
INCIDENTAL SUGGESTIONS

THE FOLLY OF SCHOOL MARKING SYSTEMS.

Etaples, Pas de Calais, France, March 5, 1909.

When I began to teach in the Chicago public schools—away back in 1886, I think it was.—I taught for about one year in the primary grades, and after that I had seventh or eighth grade work. It was only at the time when I had to make out the written monthly reports on my children that I ever wished myself back in the primary grades, where the teachers are free from the unwarrantable waste of time and effort necessitated by those exasperating reports. According to my opinion and that of hundreds of other conscientious teachers who have used these reports for many years because the authorities compel their use, they are of no earthly benefit,—except in, we may say, five per cent of the cases; and in those cases something else much better could be substituted.

Take my own experience as an example.

Each September I came back refreshed from the best vacation I had been able to afford, eager for my work. In front of me were forty-eight desks, each with its occupant just as full of earnest endeavor as I was. For a week I was pretty busy seeing that all the new books were bought or provided in some way, that my two books and my enrollment lists were filled out with all the required information as to time and place of birth, residence, vaccination and the other wearisome details demanded by school authorities and census takers. At last I was able to turn to the real work, the delightful work of teaching, without a thought of other things.

All this time I had been getting better and better acquainted with my little flock—finding out the faithful and the unfaithful, those who needed to be watched and those who could be trusted, those who were over timid and must be encouraged, the others who were over confident and must be set hard tasks. Work is going along well. There are two new things, algebra and English history, and everyone feels "Here we start even, and we shall be most careful not to get behind." By dint of one device and another, interest has been revived in the older subjects that have run through several years. There is great enthusiasm over study in the autumn fruits and flowers, making drawings of them and beginning collections of seeds to study later.

But all too quickly the end of the month approaches, and one fine day forty-eight cards and as many envelopes are brought to my room from the office. On the cards must be written the names of the children and the teacher, and each envelope must be addressed to a child. Then each of those forty-eight children whom I have known for twenty short days must be marked by me in an appalling number of subjects: reading, writing, spelling, arithmetic, English, geography, history, physiology, drawing, and last but not least, deportment.

On one side of my head there are a few gray hairs, and I am sure they grew gray while I sat many a time with pen in hand, pondering as to whether

Johnny should be 80 or 85, and whether Mary should be just within the 90's or just below them. There are always a few at the top who seem to you as near perfect as a child can be, and a few at the bottom who, perhaps, seem as completely heedless as may be, but over whom you think and yearn and wonder, as reluctantly you record the low mark, if this is going to be the way to do them any good.

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If you are a careful teacher and believe in the desirability of the tangible and definite results that seem to be obtained by written work, you have given written tests in what seem to you the more important subjects. You have gone laboriously and painstakingly through the papers, marked them all and returned them to their owners. Having discovered where the comprehension of the class has been weak, and your explanation, perhaps, insufficient, you have carefully gone over the subjects again with the whole class, striving to elucidate the more obscure points, so that even the dullest may be left without excuse. Then it is up to you, from the mass of evidence oral and written, to decide who are the best and the poorest, and all the varying grades between.

I tell you, no one ever tried to do it and be absolutely fair and just more than I did, for well on to twenty years; and I was never sure that I succeeded. It is my belief that no angel from heaven could succeed, and that only God himself knows how much blame and how much praise is coming to each one of those little children for the working and the striving toward the high, the good, and the true, that each had accomplished in the short space of four weeks.

When the day came and the "cursed cards"—excuse the adjective—had to be given out, I felt like a beast. Who was I that I should say to Johnny, bursting with animal spirits and doing well to come to school at all those glorious autumn days, "You are not nearly so attentive or earnest as dear, quiet, studious Mary." Who was I, to judge?

And the children have their standards. To them the noisy, restless boy is always the worst boy. They have seen how he often annoys the nervous teacher and upsets things for a minute, and they demand that his mark shall be low. How to satisfy their ideas and your own conscience! Alas! and alack, it is a problem I have striven to solve many a time in the hours after school, until the merciless janitor—I beg his pardon, engineer—drove me from the building, only to have to take it up again at home and wrestle with it into the wee sma' hours, till heart sick I went to bed only to dream that Johnny was sulky and Mary wept bitterly, because neither was pleased with that awful monthly report.

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Before handing out these formidable documents that had given me more "nerves" in their preparation than a whole year's teaching, it was my custom to make a few remarks.

I said in effect, tho not in reality, "My dear children, attach no importance to these cards. They really are not worth the paper they are written on. I have sweat blood over them, and made them out according to my best judgment; but I despise the whole business. Any other teacher would have

marked you differently. You probably could not find two in the whole city who would agree on every item of your card; nevertheless it is as it is, and you and I must just make the best of it. Believe that I love you—the dullest as much as the brightest, the worst as well as the best. Believe me in spite of this record, which will say to some of you, "There is no use trying. I have worked so hard and what do I get? Only 75 or 80, while the boy next to me gets 90 without working half so hard."

To do the dear children justice, my presentation of the matter worked with most of them; but there never was a month without at least one harrowing case, and sometimes more. There would be a girl whose mother had promised her some delectable thing if all her marks continued to be above 90; and in some unguarded moment Jennie's algebra would go down to 80 because the work had been extra hard or Jennie a little careless. There would be weeping at home and at school. Always there were the very ambitious and the extra sensitive, who could not bear to see their mark in department vary a single point. They would be positively ill for a day or two because from 97 they had fallen to 95. And then there was the class of serenely indifferent, who wished only to be above the "passing mark" of 80, and to do as little work as was consistent with staying there.

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Now I should like to submit to any candid jury, of what earthly use was all this troublesome machinery of reports and monthly averages unless to harrow teacher and pupil, and so to destroy the big joy of working and living for things worth while.

Apply the same system to teachers and supervisors, and in place of the approval of parents and the hope of graduating, put the approval of society and the earning of bread and butter, and the evil is only increased.

Sometime ago, prizes in the public schools were abandoned. Before that, corporal punishment had to go. Why not then the whole marking system, which is only a more refined species of cruelty to teachers and children?

Where children are not doing their work properly, the teacher should plainly and fearlessly say so to each child, lovingly and carefully pointing out the fault. If necessary and advisable, she should see the child's parents and consult with them. In the great majority of cases this is unnecessary. They are doing their best. Only leave them alone and don't worry them.

And as for teachers, how can they do intellectual and emotional work—teaching children is both—with a sword of Damocles constantly hanging by a thread over their heads? Teachers can no more be slaves to arbitrary systems than to anything else, and still be teachers. They must be free.

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Just a year ago, in Paris on a bright Sunday afternoon, a number of us trooped down to the Julian Academy to see the results of a painting "conours." There was to be a prize to the one who had painted the best half figure of a man who had posed one week for the class.

When we arrived, the thirty odd works considered

worthy to appear in the contest were arranged in the order of merit and numbered consecutively, except that the first three were each numbered "one."

Upon inquiry we discovered that Monsieur J. P. Laurens—or as the boys love to call him, John Paul—had come early, at the break of day, they said, and had arranged the canvasses according to his judgment. Some hours later, along came the two other members of the jury, and they did not at all agree with "John Paul." After a lively altercation they compromised as follows: No prizes should be given; they must try again, and three should be marked "Number one." Even then it was not settled, for they disagreed on who should be placed first in the long line curved around the end of the "atelier."

The next day our friend who had been so lucky as to be the first of the number "ones," was called to the front of the class, where he walked proudly, looking for the commendation of his beloved Professor. But the Professor only looked at him calmly, and said clearly so that all could hear, "Young man, your picture was first yesterday, but don't imagine for a moment that I put it first. By no means. Being only one, my judgment was over-ruled by the other two. I would have given you quite another place."

At this point the "boys" set up a shout, and the rest of the explanation was lost, but to-day Mr. W. is constantly reminded that "Old John Paul" did not put him first.

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Whoever may be the means of exterminating the system of measuring the minds of children and the efficiency of teachers with percentage marks, will have done for the schools and the community a blessed work.

IDA FURSMAN.

NEWS NARRATIVE

To use the reference figures of this Department for obtaining continuous news narratives:

Observe the reference figures in any article; turn back to the page they indicate and find there the next preceding article, on the same subject; observe the reference figures in that article, and turn back as before; continue until you come to the earliest article on the subject; then retrace your course through the indicated pages, reading each article in chronological order, and you will have a continuous news narrative of the subject from its historical beginnings to date.

Week ending Tuesday, March 23, 1909.

Progress in the Cleveland Traction Controversy.

When we last reported the traction situation in Cleveland (pp. 204, 224, 253), the conferences behind closed doors had come to an end in mystery. It was reported that there were intimations of a satisfactory settlement; but Mayor Johnson's refusal to say more than that some headway had been made between himself, Judge Taylor, and John G. White (representing the monopoly traction interests), left an impression that no conclusion had been reached. This proves to have been the fact. And so unsatisfactory do the meetings behind closed doors appear to have been that Mayor Johnson declares there shall be no more,