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## The Role of Grades in Motivating Students to Learn

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### Abstract

Traditionally, it is considered that grades have a significant motivational influence on students; that is why researches in the field have centered mainly on refining grading instruments and less on discovering alternatives to those. However, in the last years, more and more researches have denied the effectiveness of grades in motivating students to learn; these researches constitute the background of our current study.

This study analyzes the possible correlation between the grades students receive and their motivation to learn. At the same time, we attempt to verify whether there is a significant correlation between grades and the internal, respectively external motivation of students.

For this purpose we have used a questionnaire to analyze teachers' perception towards the effectiveness of grades in motivating students; 130 teachers from undergraduate education institutions were questioned and the results have been discussed as part of two focus-groups organized on two levels: primary education and secondary education.

A first data analysis reveals a significant relation between grades and short term learning, as well as between grades and external motivation; on the other hand an extremely interesting correlation is observed between grades and external motivation, understood as "duty towards parents".

Beyond ascertaining the facts regarding the efficiency of grade use in motivating students, we will use the results of the research to suggest alternative ways to motivate students.

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### Grades and Motivation

For Michel Foucault, school is only a component of the area of disciplinary power, and assessment is only one of its instruments. Thus, if we talk about grades and grading, we should refer to their ability to create conformity. The French thinker highlights the fact that examination is defined as "normative", as "surveillance that allows definition, classification and punishment" (see Michel Foucault, p. 266).

Michel Foucault demonstrates that the power of King, which was strengthened and re-legitimized through lavish ceremony by placing himself in broad daylight, was replaced by disciplinary power, diffuse, tiny taking care to hide

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and to shed light on the subject upon which is manifested. Thus, the subject is (only) changed into the object of power.

Analysing the changes in school assessment reveals a striking analogy with the process described above: examination as a means of highlighting the teacher's power has been increasingly replaced with devices and dissipation mechanisms of assessment, all united under the name *rhythmic grading*.

The process of replacement continues, because today we are talking (and use) more and more complementary or alternative methods of assessment (*softer*, less visible in their concrete manifestation). In other words, the efficiency of disciplinary power depends on the "banality", the insignificance of its elements, both socially and at school. It follows that grades and grading are part of the wider flux of the action of the disciplinary power, even if it leaves the impression of technical mechanisms for recording the academic achievement of students.

In this context, we intend to discuss the relationship between grades and student motivation for learning, among others, because the type and level of motivation of students depend significantly on the social-community environment, outside school, "the way in which media present illiterate or semi-illiterate persons who have acquired fame, political power and financial resources steadily erodes learning motivation for students in Romania. This is compounded by the dramatic fall in social prestige associated with the teaching staff, their economic status is in itself de-motivating."(see Stefan Popenici, p. 25)

Besides the significant correlation between external environment and motivation for learning, one should reveal the correlation (at least) equally significant for involvement in the educational scenario of teachers and the motivation for learning of students.

By targeting students interests, disciplinary power becomes efficient in motivating students to learn, hence the assumption that grades shall be recorded more often in this scenario, either as a motivating/ demotivating factor or as a measure of power efficiency of the disciplinary action.

If the relationship between motivation for learning and disciplinary power seems **incredibly** direct, we might add here two arguments: one refers to the force of attraction of models that media *impose* on students and the other to bring to the forefront of public interest (thus creating enormous pressure on school) a group of subjects and withdrawal in the background of another group of subjects (in communist Romania, for example, interest was focused on technical subjects, while subjects in the Humanities were highly ideological and placed in the background; in fact, more than 90% of Romanian high schools had a technical-vocational profile).

In this context, grades seem rather designed to record power efficiency of disciplinary power: "Grades dilute the pleasure that a student experiences on successfully completing the task. They encourage cheating and strain the relationship between teacher and student. They reduce a student's sense of control over his own fate and can induce a blind conformity to others' wishes - sometimes to the point that students are alienated from their own preferences don't even know who they are."(see Alfie Kohn, p. 204)

More and more deeply, disciplinary power, by creating compliance mechanisms and preferences, dictate the desirable preferences of individuals.

## 1. Why do your students learn?

Students learn *for grades* (26% of subjects) and because they *must* (35%); they also learn because they come to school (6%); from our point of view, these three categories of responses (67%) can be analyzed together because all three show significant uncertainties of students in relation to learning goals. This crisis of purpose involves teachers to call on external motivation, i.e. call to students duty to learn.

In the conception of Charles Howell, this duty may be understood as a liability to their own future, as a duty to parents or duty to the community. On their duty to their own future, Charles Howell wrote: "We are reluctant to hold children responsible in this way. Often they cannot foresee or appreciate the long-term effects of their actions. Eight-year-old Jason does not choose a lifetime of dental work in exchange for the few minutes extra play he gains each night by not brushing his teeth. He does not choose not to be an accountant or engineer in order to avoid doing arithmetic" (see Ch. Howell).

What is more, in a time dedicated to consumerism, references to long-term goals (we dare to use a word that postmodernists defy – ideal) is not part of the arsenal of education, whether formal or informal (although a phrase commonly used is *life long learning*).

Duty to community is linked to a robust conception about civism (good citizenship), one that requires active involvement in city affairs. Yet, may children be required such an understanding of citizenship while adults today prefer to populate the public space with their own private concerns? In this regard, Zygmunt Bauman wrote: "For

the individual, public space is much more than a giant screen on which private worries are projected without ceasing to be private or acquiring new collective qualities in the course of magnification: public space is where public confession of private secrets and intimacies is made” (see Z. Bauman, p. 39-40).

It remains to be discussed the duty to parents, an argument that would justify why teachers call this type of duty in an attempt to motivate students to learn: “... the argument from parental responsibility makes the best fit with those practices that most urgently require justification, and thus renders the responsibility more plausible than the two alternative sources of duty that we have considered” (see Charles Howell).

At the same time, it is worth being noted the positivity of an attitude that is translated into a better use of time, even if students did not choose to be there and at that time (classroom time). In other words, if they are obliged to attend school, they would rather learn than show disagreement by playing truant or causing conflicts. One should note the pleasure that is associated with learning in primary education (28% of teachers – all our subjects who teach at this level – believe that students learn because they enjoy it, i.e. out of pure curiosity).

## 2. Consequences of grading on students

Significantly, *duty to parents* (46% of the teachers think that students are motivated to learn because they feel they owe it to their parents) is converted into constant learning (that is maintained by means of rhythmic grading, which engages learning and external motivation). External motivation explains the presence of a significant percentage of students who are indifferent to grades (28% of teachers think that grades leave their students indifferent). Indifference of students in relation to grades has (at least) two reasons:

1. students are not in a final year, as such they believe that grades do not significantly affect their daily life (relations with parents and teachers, etc.); promotion to upper cycles (high school and university) is carried out using a methodology which includes grades obtained during the years of study, but a significant number of students ignore this;

2. students only see school as a time spent because you need to go there or as a condition for parents to receive benefits from the state or the parents should leave them alone and give them pocket money, or as a way to leave home because their future plans do not include education as a sine qua non condition of their success. In this regard, a deeper analysis should be carried out regarding the relationship between attitudes and values that students come to school (taken from the media) and the means through which schools send their own attitudes and values.

It should be noted a similar percentage of those who learn more (28% of teachers think that grades make students learn more). This category includes, in an overwhelming proportion, students from primary school, where, apparently, curiosity prevails, the pleasure as a source of learning (internal motivation).

Such a situation requires, we believe, further investigation in order to identify when the pleasure for learning is replaced by *duty to parents* or “schooly” calculations about promotion, higher grades for a leading position in the hierarchy and so on. (external motivation).

## 3. What motivates students to learn?

Students are motivated to learn by *their duty to parents* (as we mentioned above, 46% of teachers think that their students are motivated by the *duty to parents*). How can one explain such a percentage, especially that in a different study (on praise and their effects), the main idea was that parents do not praise their children for their assistance in the family, because they do not ask for their help and because they do not expect it, under such a mentality as: *I should create all the necessary conditions that they do not struggle as I did*.

Then? Why is *duty to parents* the most powerful motivating factor that teachers use for student learning? One explanation may be that teachers have not yet realized operationally the accelerated process of dissolution of the traditional Romanian family pattern, wrongly believing that children can be motivated by their call to duty to parents. In this context, it is surprising the “amnesia” teachers have since they do not correlate sufficiently parental disinterest for the development of their children in school (particularly in secondary and high school) with the call to a duty that, most times, parents reduce it to tiresome and summarizing questions about what happened at school.

Parents “forget” about their duty in relation to their own children and go to school only in extreme situations: children’s involvement in major conflicts, failing exams, etc. “Guilty” as it is, the family buys peace by rewards: “The moment when the informed “child-king” is a decision maker and prescriber, consumption appears as a means to “buy peace” in the family, a way of making one overlook your absences, as well as a child’s right based on the pursuit of happiness, pleasure, individuality. “(see Gilles Liovetski, p. 103)

#### 4. Are students motivated by grades so that they learn?

Pure and hard polarization – *yes* (60% of teachers) *and no* (38% of teachers). Obviously, we have accumulated such answers as: *no and often no* on the one hand, and on the other hand, *sometimes yes* and *yes*, other answers were insignificant. Affirmative answers are twice as many, which reinforces and justifies the answers to *their duty to parents* as a motivating factor.

Meanwhile, duty to parents allows interpretations such as: I learn because I do not want to fail (because in these cases I would be punished by my parents or I would not be given pocket money or I would not be bought the latest generation smart phones, etc.), I learn in order to graduate compulsory education (at the moment, ten years) as soon as possible because I have future plans that do not include school etc.

Interpretation is not without interest in view of the large number of students with parents working abroad or young people willing to practise any kind of work at home or abroad for a certain amount of money. As we mentioned in the paragraph above, parents working abroad, and thus neglecting their children, may redeem their “guilt” with money, getting it wrong a second time: without being near their children when they need them, they create the so-called free addictive consumption, so it is useless. In addition, young people without financial resources live between the illusion they can have everything and the anger that they do not have all the financial resources to access what they want: “... Television is the medium that exposes the most vulnerable to the violence of consumerist images of happiness.” (see Gilles Lipovetski, p. 170)

Living in a hedonism often confused with consumerism, ethical arguments that refer to happy expectations, extending the years of education for significantly higher wages in the future disappear before the prospect of having a sum of money immediately, a sum which, when reported to the needs of young people, seems significant.

A collateral phenomenon having insignificant proportions which was recorded in high school, but which is important in higher education, is generated by the desire to have a job while studying to get their own money. This phenomenon is less connected with labour market and the fact that employers request prior experience, but it is rather related to a misunderstanding of this dependence and conditionality imposed on by parents when they offer money (parents also demand accountability for the money).

We do not exclude, of course, those who work because nobody can take care of them.

#### 5. Does sanctioning a student by grade have any effect?

In this paragraph, we refer only to the fact that the grade is perceived (in the manner of popbehaviorism) as a punishment and not as a motivating factor (be it extrinsic). Moreover, grades cause a lot of consequences that influence each other: children who learn and achieve high grades demand dedication and focus of teachers, and this attention is itself a motivating factor, which causes extra motivation for performing children, on the one hand, and on the other hand, a lack of motivation for children with poorer performance.

In addition, postmodernism placed teachers among the *marginal* (among others) as a consequence of discouraging long-term projects and profound involvement of the human being. Teacher marginalization limited the register for (possible) intervention on his part, including motivation: “From a post-modern perspective, if the teacher is “marginal” on the track of student progress, his expectations cannot influence or “strengthen” significantly self-esteem of his/ her level of aspiration. As far as the level of ambition is concerned, since it requires long-term projects, focusing on the final result, it loses its significance and poignancy in post-modern student life; therefore, the teacher must make use of the present time, the only time he can count on and weigh over students ...” (see Emil Stan, p. 148)

In this context, grades have short term effects (47% of teachers, causing what is called *learning to straighten the situation*, i.e. to avoid potential failure to pass), but by being rhythmical, they may have effects on medium and long term (35% of teachers perceive the relationship between learning and grades in this way). It remains to consider whether such a justification as *I prefer my child to learn for fear rather than not to learn at all* is acceptable and what would be alternatives.

Can such a motivation support learning that should go beyond formalities in order to comply with the imperatives and practice of *life long learning*? Or, some may think, despite consumerism (which is temperate because of the current crisis), life and career are rather under the sign of effort and duty, so learning in anxiety and insecurity would be the type of training necessary for the world today: “We are all in permanent probation and the sword of unemployment is always above our heads. Each employee is suspected by his boss that he is not actually

necessary for the survival of the company and must struggle daily not to stand out. Every day, he brings evidence for his utility, swallows extra time and shines through good proposals. Fear is a survival routine.” (see Jakob Schrenk, p. 170)

Clearly, such a conception only considers school a place for training future adults for the labour market, which, in our view, is totally unacceptable, and the invocation of John Dewey in support of this idea would only distort the American thinker’s ideas about the relationship between school (as an area of training future citizens) and social life.

## 6. Do students see any connection between school and their future?

The answers to this question reveal one thing: teachers in primary schools declare, predictably, they do “not know” (15% of teachers, a significant percentage of those who teach in primary schools), which is another way to say that children’s answers to questions such as “Why do you want to be when you grow up” are not related to the real course of life, even if there is a curriculum for career counselling even at primary level.

The situation is perpetuated by the way selection of high school students is done: access to a school with a particular profile is done in order of the averages obtained during secondary school, completely ignoring student interests and skills for future careers. In this context, we recall that the number of school counsellors in Romanian schools is totally insignificant, and future options belong mostly to parents, ignorant themselves regarding their children’s interests and skills, labour market trends on medium and long term (involvement of parents often justifies the phrase *the road to hell is paved with good intentions*): “The important thing is **what** makes young people choose models and countermodels. First, among social factors, is **family** closely followed by **friends** and **colleagues**. Factors related to **school**, namely **teachers** and **school counsellors** occupy the last positions on students options, which is a major concern in our opinion, because it is clear that school does not fulfil its function properly, that of orienting students towards values and desirable models - a function which was considered and executed anyway.” (see Stefan Popenici, p. 3)

Often, the relationship between school and children’s future depends on the models they have, and models, as shown by a study from the Institute of Education Sciences, come significantly from media stars, who do not shine through their level of education: “The vast majority of students surveyed consider that either **school does not have a significant role in the success of the selected model** or simply **they cannot assess the impact of school on that model**” (see Stefan Popenici, p. 4).

It follows that the influence of teachers is abolished in a significant degree by the influence of parents and models promoted by the media; on the other hand, teachers relate to students future options in terms of the subject you teach and its importance for national exams that students must pass (admission to high school, passing the baccalaureate). In other words, they confuse short-term interest of students (passing an examination, for reasons of *duty to parents* and its many implications that we discussed above) with medium and long term interest, regarding a possible career according to the results one got in school.

In fact, the data in our survey do not ignore these comments, since a significant percentage (22% of teachers) believe that students see no connection between school and their future and believe that few students (19% of teachers) see this link between school and their future evolution.

## Conclusions

Given the problem, we believe that some recommendations are required for the Romanian educational system:

- reducing the distance between informal and formal education by taking some ways of organizing learning and tools used mainly in informal education (grouping students into teams according to affinities and interests, increasing integration of learning activities undertaken in the classroom with those conducted outside the classroom, in the space of formal classroom learning activities that build solid skills that students acquired in informal settings, use of computers, the internet, social networking, etc.)

- initial and continuing training of teachers should focus more on the differences (and implications of these differences) between internal motivation and external motivation, and the correlation of these types of motivation with the assessment. In this regard, Alfie Kohn wrote: “The carrot-and-stick approach is generally unsuccessful; grades in particular undermine intrinsic motivation and learning, which only serves to increase our reliance on them. The significance of these effects is underscored by the fact that, in practice, grades are routinely used not merely to evaluate but note also to motivate. In fact, they are powerful demotivators regardless of the reason given for their use.” (see Alfie Kohn, p. 201)

- if “assessment is the most powerful political tool in evaluation” (Bradford), then one should rethink the process for selecting students for admission to school, on the one hand, and on the other hand, examination for the baccalaureate and its aims. Moreover, it is required a deep awareness of political influence in the school area, not so much at the level of the explicit public policy, but rather, at the level of the implicit, that of obtaining compliance, through models, values and attitudes promoted especially by the media.

- guiding students towards professional routes according to their needs and interests on the one hand, and on the other hand, according to labour market trends at national and European level. In this regard, it is necessary to legalize the presence of vocational counselling in schools and their involvement in career guidance to students.

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