

Merit Rating: Have the Issues Changed?

IT IS possible to point to school districts, including my own, in which merit rating works. We can devise rating scales and use them. We can devise a team approach to supervise the evaluation of teachers. Within this system we can select our "superior" and our "inferior" teachers with some degree of accuracy; and we can feel reasonably comfortable that careful supervision and the independent judgments of principal and supervisor concur. This is what we mean when we say—"it works."

However, there is an accompanying phenomenon. Teachers begin to perceive themselves, each other, and their supervisors in new ways. As a supervisor, I hear teachers developing a classification system somewhat as follows:

One type says, "Why should I lose money because of a limiting factor?¹ I received 'merit,' so I'm not eligible for three more years—that doesn't make sense. Why can't I get a merit raise every year?" This is the "I want merit every year" teacher. "If I'm good this year," she says, "I'll be the same, next year. Why should I lose money because of a limitation factor?"

¹The Cheltenham plan makes a teacher eligible for a merit increment, once every three years. Four hundred dollars is added to the normal increment.

Another type says, "I did not receive merit; perhaps I should leave the profession." He may add, "I received 'good' supervisory reports. I felt certain I was a merit teacher. Why didn't I get a merit rating? I don't care about the money; I feel I'm a failure." He asks the supervisor, "Do you think I should stay in teaching?" He is not asking how to improve his professional competence; rather, he is feeling failure to the point of considering leaving his chosen career. He asks for advice but he wants ego restoration.

Still another type says, "You don't have to visit my classes, I'm not interested in merit." This teacher has adopted a limited concept of the purposes of supervision. This creates a chain reaction. The supervisor visits his classes feeling unwanted and struggling to know how to help the teacher grow professionally. The teacher, the supervisor feels, has equated improvement of instruction with merit rating. The supervisor wonders whether the teacher really wants to grow professionally and a chain of negative feelings interferes with the supervisory act.

In 1950, the Commission on Teacher Education of the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development conducted a study that resulted in a

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pamphlet entitled, *Better Than Rating*.² In this most provocative work, written for the Commission by Robert R. Leeper, new approaches to the appraisal of teaching services are presented. In the section concerned with "How Rating Affects the School Program," the following statement appears.

The teacher, knowing he has been rated, usually says, "But I can't find any trace of myself or of my work in these results!" He feels his work has been compared, almost always unfavorably, with the ideal practices of a teacher who never existed in reality.³

The "Elusive Ideal Teacher"

Most school rating schemes have evolved as descriptions of so-called ideal practices which have little or no basis in instructional theory or research. Most merit rating schemes would never have evolved in schools without the pressure from School Boards or some force outside the profession. It is not surprising that the teaching profession and school systems, not ready to develop merit rating, have selected models for rating schemes from outside the profession.

Merit rating models have come, in the main, from business and industry, and the pressure to institute them has come largely from School Board members associated with such merit programs in their own work.

Many school systems have abandoned merit rating programs after several years of trial. In systems where it continues, I am convinced that it "works" only because those who administer it admit to the limitations of the system

and that the teachers involved basically trust their supervisors. I am also convinced that school morale is affected by merit rating to a lesser degree than we thought, but that the subtle and persistent pressure felt by some individual teachers serves to inhibit their personal development and their teaching performance.

Better Than Rating makes a strong case for the profession's concern for respect for the individual teacher.

School people in modern times have come more and more to base the educational program upon the premise of respect for the individual. In order to guide his development, they must start with the individual child, accept him where he is, as he is. Beginning with this acceptance and understanding, they can guide his development in accordance with his own rate of growth. The child is thus not always unfavorably compared with an ideal child who never really existed. His achievements and shortcomings are interpreted, for the most part, in the light of his own rate of growth and development.

This acceptance of the individual person where he is and as he is accords with the basic democratic principle of respect for individual personality. This applies to adults as well as to children.

Teacher-rating plans, whether they rank teachers in a certain arbitrary order, give an overall score or mark on performance, or judge teachers according to a listing of ideal qualities, are administrative plans which do not basically respect individual personality. These plans do not provide for acceptance of the individual as a competent professional person, where he is and as he is. Neither do they encourage an attitude of acceptance on the part of the rater that would cause him to point out any change and growth which may have been achieved by the individual, or what the direction of change should be to further his professional growth.⁴

⁴ *Ibid.* p. 55-56.

² Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. *Better Than Rating: New Approaches to Appraisal of Teaching Services*. Washington, D. C.: the Association, 1950. 83 p.

³ *Ibid.* p. 55.

Much of what is quoted here is reflected in the feelings of teachers who attempt to exclude the supervisor from the classroom because they are not interested in merit rating. Many supervisors have tried to separate improvement of instruction programs from merit rating. This is possible and perhaps even desirable, for until we can more precisely describe the act of teaching, how can we really place a value judgment on it?

Better Than Rating makes an important statement on rating scales.

If teachers know that their teaching is going to be judged in certain predetermined ways, it is only natural that they will plan their teaching in such a way that they will show up well in the judging. Educators, for example, have long recognized that if teachers knew in advance that the growth and development of their pupils was to be measured by the use of standard achievement tests or regents or college board examinations, they would plan their teaching so that pupils would have as adequate as possible a mastery of the facts to be measured. In like manner, teachers who know that their efficiency as a teacher is to be judged in terms of predetermined items listed on a rating scale or in a personnel record, will plan their teaching so that they will make as good a showing as possible when the scale is applied to their work.⁵

In practice, this is indeed true. As a matter of experience, the inadequacy of the rating scale looms large as teachers work to fit the scale. We have experienced some difficulty in trying to guide a teacher out of the profession because she or he *can* be rated satisfactorily on most single items on the teacher rating scale. The ASCD Commission on Teacher Evaluation found very few teacher rating scales which provided for weighing the component traits to be

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 58.

rated, and they state that "the impossibility of assigning weights is obvious, since the matrix of factors that makes one teacher eminently successful may not be the same combination of qualities that account for the success of another."⁶

Rethinking the Issues

Firsthand experience with merit rating had led the writer to reexamine the literature and rethink with colleagues the issues involved in merit rating. Four significant issues were identified 14 years ago by the ASCD Commission on Teacher Evaluation in the pamphlet, *Better Than Rating*.

The first of these issues has to do with motives which underlie efforts of individuals toward self-improvement. Does the reward-or-punishment provision implicit in most rating plans help the individual to make his greatest effort toward professional growth? Does fear of demotion or of reduction in pay cause the teacher to strive consciously and intelligently to "mend his ways"—even though he has to go in the direction prescribed by the rating plan or by the person who does the rating? Or has modern psychology not found sounder principles upon which to base a program for encouraging teachers' efforts to accomplish best results in working with children?

A second issue involved in teacher rating has to do more directly with the process of evaluation. What is the purpose of evaluation? If evaluation is part of the means by which people judge and guide the direction of their growth, then this process should be thoroughly understood and participated in by all concerned. The question involved is whether we, in a democracy, want a

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 64-65.

type of authoritarian evaluation which guides individuals into unquestioning obedience and submissiveness to persons superior in status. On the other hand, would it not be preferable to develop a type of democratic organization in which qualities of cooperative evaluation would be explored, understood, and used continuously, freely and creatively by all concerned in the process?

A third issue has to do with the effect of current teacher-rating practices upon professional growth. Just what are the characteristics of the main types of rating plans currently in use? Do these plans actually help the teacher see his "points of weakness," and thus automatically encourage him toward greater efforts to overcome these faults? Or do the plans, because of their very nature, cause greater tension and anxiety, and thus have an undesirable, and sometimes disastrous effect upon the professional development of the individual?

A fourth issue relates to the kind of organization which will best foster and encourage professional growth on the part of individuals and groups. Is the school, or the superintendent, alone concerned in evaluation of the school's program, of results of instruction? Or is evaluation the privilege and responsibility of every person affected by the school's program? An organization is shaped by people, and yet an organization also shapes people. The important thing in evolving an organization to foster professional growth in democratic schools is that it faithfully exemplify the soundest principles of democracy and thus make possible effective working of cooperative evaluation procedures.

These four issues, *fourteen years later*, are still crucial. An issue which becomes increasingly sensitive as one ex-

periences merit rating is *how an organization is shaped by people* and how an *organization also shapes people*. A rating scale becomes a shaping device no matter how supportive the supervisor, the principal or the system may be. With "merit rating" the classroom visit is "different," no matter what the relationship has been with the supervisors. Staff relationships, which shape the school atmosphere, become difficult to assess—and often guarded. Parents inadvertently shape a new problem by saying to a teacher, "Of course you got a merit raise, didn't you?"

Styles of Teaching

If we could effectively deal with the issues stated above, the issues to be proposed might not be forthcoming. One "new" issue relates to the research and knowledge being developed about the styles of teaching, theories of instruction, the nature of classroom interaction, and the relationship of personal mental health to professional growth. Some educators who have been doing research in the area of teaching and classroom interaction have stated that their work is not to be used to evaluate teachers. Perhaps this should be true in the initial stages of research. The issue seems to be, however, what will be the effect of current research on teacher education, instructional theory, and "styles of teaching" on the evaluation of teacher performance. There is a need to bring together new knowledge and research from a variety of disciplines in order to rethink the nature of teaching and the structure of better teacher evaluation procedures.

Rating or evaluation of one's work as a teacher is not an issue in most school systems today. Whether it be formal or

informal, rating exists. Will we be able to resolve old issues and professionalize our task of rating teachers when we use what we know from both experience and research about the phenomena of teaching and learning? This leads to the related issue of the nature of teacher preparation. The work in curriculum development and even school building design for future needs has already surpassed efforts to study and improve teacher preparation. Teacher education has many dimensions, some of which will have a powerful influence on teacher education in the future. These are defined in *The Education of the American Teacher* by James B. Conant and *The Miseducation of American Teachers* by James D. Koerner.

The writings of these men will no doubt have an immediate influence, but whether or not their recommendations will improve the quality of teaching is central to the issue of teacher performance and ultimately teacher evaluation. My hunch is that we will find more effective guides for understanding teaching in the research on teacher education conducted at San Francisco State College by Fred Wilhelms and others and in the work of Ned Flanders, N. A. Fattu, Arno Bellack, B. O. Smith, Hilda Taba, Elizabeth S. Maccia and others who have been engaged in developing "models" of instructional theory and classroom interaction. Once we know *who* should teach and *what* teachers do that results in learning, then we will begin to know what to value and reward in teaching.

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