Grades and External Motivation in Waldorf High Schools

Examining the Assumptions and Imagining Alternatives

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I took one of the Main Lesson books off the stack in front of me and started flipping through. The eighth-grade class teacher was kind enough to pass along the students' work so I could start to form a better picture of the developmental journey of all our students, not just the ones I teach. So much of what they produced was breathtaking. I saw intricate drawings, elaborate calligraphy, shading and border techniques, and a growing capacity to explain their experiences of the world with clarity. Of course, not every Main Lesson book would be destined for display at an open house or Holiday Faire curriculum table, but every child turned one in. Every child showed evidence of their growth through the way they worked with the material. Every child made progress.

On a Saturday afternoon, I was sorting through the mail, ready to toss everything in one indiscriminate heap in the recycling bin, when I eyed an unexpected hand-addressed letter. I instantly recognized the belabored scrawl of one of my students, a senior. He had apparently decided that he hasn't dedicated enough time to improving his creative writing skills and wanted my input on a short story he had written. He enclosed the story and a wealth of warm wishes for my forays into the life of his imagination.

A student's mother smoothed the tablecloth that covered the desks that I had pushed together for parent-teacher conferences. It was our first conversation together, though I had already had a few brief interactions with her husband. We fawned a bit over her ebullient daughter and then moved on to her son. She opened by informing me that he was a genius, even though at school it's hard to tell because his grades are so poor. He's learning all the time, she told me; he just doesn't care what letter gets attached to his learning, and he doesn't want to play the game the teachers are asking him to play. We, the teachers, had accepted the forgone conclusion that his low output reflected some kind of cognitive or processing impairment, but recent educational testing has shown that not to be the case.

One morning in the early weeks of the COVID quarantine, I drove over to a student's house and fashioned the words "Happy Birthday" out of quartz landscaping rocks, because turning 18 all alone in an empty house is not fun. For many days, the student hadn't really participated in Zoom classes, beyond turning on his video for attendance. I was hoping the gesture would shift something for him. While he saw me just as I was leaving, came outside with tears in his eyes and said "You didn't have to do this," still, his level of engagement in the class did not change. Three weeks into a Main Lesson named "The Art of Living," which I specifically designed for distance learning, he took a picture of those landscaping rocks, rearranged into the word "change," and submitted it for a gratitude photography assignment. After that, he started opening up about how hard the pandemic was on him. And after that, he started creatively participating in class. I assured him it was not too late.

These vignettes are meant to invite us to confront, in living pictures, either for the first time or once again, one of the age-old assumptions about giving grades to high school students. Most of us have either implicitly or explicitly accepted the idea that grades are necessary to motivate students to do work. In a similar vein, we seem to have subscribed to the idea that without grades, students would slack off, become complacent, or not live up to their potential (as determined by the limited perspective of the teacher, of course, but I will leave this issue to be discussed on a different occasion). While it is true that grades appear effective in providing an external motivation for some students, there is a growing body of research in contemporary education studies, directly refuting the necessity of grades for learning and growth. Most notably, *Challenge Success*, a research organization under the auspices of the Stanford Graduate School of Education, provides thorough evidence that the promise of mastery and self-improvement is enough to motivate students to take up meaningful work.[1] One of the shorthand terms for this phenomenon is 'intrinsic motivation.' While you may have heard students or parents express opinions to the contrary, stating that aiming for the A keeps them on top of their work, I invite you to imagine that this is simply because they don't know (how to imagine) that another way is possible. In doing so, I hope we can use

1 Challenge Success even goes so far as to say that students should not be graded during distance learning. They advocate for credit/incomplete in all student assessments. See: https://www.challengesuccess.org/blog/guidance-on-grading-crediting-policies-during-COVID-19/

that imagination to inspire an alternative to using letter grades in assessing high school students.

Examining the Assumptions

First, let us examine the premise that is illustrated by the first vignette above. We could ask the question in a very simple and direct way: Is a student at the end of eighth grade and a student at the beginning of ninth grade in significantly different phases of their development? If the answer is yes, then it may be possible to state that while grades weren't necessary to motivate an eighth-grader to learn or do school work, they have somehow become necessary by the beginning of ninth grade. Taken from this angle, however, the assertion starts to sound a bit absurd. It is more likely that whatever motivated students in middle school, for better or for worse, is still what drives them once they begin high school. It could be a desire to please the teacher, to excel, to express oneself, to experience growth, to produce something beautiful, to conform to an idea of intelligence, or any number of other things. It seems unlikely that receiving a grade, in and of itself, would be the determining factor.

From an anthroposophical perspective, it is true that the skills and capacities of the twelfth-grader are different from those in grade nine, and we do indeed need to consider the arc of the whole high school. For example, a ninth-grader is much more likely to respond to the authority of the teacher and perform a given task just because she or he is asked to do so. The reflex of questioning has not fully set in. But after the shift around the age of fifteen, when the authority of the external world starts to hold less influence, perhaps it would seem logical to then employ grades to motivate students to do work that they might otherwise question. In that sense, I can imagine that grades appear tempting to a teacher of tenth, eleventh, and twelfth grade students, as a means to keep students on the track that the teacher has laid out for them. However, I propose that because grades belong very clearly to the world of external authority, they work against the developmental changes happening in students and are therefore not as effective as one might think. In fact, they likely impede the inner growth and conviction, which mainstream research terms intrinsic motivation, that is beginning to develop in the upper grades.

In the second vignette, the student's quest for feedback on a non-required, non-graded assignment starts to shake up the assumption that grades are the primary tool for motivating students to do their best or highest quality work. Without them, students may complete the tasks that are assigned, but they may not fully invest themselves in them or develop themselves to the same degree. That is certainly true in some cases, but in others, as in the vignette described above, it is not. One of the questions that arises as a result is: Must we use an external motivator to try and strong-hand students into performing (in distinction to learning) at the highest possible caliber for every assignment? As a corollary, must we ignore all the students who do their best work *outside* of the system of grades, taking few or no cues from their pursuits, their growth, their learning?

If you are tempted to believe that a student mailing a short story for feedback is an outlier, you would be correct only at the letter of the phenomenon, not in the spirit of it. At many schools, senior capstone projects are an ongoing example of students investing significant effort and energy in meaningful projects, even when there is no grade attached to it to motivate them to do so. Observe any student practicing a team sport or engaged in a hobby, even a very demanding one, for further evidence that the promise of improvement and mastery is enough of a motivation to undertake rigorous pursuits. I contend that grades are simply not necessary in the way we have typically thought.

While the first two vignettes presented above offer examples of students thriving without grades, the third one exposes a less rosy picture. The very thing that we are tempted to think grades do, which is to motivate students to do work, is by no means a failsafe. Teachers know this, of course, but are not generally given the time or space to really explore it. What students with failing grades expose is that motivation is much more complicated and individual than the uniformity or rigidity that quantified grades represent.

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As I reflect on the students who have been given poor grades over the years, I see two primary patterns emerging. First, some are far more interested in growth and learning than in performing in the rather limited ways that they are instructed to perform; the reasons for that are all over the map. For example, one student recently explained to me that she was finding a lot of meaning and a sense of fulfillment in her after-school job and was becoming less interested in "jumping through hoops" at school. A student-athlete who competed at the national level said very clearly that he would rather

put in another hour on the field than spend it on the artistic embellishments that impress teachers. There are likely more students who share these attitudes than we realize, but our school culture does not necessarily solicit such reactions or allow them to surface. The student portrayed in the third vignette falls into this category. He tends to do the minimum amount required for many classes, or to sporadically invest himself in school activities, according to his own interest. In fact, I learned that he taught himself to build guitars in his garage and to play new instruments; he chose these activities over doing his homework, thereby negatively impacting his grade, which was constructed according to a traditional model. He didn't care. He cared about creating things and music. To be clear, I am not saying that it is of no consequence that this student was routinely late to class or completed only small portions of his work. What I am saying is that if we want to find sources of motivation, we should take more cues from this student's success rather than his failures. I am confident that we can broaden his interests and encourage more consistent engagement through human connection and meaningful tasks; we most definitely will not achieve this through dangling grades in front of him as rewards for external achievements. Unfortunately, the discourse about grades tends to end up dominating the conversation.

In the case of the final vignette, for this withdrawn student, finding motivation was at the heart of his issue with schoolwork. Tackling the challenge from the perspective of a potential failing grade would have been completely counterproductive. At the root of the issue was the fact that he perceived school to be a waste of time while people were dying of COVID-19, when neighbors were losing their jobs and their security, and when he felt utterly helpless to do anything of value in the moment. Imagine meeting such a monumental soul-dilemma with, "Well, I'm sorry, but you still have to do everything I say if you want to get a good grade." And, unfortunately, it's much more common than teachers might think for students to hear, "You still have to do everything I say in order to be a good person." This student saw right through these façades. Instead of meeting a student like this with an "objective" conversation about the impact his behavior has on his grades, communicating on a human level, heart-to-heart, is a much more beneficial route. Emphasizing the safety of the relationship, rather than setting up some external yardstick of "good enough," creates a space from which intrinsic motivation can be discovered. This approach is especially needed in a distance learning situation, when the things that formerly felt important may no longer hold as much sway. In fact, they may have lost their appeal altogether. While many teachers are willing to acknowledge the unprecedented circumstances of the pandemic and of distance learning, are just as many willing to allow these circumstances to surface and be expressed in ways that they do not seek to control?

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Grappling with control in a real way is vital to discussions of student motivation and assessment, and it is more important than ever in the context of distance learning. It's easy to fall prey to the illusion of control when we are in the classroom because we can craft and curate experiences in very specific ways. We can make seating charts, aim to reduce distractions, provide immediate tactile support, arrange time and space just so. But this is not the case for remote teaching. The factors that motivate students in the classroom—like dynamic group energy, like getting a hug or a high five, or hearing piano music drift in from the other across the hall—are currently not present. This doesn't mean that many students can't still do well or even thrive in their home environments; it simply means that we shouldn't punish students for what has been taken away from them. I see the refusal to punish the student in the fourth vignette above as the reason why he did end up recovering his own motivation. He found a reason to engage in the classwork – not out of fear of failing, but because he had time to process the obstacles of the pandemic and of distance learning, only after which he could find a way to make his work meaningful. And what if he hadn't? Should he have been punished for that with an F grade because he was forced into a distance learning setting that didn't meet his needs or optimize his learning in the way that an in-person experience does? By now, it is probably clear what my own answer would be.

In parallel to this final vignette, many students are just not yet able to do what is being required of them, for whatever reason, and I do want to emphasize the word *yet*. They are at a different place than the "ideal student" in their learning process. The assumption that we can motivate students with grades to somehow be at a different place in their development, in their neurocircuitry, in their soul life, is dubious at best and unethical at worst. In other words, external motivation is simply not a factor in their process in the direct way—i.e. students want to earn the reward of a good grade and avoid the punishment of a bad grade—that we assume it to be. Learning differences, psychological states,

family stressors, the challenges of distance learning, and myriad other factors influence what a student is able to do at any given moment (I will explore these issues in another essay). For now, it seems difficult to imagine a teacher who hasn't already experienced the limitations of using grades as a motivator; the question then is whether teachers can find the courage to examine such experiences and act on them.

For students who receive failing grades but seem not so bothered by that fact or are unable to respond in the way the teacher expects them to (that is, by improving their grades), educators must seek new avenues of connection. Each student deserves an assessment method that actually promotes *internal* motivation, rather than demands it from the outside.

Action-Based Research

Under my direction, the humanities department at my school began last February undertaking its own action-based research on the subject of grades and external motivation. To get things moving, and following the inspirations of work conducted at a conference with the Center for Contextual Studies, I decided to opt out of the traditional grading scale in both the Main Lesson and the track class I was teaching at the time. Instead, I informed the students that their default grade in my classes was an A. There was a lot of looking around the room to see if I was serious or not (I am known to fabricate some rules to expose ways of thinking and solicit reactions), but there was nothing behind the curtain this time. I was taking a risk.

If the tales about needing grades to motivate students were true, then I should have expected almost immediate changes in several aspects of student engagement. Most notably, I would have seen drop-offs in engagement, participation, and quantity and quality of work. However, this was not at all the case. In the Poetics Main Lesson that I was teaching, I actually saw sustained evidence to the contrary, and it started right away.

As most teachers can attest, the tenth grade can be a tumultuous year, rife with clashes with authority, a loss of belief in external structures, and a rejection of the perceived and real imperfections of the world. In response to my new non-grade policy, I discovered that instead of taking full liberty to rebel against school with the safeguard of not being punished with a bad grade, every single student leaned in more deeply. The students exhibited noticeable relief from what was perceived not as an external *motivation* but as an external *pressure*. And when the energy usually given over to worrying about grades was freed up, new things became possible. I didn't have a single disciplinary issue (although chronic tardiness persisted with a few students); not once did I have to fight to get the students' attention, and I did not experience a single clash of will. The type of motivation that was allowed to come to the forefront was the desire to say something meaningful. Nothing else was needed to sustain the students' engagement. Furthermore, the primary reason any other external measure would be needed would be due to the absence of the desire to say (produce, build, invent, etc.) something meaningful. As educators, we would do better to invest our time in designing meaningful experiences, encounters, and opportunities, rather than elaborate grading systems and policies.

In fact, for two weeks, every single student did every single activity and assignment. This included the work during Main Lesson, such as completing dictations, discussing poems, writing original poems using various techniques, participating in workshops, and finishing or typing up their original poems for homework that night. This has never been the case in any of my previous classes (including in classes I had taught at top-tier universities) that every single student completed every single assignment for even two consecutive days. Furthermore, the quality of the work that the students produced, the depth and texture and creativity of their use of language, far surpassed what I have witnessed in years past. There were perhaps some other factors that played into this, but none quite so salient as the removal of grades from the learning equation, so that the experience of meaning-making could be at the center.

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It is true that there was a slight drop off, in the last week of the Main Lesson, in the immediate turnaround time for the students' original compositions. However, instead of just dropping assignments, the four students who didn't meet the initial deadline went back and completed all of the work by the following day. It's not that they had lost motivation; it's just that they needed more time to fully come into what they had to say. One of these students made it a point to say that had he been graded for the assignment, he would have turned

in what he felt was "a load of crap," just to be done and get the points, instead of taking the time to be more deliberate in his work. In this sense, not being held to the traditional grading scale actually improved the quality of the work of five students in the class.

On the penultimate day of the block, the students all showed up to perform their original poems at a Poetry Night. I never told the students that this performance was required or that they had to do it to pass the class. I never said I was evaluating them on their diction or expressiveness or any other performative aspect of their poems. And still, they all showed up and showed up strong. Two of them broke down into tears while reading their work, and there were many teachers and parents in the audience who were shedding tears as well. Several parents stayed afterwards to tell me that they didn't know teenagers could write like that. A colleague mentioned that even the adults in her MFA program would be hard-pressed to write as well as some of the students. One parent asked me how it is possible to get a room full of guarded, self-conscious teens to be so vulnerable. Because I have taught very similar classes in the past with the same kind of enthusiasm and investment in individual students, yet with different results than the ones described above, I am inclined to believe that the power of our experience of going grade-free had a lot to do with it.

When that relationship between students and their own creation, or lack thereof, is finally and ultimately mediated by a grade, it is very easy to lose sight of the purpose of the work itself.

Overall student engagement has continued, even over Zoom and even for seniors, whom we normally peg as "checked out" by the end of the school year. Giving my twelfth-grader distant learners a default A was definitely the biggest risk in terms of motivation. They already had their college acceptances, their scholarships, and their post-graduation paths. They also had disappointment and disillusionment with everything they seemed to be losing: prom, class trip, graduation ceremony, and all the rest. In other words, if there were to be one group of students who would be poised to take advantage of my grading policy, it would be the seniors. However, this was not at all the case. Instead of trying to translate the classroom to the computer, I asked them to stay curious, stay connected, and keep striving. I designed a new Main Lesson specifically for online learning, naming it "The Art of Living," and I also co-taught a drama elective with one of the seniors, in which half the class enrolled. Instead of investing my energy into devising elaborate schemas for collecting work, grading it, and returning it, and holding it up against an external standard (that I would have had to invent in isolation), all of which would have further tethered students to and made them depend on electronic devices, I opened up space for students to find and exercise their will. In their humanities classes, students had a chance to find their own motivation, to connect with a truer, deeper reason for doing things. It's true that some opted out here and there, but these were the same students who were already inconsistent within the system of grades, like the one described in the third vignette, so there was nothing lost as a result of this change. All of these data points once again expose their limited efficacy as motivators; instead, what becomes highlighted here is the promise of a meaningful, self-directed experience as sufficient for most students to stay invested.

In the months since piloting this initiative, two other teachers in the humanities department have adopted the same policy; each student's default grade is an A, and if there is really a need to deviate from that to reflect a complete shirking of expectations or total lack of engagement, we have left in place the possibility of assigning a failing grade or of not giving credit for a course. So far, only one student did not earn credit for a class. There was one other student, who would have likely failed with the kind of scholarly performance displayed had it been in an in-school setting, but the department decided to not penalize for needing the physical school environment, the direct contact with peers and teachers, in order to succeed. This solution is temporary until the school is ready to move away from grades all together and adopt an alternate transcript, like the one used at the Rudolf Steiner School of Ann Arbor. The courses that have been impacted by this change are: Digital Literacy (12 Grade), History through Music (11 Grade), History of Consciousness (12 Grade), The Odyssey (10 Grade), Transcendentalism (12 Grade), The Art of Living (12 Grade), Native American History (9 Grade), Rhetoric (10 Grade), and The Novel (9 Grade). The first three of these classes began before the COVID-19 shutdown but finished in distance learning. None of us has had any new concerns about student motivation, engagement, participation, or quality of work. On the contrary, we can all provide evidence of growth and progress that we could not have anticipated.

Closing Considerations

In addition to all of the considerations above, as a Waldorf school, we must also take into account the soul impact of using a reward/punishment system to maintain what are often unexamined standards of poor, passing, excelling, etc. at any given moment. When we begin observing students at a deeper level, developing our imagination, inspiration, and intuition, it actually seems likely that using grades as a motivator actually detracts from the inner agency of the child. From an anthroposophical point of view, this interferes with the growth and development of the child in a harmful way. If we take seriously one of the central ideals of our movement, that Waldorf education is a healing one and that healing is experienced first and foremost through agency, we will have to conclude that using grades as a motivator actively works against our core mission and values because it detracts from agency.

High school students in particular are very aware of the fact that on the one hand, our Waldorf schools promote agency and freedom, but on the other hand, they still tend to engage in reductive practices that limit student's ability to discover in themselves how to relate to their work, or even what their individual work (usually called *a path*) might be. When that relationship between students and their own creation, or lack thereof, is finally and ultimately mediated by a grade, it is very easy to lose sight of the purpose of the work itself. As Waldorf educators, we continue to emphasize process, but outcome still gets the final word in the form of a grade. With the advent of distance learning, we see far less of the process than ever before, and therefore are not able to guide and support it in the ways to which we are accustomed. Yet we are still attaching ourselves to grading outcomes. This does a disservice to the students' growth, and we owe it to them to examine the reasons why we continue to cling to grades with such fervor. Becoming aware of the discrepancy between the processes we observe via distance learning and the outcomes we evaluate can serve as an open invitation to question that relationship in the classroom as well. Indeed, in examining grades and motivation, there are so many entry points into larger questions around student assessment.

Finally, I have not been able to find a single reference to grades in any of Steiner's lectures on education or adolescence. On the contrary, grades seem to be something that are more suited to serve the needs of institutions rather than the needs of individual children; of that, Steiner makes broad and sweeping condemnations, most directly in *Education as a Force for Social Change*, but in many other places, as well.

To be clear, what is being proposed here is not an elimination of expectations or of rules that ensure a safe and supportive environment; nor is there any intention to do away with feedback on engagement, participation, and quality of work. The issue at hand is only the use of letter grades as a means of motivation. There are many other reasons to let ourselves outgrow the use of grades, including misgivings about fairness, issues of college readiness, and the need to measure learning, all of which I will be addressing elsewhere. If there were ever a time to shed an old practice and try something new, it is now, when so much is up in the air and primed for new imaginations. We have been gifted an opportunity during this pandemic and suspension of our normal practices to keep what best serves learning and the growth and development of human consciousness; creating more meaningful experiences of intrinsic motivation and agency must be a part of the fulfillment of this opportunity.

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