

Standards-Based Grading and Student Motivation

Most classroom teachers value student motivation highly. They want students to exert effort, to try hard. They want them meaningfully engaged in the pursuit of knowledge and understanding. It is quite reasonable, then, for teachers to be concerned about how grading will affect student motivation. More specifically, how does standards-based grading affect motivation?

There is a solid literature that has led to well-supported principles of effective motivation related to assessment and grading (Brookhart, 2004; McMillan, 2007). For most students, grades motivate, though depending on whether it is intrinsically or extrinsically oriented, the nature and effect of the motivation can be quite different. If grades are viewed as extrinsic rewards for successful performance, students are motivated to obtain the rewards, not by improving their knowledge, understanding, or skill. Extrinsic rewards are akin to *performance goals*. Students are motivated to perform well, pass, get a high grade, avoid punishment, or score higher than other students. This kind of reward, like achieving a “proficient” rating on a standards-based test, focuses more on the outcome itself and much less on how students change and improve their knowledge. Performance goals can be further delineated as either *approach* or *avoidance*. With an approach orientation, students strive for something positive, whereas in an avoidance orientation, students avoid negative events or outcomes. Both of these orientations involve achievement for what it will obtain for them, extrinsic to inner development and learning. In Chapter 2, Tom Guskey argues convincingly about the negative effects of using grades as extrinsic motivators.

A *mastery- or learning goal-oriented* student is motivated by a desire to improve knowledge to have deeper understandings; getting the reward or avoiding punishment is secondary (Ames, 1992). As a result, learning and motivation are more intrinsic. Students with this orientation see the value in what is being learned, prefer more challenging tasks, display independent learning, stay engaged longer, have more positive attitudes about learning, become more success-oriented rather than failure-avoiding, and understand the connection between their effort and successful performance (Dweck & Leggett,

1988). The advantages of having a more mastery goal orientation are indeed substantial! Despite this research, many grading practices promote more of a performance orientation.

Standards-based grading can lead to more of a mastery goal orientation with intrinsic motivation. This is because what students learn is focused on the criteria that indicate success. When standards are fully explicated for students and evaluative criteria are used to indicate success, there is more internalization of what is being learned. Students can see the direct link between the criteria and their performance. Learning for greater understanding becomes more important than what rewards follow from successful achievement.

Self-efficacy is another important component of motivation that is positively enhanced with standards-based grading. Self-efficacy refers to the extent to which students believe they are capable of successful performance on specific tasks. Strong self-efficacy leads to greater intrinsic motivation because students think they can achieve and do well (Pintrich & Schunk, 1996). Self-efficacy is strengthened with standards-based grading because of the association established between what they have done and how that performance relates to standards. This encourages an explanation for success that is internal and controllable. Self-efficacy is also strengthened when separate grades are given for academic enablers, such as effort and participation, and achievement. This is because it helps students understand the connection between effort and performance and that trying to learn results in better performance. As students realize that their understanding increased because of their efforts, they will make internal attributions to both effort and their own ability. As a result, students are more likely to be motivated and engaged.