GRADES AND GRADING PRACTICES

Second Edition

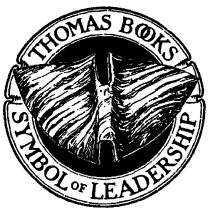
GRADES AND GRADING PRACTICES

Obstacles to Improving Education and to Helping At-Risk Students

By

CHARLES H. HARGIS

College of Education, Health, and Human Services
The University of Tennessee
Knoxville, Tennessee



CHARLES C THOMAS • PUBLISHER, LTD.
Springfield • Illinois • U.S.A.

Published and Distributed Throughout the World by

CHARLES C THOMAS • PUBLISHER, LTD.
2600 South First Street
Springfield, Illinois 62704

ISBN 0-398-07430-5 (hard)
ISBN 0-398-07431-3 (paper)

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 2003046770

With THOMAS BOOKS *careful attention is given to all details of manufacturing and design. It is the Publisher's desire to present books that are satisfactory as to their physical qualities and artistic possibilities and appropriate for their particular use.* THOMAS BOOKS *will be true to those laws of quality that assure a good name and good will.*

Printed in the United States of America
SM-R-3

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Hargis, Charles H.
Grades and grading practices : obstacles to improving education and to helping at-risk students / by Charles H. Hargis -- 2nd ed.
p. cm.
Includes bibliographical references ad index.
ISBN 0-398-07430-5 -- ISBN 0-398-07431-3 (pbk.)
1. Grading and marking (Students)--United States. 2. Underachievers--United States. I. title.

LB3051.H343 2003
371.27'2--dc21

2003046770

PREFACE

The first edition of this little book was the third in a trilogy directed to educational reform. The first was *Curriculum Based Assessment: A Primer,* the second *Teaching Low Achieving and Disadvantaged Students*. Each of those books directed some attention to the obstacles that our grading practice create to improving the quality of American education and to helping students who are at risk. This work was, and is again in its second edition, a fuller exploration of the problems caused by grades.

I have received some praise and attention for the ideas expressed in the first edition. However, the problems caused by our grading system remain, and of late, the "standards" and "high-stakes" testing movements have added complexity to the problems caused by the grading system. The ideas presented in the first edition remain in this one. What I have attempted here is to define the added problems and suggest some antidotes to them.

C.H.H.

CONTENTS

GRADES AND GRADING PRACTICES

Chapter 1

OVERVIEW

Habit is stronger than reason.

George Santayana

My interest in grades and grading practices emerged gradually. The conceptions I developed were influence by my perspective in special education. These conceptions were further influenced by working with an evaluation system called curriculum-based assessment. I had been engaged at length with the problems associated with the identification and classification of exceptional children when it became clear that grades were a constant factor.

The fundamental fact in the identification of exceptional children is that most are identified by failing grades. Our primary identification tool is our grading system. Most children who are referred to determine eligibility for special education services have been so because of failing grades.

This is such an obvious notion to most that the immediate reaction to the above statement is, "So what!" We have come to assume that failing grades are a symptom of learning handicaps and disabilities. Nagging questions kept recurring to me, nevertheless. Are grades simply evidence, merely symptoms, of learning handicaps and disabilities? Could there be an error in my logic? Have we made erroneous assumptions about grades? Are they really just objective evidence of learning handicaps?

I have come to the conclusion that our reasoning has been faulty. I believe that grades are not merely symptoms but primary causes of many learning problems. This book will review the problems caused by grades and then pose alternatives to the evaluation systems that

require destructive grading practices.

We have a powerful need to grade. Things with the same position, standing, characteristics, or value are grouped together. Oranges, apples, and eggs are graded according to size, color, and quality and they, like children, are given letter grades.

Grades are an institutional part of American education. They are the shared paradigm that is above self-reflection. Grades are used to divide the curriculum, and a grade is a stage in the curriculum. It is also a year's work. The typical curriculum is ordered in a sequence of thirteen grades.

The dominating attribute used for grading students is chronological age. Students who have birth dates within certain calendar boundaries are placed in the same grade. Once in their assigned grade, their performance relative to other students is further graded. They may be assigned to one of several reading groups, depending on their performance in reading. Their relative performance in the group is also graded. The most usual procedure for grading performance is with letter grades.

In spite of our best efforts at grouping and grading students into increasingly homogenous units, variation within each grade or group will persist. Direct evidence of this is provided by the distribution of letter grades that is produced by the students within each of the grades or groupings.

For example, if we check the scores on the weekly spelling test in any elementary classroom, it would surprise no one to see a wide range of scores and resulting grades. The same range would be found if we checked other tests or assignments that are routinely given. The fortunate students get the A's; the unfortunate ones get the D's and F's.

We expect our grouping and grading practices to solve all problems with variability of academic aptitude. However, the distribution of grades that is produced when an instructional task is given to a group of students always confirms the continued existence of variability.

Occasionally, we find ourselves in two contradictory positions simultaneously. We want all students to do well while at the same time we want to have rigor in our grading system. We must maintain standards; we have to be tough. These opposing positions produce a dilemma not easily resolved when we blindly accept the institution of grading.

The underlying reason for the distribution of grades is that one level of instruction is given. The variability in grades is simply indicative of the variability, the individual differences, in learning ability and readiness of the students who undergo the instruction.

Academic ability exists on a continuum. It does not lend itself too well to grouping and tracking practices. Grouping and tracking are used to narrow the range of differences so that one level of instruction can be directed to each group. But there remain students at the high and low ends of the ability range, and they are out of tolerance with the level of instruction offered. Better to find the level of instruction too easy than too difficult, but either position is not the optimal one for either the high or low achievers in any group.

Students in the extremes often share more learning and aptitude characteristics with students in groups or grades below or above them. Even if action is taken to move the student through either retention or acceleration, the movement is usually done at the end or beginning of the year, the year being the grade's time unit. Consequently, acceleration or retention is done in the curricular lock step.

Perhaps a concrete illustration using chronological age is in order. Children begin the first grade of the lock-step curriculum if their sixth birthday falls before some arbitrarily selected date at the beginning of the school year. They then are supposed to move through the grades with students who became age six at some time within the twelve-month period prior to this cutoff date. Even though this supposedly keeps the students with their age-mates, the younger students in each grade will be closer in age to the older students in the grade below than they are to most of the students in their own grade. Conversely, the older students in any grade will be closer to the younger students in the grade above.

The same condition exists for academic ability as for chronological age. The low-achieving students are closer in ability to the students in the grade below, and the high-achieving students are closer to students in grades above. The differences in academic ability are much greater than differences in chronological age. The range of academic ability, excluding all handicaps, in almost any first grade classroom is at least 2.5 years. Chronological age range is only twelve months, but the range of academic ability in the same students is over thirty months! The range in chronological age will stay the same as a group of students moves up the curricular ladder. However, the range in academ-

ic ability actually increases and will more than double by the time the students are in high school. These facts can be verified by examining the normative data for any popular standardized achievement test.

Consider the normative data from the Peabody Individual Achievement Test (Markwardt, 1989) and the updated norms for 1998. At the first grade level, the raw scores range from 40 to 180. The grade equivalents for these scores are 0.2 to 3.9. This is a range of 3.7 years! If the range is reduced to include the fifth percentile through the ninety-fifth, the grade equivalent range is 0.5 to 3.4. The range is still 2.9 years! This is the kind of range in achievement and readiness levels that first grade teachers can anticipate every year.

When I demonstrated what the range was when the top and bottom 5 percent was removed, I was eliminating the majority of the students who could ultimately be classed as exceptional (Stone, Cundick, & Swanson, 1988), either handicapped or academically talented.

Consider the range in achievement that exists in subsequent grades through the fourth grade; again the fifth through the ninety-fifth percentiles are shown: At the second grade the range is from 1.1 to 5.3, or 4.2 years. At the fourth grade, the range is 2.5 to 8.7, or 6.2 years. It is quite evident that the normal range of achievement is remarkably wide, and it continues to widen the longer the students stay in school.

Grouping by grades and tracking are efficient means of dealing with a majority of students but ineffective as methods of dealing with extremes in individual academic differences. Why do we impose this practice on all students? It is administratively easier. A majority of the students are able to achieve adequately in the system, so we have deluded ourselves into believing it is appropriate for all students. The grade is the standard of performance and the level by which achievement is gauged.

Performance relative to grade placement is indicated by letter grades based on percentage scores or by letter grades based on a curve. Ninety-five years ago, the grading systems based on curves were introduced (Cureton, 1971). Soon the most common became the 6-22-44-22-6 curve. The six at either end corresponds to the number of F's and A's. The twenty-two's are the number of D's and B's, and the forty-four represented the number of C's.

Most teachers don't adhere to this distribution when assigning grades. After all, as Glasser (1971) pointed out, each semester three or four students will fail in virtually every classroom of about thirty stu-