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Grades or Growth? Exploring Students' Perceptions of Grade-Oriented Education and Meaningful Learning

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Abstract

This study explored the perceptions of Grade 12 students regarding grade-oriented education and meaningful learning at Tanjay City Science High School. It aimed to understand how students perceive the importance of grades and meaningful learning, identify factors that shape their learning priorities, and examine how grades influence their motivation, study habits, and educational experiences. An exploratory qualitative research design was employed, with 14 Grade 12 students selected through purposive sampling. Data were gathered through researcher-made semi-structured interviews and analyzed using thematic analysis following the six-phase approach of Braun and Clarke (2021). Member checking was also conducted to strengthen the credibility of the findings. The findings revealed that students generally recognized the importance of grades, particularly because grades may influence academic opportunities and future educational goals. However, participants also emphasized that grades do not fully represent genuine learning. Meaningful learning was commonly associated with understanding lessons, remembering knowledge, applying what was learned in real-life situations, and developing skills that extend beyond examinations. The participants also described how academic pressure and the pursuit of high grades could encourage memorization and studying primarily for examinations, while activity-based tasks, practical applications, feedback, and opportunities for engagement could encourage deeper and more meaningful learning. Although students differed in the importance they assigned to grades and meaningful learning, their responses generally reflected a desire to maintain academic achievement while also gaining knowledge and skills that remain useful beyond the classroom. The study concludes that students do not necessarily view grades and meaningful learning as mutually exclusive. Rather, they recognize grades as important indicators and gateways to academic opportunities while considering meaningful learning as essential to genuine understanding, personal development, and the long-term retention and application of knowledge. The findings suggest the importance of educational practices that maintain academic standards while providing students with opportunities to understand, apply, and engage meaningfully with what they learn.

Keywords
Grade-Oriented Education, Meaningful Learning, Students' Perceptions, Academic Achievement, Thematic Analysis

Introduction

Education seeks not only to measure students' academic achievement but also to foster meaningful learning that prepares them for lifelong personal, professional, and societal success. Within educational systems, academic grades have long been recognized as one of the primary indicators of students' performance and learning outcomes. Grades are widely used to evaluate academic progress, determine scholastic standing, and provide access to opportunities such as scholarships, awards, and admission to higher levels of education. As an essential component of educational assessment, grading communicates students' level of achievement, supports educational decision-making, and influences future educational opportunities (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2023). Because of their significance, students often strive to obtain high grades as indicators of effort, competence,

and success. While grading serves an important role in evaluating learning outcomes, a strong emphasis on academic performance may also shape how students approach learning, sometimes placing greater value on grades than on the learning process itself (Horne et al., 2022).

Alongside the pursuit of academic achievement, contemporary education increasingly emphasizes meaningful learning as a fundamental goal of quality education. Meaningful learning promotes educational experiences that enable learners to actively construct knowledge through real-world situations and purposeful engagement. Rather than focusing solely on memorization or examination performance, it encourages students to analyze problems, collaborate with others, reflect on their experiences, and apply acquired knowledge in practical contexts. This approach develops higher-order thinking, creativity, communication, problem-solving, and lifelong learning competencies that prepare learners to meet the demands of an ever-changing world. Likewise, educational frameworks emphasize that quality education should balance academic achievement with meaningful learning experiences that allow students to apply knowledge beyond the classroom (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2020; UNESCO, 2021).

Although grading and meaningful learning are often discussed as separate concepts, both play important roles in supporting students' academic and personal development. Grades provide standards for evaluating academic performance, while meaningful learning encourages deeper understanding, reflection, and the practical application of knowledge. Students' motivation is likewise influenced by both external factors, such as grades and academic recognition, and internal factors, such as curiosity and the desire to learn. According to Ryan and Deci (2020), educational environments that emphasize external rewards may encourage students to become more grade-oriented, whereas environments that support intrinsic motivation foster deeper engagement and meaningful learning. Similarly, Horne et al. (2022) found that students often experience considerable pressure to achieve high grades, influencing their learning priorities, motivation, and overall educational experiences. These findings underscore the importance of understanding how students themselves perceive grade-oriented education and meaningful learning, particularly within academically demanding school environments.

This concern is particularly relevant in Tanjay City Science High School, where students are expected to meet rigorous academic standards and consistently demonstrate high levels of scholastic performance. Such an academically competitive environment may influence how students define success, prioritize learning, and perceive the role of grades in their educational experiences. Exploring these perceptions may provide valuable insights into how students balance the pursuit of academic excellence with meaningful learning.

Despite the growing body of literature on grading practices, student motivation, meaningful learning, and educational assessment, these topics have largely been examined independently or from the perspectives of teachers, assessment systems, and educational institutions. Comparatively fewer studies have explored students' own perceptions of grade-oriented education and meaningful learning, particularly among senior high school students in academically competitive learning environments. Furthermore, to the researchers' knowledge, there is limited documented evidence examining these perceptions within the context of Tanjay City Science High School. This gap highlights the need for a qualitative investigation into how students perceive grade-oriented education and meaningful learning and how these perceptions influence their learning priorities and educational experiences.

The findings of this study may benefit several stakeholders. Students may develop a deeper understanding of their own learning priorities and reflect on how grades and meaningful learning influence their educational experiences. Teachers may gain valuable insights into students' perspectives, enabling them to design instructional strategies and assessment practices that promote both academic excellence and meaningful learning. School administrators may use the findings to strengthen policies and programs that support balanced educational experiences while maintaining high academic standards. Future researchers may also use the findings of this study as a reference for further investigations related to grading practices, meaningful learning, and students' educational experiences.

Therefore, this study aims to investigate students' perceptions of grade-oriented education and meaningful learning at Tanjay City Science High School. Specifically, it seeks to understand how students perceive grade-oriented education and meaningful learning, identify the factors that shape their learning priorities, and explore how they describe the role of grades in their educational experiences. Through these insights, the study hopes to contribute to a deeper

understanding of how students navigate the balance between academic achievement and meaningful learning within an academically competitive school environment.

Literature Review

Grade-Oriented Education and the Role of Academic Grade

Academic grades have long been regarded as one of the most widely used indicators of students' academic achievement and educational performance. Within educational systems, grades serve multiple functions, including evaluating learning outcomes, communicating achievement levels, determining academic standing, and providing access to opportunities such as scholarships, awards, and admission to higher levels of education. Because of their importance, many students perceive grades as a primary measure of success and competence. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2023) emphasizes that academic performance remains a significant indicator of educational attainment and continues to influence students' future educational opportunities and outcomes.

The strong emphasis placed on academic grades has contributed to the development of grade-oriented educational environments, where students prioritize achieving high marks as a central goal of their learning experience. In such settings, academic success is often defined through numerical performance, encouraging students to focus on assessment results and academic recognition. According to Horne et al. (2022), students frequently adapt their learning strategies to maximize grades, placing considerable attention on examinations, assignments, and assessment requirements. As a result, the pursuit of high grades may become a dominant factor influencing students' academic behaviors and decision-making processes.

Research further suggests that grade-oriented educational practices can shape how students approach learning. While grades can motivate students to exert effort and maintain academic discipline, an excessive focus on performance outcomes may encourage surface-level learning strategies such as memorization and examination-focused studying. Horne et al. (2022) argue that when students become primarily concerned with obtaining favorable grades, learning may be viewed as a means of achieving academic rewards rather than as an opportunity to develop knowledge and understanding. This shift in priorities may influence how students define educational success and evaluate their academic experiences.

Although grading remains an essential component of educational assessment, contemporary discussions emphasize the importance of balancing academic achievement with meaningful learning. Alternative grading approaches have been proposed to encourage deeper engagement and reduce excessive emphasis on numerical performance. Sese (2020) found that alternative grading practices can support meaningful learning by encouraging students to focus on improvement, reflection, and mastery of knowledge rather than solely on grades. These findings suggest that while grades continue to play a valuable role in education, understanding their influence on students' perceptions and learning priorities remains an important area of investigation.

Meaningful Learning and Student-Centered Education

Meaningful learning has emerged as an important educational approach that emphasizes meaningful learning experiences and the practical application of knowledge. Unlike traditional approaches that often focus on memorization and examination performance, meaningful learning encourages students to actively engage with real-world problems, collaborate with others, think critically, and apply what they have learned in meaningful contexts. According to UNESCO (2021), education should equip learners with the knowledge, skills, values, and attitudes necessary to respond to the challenges of an ever-changing world. This perspective highlights that the goal of education extends beyond achieving high academic performance to developing lifelong learners who can contribute effectively to society.

Similarly, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2020), through the OECD Learning Compass 2030, emphasizes that learners should develop competencies such as critical thinking, creativity, communication, collaboration, and responsible decision-making. These competencies are best cultivated through student-centered and meaningful learning experiences that encourage learners to construct knowledge actively rather

than passively receive information. Such educational practices prepare students not only for academic success but also for future personal, professional, and civic responsibilities.

Recent studies further demonstrate the value of meaningful assessment in supporting meaningful learning. Garcia (2025) found that meaningful assessments in biology enhanced Grade 11 students' understanding of concepts by allowing them to apply their knowledge through practical and performance-based activities. Students became more engaged in the learning process and demonstrated greater confidence in connecting classroom lessons to real-life situations. These findings suggest that meaningful assessment can promote deeper understanding while encouraging students to become active participants in their own learning.

In a similar study, Habagat and Hermosa (2024) reported that meaningful assessment positively influenced students' learning outcomes by providing opportunities to demonstrate knowledge through meaningful and contextualized tasks rather than relying solely on traditional examinations. Likewise, Far et al. (2025) emphasized that student-centered assessment practices encourage learners to reflect on their progress, participate actively in the assessment process, and develop higher-order thinking skills. Collectively, these studies indicate that meaningful learning and student-centered education provide meaningful educational experiences that complement academic achievement by promoting deeper understanding, engagement, and the practical application of knowledge.

Student Motivation and Learning Goals

Students' motivation plays a significant role in shaping their learning behaviors, academic priorities, and educational experiences. Motivation influences the goals students pursue, the effort they invest in learning, and the strategies they use to achieve academic success. According to Ryan and Deci (2020), motivation exists along a continuum from intrinsic motivation, in which students engage in learning because it is personally meaningful and enjoyable, to extrinsic motivation, in which learning is driven by external rewards such as grades, recognition, or academic achievement. While both forms of motivation can encourage learning, intrinsic motivation is generally associated with deeper engagement, greater persistence, and improved long-term learning outcomes.

In grade-oriented educational environments, students may become increasingly motivated by external rewards rather than by the desire to acquire knowledge and develop meaningful skills. The emphasis on high-stakes assessments and grading practices often encourages students to prioritize examination performance and academic recognition over genuine understanding. Dong and Liu (2022) found that students' perceptions of high-stakes assessments significantly influenced both their learning motivation and the amount of time they devoted to studying. Students who viewed these assessments primarily in terms of their external consequences, such as grades and academic requirements, were more likely to exhibit extrinsic, requirement-oriented motivation. In contrast, those who perceived the assessments as valid, meaningful, and supportive of learning demonstrated stronger intrinsic motivation, indicating a greater desire to learn for personal growth and understanding rather than solely for academic rewards.

Assessment practices also influence students' motivation by affecting how they monitor and evaluate their own learning. Yan et al. (2023) emphasized that self-assessment encourages learners to reflect on their strengths, identify areas for improvement, and become more actively involved in the learning process. Such practices promote self-regulated learning, helping students focus on personal growth and continuous improvement rather than solely on academic results. By encouraging reflection and learner autonomy, self-assessment supports the development of intrinsic motivation and lifelong learning habits.

Furthermore, students' beliefs about learning can influence how they respond to academic challenges. Burnette et al. (2022) reported that growth mindset interventions positively affect academic achievement by encouraging students to view abilities as developable through effort and effective learning strategies. Learners who adopt a growth-oriented perspective are more likely to value improvement, resilience, and meaningful learning instead of viewing grades as the sole indicator of success. These findings suggest that students' motivation is shaped not only by grading practices but also by the educational experiences and assessment approaches that encourage learning, reflection, and personal development.

Students' Perceptions of Grades and Meaningful Learning

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Students' perceptions of grades and meaningful learning play an important role in shaping their educational experiences, learning priorities, and definitions of academic success. These perceptions are influenced by the learning environment, assessment practices, personal motivation, and the expectations established by schools. As students progress through their education, they develop beliefs about whether academic success is best reflected by high grades, meaningful learning, or a balance between the two. Understanding these perceptions is essential because they influence how students approach learning, respond to assessment, and evaluate their own educational experiences.

Research indicates that many students continue to associate academic success with obtaining high grades because educational institutions commonly use grades as the basis for recognition, scholarships, and future educational opportunities. Horne et al. (2022) found that students often prioritize graded tasks and examinations, viewing grades as tangible indicators of achievement and competence. While grades may motivate students to perform well academically, an excessive emphasis on numerical performance may shift students' attention away from developing deeper understanding and transferable knowledge.

Conversely, studies on meaningful learning suggest that students also recognize the value of educational experiences that extend beyond academic performance. Garcia (2025) reported that Grade 11 students viewed meaningful assessments as meaningful because they allowed them to apply classroom knowledge to practical situations and actively participate in the learning process. Similarly, Habagat and Hermosa (2024) found that meaningful assessment encouraged students to demonstrate learning through contextualized and performance-based tasks, resulting in more engaging and meaningful educational experiences. These findings suggest that students appreciate learning opportunities that promote understanding, critical thinking, and the practical application of knowledge rather than relying solely on traditional examinations.

Students' perceptions are also influenced by assessment approaches that encourage reflection and active participation in learning. Yan et al. (2023) emphasized that self-assessment enables learners to evaluate their own progress, recognize their strengths and areas for improvement, and become more responsible for their learning. Likewise, Sese (2020) highlighted that alternative grading practices can shift students' attention from merely earning grades toward developing mastery, self-improvement, and meaningful engagement with learning. Collectively, these studies suggest that students' perceptions of grades and meaningful learning are shaped by the educational practices they experience, reinforcing the importance of understanding how learners themselves interpret the relationship between academic achievement and meaningful learning.

Research Gap

The reviewed literature demonstrates that previous studies have extensively examined grading practices, meaningful learning, student motivation, assessment methods, and educational outcomes. Existing research has shown that grades play a significant role in shaping students' academic behaviors and motivation (Horne et al., 2022; Ryan & Deci, 2020), while meaningful learning and student-centered assessment promote deeper understanding, critical thinking, and the practical application of knowledge (UNESCO, 2021; OECD, 2020; Garcia, 2025). Similarly, studies have emphasized the importance of self-assessment and alternative grading practices in fostering learner engagement and continuous improvement (Yan et al., 2023; Sese, 2020).

Despite these contributions, the existing body of literature has primarily examined these concepts independently or from the perspectives of teachers, assessment systems, or institutional practices. Comparatively fewer studies have explored how students themselves perceive the relationship between grade-oriented education and meaningful learning, particularly within academically competitive senior high school environments. Moreover, while several international and local studies have investigated grading practices and meaningful assessment, there remains limited literature focusing specifically on the perceptions of students in Philippine science high schools.

This gap highlights the need to explore how senior high school students perceive grade-oriented education and meaningful learning and how these perceptions influence their learning priorities and educational experiences. By focusing on students from Tanjay City Science High School, this exploratory study seeks to contribute to the existing literature by providing context-specific insights into how learners balance the pursuit of high academic achievement

with meaningful learning. The findings may also serve as a valuable reference for educators, school administrators, and future researchers in developing assessment and instructional practices that promote both academic excellence and meaningful learning.

Methodology

This chapter discusses the methods that were used in this study. This includes the research design, research setting, research subjects, sampling procedure, research instrument, data collection process, and data analysis as well as ethical considerations. The above-mentioned methodological elements were the foundation for implementing the study and achieving the objectives of the study which sought to investigate the students' perceptions regarding grade-centered education and meaningful learning.

Research Design

The present research employed a qualitative exploratory research method. The qualitative research methodology was chosen to be exploratory in order to have a better insight into the experiences, views, and perceptions of the participants regarding the specific phenomena. This research was done to explore the perceptions and insights of the Grade 12 students of Tanjay City Science High School with regard to grade-oriented education and meaningful learning.

Put differently, the perceptions of the students concerning the importance of grades, the difference between grades and meaningful learning, the factors which affect their learning priorities, and the effects of grades on their motivation were investigated in this research. The use of the qualitative approach allowed the researchers to identify recurring themes from the participants' responses as well as create themes based on how they perceived the link between academic success and meaningful learning.

Research Locale

This research was carried out at Tanjay City Science High School (TCSHS) in Tanjay City, Negros Oriental, Philippines. TCSHS was selected as a setting because the highly academic environment provided a perfect setting in which to explore students' perception on grades and significance of learning.

TCSHS is a science high school and as such has an emphasis on academic achievement. TCSHS offers chances for the students to engage in activities that encourage them to think critically and solve problems. These activities expose the students to assessment and expectations for scholastic success. Hence, the school presents itself as a fitting setting to conduct research regarding the perception of the learners about the importance of grades and the conflict between getting good academic grades and meaningful learning.

Furthermore, it is for this reason that the researchers chose the institution in question because the learners were undergoing the educational processes of the school at that particular time. As a result of their experience, they had some useful insights concerning the effects of grades on motivation, studying habits, and meaningful learning.

Research Participants

14 Grade 12 students at Tanjay City Science High School in School Year 2026-2027 were the participants of this study. The selection of participants was based on the rationale that Grade 12 students, being learners who are just one step away from college and other post-secondary learning institutions, were expected to have enough capability to reflect on their learning experience, study habits and priorities as well as views on grades and meaningful learning.

Being closer to college, these participants were able to reflect on the practical value of grades as far as college entrance and scholarships are concerned. Being in an academic environment, they could also give relevant reflections on the discussion of getting good grades vs gaining knowledge and understanding.

Purposive sampling was used in the selection of the participants since this approach would help in identifying participants that can give relevant responses on the subject matter of grade-oriented education and learning.

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The selection criteria for the participants are as follows: 1 Grade 12 students of Tanjay City Science High School for the school year 2026-2027 and 2 enrolled Grade 12 students of Tanjay City Science High School during School Year 2026-2027 who attend classes every day of the school's five-day class schedule or four days a week and never miss classes for three consecutive days. For confidentiality and protection of participants' identities, the participants were assigned codes P1 to P14 throughout the presentation and analysis of the findings.

Research Instrument

In this particular research study, the primary instrument used for data collection was a semi-structured interview guide, which was constructed by the researcher. There were 14 open-ended questions that were framed based on the research objectives and a review of literature on grades-based education and meaningful learning.

The interview questions had been classified under the following five domains: 1 grades experience, 2 learning perceptions, 3 grades and learning, 4 classroom experiences, and 5 reflection and suggestions. The semi-structured interview technique helped the researchers remain consistent with the questions while at the same time giving participants sufficient freedom to share their experiences, views, thoughts, and perspectives. If needed, some probing questions had also been raised to gather additional information.

Prior to conducting the actual process of data collection, the interview guide was evaluated by the research adviser and the credible validators for its clarity, relevance, and suitability to the goals of the research study. The tool was subjected to a pilot test conducted on July 27, 2026 using students who were not part of the actual sample subjects but had qualities comparable to the qualities of the actual participants. Through the pilot test, the researchers were able to determine questions that needed to be clarified or modified.

Data Analysis

The data obtained from the semi-structured interviews were analyzed through thematic analysis based on the six steps involved in conducting thematic analysis according to Braun and Clarke (2021).

In the first step, the researchers transcribed the interviews which had been recorded in audio and re-read the transcription in order to get familiarized with the data. In the second step, the researchers coded the data in order to identify meaningful phrases and statements in terms of the students' perceptions about grade-based learning and meaningful learning.

Thirdly, codes that were related and similar to one another were grouped together based on certain ideas and patterns observed from the participants' answers. These groups were analyzed to establish possible themes. The fourth step involved the review of these themes to establish their validity in terms of their representations in the coded data and the whole dataset. Themes that had close relations to one another were combined under the most appropriate themes.

The fifth step involved the establishment of definition for each theme based on the core concept and its relationship to the research question. The last step involved the interpretation of the established themes and presentation of the findings based on certain quotes from the participants. In this way, the researchers managed to establish nine themes based on the participants' perceptions about grades, learning, motivation, studying, class experience and assessment.

Data Gathering Procedure

Pre-Data Gathering

Permission and approval were sought and granted by the appropriate school authorities on July 15, 2026 before carrying out the data collection activities. The approvals needed were acquired and purposive sampling was used to select the respondents identified as meeting the inclusion criteria that have been put in place.
The selected respondents were briefed about the nature of the study, what the respondents' role is, what the interviewing process will have and how the information will be used for academic purposes. The respondents were

informed that participating was voluntary and that confidentiality will be respected. Informed consent was already obtained before the interviews took place.
Also, the semi-structured interview guide that was created by the researcher was pilot tested on 27 July 2026. The pilot testing helped the researchers assess whether the questions asked by the interview guide were comprehensible to the respondents and whether certain sections of the interview guide needed to be modified.

During Data Gathering

Semi-structured interviews were actually conducted on July 31, August 6, and August 11, 2026, at a convenient time and suitable locations in Tanjay City Science High School. The interviews were done using the validated semi-structured interview guide that contained 14 open-ended questions.

Respondents were free to express their ideas, sentiments and perspectives regarding grades and meaningful learning without any restriction. Additional questions were asked to probe further if needed. Permission was sought from the respondents to audio-record the interviews for exact documentation of their responses. Moreover, field notes were made by researchers. This was done to create an environment in which the respondents felt free to give their true opinions on their education experiences without judgement.

Post-Data Gathering

Transcription was done verbatim once the interviews were completed. Careful reading of the transcripts ensured that the responses of the participants were accurately captured without mistake. The researchers proceeded to code the transcripts and prepared them for thematic analysis.

Member checking was conducted on 12-13 August 2026 when the participants were free and at other times convenient to them. This gave the participants a chance to verify their responses for accuracy and identify mistakes. The transcribed responses were returned to the participants to be verified by them as being what they wanted to say.

The researchers proceeded with coding after the member checking was done. The themes were formed from the analysis of the participants' perception of education oriented towards grades and meaningful learning. This was done through coding, categorizing, identifying patterns, and formulating themes. In order to protect the identities of the participants, the use of codes such as P1, P2, and P3 was employed.

Trustworthiness of the Study

Credibility

In order to validate the findings of the study, the researchers gathered the needed data through semi-structured interviews from selected Grade 12 students of Tanjay City Science High School. The participants were made to reveal and share their personal experiences and views on grade-oriented education and meaningful learning.
The researchers contrasted the views of several participants in order to see patterns of similarities and differences in the experience of the respondents. It also enabled the researchers to see whether the findings gained are consistent with other participants' views. Transcription followed, after which member checking was done on August 12 and 13, 2026 at the participants' convenient times. Here, the participants were provided with the chance to verify and authenticate their views.

Transferability

The transferability of the results was ensured through the thick description of the research site, participants, and data collection processes. The setting, wherein the participants were exposed to academic demands, the system of grading, and learning activities, was described as Tanjay City Science High School. In addition to that, descriptions of the features and selection criteria of the Grade 12 participants and the interview process were given.

Detailed descriptions of the participants' experiences and themes that emerged from their answers were provided to give enough information about the context to judge if the findings could be transferred to other settings of education with similar features. The researchers had no intention to generalize the findings for all students and all schools; on the contrary, they provided the contextual information to let the readers and further researchers judge the applicability of the findings to other settings.

Dependability

Dependability was achieved through keeping detailed documentation of the research process involving the selection of participants, interviewing, transcription, coding, theme creation, and data analysis. Interviews were done consistently using the same semi-structured interview guide for all the participants, yet at the same time giving room for each participant to give their views and experiences.
Also, the researchers kept track of how the codes and themes developed during the thematic analysis process. This documentation provided a clear description of how the researchers arrived at the themes from the responses of the participants.

Confirmability

The confirmability was ensured through making sure that the results were based on the responses from the participants and not on any personal beliefs or opinions of the researchers. The interview transcripts, the codes, the statements made by the participants, and the notes from the research acted as the audit trail for the interpretations and development of the results.

The researchers ensured reflexivity throughout the research through being conscious of their own points of view on grading and meaningful learning. The participant statements were used to back up the interpretations and themes used in the research.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical practices were observed during the entire research to ensure the protection of the rights, privacy, safety, and welfare of all participants of the study. Prior to the actual data gathering procedure, permission and approval were obtained by the researchers from the proper school authorities on July 15, 2026 in line with the institution's requirements.

The participants participated in the study voluntarily. Before conducting the interviews, the researchers provided the participants with enough information and insights concerning the purpose, procedures, and nature of the study. Consent was also secured from the participants before allowing them to participate in the study. The participants were informed about the fact that they have the freedom not to answer certain questions and that they can pull out of the study anytime without penalty or consequence.

The researchers ensured the confidentiality of all information that was shared by the participants. The information was used only for academic purposes. Codes for the participants such as P1, P2, and P3 were used to ensure that the identity of the participants remained confidential in the presentation and analysis of the data.

The researchers also obtained permission from the participants prior to the recording of the interviews. Audio recordings, transcripts, field notes, and other research information were kept secure and accessible only to the researchers. Throughout the entire research process, the researchers maintained honesty, respect, and professionalism to ensure that the participants were not pressurized, harmed, or unnecessarily exposed to risk due to their participation in the study.

Findings

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This chapter presents the findings gathered from the 14 Grade 12 participants of Tanjay City Science High School regarding their experiences and perceptions of grade-oriented education and meaningful learning. The participants' responses were analyzed and grouped into nine themes based on the common ideas and patterns found in their answers. Each theme is discussed using statements from the participants and related literature to further explain and support the findings. The discussion focuses on how students view grades, meaningful learning, academic pressure, and the ways these affect their learning experiences.

CODES	
Grades as a basis for college admission and acceptance into prestigious universities Grades as a key requirement for scholarships and preferred college courses Grades as gateways to better career opportunities, employment, and financial stability Grades as determinants of future success, goals, and professional opportunities Viewing grades as essential for opening opportunities and avoiding failure, especially when financial circumstances are a concern	Grades as Gateways to Academic and
Feeling happy, fulfilled, and accomplished from good academic performance Feeling sad, disappointed, or frustrated by low grades and questioning one's effort Experiencing insecurity, self-doubt, and feelings of inferiority when comparing oneself with others Experiencing changes in motivation, confidence, and pressure due to academic performance Recognizing personal weaknesses while maintaining self-worth and motivation to improve	Emotional Impact of Academic Performance
Understanding concepts deeply rather than simply memorizing facts Explaining lessons in one's own words and connecting them to prior knowledge and experiences Applying and transferring knowledge to daily life, real-world, and future situations Retaining useful knowledge and skills beyond lessons, tests, and school Valuing learning as meaningful, enjoyable, and motivating through experiences, failures, and	Meaningful Learning Through Understanding, Application, and Retention
Prioritizing memorization and grades over genuine understanding Studying mainly to pass exams and meet academic requirements Relying on cramming, repetitive reading, and memorization techniques Focusing on likely test information rather than deeply understanding lessons Experiencing academic pressure, fear of failure, and exhaustion from exam-oriented learning	Memorization and Exam-Oriented Learning
Explaining concepts clearly and thoroughly Using hands-on activities, projects, discussions, and varied learning activities	Effective Teaching Strategies and Engaging Learning Experiences

Providing real-life examples and opportunities to apply learning in real-world situations Using visual aids and engaging strategies to support understanding Considering students' prior knowledge, learning pace, and needs while encouraging active participation	
Balancing test scores with students' overall performance, growth, effort, and participation Assessing students' actual understanding, application, and capabilities through varied assessments Reducing reliance on high-stakes exams and providing diverse opportunities to demonstrate learning Ensuring fair, balanced, and unbiased grading that considers students' different needs and abilities Using student progress and feedback to improve teaching, learning, and grading practices	Fairness and Authenticity in Assessment and Grading
Experiencing family expectations and parental pressure to achieve high grades Viewing high grades as important for family approval, academic opportunities, and future career goals Prioritizing high grades and academic achievement over meaningful learning Setting high academic goals and using grades as motivation to improve and push oneself Experiencing academic pressure, fear of failure, and grade-oriented behaviors such as minimal effort or memorization	Academic Pressure, Expectations, and Grade-Oriented Motivation
Recognizing that grades influence but do not define one's identity and self-worth Accepting personal limits while valuing individual effort, strengths, and learning pace Valuing meaningful learning, personal growth, and skills beyond grades Avoiding comparison and accepting that one does not have to be the best Persevering through setbacks, learning from mistakes, and developing resilience	Personal Identity, Self-Worth, and Resilience Beyond Grades
Recognizing that meaningful learning is not measured by grades alone Balancing academic achievement with meaningful learning and understanding Recognizing that deep understanding, effort, and improvement can lead to academic success Applying learning beyond academic requirements and other school activities Valuing learning as an enjoyable, meaningful, and memorable experience	Balancing Academic Achievement with Meaningful Learning

Discussion

Grades as Gateways to Academic and Career Opportunities

The participants commonly viewed grades as more than indicators of school performance; they perceived them as important credentials that could open or restrict access to future educational and career opportunities. Several

participants specifically connected grades with college admission and scholarships. P1, P6, P12, and P13 stated that grades "help determine scholarships and what colleges or universities will accept me," while P4 described grades as the "main requirement when you apply for college." Similarly, P2, P9, and P14 referred to grades as "one of the keys to open a door," suggesting that academic performance was perceived as a pathway toward opportunities beyond senior high school. Other participants extended this view to their future careers, with P2 associating high grades with a "successful career and a stable financial situation," P4 stating that grades could "help you get better jobs," and P10 saying that grades "dictate my profession in the future."

This perception is supported by recent research showing that high school academic performance can be relevant to students' transition into higher education. Punongbayan (2025), examining the University of the Philippines admissions system, found that high school grades better predicted subsequent academic performance than entrance examination scores. The study also described how UP's admissions system considers academic performance alongside considerations related to equity and students' backgrounds. Similarly, Bastedo et al. (2023), using a dataset of approximately 2.3 million students, found that contextualized high school grades and standardized test scores were strongly associated with college success, including college grades, retention, and graduation. Their findings also showed that contextualized grades had a stronger and more consistent association with college success than contextualized test scores. In the Philippine context, Laus (2021) found a statistically significant positive relationship between pre-entry grades and later academic performance, with pre-entry grades emerging as the strongest predictor among the admission variables examined. These findings help explain why participants regarded grades as important gateways to college opportunities rather than simply as numerical measures of classroom performance.

The participants' perceptions also extended beyond admission itself. P2 associated grades with obtaining a "successful career and a stable financial situation," while P4 believed that grades could "help you get better jobs." Although grades do not independently determine a person's eventual career or financial situation, the participants' views reflect a broader understanding that academic performance can influence access to educational opportunities that may shape later outcomes. Bastedo et al. (2023) found that high school academic indicators were associated with college grades, retention, and graduation, while Punongbayan (2025) demonstrated the predictive value of high school grades in the context of university admissions. Thus, the participants appeared to understand grades as a form of academic currency—something that could help them qualify for opportunities they considered important for their future.

However, the participants' responses also showed that they did not necessarily view grades as the only basis for determining their abilities or future. P8 stated, "I don't want it to be the thing that defines me," while P12 described grades as "not the only thing that is needed." P13 similarly emphasized that grades were "not as important as actual learning." These responses provide an important qualification to the idea of grades as gateways to opportunity. Although academic performance can influence access to higher education, grades do not necessarily provide a complete picture of a student's potential or circumstances. Bastedo et al. (2023), for example, emphasized the importance of considering students' high school context when interpreting academic indicators rather than treating grades as isolated measures of ability. Similarly, Murphy and Wyness (2020), examining predicted examination grades in the United Kingdom's university admissions system, found substantial inaccuracies in predicted grades and found that high-attaining disadvantaged students were more likely to receive pessimistic predictions. Their findings illustrate how reliance on grade-based information can sometimes disadvantage students when the information used in admissions does not fully represent their actual academic potential.

Therefore, the findings suggest a tension in how students understand the role of grades. On one hand, participants viewed grades as valuable credentials that could provide access to scholarships, colleges, and future opportunities. On the other hand, several participants recognized that grades should not completely define their abilities, potential, or learning. This suggests that students viewed grades as important gateways rather than complete measures of personal or academic worth. Their perceptions reflect a practical understanding of the value of academic performance while also acknowledging that meaningful learning and individual potential extend beyond what grades alone can represent.

Emotional and Psychological Impact of Academic Performance

The participants described grades as having a strong influence on their emotional and psychological experiences. Positive academic outcomes were commonly associated with feelings of happiness, fulfillment, satisfaction, and

accomplishment. P1, P5, and P6 stated that they "feel happy because it means I performed well," while P3 described feeling "happy, fulfilled, and accomplished." Similarly, P4 said, "It feels good to see high marks," and P7 and P12 described experiencing a sense of "satisfaction." These responses suggest that students may interpret high grades not only as evidence of academic success but also as confirmation that their efforts have produced positive results. P3, P5, P9, P12, and P14 specifically connected high grades with the feeling that their "hard work paid off," while P5 associated academic success with being able to "make my parents proud." Thus, high academic performance appeared to provide participants with emotional rewards that reinforced their sense of accomplishment and satisfaction.

In contrast, participants described low grades as emotionally difficult experiences. P2, P3, P4, P7, P10, and P14 said they would feel sad, while P9 reported feeling "bad and disappointed in myself" and P11 stated, "I got so down." P12 described feeling "frustrated at first," while several participants questioned whether they had exerted enough effort. These responses indicate that academic performance may influence students' emotional reactions to their own work. This pattern is consistent with Camacho-Morles et al. (2021), whose meta-analysis found meaningful relationships between achievement emotions and academic performance. Their findings showed that emotions experienced during achievement-related activities were associated with motivational, cognitive, and self-regulatory processes that are relevant to academic performance.

The participants' responses further showed that grades could influence how they perceived their own academic abilities. P2, P5, P11, P12, and P14 described doubting themselves, while P4 and P9 said that low grades could make them feel that they were "not smart enough." P10 explained that grades had "affected my motivation and confidence a lot," while P11 described feeling "extremely insecure and self-conscious" and "inferior and very out of place." These statements suggest that students may sometimes interpret academic outcomes as reflections of their personal ability rather than simply as feedback about a particular task or performance. Clem, Hirvonen, Aunola, and Kiuru (2021) found reciprocal relationships between adolescents' self-concepts of ability and achievement emotions in mathematics. Students with stronger perceptions of their ability tended to experience more enjoyment and less anxiety, while lower self-concepts were associated with greater boredom. However, their findings differed across subject areas, as comparable reciprocal relationships were not detected in literacy. This difference is important because it suggests that the relationship between academic self-perceptions and emotions may not be identical across all learning contexts.

The participants also described motivation as something that could move in different directions depending on their academic results. For some participants, disappointing grades became a reason to improve. P1, P3, P5, and P10 said they became "more motivated to improve," while P4 stated, "I learned from my mistakes," and P6 said they would "strive for a better grade." However, other participants experienced the opposite response. P3, P4, P9, P11, and P13 reported that they "lost motivation," while P6 and P8 said they felt discouraged. This variation suggests that grades do not produce a single emotional or motivational response among students. The same experience of receiving a disappointing grade may encourage one student to work harder while causing another to lose confidence or motivation. Bross, Nett, and Daumiller (2024) support the importance of this distinction in their meta-analysis of 355 studies involving 155,208 participants. They found meaningful relationships between different types of achievement goals and achievement emotions, while also showing that these relationships varied depending on the particular goal and emotion being examined.

The reciprocal nature of grades and emotions is further demonstrated by Pekrun et al. (2023), who examined five years of data from 3,425 German students. The researchers found that higher grades predicted more positive emotions over time, while positive emotions were also associated with subsequent higher grades. Conversely, grades were negatively related to negative emotions, and negative emotions were associated with poorer subsequent grades. These findings are particularly relevant to the participants' experiences because they suggest that the relationship between academic performance and emotional well-being may work in both directions. A positive academic outcome can contribute to positive emotions, which may support subsequent performance, while negative emotional experiences may contribute to difficulties in later academic performance. However, the participants' responses also demonstrate that this process is not necessarily the same for everyone, as some students reported using disappointing grades as motivation to improve rather than becoming discouraged.

Overall, the participants' responses show that grades are emotionally meaningful rather than merely numerical measures of academic performance. High grades can provide satisfaction, confidence, fulfillment, and a sense that

one's efforts have been rewarded, whereas low grades may trigger sadness, disappointment, self-doubt, insecurity, or reduced motivation. At the same time, some participants viewed disappointing results as opportunities to recognize mistakes and become more motivated to improve. The findings therefore suggest that the emotional and psychological impact of academic performance depends not only on whether students receive high or low grades but also on how they interpret and respond to those results. Rather than producing a uniform emotional response, grades may function as experiences that interact with students' self-perceptions, goals, and individual ways of responding to success and failure.

Grades, Pressure, and the Shift Toward Memorization

Participants described how pressure to obtain high grades could shift their attention from genuinely understanding lessons toward memorizing information and preparing specifically for examinations. P3 stated that they "prioritize memorization instead of understanding," while P3, P5, and P6 similarly described how they "prioritize memorization over actual understanding." P4 emphasized this distinction by stating that students should "truly understand deeply instead of memorizing facts." These responses suggest that when academic success is strongly associated with examination results, some students may focus more on remembering information needed for assessments than on developing a deeper understanding of the lesson.

This pattern was also evident in participants' descriptions of their study habits. P1 stated that they "memorize the lessons," while P2 said they were "focused on memorization." P3 described "cramming" as unavoidable and said they were "prioritizing studying subjects just to pass." Similarly, P6 and P7 reported studying only "a few minutes before the exam," while P8 said they studied "just for the grades" and "just wanted to pass the test." P10 stated that they studied mainly "to pass the exam" and memorized "the important parts," while P13 said they "memorized for the exam to pass." These responses indicate that some participants adopted short-term, assessment-focused study practices in which the immediate goal was to recall enough information to perform adequately on an examination.

The distinction between surface and deep approaches to learning is supported by Frey et al. (2024), who examined students' metacognitive knowledge and reported use of surface and deep learning strategies. Their study distinguished surface strategies, which are generally associated with memorization and short-term processing, from deep strategies that support understanding and deeper processing. Students who recalled their teachers recommending deep-learning strategies were more likely to value and report using deep strategies. This finding supports the participants' distinction between memorizing information for an examination and developing understanding that can be retained and applied beyond the assessment.

Similarly, Lee, Kim, and Choi (2020) found that dental students' approaches to learning varied across their years of study. Although students generally demonstrated deep approaches during their first and second years, third-year students showed greater reliance on surface approaches and lower intrinsic motivation. Importantly, however, the researchers found that the learning approach was not significantly related to academic achievement. This provides an important qualification to the present findings: a surface approach should not automatically be interpreted as producing poor academic performance, nor does a deep approach necessarily guarantee higher grades. The authors instead emphasized the importance of considering curriculum and assessment practices when examining students' approaches to learning.

The participants' responses further suggest that pressure and fear of failure may reinforce assessment-oriented studying. P7 said they studied because they were "scared of failing" and described studying as "exhausting because it feels like I'm just doing it to survive." P10 similarly described studying as "just doing it to survive," while P11 referred to a "hunger for grades." P8 explained that they "put so much pressure on myself to get a high score" instead of focusing on understanding the lesson. These statements suggest that when students perceive academic success primarily in terms of grades or examination results, immediate performance may become more important than the process of understanding.

Research on achievement goals provides further support while also presenting a more nuanced picture. Paloș, Vîrgă, and Okros (2024), in a longitudinal study of 565 university students, found that performance-approach goals were related to learning approaches through students' academic self-efficacy. Their findings indicated that performance-

approach goals could contribute to greater use of surface approaches; however, increased self-efficacy was associated with greater use of deep approaches and a decline in surface approaches. This suggests that the relationship between performance-oriented goals and learning is not necessarily straightforward. Students who are concerned about performing well may still engage in deeper learning when they possess sufficient confidence in their academic abilities.

Janson and Janke (2024) likewise examined how achievement goals and students' perceptions of the usefulness of e-learning tools were associated with learning behavior. Their findings demonstrate that students' goals influence how they use learning opportunities, but the relationship depends on how students perceive those tools in relation to their academic goals. Thus, performance-oriented goals may shape learning behavior without necessarily determining that students will rely exclusively on memorization or surface strategies.

Importantly, the participants did not reject memorization completely. Rather, their responses suggest that memorization becomes problematic when it replaces understanding rather than supports it. P9 described meaningful learning as knowing "how it applies, why it matters, how it works," while P2 described it as being able to "transform knowledge into wisdom." P6 emphasized that genuine learning should remain "imprinted on my brain" and remembered after the lesson, while P11 said learning should "carry beyond the classroom." These statements demonstrate that participants distinguished between temporarily memorizing information for an examination and retaining knowledge that can be understood and applied beyond the assessment.

This distinction is also supported by Frey et al. (2024), who caution against treating surface strategies as universally ineffective. Their discussion recognizes that surface strategies can serve particular learning purposes and that effective learning may involve using different strategies flexibly depending on the learning goal. Therefore, memorization itself should not necessarily be regarded as the opposite of meaningful learning. Rather, the participants' concern was directed toward situations in which memorization, cramming, and examination preparation became the primary purpose of studying, leaving limited attention for comprehension, retention, and application.

Overall, the findings reveal a tension between performing for grades and learning for understanding. Participants described how grade pressure, fear of failure, cramming, and examination-focused studying could encourage them to rely on memorization and short-term learning strategies. However, the findings do not suggest that memorization or performance goals are inherently harmful. Existing research indicates that learning approaches are influenced by several factors, including students' goals, self-efficacy, instructional practices, and learning context. Therefore, the issue identified by the participants is not simply the use of memorization, but the possibility that grade-oriented pressure can cause memorization and examination performance to take priority over deeper understanding and application. Meaningful learning, from the participants' perspective, occurs when knowledge extends beyond the examination and can be understood, retained, and used in other contexts.

Meaningful Learning Through Understanding, Retention, and Application

Participants consistently described meaningful learning as something that goes beyond memorizing information for examinations. Instead, they associated meaningful learning with deep understanding, long-term retention, connection to existing knowledge, and the ability to apply what they have learned beyond the classroom. P1 emphasized that meaningful learning is "not just memorization," while P4 stated that students should "truly understand deeply instead of memorizing facts." P9 similarly described learning as being able to "know how it applies, why it matters, how it works," while P2 characterized meaningful learning as being able to "transform knowledge into wisdom." These responses indicate that participants distinguished between simply remembering information and understanding its meaning, purpose, and relevance.

The participants also emphasized retention as an important indication that genuine learning has occurred. P6 described knowledge as being "imprinted on my brain" and said it should remain remembered even after the lesson has ended. P8 similarly stated that knowledge "stays in your mindset," while P11 said meaningful learning should "carry beyond the classroom." In response to Question 5, P3 and P4 explained that they knew they had learned something when they could "still remember it even after many years have passed," while P11 said they could "remember and understand it

even after a long time has passed." These responses suggest that participants viewed lasting knowledge as stronger evidence of learning than temporary recall for an examination.

This perception is consistent with Gupte et al. (2021), who examined students' meaningful learning experiences in organic chemistry and described meaningful learning as involving the incorporation of new concepts into students' existing knowledge frameworks. Their findings emphasize the importance of students connecting new information with what they already know rather than treating knowledge as isolated pieces of information. This corresponds with P10's statement that meaningful learning involves being "helpful to correlate to other information connected to it" and P14's description of being able to "connect it to what I already know." Thus, for the participants, meaningful learning involves building relationships between new and existing knowledge.

Another major characteristic identified by the participants was the ability to apply knowledge in real-life or unfamiliar situations. P1, P2, P3, P4, P8, P12, and P13 emphasized applying what they had learned in daily or real-life situations. P1 stated that meaningful learning means being able to "apply it even outside of quizzes or exams," while P3 and P4 said they should be able to "apply it in my daily life." P13 and P14 further emphasized being able to "apply it to a new situation." This idea was also evident in Question 4, where P1, P3, P4, P8, P12, and P13 specifically described applying learning in "real life." These responses suggest that participants considered knowledge more meaningful when they could transfer it from the classroom to situations beyond the immediate learning activity.

Recent research on authentic learning and learning transfer supports this perspective. Anagnostopoulou, Hummel, and Martens (2023) examined the role of authentic tasks in promoting transfer and emphasized the value of learning activities that resemble situations outside the classroom. Similarly, Li, Wang, and Wang (2023) described learning transfer as the ability to use knowledge and skills acquired in one setting in another context. James (2023) also emphasized the importance of helping students transfer learning to new situations beyond formal classroom instruction. These studies support the participants' perception that meaningful learning involves more than possessing information; learners should also be able to use what they know when faced with different situations.

The importance of transferring knowledge is further reflected in Bredenkamp, Botma, and Nyoni's (2023) scoping review, which identified several factors that influence students' motivation to transfer learning, including educational design and learning environments. This provides an important qualification to the participants' perceptions. Although students may understand that applying knowledge is evidence of meaningful learning, successful transfer does not depend solely on whether a student understands the content. Opportunities to practice, instructional design, learning environments, and students' motivation can also influence whether knowledge is successfully transferred to another situation.

Moreover, retention should not necessarily be treated as complete evidence of meaningful learning by itself. The participants frequently associated remembering information for a long period with genuine learning, but remembering information does not automatically demonstrate that the learner understands its meaning or can apply it appropriately. A student may retain a fact without understanding how it relates to other concepts or when it should be used. This distinction is important because the participants themselves repeatedly connected retention with other elements of learning, particularly understanding and application. P11, for example, did not simply state that meaningful learning involved remembering; the participant emphasized being able to "remember and understand it even after a long time has passed." Similarly, P14 described genuine learning as being able to "still remember and use the knowledge even after the test is over." Thus, the findings suggest that participants viewed retention as most meaningful when it is accompanied by understanding and practical use.

The participants therefore described meaningful learning as something that remains useful after an assessment has ended. P5 stated that meaningful learning involves being able to "remember what I have learned," while P9 emphasized being able to "apply the things you truly have learned." P10 described knowledge as being "remembered deep inside my brain and my heart," and P14 said that genuine learning means being able to "still remember and use the knowledge even after the test is over." These responses reinforce the distinction between temporary memorization for examinations and knowledge that is understood, retained, connected to previous knowledge, and applied in new contexts.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that participants define meaningful learning through understanding, retention, connection, and application. For them, learning becomes meaningful when knowledge is not simply recalled for an examination but is understood, remembered over time, connected to existing knowledge, and transferred to situations beyond the classroom. At the same time, the findings and literature indicate that no single characteristic, such as retention or application, should be treated as sufficient evidence of meaningful learning. Rather, the participants' responses suggest that meaningful learning is best understood as the combination of understanding what is learned, retaining it beyond the immediate assessment, connecting it with existing knowledge, and being able to use it meaningfully in other situations.

Assessment Practices That Better Reflect Meaningful Learning

Participants expressed a preference for assessment and grading practices that measure understanding, application, effort, and progress rather than relying too heavily on examinations and numerical scores. They suggested that students should have different ways of demonstrating what they know. P1 recommended being "a little more forgiving" and considering a student's "overall performance, not just performance tasks or test scores," while P8 emphasized giving "different ways to show what they have learned." Similarly, P9 suggested that students should be able to "showcase their understanding of a lesson through activities, projects, or even real life applications." These responses indicate that participants viewed meaningful assessment as something broader than conventional written examinations.

Participants particularly favored performance-based, practical, and authentic forms of assessment. P3 suggested "applying knowledge in different situations rather than simply recalling information," while P8 recommended giving "more importance to activities, projects, and practical applications." P13 similarly stated that "projects test both understanding and effort," and P14 wanted students to have "more opportunities to show what they have learned through practical activities, projects, and real-life applications." This perspective was also evident in Question 11, where P8 explained that "projects, discussions, and other activities can also show if we really understand the lesson," while P8 and P9 emphasized grading students "more fairly and in a more balanced way." These statements suggest that participants wanted assessment to provide multiple opportunities for demonstrating learning rather than depending predominantly on test performance.

This preference is supported by literature on performance and authentic assessment. Sabijon (2021) explains that performance assessment can provide opportunities for students to demonstrate their knowledge and skills through tasks that require more than simple recall. Similarly, Puteri, Yoenanto, and Nawangsari (2023), in their review of authentic assessment, describe assessment approaches that allow students to demonstrate their understanding through meaningful contexts and emphasize the value of assessment processes that provide information useful for learning. These findings correspond with the participants' preference for projects, activities, and practical applications as ways of demonstrating what they understand and can do.

Participants also emphasized the importance of feedback and progress rather than treating assessment as a final numerical judgment. P12 specifically suggested receiving "feedback, not just scores," while P13 wanted teachers to "focus more on students' progress." P14 similarly identified "effort, improvement, and understanding" as important considerations. This concern was also reflected in P4's statement that grades should "reflect actual understanding, not just numbers" and P5's desire for grades to be "truly accurate to what students actually know" and to "showcase their real capabilities." These responses suggest that participants viewed assessment as more useful when it helps students understand what they have learned, what they still need to improve, and how they can progress.

The importance of feedback is consistent with formative assessment research. Messier (2022) explains that formative assessment provides information about students' current understanding and can help teachers and students identify areas for improvement. Assessment therefore does not have to function solely as a means of assigning grades; it can also provide information that guides subsequent learning. This supports the participants' preference for feedback and progress-oriented assessment, particularly when they expressed concern about receiving scores without understanding how they could improve.

At the same time, the participants' responses should not be interpreted as meaning that examinations or conventional tests have no value. P2 suggested that "surprise quizzes should have less weight or perhaps be avoided," while P13

and P7 recommended "less high-stakes exams." Importantly, the participants did not call for the complete removal of assessment. Rather, their responses focused on how much weight particular forms of assessment should have and what aspects of learning they should measure. This distinction is important because written examinations can still provide useful evidence of students' knowledge and can be practical for assessing learning across larger groups. The concern raised by participants is therefore more specifically about overreliance on high-stakes or recall-oriented assessments.

This qualification is also reflected in discussions of authentic assessment. Ashford-Rowe (2023) cautions against treating authenticity as simply replacing traditional assessment with tasks that imitate real-world activities. Instead, the value of an assessment depends on how well its form and context correspond with the intended learning outcomes. In other words, a practical project is not automatically a better assessment simply because it resembles a real-life task. Its effectiveness still depends on whether it appropriately measures what students are expected to learn. This provides an important counterpoint to the participants' preference for projects and practical activities: alternative assessment methods can support meaningful learning, but they must still be carefully designed and aligned with learning objectives.

The participants' concern about high-stakes examinations also relates to their earlier descriptions of memorization and examination pressure. P2 explained that surprise quizzes could cause students to "rely on short-term memorization instead of long-term understanding and retention," while P14 argued that assessment should focus on "actual understanding and application rather than just test scores and requirements." These responses connect Theme 5 with the participants' broader perception that assessment practices can influence how students approach learning. When students believe that examinations carry disproportionate weight, they may prioritize preparing for the assessment rather than developing understanding that extends beyond it.

Overall, the findings suggest that participants favored a balanced and varied approach to assessment rather than the elimination of traditional examinations. They wanted assessment practices that consider understanding, application, effort, improvement, and progress alongside test performance. Their preference for projects, activities, practical applications, discussions, and constructive feedback reflects a desire for grades to provide a more comprehensive representation of what students know and can do. At the same time, the literature indicates that alternative or authentic assessment should not automatically replace conventional assessments; rather, different assessment methods should be selected according to their purpose and alignment with intended learning outcomes. Thus, the participants' responses point toward a balanced assessment system in which examinations remain useful but are complemented by other forms of evidence that can capture deeper and more meaningful aspects of learning.

Engaging and Supportive Teaching Strategies for Meaningful Learning

Participants emphasized that the way teachers deliver lessons influences how well they understand and engage with learning. They particularly valued hands-on activities, clear explanations, real-life examples, visual aids, teacher guidance, and opportunities to actively participate. P1 described "hands-on learning" and teachers who "explain the lesson well," while P2 similarly preferred "hands-on learning experiences" and projects in which teachers provide guidance. P3 emphasized the importance of a "deep understanding of subject" and teachers who "teach concepts rather than just facts." These responses suggest that participants viewed meaningful learning as more likely to occur when teaching goes beyond simply presenting information and instead provides opportunities for students to actively process, explore, and understand concepts.

Participants also highlighted the importance of connecting classroom lessons to real-life situations. P5 said teachers should "provide real-life examples," while P8 preferred "activities connected to real life." P10 likewise identified "real-life examples" as helpful, and P14 emphasized "applying the lesson into reality." P14 further provided the example of "try running a business," illustrating the participants' preference for activities that allow them to practice concepts in situations resembling those they may encounter outside school. This reflects an experiential dimension of learning, in which students engage with concepts through meaningful experiences rather than encountering them only in abstract or theoretical forms.

Morris (2020), in a systematic review of experiential learning and Kolb's model, emphasized the importance of active engagement and reflection in experiential learning. Similarly, Kang, Roestel, and Girouard (2022) identified hands-

on activities, projects, workshops, and other active experiences as common forms of experiential learning in higher education. These studies support the participants' preference for learning experiences that involve active participation and practical engagement rather than relying exclusively on passive reception of information.

The participants further stressed the importance of teacher guidance and clear communication when learning difficult concepts. P3 wanted teachers to "explain the topic clearly," while P7 preferred teachers who "explain thoroughly" and present information "in a way that is easily understood." P11 and P12 emphasized that teachers should "don't use too much jargon," while P12 also suggested that teachers should "don't move too quickly" and "provide plenty of examples." P11 additionally suggested that teachers should "consider the students' prior knowledge." These responses indicate that participants valued instructional approaches that account for differences in students' existing knowledge, comprehension, and learning pace.

Recent research supports the importance of instructional support in student engagement. A 2025 study published in Learning and Individual Differences examined the relationship between instructional support and student engagement and found an association between perceived instructional support and students' engagement. Likewise, a 2021 study in Learning and Instruction examining need-supportive teaching found that teachers' autonomy, support structure, and involvement were associated with students' behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement. These findings correspond with the participants' perceptions that clear explanations, appropriate guidance, and supportive teacher-student interactions can contribute to greater involvement in learning.

Participants also valued opportunities to actively participate and collaborate rather than simply receive information from teachers. P8 said teachers should "allow us to participate and actually do something" because such activities are "much more engaging." P5 and P8 both noted that "peers can help each other," while P3 highlighted "cooperation and coordination" as something learned through experience. P13 similarly wanted teachers to make "the learning process fun" so students become "more interested and engaged." These responses suggest that participants associate meaningful learning not only with what teachers provide but also with the opportunities students receive to interact with content, teachers, and classmates.

However, the participants' preference for engaging and hands-on strategies does not necessarily mean that every activity-based approach automatically produces meaningful learning. Experiential learning is most useful when activities are connected to clear learning goals and accompanied by opportunities to process or reflect on what was experienced. Morris (2020) emphasizes the role of reflection within experiential learning, suggesting that simply participating in an activity is not sufficient on its own. This provides an important qualification to the participants' responses: an activity may be enjoyable or engaging without necessarily resulting in deep understanding if students are not given sufficient guidance to connect the experience with the underlying concept.

This distinction is particularly relevant to P13's preference for making "the learning process fun." While enjoyment and engagement may encourage students to participate, meaningful learning involves more than simply making lessons entertaining. Similarly, P8's preference for activities that allow students to "actually do something" reflects a desire for active participation, but the educational value of such activities depends on whether students are able to understand and apply the concepts being taught. Thus, the findings suggest that students value engagement most when it is combined with clear instruction, appropriate guidance, and meaningful connections to the lesson.

Overall, participants viewed effective teaching as more than simply delivering information. They preferred approaches that actively involve students, provide clear and understandable explanations, connect lessons to real-life situations, consider students' existing knowledge, and provide opportunities for practice and collaboration. At the same time, the findings and literature suggest that engagement alone is not sufficient to guarantee meaningful learning. Rather, effective teaching appears to involve a combination of active participation, instructional support, clear explanations, contextual relevance, and opportunities for reflection and application. These findings indicate that participants associate meaningful learning with teaching strategies that position them as active participants while still providing the structure and guidance necessary for genuine understanding.

Balancing Academic Achievement and Meaningful Learning

Participants described academic success as involving a continuing tension between achieving high grades and gaining meaningful, useful knowledge. Some participants prioritized grades because of their practical consequences, particularly for college admission, scholarships, and future opportunities. P1 and P2 stated that "getting high grades is my top priority," while P6 explained that grades are important because "getting a good college course or in getting a scholarship... based on your grades." P12 similarly said that high grades can "determine whether I pass or not, especially when it comes to college admissions," while P13 noted that getting higher grades remains a priority because it can help them "enter to a prestigious university." These statements show that participants did not view grades simply as numerical indicators of classroom performance; rather, grades were perceived as having practical value because they can influence access to opportunities beyond senior high school.

At the same time, other participants emphasized that grades alone are insufficient indicators of educational success. P4 questioned, "What is the point of having high grades if you do not actually understand anything?" and stated that "meaningful learning is far more important." P9 similarly asked, "What is the purpose of having high grades when you do not even know what you are learning?" P5 explained that meaningful learning "comes first because it's something I can carry with me wherever I go," while P14 described meaningful learning as "more practical" for dealing with "challenges in life." These responses demonstrate that participants distinguished between the immediate value of academic credentials and the longer-term value of knowledge and skills that can remain useful beyond school.

Several participants therefore viewed grades and meaningful learning as goals that can be balanced rather than completely opposing choices. P3 described the situation as "all about balance," explaining that students need good grades to succeed in school while also needing meaningful learning. P5 stated that "both are important," while P8 and P11 likewise expressed a preference to "focus on both." P10 described pursuing both as a "win-win situation educationally and emotionally," and P14 similarly asked, "why not choose both." These responses suggest that participants recognized that academic achievement and meaningful learning can serve different purposes and do not necessarily have to be treated as mutually exclusive.

This finding is consistent with research on achievement goals. Co Shu Ming (2021), in a study of Filipino college students, identified performance, mastery, and future-oriented goals as distinct dimensions of students' achievement goals. The findings suggest that students can pursue academic goals for different reasons, including demonstrating competence, developing their abilities, and preparing for future outcomes. This helps explain the variation among participants: some placed greater importance on grades because of college admission, scholarships, and career opportunities, while others placed greater importance on understanding and developing knowledge that they could use beyond school.

Research further suggests that performance-oriented and learning-oriented goals may operate through different motivational processes rather than simply representing two ends of one continuum. A 2022 study examining multiple pathways to achievement found that learning goals and performance-approach goals could be associated with academic achievement through different forms of task value. This provides an important perspective for interpreting the participants' responses. A student's desire to obtain a high grade does not necessarily mean that the student has no interest in learning, just as valuing meaningful learning does not necessarily mean that the student is unconcerned about academic performance. Students may attach different forms of value to both goals depending on their circumstances and priorities.

The participants' responses also demonstrate that their preference between grades and meaningful learning can be shaped by circumstances outside the classroom. P8 and P11 said that "getting good grades sometimes feels like the bare minimum," while P8 described being afraid of failing or disappointing their parents. P11 similarly expressed wanting "a choice for myself." P12 explained that they would choose high grades because they were not in a financial situation where they could "afford to fail," even if this meant "compromising some opportunities to learn in a more meaningful way." These responses indicate that students' academic priorities cannot always be understood as purely personal preferences. Family expectations, financial circumstances, college requirements, and perceptions of future consequences may influence how students decide between immediate academic performance and deeper learning.

Recent research provides support for the role of academic pressure in shaping students' experiences. A 2022 study examining school-related pressure and autonomy support found that school pressure was associated with students'

well-being, while autonomy support was associated with more positive outcomes, including students' vitality, contentment, and academic performance. Dela Cruz (2024), meanwhile, identified concerns related to grades, workload, self-expectations, and study pressure among the academic stressors experienced by Filipino students. These findings provide context for participants such as P8, P11, and P12, whose responses suggest that the importance of grades may be intensified when students perceive failure as carrying serious personal, family, or financial consequences.

However, the findings should not be interpreted as demonstrating that a focus on grades necessarily prevents meaningful learning. Some participants deliberately pursued high grades while still recognizing the importance of understanding. P1 and P2 prioritized grades, for example, because of their perceived practical value, while other participants believed that grades and meaningful learning could be pursued simultaneously. Likewise, the literature on achievement goals suggests that performance-oriented goals and learning-oriented goals can both be connected with academic achievement through different motivational processes. Thus, the relationship between grades and meaningful learning appears more complex than a simple opposition between the two.

Instead, the participants' accounts suggest that the conflict becomes more apparent when the pursuit of grades begins to replace rather than complement meaningful learning. P12's statement about potentially "compromising some opportunities to learn in a more meaningful way" illustrates this tension particularly clearly. Similarly, participants in the earlier themes described memorization, examination preparation, and pressure as situations in which achieving a desired academic outcome could become more important than understanding the lesson. These responses indicate that grades themselves are not necessarily viewed as harmful; rather, participants questioned what happens when academic performance becomes the dominant measure of success.

Overall, this theme reflects the participants' perception that academic achievement and meaningful learning have different but interconnected forms of value. Grades provide tangible opportunities such as college admission, scholarships, and future career possibilities, whereas meaningful learning provides understanding, practical knowledge, and skills that students can carry beyond school. The findings do not support a simple choice between grades and learning. Instead, participants largely described a need to balance the two, recognizing the practical importance of academic achievement while maintaining the deeper purpose of education: developing knowledge and skills that remain valuable beyond the immediate assessment. At the same time, the participants' experiences show that achieving this balance can be difficult when external pressures and perceived consequences make high grades feel necessary for future success.

Emotional Responses and Motivation Shaped by Academic Performance

Participants described grades as having a strong influence on their emotions, confidence, motivation, and willingness to continue improving. High grades were commonly associated with positive feelings and a sense of accomplishment. P1, P5, and P6 said they "feel happy because it means I performed well," while P3 described feeling "happy, fulfilled, and accomplished." P4 said, "It feels good to see high marks," and P7 and P12 described experiencing "satisfaction." P3, P5, P9, P12, and P14 also connected high grades with the feeling that their "hard work paid off." These responses suggest that academic performance can serve as an emotional indicator of students' perceived success and effort, particularly when students interpret high grades as confirmation that their efforts have produced a desirable outcome.

In contrast, receiving low grades was frequently associated with disappointment, frustration, self-doubt, and reduced confidence. P2, P3, P4, P7, P10, and P14 stated that they would "be sad about it," while P9 said, "I instantly feel bad and disappointed in myself." P11 explained, "I get so down," and P12 described feeling "frustrated at first." Several participants also questioned their own efforts after receiving disappointing results. P3, P4, P5, P11, and P12 said they would "question whether my effort was enough," while P2, P5, P9, P11, and P14 described "doubting myself." These responses indicate that grades can become connected to students' perceptions of their academic capability, especially when students interpret a low grade as a reflection of their ability rather than as information about one particular performance.

The emotional effects of grades were especially evident when participants experienced academic setbacks. P3, P4, P9, P11, and P13 reported that they "lost motivation," while P6 and P8 said they were "very discouraged." P10 explained

that a low grade "affected my motivation and confidence a lot," and P4 said that low grades could make them think they were "not smart enough." P11 described feeling "extremely insecure and self-conscious," "inferior and very out of place," and unable to "reach the same level as my classmates." These accounts suggest that academic results can influence not only students' willingness to continue studying but also how they evaluate themselves in relation to their classmates.

However, the participants also demonstrated that low grades do not necessarily produce negative outcomes for everyone. P1, P3, P5, and P10 said they "became more motivated to improve" after receiving lower grades. P4 stated, "I learned from my mistakes," while P6 said, "I did not give up." Similarly, P13 explained that grades can help students "identify what I need to improve," and P10 said they make them "more aware of where I need to maintain and improve my grades." These responses provide an important contrast within the theme: while some participants experienced disappointment or discouragement, others interpreted academic setbacks as feedback that helped them identify weaknesses and improve their performance.

Recent research provides support for this variation in students' motivational responses. Diseth (2025), in a study of 401 Norwegian upper-secondary students, found that motivation, self-efficacy, and learning strategies were associated with academic achievement. The study also reported differences in motivation and learning strategies across grade levels, including declines in intrinsic goals and effort management during upper-secondary education. These findings suggest that students' motivation is not fixed and may change throughout their academic experiences.

The type of motivation surrounding academic performance may also influence students' experiences. A 2021 study published in Learning and Instruction found that autonomous motivation was associated with higher grades, while controlled motivation did not provide the same benefit. The researchers further found that students with higher autonomous motivation and lower controlled motivation tended to achieve better academic outcomes. This distinction helps explain the different experiences described by the participants. Students who view grades as feedback for personal improvement may respond differently from those who feel that they must achieve high grades because of fear of failure, parental expectations, or external pressure.

The participants' responses regarding feedback are also important. P12 preferred "feedback, not just scores," while P13 wanted teachers to "focus more on students' progress." This preference is supported by Koenka et al. (2021), whose meta-analysis found that grades could positively influence achievement but were associated with less optimal motivation than written comments. The researchers also found that students who received grades rather than comments showed poorer achievement and less optimal motivation in the comparisons examined. This suggests that numerical grades alone may not always provide the type of information students need to improve, whereas explanatory feedback may help students understand their strengths and areas for development.

At the same time, the participants' experiences should not be interpreted as showing that grades are inherently harmful to motivation. Some participants clearly viewed academic results as useful indicators of progress and as reasons to improve. The fact that several participants became "more motivated to improve" after receiving lower grades demonstrates that the same academic outcome can produce different responses depending on how students interpret it. Grades may therefore function as either encouragement or pressure, depending on students' goals, self-efficacy, expectations, and the support they receive.

Overall, the participants' responses show that academic performance can have both positive and negative emotional and motivational effects. High grades may produce happiness, satisfaction, confidence, and a sense that one's efforts have paid off, while low grades may lead to disappointment, self-doubt, discouragement, and reduced motivation. However, some participants were able to interpret disappointing results as feedback and use them to identify areas for improvement. The findings therefore suggest that the emotional and motivational influence of grades is not uniform. Rather, it depends partly on how students interpret academic results and whether grades are experienced as external pressure, evidence of personal success, or useful feedback for continued improvement. This complexity highlights the importance of looking beyond grades themselves and considering the motivational and emotional context in which students receive and interpret academic evaluations.

Fairness and Limitations of Grade-Centered Assessment

Participants expressed concerns that grades do not always fully represent students' actual learning, abilities, effort, or progress. They recognized that grades can provide useful information about academic performance, but they also believed that a numerical score may be influenced by the type of assessment, grading practices, time constraints, and other circumstances that do not necessarily capture the full extent of a student's understanding. P4 stated that grades should "reflect actual understanding, not just numbers," while P5 wanted grades to be "truly accurate to what students actually know" and to "showcase their real capabilities." Similarly, P13 and P14 emphasized that grades can show students' progress but also recognized that "learning is more than just getting a high grade." These responses suggest that participants viewed grades as useful indicators of academic performance but not as complete representations of learning.

A major concern among participants was the reliance on examinations and numerical scores as important components of grading. P6 explained that grades "do not really give justice" when a student understands the lesson but receives a low grade, while P7 noted that "whatever score you get on that test will reflect on your grade." P7 further questioned whether a high grade alone could demonstrate that a student had experienced meaningful learning. P8 similarly emphasized that "grades aren't solely based on exams" and that "projects, discussions, and other activities can also show if we really understand the lesson." These responses indicate that participants perceived a possible mismatch between what an assessment measures and the broader understanding that students develop through the learning process.

Participants also identified differences in students' circumstances and abilities as reasons why assessment should allow some flexibility. P7 suggested that teachers should "give consideration to student-athletes," while P12 stated that "it's normal for us to struggle sometimes" and argued against making it "unnecessarily difficult for students to get reasonable grades." P1 recommended being "a little more forgiving" and considering "the student's overall performance, not just performance tasks or test scores." P3 similarly wanted grades to "better reflect students' actual understanding and learning instead of being affected by time constraints." These responses suggest that participants associate fairness with considering multiple forms of evidence of learning rather than relying on one assessment result or treating every learning situation as identical.

The participants therefore favored more varied and balanced assessment practices. P8 recommended placing "more importance to activities, projects, and practical applications," while P9 suggested allowing students to "showcase their understanding of a lesson through activities, projects, or even real life applications." P13 recommended "less high-stakes exams" and explained that "projects test both understanding and effort." P14 similarly wanted students to have "more opportunities to show what they have learned through practical activities, projects, and real-life applications." These responses demonstrate that participants preferred assessment practices that allow students to demonstrate knowledge through different forms of performance, particularly when those forms require application, explanation, or practical demonstration.

Recent research supports the participants' preference for assessment that encourages active and meaningful engagement. Quinlan, Sellei, and Fiorucci (2025) examined educationally authentic assessment and found that assessments incorporating meaningful engagement and connections to real-world contexts can provide students with opportunities to become more actively involved in their learning. This supports the participants' preference for projects, practical activities, and real-life applications rather than relying exclusively on conventional examinations.

Similarly, a 2024 study on assessment as learning found that students' active participation in assessment can contribute positively to learning. The findings suggest that assessment can serve purposes beyond measuring achievement when students are given opportunities to participate in evaluating and developing their own learning. This corresponds with participants' desire for assessments that allow them to demonstrate and improve their understanding rather than simply receive a numerical score.

Participants' concerns are also consistent with research examining how assessment systems shape students' engagement with learning. A 2024 qualitative study comparing different assessment systems found that students' beliefs about assessment goals, the cognitive demands of assessment, and the structure of grading systems influenced their affective, cognitive, and behavioral engagement. The study further suggested that when assessment systems

strongly reward particular forms of performance, students may adjust their behavior toward achieving the rewarded outcomes. This provides context for participants who questioned whether obtaining a high grade necessarily means that meaningful learning has occurred.

However, the participants' concerns do not necessarily mean that grades or examinations are inherently inaccurate or unfair. Grades can provide useful evidence of academic achievement when assessments are appropriately designed and aligned with learning objectives. The concern raised by the participants is instead about overreliance on a limited set of measures. A test score may accurately describe how a student performed on that particular assessment, but it may not capture every aspect of the student's understanding, ability to apply knowledge, progress, or effort. Thus, the fairness of grading may depend not only on the score itself but also on the range and quality of evidence used to determine it.

This distinction is important because participants did not call for the removal of grades altogether. Rather, they advocated for assessment practices that provide a broader picture of learning. Their suggestions for projects, activities, practical applications, discussions, feedback, and consideration of progress indicate a preference for a more comprehensive approach in which grades remain part of assessment but are supported by multiple opportunities for students to demonstrate what they know and can do.

Overall, this theme demonstrates that participants viewed fair assessment as assessment that captures understanding, application, effort, and progress rather than relying primarily on test scores. Their responses reveal a perceived limitation of grade-centered assessment: although numerical grades can communicate academic performance, they may not fully represent the complexity of learning when based on a narrow range of assessments. At the same time, the participants did not reject grades themselves. Instead, they emphasized the importance of using varied and appropriately designed assessment practices so that grades provide a more balanced representation of students' learning and capabilities.

Conclusion

The findings of this study reveal that students perceive grades as an important but incomplete part of their educational experience. Based on the participants' responses, grades serve practical purposes such as determining academic standing, qualifying for scholarships, gaining admission to colleges and universities, and creating opportunities for future careers. Because of these perceived consequences, students recognize the importance of achieving good grades and, in some cases, prioritize them because of personal goals, family expectations, financial circumstances, and the competitive nature of their academic environment. However, the findings also show that students do not equate high grades with learning itself.

For the participants, meaningful learning is characterized by genuine understanding, long-term retention, and the ability to apply knowledge beyond examinations and the classroom. They described truly learning something as being able to explain it in their own words, connect it with previous knowledge and personal experiences, remember it over time, and apply it to real-life situations. Experiences in which students learned valuable knowledge and skills despite receiving low grades further demonstrate that they recognize learning as something that cannot always be represented by a numerical score.

The findings further indicate that a strong emphasis on grades can influence students' learning behaviors and priorities. Several participants described studying primarily to pass examinations, memorizing information because of limited preparation time, or focusing on what they believed would appear on a test. Academic pressure, fear of failure, parental expectations, and the need to maintain opportunities for higher education can encourage students to prioritize grades even when they recognize the greater value of understanding. At the same time, grades can also motivate students to study harder, identify areas for improvement, and continue striving toward their academic goals. Thus, grades can function both as a source of motivation and as a source of pressure, depending on how students experience and interpret them.

The participants also emphasized the importance of teaching strategies and assessment practices that support meaningful learning. They valued hands-on activities, real-life examples, clear explanations, opportunities to apply

lessons, collaboration with peers, and activities that allow them to actively participate in the learning process. Similarly, they expressed a preference for assessment practices that consider understanding, application, effort, improvement, and overall performance rather than relying heavily on high-stakes examinations and numerical scores. These findings suggest that students do not necessarily want grades to be removed; rather, they want grading and assessment to more accurately reflect the different ways in which learning occurs.

Overall, the study concludes that students do not view grades and meaningful learning as completely opposing goals. Instead, they recognize that both have value but serve different purposes. Grades provide measurable indicators of academic performance and can open doors to future educational and career opportunities, while meaningful learning provides knowledge, understanding, and skills that students can carry beyond school. The participants therefore favor a balance in which academic achievement is pursued without allowing grades to become the sole measure of intelligence, ability, or success. Ultimately, the findings suggest that educational success should extend beyond obtaining high grades and should also include the development of knowledge and skills that students genuinely understand, remember, apply, and carry with them throughout their future experiences.

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