

## Assessment, reporting and student self-esteem

In this issue of *TCFNews* summaries of two Journal of Christian Education articles on self-esteem have been published. They provide interesting insights into how self-esteem has been an issue for education in the last ten years and how many teachers are still attempting to come to terms with issues about their own self-esteem as well as how they might raise students' self-esteem.

For students, one of the key influences on self-esteem can be their success or lack of success at school. In recent years, there has been a tendency to move away from both cohort reporting (position in class or grade) and norm referencing (spreading the results over a bell shaped curve where half get less than 50%) to provide more personalised reporting and in some cases reporting against standards.

### The move to standards

Education in the 1990s witnessed the rise of standards-referenced reporting. The expansion of basic skills type tests into secondary schools for literacy and numeracy was based on new measurement techniques involving item response theory. The tests set up achievement scales where the test items were ranked according to difficulty. These scales allowed different student groups to be measured from one year to the next against the standard represented by these scales and hence improvements could be acknowledged. This is what governments had always wanted, to know, whether the students were doing any better today than yesterday.

Reporting on these tests was not only against standards which could describe what students know and can do. Cohort reporting, although in much broader terms than position in class, was also provided by the percentages of students located in each of the bands.

### The HSC

The well documented problems with the HSC in the McGaw Report 1996, *Their future*, highlighted the confusion around courses and the reporting of achievement which focused on norm referencing even though the course means were set at 62. For many students, the subsequent determination of a Tertiary Entrance Rank had become their sole focus, so much so that they only paid second attention to subject marks. Half the number of students received TER scores below 50 and felt failures, while other capable students, even with scores in the 90s felt a failure if their score did not provide access to their preferred university course.

The government rightly wanted to take this focus off the TER and to get it back onto what students know and can do so that after 13 years of schooling students' achievements might be recognised. It was a radical change, "courageous" as might be said in a *Yes Minister* episode, to move the whole HSC away from norm-referenced reporting to standards-referenced reporting. Students are now reported against explicit standards (bands) which were set by student performance in the first HSC examination in 2001.

The new HSC reporting format still provides cohort information in subject reports with the graph of cohort performance beside the scale. But the most controversial decision was to set a minimum standard in each subject and to align this standard with a mark of 50. In fact, this decision was based mostly on a community understanding that 50 represented a pass, irrespective of how it might have been determined or what students knew and could do. Norm referencing destined half the students to failure, no doubt a reason why the Board of Studies had already

lifted the mean to 62 for courses so that one standard deviation of candidates below that mean would have a mark greater than 50.

There were two opposing arguments in allocating 50 marks to a minimum standard. Using norm-referenced reporting, it was inappropriate in the eyes of the public for half the students after 13 years of schooling to fail, especially when this mark represented no comment on standards, but student rank only. For others, the concern was that, with only around 4% of students not reaching the minimum standard, this would be seen as too small a proportion.

From the beginning, teachers had difficulty with this minimum standard, especially when they used the full range of marks in assessment tasks with many students continuing to get marks of less than 50%, but ending up with higher marks and bands at the HSC. For some students the continually low marks in assessment tasks contributed to their sense of failure and many voted with their feet and left school during or at the end of Year 11. In regards to the HSC, marks, standards and self-esteem are connected and the double standard of assessment marks that don't reflect standards affects self-esteem.

### **Primary schools -Different problem, same result?**

Throughout the 1990s, primary schools have been encouraged to use outcomes as the focus of teaching and learning and assessment and reporting.

The move to assess and report student performance based on the achievement of outcomes has been driven by the standards movement. The key phrase has been "outcomes in a standards framework" and the first serious attempt to do this was the 1994 national curriculum profiles which set up eight levels of outcomes in each learning area. These outcomes were independent of a student's age or grade and therefore constituted a measuring tape against which students work could be align at any time during their schooling. The standard was described by the outcomes, the level statement, the pointers (indicators) and the work samples that illustrated the standard.

In NSW, the Eltis Report 1994 into the use of outcomes and profiles recommended a different framework of outcomes in stages. The Board of Studies developed its K-6 syllabuses and new Years 7-10 syllabuses on this model. But the question is: Does this development of outcomes in stages represent a reporting framework? Many thought that it did, or should, and teachers were encouraged to keep records of student achievement of each outcome and to report on each individual outcome.

The problem was, and still is in many cases, that what achievement of each outcome looks like has not been established and understood comparably by teachers. Without a well defined and generally understood standard, teachers' reports against these standards (outcomes) are idiosyncratic. Although the consistency of teacher judgements projects have widened the understanding of some teachers, they do not yet provide statewide standards for consistent judgements. To then, as some schools do, place performance standards, 1-5 or A-E, on each outcome at school reporting time brings no additional credit to schools, quite the contrary.

It is in this context that the NSW Department of Education and Training is to provide advice to schools on assessment and reporting.

### **Issues of self-esteem**

The JCE articles referred to in this issue make it clear that self-esteem is found primarily in the love of God. He loves us, and that worth is imputed, not earned. As

Christians, we want our students to know Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour so that they might know and experience the love of God as a base on which to build their self-esteem.

The authors point out that the family, the school and the church all have roles to play in developing and maintaining self-esteem. Self-esteem based on achievements is always fragile as failure enters life in the most unexpected way; often through broken relationships which can bring down the highest of flyers. Self-esteem can be fragile and easily upset. Its foundation in faith in the work of Jesus Christ in reconciling us to God needs to be experienced in families and churches as well as being known. Christian communities everywhere need to watch that they don't inadvertently destroy the self-esteem of Christians by unbalanced presentations of aspects of doctrine. As Paul reminds us "Watch your life and doctrine closely" (1Tim:4:16).

Christians need to be involved in the current debates about assessment and reporting and the TCF Conference, *Could do better: Assessment and school reports*, will be one opportunity to do this. It will raise more issues than it will solve, but being informed is essential if we are to influence the debate.

Some of the things that we need to think about from a Christian perspective are:

- If we are to report against standards, what are these standards in the primary years and Years 7-10 and how can they be comparably understood by teachers across NSW?
- Is what I am putting on my school reports based on evidence aligned to well understood standards or are they simply my best guesses?
- How can I fairly assess all students using a full range of marks if everyone sees 50 as a pass?
- Are assessment and reporting practices in my school building up, or breaking down, students' self-esteem?

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