

Johnny Looks at Himself

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An appreciation of values stands close to the top in any list of basic skills. Most teachers, no matter what reporting system they use, will insist that the important thing is Jane's own growth—not how Jane stands in comparison with Jim or Jean or Sally. But how are youngsters going to acquire this viewpoint, when they are sent home each month with nothing but A-B-C report cards? Such a system is helping children to grow up with an unfortunate—even a defeatist—sense of values. A realistic account of the problems that go with making a change in reporting practices and the satisfactions that come from observing development of children's values is presented here by Mildred Sheppard, fifth-grade teacher in West End School, Montgomery, Ala.

JAMES RUBBED the seat of his trousers; Sue sat tense, clutching her stack of books tightly; Johnny sucked his breath between his teeth audibly and fearfully. Forty sets of eyes gazed expectantly as the new teacher started handing out report cards at the end of the first six weeks of school.

Tension eased as hurried glances revealed mostly passing marks. The classroom cleared rapidly, but remarks kept coming in from the playground as friends met and discussed the topic of the day—report cards. "I passed everything." "Let me see yours." "My Daddy said I'd better not have no U's." "Boy, I had shucks in my pants last year"—an expression new to the teacher, but the meaning was obvious.

In the hallways little low-voiced groups broke up as the teacher approached. Tantalizing fragments of conversation came to the teacher—"made all C's¹ last year"; "I don't know why—"; "My Mama said—"; "I'm satisfied with—"; "You made better than—"; "Do you pass if you make an 'M'?"

It was all wrong. Why didn't the children talk to the teachers? Why did they stop when a teacher came by? What was it they didn't understand? Why couldn't children understand that the marks were based on their own progress rather than on a comparison of others? Was *anyone* concerned

with learning rather than making good grades?

"Shall We Try a New Report Form?"

Twelve weary teachers were discussing school problems with an equally weary principal. It was a warm April afternoon. The decisions were made and checked off the principal's list with little comment and no animation. Suddenly a spark of life entered. "We have to decide what kind of reports will be used next year so the forms can be printed. I'd like to read some narrative reports which have been written by teachers in other schools."

The discussion became more vigorous. "Think of the time it takes to do all that." "Parents want grades." "That report doesn't cover all the important phases of school life." "I don't see the basis for failing that child." "She doesn't make things clear; the remarks are too general." "I don't see any advantage in changing." "I know a school that tried it and it didn't work; they don't use it any more." And again and again, "Think of all the time it would take."

The affirmative made its side heard too. "Let's put it up for discussion at P. T. A. tomorrow and see what reaction we get. Our parents have always been willing to cooperate when changes are proposed." "The samples we have are weak in many respects, but they show the possibilities." "I'm not satisfied with the form we have; perhaps the results would justify the time spent in

¹ Grading system used consisted of four ratings: CP, Commendable Progress; FP, Fair Progress; MP, Minimum Progress; UP, Unsatisfactory Progress.

writing better reports." And after everyone had aired all her pet prejudices and talked while everybody else talked, six teachers clung to the formal, check-type report; six dared to try the narrative form—parents willing.

The Daring Ones Face Problems

The first week of school and at least one teacher was already worried, seriously worried, about report cards. Although she had never used a narrative report, she believed that it could help more than any other type of report to win home cooperation, to create a better understanding between home and school, to bring about desirable changes in pupil behavior, and to improve the instructional program.

Its use could also have just the opposite effect. Hurt feelings could result from uncertainty as to meanings, from stress on things best left untold, from repetition of unchangeable facts. Dissatisfaction might arise with the use of two different forms in the same school, with three reporting periods instead of six. True this had all been gone over and over in P. T. A. and apparently the parents present understood and approved the change. However, it was up to teacher to anticipate some of the difficulties and try to make the experiment a successful one.

For instance, there was the question of pupil reaction. Everyone had been concerned about parent cooperation, but nobody had consulted or even told the children. Mary and Johnny and Billy hadn't had a chance to say a word about the new reports. For four years they had been pushed and shoved with grades as the goal. For four years Betty had run home to be praised for her perfect marks. For four years Henry had meekly pulled out his report card to be blamed, whipped, or scolded. For four years Gene had sought ways to hide his report, to get others to sign it, or to change low marks to higher ones. During four years adults had built up strong desires for certain marks. Miss Jones and Miss Smith, who had both taught for a long time and who were widely recognized for their good work, said grades were needed for motivation. Children would not work, would not be interested if they didn't have grades.

The problems certainly could not be

solved by worry and wishful thinking. There were some things that could be done at once. Go visiting, invite the parents to come to the class program next week, take time to chat in the store and on the street. Call Mrs. Clark, Mrs. Lowe, and Mrs. Boyd. Invite them to come to P. T. A., and talk long enough to make friends. Speak personally to every father and mother who came to P. T. A.

Yes, all of this was extra trouble. It must have been a mile to Mrs. Black's house, and it was hot that afternoon. It took so long at Mrs. Burn's. She was expecting the teacher and had sandwiches and tea ready. Mrs. Cox wanted the teacher's telephone number and called twice on trivial matters. That could become a nuisance. After all, how did it help? Report cards were not even mentioned.

Gene's mother, who had formerly had a very belligerent attitude toward school affairs, was beginning to think for the first time that teachers were sincerely interested in her child. Mary's mother volunteered to come to school to help make costumes for the program. Johnny's mother and the teacher were good friends and whatever the teacher might say would be met with an understanding that can come only with real friendship.

And the teacher had an idea of how each parent would treat the child on receiving the report. Oscar had been consistently untruthful and dishonest. If that went home on the report, Oscar would be severely whipped by a stern father and cried over by a neurotic mother. Oscar would have to be helped in other ways. Earl frequently had temper tantrums and refused to play when he couldn't have his way on the playground. Earl's jolly, good-natured father would have a heart-to-heart talk with him and later round up the boys for a ball game. Everybody would have a good time, and good sportsmanship would prevail at home as well as at school.

Children Share in the New Report

A month was gone, a whole month, and no explanation about reports had been made to the children. Two more weeks and half the boys and girls would go home without reports while their brothers, sisters, and friends in the other rooms had them. An-

other week went by, and Susie asked in discussion period, "Don't we get our report cards next week?" It had to come sometime. What was it the principal had told the parents? Couldn't the same simple explanation be made to Susie?

"And you mean next week we won't get a report card when we're 'sposed to? We'll have to wait six more weeks?" It wasn't so easy to explain.

"But of course you'll get reports next week! They'll be a little different from any you've ever had before. They'll be reports that you've written yourselves. Every day in discussion group we talk about what we have done right and how we can improve our work. We plan together. We can put those things in letters to our parents, and they will know what we're doing in school."

"How shall we begin our letters? Yes, the first paragraph should explain about the kind of report cards we'll get this year. You're going to tell about a different subject in every paragraph? Good! And what will you tell about each subject? What have we been trying to do in social studies? How much of the work have you done? How well did you do it?"

Two full discussion periods went into making an outline and putting it on the board. Johnny wanted to leave out about how well he had done his home work; Mary thought it wasn't necessary to tell how many words she had missed in spelling; Susie wanted to be sure to include the library books read for pleasure. Joe wanted to tell about looking at the grasshopper's ears with the magnifying glass. William thought the letters should tell who froze ice cream the hardest (he had, of course). The decision to tell about learning some two-dollar words—thorax, iridescent, transparent, metamorphosis—was almost unanimous. Many ideas were not included in the group plan, but the individual suggesting them could include them in his own letter. Perhaps the finished outline was not so comprehensive nor so well organized as teacher would have made, but Billy and Mary and Henry understood it and were eager to get to work.

It wasn't all fun even with the outline on the board. There was much thumbing through folders, many asking teacher what she thought instead of trying to judge for themselves. Mistakes had to be marked, let-

ters rewritten. Tommy still used manuscript, and even so, writing was a slow, painful process. He simply could not reach the goal set up by the class. Jane had difficulty with spelling, and unless she were given much help, her letter could not be read. Linda had never written in complete sentences, and her report was a jumble of words without any meaning at all. But maybe those painful scrawls would help mothers and fathers realize more than words could the difficulties their children faced.

What the Youngsters Wrote

And for every discouraging little paragraph there were three beautifully written letters. Arthur, who had done so well in arithmetic, wrote, "I make my papers neat and I never waste any time in arithmetic period. I have learned to read big numbers. When I came in this room, I counted on my fingers very bad, but now I have learned not to count with fingers or lips." Patsy said of her reading, "I have read four big thick books for pleasure. I have also read a lots of books about nature. You know I read fairly well, but I stumble over some words and come back to them. I take good care of the library books and turn them in just like they were when I got them. I enjoy reading period very much."

Barbara who took a special interest in social studies wrote a detailed account of her work in that subject. "All the class made the questions in our discussion period. The teacher wrote them on the board and then she put them on a chart. I have answered all the questions. I studied each question carefully and used about three or four books to answer them. We have pictures on the board and I get a lot of information to answer the questions from the bulletin board. I have brought insects and studied the science table. I have made a lot of reports, and I have tried to take as much part in discussion as I possibly can. I have learned a lot about locating places on the maps. I have learned to use the legend and I know what the colors mean. Just as soon as I come into the room every morning I start to work because I have it all planned out what to do."

Bob who had serious difficulty in getting along with others said, "I used to fight with my boy friends on the playground but I have improved and I am proud of myself

and I know that you and Daddy will be proud of me too. I have been pretty good this year." Could it be that fifth-graders were thinking critically, judging themselves fairly, thinking through their difficulties, seeing their own needs?

The number of major problems was diminishing. There was no objection to the pupil-written reports. There were a few favorable comments. Grades were not mentioned. The children understood that they would not get grades, but even the supercritical Miss Jones could not have said that the children had stopped working. Many parents in conferences and in writing had commented on the unusual interest the children had in their work.

Teacher Prepares Her Part of the Report

The biggest task was just ahead. Teacher must study the work of thirty-eight children, the records of their progress in each school subject, and their social habits so carefully that all parents would receive accurate, comprehensive accounts of their children's growth over a period of three months.

There were some absolute "musts" if the reports were to be worth the effort expended on them. Each report *must* be individual, permitting the parents to see their child as a unique personality but as one who had part in and responsibilities to a group. Shortcomings *must* be told in such a tactful way that no misunderstanding would arise between the child and the teacher or between the parents and the teacher. The reports *must* be written in a readable, easy-to-follow, well-organized way using a style and vocabulary that children as well as parents would understand. Parents *must* be given a clear picture of what the teacher, the group, and their own child were working for in school and to what extent their child was meeting the standards in each field of endeavor.

The order did seem like a big one, but, after all, it didn't have to be attacked in haphazard fashion. One didn't just sit down and write what one thought of Johnny on November 17. Goodness! He'd been dreadfully noisy in school that day. He did contribute worthwhile information in discussion group, but he just would interrupt someone every few minutes. And think how many misspelled words he had in his written work! Did he ever use a capital letter or punctuate the

heading of his letters correctly? Was he always so inattentive in reading period?

Today was only one day out of sixty. The records would show what he had been doing the rest of the time. There was all the work he had been putting in his folder since the first week of school nicely arranged in chronological order. His art envelope was full. His reading record, the notations on his anecdotal record, the standardized survey and diagnostic tests would help paint the true picture of his abilities and his progress. Perhaps November 17 was a typical day for Johnny; perhaps it was not. Study the records for three months. The report must be accurate.

Teacher had sat with pencil poised for fully fifteen minutes, but as yet the paper was blank. She'd be more sympathetic next time she saw Dan squirming and chewing his pencil. There was so much to tell and there seemed to be no logical starting point. It *was* rather confusing. Must be some way to begin. Stop that vicious circle going round in the head and begin just anywhere. It could be revised later.

The school day started with social studies; the report, after a polite introductory paragraph, might as well begin the same way. This must be good; it was the very heart of the program. Included were social habits, information, work habits, study skills, all those tangibles and less tangibles the individual, the group, and the teacher had been shooting at these three months. The play activities followed more easily; the creative work, not so easy. The skills of reading and arithmetic—now there was something one could really put one's finger on and diagnose with more feeling of satisfaction. Reading—Johnny reads aloud fluently, but he does not notice details and he cannot tell in an organized way what he reads. Arithmetic—he has learned the addition combinations and does not count on his fingers. He no longer skips around in adding long columns, but he persistently writes the carried number at the top of the column rather than add it in first.

One report was finished. Oh, no. Just a minute. Johnny had some serious health habits which his mother probably did not know about and which required some home cooperation to correct. He frequently bought candy with his lunch money before he came to school. Seemed to lack energy and had difficulty in maintaining good sitting pos-

ture. Stooped badly when reading and squinted at his book. The account included what had been done at school to help him and made some suggestions as to possible ways of helping him further. A summarizing paragraph, an invitation to visit the classroom, a statement that comments or suggestions would be welcome, and the first report was finished. The next and the next would probably be a little easier. Some techniques had become clearer. A little order had come into the chaos that for a time took the place of a brain. Better not give this one to the typist yet. It would probably need revision when teacher had experience with some others.

Good Results Can Be Convincing

There had been so much discussion among faculty members about the use of the narrative reports that teacher decided she had better keep some figures in mind. A few tabulations on what happened when narrative reports were tried might be useful sometime in the future. Eleven children had lingered in the room to read, ask questions, and discuss the reports. Within a week every child had asked to have a conference after school with the teacher to go over his report and make a list of the things in which he needed to improve. Twenty-three parents wrote notes in reply, some praising, some explaining, some questioning.

The best results, however, just could not be tabulated. Figures could not describe the change in Don, the more serious way he went about his work, the pride he was beginning to take in finishing the tasks he started, the conscious effort to be polite to his classmates. Figures did not account for the day Earl started to leave the ball game, stopped short, gave teacher a big grin, and went back without a murmur of dissent. Figures did not tell about all the work accomplished the morning teacher left to help the third-graders dress for the operetta. The discussion period on the morning after reports went out—Bobby explaining that he had not brought his

report back because he wanted to send it to his father in the Army in California; Ann telling that her mother had her make a copy to send to grandfather and grandmother; Joe saying mother had kept his till father came home and they could all talk about it together—that could not be put in a column and labeled. Hundreds of tiny little items could not be tabulated, could not even be told, but they could remind teacher of the changes that were taking place in her boys and girls, could also be an inspiration to her when the work seemed too hard.

Teacher Decides About Next Year

Teacher sat and rocked and thought. It was Sunday afternoon on a lazy April day. Tomorrow there would be faculty meeting and each teacher would have to decide on the kind of report cards she wanted to use next fall. Would a year's experience make a difference? Remember those hours and hours of work when it seemed impossible to write another word. Remember how tedious it was to keep those anecdotal records. Remember that Mrs. Baker was never satisfied with knowing what Hazel was doing, but wanted only to know if she would pass.

There was no use pretending that the change had been easy to make. There was no use trying to minimize the time required to write the reports. But remember that Mrs. Baker was the only parent who was not well pleased. Remember how others responded to suggestions made. Remember the way the children talked about the reports, showed an understanding of them. Remember their animation when they started to write their own reports for the second time. Remember Clyde's saying, "I want to tell my Mama about the fun we have at school. I want to tell about helping make Christmas decorations for the hall. They didn't look like nothing that was made in a school."

Making the decision did not require so much thinking after all. The office would not be bothered with printing report cards for at least one teacher!



EDUCATION IN HUMAN RELATIONS is the most vital need today in schools and colleges. More people fail in professions from a lack of human relations understanding than from want of efficiency or technological knowledge.—M. R. TRABUE, president of the National Vocational Guidance Association, in *The Washington Post*, October 14, 1945.

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