Is Standards Based Grading an Answer to Student Motivation?

[Student Name Redacted]

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As teachers, we are always looking to find ways to motivate our students to learn. Not just to learn so they can get a good grade, but to learn for learning’s sake, to understand new content and to grow in knowledge. The question I will attempt to answer is, “What impact will implementing standards-based grading have on my 8th graders’ motivation to meet assigned learning targets in science?” Throughout this review I will analyze grading and communication, teacher attitudes, what grades should mean and student motivation in an attempt to find information about my question and to guide me to an answer.

Review of the Literature

Grading and Communication

Raths, Wojtaszek-Healy and Della-Piana (1987), through on-going research, stumbled upon a truth that remains today. That truth is: when giving out grades, most problems stem from a miscommunication between teacher and student. Now whether that miscommunication is from a lack of clear expectations or a feeling that the student views their work as competent and the teacher does not, there still lies a muddy middle ground that needs to be cleared up (Raths et al., 1987, p. 133). Raths et al. (1987) found through further research that many students do better when they know the clear expectations of the teacher, especially when exemplar work is offered for them to view. In more recent research done by Wright (2013), she finds that students who receive clear feedback from teachers on why they obtained a poor grade are less inclined to seek further communication with the teacher about it. This confirms the importance of extensive feedback as a tool for communicating with students. Cox (2011) also found that teachers saw better results the clearer they made their expectations. Some, like Wilcox (2011), think the message to parents and students from teachers using current grading practices shows that “compliance is the priority, and grades have little to do with learning” (p. 7). When investigating Standards Based Grading (SBG), “Parents have noted that standards-based grading is similar to workplace evaluations” (Shippy, Washer, & Perrin, 2013, p. 16)
which can make communication of grades clearer to families because they are related in a way that many working adults can understand.

**Teacher Attitudes in Adopting Grading Policies**

Change is hard, even when it is for the better. In teaching, maybe more so than any other field, there always seems to be the next best thing. How do we know that standards based grading is actually an improvement? Well in truth, we do not, but there is evidence and data that shows it does move us in the right direction. There are extremes such as Kohn (2011) who feels that, “the absence of grades is a necessary condition for promoting deep thinking and a desire to engage in it” (p. 31) and many more moderate researchers who feel, like Scriffiny (2008) and Noschese (2011), that SBG makes meaningful assignments and should replace the point based system. Scriffiny (2008) also points out that teachers have a hard time explaining the differences between an A, B, C, D, or F in their current grading practices. Cox (2011) found a divide amongst teachers as they were asked to implement new grading and assessment policies. Some of the policies were more accepted than others, such as common assessments. But when asked to make all F’s count as 50%, there was some push-back.

Teacher attitudes and beliefs are hard to change, especially if they have been teaching and doing things the same for a long time. Administrative support can make these changes a smoother process. Cox (2011) wrote of the school he was researching in that, “the superintendent has urged all teachers to have the discussion, to talk about grades, grading, and the impact on students” (p. 13), having that kind of support is needed when making the huge change to standards based grading. After making the shift, Scriffiny (2008) realized that he understood in more depth where each student was at with their learning and was able to support his students better through their journey to meet the standards.

**What Should Grades Mean, or Accomplish?**

That is the question teachers are constantly trying to answer. What weight should we put on grades and what do they really say about our students? Some researchers have found that teachers can
meet this challenge by using SBG. In the study completed by Tierney, Simon, and Charland (2011), they found that most of the participants (teachers) claimed their “grades indicated the degree to which students had achieved the learning expectations” and that the majority of them did not include such things as participation or students’ attitudes or even group work, which they felt did not truly represent a student’s achievement, into the grade they assigned. This once again shows that what grades should mean or accomplish is an honest representation of the students’ knowledge. Noschese (2011) simplifies it nicely when he states, “students are evaluated based on whether they understand the standards” (p. 10).

In standards-based grading, Clymer and Wiliam (2007) believe that students should have multiple attempts to show mastery of a standard, that learning should not be a one-shot deal (p. 3). They state that offering the correct type of feedback can support the student and help give them direction in their learning. It has also been shown that SBG can clearly state to students what they need to know and do to be successful by letting students know how they are progressing by showing them evidence (or lack of) learning in both their strong and weak areas (Noschese, 2011). In standards-based learning “the teacher commented on individual students’ work to coach the students to higher achievement. Students were encouraged to act on the feedback by providing additional evidence of mastery or by revising their work to improve” (Clymer & Wiliam, 2007, p. 4). Standards-based mastery demonstrates the potential to fulfill a teacher’s need to know where a student is with their learning.

**Student Motivation to Improve**

In the constant struggle to engage students and find ways to connect with them we look to creative minds who have explored strategies and researched young minds to find answers. Saeed and Zyngier (2012) stated, “To be motivated means to be moved to do something….In the classroom setting, student motivation refers to the degree to which a student puts effort into and focus on learning in order to achieve successful outcomes” (p. 253). Researchers question whether the current grading
policies teachers use do not create this motivation we seek. In fact, Kohn (2011) makes a strong statement when he says, “every study that has investigated the impact of grades on intrinsic motivation has found a negative effect” (p. 29). With general grading practices Wilcox (2011) claims, “students very quickly come to understand that “learning” is about completing the task while avoiding making too many mistakes” (p.5); this is not how we want students to view education. With SBG, the extensive feedback to students on how to improve leads to, “dynamic, interactive and ongoing” learning in which students want to read the feedback because they understand the “conversation is not over with the assessment” (Wilcox, 2011, p. 10). When students know they have the opportunity to go back and address standards that they did not meet the first time, they have the opportunity to see the knowledge that they gain in the process. Marzano and Heflebower (2011) claim that by seeing the gain students can be intrinsically motivated. In Clymer and Wiliam’s (2007) research in working with 8th graders, they found that most of them felt the new grading system helped them achieve better learning and even more exciting is that many students shifted from their goal being to get the highest grade to their goal being to understand the content. Scriffiny (2008) also found that students expressed increased satisfaction in having more control over their grades (by having the opportunity to re-do assessments or make revisions to work done to show their learning). This is a positive step towards student motivation; to care about their learning.

**Analysis**

This literature review has looked at some contrasting views on grading. One researcher feels we should get rid of grades all-together (Kohn, 2011), while the majority of the others feel that a switch to standards-based grading would be beneficial (Marzano & Heflebower, 2011; Noschese, 2011; Scriffiny, 2008; Wilcox, 2011). The research is pointing to a few important factors for standards-based grading. Teachers need to clearly communicate their expectations to students as Raths et al. (1987) point out and is redefined through the research of Cox (2011) as he discusses with teachers how they feel standards-based grading is most effective. A change over time is seen in the
study completed by Raths et al. (1987) as they found very few teachers would allow students the
opportunity to rewrite papers but when we look at the policies being implemented by the teachers in
Cox’s (2011) study, that is one policy that is widely accepted by all the teachers. The importance of
communication is clear, so are the advantages for the students when we allow for such things as re-
takes/re-dos and grading according to standards instead of traditional grading methods. There is the
caveat with SBG; the standards have to be clear, so thought and planning needs to go into
implementing them.

According to survey results from Wentzel (1997) on student motivation; the students were
more motivated when they knew the teacher cared about teaching and made class interesting as well as
taking the time to make sure the students understood the content. Also noted was when teachers
provided constructive feedback, such as what happens in SBG. Student motivation has been clearly
shown to increase when teachers use constructive feedback along with standards-based grading
(Noschese, 2011; Wilcox, 2011). It has been shown that students understand what is expected from
them and know what they need to do to succeed. Teachers support the in-depth communication they
have with their students as they guide them in meeting the standards, as well as being able to gauge
their instruction from these conversations.

Conclusions

In conclusion, in order to create motivation in students, standards-based grading, when
implemented correctly, has the potential to do so. In order for implementation to be successful, there
has to be teacher buy-in and support. In order to accomplish this, there needs to be scheduled
opportunities to learn about the systems being implemented and how they will benefit the students.
Standards-based grading puts success in reach and with our support and thoughtfully constructed
feedback we can help our students meet their academic goals and put the focus back on learning and
not on just a grade. Shippy et al. (2013) write that, “Standards-based grading allows students to be
graded solely on mastery of course content, which can lead to student motivation and a meaningful
learning relationship” (p. 14). This has been supported by much of the research noted throughout this literature review. It only makes sense to use SBG when we are already creating our curriculum around standards. The research shows that both teachers and students stand to gain from using this type of grading instead of current practices, and even though the change will take time and there will be bumps along the way, student learning, and ultimately student motivation is the reward.
References


