



Grades versus Comments: What Does the Research *Really* Tell Us?

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In articles and presentations on student feedback, educators are admonished today to use *No grades, comments only!* Grades, they are told, make students complacent and unmotivated. Comments, however, are said to improve motivation and enhance achievement.

To support this contention, writers and consultants typically cite a study conducted by Ruth Butler from Hebrew University of Jerusalem in 1988. But it seems clear that few have read the original study and understand its focus or the nuances of its findings. Instead, they cite other authors' summaries and conclusions, without careful attention to these crucial details.

Butler's (1988) study actually focused on differences in the effects of *ego-involving feedback* versus *task-involving feedback* on students' interest and motivation. The investigation involved

132 5th and 6th grade students randomly assigned to one of three feedback conditions. The first group received "ego-involving numerical grades" ranging from 40 to 99 that were based on students' normative performance on academic tasks. So instead of being determined by what students learned, the grades were based on students' relative standing among classmates and designed "to follow a normal distribution" (p. 4).

The second group received "task-involving individual comments" related to students' performance on the learning task, and a third group received both. Results showed that students' interest and motivation were generally higher after "task-involving comments" than after "ego-involving grades" alone or grades with comments.

Results in this study were not entirely consistent, however, and revealed what researchers label an "interaction" effect. Specifically, the effects were true *only* for low-achieving students, that is, students ranked in the bottom 25 percent of their class and received low grades. High-achieving students ranked in the top 25 percent of their class who received relatively high grades maintained their high interest and motivation.

In other words, the influence of "ego-involving grades" on interest and motivation varied depending on the grade students received. The 5th and 6th grade students who got high grades continued to have high interest and motivation. Those who got low grades based on their relative standing among classmates experienced diminished interest and motivation. Whether this is true for younger elementary students, for older secondary students, or for the 50 percent of 5th and 6th grade students who ranked in the middle of their class was not considered in the study.

What does this tell us?

Given the context, these results make intuitive sense. "Ego-involving grades" are personal. They are about the student—in this case, about each student's ranking compared with classmates'—not about the learning task. "Task-involving comments," however, provide students with information about their performance on the learning task. They are "related specifically to the performance of the individual child" (p. 4) and offer direction for improvement.

In essence, Butler's (1988) investigation showed that the effects of feedback offered to low achieving 5th and 6th grade students depend more on its substance than on its form or structure. If the study had considered criterion-referenced, "task-involving grades" based on learning goals, or "ego-involving comments" such as "You need to work harder," or "This is one of the poorest papers in the class," the effects on the interest and motivation of these low-achieving students might have been quite different. The critical implication of the study is this: Before making sweeping recommendations like *No grades; comments only!* we must *always* consider both the nature of the grades *and* the nature of the comments.

Grades

Although grades certainly have their limitations, they are not inherently good or bad. Grades are simply labels identifying different levels or categories of student performance. When based on clearly articulated learning criteria, grades can provide valuable feedback by describing in shorthand, abbreviated fashion how well students performed.

To serve this important feedback purpose, however, we must ensure that students and their parents understand that grades do not reflect *who* you are as a learner, but *where* you are in your learning journey—and *where is always temporary*. In Butler's terms, grades must be *task-involving* rather than *ego-involving*. Knowing where you are is essential to improvement. Informed judgments from teachers about the quality of students' performance can also help students become more thoughtful judges of their own work.

But alone, even accurate, task-involving grades don't lead to improved student learning. Students get no direction for improvement from a letter, number, word, phrase, or symbol attached to evidence of their learning. *Only* when grades are paired with individualized comments that offer guidance and direction for improvement do they enhance achievement and foster learning progress.

Comments

According to early research by Benjamin Bloom and his colleagues (Bloom, Madaus, & Hastings, 1981), the most effective comments have four essential elements. First, *they begin with the positive*. Comments should first point out what students did well and recognize their accomplishments. Second, *they identify the specific aspects of students' performance that need to be improved*. Students need to know precisely where to focus their improvement efforts. Third, *they offer specific guidance and direction for making improvements*. Along with knowing what to improve, students need help in discerning how. They need to know what steps to take in order to make their product, performance, or demonstration better and more in line with established learning criteria. Finally, *comments should express confidence in the student's ability to learn excellently and achieve at the highest level*. Students need to know their teachers believe in them, are on their side, see value in their work, and are confident they can achieve the specified learning goals.

Conclusion

Like many issues in education, the truth regarding these different forms of student feedback is not as clear-cut as some would have us believe. The research evidence on this issue is far more complicated and more highly nuanced than most writers and consultants acknowledge. By considering the complexities identified in this research, educators can develop feedback policies and practices that are more effective and much more likely to benefit students.

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References

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