The Responsibilities of Grading

ROBERT I. WISE*
BETTY NEWMAN

TRADITIONAL grading practices are very much with us. In 1970, the National Education Association reported that over 85 percent of the public schools were using percentages, points from 1 to 5, or letter grades in reporting student achievement (4). Yet evidence is mounting against these traditional grading practices, and educators are becoming increasingly concerned with "the grading problem." Several alternative grading procedures have been proposed. These include parent-teacher conferences, descriptive or narrative reporting, student self-evaluation, mastery or performance-based evaluation, pass/fail and its variants, dual systems, and giving credits in relation to amount of work completed.

As it becomes easier to criticize traditional grading practices and to see the need for alternatives, it is tempting to propose solutions without considering the problem in perspective. If we succumb to this temptation, our solutions will tend to be piecemeal and patchwork rather than substantive alternatives. Our purpose here is to address the question, what is a *good* alternative? We will identify two educational responsibilities that any alternative must consider, and in light of these responsibilities we will discuss the nature of grading and the qualities that a good solution requires.

Responsibility to Parents

Parents are rightly concerned about what their child learns at school and how well the child does at the tasks of learning.

A task-referenced standard of evaluating and reporting has emerged within recent trends toward individualized instruction and criterion-referenced test interpretation.

They may make decisions about their child's future on the basis of the school's assessment of his or her achievement. In a study of the parents and teachers of 2,150 students, Otto (5) found that both parents and teachers wanted realistic, factual descriptions of student development. They also wanted information about specific strengths, weaknesses, and areas for improvement, and suggestions of ways in which parents might help their child.

A public school has the responsibility to report meaningfully and honestly to parents what the school is teaching and how well their child is learning. At present, most report cards fail to carry out this responsibility. Student achievement is often reported in separate subject areas, but it is difficult to determine what is specifically being taught. Furthermore, traditional grading symbols are so imprecise that it is difficult for parents to determine how well their child is learning. Most of us would agree with Wandt and Brown (7) who suggest that:

* *Robert I. Wise, Assistant Professor of Education, California State College, Bakersfield; and Betty Newman, Teacher, Edison Elementary School, Bakersfield, California*

The "A" Johnny brings home in reading can have a variety of meanings. It can mean that Johnny is reading consistently above grade level. It can mean that Johnny is one of the better readers in his class even though not reading above grade level. It can mean that Johnny is reading as well as the teacher thinks he can, even though he may actually be one of the poorer readers in the room in terms of absolute achievement.

A letter, percentage, or number written beside a major subject area such as reading, language arts, mathematics, history, or physical education cannot provide parents with meaningful descriptive information that would help them understand their child's progress in relation to school expectations.

Responsibility to Students

The primary function of report cards is to report student progress to parents. The education of students can proceed without grades at all. Students can be best served by timely diagnostic evaluations indicating what they have and have not learned. A grade need never be mentioned. Our responsibility to students is to provide the opportunities and encouragement necessary for them to develop academically and personally to their fullest. This development can be hindered by the use of grades which do not meaningfully describe what the student is learning.

If grading is vague and ambiguous, a student can confuse an assessment of achievement with an assessment of personal worth (2,3). Low achievers are especially susceptible to this confusion. Some react to low grades by withdrawing, while others rebel (8). It has been found that those who must endure repeated failure come to expect failure and perform accordingly (9). Grades can also interfere with the best personal development of the "A" student. This student is susceptible to an egotism based on succeeding at that rather narrow range of human activities we call scholastic. He or she may also suffer more grade-related anxieties than those receiving average or low grades (9). The superior student may strive for grades at the expense of personal integrity (6).

Using grades as threats or bribes to motivate learning is another way in which we fail in our responsibility to students. While Krause (3) found that fear of a bad grade did motivate to a limited extent those who were good at memorizing and studying for tests, she noted the negative effects such fear has on the learning of many students. If we need to motivate students to learn, there are many motivators that are more effective than grades. Using grades as either carrots or sticks can only reflect on our competencies as teachers.

Considering Grading Standards

In light of our responsibilities to parents and students, how will we judge proposed alternatives to traditional grading practices? What qualities must an alternative have in order to meet our responsibilities to parents

and students? If we understand what grading involves, we will have a perspective essential to answering these questions. Any grading procedure contains two aspects, *evaluation* and *reporting*. In evaluation, student learning is assessed in light of some *standard*. In reporting, that assessment is summarized in some kind of report *format*. If we view the grading problem narrowly as being simply one of finding the right format, we may find no satisfactory answer at all, for evaluation and reporting are related. The grading problem is as much a problem of evaluation, and the standards we use, as it is one of the format in which we report our evaluations.

Three types of evaluation standards are possible: group-referenced, self-referenced, and task-referenced. We are not referring here to any specific standard which indicates how well a student must perform to achieve some grade, but to the *type of standard*, that is, whether a student is compared to his group, to himself, or to the tasks of learning at which he is to succeed. If we now consider each of these types of standards in terms of our two educational responsibilities, we can see that only one fulfills those responsibilities satisfactorily.

Group-referenced standards, the most familiar of which is "grading on a curve," fail to meet our responsibilities to parents and students in ways we all understand. Knowing Johnny's relative position in his group tells a parent neither what Johnny has learned nor how well Johnny has learned. Likewise, a group-referenced standard does not carry out our responsibility to our students because given the compulsory nature of schooling, it is inhumane. Given the same race to run again and again, some students will tend to always win and some will rarely win, a situation which is educationally intolerable.

A self-referenced standard, sometimes corrupted in the phrase "letting the student compete against himself," assesses each student's achievement in terms of his own rate of learning. Thus a slower student who is showing imperfect but steady progress and a faster student who is several chapters

ahead and making no mistakes are both evaluated as doing well. Skipping the obvious fact that such a standard describes a student's learning no better than a group-referenced standard, it can also fail us in meeting our responsibility to students.

The difficulty is that the use of a self-referenced standard requires the prior assessment of each student's learning potential. And the assessment of learning potential is more difficult and more susceptible to error than assessment of achievement. Under-assessment of potential can result in a student's progressing no faster than his or her teacher expects. At the other end, over-estimation of potential can result in an assessment of "not doing as well as he could," which says nothing about achievement, yet reflects on the student's character. One final point is that the assessment of learning potential is itself group-referenced; we can rate a student as "slower" or "faster" only in relation to the group.

The task-referenced standard is relatively new, having emerged within the context of recent trends toward individualized instruction and criterion-referenced test interpretation. We do not intend the word "task" to be understood in any narrow sense here. It refers to any and all school learnings we expect of students, from learning basic addition facts to working cooperatively in a group. Some learning tasks are simple enough that "how well" a student has learned can be a matter of mastery or nonmastery; more complex tasks may be assessed in relation to a continuum of development on which

> *"When my father saw my report card he said it was not a good one. The place he did not like was that the teacher and classmates would like me better if I came cleaner to school. You may be sure I come cleaner now because father said he wouldn't feed me if I didn't. ... I am running a race with sister to see who will get the best report card next time."*—Journal of Educational Method, April 1923.

intervals are described in terms of specific characteristics. Using this type of standard, a teacher would assess how well a student had mastered or improved on a particular task.

A task-referenced standard seems to be the only one that meets our responsibilities to both parents and students. It allows us to report to parents both what the school is teaching and what their child has specifically learned. It refers to a student's achievement only in terms of what he or she can and cannot do, saying nothing about what he or she is or is capable of. A task-referenced standard does not necessarily require behavioral statements of intended student learnings, and this is fortunate. If it did, we would be restricted to evaluating and reporting on only a relatively narrow range of educational objectives that we seek. Such a standard does require, however, that a teacher be explicit regarding what constitutes successful learning. Also, it must be recognized that a task-referenced standard is not necessarily more "objective" than the other two types of standards, for the teacher must still use judgment in determining whether a student has mastered or improved on a given task.

Considering Reporting Formats

Formats for reporting student progress seem to fall into two basic categories, coded and narrative. Most report cards use some form of code such as letters, numbers, or checkmarks to indicate student achievement. Narrative formats have included both written prose descriptions of a student's progress and parent-teacher conferences. An innovative narrative format reported recently (1) involves the teacher's picking descriptive phrases from a large pool of phrases stored in a computer, and then having the computer put together a prose description of the student's progress.

Given that the standard is task-referenced and explicit, the kind of format is not so crucial. Even letters or numbers can possibly be used to indicate mastery or improvement on a task or category of tasks. Due to a tradition of grading abuses, however, it might now be safer to use checkmarks to indicate achievement. Written narrative reporting would seem to allow opportunity for a more complete description than any checkmarks could, but narratives require more time on the part of the teacher. A parent-teacher conference provides opportunities that no other format can because it allows parent and teacher to exchange information about many aspects of the child and his or her development. While each of these alternative formats has its advantages and disadvantages, a school or school district may find that a judicious combination may be the best solution to its grading problem.

References

1. Duane M. Giannangelo and Kwi Yoon Lee. "At Last: Meaningful Report Cards." *Phi Delta Kappan* 60 (9): 630-31; May 1974.

2. John I. Goodlad and Robert H. Anderson. *The Nongraded Elementary School.* New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, Inc., 1963.

3. Carolyn Krause. "Person-Centered Evaluation Builds Positive Self-Concepts." *Peabody Journal of Education* 49 (4): 290-94; July 1972.

4. National Education Association Research Division. "Marking and Reporting Pupil Progress." *Today's Education* 59 (8): 55-56; November 1970.

5. Henry J. Otto, Malvin G. Bowden, M. Vere DeVault, Joseph J. Kotrlik, and James A. Turman. *Four Methods of Reporting to Parents.* Austin, Texas: The University of Texas Press, 1957.

6. Robert D. Strom. "School Evaluation and Mental Health." In: E. Paul Torrance and Robert D. Strom, editors. *Mental Health and Achievement.* New York: John Wiley and Sons, Inc., 1965.

7. Edwin Wandt and Gerald W. Brown. *Essentials of Educational Evaluation.* New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1957.

8. Fred T. Wilhelms. "Evaluation as Feedback." *Evaluation as Feedback and Guide.* Washington, D.C.: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 1967.

9. R. R. Zimmerman. "Individualization of Instruction: Evaluation—A Roadblock." *Education Monograph Number 5.* Montana University, Missoula Division of Educational Research and Services, August 1970. □