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How Practices and Attitudes Regarding Marking and Reporting in a Sampling of Randomly Selected Secondary Schools Compare With Research Findings in the Area

by

Thelma Moore Harmond

INTRODUCTION

Changes in emphases on evaluative systems are characterized by increased comprehensiveness in areas of student development being marked, by greater specificity in what is marked, and by broader involvement among all persons concerned with marks.

Historically, there has been a great concern for the evaluative techniques and concomitantly, there are many schools of thought. One authority contends:

> . . . the concern for systematic reporting of learning progress may be described generally in two phases: (a) the period extending roughly from 1910 to 1940 when research interest was focused mainly on the mechanical and semantic problems of marking; and (b) the period from 1940 to the present, during which a greater interest has centered on improvement of marks in comprehensiveness and communication . . .

> The literature since 1940 indicates a growing conviction that marking practices must be consistent with educational objectives.[1]

The Problem: A perennial concern of our times is the great lag between school practices and courses of action which educational research and experiment have proved to be sound. A review of this century's research on grading pupils and reporting grades to parents, led to this investigation and more specifically to the extent to which current practices and attitudes toward marking and reporting practices in secondary schools compare with research findings in this area.

Because an understanding of terms used throughout this study is important to the reader, their meanings are presented in terms of their utilization in this study.

The *Encyclopedia of Educational Research* defines marks and marking systems:

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[1]Encyclopedia of Educational Research, 3rd. ed., pp. 783, 787.

The term *marks* . . . includes all notations and devices used to record or report student status and progress in a given period of time although most emphasis is given to methods of reporting achievement in school subjects. The term *marking systems* refers simply to common methods of reporting adopted for use by teachers in the several schools of any educational unit such as a school district or city.[2]

And Wrinkle defines conventional marking and reporting practices:

The expression "conventional marking and reporting practices" means evaluating student achievement by the use of a single ABCDF mark and by periodically issuing a report card on which the mark is entered plus the incidental checking of a list of character or personality traits.[3]

Since the turn of the century investigators have been concerned about enhancing secondary school children's experiences in this country and about marking systems and marks used in these schools. An editorial in the *Journal of Secondary Education* reflects the problem as it is viewed today:

As high schools strive for higher levels of excellence one problem that arises is that of the marking or the grading system. . . . As attempts will be made to resolve problems that stem from efforts to raise standards, we should be mindful of the fact that when too great preoccupation with grades occurs . . . something has gone awry elsewhere in the system. The grading system, it should be remembered, is more symptomatic than causal.

And Klausmeier reflects on matters concerning certain practical implications of grading, reporting, and public relations:

Since the purpose of the grading system is to communicate the progress and status of pupils, it is important that the standards and goals be clearly defined, understood and accepted both by pupil and teacher. There should be clarity on the kind of evidence to be used and the weight to be given to various factors in computing grades. Lack of agreement between faculty members should be reduced, for such differences raise questions in the minds of pupils and parents. . . . When a low mark is received, the natural human tendency is to look elsewhere than to oneself for the fault. Even though the strong force persists to cause one to want to know how well one is doing, we do not like to find out or to be told that we are not doing well. He who evaluates another— as a teacher must—places himself in uneasy position.[4]

There is no one technique or report form that works best in all schools, at all grade levels, in all areas of school work, with all teachers. However, when the reporting system, with accuracy

[2]Ibid., p. 783.
[3]William L. Wrinkle, *Improving Marking and Reporting Practices in Elementary and Secondary Schools*, p. 30.
[4]"The Grading system and Higher Levels of Excellence," Editorial, *Journal of Secondary Education*, pp. 65-67.

and with full respect for each child and each parent as a worthwhile individual, indicates that the children with few exceptions are making progress, the areas in which they are making progress, and what the teachers are doing to help the children, more parents may work zealously to double the amount of funds which will apparently be needed to maintain, not improve, the present quality of education being provided for American children.[5]

Casey[6] points up difficulties involved in the attempt of teachers to grade pupils in terms of their improvement, rather than in terms of set standards. This scholar is not opposed to the improvement premise, but he proposes to help teachers recognize possible difficulties when they use it. He feels that the reliability of gain must be computed rather than be used to test reliability. He also thinks that consideration of where the student was initially is important.

According to Wrinkle:

> The use of the single letter marking system is supported by six fallacies: (1) The mark is an effective conveyor of information; (2) anyone can achieve any mark he wishes if he is willing to make the necessary effort; (3) people succeed in out-of-school life about the same as they do in school; (4) the mark is rightly comparable to a pay check; (5) marking practices provide a justifiable introduction to competitive adult life; and (6) the mark can be used as a means without its eventually being recognized as an end in itself. All are unsound.[7]

Wrinkle reports five departures from conventional reporting practices: (1) Manipulating symbols as per cent to letters, from five letters, to S and U et cetera; (2) supplementing symbols with characteristics; (3) parent-teacher conferences; (4) informal letters to parents; and (5) check forms.

Among the generalizations which Wrinkle's Colorado group accepted as bases for experimentation were as follows:

1. The traditional marking system cannot provide an intelligent solution to the administrative problems of student guidance, placement, promotion, motivation and graduation.

2. The purpose of general public education is not to discourage students from continuing in school; those who consistently receive low or unsatisfactory marks are unlikely to be enthusiastic about continuing.

3. Justification for any scheme of rating is found in the increased possibility of producing educationally desirable changes in the individual . . .

[5]Herbert J. Klausmeier, "Grading, Reporting, and Public Relations." *High School Journal*, 40 (January, 1957), p. 151.

[6]John E. Casey, "Evaluating Pupils in Terms of Improvement," *School and Society*, 86 (June 7, 1958), pp. 263-265.

[7]Wrinkle, *Op. cit.*, p. 49.

4. Good teaching does not demand coercive devices to ensure individually appropriate learning by pupils.[8]

In short, Wrinkle's basic theses could be summarized thusly, that education is the modification of behavior, that the quality of purposes determines the effectiveness of learning, and that evaluation of marking systems must be preceded by the evaluation of objectives.

Added to this statement are also these findings reportedly by ASCD researchers:

> Actually, the report card itself is but a surface issue. The basic factors involved in the appraisal and reporting program are part of the fabric of the total school program and are involved in the philosophy of education under which the school operates and the objectives which are agreed upon . . . Thus, the steps which a school takes to improve its over-all reporting to procedures should not actually begin with the question, "Shall we have an 'ABC' report or not" The first step begins with parents' and teachers' answers to these questions: "What must we do to have a school program that recognizes and provides for the continuous and sequential growth and development of children and youth in all possible areas? What is the most effective procedure to use in appraising and reporting the individual's progress from level to level?"[9]

Examining the problem of marks and reporting and considering the dissatisfaction with present reporting methods, Strang sets forth these causes:

> Many schools have not determined clearly just what purpose they want their report cards to serve—as a means of telling parents how their child's achievement compares with others, as a device to motivate the pupil to do his best, as a means of helping both parent and child to understand the child's many-sided development, or as an instrument of punishment or reward.

> Many schools are not certain as to what qualities or skills they want to evaluate.

> Many schools are uncertain as to the basis of comparison to use in marking a child—how well the child is doing compared to others in his grade, how well he is doing in relation to his own ability to achieve, or both.[10]

Strang admits that there is no "last word" in reporting systems, but her recommended plan notes the following:

> The best reporting systems use a combination of different methods of reporting, with attention to both individual differences and achievement in relation to grade standards. But even the

[8]Ibid., pp. 64, 65.
[9]Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, *Reporting is Communicating,* pp. 44-45.
[10]Ruth Strang, *How to Report Pupil Progress,* pp. 3-4.

best reporting system is only part of the whole pupil-teacher-parent relationship. It is not a substitute for day-by-day guidance in learning, an intrinsic part of the teaching process. It is not a substitute for parent-teacher conferences between regular reporting periods whenever the need is indicated.

A comprehensive reporting program should include the following aspects:

1. A continuous program of home-school contacts.

2. A regular program of parent-teacher and pupil-teacher conferences.

3. A written report which includes an objective, graded rating of comparative achievement; a rating of achievement in terms of ability to achieve; free space for comments on progress toward personality goals and suggestions for making better progress.[11]

Many studies have been devoted to a study of factors, other than achievement which enter into marking for Russell and Thalman conducted an interesting study from which came the following observations:

. . . It is important that we know the extent of the relationship between teachers' marks and the teachers' estimate of the pupils' personality, because there is a widespread belief that marks are assigned on the basis of academic achievement. If the findings of this study are true, they should be recognized and either accepted or corrected in terms of our educational philosophy; and if they are false, they should be challenged and shown to be false. Boys and girls are meeting success or failure in many of our nation's schools on the basis of the mark which a teacher gives to them in recognition of some unkown quantity of hidden ingredients. Serious and permanent damage to a pupil's continued failure in school; and if the mark results from a personality conflict between the teacher and the pupil, the act is cruel and unjustified. A challenge is made to teachers to guard against prejudice and to be on the alert for personality problems which may cause the pupils who have them to function at a level lower than they might achieve. Recognize those problems for what they are, but avoid allowing them to appear in the disguise of a teacher's mark.[12]

From the literature, it would appear that there are dangers in being either consciously or unconsciously subjective in grading, but Drayer also points out dangers in the educator's attempt to be wholly objective about human evaluation:

. . . It would seem that some educators have so preoccupied themselves with statistics that they have lost sight of the fact that they are dealing with human beings. It is one of the contradictions

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[11]Ibid., p. 23.
[12]Ivan L. Russell and W. A. Thalman, "Personality: Does It Influence Teachers' Marks?", *Journal of Educational Research*, p. 564.

in education that some educators expound at great length on the necessity of treating each pupil as an individual, taking into account his peculiar interests, aptitudes, and abilities, and then, in evaluating the pupil's progress, completely disregard the admonition by throwing him into a frequency table where he loses his individuality and is treated as a statistic.[13]

One of the most interesting and workable approaches to the problem of marking and reporting is reported by Irwin A. Keller, College High School, Southeast Missouri State College. The following statements comprise the summary of findings and observations since the initiation of a "dual marking system":

1. The fact that teachers must examine the apperceptive background of students to give the dual marks has resulted in a better knowledge of individual differences and has caused the teachers to increase their attention to these differences. This has resulted in better teachings.

2. It insures better use of a standardized testing program.

3. It more nearly implements the accepted theories and principles of evaluation of secondary-school teaching than does any other system of marking.

4. Many students have improved the quality and quantity of their work after learning from the dual marks that the teachers thought they were capable of doing better.

5. The dual marks are a better basis for determining the probable future success of a student than are single marks.

6. The reliability of the marks given has been increased.

7. The dual marks help the student to understand better.

8. Parents have a better understanding of what their children are capable of doing and how well they are applying themselves in their studies.

9. The parental pressure has been diverted from expecting a student to "do as well as Johnnie does" to concern that he does as well as he is capable of doing.

10. Teachers consider it to be an improved marking system.

11. It has been well received and supported by parents.[14]

The Method of Study: Data for this study were secured from a questionnaire devised by the writer and circulated among the participants in a seminar composed of persons who were secondary teachers and administrators, or those who had taught in secondary schools within the past two years. Copies of the questionnaire were also given

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[13]Adam M. Drayer, "An Approach to Grading," *Catholic Educational Review,* 53 (December, 1955), p. 609.
[14]Irvin A. Keller, "An Evaluation of the Dual Grading System," *The Bulletin of the National Association of Secondary-School Principals,* 39.

to persons, randomly selected if they indicated present or recent association with secondary schools as teachers or administrators. The literature on marks and marking systems was also reviewed so that data from the questionnaire might be analyzed against it. Particular attention was given to literature which has appeared since 1940.

Figure 1 is a copy of the questionaire. It can be seen that it contains 3 divisions of concern; ways of reporting achievement, rating of the type of system, and preferred reporting of pupil progress. Six areas for checking each of these 3 concerns are provided.

Questionnaire on Marking and Reporting In Secondary Schools

Your High School .... Location ....

Name of School System ....

Directions: Please respond to each of the three questions below by placing a check mark under the column which lists the most appropriate answer for you. If your response is placed under the "Other" column, please give enough description to make your meaning clear.

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
1. In what way(s) does your school report achievement, growth, or progress of the individual pupil?	Per Cent or Numerical Grade	A,B,C, D,E (or F) Grades	S,U Pattern	Checklist	Combination of Letter Grade and Traits to be Checked	Other (Please describe briefly)
2. How do you rate the type of system or device used in your school?	Excellent	Very Satisfactory	Adequate	Acceptable	Unsatisfactory	Other Rating
3. Granted complete freedom to make changes in your present marking and reporting system, how would you report pupil achievement, growth, or progress?	A Numerical System	A Letter System as A,B,C, D,E, or H,S,N,U*	Checklist	Conferences	Combination of Letter Grade and Conference or Checklist	Other (Please describe briefly)

*Honors, Satisfactory, Needs to Improve, Unsatisfactory.

Note: Only the statistical data derived from this questionnaire will be used as a part of an original study.

Figure 1.   Questionnaire

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Findings

As has been said, the data for the study were secured by summarizing questionnaire returns. Thirty copies of the questionnaire were distributed to members of the seminar and to in-service teachers randomly selected.

Of the 22 returned, three were from junior high schools, 18 from combination or senior high schools, and one from a special school (for the deaf) making a total of 22.

The 22 different school systems were then studied in regard to geographical distribution. Fifteen were from Ohio (one a special school), two from Florida, and one each from Colorado, Georgia, Kentucky, West Virginia, and the District of Columbia.

Table 1 gives the responses to question one—"In what way(s) does your school report achievement, growth, or progress of the individual pupil?" It can be seen that 68 per cent of the 22 schools used the ABCDE (or F) marking or reporting system, and that 22.7 per cent used a combination of letter grades and traits.

Table 1. Methods Of Reporting Pupil Progress

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	
	Per Cent or Numerical Grade	A,B,C,D, E (or F) Grade	S, U Pattern	Check-list	Combination of Letter Grade & Traits	Other Letter with Numerical Significance	Total
No. of Schools	1	15	0	0	5	1	22
Per Cent of Schools	4.5	68.2	0	0	22.8	4.5	100

Table 2 shows that nine of the 22 persons rated the type of system used in their schools adequate when the question "How do you rate the type of system or device used in your school?" was asked. Only four participants reported the device or system presently used to be unsatisfactory.

Table 2. Ratings Of Reporting System

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	
	Excellent	Very Satis-factory	Adequate	Acceptable	Unsatis-factory	Other Rating	Total
No. of Schools	0	3	9	6	4	0	22

It is noted in Table 3 that the majority of the persons questioned would make some changes were they given complete freedom and only one person would make considerable adjustment in his present marking and reporting system. These results were given in response to the questionnaires. "Granted complete freedom to make changes in your present marking and reporting system, how would you report pupil achievement, growth or progress?"

Table 3.   Suggested Ways Of Reporting Progress

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	
	Numerical System	Letter System as A,B,C,D,E, or H,S,N,U	Checklist	Confer-ences	Combination of L. G. & Conf. or Checklist	Other*	Total
No. of Schools	0	4	2	1	13	2	22

Summary and Conclusions

This study proposed to compare current practices and attitudes of a sampling of secondary school teachers and administrators in marking and reporting practices with conclusions, regarding these two areas, from published materials. Although twenty-two schools and twenty-two school systems were reached through the questionnaire devised to gather data from secondary teachers and administrators, only twenty-two persons participated. It is realized, therefore, that the conclusion reached by Vredevoe can not be drawn from a study involving only 22 schools and 22 people. That researcher found that marking with symbols, A,B,C,D,E, or their equivalents was the practice used by almost all secondary schools and that "letter grades will remain as part of the reporting methods by secondary schools for some time, in spite of their limitations."[15] But this study does reveal the fact that over 68 per cent of the twenty-two systems accounted for by the twenty-two persons answering the questionnaire used an A,B,C,D, form of marking, that only 18 per cent of them reported that they felt their present method of reporting was unsatisfactory, and that over 59 per cent replied that they would continue using a letter grade, plus a conference or checklist if they had complete freedom in marking and reporting.

From examining and evaluating the literature, it is concluded that:

1.   A,B,C,D grading systems rest upon fallacious assumptions.

2.   Schools cannot revise successfully their conventional grading systems without critically examining (and, perhaps, revising) their philosophy and objectives. Objectives should be so stated

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[15]Lawrence E. Vredevoe, "How May We Make the Recording and Reporting of Pupil Achievement More Meaningful?", *National Association of Secondary-School Principals*, 37 (April, 1953) pp. 180, 181.

that marks become an indication of student growth and development toward desirable learning behavior.

3. Schools and individual teachers ought to be constantly alert to the possibility that grades often represent teacher and peer opinions about pupil personality, rather than quality of achievement.

4. As described by Keller, the dual system of grading merits study by schools who wish to experiment with marking and reporting devices which more nearly reflect the modern philosophy of the secondary school.

Implications: Although the original portion of this study was done with secondary school teachers and administrators, the findings also have validity for the elementary school.

Findings and conclusions of studies often imply, at least, much more than their original problems, assumptions, or hypotheses suggest. So it was with the research and articles used in this investigation. However, they tended to fall into these three broad, overlapping categories:

1. Unreliability of and Variability in Marks (3), (4), (5), (17), (20), (24).

2. Personality and Marking
   A. The Pupil's Personality (18)
   B. Impact of Teachers' Comments (16)
   C. Peer Judgments (12)
   D. Social and Emotional Adjustments of Promoted and Non-Promoted Pupils (19)

3. Reactions to Marking Systems
   A. "Successful" Innovations (13), (23)
   B. Reactions of Pupils (1), Parents, Teachers, Administrators, Graduates (22)

The identifiable motif in all the studies is that marks are unreliable and variable. This is said in many different ways; yet, it is the recurring, persistent theme—the ultimate conclusion. There are the studies which suggest that "happy" results have been obtained with a given system, but they mention eventually certain variables—too little or too much reported; there are teachers who cannot write good letters, et cetera—which make the search for *the* excellent reporting system a continuous one. Of course, proof of unreliability in school marks was well established in studies done between the early years of this century and the mid-forties.

Many of the more recent studies establish that marks are penalizing. Sometimes, the penalty is exacted in ways which educators term "scientific" or "objective" (Riffenburgh—inappropriate use of the normal curve) ; sometimes, as an end-result of marking, non-promotion, with possible emotional and social problems resulting; sometimes, as a major cause of pupil drop-out. The less able tire of constant failure. Another infrequently discussed, but increasingly recognized, possible

penalty of grading practices is that of contributing to the under-achievement of the very able pupil.

Marks and reporting systems are potent public relations factors. The study by Vredevoe, ASCD's findings and Klausmeier supports this fact.

The emphasis which schools place on marks has caused marks to become *ends* rather than *means* to guidance and other valid purposes for their uses. There is, by no means, universal agreement on this point. Several studies have been used to prove that marks serve as necessary incentives to student effort. However, other studies, without denying the necessity for student-evaluation, suggest that emphasis on marks cause students to cease learning when "grades are no longer given—at graduation."

There is rather general agreement that marking systems, to have real meaning, must evolve from behavioral purposes attuned to the philosophy of the modern secondary school.

Finally, a study of the studies, reported herein, reveals that educators are aware that their commonly used systems of marking and reporting have many weaknesses and limitations, but administrators lack, perhaps, either the *will* or *skill* to undertake the comprehensive "over-hauling" job necessary to perform the task most effectively. At the risk of appearing to conclude this investigation facetiously, the writer wishes to suggest (1) that research is needed to develop "instant" educational change and (2) that educators sometimes find themselves in the position of the farmer, upon being urged by his county agent to experiment with a new method, replied with candor and vigor, "No, siree! I already *know* far more than I am a-going to *do!*

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