

Could Standard Grading Practices Be Counterproductive?

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By Paul Barnwell

Imagine the following scenario: Valerie gets her report card back on a day when palpable excitement and fear surges through schools when students bustle back to homeroom at the end of the day. She is relieved; straight A's, as usual, and she goes on her way. She is a responsible student—some might label her a teacher pleaser—and completes most of her homework, despite struggling a bit on exams. In another classroom, Jonathan gets his report card from his homeroom teacher and his hands tremble as he unfolds the paper. A few C's, a few D's, and one F, despite the fact that he scored highly on his tests in all subjects. He usually didn't turn in homework, and was lazy at times in class, yet demonstrated mastery of the content. I challenge you to consider the following: What do grades mean? More importantly, what should they mean? Should they be emphasized in our schools as much as they are?

Of course, grades can mean many things. To receive an "A" like Valerie, it might mean a student worked diligently, completing all work and doing just well enough on tests and other projects. It also could mean that the student knew most of the material going into the course and had no trouble at all, receiving high marks but barely learning anything. It might mean grade inflation. It might be a reflection of a few graded assignments, or it could reflect dozens of assigned grades, depending on the teacher's assessment methods. Countless other variables occur when grades are tallied.

Hardly surprising, parents, teachers, and students often discuss or dispute grades, with the constant threat of panic or conflict if a

grade drastically dips. What is shocking is how rare the following question is asked: Does this grade reflect whether or not the student has actually learned anything?

The problem with our grade-dominated system is that emphasizing grades and grading can distract us from focusing on what really matters—whether or not students are comprehending and learning the material. A ridiculous—even tragic—amount of time is devoted by too many teachers disputing grades with parents and students, instead of using that time to discuss what the child is learning, or having other productive conversations.

Another problem with a reliance on heavy grading is the underlying assumption that grades are a necessary motivator for students. There are several problems with this contention. Psychological research proves that students, and people in general, are more likely to lose interest in what they're doing if they are promised carrots or threatened with sticks. Using grades as a "threat" (stick) or "reward" (carrot) for completion of work is extrinsic, or external, motivation. This type of motivation often results in decreased student focus on the learning objective.

I cringe when I hear students ask, "Mr. B, is this for a grade?" because of this very fact. We should desire to eliminate that question in our schools—do we not want students to be motivated for the sake of learning itself? In classroom environments where grades are pushed, **the sad fact is that students will often choose the easiest path to high grades, rather than challenging themselves in meaningful and creative ways.** In classrooms where students are intrinsically (internally) motivated, excellence is more likely to occur.

Most students want to learn if presented with engaging and exciting learning environments and experiences. At the least, I've found that more students are motivated to learn when presented with authentic, stimulating learning climates than by the "threat" or "reward" of grades. Research proves that the

human brain is wired to enjoy discovery and novel ideas, experiences, etc. If we focused more on creating ideal learning climates, grades could slowly be pushed aside and we could focus on feedback that is constructive, spurring more student growth. Unfortunately, the pressure of grade competition and comparison is engrained in our system.

I currently work in a public school environment where grading is seen as an important motivational facet and feedback tool, and this is no reason for me to despair, despite the problems with the practice. I commend members of the math department at my school for actively making strides in recording fewer grades, instead focusing on formative assessments and interacting with students to constantly gauge what he or she knows. One of the most productive things I've decided to do as a teacher has been to deemphasize grades, because traditional grading is insufficient as I attempt to assess student learning, growth, and development.

Like anyone, I enjoyed receiving good grades throughout my schooling years. But I honestly didn't care as much about grades in the courses where I was interested in what we were doing for the sake of learning itself—the intrinsic motivation that can ultimately lead to the creation of students who display the greatest tribute to public education, a desire to continue learning.

<http://www.questionsforschools.org/on%20grading.htm>