

ASSESSMENT AND REPORTING “DOWN UNDER”

Over the past decade, primary schooling in Australia and New Zealand has undergone dramatic changes, driven by community demands for improved educational quality and increased accountability. One of the most significant features at both national and state levels has been the change toward outcomes-based education.* At the school level, this has occurred as more of an evolutionary trend than an abrupt change.

Moving away from a content-based organization* has posed a challenge for many teachers. As a result, during its early stages, implementation dealt mostly with planning programs for teaching and learning. In due course, however, developers began to focus on the implications of this change for assessment and reporting. Ways are being explored to (1) find more valid ways of determining whether students are acquiring the desired knowledge, understanding, skills, and values, and (2) create a more authentic portrayal of achievement and performance. The focus is on what is being assessed, why it is being assessed, how it can be assessed, and how to communicate the results to legitimate parties. This trend

**See Glossary on page 33 for definition.*

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represents a significant break with traditional forms of assessment, which are based on teacher-made tests, numerical grades, and twice-yearly report cards. A growing number of Adventist schools in Australia and New Zealand have joined this trend.

Until recently, innovation in Adventist schools occurred mostly as local initiatives. However, 1997 was designated for collaboration between these educators and the South Pacific Division Curriculum Unit. They researched ways to guide and support teachers in developing assessment and reporting strategies, and collected examples and alternatives to help individual schools develop their own programs.

The Adventist Curriculum Context

One of the roles of the South Pacific

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Division's Curriculum Unit is to evaluate national and state syllabus documents, and to transform them to faithfully reflect the distinctive features and values of Adventist education. At the same time, they try to maintain the emphases of current educational trends, as appropriate. A relatively recent innovation in Adventist education in Australia and New Zealand is the K-6 primary curriculum framework, "God Is Like This," which highlights aspects of God's personality and character and encourages students to emulate those qualities. This model undergirds key learning areas: Bible, English, mathematics, society and the environment, science, technology, health and physical education, and the arts.

In studying society and the environment, for example, human relationships are shown to be modeled after the way God Himself relates to humans. Our care of the environment is presented as a reflection of the quality of our relationship with Him.

Another example is the new Bible program, which seeks to develop personal faith. Since program developers believe that faith has cognitive, affective, and practical dimensions, they have intentionally de-emphasized rote memorization of isolated facts and emphasized understanding and practical action. Materials for teaching, learning,

assessment, and reporting include an outcomes framework.* (A future article in this journal will provide more details on this program.) As a bonus, all these frameworks encourage natural integration with other key learning areas.

Assessment Approaches

Now that the frameworks are well underway, attention is being given to assessment and reporting. Adventist teachers who have experimented with alternative forms of assessment generally view what they are doing in the following ways:

- In terms of outcomes or performance;
- As based on a range of continuing pupil experience such as portfolios of work samples, teacher observation of performance, skills checklists, and even pupil self-assessment rather than

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on periodic teacher-made tests and examinations;

- As reporting that is more descriptive than numerical;
- As a variety of results communicated to parents throughout the year rather than only a few times a year;
- As encouraging more open communication about student progress between the teacher/school and parents.

These recommended changes mean far more than just a different way of assessing and

reporting. They represent a significant paradigm shift with far-reaching implications for the whole teaching and learning process. They affect how teachers plan, organize the curriculum, and relate to students. But such a sweeping paradigm change does not happen

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A three-party relationship—teacher, parent, and child—is the basis for authentic assessment.

overnight. The rate and degree of change vary in relation to the teacher's background, experience, and theoretical perspective. A significant number of Adventist educators in Australia and New Zealand have been exploring and experimenting with these changes.

They are now a catalyst for change and a source of ideas system-wide. Their collaboration will produce a model to motivate and guide others as they embark on their own journeys. Following is a collage of changes that have taken place or are in progress in the SPD.

Outcomes-Based Orientation to Planning

The decision to use authentic assessment and reporting grows out of an outcomes perspective. Until recently in Australia and

New Zealand, curriculum planning was predominantly content-based.

By contrast, the new Adventist syllabus documents in the learning areas have adopted an outcomes framework. The implementation phase is designed to support teachers as they adapt to this

new focus. In

New Zealand, planning strategies that begin with out-

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comes have been dubbed "planning inside-out." Schools across the division are discovering that it is easier and more efficient to organize their classrooms by using this perspective. As planning in each of the learning areas is being streamlined, integration across the curriculum occurs spontaneously, making it easier to plan, teach, and monitor, as well as assess and report.

A popular literacy development program developed in western Australia, "First Steps,"¹ has also gained popularity in Australian Adventist schools as part of the English program. It covers oral language, reading, writing, and spelling, and is based on developmentally organized performance indicators extending from kindergarten through post-grade 6. These, too, function as outcomes, enabling each teacher to locate and then track each student on a literacy continuum. In Adventist schools, the new English syllabus clearly links these "First Steps" indicators with its own outcomes framework. In so doing, it provides a vast resource for teachers in organizing and managing their English programs. These kinds of approaches show both teacher and parent more precisely what the child is capable of doing and how he or she is performing at that particular time.

Collecting and Recording Information for Assessment

The main feature of this process is broadening the scope of assessment tasks to enable students to show more clearly and fairly what they know and can do. There is a need for assessment activities in the following areas:

- Knowledge and understanding;
- Analysis and critical thinking;
- Synthesis and creative thinking;
- Problem solving;
- Application and performance;
- Making judgments.

This requires a variety of assessment activities throughout the unit. In time, students complete a range of assignments related to the outcomes being assessed. These are collected in individual *portfolios*, along with other materials the teacher selects as evidence of achievement. The materials in these portfolios are a significant source of in-

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formation for the reports to be sent to parents.

Another form of work sample is the *presentation*, which occurs at the culmination of a unit of study. In one grade 5/6 classroom established recently in Victoria to explore the use of computers in education, students collaborated in groups using special software to produce a multimedia presentation for each unit.

Units of study constitute a collection of "work contracts" organized around a theme or issue. Some assessment takes place at the completion of each contract. However, at the end of the unit, the presentations are shared with parents and other groups in the class as a culminating event. This is also an appropriate time for discussion, critique, and some assessment.

Record Keeping

At the present time, Adventist schools in the SPD use diverse record-keeping practices to measure students' academic understanding, skill performance, and development of values and attitudes. Checklists, anecdotal records, diagnostic and standardized tests, rating scales, tracking sheets, and student profiles are just some of the approaches being adopted by teachers. Assessment is thus an ongoing process. It is integrated with teaching and learning rather than being an intense, concentrated event at the end of a term or half-year.

Good teachers have always been sensitive to using approaches that indicate how well children appear to be performing along the way. However, the increased emphasis on continuing as-

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assessment does create stress for some teachers. Primarily, this is seen in their concerns about increased demands on their time. This part of the paradigm shift will require some time.

Parents as Partners

Parents have a right to a clear, authentic picture of their child's performance. However, many of them have been socialized to believe that educa-

tional measurement consists mainly of tests, examinations, and numerical marks. Understandably, they are often confused, cynical about new methods, and resistant to change. A growing number of Australian and New Zealand Adventist schools, like others, are putting more emphasis on including parents as partners in their children's education:

- Teachers are holding parent workshops in some areas to explain and discuss the new approaches with parents.
- Parents are actively involved in the development of assessment and reporting procedures.
- Some schools have established curriculum committees comprised of interested parents. These committees meet with the principal and staff to review and monitor the school's curriculum documentation—from philosophy to as-

essment and reporting. In one such school, the principal introduced the new Studies of Society and the Environment syllabus document to the committee. He explained its distinctive Christian rationale, the outcomes framework, and the implications for assessment. The parent members responded by helping to write (with the principal and teacher) a unit for the younger students focusing on the Christian family. This unit was taught during the last term of 1996. The cycle was completed by assessment and reporting of results to all parents. It is no surprise that these parents have a strong sense of accomplishment and ownership of their school.

Students as Partners in Assessment

The notion of actively involving students in the curriculum process is by no means new. However, some schools in

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Teachers and students collaborate to create a rubric to assess writing.

the SPD also plan to get students involved in assessment, which will help to develop a strong relationship between school, parents, and students. A cooperative approach to assessment combines self-assessment and peer review of work samples, along with teacher assessment. Students are encouraged to use personal journals for reflective self-critique of their work.

Optimally, the assessment process encompasses the entire teaching-learning cycle. At the beginning of each unit, students are encouraged to consider the outcomes for the unit and the related tasks. They then collaborate with the teacher to construct "rubrics"* that clearly define the goals and purpose, as well as criteria for the quality of each task to be undertaken. Not only do these rubrics become a reference point for assessment at the conclusion of the

unit; they also serve as a frame of reference during the teaching and learning phase.

Reporting Format

This is where one sees the most change in SPD schools. Although most schools have modified their reporting format somewhat, there is much to be done. Presently, schools are using diverse approaches and enthusiastically discussing a variety of options. One constant is the trend toward a more descriptive style of grading and assessment. The perception that "parents still want marks" does cause a dilemma for some teachers. Other teachers fear that the new techniques will make increased time demands on their already tightly packed schedules. However, a pattern is beginning to emerge. Schools are using techniques that ensure a more authentic portrayal of what each child knows, understands, is able to do, and the personal values that are evident. Further, reporting is occurring more frequently in some schools. Initially, schools ex-

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pand the frequency of reporting for certain areas of the curriculum, or for a cluster of learning areas that make up integrated units of study, with a view toward moving toward this for every subject area. This obviously calls for new organization and monitoring skills at the school level.

Glossary

Outcomes-based education—Curriculum organized around outcomes statements that represent conceptual elements and understandings characteristic of the subject or learning area. Matched tasks completed by students provide evidence of achievement.

Outcomes framework—Required competencies in each subject or learning area are arranged in strands, stages, and levels of development over a period of time, e.g., kindergarten to grade 6.

Content-based education—Curriculum viewed as a set body of knowledge to be learned and retained.

Rubric—A device to evaluate a piece of work or task. Criteria are listed vertically on a matrix. Varying levels of quality, from excellent to poor, are arranged across the top of the matrix. If desired, criteria can be negotiated between teacher and students as part of the learning process.

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Conclusion

This article has attempted to describe the current state of flux in Australian and New Zealand Adventist schools in the areas of assessment and reporting. While being implemented with creative flair and professionalism in many quarters, the new techniques also pose many challenges and create some major stresses for certain teachers. Despite this, the division and its personnel are committed to meeting these challenges, and producing a set of strategies that will enhance the quality of education in Adventist schools in the South Pacific Division. ✍

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REFERENCE

† Education Department of Western Australia, *First Steps, Oral Language, Reading, Writing, and Spelling Continua and Resources* (Melbourne: Longman Australia, 1994).