

Veritas Classical Academy

Grading Systems and How they Affect Students

Morgan McKay

Senior Thesis

April 2021

Morgan McKay

Veritas Classical Academy

Senior Thesis

26 April, 2021

Grading Systems and How They Affect Students

INTRODUCTION: THE PROBLEM WITH GRADES

Everyone has experienced being graded in their lives specifically through school. Even though this system of grading students has been a part of educational establishments for over a century, it might not be the best way to evaluate students. The research collected here shows how students can be negatively affected by harsh or inflated grading systems. In order to counteract problems with American grading systems and benefit students overall, this research concerning A through F and percentage scales shows how these methods could have negative effects on students. Some grading practices can cause students to experience serious demotivation and even lose their desire to learn. The mental health and learning ability of each future generation is too important to let the grading systems in schools go unchanged. The pursuit of knowledge for its own sake becomes a burden rather than something to be enjoyed. School should inspire students to develop their education and personal knowledge rather than make students believe they have to cheat in life in order to get by. Because of the strain and pressure students take on due to the whole grading process, the appropriate action would be to reduce the weight of grades if not get rid of them altogether.

Grades and grading systems were put into place to motivate students. Grades are used as an incentive and meant to push students towards their education and encourage them to get more involved in their own learning. An A on a test shows how the student worked hard and put time and effort into their own education. Grades give students something to work for and a reason to come to school. That achievement drives the best minds to work hard and show how

their efforts and intellect have paid off. Good study habits mean good grades and good grades means success and opportunities for the rest of your life. Students are taught that their education is valued and that it is the key to having a future. They have to get good grades in middle school to do well in high school, and in turn do well in high school to get into a good college and so on. However this tactic may actually be detrimental to the students and their ability to learn and retain knowledge. Grades put momentous amounts of stress and pressure on students. They are taught that if they do not get good grades they cannot succeed at all.

While it is true that some students can be motivated by a letter showing their achievement or a percentage of the work they did throughout the school year, many students have no desire to work for grades and can even be seriously demotivated by the judgement portion of grading systems (Schwartz 3). Students that do not do as well on tests or assignments are discouraged from even trying (*The Case Against Grades*, 2). The A+ or 100% seems impossible and not worth the effort. Grades can show a representation of how much effort a student needs to invest in order to pass. They show students that they can still pass whatever class they are in with very minimal effort. Minimal effort can still produce a passing grade even if students are not learning or retaining anything that is being taught to them.

At some point cheating to get good grades makes more sense than trying to balance homework, extracurricular activities, and home life. Additionally many students have jobs for a multitude of reasons and this can take up lots of time and effort. The grade is what these students need and after having this reward so central to their entire school career the best way to get the grade is to some the easiest. Students will take courses and assignments that seem the easiest so the effort necessary to get a good grade is lower than usual. This shows how letter grades and other similar grading systems can be inaccurate in how they portray the actual knowledge of students. A student can have straight A's through their entire high school and college career but if they cheated their way through it, then they have no real knowledge of what they are being taught.

Grades are not even the most important thing in some schools (Jung 35). There are many schools across the United States that value athletic ability and the ability to compete and win competitions more than getting straight A's. Jung notes that sometimes schools celebrate athletes more than they celebrate academics and this shows students that their academic efforts are not as highly valued. Sometimes academics are not as important when you can run really fast or if you can manipulate a ball to go into a goal. The same applies to college sports. Many colleges offer sports scholarships for the purpose of bringing in students who have that athletic inclination. There are even recruitment programs specifically designed to seek out students who could be beneficial to their current sports teams.

EXTRINSIC MOTIVATION: LEARNING FOR THE GRADE

Along the same lines, when a student's grades are celebrated, the actual knowledge gained is set aside to make way for the grade achieved (Durm 1). This concept shows students that what they have actually learned is not important compared to the grades they achieved through any means necessary. Alfie Kohn explains this concept, known as extrinsic motivation, in *The Case Against Grades* (3). Extrinsic learning is a student learning for the grade itself rather than the actual knowledge that is meant to be earned. This way of learning can even degrade a student's desire for intrinsic learning which is on the opposite end of that spectrum (Sansone & Harackiewicz 313). Students are being unintentionally retrained to see learning and creative expression as something weighted with judgement and stress rather than seeing learning as something beautiful that should be celebrated (Case 2). Intrinsic learning, which is gaining knowledge for the sake of gaining knowledge, develops a student's personal education without the weight of a grade slowing them down. If the only reason a student is putting any effort into their school work is for a grade, then they will start seeing the work they need to do for their intellectual benefit as a chore rather than knowledge that they could call upon for years. This effort is not worth the stress and pressure that comes with the potential grade given. This

degrades how students see learning in general, not just learning in a school setting. Learning as a concept becomes a chore that is not worth doing. It becomes a waste of time and effort.

On this note, if students continue to see the work being assigned to them as a chore or a waste of time, the logical response would be to cut corners, cheat, or anything necessary to get the grade that everyone says you should have. This expectation that students are brought up to, pushes students away from the learning process and can make students completely uninterested in classes, projects and concepts as soon as they know it will be for a grade. However, this is contrary to the popular belief. Many teachers believe that if the grade every student is given is predetermined at the beginning of the year, rather than earned throughout the year, students will have no reason to try at all.

After some time students are only focused on the grade they are being given and not the material they are learning. The end goal is the only thing they want and what they are actually supposed to be learning becomes an afterthought. Students learn something for the test or assignment and then forget everything about it immediately after. Some even refuse to go as far to learn the material and cheat their way to good grades or even just passing. Finding creative ways to get out of work is an easier solution to actually just doing the work which sometimes would take a shorter amount of time and overall less effort. However this work has been displayed as something students are being forced to do by their parents or the government or something else that has power over them.

Along similar lines, if a student is being graded, their general quality of thinking is degraded (*From Degrading to De-Grading* 1). This results in a loss of creative thinking and leaves students more uniform in thought than constantly developing. What the students learn is what they are being graded on and everything else becomes a pointless side quest with no reward.

INTRINSIC MOTIVATION: KNOWLEDGE FOR ITS OWN SAKE

But these little side quests do have rewards. They are their own reward. Knowledge for its own sake is the reward. Learning what is interesting to the student makes them more involved, and they inevitably get more out of the knowledge they are consuming. Learning is meant to be fun and exciting. Humans are constantly evolving and as Aristotle said in his work *Metaphysics* “All men by nature desire to know” (1). Aristotle continues to explain how humans see consuming everything through their senses brings men joy and fuels their natural curiosity. This concept is known as intrinsic motivation (Wood, Wood, & Boyd 145) . Intrinsic motivation is someone’s natural interest in a concept or idea. Intrinsic motivation can be considered the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake. If knowledge is meant to be its own reward, then why are students still being judged for the things they are meant to be enjoying? Learning, something humans naturally enjoy and even seek out, has become a chore and a bother.

Parents are told and recommended to avoid suffocating their young children so they can learn and make mistakes on their own. Now this does not mean parents should not be involved in their child’s life at all but that parents are meant to be a guide rather than a dictator. Positive and negative punishment both have a role in this process. Specifically negative reinforcement in the context of teachers being strict or even draconian. While negative punishment might work in the moment, students may recognize the punishment only occurs in the presence of the authority figure, which is the teacher in this circumstance, and continue with that same negative behavior whenever they are not in the presence of the person in power. The bad or undesirable actions only become bad or undesirable if they get caught. Another result is the desensitization to the punishment due to overuse or a lack of fear towards the punishment to begin with. When these negative reinforcement or scare tactics are ineffective in their desired purpose, they turn into sullied reputations between students and teachers and a vicious circle that neither party is willing to break (Wood, Wood & Boyd).

This tactic also conditions students to believe that all teachers have the same views of punishment. While students are still developing, they gain knowledge based on their experience and can form stereotypes as a result. Students begin connecting the punishments they are receiving with their teacher. Of course it must be noted that this, like many other circumstances, does not apply to every student, no matter how common. However, the fact of the matter remains the same. Teachers are not meant to be dictators.

CONSTRUCTIVIST VIEW OF LEARNING

One theory of learning is called constructivist learning and it is explained by Burke (xiv). This theory is centered around the individual. "Learning is not linear", in that it is constantly expanding in multiple directions (Burke xiv). Like a tree branch, basic learning is not uniform. An individual's knowledge is constantly expanding in all different directions and over all sorts of different topics. It is developing through their own personal experience. This means that everyone's knowledge is different due to the reality that everyone lives under different circumstances.

Students should have the ability to make connections in light of this constructivist view of learning. They should be able to use what they have already learned to better understand what they are currently learning. They need to have the skills and opportunity to interpret what the teachers are doing their best to pass on to the students. If the student does not know when and how to use the tools given to them then the knowledge being provided for them does not benefit them at all. Teachers should have the ability to not only provide their students with all the information they need, but also be able to fill in the gaps where each individual student needs more help.

Typical letter grades do not effectively meet these requirements. Burke specifically references the ineffectiveness of multiple choice tests (xiv). She mentions how multiple choice tests do not help students apply what they should be learning to complex situations. In order to

show that each student has an accurate grasp of each concept they need to be able to show that they can manipulate their experiences and apply it to other situations that require the same knowledge, used in a completely different way. While they are simple to take and easy to grade, multiple choice tests are not an entirely effective method to show this.

There are many schools that have already recognized the systems schools use for grading students as deeply flawed. There are multiple colleges in New York that have either done away with grades entirely or produced alternative ways for students to assess their progress.

For example, Brown University allows students to choose how they are graded. They have several options for students to choose from, such as a modified letter grading scale. The scale they offer uses A's, B's, and C's but has no plus or minus grades and does not include failing grades on a student's transcript. They also give the option similar to a pass or fail system that they call satisfactory or no credit. It is similar to pass/fail in the lack of fluidity in the grading. The student either passed or they did not. Students also have the option to receive written evaluations from their teachers that are meant to help them recognize they need specific help or improvement. This system is meant to help students play to what they can see as strengths and weaknesses ("10 Colleges Without Letter Grades").

Another college that has put their own spin on the typical letter grades is Sarah Lawrence College, which is also in New York. They combine teacher evaluations and letter grades to provide an accurate and direct way of conveying what a student has learned and what they need to focus more on. This system is incredibly similar to the one used at Veritas. Teachers provide narratives that are included on students' report cards that were put into place to show exactly where a student needs more improvement. Sarah Lawrence also provides smaller class sizes in order to cultivate better relationships between students and teachers, along with a more involved lecture and learning plan. They have also implemented one-on-one conferences with professors to act as a progress report or a simple check in ("10 Colleges").

One complaint concerning narratives is the time that is taken up writing them. Teachers would have to take the time to evaluate each student individually rather than providing feedback based on a set scale. These evaluations do not have a specific rhyme or reason unless previously set by the teacher. Even then, each teacher would have a different standard for what should be included in their evaluations.

Letter grades continue to be the standard even though they can take up just as much time to use as a more effective evaluation tactic. With traditional grading, teachers have to comb through every assignment given, every test taken and combine that with their own interpretation of how well the student is participating and any other factor the individual teacher decides to include. With the use of narrative responses, teachers can take more time to focus on the personal development of the student rather than how many questions they missed on one test from a week ago.

THE BACKGROUND OF TRADITIONAL GRADING

There are many different grading systems that have been developed throughout the course of history. Some of the earliest use of grades was at Yale, which used “descriptive adjectives” as early as 1785 (Durm 2, Schinske). Yale also used a scale based on numbers. This is where the 4.0 grading method originated (Durm 2). Harvard later adapted this numerical grading scale to 20 rather than 4 (2). In 1837 mathematics and philosophy professors switched to a scale of 100 which gave them more room for precision in their grading process (2). By 1850, Harvard had used several different combinations of “descriptive adjectives and various numerical systems” and continued their method of trial and error for several years (2-3). They then began dividing students into division based on their merit and a scale of 100 points. This system was adapted into letter grades in 1883 (Durm 3, Schinske).

After much struggle, these grading systems have been adjusted and modified to form the now most common grading system, the A through F grading scale. In this system an A is the

highest grade a student can receive with the options of adding pluses and minuses to each letter. Each letter is used as a summary of the student's work throughout each grading period. It is meant to show how much a student has learned and give an accurate description of how they've intellectually developed. These grades can be earned through tests given, homework assigned, or any other way a teacher sees fit to evaluate their students. These assessments of a student's knowledge show that they are ready to graduate college, high school or whatever other schooling they are trucking their way through (Lanphear 79).

The concept of this grading system is meant to provide a sense of competition and drive the students to continue to achieve better and better grades as they continue to work for them. However, Kohn explains, "A teacher can meticulously record scores for one test or assignment after another, eventually calculating averages down to a hundredth of a percentage point, but that doesn't change the arbitrariness of each of these individual marks;" in fact, it can even have the opposite effect with students experiencing serious demotivation and loss of their desire to learn. Kohn continues in his explanation of how this grading system and many similar systems are entirely subjective and can even distort the pre-stated curriculum (2-3). The student's entire grade is based on what the teacher chooses to grade (Burke xii). Kohn illustrates how different teachers with the exact same qualifications can grade the exact same assignment completely differently simply based on who they are as educators (2). Through this system, educators, it seems, "may have created [their] own nightmare," (Durm 1).

Based on this knowledge it can be gathered that these types of grades fail to provide an accurate description of what a student has even learned. Teachers have the potential to use their ability to grade as a weapon and a means to control their students (Burke xii-xiii). The grade becomes a way for the teacher to gain power over their students rather than show how they have grown in their knowledge and as students. Veritas Classical Academy has a very simple way of counteracting this in their virtue grading system. Teachers use the same A-F scale to show how students have shown their fortitude, prudence, justice, and temperance.

These grades are all entirely subjective and chosen based on the teacher's experience with the student and guidelines previously set by the school. The virtue grade and the academic grade are then averaged to show the mission point average.

UNINTENDED CONSEQUENCES OF TRADITIONAL GRADING

When a teacher uses their ability to grade against the students, the false ceiling begins to form. Teachers set goals for students that are impossible for them to reach. They show an image of the goal the students could be achieving, but in actuality the goal is impossible. The teachers now have a precedent and are grading based on a bias. There are teachers who simply do not give A's or A+'s even if a student has done perfectly in the class. This causes students to strive for things they simply cannot achieve because the teacher will not let them even though many have earned it.

A similar effect occurs when teachers begin grading on a curve. When students are graded on a curve those who are excelling are being limited by those around them. Then their classmates become their rivals and the students around them that are meant to be their friends or community become their enemies and obstacles that get in the way of their success. Schwartz quotes a previous dean of Harvard University who describes it as "an empty game of score maximization" (2). School becomes a competition, and the purpose of learning and knowledge is lost in the fray. This competition for the best grades or the highest GPA results in students stepping on each other and demeaning others for their own gain.

Another unfortunate level of conditioning is learned helplessness as discussed in *Mastering the World of Psychology* and many other introductory psychology texts (145). Learned helplessness is an acceptance of bad occurrences or circumstances because of an inability to escape them in the past. The example used by Wood, Wood, and Boyd has dogs that were previously conditioned to experience a shock while in restraints then experience the same shock without said restraints. The group of dogs that were preconditioned stayed where they

could feel the shock even though they could have easily escaped like the dogs that had not been preconditioned. This same example can be applied to humans. Those who have experienced past trauma without being able to escape it expect all trauma to be the same. A student who might appear to be struggling in school and is receiving negative feedback in grades, can be conditioned to remain in a state of struggling and helplessness.

As soon as teachers begin using a student's grades against them the relationship between the teacher and student begins to deteriorate. This means that not only are the students all against their peers but the students feel their teachers are working against them. They are fighting an uphill battle with everyone around them searching for an opening to make them slip. This constant fighting for success can cause students to experience serious burnout and demotivation. It can even turn them away from learning all together. Students are conditioned to believe that learning means fighting and learning can never be fun. The entire point of going to school becomes a competition where no one ever wins and everyone is stressed for no reason. Using negative emotions to fuel effort and work is seen to be less effective than positive reinforcement (Pintrich 396).

The reasoning behind this falls to the definition and uses of punishment in learning. Wood, Wood, and Boyd discuss the different forms of punishment and reinforcement. For both concepts there is a positive and negative side, each with their own benefits and detriments. If teachers can learn how to use these tools to their advantage they can produce students with better learning ability and a better ability to recall what they've been taught. These concepts of punishment and reinforcement are fundamental to any learning or conditioning process.

Reinforcement is key to increasing the rate at which someone or something does a specific action or series of actions, and there are two types of reinforcement: primary and secondary reinforcers (Wood 139). Primary reinforcers are necessary to basic survival such as food, or water. They are a natural reward for effort. When training an animal, a treat or piece of food is given when the trick or habit is successfully completed. However a primary reinforcer is

not necessary for learning. Knowledge can even be an enforcer on its own. Secondary reinforcers are first experienced in tandem with primary resources before they can be independent reinforcers. Grades are an example of secondary reinforcers. The desire for knowledge can be used to lead students towards the development of themselves and better grades as a secondary benefit.

Yet some students may still be unmotivated by the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake and that is where secondary reinforcements come into play. They are used to motivate students to do better in school because if they do not study or do their homework then they cannot get a good grade. However, this system of reinforcement falls through when the reason schools were established in the first place is reevaluated. Schools were put into place to teach students. This system of reinforcement ingrains the idea that grades are the only reason to acquire knowledge. Things are learned to get the grade and then they can be forgotten. This strategy also falls through when, to the students, the grade is not worth the effort. Even when on the cusp of a higher grade, “students [are] more likely to seek an “F” to “D” change rather than a “B” to “A” change” (Rosenthal 375). With traditional grading, the quest for secondary rewards of learning— in this case grades— eclipses the pursuit of the primary enforcer, which is learning itself.

While some students may see grades as a reward to be pursued, others see that as a penalty to be avoided. This form of learning is escape learning. Escape learning uses a negative consequence as a result of not doing a task (Wood 145). For example, late registration fees are put into place in order to encourage those registering to do so on time rather than at the last minute. This is an example of using negative reinforcement in learning. Low grades are used in the same way. A failing grade is given if the student does not pass a test or do the homework assigned to them. Therefore if a student studies and does the homework they can avoid the bad grade.

Similarly, there is the concept of avoidance learning (Wood 145). Avoidance learning pairs a negative consequence with an action or concept rather than failure to complete an action like in escape learning. Through this pair the negative action and by extension the consequence is avoided. The example used by Wood, Wood, and Boyd involves drunk driving (145). They explain how the negative action of drunk driving is paired with the undesirable consequence of getting into a car crash or even death. Students that are failing their classes are seen as outsiders and teachers use these students that are in need of assistance and guidance, as deterrents to help push the rest of their students in the right direction. The students that are not doing so well become completely separated from the rest of their peers and are left to fend for themselves. Students would want to learn or achieve in order to avoid the ostracization and lack of support that comes with the label of being a failure or underachiever.

Teachers occasionally use similar tactics to motivate students to try harder and work for better grades. However, the fundamental problem with these methods is that they are centered around the grade: the grade is what gets these students to graduation and potentially higher education. The grade is what keeps students from a hard life or a job that keeps them from advancing. In reality the grade is just a letter. What really matters is the knowledge that is meant to be attained through schooling in general. Another downfall with methods that include or are similar to avoidance and escape learning are the reaction to grades students begin to experience. Students start to associate the concept of grades as a whole with the negative consequences tied to them by the teachers that are meant to be helping them towards self-betterment.

COMPULSORY EDUCATION

Students in the United States at least are required to go to school at least through different levels depending on the state. Compulsory education typically begins around five or six years old. One downside of schooling being required by law can be that many students feel trapped

by the schooling system. They are being told what to learn, when they are learning it, and how the information is getting to them. Without much choice in what their education involves, many students that do feel constrained by the school systems or government officials cannot bring themselves to avoid it because of this conditioning and the only way they can take control the situation is either avoiding doing schoolwork entirely so they do not have to worry about whether or not they get a good grade, suffer through the unnecessary stress, burnout, anxiety, and even subsequent depression. Having a sense of control is absolutely necessary to developing a student's intrinsic motivation (Albrecht 38).

This level of required education even causes a loss of the highly desired intrinsic motivation that is originally seen in students (Albrecht 36). It is seen that an obvious "emphasis is placed on extrinsic rewards" rather than intrinsic motivation that will lead to a higher desire to learn in the future (Albrecht 37). Another disheartening fact is how little this process benefits the students themselves. This is explained by Albrecht, "the only people who benefit are the teachers and parents" (37). This makes it incredibly difficult to make any large scale changes to the way students are evaluated. Parents and teachers often cannot see how this way of grading can affect students and think everything is going smoothly from everyone's end.

Procrastination is a battle worth fighting. Procrastination is an avoidance of work or effort because of prior negative conditioning connected to the circumstance. This practice allows students to avoid the grief and trials of studying by simply not doing it. As per the explanation given by Wood, Wood, and Boyd , procrastination can become a common practice in students due to the fear of failure, because they are unconfident in their abilities, or simply the preference of activities that are immediately enjoyable and immediately satisfying like watching television (145). While working hard and studying can lead to satisfying ends, the time and effort necessary for these circumstances are much more than simply sitting, or even lying down, and watching a show.

Because of this separation between long-term and short-term gratification, seeking a good grade on one assignment in a sea of letters and numbers becomes suffocating (Wood, Wood, & Boyd 145). Grades are meant to be the reward given for hard work. Students should be able to see that all the work they should be putting in is for their personal growth and not just a letter on their report card that will be forgotten in five years.

MASTERY LEARNING: A BETTER GOAL

One solution to the grading problem is the development of mastery learning (Spencer). Mastery learning is student centered (Mastery Collaborative). Each student works independently towards the mastery of a concept. The individual works until they can show they know what is being taught to them. Teachers work as guides and direct students in the right direction for the pursuit of knowledge rather than the pursuit of a grade. Each student works at their own pace and has the opportunity to move on to the next concept whenever they have reached mastery (Mastery Collaborative). The evaluations are not used as a punishment or a reward but simply an evaluation of the student's progress. This process helps students fuel their abstract curiosity and desire to discover rather than just complete the required assignment or pass the test given.

While there are many downsides to letter grades there are several circumstances where an exact description of the student's knowledge is necessary. Specifically in the case of medical professionals, an accurate and broad knowledge of the material is the only way lives can actually be saved and made better. Without this intensive knowledge of how the human body works, medical professionals cannot appropriately assess situations that may cost a person their life (Lanphear 81). Lawyers are in a similar situation. Without an accurate representation of how much they actually know about the law and how it works, the entire legal system would fall into chaos.

These grading systems that have been cultivated do not need to change according to Lanphear. The fact of the matter is that not everyone is motivated to do things just because. Not

everyone has the same intrinsic motivation for the same things. There are students that are more interested in writing and reading, history and language, while there are also students that prefer math and science. Not everyone will be interested or naturally good at everything. This concept continues into discussion of the future workforce. Not everyone will get their ideal job (Urdañ 323) and in some cases that cannot be helped. There are just some jobs that no one wants to do. Continuing with this idea, teachers simply cannot make every little piece of information, fun or exciting to learn (Urdañ 323). Not every test will be as exciting as watching a good show or reading a good book. Some things cannot be their own reward.

Simple concrete grading systems are the baseline for the easiest, and best indicator of a student's progress as said by (Urdañ 323). However, if an adult that has graduated from high school or whatever higher education they pursued and saw that they received a B on one report card and a C on another for the same subject, would they be able to tell you exactly what they were struggling with that made them drop down a letter or what they fully grasped that made them move up the same amount? These things become trivial after some time and in the grand scheme of things, if said graduate never knew what they needed help with or what they were excelling with in the first place how are students now meant to benefit through the same system that has not been telling them how they can improve? Tests, assessment, and grades need to show where a student is at any point in their education and what they can do in order to improve their surrender standing.

However, this does not mean that grading systems cannot change to better suit the students and the teachers. While medical professionals do need a vast and precise knowledge of their field, an A through F grading scale is not the only way to achieve that goal. Without grades it is seen that students are more creative and have a higher desire to learn (From Degrading to De-Grading 1). These grades are meant to prepare students for the real world, but the real world is not graded. Employers give out evaluations and feedback but rarely specific grades. The work system is not reward or punishment based in the same way that the school

system is. Past graduation from high school, college, graduate school, the grades a student specifically received do not even matter. What matters is that they graduated. The fact that they have the degree from their college is the only thing employers look at. This means that the employers have no real grasp of what the graduate has even learned and might not even need to know how well the graduates grasped specific concepts. A student could have nearly failed all of their classes or cheated through the entirety of their college career, but because they graduated they have technically earned that stamp of approval from the college.

However, without the knowledge a student should be achieving many aspects of a job that are degree specific cannot be completed. If the graduate in question has not actually learned anything from their time in whatever school they attended and gotten a job related to their field of study despite that fact, depending on the job catastrophe could be the result. Architects or engineers that have no real knowledge of how structures are meant to be built.

USE OF LIFE-LEARNING STANDARDS

In Burke's section that discusses standards, she covers the concept of life-learning standards (9). These sets of standards work in tandem with all other sets such as performance and content and "help students become lifelong learners" (9). Life learning standards are meant to be skills that can be used by future workplaces. According to the Secretary's commission on Achieving Necessary Skills, or SCANS, there are three main categories that these valued skills and personality traits fall under. These categories were derived from interviews and discussion with business owners over an extended period of time.

The first category is composed of the traditional academic skills such as the ability to read and write. Also included in this category is simple arithmetic and mathematics. Then they move on to less conceptual skills such as listening and speaking. These skills are a basic

foundation for any job. Not every job will require the same quality of each of these skills, but they are all fundamental in being able to complete most tasks required (Burke 10).

Of course with every system of learning or education there have to be standards for learning involved. Learning standards are put into place for the benefit of both students and teachers. Specific standards provide a foundation for teachers to base their lesson plans off of. Teachers will know beforehand what students need to for them to reach the goals given to them by those tasked with producing said standards. On the other side of the story, students will know exactly what is expected of them. According to Burke standards are put into place to “improve the quality of life” (2). With this concept of specific standards the old as education question of “will this be on the test?” will not be completely eradicated due to the nature of some students, but students can be given precise specification as to what they need to learn.

The second category is related to thinking skills. These skills show that the person interested in the occupation can think creatively, and has basic problem solving skills. Applicants need to be able to learn and adapt to all sorts of situations that could arise from having said job. Rational thinking is also a big part of any job. No matter what kind of job a student could get there will always be the occasional unforeseen circumstances

The life-long learning skills compose the third category. This category involves traits such as responsibility and independence. They can be taught to students but some experience it to a different extent than others. This category also includes integrity, sociability and self esteem (Burke 10).

These are the traits and abilities that many employers are looking for. If school is meant to be preparing students for their future, then why are schools still using grading systems, such as letter grades, that can cause these traits and skills to deteriorate in students? As previously mentioned by Kohn, “Grades tend to reduce a student’s quality of thinking” (From Degrading to De-Grading 1). In that same passage he brings to light that “students given numerical grades were significantly less creative than those who received qualitative feedback but no grades” (1).

Many of these necessary skills are being pushed aside in an attempt to cram more knowledge into students.

Other factors that can affect how students learn are the opportunity to learn standards which are explained by Burke (11). Opportunity to learn standards are the conditions that a student needs in order to succeed or meet the specific standards set for them. There are many situations in which students are punished for not having the right resources or proper help they need in order to learn the material. Students must meet the necessary standards in order to avoid punishment. Several key resources are discussed by Burke (11). These resources include teachers that are qualified to teach the subject they need to teach and class sizes that are reasonable enough for the teacher to handle. Children can be a lot to handle on their own, so reasonable class sizes are instrumental to proper teaching. Each program needs to have the appropriate funding to ensure the best instruction and materials possible. This then leads to the final point which is student access to all necessary materials, textbooks, and anything else a student would need for their education.

Students should not take the fall because they were not given the proper tools and resources for their education. Burke argues that “students should not have to suffer because the system has failed them” (11). They should be able to feel comfortable in their education. Students need to be able to feel like they are making progress and show specifically where they were able to better themselves. Students need these standards in order to see where they are and where they need to be. Burke brings up how repeating a grade statistically does not actually help students make up the knowledge they lost from improper instruction or ineffective use of resources. What repeating a grade can do is lower a student’s self esteem and make them more likely to fall into a vicious circle that they can never escape of self doubt and lost ground (Burke 12).

Standards are meant to be a more specific form of grading students (Burke 12). They can be easily adjusted depending on changes that need to be made in personal and overall

goals or even between teaching styles. Specific standards counteract the lack of uniformity that comes from state or even national curricula. These specifications also produce more concrete expectations when it comes to the grading process.

Several parts of the grading process are left entirely up to the individual teacher. They have the option to decide how they weigh things like participation and attendance against the homework that they assign or the tests they distribute (Rosenthal 370). The process for all of these can be simplified through the use of standards. With these set standards in place teachers can focus more on what becomes of their teaching (Burke 13).

CONCLUSION

For the sake of conclusion, the main points of this paper can be brought together. Students need to receive feedback for the work that they are doing. They need to be able to see the progress they have made and how far they still need to go. Students need encouragement. They need to be able to recognize that they are putting time and effort into something that is or will be good for them. Students need to be able to recognize their strengths and weaknesses in order to better themselves in the future. Teachers need to guide their students through the maze that is the school system in order to appropriately teach them what they need to know and maintain the student's desire to learn. Attempting to offer this feedback has been "replete with trial and error" in US education (Durm 3). The A to F scale is not the best way to do this. Unintended consequences of this type of grading can include demotivation in students, ruined relationships between students and their teachers, and an aversion to learning in general. These consequences can be avoided if teachers and students make progress towards narrative feedback in place of the traditional letter grades.

However narrative feedback and mastery learning are not the only solutions. Educators and students need to remain open minded in seeking a better system to determine the knowledge gained by a student. Not every system will work for every student. As aforementioned by Durm, finding the best solution has been a struggle for quite some time, but

why stop now? If the search continues, the inefficient method of grading used today can be improved upon or even completely replaced to make way for a system that gives students the maximum benefit from their education.

Works Cited

- “10 Colleges Without Letter Grades.” *Best College Reviews*, 15 Dec. 2020, www.bestcollegereviews.org/colleges-without-letter-grades/.
- Albrecht, Eric, Rebecca Haapanen, Erin Hall, and Michelle Mantonya. *Improving Secondary School Students' Achievement Using Intrinsic Motivation*, Diss. St. Xavier U, 2009. Chicago, Illinois, St. Xavier, 2009.
- Aristotle, *Metaphysics*. *Tufts University Website*
<http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus:abo:tlg,0086,025:1>. Accessed on 24 March 2021.
- Burke, Kay. *How to Assess Authentic Learning*. Corwin Press, 2009.
- Durm, Mark E. “An A Is Not an A Is Not an A: A History of Grading.” *The Educational Forum*, vol. 53, 1993, pp. 1-4.
- Jung, Lee Ann. “Does This Count?” *Educational Leadership*, Sept. 2020, pp. 34–38.
- Kohn, Alfie. “From Degrading to De-Grading.” *High School Magazine*, Mar. 1999.
- Kohn, Alfie. “The Case Against GRADES.” *Educational Leadership*, Nov. 2011, pp. 28–33.
- Lanphear, Joel. “In Support of Grading Systems .” *Education for Health*, vol. 12, no. 1, 1999, pp. 79–83.
- Mastery Collaborative*, www.masterycollaborative.org/.
- Pintrich, Paul R. “A Conceptual Framework for Assessing Motivation and Self-Regulated Learning in College Students.” *Educational Psychology Review*, vol. 16, no. 4, 2004, pp. 385–407, doi:10.1007/s10648-004-0006-x. Accessed on 26 April 2021.
- Rosenthal, Gary T., et al. “The Grading Survey.” *College Student Journal*, pp. 369–375.
- Schinske, Jeffrey, and Kimberly Tanner. “Teaching More by Grading Less (or Differently).” *CBE Life Sciences Education*, American Society for Cell Biology, 2014, www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4041495/. Accessed 26 April 2021.

Schwartz, Barry. "Do Grades as Incentives Work." 9 Jan. 2011,

www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/practical-wisdom/201101/do-grades-incentives-work. Accessed 30 Oct. 2020.

Spencer, Kyle. "A New Kind of Classroom: No Grades, No Failing, No Hurry." *The*

New York Times, The New York Times, 11 Aug. 2017,

www.nytimes.com/2017/08/11/nyregion/mastery-based-learning-no-grades.html.

Accessed 26 April 2021.

Urduan, Tim. "Intrinsic Motivation, Extrinsic Rewards, and Divergent Views of Reality."

Rev. of Intrinsic and Extrinsic Motivation: The Search for Optimal Motivation and

Performance, edited by Carol Sansone and Judith Harackiewicz. *Educational*

Psychology Review, September 2003, pp. 311-325.