* learning develops self-regulation and metacognition. A pass/fail system, when supported by robust feedback processes, can integrate these three functions, establishing summative thresholds of competence while promoting iterative, formative engagement with feedback as a mode of professional apprenticeship. In this sense, assessment becomes not an endpoint, but a continuous dialogue through which professional judgement is cultivated.

Context of the Study

This study was conducted in a two-year consecutive teacher education program at Western University, in Ontario, Canada. In 2021, following broad faculty consultation and Senate approval, the program adopted a pass/fail assessment model (Ott & Hibbert, 2021). Two structural innovations operationalized the reform. First, the *Professional Practice Record* (PPR) documented formative feedback, evidence of growth, and candidates’ reflective self-assessments. Second, the *Master Teacher Mentor* (MTM) initiative paired teacher candidates (TCs) with experienced educators who facilitated ongoing, dialogic feedback conversations across the two years. Collectively, these structures repositioned assessment from a series of graded tasks to an ongoing, relational practice of judgement and professional learning.

The shift to a gradeless model required navigating institutional systems built around numerical evaluation. Faculty worked to reconcile a learning-centred assessment ethos with longstanding governance frameworks tied to quantification and reporting. The teacher candidates whose narratives inform this study experienced the reform within this institutional space of negotiation.

Teacher education in Ontario is situated within a wider professional landscape shaped by provincial policy. Beginning teachers enter the profession through the *New Teacher Induction Program* (NTIP), and experienced teachers develop *Annual Learning Plans* (ALPs), both of which require goal-setting, feedback, and reflection (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2005). These expectations reflect a provincial culture of formative, self-regulated learning (Zimmerman et al., 1996). Within universities, teacher candidates must demonstrate degree-level expectations, professional standards, and competencies articulated in the *Teacher Performance Appraisal* (TPA) framework (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2022). Historically, however, assessment processes in initial teacher education mirrored candidates’ prior experiences: graded assignments averaged over time, often overshadowing formative comments (Andrade, 2013; Normann et al., 2023).

We took seriously what we learned from the literature. Adopting a pass/fail system raised predictable concerns about standards. In response, the program redefined rigour as sustained engagement with feedback and iterative improvement (Boud & Falchikov, 2006). The design drew on growth-oriented approaches emphasizing that learning develops through challenge, effort, and meaningful connection (Dweck, 2016; Dweck et al., 2014; Kroeper et al., 2022). Yet we recognized that mindset language alone is insufficient; structural conditions must support reflection, agency, and relational feedback (Kaufman, 2020). These principles informed our creation of an environment in which motivation, competence, and mentoring reinforced one another. Implementation occurred gradually, beginning in 2019. Faculty development workshops, webinars, and consultations prepared instructors to replace grades with feedback as the central evaluative mechanism. Communication with incoming candidates and sessional instructors aimed to ensure transparency and coherence across the program.

The MTM groups were central to the model. Each MTM worked with approximately 12 teacher candidates, supporting the development of the Professional Practice Record (PPR; Hui et al., 2024). Within the PPR, candidates mapped progress against competencies and standards, interpreted feedback within trajectories of growth, synthesized feedback across courses, and engaged in goal-setting and reflection. Evaluation was holistic, incorporating self-assessment, peer assessment, mentor attestations, and annual reviews by senior school board partners. A “pass” indicated performance at or above the threshold aligned with TPA competencies and degree-level expectations, supported through multiple sources of evidence rather than a single numerical proxy. The implementation of this pass/fail model represented both a pedagogical and institutional reorientation. It shifted accountability toward relational forms of judgement and sought to model the reflective, dialogic practices that define professional learning in Ontario.

METHODOLOGY

Understanding how teacher candidates experienced the assessment reform was essential to informing the ongoing evolution of our program (Bruce et al., 2016). To explore these experiences, we adopted a critical narrative research (CNR) approach (Hickson, 2016; Iannacci, 2007), positioning ourselves not as detached observers but as educators and scholars interrogating the status quo (Call-Cummings & Dazzo, 2024).

The CNR approach was selected because our aims concerned how participants configure experience, identity, and practical judgement over time (Bruce et al., 2016; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Clandinin et al., 2010). Recognizing that we were interested in understanding experiences that were fundamentally different from the numerical grading systems in which we ourselves were enculturated, this study required us to consider student experiences in new ways. As Clandinin et al. (2010) note, CNR involves “living in a tension-filled midst” (p. 81), where researchers must continually negotiate the boundaries between their participants’ stories, their own experiences, and the institutional settings in which both are located. Iannacci (2007) reminds us that as CNR researchers, we must also engage in ongoing reflexivity as we consider the relationship between our own experiences and those being shared, and how they may be integrated with our knowledge and understanding as scholars. This methodology is well-suited to contexts in which change disrupts familiar structures of meaning. It invited us to attend simultaneously to participants’ and researchers’ evolving understandings.

Participants and Data Collection

Following institutional ethics approval, we recruited teacher candidates (TCs) from across program streams via a monthly teacher education office newsletter. In total, 11 TCs volunteered to participate in semi-structured interviews conducted over Zoom during the winter term, shortly after the program’s return to fully on-site learning following COVID-19 disruptions. All participants had experienced the pass/fail system, whether in their first or second year of the program. The participants represented tea-

cher candidates from Primary–Junior, Junior–Intermediate, and Intermediate–Senior program streams, encompassing a range of specializations and course loads (typically eight to 11 courses per term). To minimize potential coercion and maintain confidentiality, demographic data were not collected. Participants are estimated to range in age from approximately 22–25 years old. Research assistants, who were not instructors in the program, conducted all interviews, removed any identifying information from transcripts, and prepared anonymized data for analysis. We did not ask them to identify their gender or ethnicity, and the anonymized data did not make this evident. Interviews ranged from 40 to 90 minutes. Automated Zoom transcriptions were reviewed for accuracy by both participants and research assistants. Participants were invited to edit their transcripts to ensure representational fidelity, consistent with CNR’s emphasis on participant voice and agency.

Data Analysis

Analysis followed French philosopher Paul Ricoeur’s (1984) threefold mimesis framework as both an interpretive guide and an organizing structure. For Ricoeur, *mimesis* is not imitation but configuration: the shaping of time, action, and meaning into a coherent whole. His framework describes three interrelated movements: *mimesis 1*, *mimesis 2*, and *mimesis 3*. Together, these movements help us understand how meaning unfolds over time.

Mimesis 1 (prefiguration) refers to the world of lived practice that already bears interpretive structure. Before any story is told, human action is mediated by social norms, traditions, and symbols. In this study, *mimesis 1* represents the inherited discourses of grading, merit, and competition that teacher candidates bring into professional education. These prior assumptions frame how they initially understand assessment, success, and professional worth.

Mimesis 2 (configuration) is the act of emplotment; the process by which experience is organized into a narrative form. Here, events are connected through time and intention to create a meaningful whole. For teacher candidates encountering a pass/fail system, *mimesis 2* captures how they reconfigure daily experiences of

feedback, dialogue, and uncertainty into new stories of effort, progress, and value.

Mimesis 3 (refiguration) occurs when narrative and lived experience intersect again in reflection. As stories are told and interpreted, they reshape both teller and listener, opening space for ethical and pedagogical insight. In this study, *mimesis 3* guided attention to how narrating the experience of learning without grades refigured participants’ sense of professional responsibility and assessment practice. Through narration, candidates imagined alternative futures for teaching, learning, and evaluation.

Taken together, the threefold mimesis provides a temporal and ethical framework for understanding transformation. It allows us to trace how meaning moves from the prefigured logic of grades, through the configured experience of reform, toward the refigured self-understanding of becoming professionals. By applying Ricoeur’s (1984) analytic framework, we treated narrative not simply as data, but as a medium through which participants interpreted institutional change and articulated emerging professional identities.

The analytic process unfolded through iterative reading and memo writing. In the first stage, transcripts were read repeatedly to identify elements of prefiguration, participants’ inherited assumptions about grading and merit. The second stage traced configuration, examining how participants re-storied their experiences of feedback, evaluation, and professional learning within the pass/fail system. The final stage, refiguration, considered how narrating these experiences reshaped participants’ understandings of assessment, professionalism, and educational responsibility.

RESULTS

The teacher candidates’ narratives revealed how deeply grading had shaped their identities as learners, leaving an indelible mark on how they understood effort, ability, and worth. Encountering a pass/fail system disrupted those long-held assumptions, prompting reflection on what learning without grades might mean, and how, as future teachers, they imagined reproducing or resisting the very practices that once defined them.

Mimesis 1: “What Was” – The Power of the Status Quo

All participants described formative experiences in which grades were central to their sense of achievement. Emily reflected, “We’ve been in school since we were like three or four years old, and since then it’s been either a letter or a numerical grade.” Sam recalled, “There was always a lot of talk around grades—‘Did you get 80? Did you get 85?’—and that was what mattered.” Alex described how this culture shaped both motivation and memory:

I was so focused on achieving a number that I ended up focusing more on that number than on what I was learning. I performed well, but I don’t remember most of it because I was so focused on keeping my average.

Grades, participants explained, offered a sense of order and comparability, yet also produced anxiety and narrowed attention. As Lee explained,

It was—at first it was stressful, because I still had that undergraduate mindset of, ohh...I need specific expectations. How is what I’m producing being broken down in terms of how it will affect my grade? I’m an A student, so you know, if I do this part of the assignment, you know, what is that worth?

These early experiences established what Ricoeur would term a *prefigured* world, one in which learning and worth were measured by quantifiable symbols rather than reflection or growth.

Mimesis 2: “What Is” – Navigating a New World

After more than 18 years in graded schooling, participants found the pass/fail system initially disorienting. Having succeeded within traditional metrics that had secured admission to this competitive program, they now entered what one participant referred to as “uncharted waters.” Vinda described the transition as “a bit confusing”; expectations felt uneven across courses: “In some classes it was clear; in others

it felt almost arbitrary.” Yet as both students and faculty adjusted, anxiety lessened. Alvin captured this shift:

In three different assignments, my teachers said, “You didn’t pass this time around—please add these elements and resubmit.” It didn’t feel like one mistake would end everything. It was, “Here’s what you can learn—can you fix it?”

Many participants reported reduced stress and greater openness to feedback. Emily explained that pass/fail “helped me calm down a little...it allowed me to let go of perfectionism just a bit.” However, the new assessment approach also surfaced tensions about fairness and consistency. Lee observed:

For some professors, I felt you could do the bare minimum and still get a pass. And then someone like me, who put in extra effort, well—it would still be a pass anyway.

Having been socialized into ranking and comparison, several participants struggled with the absence of fine-grained distinctions. Their comments underscore that ungrading systems must still provide clear communication about learning progress to sustain motivation, as students continue to seek cues about progress and differentiation.

Others found the unfamiliar landscape became a catalyst for intrinsic engagement. Brady described a reframed sense of purpose:

I thought, okay, I can do the bare minimum—but I’m paying for this education; I want authentic work. I ended up pushing myself more because I wanted to learn from the experience...it took the pressure off to perform and made me focus on how to be a good teacher, rather than getting a good grade.

Similarly, Emily noted, “I was doing the assignments for my own learning, rather than to please a professor...it felt more like the reality of teaching—pragmatic, not perfect.” Through *configuration*, participants began to assemble new narratives of learning grounded in feedback, authenticity, and purpose.

Mimesis 3: “What Might Be” – Shifting from Student to Teacher

As candidates progressed, their narratives reflected a movement toward professional self-understanding. Shane’s account typified this shift:

The more I practised, the more I asked, what am I actually going to do with this information? Post-graduation, I’ll be in a classroom creating my own assignments. I want my students to get something meaningful out of it.

This growing reflexivity was supported by the program’s emphasis on formative feedback and mentorship. Alex linked these experiences to future pedagogical intentions:

In a pass/fail context you have to teach differently. Because I was exposed to that, I started thinking about how I’ll assess my own students—how to move away from line-scale marks toward feedback that shows growth.

Through *refiguration*, participants articulated an emerging ethical awareness: that assessment is relational, formative, and constitutive of professional identity (Fox, 2024). The narratives revealed a gradual shift from compliance toward agency, from performing for evaluation to engaging in learning as a moral and pedagogical practice.

Across all three mimetic movements, the participants’ stories illustrate how assessment reform became a process of professional becoming. The transition to pass/fail assessment unsettled ingrained habits, fostered reflective engagement, and opened imaginative possibilities for re-envisioning assessment in their future classrooms. While tensions around consistency and motivation remained, the experience invited teacher candidates to see learning and teaching as acts of judgement, dialogue, and care, rather than compliance with external metrics.

Critically Interrogating the Data

In keeping with CNR, we re-examined the data through iterative questioning (Bright & Du Preez, 2023; Pino Gavidia & Adu, 2022) that challenged and deepened our initial interpretations. As narrative researchers, we recognize our role in both *seeing* and *telling* these stories (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). This reflexive re-examination, conducted alongside engagement with the literature, enabled us to interrogate our own biases and assumptions, reconsider emerging interpretations, and pursue deeper insight into how teacher candidates narrated assessment and professional identity. We organized this process around three guiding questions:

1. How do TCs create themselves in social interaction about assessment?
2. How do institutional discourses influence, and how are they influenced by, personal everyday narratives about assessment?
3. How can CNR demystify the social construction of assessment and reframe it as an activity in which norms ought to be challenged?

Creating Selves Through Assessment

Teacher candidates’ responses echoed longstanding research showing that grades act as identity markers from an early age (Creen, 2023; D’Entremont, 2018). Much like Eyer’s (2024) comparison of grades to Hester Prynne’s scarlet letter (a public mark of worth and shame) participants described grades as symbolic inscriptions that became entangled with self-definition. Academic validation from parents, teachers, and peers rendered grades as more than feedback; they became indicators of personal adequacy.

For some, these symbols fused with identity: “I’m an A student.” For others, they triggered perfectionism and anxiety. Without familiar benchmarks of graded comparison, several participants reported uncertainty about their “place” in the learning community. This struggle underscores how grading practices can produce social selves organized around external evaluation—selves that must be reconstituted when the evaluative framework shifts.

Institutional Discourses and Everyday Narratives

Institutional discourses about grading are both explicit and tacit. Uncritically maintained grading systems rest on the assumption that numerical marks validly represent and communicate knowledge. Once recorded, these marks take on administrative permanence: they act as gatekeepers to employment, further study, and professional legitimacy. Participants demonstrated implicit awareness of this reality.

In our program, the revised gradeless policy established that a “pass” would equate to a minimum of 76%—a concession to institutional requirements for transcript translation. This bureaucratic adaptation highlighted the tension between pedagogical ideals and structural demands. Participants described the early months of implementation as a “nebulous space,” lacking the sense of control and predictability grades once offered. Yet, most later described embracing the freedom to focus on learning rather than ranking.

Balancing clarity and flexibility emerged as an ongoing challenge specifically within teacher education’s unique assessment ecology. As Peck et al. (2010) argue, authentic program improvement requires navigating the political and organizational tensions that inevitably accompany reform in professional programs. Our participants’ stories confirm that assessment reform is not simply a technical adjustment but a negotiation of meaning between institutional discourse and lived experience. These tensions are intensified in neo-liberal policy environments where assessment is positioned as an accountability mechanism linked to standardization, transparency, and performance management (Au, 2011; Biesta, 2010). Within such contexts, efforts to re-imagine assessment toward learning, judgement, or professional growth are constrained by pressures for comparability and auditability, positioning grades as indicators of institutional quality rather than pedagogical tools.

Noticeably absent from participants’ accounts were reflections on their own privilege or the potential bias of those assigning grades (Bygren, 2019). None mentioned concerns about grade inflation, despite its prevalence

in the literature. These silences may indicate unawareness of structural advantage, or discomfort engaging with the idea that teacher-assigned numerical grades can reflect more than student performance. Such absences remind us that ungrading reforms can expose, but not automatically redress, the broader inequities embedded in assessment cultures.

Challenging Norms Through Critical Narrative Inquiry

Critical narrative research provided a means to demystify the social construction of assessment by illuminating how participants’ stories both reflected and contested institutional norms. Their narratives juxtaposed *assessment for learning* with assessment practices that serve institutional needs and, in doing so, colonize learners’ identities of learning. As teacher candidates adapted to the pass/fail system, many began to reinterpret failure as formative rather than punitive. This refiguration marked a shift from compliance to curiosity, from seeking validation to embracing learning as an open-ended process. Within this unfamiliar space, participants described a growing sense of agency and experimentation. Several characterized themselves, metaphorically, as “explorers,” signalling a move toward navigating learning with openness rather than defensiveness. While we cannot infer more than what participants offered, the metaphor suggests that, freed from the surveillance of grades, candidates felt more able to take intellectual risks, follow unexpected paths, and tolerate productive uncertainty, capacities widely recognized as central to professional growth (e.g., Biesta, 2014; Ellsworth, 2005; Masland, 2023). In this sense, “exploring” marks a shift from performing for evaluation to engaging with learning as a space of possibility.

Through this lens, ungrading emerges not merely as an administrative reform but as a site of ethical and epistemic transformation. It invites both educators and students to question what counts as evidence of learning and whose judgements are authorized. Critical narrative research, as applied here, made visible the ways in which assessment practices shape subjectivities, and how those subjectivities might be reimagined in more just, reflective, and dialogic ways.

Limitations and Future Directions

This study was conducted within a single faculty of education at one Canadian university, and the findings must be interpreted within that bounded context. Semi-structured interviews were carried out by two trained graduate research assistants who were not instructors in the program, ensuring ethical distance and minimizing potential conflicts of interest. While the interviews were rich and extended over several months, the sample size was modest with only 11 participants. Recruitment was further shaped by COVID-19 disruptions, which limited students' capacity to participate in online interviews. The study also unfolded in a distinctive policy moment: the Ontario government's introduction of the Transitional Teaching Certificate (Ontario College of Teachers, n.d.) created new opportunities for teacher candidates to engage in paid occasional teaching during their studies. Many participants took advantage of this option, which reduced their availability for extracurricular research activities. This broader contextual factor likely influenced who chose to participate and the perspectives represented in the data. We were grateful for those who generously shared their time and reflections.

Our sample reflects those who elected to speak about their experiences and may have felt particularly positive or negative about the pass/fail system. Those who were indifferent, uncertain, or who navigated the policy strategically may be underrepresented. Consequently, the findings are best understood as situated accounts rather than generalizable conclusions. The value of this study lies in how these narratives illuminate processes of meaning-making within assessment reform, not in how they predict outcomes across contexts.

Future research could extend this work by including faculty and administrative perspectives, as well as longitudinal follow-up with graduates now teaching in Ontario schools. Such studies could examine how early experiences with ungrading influence assessment practices in professional life and how coherence might be strengthened between pre-service and in-service evaluation systems.

CONCLUSIONS

We are situated in an era of performance measurement (Ball, 2003) that has focused, in this case, on the performance of the TC. The collective excitement about big data and leveraging the ability to measure increasing amounts of discrete data (Knox et al., 2019) makes this a timely and important study. Yet, as Harris and Tayler (2019) remind us, when systems privilege what can be measured over what matters, they risk undermining the very learning and professional judgement they aim to strengthen. Teacher candidates begin their professional lives oriented toward creating conditions for learning that support others' growth, rather than their own ranking. This is particularly salient as teacher candidates now enter school systems where grading reform is actively underway (Everson, 2023; Hopfenbeck, 2019). The current fascination with automating assessment through generative AI only heightens these tensions: while machine scoring can mimic consistency, it cannot reproduce the relational, situated judgement central to professional practice (Usher, 2025).

Ungrading also carries a subversive potential within neo-liberal educational systems that privilege competition, accountability metrics, and quantifiable performance (Ball, 2003; Biesta, 2010; Giroux, 2014; Lewis & Holloway, 2019). By suspending the logic of numerical ranking, ungrading interrupts the commodification of learning and re-centres trust, dialogue, and ethical judgement as the currencies of professional growth. In this sense, it embodies what hooks (1994) called “education as the practice of freedom”: a refusal of performativity that reasserts education's democratic and relational purposes.

Fries et al. (2005) observe modern values of control and certainty are increasingly unsettled by values that foreground interpretation, multiplicity, and professional judgement. For teacher candidates, becoming aware of the limits of accountability systems while still embracing the formative power of assessment for learning was crucial. Structural distress arises when “societal-level conditions, cultural norms, and institutional practices...constrain the opportunities, resources, and practices available to professio-

nals” (Sukhera et al., 2021, p. 223). Our work sought to alleviate that distress by fostering a learning environment rooted in moral purpose (Hill-Jackson & Craig, 2023).

Ungrading does not solve all issues of teacher subjectivity. As one participant in our study astutely pointed out, different instructors might still apply the “Pass” criteria with varying rigour. This variability echoes broader findings that teachers’ evaluative judgements often diverge, particularly when student performance profiles are inconsistent or when assessment criteria remain under-specified (Südkamp et al., 2018). Without shared rubrics and calibration, even a pass/fail system can reproduce disparities in evaluative accuracy.

We do not claim that gradeless assessment is a panacea, or that it should be adopted universally (Matusov, 2025). Rather, we offer this study as one contribution to an ongoing conversation about aligning the assessment practices of teacher education with those that define professional practice. Our findings affirm that grading practices are never neutral: they shape professional identities, learning orientations, and the ethical climate of classrooms. If we want future teachers to engage with assessment as relational, dialogic, and educative practice, their preparation programs must model that stance from the outset. The transition also mirrors broader changes within Ontario’s K–12 sector, where teachers are beginning to explore gradeless practices emphasizing feedback and reflection (Whitmell, 2020).

Creating a paradigmatic shift in assessment to support professional capacity was neither simple nor swift (Hibbert et al., 2021; Ott & Hibbert, 2021). It required extensive planning, faculty development, and cross-divisional dialogue. Our findings suggest that moving to gradeless assessment fosters habits of self-reflection and continuous improvement; the same dispositions foundational to *Ontario’s New Teacher Induction Program* (NTIP) and *Annual Learning Plan* (ALP). By experiencing feedback-rich, goal-oriented assessment in their teacher education program, candidates enter the profession already attuned to the ethos of self-directed professional growth. This alignment reinforces their identity as lifelong learners and supports coherence between pre-service and in-service assessment systems.

We recognize, however, the need for continued clarity in communicating how pass/fail standards correspond to professional expectations. When teacher candidates experience assessment as dialogue and growth, they are better equipped to enact these principles in their own classrooms. Teachers and teacher educators in Canada are rarely invited to participate meaningfully in the policy making that governs their programs (Campbell, 2023; Lefstein & Perath, 2014; UNESCO & International Task Force on Teachers for Education 2030, 2024). Sustained professional dialogue that leads to co-constructed policy is essential to building professional capacity; that evolving interplay of knowledge, judgement, relational awareness, and ethical responsiveness that enables educators to act meaningfully in complex, uncertain contexts (Biesta, 2022). As teacher educators, we must lead this change, modelling in our programs the very assessment practices we hope teachers will carry forward.

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