

The Effects of Grades on the Motivation and Academic Performance of Moroccan High School Students

Mr. Lhoussine Qasserras¹, Ms. Abdelkaoui Asmae²,
Mr. Mohammed Qasserras³, Mrs. Khadija Anasse⁴

^{1,2,3,4}Ibn Tofail University, Kenitra

Abstract

The grading system is a well-established practice in education across the globe. Grades play a key role in today's education paradigm and are often identified as the potent mode of learner's performance assessment. Indeed, this a priori creates a bubble within the education system confining innovation and divergent thinking in the classroom as well as affecting students' social and psychological dimensions. The grading practice dislocates students from their real learning context, alienating the learning outcomes while pushing learners to live in an illusion of excellence. This study attempted to unravel the impact of grades on Moroccan high school students' performance through the employment of a mixed-methods research design. The findings demonstrated that grades have an undesirable impact on students' motivation and sustained performance, with a potential risk affecting their psychological and social well-being.

Keywords: assessment, grades, innovative learning, high school learners, motivation, education quality

Introduction:

Grading practices have long been a controversial issue among educators and scholars. Though grades are embraced as an important principle of assessment and an inherent part of the education system, there is still some debate concerning the effectiveness of this practice (Chiekem, 2015). Assigning grades is probably the primary metric to evaluate students' performance and progress so that both students and teachers can recognize what skills need to be nurtured and strengthened.

Though grading is the most used tool for assessment worldwide, it has been criticized by different educators and scholars. A myriad of studies indicated that this assessment tool is subjective while putting students' learning performance at risk. The grading practice can shrink students' intrinsic motivation for learning while limiting their willingness to take risks and engage in challenging and creative tasks (Deci, Koestner, and Ryan, 1999).

In Morocco as in various countries across the world, the grading system is the main measurement tool for assessing academic achievement in secondary schools. The standard-based grading is perceived as a positive practice for shaping students' progress; yet this practice can have negative impact on learners' academic performance. Indeed, this study seeks to examine the different impacts that grades might have on high school students in Morocco.

Research Problem

Though it is described as controversial and misunderstood, the grading practice is still the determining factor of educational progress for students. Learners in this context are more oriented towards grade excellence rather than learning excellence, making sustained education goals cynical. The education system in this sense invests in creating a generation of students, or, say, ‘victims, stripped of the core apparatuses of meaningful learning, deemed to develop their critical, creative, ethical, and collaborative abilities. This explains the awkward question asked frequently by students: Is this going to be assessed? No doubt, the ultimate goal of education is not to achieve higher grades but higher morals, ethos and competencies, with the potential to transform students and their communities.

Purpose of the study

This study tends to look into Moroccan high school students’ perception of grading practice as well as exploring the psychological, educational, and social effects of grades on those students.

Research questions

1. In what ways do grades affect the academic performance of Moroccan high-school students?
2. How do grades impact the attitudes and beliefs of Moroccan high-school students towards educational success?

Review of the Literature

Assessment has been an inherent part of education for hundreds of years. However, as schools grew rapidly in size and number particularly in the 19th and 20th centuries, grades became a primary mode of communication among institutions (Tanner, 2014). The grading practices are employed to communicate student’s performance in a number of areas which may include both academic achievement and behavioral aspects (Allen, 2005). Indeed, the main goal of assessment is to guide both students and teachers to find out what needs to be nurtured and improved (Munzur, 2014).

a. Psychological effects

Studies showed that public grading systems can make students more competitive thus placing more value on performance than authentic learning. This can lead to a variety of mental issues for the students such as anxiety, stress, and low self- esteem. For example, Crocker (2022) found that giving students grades in front of their peers can have a negative impact on the relationship between students and their teachers. Grades are likely to cause tension and a lack of trust and respect between the student and teacher. Pulfrey, Buchs, and Butera (2011) confirmed that students who got public grades were more likely to feel anxiety, pressure, and less confident than those who got private grades. Also, public grades ushers a culture of competition among students, which can kill their creativity and collaborative skills. This adds more pressure on students as they become more interested in out performing their peers than in understanding the learning implications.

b. Effects of students’ motivation

When grades are given too much importance in the classroom, students prioritize their performance on tests rather than giving a good amount of focus to an in- depth understanding of the learning materials. This may minimise learners’ intrinsic motivation while boosting their extrinsic incentives, where students become motivated by external rewards (such as grades) rather than internal factors (such as curiosity or a desire for personal growth). For this reason, many teachers, practitioners, and researchers are exploring

alternative approaches to assessment and evaluation that prioritise student learning and growth, with the aim of keeping students more engaged with the learning materials and their future implications.

According to Kohn (1999), grades tend to reduce students' interest in the learning itself. Students, so to speak, focus mostly on what they are going to be tested on instead of working on areas that are deemed to transform their potential. Ryan and Deci (2000) argued that extrinsic rewards can shift the focus of students' motivation from intrinsic factors to external factors. The authors argued that intrinsic motivation is more beneficial for long-term engagement and achievement than extrinsic motivation, which comes from external sources, namely grades.

c. Effects on students' performance in the classroom

Grades are often seen as the most important way to measure learners' performance in the classroom. Though students who receive higher grades often feel more confident and more engaged; yet such practice is likely to weaken the quality of their achievement, particularly after receiving numerically lower grades (Kohn, 1999).

The grading practice on the other hand makes students develop the opportunist mindset, directing all their talents and energies not for real learning but for finding ways to get higher grades. Besides, Kafle (2020) confirmed that grading practice is a subjective standard and far-fetched to assess learners' performance in an objective manner. Thus, it is indispensable for teachers to consider the potential impact of grades on student performance, along with consistent efforts to explore alternative approaches to assessment and evaluation that can promote healthy and meaningful learning.

d. Social effects

The impact of grades is not limited to academic performance and motivation but also extends to students' social life. For example, students who receive lower grades may feel discouraged and embarrassed in front of their peers which may lower their self-esteem. Turner et al., (2007) further argued that academic stress, including concerns about grades, was positively correlated with increased social isolation and decreased participation in social activities among university students. However, Holohan (2016) reported that parents appreciated their kids' achievement at school much more than happiness or kindness. Consequently, many students perceive grades as a way to win their parents' love and respect. Higher grades for them are the perfect way to be considered as the pride of their families.

Methodology

This study has opted for a mixed-methods research design. First, it aims to find any relationships between grades and the Moroccan high school students' motivation and academic performance. The study also attempts to explore students' attitudes about the use of grades in Moroccan schools.

Research population

The number of participants in this study is 150 high school students from different classes and levels.

Data collection instrument

An online questionnaire was used to investigate high-school students' opinions and views about the use of grades, which was very beneficial in exploring the effects they have on students and on their motivation and academic performance. The questionnaire consisted of 10 multiple-choice questions and two open-ended questions for an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon.

A. Demographic characteristics of the respondents

Gender	Frequency	Percentage
Male	13	26
Female	37	74
Total	50	100
Age	Frequency	Percentage
15-17	30	60
17-19	19	38
Over 19	1	2
Total	50	100
Level	Frequency	Percentage
Common core	1	2
First year bac	10	20
Second year bac	39	78
Total	50	100

Table 1: Demographic Information of Participants

The questionnaire has questions about the gender, age, and level of study of the people who are filling it out. This was done to make sure that the questionnaire reached the intended population. The results are displayed in the table below:

Table 1 shows that 74% of the people who filled out the survey were women, while only 26% were men. In terms of age, 60% of the population is between 15 and 17, 30% is between 17 and 19, and the rest, or 2%, is above 19 years old. All the respondents are high school students; 78% of them are second-year baccalaureate students, 20% are first-year baccalaureate students, and the rest 2% study common core.

B. The psychological effects of grades on high school students

In this part, the respondents talk about how their grades affect their happiness, feelings and motivation to work.

1. Low grades

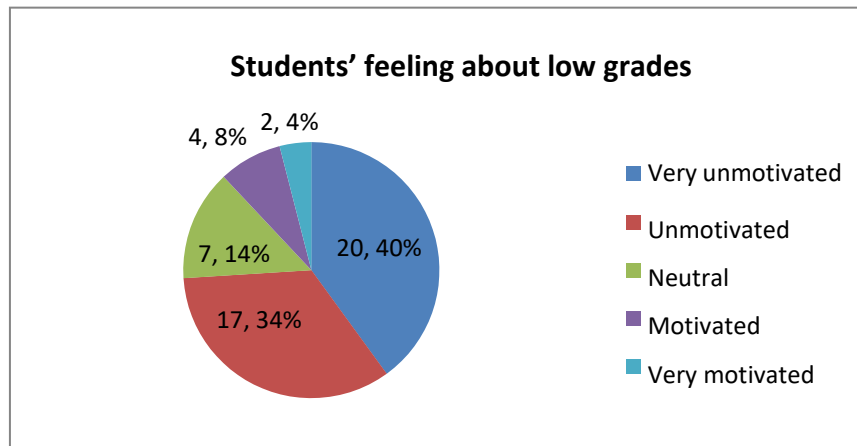


Table 2: The percentage of students who don't care about their grades based on their motivation

From the findings in *Figure 1* and *Table 2*, 40% of the respondents get very unmotivated to study after getting low grades. 34% of them feel unmotivated, while 14% are neutral, and low grades do not seem to be an issue for them. 8% of the participants feel motivated to study because of low grades, while the rest, 2%, feel very motivated to study and improve their grades.

2. High grades

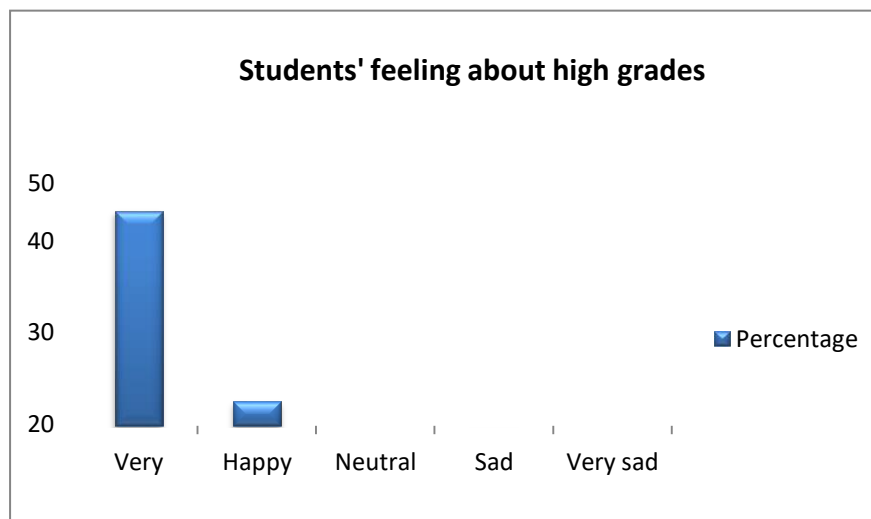


Figure 2: Students' feelings about high grades

Based on *Figure 2*, the majority of the targeted population, with a percentage of 88%, feels very happy after getting high grades. 10% of students feel happy about high grades, while only 2% are neutral. The feelings of sadness do not seem to be present when students get high grades.

C. The effects of grades on students' motivation

1. Outcome vs. learning

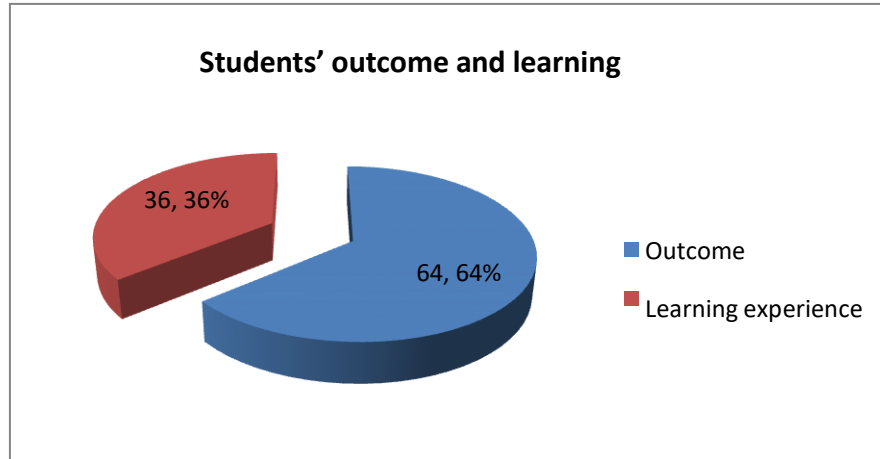


Figure 3: The focus of students while preparing for exams

Figure 1 shows that while preparing for exams, 64% of the participants focused more on getting good grades than on how they learned. The other 36% thought that learning was more important than getting good grades.

2. Participation in class

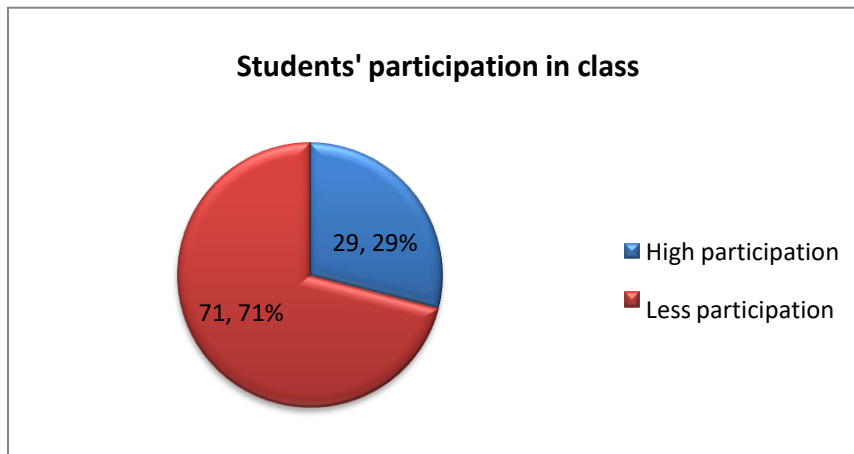


Figure 4: Students' participation in class after getting high grades

As shown in *Figure 4*, 71% of the participants start participating more in class after getting high grades, while 29% start participating less.

D. The social effects of grades on students

1. Family role

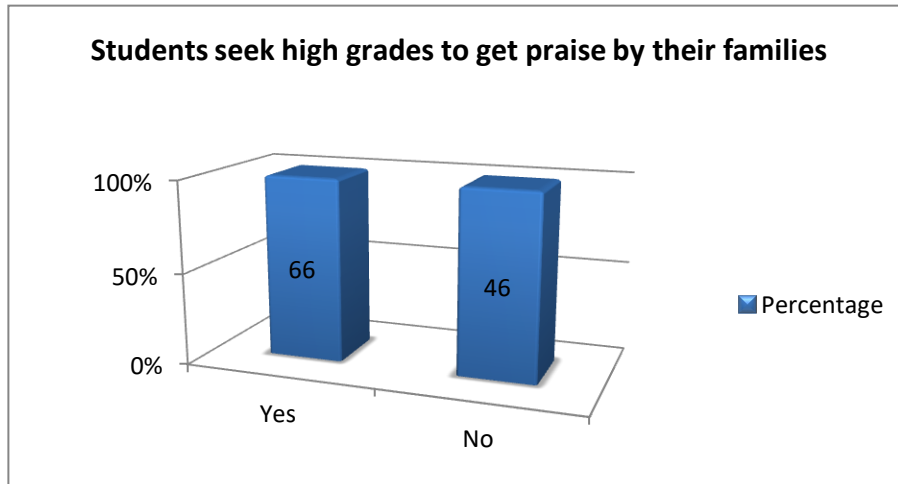


Figure 5: The role of families in students’ seeking high grades

This statistic demonstrates that 66% of the participants want their families to praise them, while 44% do not place a high priority on it.

3. Grades and students’ future

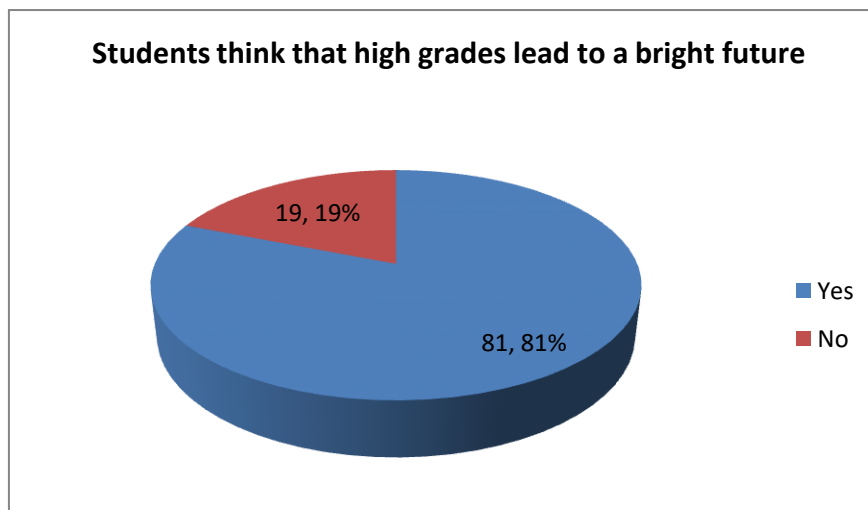


Figure 6: Students’ opinions about the role of grades in building their future

In *Figure 6*, we see that 80% of the population thinks that high grades guarantee a bright future, while 20% of them believe that they do not play such a big role.

4. Parents’ feelings about low grades

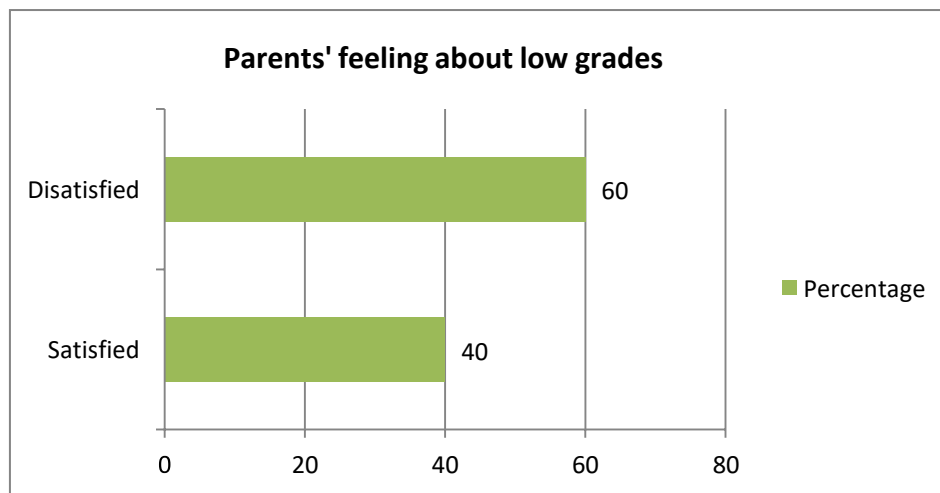


Figure 7: Parents’ feelings towards their children’s low grades

Figure 7 shows that 60% of the respondents expressed that their parents feel dissatisfied when their kids get low grades, while the other 40% do not relate to this issue.

Discussion

RQ 1: Do grades affect high school students and their academic performance?

This study does show that grades have an effect on students' academic and social well-being. The first two questions of the survey are mostly about how grades affect the academic performance and mental health of high school students. Indeed, when it comes to students’ motivation to work, the findings showed that 64% of participants focused on the outcome more than the learning experience while preparing for an exam. This shows how much more important grades are to students' happiness than how well they learn. Moreover, 74% of the respondents pointed out that they started participating more in class after getting high grades. This reveals that grades are an impact factor for students’ performance in class.

Those findings, simply put, mirror previous studies (Kohn, 1999; Butler, 1988) that indicate grades are influential factors in learners academic success, as learners often feel confident and more eager for more academic progress when they receive higher grades. High grades for most participants are associated with happiness and pride. This was confirmed by 98% of the respondents, who said that high grades make them feel happy. Thus, students’ motivation to study is merely driven by grade-related motives, justifying the notion that grades are an influential factor in a learner’s motivation to study.

The questionnaire showed that 66% of the participants sought high grades to get praise from their families, which implies that families put a great deal of pressure on high school students. Moreover, 60% of the people who answered said that their parents were unhappy with their low grades. This is because society sees high grades as what defines students’ intelligence. Moreover, 80% of the population agreed that high grades are strictly related to a bright future. This takes us back to the significant importance that is given

to grades.

High-school students believe that high grades are what bring success, which makes the ones that get low grades much worried about. Indeed, the findings for the second research question also echo the literature, as grades influence is not limited to academic performance but also to a student's social life (Turner et al., 2007; Holohan, 2016). Thus, grades, whether high or low, have an impact on the learner's psyche and their relationship with their families' abilities and potential.

RQ 2: What are high school students' attitudes towards the use of grades in Moroccan schools?

Concerning the question about students' attitudes towards the use of grades in Moroccan schools, the findings pointed out that many students wished grades were not used in school. They claimed that grades constantly "put pressure on their shoulders, and that they see themselves as 'numbers.'" Those numbers (grades), as reported, have massive control over their destiny and lives. Moreover, the findings revealed that students perceive grades as a source of judgement and critique that hinders their learning while causing them mental health damage, stress, and depression. Certainly, the findings for this question echo the reviewed literature, as grades have a negative effect on students (Turner et al., 2007; Holohan, 2016). In a nutshell, the findings pointed out that the use of grades in assessment can have a wide range of impacts on students' aspects, including academic, psychological, and social. As a result, we can claim the hypothesis, "The use of grades affects negatively the motivation and performance of Moroccan high-school students," is true.

Conclusion

This study tried to explore Moroccan high school students' perception of grading practices as well as the impact of this phenomenon on their academic, social and psychological aspects. The findings indicated that the use of grades in high school makes students more motivated to achieve higher grades than understanding the learning materials. Besides, linking up grades to prestigious schools or professional career access makes learners disoriented, unable to discover the implication of the learning and its goals. The findings also revealed that grades are perceived as a way to satisfy parents and make them happy. Higher achievers are often the pride of their families.

However, the majority of the respondents expressed that grades affect them negatively. Consequently, educators and scholars need to find alternative ways to assess students in schooling, beyond the standards-based grading.

This study displayed that grades have several negative effects on Moroccan high-school students. Indeed, this study is not to reject the grading practice, but it is more a call for educators and practitioners to be innovative by finding different ways to assess their students' achievement, with the hope to develop a quality education that respects different student's intelligence. Thus there is an urgent need to go beyond assessing cognitive competencies by standing on other non-cognitive dimensions which are deemed to transform students' agency. This can be achieved particularly via adopting non-formal education spirituals such as, gamification, group drawings, reading groups, debating, project-based learning, team building activities and more, with the potential to meet different learning styles while exposing learners to a variety

of forms of intelligence. Also, incorporating self-assessment is beneficial, for it allows students to develop problem solving rituals with the potential to promote innovation and creative learning.

In short, the findings of the current study are useful for reimagining the education philosophy. Rethinking the grading paradigm by linking up assessment to innovative methods is a necessity today to create a healthy generation of learners able to recognize the future implications of the learning materials.

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