



A Faculty Studies Evaluation

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Recognizing pupil evaluation as an urgent problem, a faculty committee organized a preliminary effort that channeled group energies into a larger project. The committee also learned how administrative leadership may facilitate a group endeavor.

I GOT *A* in English and social studies last year in your room. This year I'm getting *B*'s."

"Why, I got a *C* in social studies. I've never had that low a mark."

"My teacher this year is a hard marker. But I know what I have to do to get better marks next quarter."

These remarks by eighth graders when they returned to visit their seventh grade English-social studies teachers at the end of the first marking period caused various reactions in those five teachers, reactions that were released at the next weekly meeting as feelings of doubt, of uncertainty, of annoyance. Had we over-estimated our sensitivity to these children when they were in our classes last year? Were the eighth grade teachers oblivious to certain considerations in assigning grades? Did being in the eighth grade necessitate or indicate a more rigorous evaluation? Had we failed to prepare these children for the eighth grade?

When, the following week, the seventh grade teachers assembled at eight A.M. to prepare the agenda, one of the teachers who had been at the meeting the previous week named pupil evaluation as the major problem. Although only five of this larger group



had been at the first meeting, the increasing number of parent conferences had given most of the teachers a new appreciation of how a report card was interpreted by the family: too often a child's grades classified him as a successful or unsuccessful person in the eyes of his family and, therefore, influenced his estimate of himself. For years letter grades had been symbols, and if the teacher, parent and pupil read the definition of each symbol on the report card, everything should be clear to everyone. Now these new eighth graders, their parents and their seventh grade teachers were beginning to wonder whether or not these grades said what they were supposed to say, or even what their teachers had intended them to say. Responsibility for looking into the state of confusion in the seventh grade was given to a committee who would report at a later time.

Present Program Studied

Sensitive to the possibilities of their work and enthusiastic about their membership in this group the committee of teachers came together. Their assignment had to do with the problem of pupil evaluation. Present also at this meeting were the principal and the assistant principal. The principal provided a point of departure when he gave to the members of the committee summary sheets showing the distribution of marks for the first quarter for each division in each subject. This summary sheet proved that serious inconsistencies in grading did exist: several teachers gave no *A*'s; others used a two-point grading system; the marking within a department was not consistent; several teachers gave an unusually large

number of *D*'s. The committee's assignment was suddenly apparent; it must determine as objectively as possible what evaluation techniques were currently operating in the seventh grade. The sharing and pooling of ideas and experiences was an old and respected practice at Weeks. This would be a more systematic collection of information that might be useful in exchanging techniques and reaching agreements.

The area for study was quickly staked out. But a sense of frustration enveloped the group; there was no place to turn for help, and there were no experts to sharpen their thinking. For weeks the committee met to raise questions that ought to be answered. Finally the assistant principal gathered these questions and had them typed for distribution to members of the committee, who reorganized them. Suddenly the committee saw real and intensely interesting possibilities in such a study. Now the method of gathering the information must be determined. The questionnaire with space for writing in answers was considered: should this be done in a faculty meeting or by each teacher when he had time to ponder his answer? The decision was finally made to use the individual interview method with two members of the committee working as a team, one asking the questions and the other taking notes. Perhaps this method of inquiry was chosen because one member of the committee, a woodworking and mathematics teacher, had had extensive experience in interviewing during his service in

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World War II. He had the skills necessary for conducting a comfortable interview, and he understood from experience the general validity of unrehearsed responses and spontaneous reactions. He and one other member of the committee volunteered to test the questions in interviews with ninth grade teachers to determine whether or not this procedure would yield the information sought.

When the committee, the principal, the assistant principal and the curriculum director met to consider the results of the preliminary interviews, there was only one conclusion: here was rich, vital, personal material that the committee was not sure it could or should handle. The administration withdrew completely at this time, and the committee, conscious that this information not only examined the ways in which teachers determined their marks but also revealed their teaching objectives and philosophy, decided to continue the study on an entirely confidential basis.

The questions were further regrouped and refined so as to lessen the possibilities for repetition in the interviews:

1. How do you translate classroom experiences into letter grades?
2. What part of your group is marked *C*? Why do you mark a pupil *C*?
3. How do you determine who the *A* pupils are?
4. Under what conditions do you feel a child deserves *F*?
5. Do you ever use grades to force, motivate, or encourage pupils to do better work?
6. To what extent do you consider

the child as an individual when you mark him?

7. To what extent are your marks accumulative (e.g., according to the junior high school report in Newton the most recent grade represents a child's achievement to date in that subject)?

8. Do you follow the criteria of letter grades as indicated on the present report card?

At this point, too, the decision was made to interview as many of the faculty as were willing. Thus the individual conference, the critical period in the study, was launched. Because only six weeks of the school year remained, the two members of the preliminary interview team initiated a third into the work. The three teachers then divided the interviews. Before each interview one of the team asked a colleague if he would be willing to talk about his methods of determining grades, and a time was set. Only two teachers asked to be excused, and they were, without comment. The interview itself was casual and friendly, sometimes taking place over coffee; the leader explained that the purpose of the survey was to gain a picture of the evaluation systems in the school, not to condemn, to condone, or to criticize any teacher in any way. When the interview had ended, the team discussed the material so as to clarify their thinking about the information that had been obtained and to try to understand what the teacher had really said so as to avoid a free interpretation. Two teachers asked if they might read the typed reports of their interviews. These were made available immediately. For every hour spent in the interview situ-

ation two or three hours were required to write the individual reports. These reports were typed privately, and at all times the committee had complete control of the material. Although the faculty referred jokingly to the study as the "Weeks' Kefauver Report," the fine cooperation of all the teachers gave to the total project whatever meaning it did possess.

The committee of three contributed in their way to the success of the interviews. The teacher with the unusual experience in interviewing communicated some of the spirit and skills to the other two teachers. In planning the schedule any one of the three felt free to decide whether or not his personal relations with a particular teacher would facilitate or block the interview situation. They worked together harmoniously and gradually learned to share their findings and feelings freely with one another. This helped them to keep their own counsel and to continue their comfortable relations with the school.

Findings Presented

The committee had been charged by the seventh grade teachers with the responsibility of reporting back to the group. But the forty-odd interviews were lengthy and confidential. How could the findings be presented so as to develop feelings of concern and a desire for action without arousing opposition? On a hot day in the rush of the last week of school the committee spent six hours sifting the interview materials to discover questions, issues and common trends. In midsummer they met to write the report. By selecting responses to the original questions

from the interviews there was ample evidence to show that the divergences so apparent on the summary sheets distributed at the committee's first meeting had their roots not in thoughtlessly bestowed symbols of achievement, but in terms of the philosophy, the objectives, the pressures and the experiences of the individual classroom teacher. The committee dramatized these basic differences in evaluation procedures by raising questions about evaluation that the material had suggested to them. They concluded their report with the statement, "This report represents an honest effort to summarize the facts about our present system of marking as obtained through the interviews in which you so generously cooperated. We compiled a voluminous mass of material which had to be considerably abbreviated if we expected it to be read or studied. A deliberate effort has been made to present these findings as accurately and objectively as possible, but we are well aware that there may be subjectivity in our thinking which may be reflected in our generalizations." Giving it the title it had ironically been called, "Report of the Weeks' Kefauver Committee," the committee handed it to the principal, and, as a means of avoiding defensive support of the "Report" that might weaken its reception, dissolved the committee.

The following September the "Report" was placed in the boxes of all faculty members and a meeting time was set aside for discussion of the findings. The faculty raised questions. What did "Kefauver" in the title mean? What right had the committee to add its questions and to proclaim its objectivity? Because the committee no

longer existed, there was no one to step forward with the interviews as proof or disproof. No one was defensive about the "Report." Its future rested with the faculty. When, after several meetings, the faculty had failed to involve the members of the former committee, who felt that they had done an honest study that required no defense, and had been unable to meet the challenge of the "Report," they voted to refer it to the Advisory Council (composed of representatives of the faculty elected by grades and the administration) for its consideration. Although the Advisory Council, too, questioned the objectivity of the generalizations in the "Report," there was no doubt that the variety of evaluations being carried on could only confuse pupils and parents. The faculty voted to follow the Advisory Council's recommendation by organizing a workshop to study the area of pupil

evaluation and reporting. Therefore, although the findings of the "Report" were never wholly accepted by the faculty, the study served to focus the group's attention on a problem that was specific and real to them.

Group progress in the direction of accomplishment is a slow, often tedious process. To the onlooker it may appear to be time wasted. For the participant it may be painful; it will surely require much effort. For the deeply involved, exciting new areas of thought and the satisfactions of shared effort are a reward and a spur. If this account can contribute to a better understanding of the feelings and activities involved in a preliminary effort that channeled group energies into a larger project and to an appreciation of how administrative leadership may facilitate group effort, this recounting will have served its purpose.

Can We Sharpen the Concept of Action Research?

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This article reviews various definitions of action research and raises some questions concerning its characteristics.

DURING the past few years much has been said and written concerning action research. Some of the statements have been helpful, but others have confused the situation because the definition of the term has been so loose.

Action research as it has been defined by some has many of the characteris-

tics of evaluation. Lippitt and Radke analyzed eight studies using the action research approach and identified the following common characteristics: (*The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, March 1946, p. 171-175.)

"Sensing a need to discover facts; decisions as to what needs to be known; construction of instruments for gathering data; use of the objective ap-

¹ Based on discussion with Harold G. Shane, professor of education, Northwestern University, Evanston, Illinois.

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