

## **The Grading System: Student's Attitudes and Motivation**

By Jordan Sitler

### **Introduction**

Picture an animal performing at a zoo for excited tourists, and that animal was trained to receive rewards, or “the big fish,” instead of enjoying or having the passion to perform. “The big fish” is grades, and students have been trained to receive high grades, rather than learning the content they will need. The way schools teach and motivate students to learn could impact them for the rest of their life, and it is significant for students to learn to become contributors to society. The grading system is used to evaluate students' performance on an A-F letter scale. William Stallings and Elwood Leslie (n.d.) conducted a study in which they discuss this in their article, and although the study indicates that students find certain aspects of grades to be positive, the results show student attitudes toward the grading system are negative. Although there are positive aspects regarding grades, students continue to be affected, which is shown through their efforts and mentality in the classroom. By studying the effects of how the grading system impacts student attitude and motivation using research from the education field and the psychological perspective, educators and administrators can encourage schools to test new strategies that can help students' future success in a positive way.

In addition to gaining knowledge on this subject through facts and research, the purpose is to better understand the internal and external impacts that grades have on students regarding attitude, motivation, and future generations. The goal is to focus on how negative impacts of grading, such as stress and anxiety, would affect students mentally. Another goal is to use studies to examine how students' attitude and motivation are affected due to the grading system. How

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does the grading system affect student motivation? How could the grading system affect future generations? And why are students struggling to view the grading system in a positive manner? Grades can motivate students for the wrong reasons, which can instill stress and fear of failure in students. Studies have shown that grading students could potentially have an even greater effect on students in the future. Since students focus on high grades, the system has a significant impact on the idea that receiving high grades is the only way to be successful, which can put pressure on students to do what they can to achieve that goal, even if it is unethical.

### **Literature Review**

The grading system was a universal technique used by schools, but every school, and even certain professors, used this system differently. The most used grading systems were letter and percentage grades, which would range between a student receiving a grade A to an F. To define grading, T. R. Guskey and H. R. Pollio (2002) summarized it as, “an exercise in professional judgement on the part of teachers.” There were several purposes for creating the grading system, some reasons that could be considered more important than others. The University of the People (2021) stated, “The main reason that grades were invented was to make it easy for institutions to communicate with one another about a student's academic readiness.”

Before 1850, there was little knowledge about the idea of grades in the education system, and many of the ideas used today were based off European models. Instead of documenting students' grades, teachers would relay the progress of the students' learning to their parents by means of speech. Schools began to create grade levels by separating students based on their age due to the increased number of students. As changes were being made in schools, an idea in which teachers took note of the mastered and unmastered skills of students, which became the

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earliest example of a narrative report card, was used. Guskey and Pollio explained this method by saying, “This was done primarily for the students' benefit, since they were not permitted to move on to the next level until they demonstrated their mastery of the current one” (2022).

Between 1870-1910, the beginning of the grading system currently used was created because of the increased number of high schools, which resulted in teachers using percentages to verify the success of students in all subjects.

As researchers noticed the impactful difference in teachers grading practices due to widely varied scores, they concluded that a shift needed to be made; “To ensure a fairer distribution of grades among teachers and to bring into check the subjective nature of scoring, the idea of grading based on the normal probability, bell-shaped curve became increasingly popular” (Guskey T. R., & Pollio H. R., 2002). Because of this, students began to be ordered through rankings based on their performance; they would receive letter grades between A-F, which became the most popular practice. This method was based off European models, which resulted in American schools creating a ranking system. Despite the minor differences in the grading processes among schools and teachers, grades began to affect students in a comparable way. According to Chamberlin et al., grades could affect the well-being and learning of a student; “grades can enhance stress and anxiety and cheating and reduce cooperative learning, critical thinking, autonomous academic motivation and feelings of trust between teachers and students” (2018). Whether or not the grading system was effective had been a topic of discussion throughout the years, and schools continued to search for improvisations that would positively impact students. Grading practices had been questioned by researchers and digging deeper into criticizing the explanation and reasoning for grades was an important part of understanding the positives and negatives.

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As researchers began to take notice of the underlying issues behind the grading system, they decided further examination was needed. Anderson's article reviewed the criticism behind the process in which grades are assigned to students. Her purpose for writing this article was to examine the strengths and weaknesses of grading systems and grading practices while using both historical and current research. The article's main points were based off five basic questions: "(1) Why do we grade students? (2) What do grades mean? (3) How reliable are students' grades? (4) How valid are students' grades? and (5) What are the consequences of grading students?" (Anderson, 2018, p. 1). The relationship between grading and motivation was not viewed as entirely negative or positive, as critics claimed that grades may encourage the wrong kind of motivation from students. Schinske and Tanner (2014) stated that "At best, grading motivates high-achieving students to continue getting high grades... At worst, grading lowers interest in learning and enhances anxiety and extrinsic motivation, especially among those students who are struggling" (as cited in Anderson, 2018, p. 4). Anderson went on to thoroughly explain the different representations of grades based on how a specific teacher decided to grade. She provided different studies throughout the article to show how researchers would determine whether certain practices needed to be altered. Anderson included a list of negative consequences of grading students that was organized by Kahn (1999, 2011), however, Anderson also included revised statements from the same list to show that students could also be impacted by other factors of school. Instead of listing only the negative impacts regarding grades, this article provided a non-biased, informational outlook into the grading system and grading practices along with recommendations on how grading students could be dealt with from this moment forward. Regardless of the positive impacts, they were outweighed by the number of opposing views from educators, researchers, and most importantly, students.

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As a consequence of the number of negative standpoints, grades had begun to change the way students viewed school, which took away from the main goal that children attended school—to learn. Lemons (2019) stated this claim by saying, “Youth today are taught that grades are most important, over actually assimilating knowledge.” With the idea placed in students’ heads from an early age that grades determined the outcome of someone’s future or the way they would be labeled, students' motivation and attitude toward school and grades may dwindle. This issue could result in an increase in cheating; “Due to this flaw within our education system, some students will go to whatever means necessary to be successful in the classroom, whether those means are cheating or sacrificing their sleep to complete homework” (Lemons, 2019). Not only could the stress placed on students to achieve a high grade affect them mentally, but the expectations also had the ability to physically impact students, as Lemons (2019) expressed in the previous statement. A second article was written that continued to discuss the issue of how grades affected students’ experiences with learning.

To emphasize the change of students' perception in school, Rebecca DeLisle and Jace Hargis (2005) authored an article discussing the problem that the grading system had instilled upon students, which was schools making students believe that receiving a high grade was more important than learning and enjoying learning. DeLisle and Hargis referred to grades as “the big fish,” and they stated that “Emphasis is not placed on how much students enjoy learning...what is most important is who can reach the biggest fish, regardless of the nutritional value inside the big fish” (2005, p.1). Students had quickly learned in school that if their grades were good, it did not matter whether they learned the material or not. They argued that students had become the victim of the artificial system with no choice but to focus on grades. If a student were to decide to enjoy school instead of trying to reach “the big fish,” they would be quickly labeled for not

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immediately conforming to the norms inside of schools (DeLisle & Hargis, 2005, pp. 1-2). The article stated, “In order to avoid these labels the student easily gives in to our artificial system and begins to jump through the hoops in order to receive the big fish in the end and make others happy because that is what the system reinforces” (DeLisle & Hargis, 2005, p.2). Typically, children do not desire good grades because they care about it, they only yearn for the approval of their parents along with the thought of being rewarded. Grades began to control students' lives because they had been taught that receiving good grades was the path toward acceptance, which, in turn, could cause stress resulting in a negative attitude. Many researchers, that would be discussed throughout the paper, had come to the same conclusion about students' views: students' attitude and motivation toward the grading system were found to be negative, and this inference was proven true in the following article.

To strengthen the credibility on the conclusion of negative opinions, researchers Stallings and Leslie conducted a study that was created to assess student attitudes toward grading practices. They used questionnaires to obtain real feedback from students who attended multiple different institutions. Stallings and Leslie included reports from committees who were part of the Education Department, that discussed the negative impacts of competition and pressure placed on students because of grades. Based on the study, all three Universities had more than half of the students agree that they did not take certain classes due to the fear of receiving a low grade. Another result from the study based off the questions students were asked was, “at least 78 percent of the students agree that an emphasis on grades encourages cheating, restricts study to material likely to be on the test, and encourages students to conform on tests and in the classroom to the instructor's views and opinions” (Stallings & Leslie, p. 7). This study generalized that student attitudes toward the grading system were negative, which suggests that

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students tend to do what was possible to receive a high grade instead of focusing on learning the material. A student's attitude toward grades could impact the amount of motivation they were willing to put into their schooling, and certain unexpected issues that could change the traditional learning environment could further jeopardize student motivation.

As schools continued to struggle with the lack of motivation from students, COVID-19 suddenly changed the dynamics of the school environment when schools had to shut down. Klein authored an article on the effects of this change, and his purpose was to build awareness on the issue that the grading system brought to student motivation, and he provided recommended solutions. Distance learning had affected students' ability to focus, and schools were struggling to find ways to motivate students since the traditional ways were not available. Before COVID-19, schools encouraged students to work hard and do well by rewarding them with grades, GPAs, and class rankings, but grades seemed to have lost their meaning (Klein, 2020). Schools had begun to change their grading policy to pass/fail or not having grades at all, but removing grades eliminated the motivation that would come with doing well in school. Although many people believed that grades motivated students to do their work, Klein stated that "yet there is little to no evidence or research that proves that grades make students learn more or work harder...there is ample evidence that grades actually do the opposite: They hurt academic motivation and inhibit learning" (Klein, 2020). He recommended that schools look at how to motivate students through intrinsic motivation rather than resorting back to the older practices. Researchers Richard Ryan and Edward Deci created a theory that suggested schools focus more on intrinsic motivators, rather than using grades as a motivator. Klein described this theory by stating that "Deci and Ryan's framework for motivation, called Self Determination Theory, has identified three elements that foster intrinsic motivation: autonomy, competence and relatedness" (Klein, 2020).

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Supporting students' well-being instead of worrying about the outcome of their grades could be significant to their future perspective on whether they need the reward system of grades to have a passion for learning. He emphasized that although COVID-19 had a huge negative impact, schools should take the time to get rid of old practices that had been proven unhelpful and embrace new strategies that do help. Klein wrapped up his article by encouraging schools to develop practices that will positively affect students' future success. This issue of student attitude and motivation brought about the discussion of how certain factors could impact future student achievement, whether that would involve getting into college or getting a respectable job.

It had been said that grades determined a child's future and allowed them to live a better life. While that was true, since grades were viewed as the principal factor in school, no one gave credit to the amount of effort that students put into their work, which was an important quality to have when attending college and getting a job. Klapp's article was based on a study that was conducted to examine how grades affect student achievement. The purpose was to investigate the long-term effects of grading in primary school to upper secondary school and how certain characteristics of students like cognitive ability, SES, and gender, were affected by grading. The hypothesis stated that “grading in Grade 6 will negatively impact grades in 7th, 8th and 9th Grades for continuing subjects while exhibiting a weak or no relation to grades...negatively related to educational attainment in upper secondary education” (Klapp, 2015, p. 6). The study that Klapp presented used data that was collected in the 1980s, and researchers chose 8,558 students born in 1967. These students were divided into two groups in grade 6—one group was graded for their work while the other group was not graded. The results indicated that grading on future achievement (grade 7-9) showed a significant negative effect.

Students that were not graded in grade 6 received higher grades through grades 7-9, and their

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odds of finishing upper secondary education were higher than students who were graded. This study concluded that grading influenced the later achievements of students, and it affected students differently according to their cognitive ability and gender. Since the study was conducted many years ago, Klapp took the present-day grading system into consideration by saying, “Given that the consequences of failing grades in the present criterion-referenced system are severer... it may be assumed that the negative effect of grading on student later achievement will be even stronger for students today” (Klapp, 2015, p. 21). She recommended further research on this topic to see how low-ability students would be affected and why grading had a different effect. Despite every study that had proven the grading system to be a problem, people continued to argue that it was effective.

### **Counterargument**

People believed in the grading system and felt that it was beneficial for students by giving them a straightforward way to measure their progress. Patricia Willis, a teacher, discussed the reasons why she felt grades worked well for students and, in her opinion, why they give students the motivation to succeed. While other researchers had argued against competition in schools, Willis believed competition was a positive aspect in grading. She explained that it made students work harder when they were able to see grades as a reward. Willis explained, “When everyone in class gets the same score - a pass - for completing an assignment on time, there is little incentive for students to work hard” (Willis, 2017). Although competition could benefit students’ effort and motivation on assignments, that mindset had the ability to turn into an unhealthy obsession with a need to be better than their peers, which could cause negative relationships within schools. Willis believed that letter grades were a clear measure for students, and it made it easier for students to know where they stand so they would be motivated to achieve the grades that they

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want. Willis also believed that this grading system was easier for parents to understand since they were familiar with that system. To support her claim, Willis said, “With letter grades, parents can see where more effort and guidance are needed” (Willis, 2017). An anonymous author continued this argument by explaining that a grading system was needed to track students’ progress, and it was a measurable reflection of learning or academic growth. They believed that the letter grading system better reflected a student’s overall ability in the classroom because it helped to create an accurate idea of their abilities over time. They said, “Since letter grades are assigned based on the cumulative score of a student over a semester or academic year, it reflects the sum of their performance, rather than one instance of it” (Fedena, 2018). They also claimed that a report card using the letter grading system was easy to understand by everyone that needed to view it. Regardless of the arguments directing the present grading system to be positive, it had been concluded by countless researchers that the grading system needed revision.

## **Conclusion**

Students need a fair and effective education to be successful because they are the future of society's work force. They will become our future doctors, lawyers, teachers, mechanics, construction works, etc. If students continue to be taught that achieving good grades is more important than learning, there could potentially be a decrease in effective, knowledgeable workers. This topic may help people who are responsible for schools to gain insight into how students are being affected by the grading system. This is not a suggestion to completely abolish grading, since that will not be effective. Schools should revise the system to improve students’ well-being and their mindset on learning. Most researchers suggested future research on this topic, as well as a suggestion from Klein that schools should focus more on intrinsic motivation rather than using grades as a motivator. The moment that schools and their faculty can

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focus on their students' wellness, students may change their views so they will be able to find a love for learning again.

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