

A Look at "Verifiable Performance Objectives"

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OUR school district is engaged in the process of teaching everyone to write "verifiable performance objectives" as a part of a move toward "planning, programming, budgeting" in our schools. Many of our teachers and some of our administrators have nagging doubts about what we are doing. These doubts concern the kind of measures used to verify the attainment of the objectives, the lack of pupil participation in the formulation, the danger of using the list of objectives to judge the school and the teacher, and most of all the appropriateness of the kind of objectives on which we are working.

Our doubts do not mean that we are not going to learn all we can. We all feel that anything that sharpens our focus on the ends of our endeavor is worthwhile. We all know we need to define what it is we are trying to do in education and that we need precision in any definition. Most of us are trying to think in terms of the development of human beings.

The kinds of objectives on which we are now working are those which specify what children ought to know, or do, or feel as a result of having spent some time with a teacher or teachers in the school. We are learning to state *how many* children are supposed to know, to do, or to feel *what* as judged *by what* or *by whom*—*when*. We are coming up with the kinds of objectives which read something as follows: "On a teacher-made

test, 90 percent of all eighth grade pupils at the end of the eighth grade will be able to pick out the nouns in a typical sentence taken from an eighth grade reading text."

We are working on objectives for different levels as these descend from the goals of the school district. We hope eventually that our teachers will compile many verifiable performance objectives for what goes on in the classrooms, and that the accomplishment of these objectives will advance the whole reading or science or math *programs* of the district, which in turn will accomplish the objectives of the instructional *program* and thus advance the goals or timeless aims drawn up and adopted by our school board.

While the teachers are going to compile the verifiable performance objectives for the classrooms, I gather that the objectives in the district subject area programs and in the instructional program itself will be compiled by committees. These committees will be composed of teachers, administrators, community members, board representatives, and maybe children. But we are not sure just how children fit into the picture, except that they are the ones who are going to accomplish the knowing, or doing, or feeling contained in the objectives.

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While I was sitting in the fifth or sixth meeting on verifiable performance objectives, I reached into my coat pocket for something and pulled out a "wallet size" picture of a little girl. I had not worn that suit in some time, and I did not know the picture of that little girl was in the pocket. She gave me the picture last year at the elementary school where I was principal. To save my life I could not remember this little girl's name at first.

But I remembered *her* very well—what a fine person she was—how she changed from a fear-ridden little girl who did not even know how to say "hello" to a regular six-year-old chatterbox and champion cat skinner on the low bars.

Objectives for the Nameless

It struck me that we are learning to make up performance objectives for people whose names we do not know. Not only do we not know their names, we do not know whether or not they will want to accomplish what we want them to accomplish—or whether they will need to. It is possible that for a good many children there will be other school tasks more important than those necessary to accomplish the performance objectives. How do we know until we know the individual human beings?

This little girl whose name I could not remember was last year a first grader. When I met her she was wandering around on the playground all by herself. I try to make it a point to talk to these "loners" when I am out at recess or at noon. They are not having any fun. They want to join in the boisterous play with other children, but for one reason or another they do not know how to do it. Sometimes you can get them to talk to you and then help them meet other children and move them into the world where they belong. You want to avoid allowing them to make contact only with you, for then they will follow you around instead of joining with their classmates. When I approached this girl she would not even answer me to tell me her name or her room.

One of the hallmarks of the good and

verifiable performance objective is that it can be quantified, that is, that it produces something you can measure. You can count the number of eighth grade students who can pick out the nouns in a typical sentence taken from an eighth grade reader. You can note the number of errors and you can put in some criterion for this aspect of this objective. There are some performance objectives about things you cannot measure very well.

An example from another school district states: "95 percent of the pupils seem to enjoy school as judged by what their parents say at parent conference time." Here you are getting somewhat nebulous and there are not many of these objectives. It is much better to have the kind of objective that reads something as follows: "On a standardized test, 95 percent of all pupils with average and above ability who are in the regular school program will test at or above grade level." For this objective, you have some good, solid grade level test scores. These test scores impress people.

And it is getting to be important that you impress people. Listen to this quote from a local newspaper:

As part of the drive for improved teaching, the U.S. Office of Education is planning to send out "accomplishment auditors" to evaluate educational projects. They will begin on federally funded programs for dropout and bilingual education. This plan may be expanded to hold schools responsible for the failure of students. Those schools whose students reach a certain level of achievement would receive federal aid. The schools that fell behind would be penalized financially.

You can safely bet your life that those federal auditors are not going to be impressed with anything except test scores. Those test scores are solid evidence. Right now in California the managers of compensatory education (education for so-called disadvantaged children) have stated they will channel federal money only to those school districts which come up with "moderate" or "substantial" improvement as a result of the reading or mathematics programs they are operating. "Moderate" improvement is defined as pupils making a year or more grade

level growth as judged by scores on a standardized test, and "substantial" progress is defined as a grade and a half or more on such standardized tests. Oh, yes, it will be much better for you to have verifiable performance objectives which can be verified by test scores.

Then I remembered her name—Kathy! That was her name but I still couldn't remember her last name.

Every day I came out on the playground I saw Kathy there by herself. She was so forlorn—a ragamuffin child, dressed in an old, nondescript coat. She had a thin face, framed by stringy blonde hair. I would greet her but she would only look at me levelly through those large, solemn, brown eyes. This went on for weeks. Then she took to coming up and holding my hand.

Greater Than the Sum

What a child knows, or can do, or feels is generally something more than its particularized parts. The concept or generalization is not fully explained by the individual ideas associated with it. The particularized essentials of a skill or an affective state may not add up to the skill or to the state. It is possible in tennis to be able to execute every separate stroke and still play a lousy game. I know some people who thoroughly enjoy certain kinds of music and have no more idea than a fish why they do. It is an immutable law in human development that the whole is always greater than the sum of its parts.

One of the documents we are examining in our work on verifiable performance objectives is a list of these objectives in the various subject areas prepared by one of the California "pilot" districts working on planning, programming, budgeting. This document is about an inch-and-a-half thick and contains literally hundreds of particularized objectives—all the reading skills, every item of knowledge and performance in the primary, intermediate, and upper mathematics program, etc. When one examines this document, he has a good idea of the bits of information and skill that children are expected to acquire in the various subject areas.

The evidence of this learning is specified in each one of the particulars—test scores, written teacher observation, written descriptions of performance, number of repeated acts, and so forth. One does not know what concepts, generalizations, useful skills, or attitudes all these particulars signify. The mastery of the objectives is supposed to add up to the district goals for the various subject areas; yet there is, alas, no way of showing that it does, since goals are not qualifiable or measurable. And a larger question still is the *should* of the situation. *Should* the stated number of children be able to know, do, or feel what the objectives say they should? Why? By whose idea?

Kathy is not going to have anything to say about what she is supposed to know, to do, or to feel in the second grade. She is too young to help in writing the performance objectives. She does not know that she should be among the 95 percent of children who "at the end of the second grade will be able to associate the sound and letter of all single consonants found in reading material of the second grade level with 75 percent accuracy as measured by teacher observation and oral and written assignments." She probably would not know what that meant even if you told her. And it is not only that Kathy will not have anything to say about the second grade, we have got it pretty well planned that she will not have much to say *anytime* about what she should know, do, or feel. This list of performance objectives we are working on is going to be the committee's or the teacher's list—not Kathy's.

I am not sure that the list is really even going to be the committee's or the teacher's list. Maybe it is going to be the legislature's list or the parent's list or the school board's list. I say this because we all have the feeling that verifiable performance objectives, district and state educational aims and goals, and all of planning, programming, budgeting are really so that someone outside the children and the teachers can use them to judge the children and the teachers.

It is not too much extrapolation from what presently obtains to a time when a teacher will be rated by how well the pupils

come out on the verifiable performance objectives. At present, standardized test scores are taken by the legislature to indicate how well pupils read, and a school-by-school listing of reading scores implies that one school is better than another. Many schools give parents numerical scores that they announce indicate pupil mastery of some phase of the school program. It is not difficult, in the coming era of negotiation between teachers and school boards, to imagine that boards will begin to look at how many or how much of a list of objectives a teacher's pupils have attained to judge the individual teachers. Just one other step is necessary to have the teacher's salary dependent on how well his pupils achieve.

A Pupil's Interior

What is wrong with this? Well, it assumes that some *scores*, some *observations*, some *tests* really indicate a desirable state of a pupil's *interior*, his status as a human being. As one college professor put it: "When it comes time to make out the grades at our school, I make marks in the bubbles on mark-sensing cards. These are sent to the IBM machines where the marks are translated into holes on punch cards. Isn't it ironic for us to think we can reduce man's finest achievement—the work of his mind—to a hole?" It is equally ironic to think we can reduce the description of any human being's achievements to any list or judgment based on these lists.

There came a day when Kathy did not come to greet me during the first morning recess. I looked for her and saw her with a group of other girls leaning against the classroom wall to keep out of the cold. She stayed with the girls throughout the period. Then Kathy began to join in the games with the other children. I was amazed and gratified one day when she and three of our most ebullient and uninhibited first graders formed a "yell leaders squad" in imitation of our eighth grade basketball cheerleaders and held several loud, enthusiastic, and original performances. The lost-puppy look left Kathy. Her eyes took on a sparkle and the unkempt

hair was usually flying in the breeze as she ran with the other girls on the playground. She filled out physically—a development which I took to be the result of a different mental attitude. When she did come up to me on the playground, it was usually to get me to watch one or the other of her athletic feats on the low bars. Kathy could hook her knees on that low bar and go round and round so fast she was almost a blur. She used that old coat to keep the bar from blistering her legs. This "act" always drew a group of onlookers and sometimes envious applause.

As nearly as one could tell, Kathy became a different person during that first grade year. From a retiring, fear-filled youngster she became a confident and popular little girl. I do not know whether this development was due largely to her school associations, but I suspect it was. After kindergarten, entering the more crowded primary grades, Kathy had a chance to lose her fears, to grow socially, to make friends, and in general to live in a way that made her happier. I think in that year at school this little girl became for all time a different person. She used that year to accomplish what for her it was most important to attain—to relate to other children, to chase away her fears with dreams of becoming a basketball cheerleader, to develop the spectacular whirl on the low bars which made her popular and even envied. And you will not find goals like these in the ordinary list of verifiable performance objectives.

So I hope they will not judge the school by the performance objectives. I hope the lists we are now learning to compile will give way to lists of things that are really important for those pupils who individually need different things because each one of them is a unique human being. I hope our future lists will be largely those which are derived from what children, in one way or another, tell us they need to have a better life, now and in the future.

I hope our present exercise sharpens our skill but that the skill is used in the context in which every performer of the verifiable performance objectives has a name, a name that each of us knows. □

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