

Grading: A Searching Look

RICHARD L. SARTORE*

We want youngsters to succeed in school, not through the threat of grades, but, rather, because they are interested, motivated, and sincerely desire to pursue knowledge.

CURRENT methods of grading are based predominantly on how well a student's retention compares with his or her classmates. Grading procedures are common in teaching environments that are highly structured, uniform, and regimented. Students who respond favorably to the rigors of these classrooms, whether on the elementary, secondary, or college level, are more likely to obtain higher grades than those who do not.

Assumptions About Children

Any meaningful evaluation system is closely related to the expertise, innovations, and professional attitudes that exist in a given school. The type of learning that ensues is further affected by the school's overall philosophy and resulting objectives. Numerous schools include in their philosophy some fundamental premises about how and why children learn. These beliefs about children serve as a foundation for the creation of reporting standards. In order to inaugurate a mode for measuring student progress, the following premises about children and learning are proposed as being inherent in any profitable learning environment:

1. Learning is facilitated when youngsters are motivated by what they are doing.
2. Children should be exposed to a

wide range of learning experiences, including other individuals, materials, and environments.

3. Children are curious, imaginative, and creative human beings.
4. Children are different from each other and therefore learn differently, according to their own abilities, pace, interests, and learning style.
5. Children learn by freely sharing experiences and working together with other students and adults.
6. The process of learning is more important than the product.
7. Most significantly, children want to and will learn if programs are humane, challenging, and directed toward individual concerns.

Grading for What?

If one shares these impressions about children and learning, then the reasons given by proponents of a grading system are subject to debate. We must ask ourselves what essentially is the purpose of grades and do they in fact help a student learn? Explanations offered for using a grading system are mixed and far-reaching. Some cite the need for instituting scholastic standards while others blame parental pressure and the complicated demands of society.

John Holt (2) points out that many children in school fail. Few would deny that

* Richard L. Sartore, Elementary School Counselor, Arbor Hill Elementary School, Albany, New York

our schools are notorious for labeling children failures. Grading is probably the foremost device for such labeling. This fear provoking tactic manages to penalize the student who works slowly. For the student who is adept in guessing and who can feed back teacher-imposed lessons, grades provide an advantage.

When grades are equated with advancement and promotion, some students, as well as adults attending college, are apt to use questionable means of securing them. A student's ability to deceive and manipulate is reinforced. Achieving a commendable grade in school becomes more crucial than the intellectual enrichment that might have resulted. The mark turns out to be a substitute for learning itself.

Children are made aware at a very early age that those who do well in school, which usually means earning good grades, go on to further education. Those with poor grades, however, are relegated to less desirable alternatives. Interestingly enough, the occupational areas have been negatively labeled

the "other alternative" to further education.

No impartial and fair system of grading exists. Individual standards, student perceptions, personal differences, methods of evaluation, and results vary appreciably. Different graders have diversified standards and thus, particularly with essay examinations, the grade may range from A to F on the exact same paper. Once a grade is decided the receiver has to try to figure out exactly what it means.

Testing is one popular method of determining a grade. Grades are usually based on tests and, as John Holt (3) notes, "at best, testing does more harm than good, at worst, it hinders, distorts, and corrupts the learning process." Memorization and irrelevancy are necessary ingredients for good grades. Success in school is achieved by merely regurgitating what the teacher says and by sitting silently in class—preferably with very little movement. The end result of this unnatural condition is a reduction in the potentially warm relationship that could exist between child and teacher.



Consider a text that provides practical guidelines for developing, analyzing, evaluating, and adapting the elementary school curriculum.

One that stresses individual differences and examines behavioral objectives, open classroom organization, and strategies for diagnostic, formulative, and summative evaluation.

One that gives up-to-the-minute coverage of new developments in specific content areas of the curriculum.

Consider **NEW DESIGNS FOR ELEMENTARY CURRICULUM AND INSTRUCTION**, Second Edition, **JOHN U. MICHAELIS**, University of California, Berkeley, **RUTH H. GROSSMAN**, The City College of the City University of New York, and **LLOYD SCOTT**, University of California, Berkeley, 1975, 448 pages, \$10.95

Price subject to change.

College & University Division / **McGRAW-HILL BOOK COMPANY**
1221 Avenue of the Americas, New York, New York 10020



Young people should learn to participate in evaluating their own work. Schools do not as a matter of course permit students to detect and rectify their own mistakes. Errors are more likely to be corrected by the teacher.

Various discipline problems can be traced to the subjective use of grades. Students realize that grades are permanent and will follow them for life. Under these circumstances, they respond adversely to their use. Personal frustration is ordinarily directed against the teacher, other children, or the school building. Time and again, we erroneously regard the student with low grades as being a problem and the student with high grades as being a well-rounded youngster, an unfortunate assumption to say the least.

Alternatives to Grading

The most equitable approach to grading is to eliminate grades entirely. The question certainly arises as to how children can best be evaluated. Any assessment system that does not contribute to a youngster's learning potential is not worth using. How one

assesses a student's academic and personal growth depends largely upon the type of children, educators, and community involved. No single methodology is appropriate for all students. Any good evaluation program is evolutionary in nature. It cannot simply be created. Provisions for flexibility and revision are considered. Most notably, the approach should allow for individual differences and growth.

In designing reasonable evaluative options that deem the student as the primary benefactor, one may wish to weigh the following suggestions:

- *Consider carefully what is to be evaluated and if it is possible to appraise fairly.* Roland Barth (1) indicates that objective assessment of factors that really matter would seem almost impossible. As a result, we focus in on things that we believe can be measured. What we attempt to mea-

sure, however, frequently turns out to be trivial.

● *Let youngsters learn to participate in evaluating their own work.* Children learn to walk, talk, run, and master other activities by comparing their own accomplishments with others. Changes are made accordingly until the child is competent in what he or she does. Schools do not as a matter of course permit children to detect and rectify their own mistakes. Errors are likely to be corrected by the teacher. Children, nevertheless, can usually figure out their own errors, especially with the help of other students. When the youngster is unable to make the appropriate correction, the teacher helps.

● *Exposure to a wide range of learning materials, approaches, and settings helps children to behave more overtly so that personal and academic growth are easier to gauge.* The kinds of planned occurrences a youngster is subjected to should extend beyond the four walls of a classroom. Both home and community are integral parts of that ongoing exposure. Learning centers may be established within the classroom. These centers differ in makeup depending upon such variables as interests of students, teacher goals, season of the year, current world events, and the like.

● *Develop a log of each student's daily work activities.* Large index cards can be filed alphabetically according to such concerns as motivation, acquired skills, projects completed, along with comments by parents and other involved persons. Areas the youngster has worked in, personal strengths, weaknesses, books read, new vocabulary words, math concepts, writing samples, assumed responsibilities, and ability to work with others might also be included.

● *Student evaluation checklists with skills accomplished and those yet to be mas-*

tered may be developed by the teacher. The skills continuum sheets provide detailed reports of a youngster's regular educational growth. Therefore when a student transfers to another school, a full and thorough record is available. Students who do not meet minimum academic requirements, nonetheless, should be eligible to make up those requirements or repeat a lesson or unit of study. School records should be kept only on what has been successfully achieved.

● *Notify parents frequently about what their child is doing that benefits his or her personal and class growth.* Parents are invaluable resources for information concerning their children. Understanding is necessary for individual appraisal. The amount, quality, and progress of work finished by the student provide parents with a comprehensive overview at reporting time.

● *Finally, the most effective form of evaluation is through direct observation of applied learning over a long period of time.* The enthusiasm, curiosity, excitement, and creativity exhibited by the youngster are perhaps nearly impossible to measure, yet these are truly among the best reflections of learning.

This, in my opinion, is what ought to happen. To think that it may happen in the near future might be overly optimistic. Learning is difficult if not impossible to measure accurately. Not only can we not measure it, but sometimes we cannot even see it. We want youngsters to succeed in school, not through the threat of grades, but, rather, because they are interested, motivated, and sincerely desire to pursue knowledge. William Glasser (4) summed it up very well when he said that "the kind of education offered (relevance and thinking) and the way it is offered (involvement) have much more to do with incentive than grades."

References

1. Roland S. Barth. *Open Education and the American School*. New York: Agathon Press, Incorporated, 1972.
2. John Holt. *How Children Fail*. New York: Dell Publishing Company, 1971.

3. John Holt. *The Underachieving School*. New York: Dell Publishing Company, 1972.
4. William Glasser. *Schools Without Failure*. New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, Inc., 1969. □

Copyright © 1975 by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. All rights reserved.