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Educating for Discernment
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"Reading my old school report cards, I was reminded that the focus of a basic education, at least in New England, was on character as much as knowledge. My teachers graded me based on their *discernment* rather than their *measurement* of my progress."

The other night, unpacking some books, I came upon my old school report cards, lovingly filed away by my mother.

The cards from high school were little more than grids, neatly penned in with letter grades. No teachers were mentioned. Aside from my name on the front, the only other signs of human engagement were the signatures of my parents and the printed names of the superintendent and principal. Even so, those letter grades cast some light on the adolescence of a literary career: One year I blew it in art and later landed a D in something called "Word Shop."

More intriguing were the verbal comments from elementary school. Restricted to a few sentences on a now-yellowed card (politely called "The Record of Progress"), they chart my teachers' perceptions of my development through the four periods of a year. In those days, clearly, the focus of basic education -- at least in New England -- was on character as much as knowledge. To be sure, there were sporadic comments about arithmetic, reading, and science -- or even, as Mrs. Carkhuff in second grade archly noted, social studies, which to her surprise "he seems to like." On academics she was a martinet (a word I later learned in high-school English). Yet, even for her, the real issue lay in the habits of social integration. "He requires constant attention and reminding concerning behavior," she glowered in her Third Period comment that year.

That came as no surprise to me, of course, nor should it have to her. Her predecessor, the aunt-like Mrs. Doran, had sized me up adroitly the year before. In her neatly printed green ink, she commented that I had "boundless energy," that "sitting down was one of the hardest things he has to do," and that "he likes to visit with his neighbors too much at present."

But what intrigued me was the fact that two teachers, presumably acting independently, had nailed me on the same charge. In third grade, the irresistible Miss Power observed that "when Rush works, he works very well but he would rather sit and play with rulers and such" -- a theme picked up by the edgy Miss Barrows the next year, who declared that I was "a good student" who "wastes time playing with rulers." The formidable Mrs. Johnson in fifth grade put it more charitably when she noted in her spidery cursive that I had "many interests" that kept me from "doing my best."

Reading those old reports, I was reminded of some conversations last month in Washington with a group of character educators from around the nation. They are worried about the current educational emphasis on testing and assessing student progress at every turn. They admit we need to test: It won't do to graduate students who can't read,

write, or compute. And they're committed to measuring the impacts of character education. Yet they were struggling with a fundamental inconsistency, which is that while character and ethics belong to the humanities, the assessment of student character must finally be reduced to numbers and letters on a grid.

And then a friend who is a longtime Scottish educator nailed the problem. "We've virtually lost the capacity," he said, talking about the global educational establishment, "to consider evidence that arises from *discernment* rather than *measurement*."

That's a most helpful distinction. He's not urging us to turn away from evidence-based assessments. He's simply questioning whether the best evidence might be neither a letter grade nor a number followed by a percent sign. The real marker of progress may be a handful of discerning words about habits and some observations about aspirations -- or even an anecdote.

I think my grade-school teachers knew that. But this is not a call for turning back the clock. In recent years, we've learned more about testing in diverse cultures than the rural homogeneity of my New England schooling ever could have taught us. Instead, it's a call for respecting words as much as percentages, ideas as much as grades, humanity as much as numeration.

Yes, that can lead to problems -- subjectivity, bias, even favoritism. And yes, it's easier to score tests with a machine than to write thoughtful evaluative comments. But I sense, in the admittedly anecdotal evidence from this one career, that the few words of my early teachers distilled me more accurately than all those later years of letters and numbers ever did. Machines measure. Educated characters discern. And the building of discernment has got to be education's abiding purpose.