

## What's in a Grade?

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Eileen's overall performance in her music class barely reached the basic level (2 on a 4-level scale). This was reasonable. Having emigrated from Germany a year ago, English was her second language. She had no formal music instruction before arriving in Mrs. Commer's music class and does not engage in any formal music activities outside of school. She is, however, enthusiastic and motivated to succeed. Concerned that a low grade might crush Eileen's already fragile self-esteem, Mrs. Commer raises her grade to level 3 (proficient).

How do we interpret this grade? Parents and administrators may assume that Eileen consistently demonstrated achievement in relation to the academic goals of instruction at the proficient level. They do not know which portion of the grade reflects achievement and which portion reflects other aspects of behavior the teacher viewed as important. If we expect grades to contribute to accurate and honest communication with parents, students, and administrators, this scenario presents a problem.

Since music teachers are concerned with numerous aspects of their student's development, achievement is rarely the sole criteria in determining grades. Thus, the grade often becomes a hodgepodge (Brookhart 1991)--that is, a grade based on a combination of judgments in areas of achievement and attitude. Teachers who use hodgepodge grading typically want students to achieve high grades. They reason that a high score in one area may offset a low score in another. This issue is explored here by presenting an argument for using only achievement grades within standards-based teaching and learning, explaining why other attitudinal attributes such as effort and self-esteem should not be included in the grade, and providing some solutions for this *grading* dilemma.

### Achievement Only Grades

With the National Standards for Music Education (MENC 1996) as a guide, teachers identify what they want students to learn. Using a variety of assessment instruments (for example, teacher-made tests, performance-based assessments, and portfolio materials), teachers collect information from selections of student work, thus obtaining tangible evidence on which to reduce student performance to a single symbol such as a percentage or letter grade. Using achievement as the sole basis for *grading*, one assumes that students who demonstrate high achievement in terms of the content and skills that formed the basis of instruction will obtain a higher grade than students who demonstrate lower proficiencies in these areas.

In addition to providing an indication of student achievement, this procedure provides a valid position from which to explain and defend *grading* practices. Using our earlier scenario, we can justify the position that Eileen was awarded a 2 because she demonstrated a basic level of performance in relation to the content and processes of instruction. Within standards-based instruction, the argument that Eileen deserves a 3 because she is motivated and enthusiastic holds little credence. (n1) In essence, then, achievement-based *grading* rests on the premise that grades are based solely on the extent to which students demonstrate facility with the content and processes of instruction. Grades based on factors related to attitude, such as effort and self-esteem, provide parents and students with misleading information about a student's performance in class.

## Attitude Grades

Including attitude in a grade argues that, given two students who perform equally well in terms of achievement, the one who appears to have a better attitude will be awarded a higher grade than the student who appears to have a poor attitude. This creates a problem. When the grade is raised to account for attitude, it no longer represents what a student can do as a result of instruction--that is, unless developing a positive attitude toward music is a specific goal of the course. This practice makes it difficult to interpret what the grade really means. Which part represents achievement? Which part is based on the student's behaviors in class?

Teachers who include attitude as a part of a grade think they have educationally sound reasons for doing so. In some cases, they presume that the resulting positive influence on self-esteem will bolster future achievement. Some teachers believe that tying attitude to grades will force students to demonstrate appropriate classroom behavior. Regardless of the reasons, we mislead parents and students when low-performing students are awarded high grades based on attitude. Using Wiggins' words, "we rob all children of a successful future if we do not provide them with information about their absolute levels of performance" (1994, p. 33).

## Effort

Including effort in a grade argues that, given two students who perform equally in terms of achievement, the one who appears to exert more effort will be awarded a higher grade than the student who does not exert the appropriate effort. On the face of it, this makes sense: More effort suggests more motivation and interest, and shouldn't we reward students when they are motivated and interested? Isn't it good to motivate low-achieving students who try hard? Don't we need to find something to praise low-achieving students for to keep them motivated? Isn't it true that we value effort as a society, so children should learn the importance of effort by seeing it reflected in their grades (McMillan 2001, p. 323)?

While attitudes are important, the assessment of effort is problematic. For one thing, it usually relies on teacher judgment based on behaviors exhibited by the students--behaviors that are open to student faking (McMillan 2001). As well, students who assertively seek the teacher's attention may appear more motivated than students who are naturally shy (Stiggins 2001).

For example, consider Carol and Maud. In their school, grades in all subjects are assigned on a four-point scale--1. beginning; 2. basic; 3. proficient; 4. outstanding. Carol does not put forth effort in music class. She never volunteers to play any of the percussion instruments and has little interest in the folk songs the class is learning for the spring concert. Carol's assessment results are at the basic level. Her grade for the class is 2. In contrast, even though Maud is not particularly interested in music class, she presents a positive attitude in front of the teacher. She believes that this will positively influence her grade--an important consideration because her parents promised to buy her a computer if she does well in all her classes. Maud's assessment results are at the basic level (a score of 2). However, in consideration of effort in class, her grade is raised to 3. As we can see, Maud's apparent positive attitude (controlled by extrinsic motivation) has put her at an advantage over Carol. This **grading** system fails to take into account why Carol is behaving in this way. Perhaps her parents' recent divorce has weighed heavily on her. This has negatively influenced her self-esteem to the point that she appears despondent at school.

As we can see, raising Maud's score based on effort is misleading to students, parents, and administrators who may interpret the grade as based on achievement. While motivation and interest are desirable qualities, subject matter-grades are not the place to reward such efforts.

## Self-Esteem

In general, low grades are thought to deflate a student's feelings of self-worth. With this in mind, music teachers may inflate grades so low-achieving students have a positive outlook toward the class. It is thought that the resulting lift to the self-esteem will positively influence achievement in subsequent **grading** periods. Unfortunately, self-esteem has little effect on achievement levels (Edwards 2000). Further, efforts to bolster self-esteem by awarding students higher marks than deserved for poor work may actually undermine their feelings of worth (Edwards).

Instead of grade inflation, students need to earn their self-esteem. This happens when they work hard to achieve their goals and in the process of doing so, overcome the obstacles they meet along the way. This is what happened to Gilles. From the time he entered grade 1 he struggled in music class. His psychomotor skills were not as advanced as those of the other children, and he had difficulty matching pitch. As a result, he seemed uninterested in music class. While he tried to participate in the activities, his lack of success seemed to erode his feelings of self-worth. This changed in grade 4 when he had the opportunity to play the recorder. He wasn't self-conscious playing this instrument. Unlike singing, he could see the mistakes he made in fingering and was able to correct the pitch. Success in this area eventually led to success in other aspects of his musical life in school.

## Borderline Cases

Considering borderline cases in assigning grades argues that when the quality of work falls just below the cutoff for a particular grade, a student may be awarded the next higher grade. Many times, grades derived from borderline scores are raised to reward individuals who display a positive attitude or to enhance self-esteem.

If grades are based on achievement, however, adjustments to borderline cases should be based on performance in relation to the goals of instruction, not on nonacademic factors such as attitude, effort, or motivation. For example, when grades are calculated, Tom has a borderline score of 84; a score of 85 would raise his grade from a B to an A. His music teacher, Mrs. Commer, has a plan to deal with borderline cases. She reviews the drafts of a composition Tom included in his music portfolio. Based on the quality of this work, she is justified in raising his grade to A.

## Solutions for Grading Dilemmas

Among their many purposes, **grading** systems( n2) summarize the proficiency with which students have attained specific learning goals and **report** this information to interested parties such as parents, administrators, and the students themselves.( n3) In this role, grades serve as a summary **report** for record keeping and accountability. They may also be used for making decisions such as which music students are allowed to take part in special festivals or field trips.

**Traditional grading** systems fall short of providing a comprehensive picture of what a student can do as a result of formal instruction. What we need is a **grading** and reporting system that provides information about a student's current status in a wide variety of academic and nonacademic goals and that also assists in the student's development and learning (Linn and Gronlund 2000). Rather than replacing current **grading** systems, we need to develop multifaceted approaches wherein grades for achievement are only one form of reporting. This may be accomplished by using achievement and attitude checklists or ratings, rubrics, or narrative **reports**.

## Achievement and Attitude Checklists or Ratings

As shown in figures 1 and 2, achievement and attitude checklists consist of a listing of academic or attitudinal goals for the music class. If using checklists, the teacher marks all areas where the student has achieved an acceptable level of proficiency. The absence of a checkmark indicates that work is needed in that area. If using a rating scale, the teacher marks the descriptor that best depicts the student's behavior in relation to each of the comments listed. The levels indicated by checkmarks inform students of areas in which they are performing well and areas where improvement is needed.

Teachers using this approach need to develop checklists or rating scales that cover all areas of the students' school music experience. Once the lists are developed, they are easy to complete, providing that the teacher has collected relevant observational information throughout the term. Since the same list is completed for all students, they are sometimes thought to be impersonal. It is possible to address this problem through the use of narrative **reports**.

## Rubrics

A rubric is a scale on which levels of proficiency are delineated in terms of the aspects of performance one might observe among students who complete a specified task (see figure 3). When using a rubric, the teacher marks the level on the continuum that best describes a student's performance of this task. Descriptions supply students with specific information on how they performed at a given time. By examining the descriptions along the continuum, students become aware of how to improve their performance. Rubrics are often completed by teachers. When completed by students, they serve as a tool for peer and self-assessment.

Teachers using this approach need to develop rubrics that cover all areas of the students' school music experience. These rubrics become the basis for recording information collected during classroom observations. When several completed rubrics are collated for a given student, they provide a detailed profile of student performance within the contexts observed. Since the development of rubrics requires a significant amount of time, teachers may choose to use both rubrics and checklists or rating scales. In doing so, rubrics would be developed to assess achievements or attitudes emphasized during a given term; checklists and rating scales would provide information on achievements or attitudes that, while important, were not given as much weight in instruction. This reporting system may be supplemented with narrative **reports**.

## Narrative Reports(n4)

Narrative **reports** are open-ended written descriptions of student performance. Depending on the nature of the **report**, narratives can focus on academic achievement or can provide insights on both academic and nonacademic aspects of performance. Traditionally, narrative **reports** were used more widely in the primary grades than in middle and high schools. Recently, they have been used across

all subjects and grades. Narrative *reports* generally supplement *traditional grading* systems. In doing so, they allow the teacher to clarify instructional objectives, point out a student's academic strengths and weaknesses, and provide information about a student's personal and social development (see figure 4).

Whenever possible, comments should refer to a student's strengths. Descriptions of areas in need of improvement should be accompanied with strategies to assist with future progress. The content of narrative *reports* should relate to specific learning goals clearly and directly. For example, documenting that "Darlene sings pentatonic melodies with a clear head voice" is more informative than reporting that "Darlene loves to sing."

Narrative *reports* can be extremely time-consuming to prepare--especially for music teachers who work with hundreds of students. Some schools opt for computerized *grading* programs. With these systems, teachers select from a list of comments on a wide range of achievement and nonachievement aspects of a student's performance. Some programs permit teachers to add their own comments to this list--a necessary feature that allows comments to refer to specific aspects of their music curriculum.

While the use of computer programs assists with preparation of these *reports*, the results can be impersonal. It is recommended, therefore, that music teachers write narrative *reports* specific to each student. Compromises may be needed to make this a practical choice for *grading*. Providing narrative *reports* for different groups of students at different times of the school year may be the most feasible way of dealing with the amount of time needed to accomplish this task (for example, writing narrative *reports* for students in grades 1, 3, and 5 during the fall reporting period and for students in grades 2, 4, and 6 during the spring period).

### Conclusion

Traditionally, many music teachers have relied on hodgepodge *grading*--that is, *grading* influenced by nonachievement factors such as attitude and self-esteem. Clearly, this presents a problem. What part of the grade is based on achievement? What part of this grade is based on nonachievement factors? How do parents, students, and administrators interpret hodgepodge grades?

With a standards-based approach to music teaching and learning, grades should reflect what a student achieves in relation to academic goals of instruction. When used in this way, grades are a meaningful tool for communication. They demonstrate to parents, students, and administrators that the subject of music has its own body of knowledge and skills worthy of inclusion in the schoolwide curriculum. Used in this way, grades contribute to the equal standing of music with other subject areas.

While achievement-only grades provide information about a student's status in terms of the goals of instruction, they do not provide a comprehensive picture of a student's accomplishments in school music class. To address this, music teachers need to develop *grading* and reporting systems that provide information about a student's current status in terms of a wide variety of academic and nonacademic goals and that assist in the student's ongoing development and learning. This can be approached by using achievement and attitude checklists, rating scales or rubrics and by writing narrative *reports*.

Regardless of the methods chosen, *grading* and reporting systems development is an ongoing process. Achievement-only grades derived from standards-based music instruction are a starting place. From there, teachers must continually reflect on what they wish to communicate to students, parents, and administrators. They also need to consider how best to structure this information so students can use it to improve future performance. The educational benefits are worth the time required to develop and implement multifaceted *grading* and reporting systems based on the advice presented here.

### Figure 1. Grading Checklist--Grade 1

The following list summarizes the academic and social skills we have been working on in music class during this term. A check mark in front of an entry indicates that the comment describes Emma's performance in music class.

#### Academic Skills

- Sings in tune
- Performs beat accurately
- Performs rhythms accurately
- Differentiates beat from rhythm
- Aurally identifies solfa syllables  
(sol, mi, la) in song literature
- Visually identifies solfa syllables  
(sol, mi, la) in song literature
- Identifies rhythms (ta, ti-ti)
- Plays classroom instruments correctly

(rhythm sticks, maracas, finger cymbals)

#### Social Skills

- Actively participates in music activities
- Pays attention when the teacher or other students are speaking
- Demonstrates on-task behavior when working alone and in groups

#### Figure 2. Grading Rating Scale--Grade 1 Music

The following list summarizes the academic and social skills we have been working on in music class during this term. Check marks after descriptors describe Emma's performance in music class.

#### Academic Skills

Sings in tune

Always  Usually  Sometimes  Never

Performs beat accurately

Always  Usually  Sometimes  Never

Performs rhythms accurately

Always  Usually  Sometimes  Never

Differentiates beat from rhythm

Always  Usually  Sometimes  Never

Aurally identifies solfa syllables (sol, mi, la) in song literature

Always  Usually  Sometimes  Never

Visually identifies solfa syllables (sol, mi, la) in song literature

Always  Usually  Sometimes  Never

Aurally identifies rhythmic elements (ta, ti-ti) in song literature

Always  Usually  Sometimes  Never

Visually identifies rhythmic elements (ta, ti-ti) in song literature

Always  Usually  Sometimes  Never

Plays nonpitched percussion instruments correctly (i.e., rhythm sticks, maracas, finger cymbals)

Always  Usually  Sometimes  Never

#### Social Skills

Actively participates in music activities

Always  Usually  Sometimes  Never

Pays attention when the teacher or other students are speaking

Always  Usually  Sometimes  Never

Demonstrates on-task behavior when working alone and in groups

Always  Usually  Sometimes  Never

#### Figure 3. Rubric

Skill Acquisition: Using appropriate motions, student demonstrates the meter and beat while listening(\*) to the song "Oats, Peas, Beans, and Barley Grow."

unable to perform--motions do not show correct meter and beat

beginning--accented motions sometimes demonstrate meter; motions might or might not show the beat

emerging--accented motions demonstrate meter: some motions show the beat

accurate--accented motions demonstrate meter; motions show the beat, but may be stiff or awkward.

accomplished--accented motions demonstrate meter; motions show the beat and seem free and natural.

(\*) Presentation of the song could take many forms--class sings while particular students demonstrate movements; teacher plays the melody on the piano or recorder; students listen to a recording.

Note -- This is a multipurpose rating scale. The same basic structure can be used a number of times by inserting the desired meter and song.

Adapted from Scott (2003,p. 11). Used with permission.

#### Figure 4. Narrative Report

Emma actively participates in music class. She sings the pentatonic song literature in tune and is able to identify sol , mi , and la songs aurally and in *traditional* music notation. She has problems using these syllables in vocal improvisations. We plan to work on this in the next term.

Emma steps the beat and claps the rhythm accurately while singing and responds correctly when asked to differentiate between the two. She also uses the nonpitched percussion instruments correctly in rhythm activities. Reading and writing rhythms has centered on quarter notes ( ta ) and eighth notes (ti). Emma can aurally identify these musical elements, but sometimes has problems constructing the notation for what she has heard. She will have an opportunity to work on this skill in the remainder of the year.

Students often work in groups. Emma enjoys these opportunities and relates well to her classmates. She helps students who are having problems and asks questions that keep the students ontask. Her interpersonal skills are definitely an asset!

#### **Endnotes**

(n1.) The reader is reminded that the soundness of achievement grades depends on the soundness of the instruction and the assessments on which this judgment is based. "Just as good instruction can be undermined by invalid assessment, good *grading* can be undermined by poorly constructed, invalid, and unreliable assessments. Irrelevant, invalid evidence about pupil achievement will produce irrelevant, invalid grades" (Airasian, 2001, p. 313). The ways and means for developing valid and reliable assessment instruments is beyond the scope of this paper.

(n2.) Various symbol systems may be used to represent grades. Two common methods are letters grades (A, B, C, D) or levels of proficiency (1. beginning; 2. basic; 3. proficient; 4. outstanding).

(n3.) Grades represent one way for communicating with pupils, parents, and administrators. Other methods, such as process portfolios and parent-student-teacher conferences, provide more detailed information about a student's progress. However, since grades are entrenched within our school systems, we must learn how best to use them.

(n4.) This section based on Guskey and Bailey (2001).

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