

## Letter Grades, Percentages, and Other Symbols: Research Summary

Researchers report that letter grades and other symbols that communicate evaluative feedback have a negative effect on learning for all students. The negative effects are most pronounced with low-achieving students (Butler 1987, 1988; Butterworth and Michael 1975; Calkins 1991; Curwin 1978; Harter 1978; Kyle 1992; Natriello 1984).

Research shows that students of high ability and high achievement decode evaluative feedback so it provides information that assists learning (Brookhart 2001). Specific descriptive feedback that focuses on what was done successfully and points the way to improvement has a positive effect on learning (Butler and Nisan 1986; Butler 1987, 1988; Butterworth and Michael 1975; Curwin 1978; Fuchs 1985; Kohn 1993).

Students with poor marks are more likely to see themselves as failures. They are less likely to succeed as learners. Further, limiting specific feedback means students have less information to support their future learning. Because letter grades and other symbols give many students the message that they are not able learners, they become less able (Jensen 1998; Sylwester 1995; Healy 1990; Smith 1986, 1995).

Therefore, when possible, refrain from giving evaluative feedback such as letter grades, percentages and other symbols. When letter grades, marks and symbols must be used (e.g., many report cards require them), take the time to help all students learn to decode evaluative feedback so that it gives them specific information to support their learning (e.g., "do more of this, do less of this" is important). One way to do this is by defining letter grades and other symbols by providing a detailed description of the quality of the evidence that results in different grades, marks, or symbols.

## Research Favourites

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Harlen, W. and Deakin-Crick, R. 2002. *Testing, Motivation and Learning*. Booklet produced by ARG at University of Cambridge Faculty of Education. <http://k1.ioe.ac.uk/tlrp.org/TML%BOOKLET%20complete.pdf>

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