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**| RESEARCH ARTICLE**

## **What is the Cost of Silence: Examining the Drawbacks of the In-class Participation Grading Method in American K-12 Schools**

**Ricky Zhou**

*Northfield Mount Hermon School, Gill, MA, U.S.A*

**Corresponding Author:** Ricky Zhou, **E-mail:** [yuxuan171717@gmail.com](mailto:yuxuan171717@gmail.com)

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**| ABSTRACT**

This study weighs the significance of one of the commonly used grading methods in K-12 schools in a new way: the in-class participation grading method, which measures a student's quantitative engagement in classes. The participation grade is often combined with other gradings and makes up the Grade Point Average (mostly in high schools). Yet numerous flaws exist within the grading system. While it is used worldwide, only K-12 schools in the United States will be considered in this paper. The objective is to determine whether the grading method is inclusive or, in other words, fair to be used in the American education system. The essay examines and discusses the drawbacks of the method and provides plausible alternatives. Such alternatives to grading participation might shed light on innovating the American Education System in general. Though no experimental procedures were conducted, this literary analysis utilizes multiple sources for empirical evidence.

**| KEYWORDS**

Developmental psychology, education, participation, personality, grading methods

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### **1. Introduction**

Suppose you are a student who doesn't really feel like talking much, whether in class discussions or in daily life. You always dedicate yourself to every single assignment and test. When you receive your final report, however, you find that you get an A- for a class. You are confused since, based on your calculation, your grades should be in the A range. You rushed to your teacher's office and asked her why you didn't get what you deserved. She says to you: 'You speak too little in classes, so I don't feel you are engaging with or understanding the class content, which is why I lowered your in-class participation grade.' You try to speak for yourself, but you realize that you cannot argue with her since you have no evidence or record. You *can't* do anything. You are *penalized* for your silence by the in-class participation grading method. Education, the very process of imparting general knowledge in order to develop the powers of reasoning and judgment, and to prepare oneself intellectually for mature life, is one of the underlying principles of this grading method. However, given that the students have distinctive and nuanced personalities, they wouldn't all strictly abide by or suit this rubric. Even though the grading method is widely used by middle and high schools in the United States to assess a student's participation, the method on its own may not be a fair and inclusive way to accurately reflect a student's actual engagement and understanding of the class content. Limitations to this study exist: no tangible experiments were conducted, and some of the conclusions might not be generalized to every individual in the United States.

### **2. Methodology**

Even though no experiments were conducted in this essay, various sources were utilized to support the arguments as empirical evidence. Many of the seemingly unrelated findings established by the authors of these sources were connected intimately by this literary analysis.

### **3. Discussion**

Students are unique when it comes to absorbing knowledge, and they have different ways in which they feel comfortable participating in class. They carry varying personalities that affect the willingness to participate during classes. A student might possess a more outgoing and talkative personality, while another could be demonstrating a relatively more reserved one. These factors, therefore, also result in different learning styles. Students with certain personalities, such as shyness, are more prone to listen to the class and the thoughts of their following peers rather than speaking up themselves. Often, the in-class participation method can be intimidating and biased towards students who have more introverted personalities (Mello, 2010). These students do not possess the same degree of willingness to speak up during classes as the students that are more comfortable voicing their thoughts. An unfortunate consequence of this problem might be that graded participation does not build the ability to learn, but rather, it rewards those who prefer and are comfortable verbalizing what they have learned (Mello, 2010). Therefore, it is imperative to make sure that every student is placed in a learning environment in which they feel comfortable in order to achieve their maximum learning outcome. Students with personalities that don't align with the grading method will bear an unfair disadvantage when the teacher grades them because speaking up in classes is the only way in which a student's participation can be observed and assessed by the teacher. The teacher, in order to be as objective as possible, will try to recall the frequency this student participated during class, and the number of frequencies is highly subjective to memories (unless the class was archived or recorded—via Zoom, perhaps). The student's rooted personality will not be considered a factor when it comes to grading. Therefore, even though students understand the class content, their way of showing the ability to learn is limited by their diverse personalities.

While the teacher might not consider an individual student's personality as a factor when grading participation, this method also brings about student behavior that may be inflating their true understanding of the content. This further jeopardizes the objectivity of the grading method. It would be vital to discuss the fairness and the inclusivity of the in-class participation grading method. Each student has a unique way of interpreting the grading method. Once students realize how the grading method works and wish to obtain high grades, some will try to draw their teachers' attention and speak up frequently, even though they do not necessarily have a thorough understanding of the class content. For instance, they might compose unorganized thoughts and impose knowledge that is common sense—both which are not considered effective contributions to the class. Their 'participation' is of low quality, but they nevertheless obtain high grades for their 'common engagement' in classes. There is a difference between genuine effort and an eager appearance in classes. A student might participate actively, either because he or she has a genuine interest in the course or because the student simply wants to achieve high participation grades (Kelly, 2008). Both types of participation seem to be active, but only the first type can be considered true active learning. The students who participate only for the grades are not necessarily demonstrating their interest, but the teacher might not notice or consider the difference between the two types of participation and will still favor students "who appear attentive and aggressive during class... not because they have learned more material but because they have learned to act like they are learning more" (Kelly, 2008, p35). In summary, the grading method causes students to focus more on the quantity rather than the quality of their engagements (Mello, 2010). If students continue to value quantity over quality, their ability to develop critical thinking skills might be hindered. As a result, very little value is added to the class by each student under the in-class participation rubric. Another flaw of the in-class participation method is it creates an unfair share of air during class discussions. Some students would compete for air time during class discussion, hoping to be noticed by the teacher more, thereby gaining a higher participation grade, but their actions create an unequal distribution of opportunities for the others to speak up. The silenced ones are likely to be ignored by the teacher and receive a relatively lower participation grade. The continuous competition for speaking up in classes molds a high-pressure, participation-intensive class atmosphere (Mello, 2010). These problems created by the grading method are less impactful in private schools since classes are usually smaller, hence more compact. While in larger classes in public schools, the competition for air time renders some students not able to speak up and get noticed by the teacher at all (Mello, 2010). The toxic environment forces some to fight for air time to avoid being ignored. Not only from the student's perspective is the grading method unfair, but it is also subject to bias from the teachers' perspective. Teachers, whether knowingly or unknowingly, might favor individuals in the classroom with certain characteristics or personalities. For example, teachers could unconsciously favor more lively students who talk more and implicitly disapprove of shy students who don't engage much in classes. In another way, they could unintentionally develop either positive or negative impressions of different students. Therefore, teachers might offer a higher participation grade to those who are more favored when they grade their participation since they are linked to a more positive impression. The in-class participation grading method may lend itself to more bias than grades for daily assignments, projects, essays, and presentations. There is bias in grading all forms of assignments which is bound to happen, and it is not quite possible for the students to dispute their participation grades after the teachers grade them since there is no evidence of record or archive of the class unless the class takes place in online environments (such as Zoom), which could be recorded and reviewed later (Mello, 2010). The gradings are mainly based on the teacher's memory from classes, which can be influenced by many factors, including other classes they teach. Some teachers, in order to hold a more smooth and effective class, would intentionally pick on students who are more 'capable' of conducting discussions and answering questions. With the extra attention the teacher pays to cooperative students, they would receive an automatic boost from the teacher to their participation grades (Kelly, 2008). These biases are,

again, inevitable. However, they are still unfair. When teachers continuously call on more cooperative students, they might at the same time frustrate the confidence and willingness of other students to participate in class. A perspective more inherent to the student that highlights the flaw in the grading method is cultural barriers. For international students who have different cultural backgrounds, countries of origin, and native languages, their perception of class-participation differs. The education system in which they grew up might promote different learning strategies, which would shift students' personalities and in-class behaviors. Students who do not speak English as their first language may not feel confident when speaking up, which could jeopardize the frequency and willingness of in-class participation. Students from cultures that do not intentionally grade or promote class participation, such as those in East Asian societies, will experience a great disadvantage when they attend schools in the US after they were educated in their native cultures. For example, Confucianism in Asia regards teachers as 'givers of knowledge' and believes that all students need to do is to absorb the knowledge gifted by the teacher. Therefore, students' strict respect and reverence for the teachers would decrease their willingness to participate in class discussions and challenge the teacher (Mello, 2010). Furthermore, students from cultures that are regarded as 'minorities' might have relatively less courage to express their unique views that don't necessarily agree with the 'mainstream belief'. The minority students, especially those of color, could feel that their words and ideas are not accepted by the teacher or their fellow peers. They might be reluctant to express their own ideas and feelings as individuals since there is a possibility that their opinions could 'offend' others and go directly against the 'dominant system.' They would assume that they are expected to 'speak for the entirety of their cultures' experiences.' (White, 2011). The cultural barriers, just like personalities, are rooted in students and cannot be easily altered. Without accommodation from the teacher or the in-class participation grading method itself, their grades may be lower than those of their classmates.

From a psychological standpoint, mandatory participation induced by the grading method could also affect students' emotional well-being. The middle and high school years bring about the developmental period of adolescence which in some, puts them more at-risk of mental health issues, such as anxiety. In order to avoid potential judgements from others, students might not be willing to speak up and participate in classes. For example, students might want to resolve a question asked by the teacher during class but are terrified by the belief that every word will be carefully assessed by the entire class as if they were presidents. The extra caution in answering the question yields extra pressure and decreases the willingness of this student to participate. Pressure causes great discomfort, particularly for students who have social anxiety. If they wish to get a higher participation grade, they may experience uneasiness in doing so. Students are 'constantly worried about looking foolish in front of others' (Norlock, 2016, p486). Many physical symptoms such as a rapid heart rate, trembling and blushing often accompany social anxiety. These symptoms apply to daily participation in class discussions, and they escalate when it comes to tasks such as individual presentations. A student with social anxiety could spend an entire semester not actively participating in oral discussions unless asked to do so (Norlock, 2016). Therefore, students who experience social anxiety may end up with lower grades. Not participating in classes doesn't necessarily mean that a student is not paying attention or not understanding. A student could have legitimate mental health issues that prevent them from participating with ease. One other way to examine students' mindsets during classes is to take their individual self-esteem into account. Self-esteem refers to the 'set of evaluative attitudes that a person has about him/herself or his/her achievements' (Morrison & Thomas, 1975). It is derived from each student's personal beliefs, experiences, and opinions regarding a matter. Self-esteem, coupled with resiliency, often determines one's intention to participate in a discussion or not. While some students have stronger self-esteem and are not afraid of judgements and failures when participating, others might have more fragile self-esteem to rejection or criticism, which could drive them to intentionally avoid participating. Studies have shown that students who have fragile self-esteem tend to crave for a greater amount of personal space (Morrison, Thomas, 1975). Participating in classes would undoubtedly decrease their personal space because they would be addressing a larger group, which is the opposite of what they crave for. Students with low-esteem, in order to avoid being uncomfortable, would intentionally 'suppress their expression of thoughts or questions' while in classes (Morrison & Thomas, 1975, p377). However, low-esteemed students not speaking up sufficiently does not mean that they are not delivering their ideas. Research done by Morrison and Thomas indicated that students who are of high-esteem, in comparison to a group with low self-esteem, only contributed less than half of the main thoughts, and the total amounts of thoughts contributed by each group had no significant difference. The study showed that low-esteem students tend to maintain their distance from others in classes in order to maintain their maximum learning capability. Their seemingly insignificant contributions, however, are of good quality and should not be penalized for their fear of speaking up.

While the unfairness and exclusiveness of the in-class participation grading methods have been examined and discussed, proponents of this method could say otherwise. After all, the grading method has been an essential part of the US education system for many years, and as such, its advantages and usefulness should be acknowledged as well. Students' in-class engagements, promoted by the grading method, teach them to advocate for themselves and communicate effectively. By actively participating in classes, students will be able to master life skills that are vital not only for their daily lives but also indispensable for their future workplaces. For instance, students might be asked to conduct a group debate session during class, which requires them to continuously communicate with their peers and cooperate effectively. The skills obtained by participating in classes could allow students to thrive in their future jobs when they are, for example, communicating with their clients, demonstrating statistical

presentations, and interviewing others utilizing the grading method. They could furthermore benefit students' ability to socialize with their peers and their teachers as well. The acquisition of these skills is, in part, what education is about. To educate students is not to fill their brains with mere knowledge; conceptual changes that affect basic life skills are what they need. In addition, students' interactions with the teacher when participating in class enable them to build their experience of problem-solving with adults, which is useful when students grow up in society (Dancer & Kamvounias, 2005). In order to succeed in their future careers, it is best for the students to be prompted by the in-class participation grading method. As their frequency of contributing to the class increase, their essential life skills strengthen. Moreover, students would need to have the courage and know the optimal way of expressing their own opinions. For example, if a person's rights are infringed, he would have to possess the ability to advocate for his own rights. The ability can be acquired through participating in classes. Students often hold opposite views during class discussions. However, not all of them have the ability or courage to express their views and challenge others. Under the in-class participation grading method, students would be encouraged to share their voices with the class, so their courage to speak for themselves accumulates over time. Participating in classes can transform students into decision-makers and controllers of their own lives (Johnston & Ivey & Faulkner, 2011). When the students are encouraged to propose challenging views, they think about it logically before they speak, and they will choose what to say and what not to say. They would develop the ability to bravely stand up for and protect the things they value. Students will understand that for each action, there are following consequences when they are prompted by the grading method (Johnston & Ivey & Faulkner, 2011). The courage of self-advocating can be applied to a variety of real-life scenarios. By developing the courage and using a logical way to argue, students can prevent themselves from being unjustly treated.

#### **4. Conclusion**

All in all, the in-class participation grading method fails to include students' inherent personalities and learning styles as factors. Students have diverse abilities and may not be assessed based on one single rubric. Learning is an active process, not a passive one. Education is effective only when students have personalized and comfortable ways of learning. In addition, the grading method is not inclusive because teachers are often subjected to their bias when grading students' participation. Some students, on the other hand, also have their own interpretation of what participation means to themselves, which could result in low-quality responses and an unfair share of class time. This results in teachers rewarding students who talk the most rather than acknowledging those who effectively make contributions to the entire class progress. Social anxiety and self-esteem also impact students' willingness to engage during class by speaking up. Such reasons can also be taken into account when grading in-class participation. Meanwhile, benefits of this grading method exist. The grading method sets up students for success in the future by pushing them to develop important life skills. These skills can enhance students' speaking, socializing, and reasoning abilities.

While the in-class participation grading method is flawed, modifications can be made to make it more inclusive and fair. Some alternatives or add-ons to the grading method could be beneficial. The think-pair-share (TPS) teaching strategy advocated by Mundelsee and Jurkowski is an effective way to accommodate students (especially shy students) in K-12 schools with different personalities to participate comfortably. Under this strategy, students are first asked to think regarding a given topic or task. Then, each student will be paired up with another student to share their thoughts with each other. Finally, students will be able to share their extended or refined findings with the larger class. Students feel safe when they are addressing a smaller group, and this strategy allows them to have enough time to compose their ideas. These ideas are also usually of good quality since they are thoughts that have been combined and validated by a partner.

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**ORCID iD:** <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6467-3912>

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