

## School Marks and Professional Integrity

What professional *savoir-faire* can a teacher display when something unusual happens during an examination? Should marks be deducted from the scores of children who disobey the teacher, or talk, or disturb the class, or even cheat? Should the reduced score be entered in the official record, or should some other action be taken? The following examples occur regularly in the lives of classroom teachers. Wherein lies professional duty?

*EXAMPLE 1: Disobedience* — A child left his seat to sharpen a pencil after the test had begun. This was contrary to regulations; the proper procedure was to raise one's hand and get permission to leave one's seat. After the test was over, the child's paper showed all correct for the ten items. How many marks should the teacher enter in the official record?

*EXAMPLE 2: Talking* — The child talked during the distribution of papers, after the teacher had distinctly cautioned him not to talk. Again, he had all items correct. What official record for him?

*EXAMPLE 3: Disturbance* — A boy finished early and pinched the girl in front of him. She shrieked briefly, and this disturbed the class. What score should the teacher enter in the record this time, even if the boy had all items correct?

**EXAMPLE 4: Cheating** — A child, sitting at the back of the room, kept peering at his neighbour's paper and was caught obviously cheating, an offence to which he readily pleaded guilty. His paper when marked revealed all items correct. What score for him?

A teacher dealing with *Example 1*, disobedience, might argue that, inasmuch as regulations were announced before the test, the regulations became part of the test, and he would be justified in deducting one or perhaps two marks. Or, he might decide to list the penalties for each possible offence before the examination begins, so that the children know exactly where they stand, much in the manner of a motorist knowing in advance the penalty for illegal parking.\* Or, he might argue that some children are more sensitive or callous than others, and the number of marks he deducts for disobedience will depend on the child's "criminal" record.

In connection with *Example 2*, talking, the teacher might argue that, if the talking occurred before the pupil looked at the paper, it was a simple case of misbehavior, and it might be dealt with in the manner suggested for *Example 1*. However, if the talking occurred after the child saw the paper, potential cheating was there, and the record should show a "zero" in spite of a perfect paper.

For *Example 3*, pinching girls, the opinions of teachers vary from deducting one mark all the way to deducting all marks and entering "zero" in the record.

For *Example 4*, cheating, a score of "zero" seems inevitable.

*All the foregoing courses of action are absolutely wrong!*

If it is all right to deduct marks for purposes of discipline in school, is it all right for a nurse to alter entries in the medical records for the same reason? Or for a chemist to put wrong entries in his record book if he burns his finger? Consider the following examples.

**EXAMPLE 5: The Naughty Boy in the Nurse's Office** — It is "nurse's day" at school, and all the boys and girls are lined up to be weighed and measured, the data to be recorded on official medical cards. One naughty boy jostles those about him, creates a general disturbance, and ends by upsetting a tumbler of clinical thermometers which break

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\* If you are a teacher reading this, beware! *Don't do this*. The children will try every offence listed, most of which they would not have thought of by themselves!

as they strike the floor. The nurse seizes the offending boy and declares: "You are 48 inches tall and you weigh 87 pounds, but because you are naughty I am putting down 20 inches for your height and zero for your weight. Now let that be a lesson to you!"

*EXAMPLE 6: The Clumsy Chemist* — A chemist, after carefully weighing a sample of material, introduces the sample into a test tube that he has pre-heated. Forgetting that it is hot, he touches the test tube, recoils, utters unprintable language, and then dashes over to his record book to enter "zero" for the weight of the sample.

You may consider these examples funny, but they are no more ridiculous than deducting marks or awarding "zero" in the cases of the school children. The teacher should be as concerned with the accuracy of his estimate of a child's achievement as a real nurse would be with what she records on the medical cards, or with what a chemist records after carefully weighing a sample correct to four decimals of a gram. Unfortunately, the teacher's measuring instruments are not as accurate as the nurse's or the chemist's; but this is all the more reason not to permit extraneous factors to cloud the best estimate of pupil achievement that the teacher can make. This brings us to the Basic Principle of Educational Measurement:

*Basic Principle* — An official school mark should reflect how much of a subject a child knows as a percentage of what he should know at the time of the examination. The mark should not be affected by prejudice, the maintenance of discipline, administrative expediency, parental pressure, or political influence.

The teacher who estimates a child's achievement according to this Basic Principle is a real teacher and a professional person; the teacher who is sloppy about measurement and who allows himself to be swayed by extraneous factors is unprofessional.

What, then, SHOULD be done about the four examples if the Basic Principle is to be followed in awarding marks in school? The teacher need only be guided by the question: Does this mark tell how much the child knows?

*This is what should be done* — In the first three cases of disobedience, talking, and creating a disturbance (assuming that cheating was not involved in any of them), full marks should be entered in the record, simply because this indicates that the child has mastered the topic under examination.

What to do about the discipline aspect of the situation has absolutely nothing to do with the estimate of achievement. What should be done? By all means, the teacher should do *something* about a wayward child: scold him, strap him, spreadeagle him, make him walk the plank, or send him to the school psychologist! *But the teacher is unprofessional if he falsifies the records by entering scores that he knows are not estimates of a child's achievement.*

In the case of cheating, a score of "zero" is not right because it does not reflect what the child knows about the subject. There is only one thing for the teacher to do: enter NO MARK until he *does* know how much the child knows. A "no mark" entry is quite different from a "zero" entry. By withholding a score, the teacher acknowledges the truth — that he simply does not know how much the child knows. A "zero" would indicate that the child knows absolutely nothing of the subject, and while this may be true, it is most likely false. Apart from any punishment the teacher may apply in order to produce future good conduct, there remains the problem of finding out how much the child *does* know. This may be done by examining him with an alternate form of the original test.

Old practices die hard. Some teachers who read these words will find it difficult to change their thinking about how they measure achievement. It is so convenient to maintain discipline by threat of loss of marks, and it has been used universally for so long, that it has become a tradition. It *works*, so why change?

All the writer can say to such unprofessional teachers is that teaching is a way of life that promotes all the virtues. No one is more sensitive to honesty and fair play than is a school child. To alter test scores for purposes of discipline is to betray a great trust.

A movement to abolish tests and examinations appears occasionally in some communities. This is an anguished attempt on the part of frustrated people to cope with inaccurate and abused school measurement. A parallel protest movement exists in the realm of intelligence testing: because its determination and use are of questionable quality, the very concept of IQ has been undermined. But mark my words: achievement testing will endure, and the IQ will come back. In a civilization where the process of education must become increasingly scientific, accurate measurement of human traits and accomplishments is a necessity. The remedy for faulty assessment is not abolition of tests and examinations, but their application with greater validity and reliability.

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