

PEACE CORPS
volunteer
MAY 1966

Volume IV Number 7

Published monthly by the Division
of Volunteer Support, Peace Corps,
Washington, D. C. 20525.

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Grading: a Volunteer dilemma

Does the Peace Corps Volunteer teacher have to play the "grading game" according to host country rules? Or does he have the right, indeed, the self-obligation as a teacher to grade by his own guidelines, even if it means imposing his values on another society? Jonathan Pool, a Volunteer in Turkey, discusses these perplexing questions that face Volunteer teachers in many nations.

By JONATHAN POOL

One day last June, two Turkish colleagues and I were near the end of another day of oral exams. Occupying the entirety of every June, exams are given by a committee of three teachers to a parade of students seeking a middle-school or a lycée diploma, or the right to continue attending school. With only two more examinees on our list, we were asking the simplest questions we could think of to a young man who had been suspended at least a year ago for poor scholarship. But it did not matter what we asked: the best he could do was to misunderstand our questions and give incorrect answers.

I looked into my colleague Ibrahim's eyes and asked, "E?" He seemed to give a consenting nodlet, as did the third teacher, so we let the boy go. As he rose from the table he blurted out, "Please, sir, I've been out of school two years now, with a job. . . ."

He left the room; we finished off the last two examinees, and then Ibrahim said, "Let's give these boys a break, O.K.?" He wrote a "5," the minimum passing mark, next to each name on the grade sheet.

"I'm sorry," I protested, "but while I can see the last two getting '5s,' the one before them knew nothing. If you thought he should be passed, the time to say so was when I expressed my negative opinion about him, not now." Thus we plunged into an argument about the boy's lack of opportunity on

the one hand and, on the other, the fact that we were grading his English and that Ibrahim was trying to turn the process into a one-man show by writing down a passing grade after tacitly agreeing to a failing one.

The discussion had not lasted a minute when Ibrahim suddenly scratched out the "5," scribbled a "2" over it, threw the pen on the table, and said, "All right, have it your way if you want to kill the poor kid's future. You Volunteers have no idea about our problems in Turkey. The Ministry of Education ought not to give you the right to give exams and grades, and by George I'm going to make that recommendation." With this he dashed off his signature on the grade sheet and stamped out of the room.

This blow-up was the result of the discrepancy between theory and fact in the Turkish educational system. In theory, students who learn are passed, those who do not learn are failed. During end-of-the-year exams, all reference to the student's pre-exam proficiency or situation is prohibited. Even his own teacher must vote to fail a good student who forgets everything in the exam, or to pass his most despised pupil if he somehow manages to give the right answers to the examining committee.

But the fact? The partiality of the system begins in the 13,000 villages (out of 40,000) which still remain

school-less. It continues with the students who try to struggle through a strenuous 14-subject classical lycée curriculum while manning a hoe or picking apples on their families' fields after school every day. Such a boy is almost bound to fail at least one of his 14 subjects, and, if he does, he repeats the whole year. If he fails one subject the next year, he gets a one-year suspension.

Hence the tendency to grade examinees, not only on the basis of how good their English is, but also how hard they have tried, how poor they are, and whether this is the only subject that they have failed, and therefore the key to their opportunity for further education.

There is no question about which type of grading is legal: if an inspector from the ministry happens to be sitting in on your exam and sees you introducing externally based evidence into the grading process, you can expect your name to be Mehmet Mud in Ankara.

There is, however, a question about which method is the "good" one. If breaking the law is bad, if giving examiners enough laxity to be able to reward the sons of the underprivileged is bad, and if harming the morale and/or respect for law of the students who see this going on is bad, then of course the legal method of grading is good. If perpetuating injustice and unequal opportunity is bad, then the illegal

system is good. Each Turkish teacher makes a choice between the two, and I have seen some pick one and some the other.

But it is a different matter when the Peace Corps Volunteer has to make the same choice. As an invited foreigner, he is not expected under current international etiquette to break the laws of his host country, and as a representative of sorts of the U.S. he could find himself embarrassing his country by getting an official reprimand

from a ministry inspector. But as a Volunteer, dedicated to giving opportunity to those without it, he cannot get much satisfaction from seeing himself dish out failing grades to the poor and passing grades to the rich.

I leave the matter here, as a dilemma, for I have found no answer that satisfies me. The only thought I can offer is: perhaps Ibrahim was right. Perhaps grading is a normative process, and giving the Peace Corps Volunteer the right to grade means giving

him the right to impose his values on another society. Maybe our efforts should be devoted to teaching, coaching and in other ways helping the underprivileged, and we should leave the evaluating, rewarding and punishing to the citizens of the country where we work.

—Pool wrote this article from his experience teaching in a small town in Turkey. He is presently assigned to Istanbul.