



---

7-17-2023

## The Grading System: Inhibiting Curiosity in Students

Hallie Ross

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.butler.edu/the-mall>

---

### Recommended Citation

Ross, Hallie (2023) "The Grading System: Inhibiting Curiosity in Students," *The Mall*: Vol. 7 , Article 6.  
Retrieved from: <https://digitalcommons.butler.edu/the-mall/vol7/iss1/6>

This Essay is brought to you for free and open access by the Undergraduate Scholarship at Digital Commons @ Butler University. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Mall by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ Butler University. For more information, please contact [digitalscholarship@butler.edu](mailto:digitalscholarship@butler.edu).

## The Grading System: Inhibiting Curiosity in Students

*Hallie Ross*

In Ross Gay's essay, "Dispatch of the Ruins: School: The Thirteenth Incitement," he starts by explaining how school systems often see their students as units—something that doesn't think freely and follows its leader. In a section of his essay on grading, he discusses how the current grading system further pushes students to act as units. Gay writes that "grading makes obedience, or following one's leader, the first lesson" (152). Grading has nothing to do with learning and everything to do with approval and some version of the best or only answer. Grading is seen as a motivator or a cause for competition, but students are competing, not to learn the most, but to be the most obedient. And the "best students" are those who are most willing and able to follow directions. It causes students to ask not what they want, but what the teacher wants. Does this prohibit a quality education—one of curiosity and passion? Grading is not a worthwhile motivator, nor is it a factor in future success, but we still don't dispose of it. Does this inhibit our intrinsic motivation to learn and understand and create new, beautiful things that make a life full of meaning and happiness?

Ross Gay, an American poet, essayist, and professor at Indiana University Bloomington, mentions briefly that grades are seen by most as a motivator though competition to get the best grades, submit the best work, and be top of the class; however, he dismisses this by examining that "given as the result of that best and only story is that we are witnessing from the inside the tumult of a system in the throes of collapse, it seems competition is no longer, if it ever was, a worthwhile aspiration" (Gay 157). Gay mentions many times throughout this essay that school systems are in ruins, even though they do not look like it. Learning should be a valued process that people care about. There should be lots of caring in a school system, but the current school system is filled with frustration and disregard. This is because grades and competition are no longer a useful learning tool. They create students that care more about a grade than the learning process. They give students no freedom to

explore their curiosity and passion. Using grading as a motivator is robbing students of that joy and destroying the school system.

Edward Deci, who's work is summarized in Timothy Quinn's book, *On Grades and Grading: Supporting Student Learning Through a More Transparent and Purposeful Use of Grades*, proves that grades are only hurting the school system and its students. Quinn says, "Deci's experiments showed that punishments and rewards diminish intrinsic motivation" (17), and other studies have come to this same conclusion. Deci compares rewards—like grades—to caffeine. They provide a short-term boost of motivation, but the effect diminishes with time. They even reduce students' natural enthusiasm that causes them to derive joy from learning. Grades aren't a long-term motivator to lead students to success. If grades only decrease our motivation to learn over time, there is no longer a purpose for them.

Gay writes about his experience with eliminating the normal grading method and disclosing at the beginning of the semester that every student would earn an A. He explains, "We all think better and are happier," when grades are out of the picture (Gay 158). Gay noticed that his students, especially the ones who were previously always anxious and eager to follow directions became relaxed, excited, and weird. This is because they now see the classroom as a site of mutual curiosity, confusion, and a great deal of caring, instead of a site of evaluation. This is important to students, so they can maintain their intrinsic motivation for deep learning without the overpowering weight and anxiety that grades impose.

Furthermore, Sam Roberson's journal article, "Developing Student Success Through Persistence: Teaching More Than Content," summarizes the findings of multiple American psychologists. Their studies find that grades are not a top predictor of success and are possibly inversely related. Just as Gay says that curiosity is a far more effective learning tool than mastery, Carol Dweck believes that a growth mindset is the sole factor in successful learning and a fulfilled life. Dweck states that a growth mindset allows individuals to believe "that it's impossible to foresee what can be accomplished with years of passion, toil, and training" (90). Her view is that this mindset sets students up for a successful life. This is exactly what Gay's grading-free classroom structure facilitates. It allows students to draw from their curiosity and passion, in order to experience the limitless opportunities for accomplishing through

learning. In a normal grading system, the only possibilities are a good grade or bad grade, which causes students to focus more on the outcome than the process of learning.

Similarly, Angela Lee Duckworth believes that grit—which, in psychology, is an individual’s perseverance mixed with passion—is the key to a meaningful future. She explains it like this: “Enthusiasm is common. Endurance is rare” (92). Because of our natural curiosity and intrinsic motivation, enthusiasm is common; however, only enthusiasm that is consistent over the long-term is what contributes to success. A normal grading system lessens the effect of intrinsic motivation over time. Whereas Gay’s grading-free classroom builds enthusiasm and curiosity over time, leading to passion. In this case, grades can only be seen as inhibitors of a meaningful life that is full of passion and perseverance.

If grades are not supporting students and helping them achieve a successful and happy life, they should be forgotten. The current grading system is turning students into units that do nothing but attempt to find what will get them the highest grade. They’re not learning or engaging with information, and, more importantly, they’re not happy, which is making the problem even worse. Ross Gay has found that a classroom full of encouragement and support and without grading feeds intrinsic motivation, which incites curiosity, which incites joy, which incites perseverance, which incites passion, which incites access to boundless learning, which incites a meaningful life. A gradeless school system is the only way to stop the collapse of the school system that Gay mentions and create motivated, successful students—students who are happy and will continue to be happy as long as they are free to wonder and learn limitlessly.

#### Works Cited

Gay, Ross. *Inciting Joy: Essays*. Chapel Hill, North Carolina, Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill, 2022.

Quinn, Timothy. "Chapter 2: The Pedagogical Purposes of Grades." *On Grades and Grading: Supporting Student Learning through a More Transparent and Purposeful Use of Grades*.

Rowman & Littlefield, 2013. WorldCat, Accessed 30 Jan. 2023.

Roberson, Sam. "Developing Student Success through Persistence: Teaching More Than Content." *Education*, vol. 141, no. 2, 2020, pp. 83–100.