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THE REAL PURPOSE OF JOURNAL WRITING IN SCHOOLS

Journal writing has become a favorite technique in many grades of many schools. On the surface, this sounds like a good exercise to educate students how to write. But that's not the purpose of classroom journal writing.

One reader has sent me an explanation of journal writing published in the Delta Kappa Gamma Bulletin written by a teacher who likes and uses this technique. The article makes clear that, although used in English class, journal writing has nothing whatever to do with developing the ability to read and write the English language.

The teacher says that the journal "is never corrected in the usual manner -- that is, for misspelling or incorrect grammar or punctuation." Continuing, she explains, "No matter how poorly a student spells or how poorly a sentence is structured, a student can still make high marks on journal writing." With that attitude, it's no wonder that schools are graduating students who can't spell or write coherently.

The teacher goes on to explain further that journal writing enables the students who generally get low marks to score higher on journal writing, since writing and English skills don't count. She defends this giving of high marks to students who didn't earn them by saying that these poor students "like the higher grade and feel successful."

No wonder high school graduates find it hard to adjust to the real world in which you are <u>not</u> successful unless you demonstrate ability and skill! So, if writing skills are not the purpose of journals, what is?

The nitty gritty of journal writing is the content. Here is this teacher's description of the subject-matter of journal writing: "personal problems -- family fights, divorces, death, drugs and alcohol, peer conflicts and love affairs." Her students write about "personal situations with emotional impact -- what makes them happy, sad or angry."

Thus, instead of developing skills in writing and the use of the English language, the purpose of journal writing is the "student taking the teacher into her/his confidence." The purpose is the child sharing his "problems and concerns" with the

teacher (instead of with his family members).

Sorry, teacher, but most parents didn't authorize the school to pry into private family problems and affairs. Those are none of the school's business.

The new regulations for the Protection of Pupil Rights Amendment, which went into effect November 12, prohibit schools from prying into the private affairs of the child and his family without the prior written consent of the parents. Those parents who want the teacher to be a busybody keeping a record of family fights, divorces, deaths, and love affairs, can give their consent in writing. Others have the legal right to refuse.

The widespread use of journal writing and other privacy-probing techniques is why the National Education Association has just issued a newsletter making an attack on the new regulations which sounds paranoid. It tells teachers, "Your professional judgment -- how you teach in the classroom -- is under attack. New federal regulations endanger your academic freedom to teach."

The NEA is incorrect. The new regulations don't threaten the teacher's ability to teach; but they certainly do require the teacher to get parental consent before forcing children through a classroom exercise designed to pry into personal and family affairs.

The new regulations specifically prohibit the teacher, without prior parental consent, from using methods "to elicit information about attitudes, habits, traits, opinions, beliefs or feelings" or which are "designed to affect behavioral, emotional or attitudinal characteristics." That's a good description of how journal writing is used in schools today.

Somewhere along the line, the NEA and the curriculum writers have adopted the notion that the schools, instead of teaching knowledge and training in basic skills, should act as a therapist to pry into and monitor the child's emotions, family problems, sex life, and attitudes toward life and death.

Teacher training schools and curriculum guides have misread the purpose of education. No wonder our country has 23 million functional illiterates!

The protection of the child and his family from the prying eyes and ears of teachers who want to engage in therapy and counseling instead of teaching is THE civil rights issue of the 1980s. The schools should get on with the business of teaching the basics.