

"I WISH MY TEACHER WOULD KNOW..." – BEHIND STUDENT'S GRADES: THOUGHTS AND WELLBEING

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Abstract: *The grade is, in most educational systems, a key concept with a strong short-term echo, which influences the student's dynamics in school, but also with a long-term one, through the emergence of attitudes such as those related to competition and social hierarchy. The study analyses quantitatively and qualitatively the factors that stand behind the grade. The participants are 48 students in their first year of university studies. Their grades are examined through their level of interest for a particular subject and through the importance they attach to a certain course having in view their future career. Also, grades are linked to wellbeing factors. Results show that the interest and importance for courses can directly explain the increase and decrease of marks, and the quality of sleep is an essential wellbeing factor that effects school outcomes.*

Keywords: *grades; students' wellbeing; teachers' awareness;*

1. Introduction

School implies passing through a continuous process of teaching, learning and evaluation. In these three major categories, we can include the entire activity of both teachers and students. In the modern education paradigm, teaching, learning and evaluation are not in a linear relation, in which the last one ends the process (Boud & Soler, 2016). We are rather discussing about a circular route (Firestone, 2014; Whitton, Barker, Humphries, Nosworthy, & Sinclair, 2016). In this circular model, starting with teaching, learning is awakened and, from this point on, continuously calibrates the teaching. The two reach evaluation, which through its multiple functions, echoes teaching and learning.

The evaluation follows the diagnosis and prognosis in education (Bhise, Thorat, & Supekar, 2013). Selection and classification are also made by evaluating (Jahanian, 2012). It is also necessary that the assessment is regarded as a feedback moment in which the educational duo (student-teacher) can be calibrated by raising consciousness on both sides. Ideally, the authenticity of the evaluative moments will motivate and increase efficiency, and not morally disarm or place in inferiority the ones who learn, for whom teachers basically started the whole process.

In this discussion, there is a concept that fills with significance the majority of world schools: the grade. In most educational systems, with various scoring methods (Dahlgren, Fejes, Abrandt-Dahlgren, & Trowald, 2009), the grade is a prism that reflects the learners' achievements and reverberates up into their school life (Becker, Geer, & Hughes, 2017; McClarty, 2015).

Studies sustain that grades reflect 25–35% of academic knowledge (Bowers, 2011). What else fills the grade? Classroom emotional climate, students' engagement, and their interest also impact outcomes, argue Reyes, Brackett, Rivers, White, and Salovey (2012). Other aspects such as family relationships, perceived stress level, sleep quality or diet are also variables to be taken into account when discussing the grade (Ahrberg, Dresler, Niedermaier, Steiger, & Genzel, 2012; Lee, 2018; Silva et al., 2017; Stupnisky, Perry, Renaud, & Hladkyj, 2013).

Offered with a lower or higher degree of objectivity, the grade remains an essential topic in school. It is a concern for both teachers who follow personal or unanimously accepted principles when assessing (Tierney, Simon, & Charland, 2011), but especially for students who receive the grades, most of the time with a definitive status, without the possibility to fill with meaning the teachers conclusion.

This study identifies a gap in the possibility to extract feedback from students after receiving a mark. Their feedback can be used to calibrate the accuracy with which teachers make the assessment and give the mark, while still remaining in an objective area. Also, exploiting the nuances of the grade and looking for possible explanatory factors such as interest in a course or student's sleep quality, interventions can be made to improve outcomes. Mobilizing a teacher who is aware that it is necessary to make his/hers course more interesting or to place a meeting not in the first hour of the morning (Wolfson & Carskadon, 2003) may have a resonance in raising the students' outcomes.

The framework question of the research is *What is behind a student's grade?*. Starting from this question, we are looking for actual answers to:

1. Can the grade be explained by the importance and the interest in a course?
2. How do marks modify students' outlook on learning and school in general?
3. Which aspects of wellbeing influence the mark?

2. Methods

Research design of this study has both qualitative and quantitative features. 48 students attended the study. All of them are in the first year of university studies. Most participants are female, aged up to 25. The research focused on the 10 subjects studied in the first semester of the first faculty year.

In Romania the scoring is done with Arabic numbers starting from 1 (lowest score) and up to 10 (highest score). The grade for passing an exam is 5.

A questionnaire, with closed and open questions, was used to collect the data. Validity and reliability of the instrument was verified by previously filling out the questionnaire and two questions were rephrased. Cronbach alpha for quantitative scales is 0.75.

3. Results

Students were invited to fill in their the grades they had at: Fundamentals of Pedagogy, Fundamentals of Psychology, Age Psychology, Romanian language, Romanian literature and children's literature, Early education, Pedagogical practice in pre-school, Foreign languages, Sports, and Intercultural Education. They were then asked to give a score of 1 to 4 (1 low interest / least interesting, 4 high interest / most interesting) to show their interest in a particular subject and the importance they offer to a particular course in their formation.

Although R^2 has a low value (0.39), we notice the grouping of school grades (comprised in means) in a linear up trending pattern (Figure 1). So the marks can be explained by the interest shown to the 10 subjects and the importance given to each one. The two variables may explain in a directly proportional relationship the increase or decrease of the mean. Figure 1 provides a response to research question number 1.

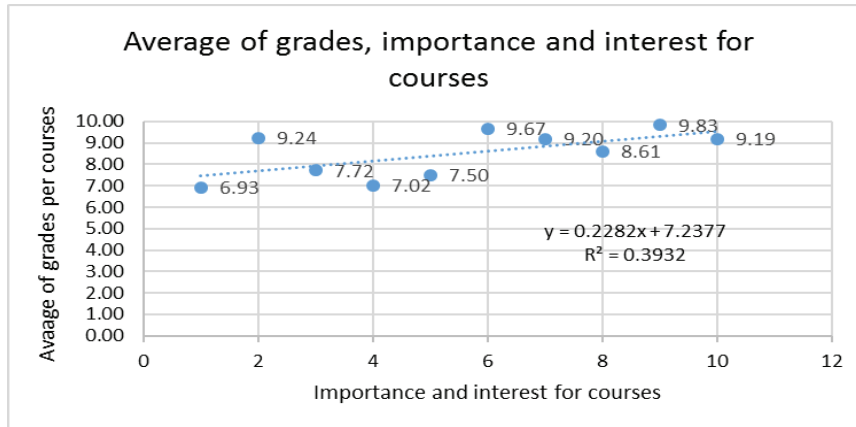


Fig. 1. Average of grades, importance and interest for courses

Figure 1. Average of grades, importance and interest for courses

In the data analysis we find a negative correlation ($p=-0.42$) between the subjects' means and the importance students give to the grade obtained for that particular subject. The higher the grade is in a subject, the lowest the importance for that subject becomes. The lower the mark, the higher the importance of the grade becomes. The importance of the grade is in general 3.37 out of 4.

Students who have had over the 8.40 average marks answer the open question and share their thoughts by continuing the phrase I would like my teachers to know that ... Those who received grades below the group average offer 50% fewer responses.

Open responses can be grouped as follows:

- Students with the highest averages provide answers that denote modesty
 We are now learning.
 The marks do not reflect a student's level of achievement.
 No one is born wise, it is for him/her to become like that.
- Most students (56%) have means between 8 and 9. Among their answers are the most messages that would like to transmit teachers that they are doing their best in learning.
 We are all interested in becoming specialists in education and teachers should be more understanding.
 I'm doing my best!
 I really try!
- The negative messages from the students' answers are:
 Sometimes quality, not quantity, matters.
 Teachers should encourage us in what we do. Some of them are really just disheartening us.
 We get bored when we are only forced to listen.
 Just as an interactive teaching is required for children, the same thing is required in the case of students. And in each subject practice, not just theory, must be emphasized.

- *Positive messages are:*
 I thank teachers for all their effort.
 Teachers are very good.
 I liked the hours we spent together.

In students' thoughts, there is a request for understanding the ones who work and can not attend classes. The averages of this category of students vary; they are not grouped below the general average, nor over it. Working does not influence their marks.

Student shared thoughts respond to research question number 2. An in-depth analysis of responses reveals a greater concern for those who have achieved higher grades. This concern places them in an area of modesty regarding learning and school in general.

Students who consider that their grades reflect their level of learning have lower averages than those who say that the grades obtained accurately reflect learning. We can once again articulate the modesty. Students who have high outcomes think they could have been evaluated more severe.

The 60% of students who believe that the grades were objectively offered by teachers have a higher average than the remaining 40% who think they were subjectively assessed. Those who have the lowest grades are those who consider that marks are very subjective.

There is a negative correlation ($p=-0.50$) between grades and self-assessed wellbeing. The index answers research question number 3. Table 1 shows in detail the average scores for each category by which the perception of own wellbeing was analyzed on a scale of 1 - bad to 4 - excellent.

Table 1. Perception on wellbeing

Wellbaing factor	S
	core
Appreciation of family relationships	3
	.58
Appreciating relationships with faculty colleagues	3
	.29
How I sleep in general	3
	.17
Self-assessment of the mental state in general	3
	.17

Appreciation of personal financial status	3
	.17
Appreciation of involvement in college in general	3
	.17
Self-assessment of physical condition in general	3
	.15
How I slept the last night	2
	.94
How well I feed myself	2
	.94
The level of stress I live in	2
	.52

Family relationships have the highest score and the perceived stress level the lowest one.

In factorial analysis and PCA (Appendix 1), how well students slept the night before influences the other factors and the grades at all studied subjects.

4. Discussion

From the data obtained from the students who participated in this study, we can conclude that their grades can be explained by the importance that students attribute to a particular course and the interest they have for a specific subject. The importance and interest may be different for the same course. Table 2 shows the order of subjects listed by interest and importance. The two different variables can be considered predictors for grades.

Table 2. Interest vs. Importance of studied subjects

Interest in subject	Importance of subject in future career
1. Fundamentals of Pedagogy	1. Sports
2. Foreign languages	2. Foreign languages
3. Sports	3. Intercultural education
4. Fundamentals of Psychology	4. Fundamentals of Pedagogy
5. Intercultural education	5. Romanian literature and children's literature
6. Romanian language	6. Age Psychology
7. Age Psychology	7. Fundamentals of Psychology
8. Pedagogical practice in pre-school	8. Early education
9. Romanian literature and children's literature	9. Romanian language
10. Early education	10. Pedagogical practice in pre-school

The lower the score in a subject, the greater the importance offered to it, the data tell us. Students want good grades. In a society that continually hierarchizes, it is normal for students to be concerned about getting a bigger grade. The result is also acknowledged by other studies, and is linked to the wellbeing of students (Pardos, Baker, San Pedro, Gowda, & Gowda, 2013).

The effect of the pressure that marks put on students has the greatest echo in the quality of sleep that directly influences other factors that build their wellbeing.

The fact that once a good grade is obtained reduces the interest in that particular course, it can also have unwanted effects. Here we can raise questions about to rush to finish a course, pass the exam and obtain a grade if this is considered satisfactory. This can generate learning just to get rid of effort, not to gain knowledge.

Students, through the answers in open questions, shared their striving and their desire to do well at exams. The ones grouped around the mean are those who struggle the most and want teachers to know about their effort.

Students with the highest grades are modest. They consider learning a process. Although having high grades, they are carefully self-assessing themselves and think that teachers should have been more demanding.

Students with the lowest marks are the ones who share the most negative answers. They blame the evaluation, considering it subjective. Their thoughts are full of frustration, and their wellbeing has the lowest scores. They are also the ones that have the worse relationships with their colleagues (Coefficients of determination (Pearson): 0.175). The grades influence their connections with their peers. Of course, other variables should be considered.

Conclusion

The grade gained an important place in school. Students want great marks. The echo of the grade is found in life aspects that socio-culturally define populations. The effect of the grade is hierarchization. There will always be some better and some less good. It is, however, very important how the two perceive one-other. This perception may influence one's attitude to competition, for example. School can teach you subtly that you have to have a good, better grade than others, so you can obtain a higher place in society. Or it can teach you social responsibility by canceling the spirit of competition and developing a cooperative attitude. All for the beauty of knowledge and for genuine wellbeing.

Most of the times, although it is given by the teacher, the grade is the student's mark. However, it takes two to tango. A low grade may of course reveal a student's lack of preparation, but it can also be a genuine feedback to raise awareness of the teacher's ability to nurture students' interest in knowledge. As long as teachers maintain their good intention to produce learning and not to point out who did well, and who did not. In this vision, the student's low grade is also the teacher's low grade.

It is, therefore, necessary to be aware of what stands behind the grade, in order to gather the full impact of it and what really emerges into society. This does not mean that teachers should give good grades. It means that teachers should work alongside students for better outcomes.

Appendix 1

Factor pattern:

	F1	F2	F3	Initial communality	Final communality	Specific variance
How I slept the last night	0.454	0.055	0.317	0.315	0.310	0.690
How I sleep in general	0.646	0.501	0.003	0.587	0.669	0.331
Self-assessment of physical condition in general	0.635	0.477	0.429	0.552	0.815	0.185
Self-assessment of the mental state in general	0.577	0.304	0.482	0.439	0.657	0.343
The level of stress they live in	0.545	0.374	0.110	0.409	0.449	0.551
Appreciating relationships with faculty collegeues	0.613	0.404	0.032	0.503	0.540	0.460
Appreciation of family relationships	0.737	0.276	0.102	0.594	0.630	0.370
Appreciation of personal financial status	0.677	0.243	0.223	0.519	0.567	0.433
Appreciation of involvement in college in general	0.568	0.458	0.180	0.514	0.565	0.435
How well I feed myself	0.718	0.216	0.170	0.509	0.591	0.409

Values in bold correspond for each variable to the factor for which the squared cosine is the largest

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