

Note 3 | 2026

Should You Show the Grade?

What Happens When Students Get Feedback With and Without Scores



Educator Notes: Insights from Classroom Assessment Research



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By Ernesto Panadero (Dublin City University, Ireland; Universidad de Deusto, Spain) & Iván Sánchez-Iglesias (Universidad Complutense de Madrid, Spain)

This Educator Note is a practitioner-focused perspective on the *Educational Assessment* publication by Ernest Panadero & Iván Sánchez-Iglesias.

Panadero, E., & Sánchez-Iglesias, I. (2025). Impact of Displaying Grades Vs. Not Displaying Grades on Academic Performance and Emotional Outcomes While Delivering Feedback Comments: A Longitudinal Study. *Educational Assessment*, 30(1), 21–40.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/10627197.2025.2455128>

Educator Note No.3 was edited and readied for production by Caroline Wylie and Alison Bailey who wish to thank the anonymous practitioner reviewers for their feedback and Bryan Drost, Co-Chair of the NCME Classroom Assessment Committee.

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Should You Show the Grade? What Happens When Students Get Feedback With and Without Scores

By Ernesto Panadero (Dublin City University, Ireland; Universidad de Deusto, Spain) & Iván Sánchez-Iglesias (Universidad Complutense de Madrid, Spain)

Imagine you have just finished marking a set of assignments. Every student will receive written feedback: specific comments about what they did well and where they can improve. The question is what else, if anything, do you put at the top of the page? Do you also add the grade? Or do you hand back only the comments, perhaps recording the grade in your own records?

What happens next? Do students who see their grade ignore the comments and fixate on the number or letter? Do they feel more anxious? Does withholding the grade help students focus on learning from the feedback?

These are questions many teachers grapple with. A major meta-analysis found that students who received only grades showed lower performance and motivation than those who received written comments (Koenka et al., 2019). That work, however, mostly compared grades against comments as alternatives. Our study asked a different and arguably more practical question: when written comments are already in place, does also showing the grade change anything? In other words, we compared feedback comments alone versus feedback comments plus a visible grade, holding the comments constant across both conditions.

One distinction is worth drawing first. Formative feedback is often given on drafts, while students can still revise the same piece of work. In that situation the evidence is fairly clear: adding a grade tends to pull attention away from the comments and can depress the learning the feedback is meant to support (Butler & Nisan, 1986; Lipnevich & Smith, 2009). Our study addresses a different situation, common in classrooms but less examined: feedback on a completed task, where the next chance to apply it is a new assignment rather than a revision of the current one.

What we studied

We worked with 99 secondary school students (ages 13–17) in four history classrooms in Madrid, Spain (Panadero & Sánchez-Iglesias, 2025). Over the course of two months, students completed four classroom tasks that were graded and received written feedback every time. The key manipulation was simple: sometimes students were shown their grade along with the feedback comments, and sometimes they received only the comments, though their work was still graded behind the scenes and students knew this. We counterbalanced the conditions across classrooms so that every student experienced both phases at different points during the study.

Two procedural points are worth clarifying for educators reading this. First, students continued to receive grades in their other subjects throughout the study; the manipulation was specific to the history tasks. Second, the four tasks were sequential (each covered different content), so students could not directly revise the same piece of work. The teachers instructed students to use

the feedback to inform their next task, framing the comments as guidance for future learning rather than as a basis for revising and resubmitting the current task.

After each task, students reported their emotions: how much enjoyment, pride, hope, anxiety, shame, disappointment, and other feelings they experienced in response to the feedback. We measured these using a Spanish-language adaptation of the Achievement Emotions Questionnaire (Pekrun et al., 2011), adjusted to fit the format and length appropriate for our classroom context.

The written feedback itself was the type of comment most teachers will recognize: a mix of corrections, clarifying questions, and brief encouragement. Examples from the study include “You are improving, but there is still a need to delve deeper into the part about contextualization,” “The classification and the main ideas are adequate, but you haven’t contextualized it,” and “Why is that a sign of underdevelopment? You need to explain these kinds of things” (Panadero & Sánchez-Iglesias, 2025, Appendix B). Most comments focused on correcting specific points or prompting deeper reasoning, with brief positive reinforcement for strong work.

What we found

The results challenged simple narratives about teachers’ and students’ perceptions of grades being uniformly good or bad.

Grades initially affected performance and emotions, but not for long. When students first transitioned from not seeing grades to seeing them (or vice versa), there was a clear effect. Students who started receiving grades after a period without them showed a dip in performance and an increase in negative emotions, with disappointment and anxiety being among the most notable. Students who had their grades removed showed improved performance and slightly more positive emotions. These differences were statistically significant at the moment of transition. This aligns with earlier experimental findings showing that grades tend to increase negative affect (Lipnevich & Smith, 2009).

Students adapted. By the second round of each phase, however, the effects faded. Performance and emotions returned to baseline levels, regardless of whether students were seeing grades or not. This suggests that students are more resilient to grading changes than we might assume: what disrupted them in our study was the *change itself*, not the presence or absence of grades as such. This adaptation pattern is consistent with the Control-Value Theory of emotions (Pekrun et al., 2006), which holds that students’ emotional responses depend on their perceived control over academic outcomes and shift as they recalibrate to new conditions.

Feedback comments appear to matter, with or without grades. Performance generally improved over time across both conditions. This improvement reflects the combined contribution of regular classroom instruction and the written feedback students received, and our design does not allow us to separate the two. What we *can* say is that displaying or withholding the grade did not undermine that progress: the feedback comments did not appear to be derailed by the presence of grades, nor did students perform worse without them. This is consistent with the broader evidence base suggesting that comments are key drivers of learning when paired with

opportunities for students to act on them (Hattie & Timperley, 2007; Koenka et al., 2019; Panadero & Lipnevich, 2022).

What this means for your classroom

The most useful place to start is with what happens to feedback after it is given. Writing good comments takes real teacher time, so it is worth making that effort count.

- 1. Consistency matters more than you might think.** The strongest negative effects appeared when students experienced a change in grading practice, not from any particular practice being inherently harmful. If you decide to withhold grades on some assignments, or to start showing them after a period without, be aware that the transition itself may temporarily affect performance and emotions. Prepare students for it (Guskey & Brookhart, 2019).
- 2. If you introduce a change, give it time.** Our data suggest students adapt to new grading arrangements within one or two assessment cycles. The initial disruption is real but brief. Abandoning a new practice because of initial student resistance may mean you never see its potential benefits.
- 3. The impact of feedback depends on what happens after it lands.** Written feedback gives students valuable information about their work. How much that information translates into learning depends on what comes next: whether students have the opportunity, the time, and the motivation to apply it to their next task or to revise. Specific, actionable comments give students more to work with, and pairing them with clear next steps (a revision opportunity, a follow-up task, or a brief conversation about progress) increases the chance the information will be put to use (Hattie & Timperley, 2007). It is risky to assume students will remember feedback and apply it to a later task on their own. Building in a concrete chance to act on the comments, ideally a revision of the same work, usually does more for learning than hoping the feedback is retained and transferred.
- 4. Frame grades as information, not judgement.** When students first saw their grades after a period without them, they experienced more anxiety and disappointment. This may reflect students interpreting grades as a verdict rather than as useful information, consistent with how control and value appraisals shape academic emotions (Pekrun et al., 2006). Connecting grades explicitly to learning goals and giving students a meaningful next step (such as a revision opportunity or a related upcoming task), can help shift attention from the number to the learning.
- 4. The grade-versus-no-grade debate is too simple.** Our study shows that even without grades, feedback comments can carry their own form of high stakes for students. A critical comment can sting whether or not a number accompanies it. The real question for educators is not just whether to show a grade, but how to help students engage productively with all forms of evaluative information (Panadero & Lipnevich, 2022).
- 5. What you write matters more than whether a grade is attached.** This point deserves emphasis. Removing the grade does nothing on its own if the comments are vague. “Good job” or “needs more detail” gives students little to act on, with or without a number beside it. The gains in our study depended on feedback that pointed to something specific. The instructional priority, then, is not simply whether to show the grade, but helping teachers write feedback that is specific, actionable, and tied to the next learning opportunity.

What is already clear is that the relationship between grades and learning is more nuanced than “grades are bad” or “grades are necessary.” The evidence points toward a more practical conclusion: grades matter less than we think when strong feedback is present, disruptions in grading routines matter more than we expect, and students are more adaptive than we often give them credit for.

Questions for reflection and discussion

The next time you return student work, pick one of the moves below and give it a try in the coming week. Each follows a simple cycle: try something small, observe what students do, then discuss it with colleagues (many of you work in PLCs or teacher-based teams where this fits naturally).

Try

Over the next two or three assignments, test one low-stakes change: hold grades back for 24 hours while students first respond to your written comments; ask each student to name one comment they will act on in their next task; or require a brief reflection or revision before students see the grade. In a PLC or team, the shared version of this move is: how are we planning to give students structured opportunities to use this feedback?

Observe

The next time you hand work back, spend five minutes simply watching what students do first. Do they read the comments, or go straight to the grade? Ask a few of them why. Think about your last three assignments: how many students were actually expected to use your feedback on a later task, and how many were explicitly taught how to do that? What small routine might help students carry today’s feedback into tomorrow’s work?

Discuss

Bring what you notice to colleagues or an instructional coach. Which students in your class are most likely to benefit from seeing grades immediately, and which might gain more from engaging with the feedback first? How could you differentiate your approach while staying within your school’s grading policy? And what would need to change about your feedback routine, based on what you observed, to make the comments easier for students to act on?

Looking ahead

This study is part of a broader research program. A companion study, currently under review, examines how students’ personality traits, motivation, and prior achievement shape their individual responses to grade display, because, as any teacher knows, not all students react the same way to a grade. We are also launching a larger replication across primary, secondary, and higher education to test whether these patterns hold across different age groups and educational contexts.

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Further reading

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