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The Zero Sum Game

As the last school year neared its end, the topic of grading practices hit the presses from coast to coast. In response to media reports, teachers, students, and parents chimed in about the zero sum game being played out in secondary schools across Canada. The issue at hand was the possible elimination of the age-old practice of issuing zeros for late assignments.

The most vocal group favours keeping the zero in its place, arguing that administrative havoc and developmental vacuum would emerge in its absence. Since May, for example, close to six thousand people have signed an Ottawa teacher's online petition¹ against new grading practices suggested in a provincial discussion paper.² Without the ability to issue zeros for incomplete work, signatories worry that students will:

- fail to learn important life skills (e.g. meeting deadlines, time management, working hard, personal responsibility);
- struggle in university or in the workplace;
- feel entitled to a free ride in school;
- lack motivation; and
- never learn from their mistakes.

Others feel the proliferation of 'no zero' policies will 'dumb down' education, unfairly penalize students who get their assignments in on time, further undermine teachers' professional autonomy, and add to already heavy teacher workloads.³

A host of students have also voiced their objections. One in a particular – a Grade 11 student in New Brunswick – reveals the cultural currency that the zero continues to hold in schools as she concludes that such policies will only indulge the "lazy...apathetic... irresponsible" students who fail to turn in their assignments on time.⁴

Those on the other side of the issue argue that punitive grading practices – especially those that mete out consequences for behaviour instead of learning – no longer have a place in high schools. 'No work, no mark' policies do not, as Douglas Reeves notes, motivate students, and in most cases they actually contribute to disengagement from school.⁵ They also work against volumes of evidence that timely, personalized growth focussed on feedback is key to student learning and achievement.

Like so many debates in education, the future of the zero is caught between maintaining the status quo and creating more effective learning environments. Proponents for both sides, however, are omitting some critical points.

The integrity of this debate depends on ignoring important differences among students. In theory, any student can get a zero for incomplete work, but the majority don't. The zero, like many grading practices, functions as a sorting mechanism, often putting the most at-risk students at further risk. Its punitive impact is magnified when it is then factored into end-of-term averages, cancelling out any evidence of learning or the quality of the work that was completed on time.

The debate also relies on an assumption that all assignments are created equal. Even the most adamant supporters of 'no zero' policies argue that the consequences for an incomplete assignment should be its completion, not a zero. This is a difficult pill to swallow for students who may ask educators, "Why complete something that wasn't worth my time in the first place?" An eerie silence falls when questions are asked about the nature of the secondary school assignments: Are they relevant, challenging, engaging? Do students have choices and a voice in creating them? Do they provide young people with an opportunity to learn about themselves as learners?

Anecdotal feedback from schools that have implemented 'no zero' policies along with strategies to support students (e.g. before and after-school programs, flexible due dates for students trying to balance school with other responsibilities) is encouraging. It is fair to ask what is leading to these results: is it the elimination of the zero, or the flexible and supportive relationships that emerged among students and teachers in its absence?

We continue to accept the premise that instructional and assessment practices, even when not equally effective, can be more or less appropriate depending on individual circumstances. Given what we know about student learning and engagement, effective teaching, and young people's social, emotional, and intellectual development, this may not be the case with the zero. Legitimate practical issues might emerge in its absence, but the zero has outlived its purpose if it teaches young people 'a lesson', but fails to engage them in meaningful learning. |

JODENE DUNLEAVY is the National Coordinator of the *What did you do in school today?* initiative. She has worked at the Ministry and board levels as a policy advisor and as a freelance education writer for CEA and within the Ontario and Nova Scotia education sectors. Her areas of focus include educational theory and research in board effectiveness and school improvement, and evidence-based policy development.

Notes

- 1 Caroline Orchard, "Re-examine the Evaluation Policy" Petition at <http://www.ipetitions.com/petition/evaluation/signatures-1.html> and Joanne Laucius, "Teacher Begins Petition to Change No-fail Policy," *The Ottawa Citizen*, 1 May 2009.
- 2 Ontario Ministry of Education, *Growing Success – Assessment, Evaluation and Reporting: Improving Student Learning* (Toronto: Queen's Printer, 2008). Available at http://www.ocup.org/resources/documents/EDU_GS_binder_010708_BMV2.pdf
- 3 Comments posted in response to Orchard and Laucius, 2009 and comments posted in response to Janet Staffenhagen, "No Zeros for Students Writing Tests or Assignments," *Report Card: An Indepth Look at the B.C. Education System* (<http://communities.canada.com/vancouverun/blogs/reportcard/archive/2009/05/11/no-zeros-for-students-writing-tests-or-assignments.aspx>)
- 4 Carolyne LaBelle, "Work Ethic the Cost of No-zero Policy?" on CanadaEast.com, 16 April 2009 (<http://thisweek.canadaeast.com/rss/article/636433>)
- 5 Douglas B. Reeves, "Leading to Change/Effective Grading Practices," *Educational Leadership* 65, no. 5 (2008): 85-87.