

Grade Wool and Wheat, not our kids.

Sean David Burke 2007,2014

I am a schoolteacher. During the seven years I taught primary aged children, I did not give any grades to my students. I encouraged them, I corrected them...in a nutshell, I endeavoured to teach them. I did this without giving them grades.

If I had given them grades, it would most likely have acted to reduce the effectiveness of my teaching. A student who was having difficulty with a subject would have been told that he was doing badly. This might have deterred future effort. A student who was managing the work easily may have received marks that told her that she could relax and not try so hard. She would not have pushed herself, and may have become lazy or bored.

Receiving average marks may have been meaningless. Or perhaps average marks tell us that we are just average guys? (That can be quite comfortable.)

Worse still is the student who works hard to get good marks because they like to get good marks. What a crime to replace a student's potential for wonder and pleasure in learning with a Pavlovian focus on the gold star and quintile letter grades.

I have often wondered how many of our prison inmates started with poor grades. If we tell a child that they are 2 out of ten often enough, then any reasonable child will believe it, will give up trying to be 'good citizens' or 'independent learners', and their abundant youthful energies will go into other areas. Small children are too young to separate the marks and approval of their schoolwork from their teachers' approval of their selves. Even adults have trouble with this separation.

Grading one student against another is not useful or meaningful because each student is on their own learning journey, with their own challenges and interests, and with their own end points. In order for a grade to be meaningful, it needs to be a grade I receive today, compared only with a grade I received yesterday, without reference to those received by other people.



Our current Governments do not accept this. Either through stupidity or base politicking they hold firmly to the view that my result can be meaningfully and usefully compared with your result, and that policy can then be based upon these comparisons.

But if we accumulate the results of every student in each state and territory, and create apparently meaningful statistics, all we have done is to take many meaningless comparisons between pairs of discreet individuals, and bundled them all up together. This doesn't actually make any more meaning than we started with. Nor is it in any way useful for teaching the students themselves.

The current Federal government now requires that schools report to parents using quintile letter grades (A, B, C, D and E). This requirement is a condition of Commonwealth funding. It is a foolish requirement.

Parents who have grown up under the system of grading may well ask, "How will I know how my child is going without getting her grades?"

The answer is twofold.

Firstly, with the grades, parents don't get information on how their child is going, they only get raw data on how their child compares to the rest of the class in each subject. This can be consoling or alarming, but it is not relevant to your child's actual learning journey.

Secondly, what parents really need to be told is what their child actually knows and can do in each subject, how they have progressed since the last report, and what they need to focus on next. This is real reporting, real information, real communication, real teaching.

Moreover, when I teach without grades, the pass mark in every subject becomes 100%. If the student learns what I have taught, then they have 100% of it. That would be their mark, and it would also be mine, for teaching. If they don't manage to 'get' the whole of the subject...if they can do, say, 80 out of 100 of the like sums in a maths topic, then they don't get a mark of 80% and move on. They just haven't finished learning that part yet, and neither have I finished teaching it to them. Their mark is not 80%, it is zero, and so is mine, until they have learnt it and thus proved that I have taught it, 100% of it.

Teaching without grading is like that. The student 'owns' his work. It is his until it is completely finished. There is no "getting a bad/mediocre/good mark and moving on". The eighty leads us to focus then on the twenty, until it is all done. It teaches responsibility to the student, and it requires teachers to actually teach individuals, rather than just deliver lectures and tests.

The greatest rewards of teaching in this way are those foreshadowed above, at the beginning. Strong students are not sidetracked into working for marks' sake, and are never told to take it easy. Their natural enthusiasm is allowed to take over, and to drive them on. Weaker students are never told, over and over, that they are stupid, and that they can't. Without the discouragement, and with the encouragement, they slowly but surely become stronger students.

We can grade wheat, and wool, and many other commodities. When we grade our children, we commit a sort of crime. We need to stop treating our own children like

cattle. They are most unlike cattle, as they are individuals, each on their own journey of learning.

Most of the teachers I meet already know these things. They learnt it on the job.

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