



# The Troubled History of Grades and Grading: A Historical Comparison of Germany and the United States

## La storia problematica dei voti e della valutazione: Una comparazione storica tra Germania e Stati Uniti

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### ABSTRACT

This article takes a closer look at the coming-into-being of grades and grading as these two can be considered a part of Tyack and Tobin's "grammar of schooling". As such, the history of these powerful tools will be explored in two cultural spheres, Germany and the USA. Even though the worked-on entity is pluralistic and messy in nature, this article will show that the educational planners' motivations have been similar in both cases and—regarding the hexamorous grading scheme—that a connection between Germany and the USA exists. In a second step, these findings will be theorized from a neo-institutionalist's perspective. The article ends with a reflection on every-day teaching practice regarding grades and grading.

Questo articolo esamina la nascita dei voti e della pratica valutativa, entrambe ritenute da Tyack e Tobin alla base della "grammatica della scuola". Per questa ragione, si conduce un'indagine sull'uso di questi due potenti strumenti in due sfere culturali: quella tedesca e quella statunitense. Sebbene l'oggetto di studio abbia un carattere essenzialmente plurale e multi-sfaccettato, questo contributo dimostra che le motivazioni di chi si è occupato di pianificazione scolastica furono simili in entrambi i casi e che, per quel che concerne il sistema esamerico di attribuzione del voto, sussiste un legame tra Germania e Stati Uniti. Successivamente, tali risultati sono sussumti in una prospettiva neo-istituzionalista. L'articolo conclude con una riflessione sulla pratica quotidiana dell'attribuzione di voti in ambito didattico.

### KEYWORDS

Grammar of schooling, History of education, Grades and grading, Systemic goals, Neo-institutionalism  
Grammatica della scuola, Storia dell'educazione, Docimologia, Traguardi sistemici, Neo-istituzionalismo

### CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The Authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

\* All parts of the article have been written in equal parts by both Authors.

## 1. Introduction

By the end of the school year, millions of learners take a look at their report card, check their grades, and—either implicitly or explicitly—compare their academic performances with their peers. Grading, grades, and report card are a fundamental reality of schools as well as other academic institutions, not just in the United States but globally. As such, grades and grading can be considered a part of what Tyack and Tobin (1994) labeled as the «grammar of schooling»: Schneider and Hutt (2013) on the matter:

«Grading is one of the most fundamental facets of American education. In hundreds of thousands of modern US classrooms, grading is a well-accepted part of schooling. It is as natural as the use of textbooks, or the arrangement of students in desks or the presence of a teacher in the room» (Schneider and Hutt, 2013, p. 201).

Oftentimes forgotten however, is the fact that these practices have been challenged and different actors attempted to establish alternative orders. Yet, «[t]ypically, these innovations have not lasted for long» (Tyack & Tobin, 1994, p. 455). Over time, these alternatives to existing structures have been forgotten and «much of the grammar of schooling has become so well established that it is typically taken for granted as just the way schools are» (Tyack & Tobin, 1994, p. 454). An ahistorical perspective on current and well-established structures indirectly supports and strengthens these structures as alternative viewpoints, approaches, and realities remain unthought of (Neuhaus & Vogt, 2022a; Hohmann & Neuhaus, 2022). By not discussing institutions' and practices' histories, these remain largely dignified and uncriticizable. Considering that «the manner in which the machinery of instruction bears upon the child [...] really controls the whole system» (Dewey, 1902, pp. 22–23), the history of grades and grading remain an under-discussed issue—a fact which strengthens current actors in power. This dimension gains relevance when considering that grades and grading are part of larger standardization tendencies which have not only been labeled as hegemony preserving mechanisms (Neuhaus, Jacobsen, & Vogt, 2021) but also whose emergence has coincided with efforts of nation building (Tröhler, 2006a; 2006b). As such, grades and grading practices pend between educational as well as a societal goals or, as Schneider and Hutt (2013, p. 203) argued that grades pend «between what promotes learning and what enables a massive system to function»—the latter dimension being under-reflected, under-discussed, and under-researched.

Therefore, this paper wants to address the issue by discussing the coming-into-being of grades and grading systems as we know them today, always keeping in mind that «grades have not always been a part of education in the United States, they have not always looked the same, have not always served the same purpose, and have not always had the same impact» (Schneider & Hutt 2013, p. 202). However, national school systems have the tendency to insulate themselves from others and thereby divert criticism (Neuhaus & Vogt, 2022b). Hence, this paper will discuss the coming-into-being of grades and grading in the USA but also in Germany (Sections 2 and 3) as international comparisons can render larger historical patterns visible. Also, as it will be shown, these two cultural geographies have had—at least with regard to grades and grading—a lively transmission of ideas. Further, it will be shown that the intentions to establish grading as we know it today have been driven by similar, primarily economically-minded, motivations

which can also be found in further institutions and practices. Even though this paper's focus is set on the establishment of grades and grading regimes in the two cultural spheres, these can only be understood by also considering further changes of the educational landscape. Therefore, the developments surrounding grades and grading will—even though not in their entirety—be presented and employed as devices of further contextualization. In order to explain these developments which could be labeled as tendencies of economization (Grigat, 2012), corporate colonization (Deetz, 1992), and/or rationalization (Bürgi, 2017; Cowen, 2021)—just to name a few—this paper will offer a neo-institutional framing (*Section 4*) of the developments outlined prior. In this paper's final section (*Section 5*), central findings will be presented and discussed regarding their implications for today's classroom practices. As such, this paper wants to thematize the troubled history of grades and grading in order to enable (much needed) discussions on as well as reflections of an overlooked issue.

## 2. The History of Grades and Grading in Germany

While assessment, evaluation, and in the broadest sense feedback have always accompanied teaching and learning processes, the idea of numerical grades is a comparably young concept which originated for the German context in the 18th century. Before the development and spread of numerical grades, reports were almost exclusively beneficiary reports<sup>1</sup> that took sides with the assessed pupil or student in the form of a full text (Urabe, 2009, p. 25). The role, form, and meaning of assessment and grading changed for the German-speaking context in the 18th century, when Jesuit schools recognized the efficiency-enhancing potential of numerical grades and introduced them to their institutions—at that time still with Roman numerals, but already with a six-part division (Schneider, 1989, p. 8). In this context, numerical grades fulfilled a dual function: due to their standardizing effect, they made it possible for learners to change between different institutions and thus to change their centre of life without interrupting their academic career<sup>2</sup> (Breitschuh, 1991, pp. 508–509). Apart from the flexibilization of the entire organisation and the possible exchange of individual actors, the introduction of the numerical grade also pursued another intention, which manifested itself primarily in its daily use. Urabe (2009, p. 29) argues that grades were supposed to motivate students to be competitive and ambitious, both also realizing a controlling function. The aspects of ambition and competition are underlined by the fact that promotion, i.e. to a higher grade, was linked to examination results and—also on the basis of these—hierarchies within individual schools were established. Grades,

1 As the name suggests, beneficiary reports were issued almost exclusively to economically disadvantaged students. These reports stated both, the academic qualities as well as the character virtues of the person. The issuing of reports was often done in order to open up opportunities for suitable students to continue their studies—i.e., by obtaining scholarships—despite their socio-economically disadvantaged starting position. Apart from this, the issuing of reports was a rather uncommon practice, as education was directly regulated by class and the available socio-economic resources (Urabe, 2009, 25).

2 Although Jesuit schools established a standardized grading scale, the religious denomination as well as their associated institutions were indirectly aware of the potential incomparability of performance. This manifests itself, for example, in the practice that the receiving schools viewed the reports but did not have to take the recommendations of the report into account in their final decision (Breitschuh 1991, p. 509).

as well as the public proclamation thereof, have served as a reward or incentive since their introduction, established hierarchies, and also contributed to the potential segregation of students who were perceived as academically too weak and/or unvirtuous (Keck, 1991, p. 69). It can thus be stated that numerical grades in their two directions—mediating between the individual parts of the institution as well as acting internally—fulfilled functions that from today's perspective could be labelled as *streamlining* as well as openly articulated competition. Both are known to be common practices in economically oriented organisations. The orientation towards competition is also reflected in the proclaimed goals of the Jesuits, since the measures described above were intended to form a secular elite (Breitschuh, 1991) which could effectively realize the Jesuits' worldly goals and projects. To this end, the Jesuits developed—following the same logic—further standardization and quality management instruments, such as uniform study regulations and later curricula (Hamann 1993, p. 47). The majority of these instruments found their way into national organized schools, sometimes in modified forms, and became a permanent fixture there.

Along with a geographical expansion and the increasingly compulsory nature of school at the end of the 18th and beginning of the 19th century, the concept of the numerical grade established itself, even though performance reports and numerical grades took on divergent functions for different social strata. These are presented briefly hereafter. Grades and reports granted a pupil the right to study, which in the Prussian context was a prerequisite for entering the civil service. Analogous to the Jesuit schools outlined above, the Prussian state attempted to form elites in the form of capable civil servants through grades, report cards, diplomas, and other elements of standardization. The need for the introduction of such measures stems from the fact that, as part of the opening of educational institutions to larger parts of society, education was now available for a broader social strata, which resulted in a rush to the associated institutions (Lundgreen, 1981)—the introduction of *Abitur* (Germany's formal degree which allows college attendance) in 1788 as well as the founding of school boards can therefore be read against the background of quality assurance with simultaneous consideration of meritocratic ideals (Kraul, 1984, p. 24). As a result, a new social class—the *Bildungsbürgertum*—emerged (Vogt & Neuhaus, 2021a). This educated and economically successful middle class legitimized its societal and economic status (at least initially) primarily through their academic achievements (Neuhaus, Pieper & Vogt, in print; Neuhaus, 2021, p. 121). Even if this period is commonly read as the emergence of a more meritocratic society, it should also be considered that access (i.e., to universities) and the associated instruments (grades, diploma, and certificates) were also used to weed out critical students—i.e., in the context of the German democracy movement 1848—by removing them from the institutions which would have enabled them to earn the right to become a civil servant (Urabe, 2009, p. 38).

While the Prussian state used educational institutions as instruments of (maintaining) power, the control function alluded to becomes particularly clear when looking at the German equivalent of board schools [*Volksschule*]. While education was associated with social, financial, and societal advancement for the middle class and [*Bildungsbürgertum*], the implementation of compulsory schooling came with enormous costs for learners in board school as well as their families. These, mostly economically disadvantaged, families required their children's labour to generate the necessary resources for survival, an endeavour which was boycotted by the state's requirement of compulsory schooling. These circumstances resulted in frequent absences in these groups of students (Hofmann, 2021). Likewise, the board

school diploma of completion came without further entitlements and was therefore of little value to the majority of the student body. Consequently, Breitschuh (1979, p. 53) concludes that the central purpose of the board school diploma was to control as well as enforce compulsory schooling. In the case of non-compliance with compulsory schooling or the lack of a report, the person in question was denied a possible marriage as well as inheritance (Urabe, 2009, p. 45). These drastic sanctions partially explain the widespread enforcement of compulsory education in Prussia around 1800.

### 3. The History of Grades and Grading in the USA

Feedback mechanisms have had a long history in the United States' educational sector. However, in the early 19th century these mechanisms were far away from being standardized and the form, format, and organization of feedback was highly dependent on the place, institution, and setting. Competitive and prestigious schools, such as (among others) the University of Yale, employed grading schemes to increase competition and enhance learner's motivation (Pierson, 1983). Yet, these precursors of current grading schemes consisted of only four grades, and they were used to evaluate and feedback academic as well as non-academic aspects of student performance (Peabody, 1888), which is an indicator that competitive feedback formats have been employed to not just improve learning but also to alter characters. While prestigious higher education institutions already employed grading practices, the problem with regular schools was that no age-coherent classes were yet established. Instead, each learner learned (often in a packed classroom) for him-/herself, the teacher moving in the classroom giving each learner spontaneous feedback on the tasks—a similar setting Prussia faced roughly 40 years earlier. Yet, even in such rather unstandardized settings, feedback and rankings have been employed; according to the *Lancasterian Model* learners were ranked in the classroom—better learners moved to the front, worse learners to the back—based on the frequently conducted examinations, tests, and recitals (Kaestle, 1983). While this model was clearly organized to foster competition «as their [students'] failure may have been a means of [a classmate's] gain, without any merit on his part» (Russell, 1826, p. 561), the Lancasterian model neither allowed to track overall progress nor comparisons outside the direct classroom environment; at this point in time evaluation and feedback did not have a long-term vision. The lack of longevity has been amplified by the fact that such an organizational model did not come with curricula and/or standards as learning (and, with it, schools) have mostly been thought of in their local context. As such, progress could not be monitored and the educational planners at the time had no idea whether their efforts were useful or not. To diverging degrees and in different scope, these problems have been worked on by different stakeholders in the United States. As a result, a plethora of standardizing elements has been introduced to the United States' educational sector in the course of the 19th century, such as age-coherent classes, curricula, and regularly written tests (Schneider & Hutt, 2013, p. 206). This coincided with the emergence of the hexamorous grading system which has found its way to the United States as a result of Horace Mann's journey to Prussia (nowadays Germany) and his fascination with the grading scheme regarding its pedagogical but also its organizational potency (Mann, 1845). Mann and his fellows saw grading's potential to solve some of the United States problems in the educational sector

which—at the time—exhibited tremendous degrees of divergence regarding quality, content, and (internal) organization.

After the Civil War, the idea of grades and grading became more popular in schools and other educational settings, yet different forms and formats were competing for primacy (Smallwood, 1935). Alongside the competing forms and formats of feedback came an increase in students and learners as the expansion of education took place (Meyer et al., 1992), schooling was gradually seen as possibility for social mobility (Schofer & Meyer, 2005), and ultimately schooling became compulsory (Labaree, 1988). While schools used to be local and relatively smoothly running institutions, the sudden increase in learners turned schools into huge organizations (Goldin, 2006). The increase in organizational size led to the necessity for standardization and optimization regarding feedback, tracking of progress, and a plethora of further factors. Schneider and Hutt (2013, p. 213) on the role of grades and grading at this point in time:

«Reformers saw grades as a means of creating modern systems for a modern world. In increasingly massive urban systems, teachers could no longer give detailed accounts of every student’s abilities. Yet this was essential for other parts of the system to work. If students were to move from one grammar school to another, for instance, or from grammar school to high school or high school to college, they would need to be tracked in some systematic way» (Schneider & Hutt, 2013, p. 213).

While the prior system could only tell a student relative standing in relation to his/her local setting, a standardized grading scheme allows for internal as well as external communication regarding a student’s progress and performance, which—in turn—increases the possibilities for geographical (different places) as well as academic (taking different courses in a school) mobility while keeping the student inside a general and communicable framework—similar advantages as intended by Germany’s Jesuits when they invented the hexamorous grading scheme roughly a hundred years prior. While the hexamorous grading system comes with in-built shortcomings and limitations, it also allows for a greater degree of freedom within the established framework.

Different trends and movements of the late 19th and early 20th century called for a higher degree of educational and vocational individualization as differences in intelligence and personality have been considered key contributors to success (Rammstedt et al. 2012, pp. 7–8; Zenderland, 1998) and schools should provide courses, degrees, and content for learners of diverse backgrounds, with diverging aims, but also with different personalities and intelligences. As such, the call for internal differentiation has been taken up, yet this was only doable as the external organizational restrictions—grading being a key part of it—have gradually been standardized. Again, Schneider and Hutt (2013) on the hexamorous grading system and its emergence as the primarily employed scheme:

«Although the A–F grading system was still not standard by the 1940s, it had emerged by that point as the dominant grading scheme, along with two other systems that would eventually be fused together with it: the 4.0 scale and the 100 percent system. This move was slow, of course—the product of a decentralized system with few formal coordination mechanisms» (Schneider & Hutt, 2013, p. 215).

Even though the hereby presented emergence of the hexamorous grading system is extremely abbreviated regarding its depth and comparatively ignorant of the diverse cultural, social and geographical differences within the (decentral organized) United States, it was still able to illustrate that the main drivers of this specific grading scheme were desires of rationalization, economization, and increasing relevance of efficiency. These factors became relevant as the educational expansion, and with it the increase of student population, created necessities which these tools and mechanisms could, at least partially, solve. As such, the (emergence of the) hexamorous grading schemes perpetuates its original intention as designed by German Jesuit schools; also, these intentions fall back on an economically-driven logic which is highly compatible with economic actors. While grades and grading have later been used by the German/Prussian ruling class as a means to stabilize their hegemonic position, the interdependence between power and grading has been under-researched for the U.S. American context—a gap future research has to fill, yet it can be suspected that the actual ruling mechanisms applied in the United States are subtler (compared to Prussian Germany) but also manifest themselves in rules, procedures, and dominant paradigms (see, i.e., Wolin, 2015) thereby reflecting the needs and desires of, at least back then, national elites (cf. Kamens & Benavot 1991)

#### **4. Grading and Standardization: a tentative neo-institutional framing**

As shown by the example of grades, standardization processes have long been an integral part of the development of the modern educational system. These are not merely individual or coincidental developments but should rather be read as an expression of a general megatrend—the standardization and rationalization of school(ing). In the 18th century, there was still no uniform understanding of what was to be understood by school, what was to be taught there and by whom, who was to be taught or how progress was to be monitored. However, if taking a closer look at the global development of education over the last 200 years, the successive emergence of a relatively standardized and universalized model of school as well as its worldwide implementation can be observed (Adick, 2003). Rationally organized, state-controlled, and formalized school structures can now be found almost everywhere in the world (Meyer & Ramirez, 2000). In addition, there has been an extensive expansion of education worldwide, which has been accompanied by a considerable increase in school attendance (Meyer et al., 1977; Meyer et al., 1992). The modern education system advanced to become a global institution with enormous legitimacy, which spread globally especially in the second half of the 20th century. As a result, great structural similarities between formal schools and educational institutions have emerged not only country-specifically, but also across countries. Structure, goals, and content are formally extremely similar in the various national education systems of modern global society. Nowadays, almost everywhere there are multi-level structured education systems with standardized learning arrangements and degrees. In short, we are living in a uniformly schooled world (Baker, 2014).

Expansion dynamics, including those of the educational sector, are essentially based on standardization and go hand in hand with it. Research explains the standardization of formal organisations primarily through the following mechanisms: coercion, imitation, and normative pressure (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). However, these mechanisms also depend on favourable cultural conditions. In order to be

able to detach themselves from local conditions and to be transferable to other contexts, practices usually have to become structures and models that are as universal and standardized as possible. Also, they have to be distinguishable or comparable by specific criteria. Standardization and expansion are therefore demanding processes which require practices and routines to produce permanence, uniformity, normativity/universalization, and comparability. This points to the importance of cultural-discursive processes and practices of categorization, theorization, and narration that generate cultural connections, generalizing abstractions, comparative criteria, and normative expectations through communication (among others: Heintz & Werron, 2011; Stichweh, 2008; White, 2008; Strang & Meyer, 1993).

Neo-institutionalist educational research in particular has demonstrated the rise and spread of standardized educational systems based primarily on Western models in empirical studies and at the same time presented a theoretical explanation for this development that focuses on the cultural dimension (Krücken & Hasse, 2005; Adick, 2003). The neo-institutionalist interpretative foil for the expansion and alignment tendencies of global educational structures, policies, and expectations is based on the macro-deterministic assumption that global cultural expectations influence local practices and structures (critically: Wiseman et al., 2013). Following this line of thought, the causes of an expansive and standardized school model are specific assumptions regarding its benefits. As such, education as a contributing factor for (economic) development and progress, a claim which has been culturally anchored and globally disseminated by various players since the 18th century, can be quoted as a contributor of its global expansion—a process that could be framed as the *pedagogization of the world* (Tröhler, 2021).

Meanwhile, the importance of social agents acting in the name of cultural values and normative ideas, described by neo-institutionalism as *rationalizing others* (Meyer 1994),<sup>3</sup> also shows the influence of external players on educational development. In the course of history, standard setting has increasingly migrated from local school arrangements to state, supranational and/or private spheres. As various examples could illustrate, standardization is implemented in schools, but the standards are developed and set elsewhere. In the field of global educational development, the OECD, UNESCO, and the World Bank (among others) play an active role in the generation and implementation of certain structures best practices. The influence of these institutions cannot be overestimated as they advise national governments on educational issues and provide national actors with specific problem-solving patterns. These are often adopted by national actors without any reflection (Krücken, 2005, p. 15). Serial comparative practices, such as rankings, also have an important function, creating cultural links and performance-specific competition and thus initiating standardization processes (Heintz, 2016). This can also be observed in the PISA rankings, through which the performance of educational systems in different countries is evaluated and compared on the basis of selective criteria and hierarchizing classification schemes (Zindel et al., 2019). Implicitly, however, these rankings feature ideals and thereby propagate possible

3 Rationalizing others can be, for example, international organisations, experts, consultants or publicists, named in this way because their motives and influence are not primarily related to their own actions, but rather because they act as «disinterested» entities that generate and disseminate certain models, categories and standards through observations, descriptions, evaluations and comparisons. Strictly speaking, they are therefore not described by Meyer et al. (1992) as acting players, but rather as others and agents (see also Meyer & Jepperson, 2000).



changes in the given setting—these implicitly articulated changes reflect the intentions of the institution responsible for the ranking.

This also represents a possible connection to the frequently observed economization of the school system. Technically speaking, neo-institutionalism is considered unsuitable to provide a theoretical framework regarding economization of schools due to its focus on cultural alignment processes neglecting capitalist world market structures.<sup>4</sup> However, on its theoretical basis, it can be argued that schools, as well as school systems, are susceptible to external critiques concerning efficiency. Through these critiques as well as the applied tools (i.e., rankings), schools as well as entire educational systems are being opened up to processes of economization in the form of capitalization (i.e., university's endowment), commodification, and privatization (Höhne, 2012). A fundamental affinity to an economic logic exists anyway through the cultural ideas on which the school system is based.

As shown by the example of grades, school-specific standardization processes are subject to a rationality logic that is fed by efficiency enhancement claims as well as quality assurance aspects. In addition, the standardization efforts analysed also represent a control and regulation function. From the perspective of neo-institutionalism, these can be understood as an expression of so-called rationality myths that shape and determine identities, organisations, and actions. These are supra-individual and universalized rules, models, and scripts that determine which players exist, according to which principles they should act, which goals are to be striven for, and which means are available to reach these goals (Meyer 2010; Meyer et al. 2005). In this context, with the emergence of occidental modernism, the abstract goals of progress and justice in particular would be passed off as the most important collective goals of action, and players would be obliged to achieve these goals as rationally and efficiently as possible (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). Against this background, the modern school system emerges and develops as a central place that produces the required subjects as well as the associated knowledge. School is a core structure of modern world society as it reflects, forms, and integrates the central goals and structures of modern society (Meyer, 1996, p. 23). Since these goals and structures are based on certain cultural (and mostly Western) conceptions of rationality, standardization of the educational system occurs under the influence of social actors as agents and advocates of these conceptions. Ultimately, these beliefs, on the basis of which the educational system is designed, manifest themselves in concrete examples—grades being one of them but also the expansion of education, enforcement of compulsory education, convergence of curricula, and many further.

## **5. Conclusion: Strength in Numbers? Summary and Implications for Today's Classroom Practices**

As this article could hopefully illustrate, grades and grading constitute practices which have been established in a top-down manner in Germany as well as the United States. Further, it can be argued that the implementation processes have

4 For a critique of this blind spot with reference to economy, domination and power, see Adick (2003, pp. 180ff.), who suggests that for their analysis, one should additionally draw from the Marxist-inspired world-system analysis of Wallerstein (2004).

been conducted (and have been accepted) as grades and grading solved problems faced by institutions and individuals alike. These problems are not genuine to the educational sector alone, which may also explain why the output-driven and efficiency-enhancing processes of economization, standardization, rationalization, and streamlining could be marked as a key contributor to what is known today as the *modern school system*. Grades and grading—as one mechanism among many to foster these tendencies—have a double function: on the one hand they allow to smoothen processes within the education sector (i.e., transfer to another school) as well as (allegedly) improve its efficiency and output (i.e., through competition). On the other hand, they also serve as communication devices which allow to transfer educational achievement into other—primarily economically-minded—areas of life, or as Schneider and Hutt (2013) phrased it: «Grades have lasting and profound consequences: once earned, they serve as a key determinant of future success—a mechanism through which schools, universities, and employers judge the individual's academic achievement» (Schneider & Hutt, 2013, p. 201). As such, grades and grading can be considered the intermediary between different institutions—a fact which helped schools to become key institutions of the modern world.

Grades as well as the practice of grading has been criticized on many fronts—i.e., as creating pressure, and thereby causing psychological damage (Feldmann, 2020), as wrongful abbreviations of learners and their personalities, as subjective/inconsistent (Ingenkamp, 1986), and as fostering unhealthy competition among learners (and thereby hindering cooperative learning) (Lynch et al., 2020). Most of these criticisms are grounded in the observation that grading—as a contributor to educational as well as a systemic goals—has gradually moved towards serving primarily systemic purposes. The establishment of international rankings, standardized national tests, and the alike can be read as further proof of these preliminary observations (Martens & Niemann, 2013). These systemic goals as well as their powerful advocates may also explain why grading has been adopted globally and—even though there is plenty of downside to it, primarily to learners—has never seriously been challenged since then (Vogt & Neuhaus 2021b). On the contrary, dedicated teachers, committed educators, and educational planners have attempted to reform feedback mechanisms and have had produced certain achievements; however, on the larger scale A–F (for the German context: 1–6) grading has proven to be a part of the grammar of schooling as «these innovations have not lasted for long» (Tyack & Tobin, 1994, p. 455) or have never moved beyond the local contexts.

Teachers are, at least to certain degrees, bound by institutional limitations. However, teaching and educating are primarily local processes which are negotiated everyday anew. Therefore, this text wants to serve as a reminder that grades and grading are both: systemic devices but also feedback mechanisms to improve learning. Also, this text wants to strengthen teachers' awareness that alternatives to classic A–F grading schemes exist and that these sometimes serve the educational/pedagogical dimension more than the institutionally prescribed schemes. *Classic* grading has had its history and has proven to be a powerful tool; however, classroom practices should explore and (re-)establish alternative forms of feedback to re-adjust the ratio of educational to systemic goals.

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