

Making the grade without report cards

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The Globe and Mail, March 3, 2007

Report cards are to kids what death and taxes are to adults -- a certainty from which no one can escape. Heck, this week even classrooms got report cards when the C.D. Howe Institute released rankings of 3,300 Ontario elementary schools.

But there is mounting evidence that report cards (at least the kind teachers hand out to students) are neither necessary nor useful. In his book *Punished by Rewards*, American educator Alfie Kohn argues that receiving grades is not only pedagogically suspect but counterproductive.

Research shows that the more children experience arbitrary judgments for task performance -- even rewards -- the more likely they are to lose interest in and detach from those tasks.

Stanford University psychologist Mark Lepper first stumbled upon this phenomenon in the 1960s when he observed two classes of pre-school children enrolled in Head Start programs.

In the one, rewards had been given to entice children to play with learning games. Their compliance and interest in the activities evaporated as soon as the rewards were withdrawn. In sharp contrast, children in the classroom where rewards hadn't been introduced never lost their motivation to engage in these activities.

Even rewards such as basic praise can be problematic. Stanford psychologist Carol Dweck, who has studied Grade 5 students in New York for the last decade, has found that "drive-by" praise -- generally focused on ends over means -- sends the message that achievement is more important than effort, perseverance or engagement.

This could explain the "doing the least to get the most" principle embraced by many students -- and the alarming rise in cheating and plagiarism plaguing North American high schools and universities.

After all, as education professor David Labaree writes in *How to Succeed in School Without Really Learning*, it is only rational for students to put in the least work for the most possible credit. Report cards ultimately encourage kids to do -- and learn -- less.

Mind you, teachers aren't the only ones who can, however counter-intuitively, spur negative results by emphasizing rewards.

In one 1994 study that followed 100 families over an eight-year period, researchers found that the more parents pushed their children to excel in school, the more these children lost interest in their lessons. This was particularly true when parents meted out rewards and punishments for achievement.

Ultimately, as Mr. Kohn has written, rewards are experienced as controlling and "we tend to recoil from situations where our autonomy has been diminished."

I can think of no better example of this than when I took my own students to the zoo for an end-of-year trip. Sprung from the confines of the classroom and a narrow curriculum, my most "underachieving" boy dazzled me with his knowledge of flora and fauna.

But graded education can do more than just devalue the learning process (wherever it takes place). It can also devalue social skills and emotional intelligence. I had a Grade 1 student, for instance, who I could only describe as "socially gifted." He missed no opportunity to support a mentally challenged classmate and had an almost magical way of getting along with others. Because his reading marks were slightly "below par," though, administrators wanted him to repeat a year.

Luckily, wisdom finally prevailed for this student. But report cards can expose the lip service given to "values education." If what's truly important is caring for one another -- the goals of school-based programs such as Roots of Empathy -- why aren't students who demonstrate these traits deemed to be at the "top of the class"?

All of which led Sarah Rainsberger to rethink the current model of a teacher as both an evaluator and tutor. At her Toronto area tutoring service, she will help students work toward their personal goals, whether that means passing the Secondary School Admissions Test or doing better in a course they are currently taking. What she doesn't do is act as an examiner and she has therefore decided against transforming her business into a credit granting institution.

"I feel it's a conflict of interest to receive money from parents for both teaching their child and for issuing a mark," says Ms. Rainsberger, who has been a professional tutor for 10 years, "especially when it is going to influence their university admission."

As for my own family? When our children entered public school in Toronto, my husband and I approached their teachers and administrators about implementing a "non-graded" educational program for them.

To a person, they instantly understood what we were trying to achieve and supported us. The logistics involved a bit of fine tuning to ensure that expectations were clear on both sides, but for the most part there has been very little difference between how our children and their classmates have attended school.

There were, however, three notable exceptions: We have had control over decisions regarding the amount and kind of homework our children do; we asked that teacher feedback on assignments be comprised of written and oral comments instead of grades; and we requested that end-of-term report cards not be issued.

This has meant our son has never had a report card and our daughter, now in high school, didn't get one until Grade 9. Instead, she has focussed more on what she learns than on the grades she receives, and she has met with success.

"To help kids become enthusiastic and proficient learners, we need to work with them," says Mr. Kohn. "Rewards, like punishments, are ways of doing things to people -- and this is definitely the case with grades. If we were really interested in providing feedback (that is, information about performance), we would never need to reduce it to a summary evaluation."

If the corollary of "this is important because it's on the test" is "everything else isn't," then doing away with a graded education has another benefit too: It conveys the message that school is not the only place to learn. Far from being "soft" or excessively child-focussed, our family's de-emphasis of marks has actually emphasized a more comprehensive and real-world approach to learning.

Admittedly, we can't shield our children from grades entirely. Report card culture permeates North American society: Fast food chains give free doughnuts and pizzas to students with good grades; "A plus" is now an adjective; and the president of the National Education Association in the U.S. sees no problem with parents giving kids "money for grades," something he did with his own children.

But examples do abound of students succeeding beautifully without grades. Sweden and Denmark give no formal grades or report cards until high school and yet both countries consistently rank in the top half of OECD member countries when it comes to academic achievement.

The academic achievements of the Winnetka School Board near Chicago -- which has long held a "no grades" policy until at least the middle of Grade 7 -- also receives top ranking by the the Illinois District Report Card.

And in Ontario, the government has tacitly approved the notion that report cards are not an educational necessity: Home-based learners can now attend Ontario universities and colleges without obtaining a Secondary School Diploma; instead, admission is based on evaluative criteria such as entrance exams, interviews and samples of related academic work.

With the abundance of studies showing the very real drawbacks of a graded education and with the dearth of research showing that report cards have any real value, the documented success of these non-graded students suggests that it's time for report cards to go the way of dunce caps -- taking their rightful place alongside other relics of school days gone by.

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