

An Open Letter

TO Administrators

FROM A Counselor

RICHARD C. NELSON

Assistant Professor of Education
Purdue University, Lafayette, Indiana

PERHAPS your school counselor should tell you this, but since a great many of them hit the right end of the ascendance—submission continuum, yours may not. Perhaps the counselor shares the responsibility because he has not pointed out, graphically and in detail, that we may be contributing in negative ways to the mental health of children through practices created for administrative convenience.

A Frenzy To Evaluate

Specifically, what are the concerns we should be pointing out to you, the administrator, as viewed from the vantage point of the counselor?

1. *We create pressure too early.* "All right, class, now that I've explained long division with borrowing, here are twenty examples. Be sure to do these neatly and carefully. The grades will be taken." Where, oh where, in our pressure-generating society, is time for ingestion and digestion provided?

Skills don't develop best under pressure. Weeks should be devoted to new processes if they are of consequence before evaluation creates its extrinsic motivation. A child simply cannot be free to learn without reference to past failures or successes unless evaluation is suspended during new experiences.

2. *We create pressure too often.* An elementary teacher frequently grades ten or more different factors. If he records grades for ten papers each term for each graded area, he has one hundred pieces of evidence. If he spends an average of thirty minutes in the distribution, explanation, administration and collection of these hundred papers, he has spent fifty in-class hours in evaluation each term.

He has thus used fifty of the one hundred fifty hours in a six-week term in the evaluation process. When other non-teaching activities are subtracted from the total it is entirely plausible to hypothesize that actual teaching time does not exceed actual evaluation time.

3. *We permeate every endeavor with pressure.* Art, music, physical education, science, health, grammar, composition, computation, problem solving, spelling, handwriting, geography, history, etc., all are letter graded. Behavior factors may also be given some kind of evaluation.

Industry grades on a three point scale of special reward for superior overall performance, maintenance in position for adequate overall performance, and dismissal for unsatisfactory overall performance. It would be considered foolishness to evaluate secretaries, for example, on a fifteen point (A through F and plus or minus) scale separately on shorthand, spelling, typing, stapling, collating, making appointments, receiving visitors, answering telephones, maintaining calendars, and on behavioral factors.

Whenever evaluation contributes direction to a teacher by indicating class and individual weaknesses, it is logical to utilize it. However, if class answers to two questions point up needs for further teaching, pushing on with twenty practice questions or examples likely means that incorrect skills and processes are reinforced. Where stress is on evaluation, though, the record book thirsts for another piece of evidence and often twenty opportunities for reinforcement are pursued, whether the information applied is right or wrong.

Many brilliant and less than brilliant people at some point in their lives vow never again to submit to the severe scrutiny of grades, yet how many would sincerely like to be exposed to wide vistas of knowledge if evaluation did not enter? At all levels evaluation leaves its scars.

4. *We promote an examinee culture.* Test takers are our great successes, perhaps because teachers tend to be good test takers. Creativity and innovation are weaned out of multitudes of individuals in this multiple choice society. Maturity is not defined in matching test exercises, and personal worth is not a true-false matter. Nor do essay questions solve the problems, not automatically, at any rate. Conformity is often more reinforced by limiting essay questions than by many objective type items.

As encouraged by typical examinations, school learnings are often fragmental, inconsequential, encyclopedic, and highly susceptible to the forgetting curve. They do little, if anything, despite the preciseness of the scores derived, to differentiate among appliers of the knowledge or skill. They *cause* differentiation as much as they *reflect* it!

We must put the emphasis on development and skill growth, devote far more time to teaching than to evaluation, and emphasize warm and understanding teacher-pupil relations. The shift of the role of the teacher from a judgmental to a helping relationship is still sorely needed in our society.

5. *We set up situations designed for frustration.* The administrative and teaching convenience of the whole age-grading concept is truly tremendous. What could be more logical (and convenient) than that at a given point in fifth grade a concept geared to that level should be introduced? It means, however, that all students, regardless of ability, ought to be able to leap the same hurdles.

Learning is a process in which growth factors are deeply embedded. Utilizing readiness factors and building upon a sure foundation of prior growth is vital to sensible learning. Dividing fractions before whole numbers can be divided successfully and consistently dooms the individual to whom the work is assigned to failure. The world is geared to accept and even reward differential abilities. Slower, more accurate performance is tedium to many, ideal to many others.

We need curricula truly designed for individual differences. Very few do more than provide token response to these variable factors. Like the weather, there is much talk about it, however. The grade labels on work are not God-given. If a child learns to read well in senior high school it may be as wonderful an accomplishment as if he learned this in third grade. We need differential abilities and we need to encourage teachers to expect skills to be developed differentially.

6. *We forget that a child can only be taller than he was yesterday.* This is as true mentally as it is physically. To reward with a failing grade a level of performance which is better than last year's performance is to prove to the child he is right when he thinks, "Nothing I ever do is good enough!" A child must be compared to himself primarily, to others secondarily.

A child who sits day after day in the midst of unrealistic learning demands, whether too high or too low, is not learning. Ergo, if our demands are not geared to the individual and his needs, we are violating our clearest mandate. We are not teaching unless children are learning. Today there should be only one cur-



Community Helpers:

- N1 Doctor - Oriental
 - N2 Nurse - White
 - N3 Mailman - Negro
 - N4 Policeman - White
 - N5 Mechanic - White
 - N6 Businessman - Negro
 - N7 Fireman - White
 - N8 - Teacher - White
- \$3.75 ea., \$27.50 set of 8
 White Family - \$11.75 set of 5
 Negro Family - \$11.75 set of 5

These are my people . . .

Very real people, too, representing family, friends, and community helpers. These are people a child knows — and people he should learn to understand.

You, plus JUDY'S NEIGHBORS — people of different races and social levels — will teach self-respect and respect for others. The NEIGHBORS adapt to many uses: language development, social studies, and as important role models in endless real-life dramas. The figures are scaled 5" per foot; the tallest is 34" high. They are silk-screened on 1/10" hardboard, and have detachable bases. All JUDY "See-How" Materials are child-oriented and carefully constructed. That's why they bear the **Judy** name.

To obtain your own free copy of the JUDY "See-How" Materials Catalog, write to: The JUDY Company, Dept. 10A, 310 N. 2nd Street, Minneapolis, Minnesota 55401.

GIVE CHILDREN A HEAD START WITH MATERIALS



riculum for the child, and that is one step or more beyond his achievement of yesterday. Reducing our frenzy for evaluation in the early years of a child's learning would allow him more time to develop security and understanding, to utilize his intrinsic motives to learn, and to grow taller than yesterday.

7. *We are too future oriented.* We have a tendency in our society to emphasize what tomorrow will bring; we create fears and concerns in our constant view toward the future. In some ways this may be a good, healthy characteristic. Insofar as it constantly forces learning downward it is generally unwise.

It is no doubt possible to teach differential calculus to some level of understanding in the elementary school. Diagramming sentences can be taught there also. Kindergarten children can be taught reading. Why? What are we rushing toward? Is this future so filled with all the good of life that we can afford to sacrifice the present and endanger the future?

Today there are some things a child is happy, willing, and able to do. There are other things that a child can readily be encouraged to do. But extra-early accomplishment is often of dubious value.

Youth can learn many things much earlier in the same way that the body *can* endure for many days under conditions of severe privation. The question should not be can something be taught, but *should* something be taught at a given level? Should it be taught to all?

Local research and much local soul searching needs to be done to weed out the learnings that have relevance only for the future and that cannot truly be justified for today.

To Rock the Boat

In summary, then, the administrator, the counselor, and teacher must help education enter an age in which leadership by the professionals generates action on the part of the public by clarifying the following needs:

1. We need more and better guidance facilities from kindergarten through grade twelve.
2. We need public support so that we can assure *every* child of a good start in his early education with pressure minimized.
3. We need public support, both vocal and financial, for programs designed realistically to meet individual differences and to provide individual instruction in which the student is compared mainly to himself.
4. We need teacher-pupil ratios that allow teachers to go beyond the limits of mass teaching.
5. We need support for a pleasant and present-oriented learning experience for children. We need less emphasis on "harder" activities and preparation for the future.

We must rock the boat! And in a different direction than it is going now!

Copyright © 1966 by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. All rights reserved.