

ONCE SPRING WAS the time for planting and re-birth, now for many young people throughout the world it means exams. By the time secondary students have reached the final step in their 12 years of schooling, examinations become modern society's peculiar way of deciding where they go next: UP or OUT.

More and more questions are being raised about the kinds and uses of exams. Are exams an effective and fair way to evaluate years of schooling? Can numerical grades correctly assess a student's worth? Does the stress caused by exams and other forms of competition, beginning often in nursery school, actually inhibit learning? Do exams affect the scope of education, limiting it to what can be measured and so preventing it from preparing young people for the challenges of the next century?

Recently these questions were discussed by 16 teachers from major world regions among themselves and with Albert Sims, senior Vice-President of the College Entrance Examination Board (USA). They began, of course, by recognising that evaluation is important to the educational process. Both students, and teachers need to know "how they are doing."

The discussants also agreed that some device is needed "to select out" the best qualified when higher educational institutions can accommodate only a limited number of applicants.

The preferred basis for selection is a student's performance in school but some feel that there is also a need for what the US College Board Vice-President describes as "an accurate national test that measures developed ability for college study, no matter where or how learned."

Because so much hangs on exams, they produce stress. The few who make high grades in the final exam earn praise and a higher place in society, the majority with lower grades are considered second best and usually find work with lower status and pay.

Most exams are focused on measurable information suitable for testing — simple questions yielding simple answers. Such narrow, black and white questions show only students' ability to regurgitate facts given by the teachers. More difficult to test, intangibles such as imagination and versatility are ignored. Exams cannot truthfully reflect students' full worth and capabilities.

The priority given to exams leads to poor teaching practices. Many teachers use grades and class ranking to motivate or control students. Contrary

to most teachers' suppositions, however, threats of failure do not improve students' performance, habitually poor grades actually discourage effort.

Another problem of mark-based education is that students become categorised — A students, C students — with predictable effects on their learning.

Exams tend to narrow education and make it more rigid. They teach young people to accept what they are told and to avoid critical thinking. The more hierarchical and conservative the system, the more exams are used for this purpose.

Exam-based education only values academic book-learning and eliminates non-formal, experiential learning which has served humankind well for so long. It also tends to be biased about cultural minorities because of the language used and assumptions of majority superiority.

The discussants deplored this narrow, elitist view of education at a time when the world's immense diversity is becoming accessible to young learners.

"Going for the grade" diverts students from education's

real goal: the challenges and satisfactions of learning. One participant described an interesting experiment in which she eliminated class ranking and withheld her students' marks until the end of the term. Free of grades, her primary pupils began to focus on the subject matter with the result that their interest, work (and marks) improved appreciably.

Although discussants had begun with a fairly uncritical acceptance of exams, this changed as they added up their findings: student stress and passivity, irrelevant, narrow content, directive teaching, bias and elitism. They began to question not only college entrance exams but also whether competition itself should be used as a major element in education.

Discussants proposed some moderate changes in exams and their use. Essay questions which demand thought rather than memorisation were recommended although they pose difficulties for evaluators. Exam preparation can be used to develop the ability to analyse, distill the essence of a topic and

understand its significance — skills of learning useful throughout life.

They recommended that much less importance should be given to exams and grading. The Japanese teacher said that exams were not needed by teachers who could monitor students more effectively through their daily work and commended Sweden's elimination of exams.

Students should be given the opportunity to evaluate their progress on their own and jointly with their teachers. Mr. Sims outlined an instrument which could be used by students for self-evaluation consisting of a broad profile of student learning in a topic area. Students could follow their development — their accomplishments and their weaknesses — by locating where they are in the stream of knowledge.

Competition in general is neither necessary nor desirable. Rather than marks, the main rewards should be discovery, growth and mastery of work they care about. One alternative is co-operative-learning, which gives young people an active part in their education and the opportunity to contribute to the group.

NEW THINKING ON EDUCATION

ARE EXAMS NECESSARY?

But some felt that these modifications do not go far enough. Education has continued its traditional conservative role of transmitting society's value as it is but the times demand more profound changes.

It was argued that exams counter the real goals of education which have expanded since 1945. Schools are now asked to undertake the teaching of morals and ethics — once the responsibility of family and religious mentors. In addition, all children now have the right to education, instead of weeding out the most talented, teachers are given the task of inspiring and moving each student as far as possible.

Most important of all, the characteristics presently neglected in exam-based education are the ones that will be most needed in the dynamic, overpopulated world of the twenty-first century: self-reliance, initiative, the ability to analyse and understand new facts and trends, adaptability and social skills.

To achieve these goals, a quite different educational process was envisioned, one appropriate for life-long learning. This would encompass the development of critical awareness, possibly giving credit for experience gained outside school, involvement in the community, and responsibility for one's own learning.

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