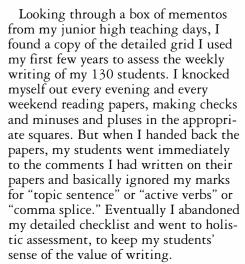
CHRISTIAN EDUCATORS LOUIS AND LOUIS

Quarterly journal for Christian day school educators

Assessment

God Saw That It Was Good

EDITORIAL



I wonder if some teachers try too hard to specify each particular response of their students, perhaps to justify their assessment of student learning and show themselves accountable.

Recently I spent two semesters observing several well-regarded writing teachers in their classrooms. By semester's end, two of these teachers experienced serious conflicts with students over their assessment process and the resulting grades. The causes were different, but I believe their situations illustrate two of our most serious mistakes in assessing student learning.

One teacher used an intricate point system of assessment, spelled out for the students on a full-page handout. She listed points for reading, for writing responses, for asking questions in class, for answering questions in class, for handing in papers on time, for including certain resources, for rewriting papers, and on and on. Every instruction was written out in detail, on color-coded paper in a 55-page course packet. The student was given every detail necessary for keeping track of his or her points and the current grade. In the end, however, students complained that the points were manipulated at the teacher's whims. In her painstaking attempt to avoid conflict, that teacher worked herself into a trap of justifying one person's point values against another. Her cleancut system proved to be anything but

The other teacher used writing

portfolios but no grades throughout the term. She spent the entire semester encouraging students to read and write, holding class discussions, commenting, guiding workshops during class, holding individual conferences with students, giving students the responsibility for the direction of discussions, always encouraging them, yet cautioning them when she believed they needed direction. Students outdid themselves in the class—they were so motivated. Then suddenly the boom fell—the last day, when the portfolios were returned with a final grade, the only grade. For a number of students in that class, all the months of encouragement were wiped away by a "C" or a "B" that they thought should have been an "A." And suddenly their friendly instructor was an enemy, and they let her know—a most painful way to end a term.

Student assessment can be the most difficult, the most agonizing part of teaching—and probably the part for which aspiring teachers are least prepared. "Nobody taught us how to determine grades," a student teacher complained recently. Probably the actual grading is less difficult than the assessment, the gathering of evidence, but assessment should be more gratifying than it often is.

Think of God's assessment of his work of Creation. Six times in Genesis 1 we read, "God saw that it was good," (Gen. 1:4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25) and finally, "God saw all that he had made, and it was very good" (31). We also, who are created in God's image, are called to assess our work. But sometimes we have imposed very earth-centered, dictatorial methods on our assessment.

For one thing, we sometimes remove the responsibility of the work from the worker. We as teachers do that when we impose a grade on our students' work without their participation in the assessment. Certainly, we have more experience, and probably we have a clearer sense of the potential for "best" work. But when we dictate the standards and give our students no responsibility in assessing their own work, we deny their image-bearing right of creation.



Lorna VanGilst

A second problem occurs when our assessment method conflicts with the teaching method or the students' method of "creating." If we assign points for specific achievements, then we must take the responsibility of keeping accurate records. Nevertheless, we can expect various students to assign different point values than we do, depending on our different approaches to the work. Personally, I resist using specific point values for each task. I find such a method very arbitrary, very fragmented, very quantitative. I don't work that way. Some of my students do, however. And so, we have to develop a respect for each other's approaches and some kind of compromise.

Most important, we who teach must discuss throughout the term how we assess student work, not just at the end. And the end grade must accurately reflect the assessment. Students' greatest anger over grades occurs when they expect one grade and suddenly receive a lower one. If they are part of the assessment throughout the term, they are much less likely to expect an inflated grade. In fact, students who assess their own work tend to be more critical of themselves than those who take no part in the assessment.

By now, most of us know about grade inflation. A "B" in the 1960s was more demanding than a "B" in the 1990s. The grade "C" is no longer "average" it's a disappointment. Inflation is as inevitable as change. We won't stop it just by holding out for "C" as a tough average. And a "B" or a "C" won't destroy a student who takes part in the assessment. But ruthless single-handed assessment by us as teachers can destroy both our students' and our own joy in doing our work. We must work together with our students, not simply making checkmarks on a grid, not popping a surprise grade at the end, but stopping at various points throughout the term to assess our goals and our work, in the service of our Lord.

May we look at our work throughout this term and see that it is good—very good.

Demystifying the Grading of Classroom Participation

Keith A. Walters

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Whenever a teacher passes back a graded paper, there are better than average odds that the teacher will hear, in some form, one of the following comments:

"Thanks for giving me a good grade. My parents will be happy!"

"Thanks a lot! Now I am going to be put back on restriction!"

"Billy must be a teacher's pet because he always gets good grades."

"How did I get this grade? I worked a long time on this assignment!"

Often teachers attribute these student comments to innocent reactions toward the grade being received. Overly optimistic teachers, however, might actually become encouraged by the student comments, based on a belief that the comments show a genuine student interest in classroom achievement. A teacher reacting to the comments in either way would be making a serious mistake.

A critical reflection upon these normal student comments reveals a serious lack of respect for the teacher and her or his profession. The comments, in essence, throw the responsibility for a student's grades primarily on the disposition of the teacher, insinuating that the grades assigned to the student's work were determined either by the teacher's current emotional mood or by the teacher's proclivity toward a particular student. In either case, the student comments question the role the student's work has on the final grade.

The Dangers of Tradition

It is safe to assume that the majority of students who verbalize comments upon receipt of a graded paper are not consciously slighting the teacher. In fact, the student comments can be traced to the everyday frustrations traditional comparative-based assessment has produced for students during the past several generations. To clarify the problems created by traditional comparative-based assessment we must understand the definition for comparative assessment. Laska and Juarez (in Juarez 1994) furnish a concise definition:

A comparative grading system provides two or more hierarchical categories for the formal evaluation of students. The grading categories may be represented by evaluative words (such as "pass," "fail," "excellent," "average," "poor"), a hierarchical sequence of numbers (such as 100-0,20-0,4-0), or letters of the alphabet (such as A,B,C,F). A comparative grading system has two other basic characteristics: (a) a fixed time period for the determination of a student's grade, and (b) an expectation that all students will not earn the highest grade. (37)

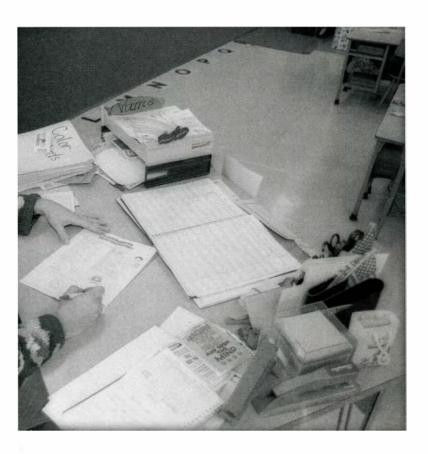
The hierarchical nature of traditional comparative assessment creates several problems. First, the hierarchical categories, by nature, require teachers to rank students on a scale. To create an accurate scale, teachers and educational institutions have created standardized tests. Currently, the majority of standardized tests evaluate students on a broad spectrum of objective knowledge. Since the spectrum of most tests is extensive, students often feel an element of surprise during testing. The surprise feeling is created whenever a student reads a test item that contains material the students failed either to memorize or to study. Many students believe the element of surprise is a testing factor that is beyond their control. Surprise test items, therefore, encourage many



students to assume that their ranking—that is, their grade—is based more on the selection of test questions than on their actual competency (Wolf 1989, Carr et al. 1991).

The frustrations students feel toward hierarchical assessment is increased by a belief that grades are "pay." Many parents and students believe that in order to receive advantageous economic opportunities, students must rank academically higher than their peers. Parents and students, therefore, begin to believe that "The Grade" becomes the focus, students become more concerned about the possibilities of receiving an above average grade based on a minimum effort (Jagacinski & Nicholls 1984) rather than on "becoming thoughtful respondents to, and judges of their own work" (Wolf 1989, 73).

Coupling the surprise nature of tests with the reluctance of students to objectively judge their own work creates a situation where students begin to discount the relationship between individual effort and success. When that correlation becomes nebulous, the students who are experiencing below average success—that is, grades—will gradually begin reducing the time and effort they are willing to give toward any type of academic achievement (Kloosterman



1988, Carr, et al. 1991). For many "below average" students, the drop in effort becomes more an attempt to maintain an acceptable level of self-esteem than a conscious decision to perform poorly. The reduction of effort often occurs because the student suspects it is easier to justify lack of success on low effort rather than on low ability (Coving & Omelich 1984, Jagacinski & Nicholls 1984).

Unfortunately, time has fossilized the traditional comparative assessment philosophy into the bedrock of educational assessment. The continued use of the comparative assessment philosophy has been justified through the use of two major arguments: first, teachers and parents assume that the only way to coerce students into learning lifeless subject content is to remind them that school prepares for their future careers. As a part of the employment training, students are told that there will be many times in their vocation when they will be required to complete a task they will not enjoy. Advocates argue that it is important for students to excel in all content areas regardless of personal interest, so they will be prepared to handle the mundane obligations of their future careers. Comparative assessment philosophy helps teach students the

skills necessary to survive in a competitive society (Juarez 1994).

Second, the lack of a better alternative has encouraged the continued use of the comparative assessment philosophy. Even though many school districts have experimented with alternative forms of assessment, each time they try a new form of assessment problems surface. The problems generally consist of such things as teacher skepticism and confusion regarding the new assessment procedures, an inconsistency between the school's assessment procedures and state-mandated testing, inconsistencies between what is taught and what is tested, and a fear that the new procedures will place the students at a competitive disadvantage (Whitehead & Corbin 1991, Juarez 1994, Holland 1995). The result has been society's reluctant acceptance that some students are destined for failure.

The Annoying Alternative

Many educators refuse to accept the notion that some students are destined for failure. They continue to push, instead, for the implementation of mastery grading, defined by Laska and Juarez (Juarez 1994) as follows:

The principal characteristic of the

mastery grading system is that it has only one meaningful grading category—a category that indicates the student has been a successful learner. The student who has not yet demonstrated his or her success is not formally labeled a failure, since it is always possible that he or she will eventually become a successful learner. Another important characteristic of a mastery grading system, therefore, is the absence of a fixed time period for determination of a student's grade. (38)

The majority of the proponents of mastery grading push for the implementation of portfolio assessment. Advocates of portfolio assessment defend their position with three basic arguments. The first argument centers on the belief that only portfolios accurately reflect the efforts students put forth in accomplishing academic tasks. Portfolios establish a student's efforts through the collection of individual assignments and reflections. The teacher assesses the student's collection of assignments and reflections as a unified body of work, providing the student with verbal or written comments that will point the student in a direction of further development. The strength of portfolio assessment is the development of personal relationships that result in a greater knowledge of each individual student's needs (Wolf 1989, Rief 1990, Juarez 1994, DeBruyn 1995).

The second argument by portfolio advocates highlights the belief that portfolios require students to take a greater degree of responsibility for their learning. True portfolio assessment, they say, must allow students some involvement in determining the academic curriculum they will study. Teachers do, however, maintain the majority of power, to guarantee that the students will learn state-mandated or provincemandated curriculum. Even though the teachers maintain true power, the student's gain in responsibility toward choosing curriculum does allow each student the opportunity to study, in depth, topics of personal interest that are often not found in traditional textbooks. This second argument maintains that portfolio assessment is superior to comparative assessment because it allows each student the "real world" experience of developing personal objectives within the established academic framework (Wolf 1989, Smith & Johnson 1993, Sanborn & Sanborn 1994).

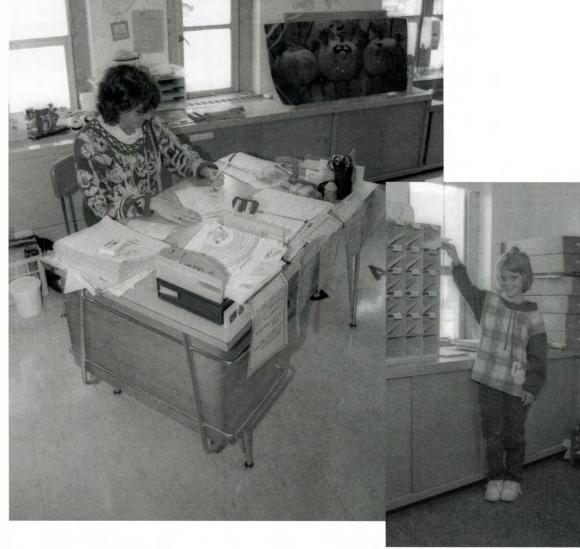
The final argument in support of portfolio assessment says proper portfolio preparation increases student achievement. Students who are interested in their studies and who are actively coached will maintain a genuine desire to learn. They realize that success is measured on the basis of personal effort in achieving standards and not on a relative hierarchical position. The advocates of portfolio assessment claim that the greatest value of the portfolio approach is a renewed desire for students to come to school and learn (Story 1986, Wold 1989, Rief 1990, Paulson et al. 1991, Sanborn & Sanborn 1994, Juarez 1994).

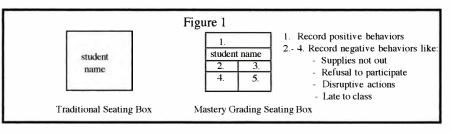
Portfolio advocates want most of all to increase student self-esteem by allowing each student the opportunity to succeed. The desire for each student's success is at the heart of the continued push at the province, state, or district level for the elimination of comparative assessment and the implementation of some form of portfolio assessment.

Unfortunately, the widespread use of portfolio assessment has produced practical problems that have often prevented its effective use: the logistics of storing all the students' assignments and reflections, the difficulty in scheduling individual student conferences, the reluctance of colleges to change admittance policies, the reluctance of teachers to change instructional approaches, and the lack of a clear formula for teachers to follow when creating classroom portfolios (Wold 1989, Paulson et al. 1991, Whitehead & Corbin 1991, Sanborn & Sanborn 1994, Juarez 1994). The result is a widespread teacher skepticism toward any form of change and a continued adherence to tradition, regardless of its flaws (Holland 1995).

A Practical Alternative

Most teachers are not required to endorse one of the two extreme assessment philosophies. A teacher who has a certain degree of flexibility in choosing an assessment philosophy should consider synthesizing comparative assessment with mastery grading one step at a time.





Using the one-step approach allows the teacher to keep much of the traditional comparative assessment philosophy while gradually adding to and/or replacing comparative assessment with elements found in the mastery grading philosophy (DeBruyn 1993, Sanborn & Sanborn 1994, Holland 1995).

The slow methodical approach to educational reform allows teachers the opportunity to isolate the inevitable problems that occur during the use of any new strategy and to define the obstacles that prevent implementation. Once the problems are defined, teachers are more willing and able to work out solutions. With each successful solution, a teacher's willingness to accept additional reforms increases. Moving one step at a time, the teacher can imple-

ment a system that is understandable and workable. Likewise, the slow one-step process allows society time to change its philosophy of education from one that views schools as training for competitive employment to one that views schools as places of cooperative learning.

A powerful step toward mastery grading is the assessment of student classroom participation. Under the traditional comparative assessment philosophy, classroom participation is usually not specifically evaluated. Many times parents and students view the lack of classtime assessment as proof that class is not an essential element in promoting successful student learning (DeBruyn 1993). Teachers, however, realize that the lack of participation in class often

adversely affects a student's overall performance. But teachers often fail to monitor class-time behavior because of the perceived additional work that class-time assessment would involve. Therefore, before classroom participation can be used as a step toward mastery grading, the teacher must develop a simple objective assessment procedure.

A simple, objective procedure for grading class-time behavior can be created with three modest alterations to the teacher's current assessment policy:

First, a change in your seating chart. In Figure 1, I have provided an example that shows a simple modification to the traditional seating chart. The modification allows the teacher to note both positive and negative class-time conduct. Teachers track conduct by placing a check in the appropriate box whenever a student's actions merit assessment. The checking process can be helped by color coding the boxes so that checks can be made within a minimum amount of time.

The teacher must clarify to the student what behaviors or actions are being graded during each class period. Establishing criteria beforehand lets students and parents know what is expected and focuses the grading (DeBruyn 1993). Teachers can effortlessly track each student's reactions to the different class-time objectives by color coding the participation check marks.

Finally, teachers must provide feed-back to students regarding their performance during class time. Feedback can be provided either through personal conferences or through detailed numerical and/or written assessment forms. It is the feedback that will allow the students to begin to realize the relationship between their efforts and successes.

The area of student assessment provides teachers with their greatest power and responsibility. Through assessment, teachers can often determine the ultimate success or failure of each student. Traditionally, society has encouraged

teachers to use their power of assessment to rank students, thereby dooming some students to failure. Now, both educational professionals and the majority of society are beginning to realize the powerful relationship between assessment and student selfesteem. Research clearly demonstrates the influence that assessment has on the emotional welfare of students. As Christians, we have the responsibility to build up the spirits of our students in an accountable fashion. We must, therefore, begin to carefully explore our own personal assessment philosophies to guarantee that they are in line with both the current educational research and with the biblical principle of building up the body of Christ. To do any less is to shun the responsibility with which we, as teachers, have been entrusted.

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ASSESSMENT: A PART OF GOOD TEACHING AND A CATALYST FOR CHANGE

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Assessment? Evaluation? What's the difference?

Although in the field of education the terms assessment and evaluation might be used interchangeably, it is important to note that they are not the same but, instead, represent different aspects of related processes. Although we discovered several different definitions, assess*ment* generally refers to the process of gathering information—collecting data—and using the knowledge gained to improve instruction. Evaluation includes the accumulation of material and adds an additional emphasis—judging the data collected to form interpretations, analysis, and opinions about student learning. Assessment is often viewed as the initiation of the larger process of evaluation. Because assessment allows teachers to make informed decisions, it should be an essential, continuous component of instruction. Assessment is part of learning.

Why and what to assess

Assessment provides the foundation for feedback to students, parents, and, of course, the teacher. The gathering of information supports the efforts of those involved in education to determine student progress and to answer questions of accountability. When administrators, students, or teachers wonder if objec-

tives, benchmarks, or expectations have been met, assessment helps determine progress. Assessment data becomes meaningful when it is used for more than grading and reporting to parents. Further, depending on the type of assessment implemented, the potential exists that it will act as a catalyst or incentive to increase student efforts as they take ownership of their learning.

Types of assessment

No one single method characterizes assessment. Assessment is multidimensional; it is a reflective process that incorporates different tasks and multiple sources in an effort to provide feedback and identify student strengths.

In our reading we uncovered an almost endless list of structures for categorizing types of assessment: group vs. individual; standardized vs. classroom-based; process vs. product; norm- vs. criterionreferenced; alternative vs. traditional; informal vs. formal; authentic vs. contrived. Rather than presenting information in predetermined groupings, we provide an inventory of assessment tools accompanied by a short description. We trust that readers will use judgment when determining strategies to be used in their classrooms and schools. Please note that the following information does not provide the absolute, complete list of all possible assessment alternatives (we're not sure there is such a list); rather, it is a springboard that should lead to discussion of appropriate approaches.

Portfolios

Portfolio assessment, relatively new in the education field, is a useful tool for assessing student progress. Although many models of portfolio assessment, exist, it is usually an ongoing collection of student work and achievement collected over time to be used for reflection, goal setting, and future instruction. The portfolio should not be a random accumulation of materials that overwhelms the student, the parents, and the teacher. Rather, the items included in a portfolio should indicate the goals of the school, the teacher, and the student. Students often take at least partial ownership of the contents of the portfolio.

Work samples

Both teacher- and student-selected work samples, often included in portfolio assessment, give a valuable indication of progress over time and can provide concrete information to teachers, students, administrators, and parents. Remember: date the sample and add background information.

Checklists and surveys

These flexible tools can be used to assess a variety of areas: skills, progress check points, completed work, general or specific concepts, attitudes, or interests. The checklist or survey should be designed by the teacher with certain objectives or criteria in mind, and it should list the desired characteristics or features. Surveys can include open-

ended questions, incomplete sentences, or statements to which students must respond.

Standardized achievement tests

Most educators are familiar with standardized tests and have read the results of such assessment devices in students' files. The information gleaned represents a small portion of the total picture and should be balanced with ideas gained from other sources.

Self-assessments

Self-assessment gives the students an opportunity to tell how they are progressing in their own eyes. Often the teacher asks students to reflect on thoughts about their work, their strengths/weaknesses, or goals for the project. This type of tool is usually not complex or long but allows educators to understand students' perceptions of their own needs or understanding.

Formal tests

Either constructed by the teacher or by a publishing company, formal tests assess student performance in relationship to a particular unit or topic. However, because the information is often evaluated but not used to assess instruction, the full range of data is not used.

Unlimited types of "alternative" assessments

Alternative assessments require students to perform, create, or produce a product. This tool is closely related to the subject area and often has real-world applications. Students are required to

solve a problem, create something that involves higher-level thinking, or accomplish a task that often takes more than one class period.

Observation

Observation is a powerful method for gathering information. However, it is *not* easy. For observation to be worthwhile, the teacher must know what to look for and have a method for recording that data. Meaningful observation usually answers a specific question. Educators might want to consider repeated observations that occur over time.

Interviews

A personal interview need not consume a great amount of time, and it gives the educator a chance to ask both general and particular questions. Questions about literacy habits might include these: What was the last book you read? What was your favorite book you read during the last year? Where do you get ideas for writing? How well do you like to write? Where is your favorite place to read or write?

Guidelines

The types and range of assessment strategies are wide, perhaps continual. The recommendation is *not* to implement a certain number of assessment tools, but rather, to select the devices that match the questions to which you want answers and are consistent with your philosophy of teaching. Note also that there are other types of assessment that pertain to a content area. For example, in literacy, teachers might want to

use a running record, informal reading inventory, miscue analysis, or retelling (Routman 1994) to assess development.

In 12 Affirmations, Vryhof and others (1989) contend that the "Christian school pays attention to and affirms each student's developmental level" (57) and "continuously seeks a more excellent way by planning and structuring for change" (81). Assessment is one way by which educators can seek to fulfill those goals. We acknowledge that assessment may at times be difficult—teachers may feel inadequate, frustrated, unsure—but we are even more certain that it is an integral part of instruction, indispensable to good teaching, improvement, and change.

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Biblical Assessment–Gather Formal and Informal Method

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Assessment is gathering data by formal and informal means on student performance. Assessment requires two basic activities, observing and recording. Observing and recording provide a record of performance that is used later in reporting.

Observation is both formal and informal. Formal observation reviews student products: notes, test, projects, reports, and presentations, using established standards as reference guidelines. A formal review often produces a mark or grade. Informal observation usually produces anecdotal notes. Informal observation includes the variety of observations teachers make of students during structured and unstructured times. Most informal observation takes place in the classroom.

Informal observation is a natural part of all social interaction; formal observation is not. The observations parents make of their child during a sports event are informal observations. The observations made by the team coach on the athletic skill level of the child are formal observations. The recording of the observations usually takes place after the interaction. While observation occurs naturally, effective recording for assessment purposes requires specific skills and experience of perception.

Assessment and evaluation are not ends in themselves. They are means of achieving something larger: increased understanding, knowledge, or learning for those being assessed and for others. Assessment that does not inform or help is of little value. Teachers need to know if their lessons are successful and are achieving the learning goals expected.

Observation of student products and learning efforts can satisfy this need. Teachers increasingly require the data that observation provides to respond to the needs of individual students. Administrators must be in a position to assure staff, parents, the board, the society, and possibly the state or province that important learning goals are being achieved. Assessment records are essential for the principal who has a panicked Grade One teacher in the office exclaiming, "It's Christmas! My kids can't read yet!" Equally, for the junior high geography teacher whose students can't seem to identify the major oceans or continents on a world physical map. The desire of parents for assessment and evaluation material is as deep as all they have invested in their children's education. For parents the more concrete and understandable the assessment is, the better. Parents want to know about the rate, the amount, and the quality of their children's learning over significant periods. Assessment records must provide a variety of users—students, teachers, administrators and parents—with data on which to make valid judgments about educational success.

A review of the mission statements of Christian schools reveals a broad definition of educational success. These statements may include academic, behavioral, social, and spiritual goals for the school program. Some goals can be assessed directly and immediately: "The students will acquire all the numeracy skills necessary for successful entrance to secondary math programs." Successful attainment of these types of goals can be determined by formal assessment methods that produce some type of grade: 14/20, 70%, B-, and so forth.

Most Christian schools have mission statements that include goals less easy

to measure: "To foster a spirit of discipleship" or "To be able to apply biblical principles to life situations." These are essential goal statements for Christian schools because in part they state the distinctive character of Christian education. They are essential, worthy goals for a mature Christian life. Assessment of these goals is not easy by a formal means. They cannot be observed directly and immediately as the result of a lesson or unit. A Bible test at the conclusion of a study of I Corinthians 13 will reveal whether students can recall seven characteristics of Christian love, but it will not reveal whether they have a heart commitment to compassion as a fundamental principle of their faith life.

However, such attitudinal, behavioral goals can be assessed over time by informal assessment observational techniques. Such assessments are possible when professional Christian educators, knowing these goals in their own walk of faith, observe their students learning by responding to educational tasks as unique, changing, maturing members of the same Kingdom. Such observations and the resulting assessments are essential to Christian education.

Observations evaluate what is important and key to success. Christian schools need to evaluate the full range of their goal statements if their claims of success are to be supportable and credible. If it is required that such goals be assessed, can opportunities be designed to assess the attainment of such goals?

Consider this example. During an art unit a teacher wants to incorporate the school's behavioral goal: "Recognize the value of cooperation and the sharing of various gifts to solve problems."

Consequently, a lesson is planned with the aim, "Provide the students an opportunity to solve a problem through

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sharing resources." So the teacher can observe such behavior, the lesson requires each group in the class to share resources, unequally distributed, with other groups in the class so all groups can complete the lesson activity. For example, each of four groups in a class is to create a collage/poster illustrating wise and unwise uses of water. In setting up the activity the teacher provides only one group with the magazines full of pictures, another group with just the creative materials, one group with the task instructions, and another group with nothing. Such a student activity would provide an opportunity to assess the degree to which students had attained the desired attitude of communal sharing to solve problems.

Would such a lesson create behavior that could be assessed for the intended aim? Could it be explained to parents as a valid learning activity by the teacher's reference to the general learning goals of the school? Would explanation to the administrator who walked in for an unannounced evaluation visit in the midst of the disorder be successful? Could the behavioral goals of the lesson be explained to the students in a manner in which they would see the value of the activity? Yes, because a skilled teacher would be able to observe many behaviors that would suggest whether the students had incorporated an attitude of sharing in their value system.

Many of the unique goals of Christian education are not easily or validly assessed by formal methods that produce a mark or grade. They can be assessed informally by observation over a period of time and reported on anecdotally. Such observations, when related to identified learning goals, are valid and accurate. Students, parents, and teachers can see by the results of formal, direct,

mark-producing assessment that some goals of the school that are not so directly assessable need to be incorporated into curriculum guidelines, unit plans, and lesson plans. Then Christian teachers, aided by the Holy Spirit, will have ample opportunity to assess such goals. Then Christian schools can report with confidence that these essential goals, goals at the heart of Christian education, by the grace of God, are also being achieved.

Revising the report card

Experienced teachers know that change in thinking and practice are constant in education. Recently one area of considerable change has been assessment and evaluation. Parents become aware of these changes when new report cards arrive at home at a term's end.

With most change, initial reaction can be negative. Change from the familiar that is understood to the unfamiliar that is not understood is always difficult. In an area as important to parents as the education of their children, parents want to understand that their children are succeeding. If the definition of educational success held by the parents reading the report is different from those producing the report card, the spirit of frustration may deepen. When these definitions differ, the report communicates little of value to the parents. Communicating valuable information about the success of their children to parents is one of the chief functions of a report card.

Two of the defining characteristics of Christian education are a high level of parental communication and general agreement about educational issues, including the definition of success. Therefore any attempt to change the report card in a Christian school needs to be handled very carefully.

A few years ago the staff at Wallaceburg Christian School felt that we could design a much better report card. We were using a traditional markbased, subject-oriented report card. After study, the staff concluded there were some reasons why a new report card was necessary. The old form had no way to report to parents many of the characteristics we as a community had agreed were essential to Christian education. The report card only allowed staff to report the grades produced by formal assessment methods: a C in literature, a 67% in mathematics. How much meaning these grades conveyed to our parents was apparent, when at the staff level we had different ideas about what a C meant. We could only imagine how different the parents' ideas about an A might be.

Many of the insights that we developed were not conveyed by the markgrade style. We considered the conclusions based on informal assessment and observation to be as valuable as formal grades. We also wanted some way to record for students and parents the learning behaviors we saw our students demonstrating. There are significant educational achievements that are not reflected in a 72% or B- grade.

We agreed as staff that assessment and evaluation should focus on the student's *work* and not the student. We wanted to assert our belief that students are unique children of God whose worth is based fundamentally on their membership in God's family. It was our practice as a staff to interact with our students as

worthy bearers of God's image. Their status has much more to do with who they are than what they do—status based on relationship to Christ rather than academic achievement.

This view of the foundation of student worth is very liberating for assessment and evaluation practices. It frees educators to discuss a student's achievement, progress, and effort without commenting on the student's value or worth. This distinction also keeps before us the significant, qualitative difference between producer and product. Outcome-based evaluation places entirely too much importance upon the products and process, at the expense of the producer, to be compatible with biblically-principled education.

The staff spent a full professional activity day producing the report card illustrated below. The response to this report card by the education committee, board, and parents has been positive. Completing this report card requires much work on the part of teacher, but we believe it is an effective means of communicating important information to our students and their parents.

We determined that three aspects are critical: Effort, Progress, and Achievement. Thus, we built into each report card an EPA structure. We put effort first because an honest, consistent effort is what we ask/expect of every student. Effort is the first step to success. Effort is judged on a four-point scale. The "Inconsistent" grade is important. Because it is at the bottom of the list, we have had to explain several times that "Inconsistent" is not the lowest "Effort" grade but that it highlights a situation of considerable variation in a student's effort.

Progress is reported on a five-point

scale. With successive terms the change of "Progress" grades indicates the skill growth of the student. At the primary level this grade is usually supported by skill check lists. In the senior grades we use cumulative portfolios of student work and tests as the primary support for these conclusions.

We base achievement grades on a significant component of formal assessment results. In the primary division achievement is graded on a three-level scale. These levels are based on the many standard lists of sequential skill development available to educators. The recently published Ontario Association of Christian Schools list of grade-specific language arts skills is such a resource.

In the Junior (4-6) and Intermediate (7-8) grades a mark scale converts numerical averages into grades. The lowest satisfactory grade, C-, is 60%. All promotions in these grades are based on much more than the attainment of a certain overall average. All circumstances of retention are considered individually.

The most innovative section of the report card is the Conduct page. We have received more positive comments on this section than on any other. The staff developed this page by listing the essential characteristics we would desire students to display while in school. We then grouped them into the three major categories: Respect, Attitude, and Behavior/Work Habits. On this page the staff conveys to the parents their conclusions based on informal assessment practices and observation. These characteristics are consistent with the qualities of character and standards of behavior our community desires the school to foster. Only effort and progress grades are given for conduct. Parents

find this section fruitful ground for discussions both with students at home and with teachers.

The comment section is used to give specific information that highlights and supports the grades given in any other section. The principal looks to see if there is consistency among the EPA grading, the Conduct page, and the anecdotal comments. Inconsistencies are quickly noticed by parents and can be difficult to explain.

At least once a year, teachers are encouraged to send a general report home to parents explaining their approach to grading and marking report cards. This supplementary general report may include the staff member's average or standard mark for the grade, a catalogue of assessment practices, or any significant characteristics of the class that will help parents understand the report card. In addition, weekly class reports go home to parents, outlining class events and curriculum progress. This report is also supplemented, as required, by a report from our Special Education/Resource teacher reporting on the results of individual students' programs.



Portfolio Assessment

Karen De Young

Karen De Young teaches language arts in grades 6-8 at Moline Christian School in Moline, Michigan.

Giving an accurate assessment of a student's progress has become more frustrating to me as time passes. Take, for example, the young man who answers questions accurately in class discussion, who leads his group well in searching for materials needed, who can look the teacher in the eye and tell everything the paper and pencil test would cover. Then, when he is faced with the written test, he freezes and is unable to respond coherently to almost half of the questions. Or look at the young woman who knows the material, who is bright and alert in class, who volunteers eagerly during class, but is unable to finish the written test in the time allotted because of the speed at which she works.

What does a teacher do in assessing these students? In the "old days" students such as these would probably receive an "F" on their tests and perhaps an admonition to "try harder" next time. Maybe that is still the way that "failure" is handled in today's classrooms.

Alternatives do exist. Among other solutions to these problems, oral tests could be used for these students. But oral testing creates another problem: How does the teacher "fairly" weigh the grade in comparison to those of the students who take a written test?

These questions stem from the philosophy that students must absorb a teacher-prescribed body of knowledge and the teacher must make sure all that knowledge gets "in." Our students need to realize, however, that ultimately they are responsible for what they learn. The teacher cannot pour the necessary knowledge into them. At the same time, our students must develop the skills necessary to assess their own work as productive or non-productive in society. God gave us minds and abilities so we can improve the quality of life around us. If we are to fulfill God's plan

for us, we must be able to assess ourselves and our own performance.

One way we can teach self-evaluation to our students is by use of portfolios, along with student-parent-teacher conferences several times throughout the school year. The teacher and student begin by saving samples of the student's written work weekly (a fair cross section). Placing these samples in the portfolio set aside for that purpose, the teacher and student evaluate the progress in comparison to goals set by the student and teacher at the beginning of the year. Laying these samples side by side should produce a fair idea of the student's progress. Then in a conference with the parents, the teacher and the student explain the goals and the level of reaching these goals. This method should give the parent a better picture of the student's progress than a letter grade can show. This method can work well for students at all levels, K-12 and beyond, with each school deciding whether to implement portfolio assessment from the bottom up or throughout the school all at once (Seminar. Alveno College 1994).

The values of such an assessment program are two. The teacher and the student develop clear-cut, concrete objectives for each level, which the student can then strive to meet. Second, the child's work is assessed individually rather than in comparison with others in the class.

This is a very rough plan of the direction many educators would like to see student assessment take. But many schools are a long way from even starting the process. Teachers need to be taught how to develop, to save, and to use portfolios. Teachers then need to teach students how to use these same procedures as well as how to set goals and evaluate progress. Most of all, administrators and teachers need to educate parents as to the benefits of this type of reporting system (Portfolio / Assessment Committee 1994).

In an assessment program such as this, we need not throw out the "old" ways of

doing things. Paper and pencil tests are still needed, but they need to be supplemented with other types of assessment. Through informal evaluation such as class discussion, notebook entries, conversations with students, and checklists for specific skills, teachers have a finger on the student's progress. More formal assessment can take place through student answers to questions, homework, portfolios, evaluation activities, and projects. (Powell 1993).

This type of assessment system also allows the teacher to report interactively for the kind of student who goofs off constantly in class and is a distraction to others, even though he or she is able to perform at an "A" level in testing situations. By showing work that is incomplete or inaccurate, parents, student, and teacher can discuss what happened and why. The conference is freed from the stigma of teacher telling on a student, since the student must explain his or her own portfolio.

The disadvantages of this system may be enough to turn away the faint of heart. Where can portfolios and other assessment tools be stored for a classroom full of students? Where does a teacher find the time to compile portfolios and assessment for all the students in the class? How do teachers help students assess themselves honestly? How do teachers develop parental support for this kind of assessment?

These questions are not as overwhelming as they first appear, and the value far outweighs the problems. Using anecdote notebooks, charts (Figure 1), and rubrics (Figures 2 & 3), the teacher can organize time as well as information to make this kind of record-keeping feasible. Storage racks, drawers, and tagboard folders work for storage. Use folders made from butcher paper large enough to hold 12" x 18" paper as a start. Place sheets of colored construction paper between subjects and date every item in the portfolio. Develop a checklist of items the student will include in the portfolio, at the same time allowing the student to include

Points from usual grade sheet		
Correctly written topic sentences		
Correctly written inverted order		Figure 1
Correctly written Participle beginning		
Correctly written infinitive beginning		
Correctly written gerund beginning		
Correctly written preposition beginning	-	
Cottactly keyed on title page		
Each of the above should have been highliq not, you did not receive credit for them.	nted. If they we	re.

816 Grade Porter Eveloation picant Paragraph of work in post lines frage tnvite-Visuel Respons **17 ****** Figure 2 17 1141 ettter-Estanded Hetapher ted free

items important to him or her. (The student should be able to give solid reasons why he or she has chosen an item for the portfolio, not "just because I like it.") Make sure the portfolios are accessible to the students. As to "finding time" to teach students to assess themselves and develop portfolios, we simply have to make time. This is a skill our students will need wherever they are called to serve. If they leave school without that skill, we have failed them. Since it is not possible to teach our students all the knowledge there is to know, we must teach them how to find or develop what they need to know. Developing the skill of self-evaluation is an important part of a student's education.

Students and teacher develop the list of items to include in the portfolio, they can make a rubric or chart at the same time. In using the chart or rubric to select pieces for the portfolio, the student learns to evaluate him or herself and the work. At first students will rely heavily on the rubric, but gradually they will abandon it when they feel more confident about self-assessment.

As for the perennial question about grades, the rubric easily adapts to a point system. Look at the example in Figure 3. The top row of criteria can be assigned a value of 4, the second row a value of 3, the third row a value of 2, the fourth row 1, and the last row 0. Then, because there are six columns, the teacher or student can add the six figures to get a number between 24 and 0. The teacher assigns a letter grade to each value to develop the necessary grade for the report card.

Of course, parents need to be keep fully informed of what is happening and why. You can begin the school year

inviting the parents to an explanatory meeting. Answer all questions frankly, admitting that this is new and you have to work the "bugs" out yet. At the same time show the parents that their concerns about the basic skills are legitimate and that the

school continues to strive to meet those needs. Ask them to be open-minded and to be sure to contact the teacher or administrator if they have any ques-

If we are honest with ourselves, we have to admit that the present system of letter grading is not the best we can do for our students. Portfolios are one alternative to better assessment. We must begin a search for improvement so that parents as well as students will have a better grasp of student progress in learning.

Legibility	Sentence Structure	Vords	Logical	Hechanics	Activity	
hy handwriting is easy to read with let- ters well made.	I write clear sentences with so run on's or sentence freg- ments.	descriptive words to help renders "see" what I seen.	My writing follows a logical se- quence of events and order.	l alwaysuse correct punctuation, capitals, and spelling.	lalways use a prewriting activity.	
Host of my writ- ing is easy to tread with most lietters well made.	Host of my sen- tences are clear and us- ually no run- on's or sen- tence fragments	I write many good deacrip- tive passages and words.	hy writing usually shows logical ne- quence of events and order.	correct punctuation, cepitals, and spelling.	I usually use s prevriting activity.	Figure
Some of my writ- ing is easy to read, but I need to work on my penmanahip.	tences are	good descrip- tive passages but I need to use more de-	is logical	I mometimes use correct punctuation, capitals, and spelling.	I sometimes upon a prevriting activity.	
Little of my writing is easy to read. I need to work on let- ter formation.	lev of my sen- tences are clear. I have many sentence fragments and run-ons.	descriptive passages. I need to use more describ-	My writing in rarely logical and it is hard enderstand my story order.		I rarely use a prowriting activity.	
my writing can't be read.	I have no clear sentences.	I don't der- cribe.	I have no log- ical order.	Correct mechanics.	I don't do It.	

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HOW DO WE DEFINE SUCCESS?

Ron Juffer

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At a recent retirement dinner, the long-time building principal for the honoree shared some very impressive statistics about the "successes" of the former students of this teacher. Over fifty percent of the students had graduated from college, a number had entered various medical fields, some had gone into the law profession, many had become teachers, a few had gone into the political arena, including one who had become a state senator, and others had become professional entertainers, including a major league baseball player. It was indeed an impressive list of successful people who had been positively influenced by the commitment of this classroom teacher.

After sharing with others the enjoyment of the evening and returning home, I couldn't help but reflect on how our society typically defines success. Many of us view success through professions and vocations that lead to lucrative salaries, status, and power. I wondered how this might relate to a biblical perspective, especially on how the teachings of Christ relate to the definition of success. Although the word success does not specifically appear in scripture, there certainly are a number of indirect references to biblical values relating to success, especially in the writings of the prophets and the parables of Jesus.

A common definition of success in our society is "that we need to become all that we can be." As educators, we need to search for ways to get students to maximize their God-given gifts. This is certainly the interpretation that many people have of the parable of the talents (Matt. 25:14-30), when Jesus commended two of the persons for their faithfulness in using their abilities but condemned the third person for sloth

and indifference. However, the question remains, what are the talents of students that should be recognized to be successful? Certainly, the goals of public schools and educators should focus on the academic and social development of students, but from a Christian perspective it seems as if we should embrace a broader perspective of success.

Probably a less supported definition of success in our capitalistic society is derived from the writings of the prophets. Jeremiah (chapter 9:23-24) and Micah (chapter 6:8) suggest that the values that lead to success should concentrate on compassion, humility, and justice. A complement of these views of success are the beatitudes (Matt. 5:1-16), where Jesus talks about the blessed life as one that encourages sensitivity to the poor and oppressed.

How can educators shape within students these biblical qualities for success? First, students need to see in educators the importance of being sensitive to others. As educators, we often publicly recognize the students who perform well in extracurricular activities (sports, music, theater), primarily because these activities are so visible in our culture. Maybe we can also begin to inquire about our students who are involved in the "little things" (visiting elderly people in nursing home, visiting "shutins," working in a local soup kitchen, spending time with children in care facilities) and single them out in class as being very special. In addition, we can look for ways to integrate biographies of people like Mother Teresa; people who bring God's love to the "least of these" should be honored as much as a Lee Iococca or Michael Jordan.

Second, we can try to encourage humility within our students as an important component of being successful. Students need to know that they can feel good about themselves and still be humble. Possibly one of the best ways

for educators to promote this characteristic is through our actions, to avoid being dogmatic and judgmental, to be good listeners and interested in the lives of our students. Students often don't care how much we know until they know we care about them as individuals

Third, we can attempt to find ways to instill justice within our students as a characteristic of success. Honesty and fairness should be viewed as significant values. However, as educators, we also need to emphasize the importance of respect for others. Modeling is so critical as students notice whether educators abide by the same rules that are expected of them (being in class on time, returning student papers in a reasonable time-frame). Justice can also be addressed within our curriculum through historical and literary assignments on Christian principles addressing racism or in readings from C. S. Lewis's Chronicles of Narnia or William Bennett's Book of Virtues.

As educators, we need to show that our careers and lives have a purpose, that we will make a difference in shaping lives. Fortunately, there are many students who have been positively influenced by educators and have not only become successful within the "secular" definition but who are also compassionate, humble, just, and God-loving individuals. The important point is not necessarily our attempt to dismantle this common secular view of success as much as it is to maximize the significance of the biblical values in how we view success.

DISCOVERIES

Mary K. Herbert

in kindergarten I drew a picture

a drawing of baby Jesus sleeping snug in his safe manger

bright with cheery Christmas colors

with great care I drew the Star shining yellow and gold

with radiant beams extending into all four corners of my paper

"Go show it to the principal" said my teacher

I ran down the hall handed him my work of art

with theatrical diffidence as I did not want to appear too eager

pawning off my efforts to perhaps an unappreciative patron

but he shone he beamed he gave me a big smile

bent down to speak with me "This is an excellent Christmas picture"

then he said "May I keep it?"

I spread my arms in a magnanimous gesture to show I had no proprietary claim

"Sure, you can keep it"
I had found a customer for my work

someone who held the visualization of my idea in his friendly hands

a safe harbor where I knew I could revel

in make-believe artistry yet savoring the possibility

of a calling a maker of pictures for God

Christmas Tree Hunting and the Paradox of Growing Up

Luke Schelhaas

Luke Schelhaas is a senior education major specializing in language arts at Dordt College in Sioux Center, Iowa.

Christmas is coming . . .

The voices call back to me, fly back like leaves on the wind . . . no, like sleds down a hill . . . no, like a speeding boatload of trees. Yeah, that'll do.

They are good voices; they are the voices of soloists, of a choir director and her reluctant husband, of the children of soloists and the children of a choir director and her husband: children's voices, therefore, blending with adult voices, singing Christmas songs joyfully on a Michigan early-winter morning. Among the voices, I can distinguish a younger version of my own. There it is again: a boy's soprano.

Christmas is coming, the goose is getting fat.

Pleased to put a penny in the old man's hat.

That was the song we sang. That one, and another about Guffy the Goofy Gobbler, and more I can't quite remember. I can pick out my father's voice, too, of course, because he sings all the time and I know just what it sounds like. And I can hear my mother and my two sisters, Jen and Rebecca, and Mrs. Koster (the director) and Mr. Koster (the husband) and their children, Mickey (my friend) and Kara (Jen's friend). But, of course, we're all friends—on this day especially. And we sing.

If you haven't got a penny, a ha' penny will do.

If you haven't got a ha' penny, God bless you.

A picture forms around the song: Nine bundled bodies crammed into one blue station wagon, towing an empty twelvefoot fiberglass boat sans six-horse-power Chrysler motor, speeding down back roads of packed snow. The windows are so frosty you can't see in, but if you're inside already, like me, then you can see everything just fine: boots, snowmobile suits, wet gloves and mittens and scarves and hats, warm jackets losing down, foggy glasses, Christmas cookies, hot chocolate, and little gifts wrapped in red paper and genuine invisible tape. All of it screaming Christmas! And all of us singing Christmas. Nine colorful, bundled bodies (five Schelhaases, four Kosters) singing like mad, sucking candy canes to sharp points, making pictures in the frost on the windows, singing Christmas once again into existence . . .

God bless you, gentlemen, God bless you. God bless you, gentlemen, God bless you.

... singing and believing: in Christmas, in God, in blessings, in half pennies and hats and who cares what else? Excitement, like a current in the cold car, giving me goose bumps, making me dream of fudge and presents and hot apple cider and . . . yes! Christmas trees! For today is the day, and here we are! Christmas tree hunting, ha ha!

We'll put the trees in the boat and bring them home for decorations and early presents and candle-light games! I can't wait.

Wee! and away we go, down the snowy roads.

It used to be a whole day affair, anticipated for weeks beforehand; it was a day second only in wonder to Christmas itself. Always it was the kind of day for which snow and winter and wind were made. Singing the songs, driving from tree farm to tree farm, looking for that perfect tree . . . these memories are funny things. I don't actually recall a specific trip, a particular year; I see just bits and pieces that somehow form a whole. I get, more than anything, a flavor of the past. When I close my eyes, this is what I see: Two dads with tree saws, two moms with smiles . . . I look over my shoulder and I see them. Us kids (as we used to say) run on ahead, clad in our colorfully mismatched winter garb, bounding up and down rows of spruce and fir, tripping over our own moon boots, spreading happiness like birdseed. Here we come, Mickey and I in one direction, Jen and Kara and Rebecca (trying to keep up) in another.

With five kids and four parents, you can count on at least six perfect Christmas trees. And that's the way it was. While I stood by a good tree, Mickey would hunt down a parent or two, encouraging them to cut down our choice. Meanwhile, of course, Jen and Kara and Rebecca had found two good trees and a parent and were trying to

work the same deal. Parents running back and forth, kids standing by trees or running back and forth after them, dads on their sides cutting down two of the six or seven perfect trees: these are the pictures I have.

Once the trees were cut, we'd cram them into the boat, tie them down with bungee cords and rubber straps and twine and shoe laces and anything else we might have found in our basements that morning. Then we'd pile into the station wagon and head home. First to the Kosters' and then to our house we would go, eating and laughing and setting up trees and decorating them and the houses with huge, colorful lights and tinsel. In cold cardboard boxes still smelling of attics, we would find the familiar ornaments. We would open the gifts we got for each other, play charades, tell stories and sing more songs ("We Three Kings of Orient Are"), and finally fall asleep (us five kids) in our parents' arms. When I close my eyes, I see all smiles; I smell pine sap and cookies and woolly sweaters; I taste chocolate and cider; I hear laughter and the crackle of a fire, feel the warmth of it; I feel love.

It is a good feeling. The memory is very good; it warms me all the way down like hot chocolate. I love to sit back and indulge in remembering it all. But in so doing, I know, I have forced myself to admit that the experience now, the continued tradition, has lost much of its original charm; it doesn't excite me as it used to. This loss, this change of heart, is natural, though; it is to be expected. But it is also sad: the past is gone. Growing up, I think, is a paradox. For how is it age makes youth seem at once boring and beautiful? When I think back to the way it was the snowmobile suits, the packed station wagon, the boat—all I really want to do is go back. I get goose-bumps wanting to have it all over again. When I think of the way I used to climb trees as a kid, that seems like the greatest thing in the world. But pull me out of the dream for a minute, set me down in front of a tree and, at twenty-two, I'm not so sure I'd climb. What's so wonderful about climbing trees? To go back to the way it was would be great, but to play those games and sing those same songs now is to repeat the actions of a child as an adult, and that's not so appealing. It's not what I did as a kid that I miss so much; for the most part, I can still do those things. It's who I was

and how I thought and what my dreams were: I was a kid and I'm not anymore.

This year, on the day after Thanks-giving, I gave my family two hours between homework, high school friends, and a part-time job. We drove fifteen miles to the nearest tree farm, picked out a decent tree, and brought it home. What was once a whole day affair, was over and done with this year in no time flat. I considered myself efficient. Now, I'm not so sure.

I feel sorry for my younger sister, whose clearest memories of the tradition begin when Jen and I have already started to grow up. And for the past six years—for nearly half of her childhood—we have lived hundreds of miles from the Kosters. The tradition has continued, but it hasn't been the same.

People change, you know; times change. So, what's the big deal?

It occurs to me that, deeper down, the paradox of growing up is this: that happy memories sometimes make us sad. It's called nostalgia, and I am feeling it, really, for the first time. One doesn't feel it, I suppose, until he's lived sufficient years. For me, I guess, that's now. At twenty-two, I begin to realize that this is the way things work, that

there is an ordered pattern to our lives, a good pattern, a promise of seasons, given, graceful, ordained. One day passes; another comes and goes, and we grow older. Though I am saddened sometimes by this passing of days, I am not truly sad. I understand.

And so, for now, I will just close my eyes and listen to the voices that call back to me like laughter down a dark blue sky, like snowflakes curling on a chilly breeze . . . like a man growing young again.

Yeah, that'll do.



Of Christmas and the Children

Douglas Loney

Douglas Loney is professor in the English Department at Redeemer College in Ancaster, Ontario.

For most of us, within the right and true picture of Christmas, that collage of holiday images held and kept in the album of the mind, there must be children. And it's not necessary to be a teacher or even to have kids (or grandkids) of one's own for this to be so, for the association of children and Christmas is very deeply rooted. There are some good reasons for this: in that manger at the very center of the season it is, after all, a Child, "whom shepherds guard and angels sing."

But surely there are also some associations merely of sentiment and tradition which force children within the frame of the seasonal picture against probability, even against reason. A tradition stretches from Charles Dickens' Tiny Tim in A Christmas Carol to Dylan Thomas's "Child's Christmas in Wales" and on to the present, from which we have inherited a vast store of potent images, of fresh-faced and joyful children all of whom understand instinctively, purely and deeply, what this happiest of days is all about, while their poor, benighted elders insist on missing the point:

Be near me, Lord Jesus, I ask Thee to stay Close by me forever, and love me, I pray: Bless all the dear children in Thy tender care, And fit us for heaven, to live with Thee there.

It's not always like that, of course. Few parents, and fewer teachers or school administrators, need to be reminded that children are *not* sinless innocents, not even at Christmas time. Walk by Santa's highly profitable Portrait Palace at the mall, or simply tune in to the well-informed playground commentary on those television ads (beginning in September!) for Nintendo and Sega and Teenage-Morphin'-Power-Barbie-Cabbage-Pogs, to see again what Mr. Mattel and his colleagues have always seen clearly, that Christmas each year brings fresh opportunities to nurture in the little ones the modern holiday spirit of competition, selfishness and greed.

Still, there is much about the Christmas season that we need to learn, or re-learn, from the children. When those old flannelgraph figures and pictures cut out of Christmas cards are resurrected from the back of the supply cupboard to decorate the classroom, it's all mint-new to this gaggle of second-graders. In them at least the excitement is still unforced when they burst through the front door of home at the end of their day to be greeted by the mingled aroma of sugar cookies and furniture polish, with the kitchen in uproar and the house scrubbed and decorated in anticipation of the annual visits of friends and relatives—visits all the more valued because they are so rare.

The sense of tradition may be stronger and healthier in a child precisely because it is still being formed: the advent calendar *must* be hung on the same wall by the principal's office, the junior choir *ought* to go out to sing carols at the nursing home, with hot cider and egg-nog to follow in the cafeteria. The manger scene must rise from that mysterious box in the staff room where it has lurked for eleven months out of the year, to take its place of honor by the school's front door and come to life again. It *must* be so because it has *always* been so: "always" at least as far back as an eight-year-old's memory can stretch.

The story itself of Jesus' birth remains fresh and moving in its simplicity and beauty only for those who can, by exercising an imagination not yet cooled and hardened by misuse or neglect, be touched by the wonder of angels—real angels!—singing to shepherds—real shepherds!—on a lonely hillside. It takes a child's sense of the mingled beauty and horror of the earth, to imagine a little Prince sent to be born into a cold world where a wicked and jealous king plots to murder him as He sleeps. But just now He is warmed by a mother's gentleness, and by the very breath of the animals whose stable has become His shelter.

The ancient "Coventry Carol" reminds us that in the traditional church calendar the Feast of the Innocents follows close upon the Nativity itself:

Lullay, thou little tiny Child, Bye-bye lullee, lullay; Herod the King, in his raging, Charged he hath this day His men of might, in his own sight, All young children to slay.

Children have good reason to feel close to this Child. It may be this shared vulnerability, this sense of being without power or defense in a hostile world, which brings to them a special understanding of what that picture truly means: a tiny bundle of life swaddled against the cold; the Creator of heaven and earth, the living Word unable to speak a word, cared for by a peasant girl and her carpenter husband who provide what little they can for him who provides for all. Paul writes that, although Jesus was in very nature the Almighty God, he did not consider his high estate something to which he must cling; instead, he humbled himself and took the form of a servant—the form of a child, the form of a baby in a manger.

But is the picture becoming too sentimental once more? Of course the manger scene is touching, but a small voice reminds me that, however often the true story of the season is celebrated in morning devotions, "stained glass" art projects and the annual Christmas concert, most of these kids will be dreaming, come Christmas Eve, not so much about the wonders of Bethlehem as about the marvelous toys that might be under that tree tomorrow morning. The pleasure of contributing to the local food bank is apt to be eclipsed by the more immediate delights of receiving cards and gifts from classmates, and later from the family.

Yet even in this there is something for the rest of us to learn. Receiving a gift ought to be exciting—unless our grown up affluence and sophistication have already jaded and sated us. After all, Jesus does promise to "give good gifts" to his children irrespective of their ages: to provide not only our food and drink and clothing, but also love and peace and hope in this life, an eternity of joy in the next. He promises at last to give us himself: that he will never be separated from us again. Rich gifts indeed!

We must have the kids to remind us that we are, all of us, beggars before the great King. We must receive his gifts. When Jesus saw that his disciples rebuked those who brought their children to him, he was indignant, and said, "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. I tell you the truth, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it." And he took the children in his arms, put his hands on them, and blessed them. (Mark 10:13-16)

The giving and getting of presents at Christmas can distract us as well as our students and our own children from what is truly important—but only if we allow it to do so. Each gift we receive is a reminder that "every good and perfect gift is from above, from the Father of lights": these Christmas presents, and those who give them, are in fact his gifts to us, just as the Christ-child is his. And each present we give is given only out of what we have already received from the Father.

To convey surprised delight upon opening the seventh identical little box of scented bath soap will require some degree of grace—as well as acting skill—from the sensitive homeroom teacher. But no such skill is proof against the humble packet of homemade wrapping paper, whose blotchy evergreen trees and snowmen fall away to reveal just that kind of chocolate bar some shy third-grader has discovered to be your favourite. And with it, traded for in September and hoarded since then

at the bottom of his pencil case, a smudged and round-shouldered baseball card of the first-baseman whose style you once admired, aloud, in class. Such tokens of simple affection and care will steal past the emotional defenses even of the veterans among us. And so they

When a child's first halting steps in poetry are celebrated with the gift of his or her very own verses (inevitably headed "Christmas Is . . . ") to the homeroom teacher; when the flowerpot, its Christmas decoupage painstakingly applied over many careful weeks of art lessons, is returned with shy pride to grace the desk at the front of the room, when those rascals in the back row present their own cassette of Christmas carols to their harried music teacher in token of what they truly feel, but could not otherwise express—when these are part of Christmas, we are near the heart of the season. For the best gifts are those which come again in love and gratitude to those who gave them first.

May the Lord give you and yours a very merry and blessed Christmas: a Christmas filled with himself.

How Do We Measure Success?

Joyce Strong

A former teacher of seventh and eighth graders, Joyce Strong is now an instructor at the Bible Teachers Institute in Virginia Beach, Virginia.

Beth stared in amazement into Margie's classroom. "Here it is only the third week of school, and she already has that class completely under control! Those same kids nearly gave me a nervous breakdown last year!" She sighed and shook her head.

"I had a rule for every situation," she continued, "but the whole year was nothing short of a nightmare. Why couldn't they have just obeyed me and not questioned everything I said? What was wrong?

If compliance is the measuring rod of success in our classrooms, we will tend to teach with rules and punishment. The children will get the message of conditional love and learn at best to be performers or people pleasers, or will resist with every ounce of rebellion they can muster. Compliance is convenient, but is it the best measure of a child's value or our success?

Because we teachers must often carry heavy teaching loads with few, if any, breaks during the day, we tend to appreciate most the child who never resists and never questions. But is it true that if the student acquiesces without question, he or she is a "good" child?

Not necessarily so. There are many self-centered, egotistical children who are praised and rewarded simply because they never cross the system. They know how to give all the right answers and be quiet at the right times, but they care nothing for anyone else. There is no fruit of the Spirit in their lives, and that's what matters.

Jesus never pressed for conformity and legal goodness, but looked into men's and women's hearts. He cared what happened to them individually, not comparing them to others or pointing out their inconvenient differences. As followers of Christ, our greatest need is to touch the students' hearts with God's love and his interest in their lives. We must look for heart changes, not legal compliance. To this, our students will respond with hope and growth.

When we know our subject material, are confident of who we are in God, and love our students without the condition of perfect performance, we will find no need for threats and little need for discipline slips. In most situations students will want to cooperate with us.

Conversely, when rules are paramount or we are unqualified to teach, we will routinely punish rather than listen, lecture rather than lovingly bring the student to understand the issue. We will alienate him or her from the rest of the class

rather than restore the student with dignity. And the behavior problems will not go away. In fact, a judgment against authority may take root in the heart that will put the child at odds with leaders throughout his or her life.

If we are consistently experiencing difficulty in the classroom, perhaps we are simply not as educationally prepared as we should be, or are trying to teach outside our area of expertise. If so, we are probably having trouble maintaining discipline and motivating the students to learn. We may be running on frayed nerve endings, never more than an inch ahead of our students academically. Like Beth, we likely have more rules than we know what to do with but find that they are no help in maintaining order or producing an atmosphere conducive to learning. We are embarrassed and discouraged.

Teaching doesn't need to be such a struggle. In this case, we should pray to God for a way to get better prepared educationally. If we are not certified in our assigned teaching area—which sometimes Christian school teachers are not—we should make it a priority to become so, if we intend to stay in that field. In the

course of our studies in that subject, we will learn a great deal about how to more effectively present the material in the classroom. Our confidence—and our students' perception—will definitely improve.

Good teachers know their stuff. This "stuff" comes from having appropriate academic preparation, honed by experience. It will be a blessing to everyone.

We don't need to feel threatened by outspoken children. When we are confident of our material we will not be afraid to let them wrestle with ideas, and we will not need a million rules to get them to listen to us.

If the gift of teaching is within us, we will enter the classroom with greater confidence and freedom in our teaching. Rules won't be paramount in keeping order; our preparedness, expertise, and enthusiasm for service will draw the children to learn with us. The difficult child may become our greatest success, and teaching may become the rewarding experience we had dreamed it could be.

Speaking of Rules

Here are some questions we should ask of any rule we may consider making:

- 1. Does this rule make it impossible for a child to question something I am teaching or to express his or her own views?
- 2. Does the rule make conformity in the classroom more important than thinking for oneself?
- 3. Does this rule allow for exceptions?
- 4. Do I need a lot of rules because I am afraid I will lose control without them?
- 5. Do rules exist to make an impression of superiority of our school's children over those who do not go to our school? In other words, do they engender self-righteousness?
- 6. Could the principle behind the rule be better taught by my example instead?
- 7. Is the rule necessary? Is it a Christlike rule?
- 8. Can I apply this rule lovingly and with sensitivity to everyone equally?
- 9. Is this rule motivated by my own selfishness or laziness?
- 10. Will this rule provoke anger?

Students can blossom beautifully under our influence. If they do, it will be because we are masters of our trade and because we long for heart changes, not compliance to a list of rules; we teach them to think, not parrot; and we enjoy their diversity.

This is the measure of success.

Trading Cards Portray Greek Culture

Trent DeJong

Trent DeJong is a grade seven teacher at the Heritage Campus of Abbotsford Christian School in Abbotsford, British Columbia.

Imagine you work for a company that makes sports trading cards. Your company is delighted with all the money that is rolling in from its hockey and baseball lines, but they hope to tap a new market in the historical field. You have been assigned the task of creating mock-ups for a series of trading cards called "Famous Persons of Ancient Greece." Each card should include the person's name, date, occupation, a fairly detailed summary of major accomplishments, other interesting facts about his or her life, and anything else you wish to include. Don't forget an illustration, not necessarily a face, which will catch the imagination of the historical trading card fan.

The above activity in a unit on ancient Greece was limited to cards for Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle. I borrowed the idea from Dave Loewen, my colleague at the Clayburn Hills Campus of Abbotsford Christian School, and expanded it to include a list of forty famous Greeks.

The purpose of the assignment was to create an awareness of the significant contribution Greeks made to western thought and civilization in areas such as philosophy, politics, science, medicine, and the arts. Greek thought is the source of much of western thought, often in contradiction to Christian thought.

We often assume we are thinking Christianly, when actually we are highly influenced by Greek thought. For example, ideals of democracy and individual rights are based in Greek thought. Dualist tendencies of separating such concepts as body and soul or sacred and secular also come from the philosophies of ancient Greece.

As students searched encyclopedia articles for information, they became aware of how many modern areas of endeavor began with the ancient Greeks. For example, they found the beginnings of history, cartography, medicine, and physical science.

The trading card activity gave students the opportunity to summarize information. A limited display of sports trading cards served as a model for the design of the card and for information to include. Designs for the front and back of the card were drawn side by side on 8 1/2"x11" paper.

Evaluation was based on the number of cards completed, from a C- for two cards to an A for a series of ten cards. An essay test could also be given, instructing students to use examples to prove the statement: "The Greeks made a significant contribution to western thought and civilization."





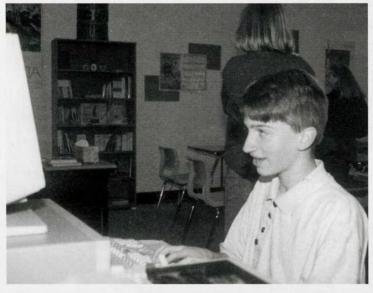




Stefan Ulstein

MAKE A CALL. GET THE FACTS.

Joel Hibbard accesses the Bellevue Public Library via computer modem. Photo by Jay Westerdal



Someone wrote an angry letter to a metropolitan newspaper complaining about the money that was being wasted on telephones in the classrooms. One wonders whether this epistolary firebrand has ever noticed that most business offices have telephones. The telephone, and its recent siblings, the fax and e-mail, are essentials of a basic education.

I have a telephone in my classroom, and a fax modem on one of my computers. I use them all the time to teach English, mass communications, and life skills. I use them to connect my students to the outside world during regular business hours.

Sheila was writing a joint English-U.S. History research paper on the civil rights movement and she settled on the topic of Lester Maddox, the born-again governor of Georgia who rose to prominence when he chased a black man out of his chicken restaurant by threatening him with an ax handle. The ax handle later became a favorite campaign souvenir at Maddox rallies.

Sheila was having trouble getting information, so I suggested she call Mr. Maddox. I gave her the area code for Atlanta, and she dialed long-distance information. Sure enough, he was in the book. She called his home and got Mrs. Maddox, who said that Lester was out campaigning but that he'd be back for supper and why didn't she call

back after seven. She did, and spoke to him for thirty minutes. Mr. Maddox remembered the past in a light more favorable to himself than would have been provided by a less selective memory. It was a pivotal event in Sheila's education.

Krissi was researching the Tuskeegee Airmen. This was before the HBO movie and before I'd ever heard of them. She located one of the surviving members of the squadron and interviewed him at length. The Tuskeegee Airmen were the first allblack squadron. As escorts for bombing missions over Germany, they never lost a plane. They were also the only fighter pilots to shoot down a Messerschmidt jet in air-to-air combat. White pilots had shot up a couple of Willie Messerschmidt's hot new planes only when the jets had run low on fuel and tried to land. Krissi got a first-hand report that made history come alive to her. She sent a copy of her research paper to the airman she interviewed, and he put it in the official Tuskeegee Airmen archives.

Much of teaching has to be spontaneous.

If a student has a question, it can often be answered with a telephone call—while the student's interest is hot. Amy, one of my most motivated and gifted students, was thinking about becoming a lawyer, but she didn't know any lawyers and wasn't sure what that would involve. I gave her the number of the University of Washington Law School. A secretary there hooked her up with a counselor who talked to her about undergraduate majors. She even sent Amy a law school application so that she could plan ahead.

Jason had procrastinated on college applications and had been told by someone that the schools he wanted to attend were all full. We called. Three of the four had plenty of room. We asked them to fax us an application.

The telephone can also be used to bring rumors down from the ozone layer of misinformation and into the realm of rational discourse. This is an area where many Christians could use some help. When the indefatigable Crest toothpaste story hit our school (the company's president had allegedly sold his soul to Satan, and in return promised to stamp the mark of the beast on all Proctor and Gamble products), a couple of otherwise sane adults I know threw their Prell Shampoo and Crest into the garbage. Get thou behind me, Satan!

An eleventh grader named Todd called the 800 number on the back of a tube of Crest and got the straight story. Later they even mailed him a big information packet. (Proctor and Gamble had a CEO, not a president.) He had not sold his soul to the devil, nor had he been on Donahue, as several people's sister/brother/uncle/dad/friend claimed. The thirteen stars on the company logo dated to 1815 when the Star Soap company, in a fit of patriotism, decided to cele-

brate the original thirteen colonies.

The immediacy of the response helped to shatter the rumor and led to a discussion of why we believe fantastic stories so uncritically. We later did the same thing with a story about atheist leader Madalyn Murray O'Hair trying to force the FCC to ban all Christian programming from the airwaves. (The story was a fake, but the FCC had received 12 million pieces of mail, and thousands of phone calls from people identifying themsleves as outraged Christians.) This led to a discussion of other hocus pocus stories like backmasked records, microchips with the number 666 implanted into soldiers' foreheads at Fort Lewis, and so on.

Once, during a book challenge (the book was alleged to be a part of a New Age conspiracy to institue one-world government), I heard the same story three times: treasury agents, charged with detecting counterfeit money, never study counterfeit money. They only study genuine U.S. currency. As a result, they know the real thing so well that they can't be fooled by a fake. The moral: only read Christian books.

This example seemed unlikely to me, so as an object lesson, I called the Treasury Department in Seattle and was told that the Secret Service handled counterfeit money.

I spoke with a Secret Service agent who investigated counterfeit money and asked him how agents were trained. He replied that they studied counterfeit money in great detail and also made their own counterfeit money with confiscated materials and presses.

"You make your own fake money?" I

"We try to trick one another," he said. "There's a lot to it, you know."

Strike two.

"Well, then," I ventured, "someone told me that you only studied real money so that you'd be able to spot a fake easily."

"That's kind of dumb," he laughed. "How would that teach you to spot a clever forgery?"

Strike three.

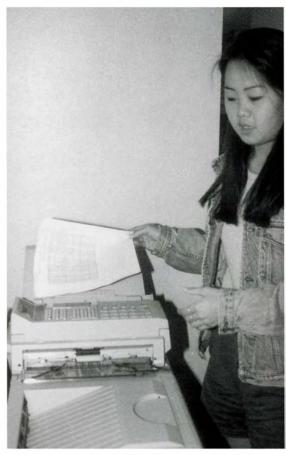
Often, all it takes to dissolve a rumor is a phone call. That's what journalists do all the time. They hear a rumor, get on the phone, and start checking. It surely beats repeating the rumor and looking like a fool, especially if it's a rumor designed to make Christians look like uncritical idiots.

More and more of my former students are getting e-mail accounts as part of their basic tuition package in college. From my classroom we can send them messages asking what they are reading, writing, and studying in college. I use the information to update my classes. My students learn what's

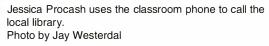
We use the fax machine to request materials. Most foreign embassies will send you materials about their countries. When students are absent, I give them the option of faxing me a request for assignments. Usually the parent faxes my pre-printed sheet from his or her office. I fax the homework back to the parent, who takes it home at the end of the day. Not too many students use this option, but it's there if they

> want it. This saves a lot of silly discussion when students don't worry about missed work until the report card comes home three months later. "Next time," I tell the parent, "fax me and I'll send it to you." Some parents like that accountability. Phones and faxes are not a superfluous waste of money in a modern classroom. Properly used, they open up the world and make school suddenly relevant to real issues. They allow teachers and students to strike while the iron is hot, go to the source, and get answers and information. And they teach students that school is not some kind of

limbo, cut off from the real world of ideas and information.



Amy Joung receives a fax from the University of Washington Law School. Photo by Jay Westerdal







Marlene Dorhout

QUERY

I've had a considerable amount of personal tragedy in my life in the past year. I feel as if these problems should stay out of my job environment. I try not to have them interfere with my teaching, but some days that seems so hard. I don't share much with my colleagues, even though they are aware of my situation. Most of the time they act as if nothing has happened, but I know they see my "down" days and anti-social behavior. I don't want sympathy. I don't want to make excuses or apologies. What should I do?

I commend you for your commitment to your school. During such difficult times, some people might shirk the responsibility or even run from it. Taking time off is usually an option; however, the busy pace of the classroom can actually offer relief, an escape from the unpleasantness.

Your colleagues and students can be a source of support and encouragement if you let them. Your not sharing when they are already aware of the situation is a signal for noninvolvement or self-pity even though you probably don't intend to relay that message. I don't know what your personal tragedy is, but whether marital or financial trouble, loss of loved ones or dealing with illness, all produce similar responses. No clear indication from you for prayers and assistance may leave your co-workers and students feeling awkward, not knowing what to say or how to help. Your aloof-

ness may even imply a false image of strength; you desire to handle this without any interference.

Perhaps you can look at this problem as yet another learning opportunity. Many of the really important lessons of life are not found in the textbooks, and maybe the avoidance of these issues is a disservice to the students and teachers. I encourage you to admit "bad" days or stress from personal problems. Amazingly, kids can be quite thoughtful and cooperative if informed. In fact, sometimes they need to know that there is a very human side to their teacher, that no one is immune to pain or difficulties. You have probably done your share of Christian caring; now let your students and colleagues reciprocate.

Every year I teach, I teach less of the textbook and cover less of the required material. I wonder how many teachers actually do adhere to the curriculum established for their courses. Not only does it seem impossible, but also unimportant. Am I right or just making excuses? Is this common practice? I don't really feel guilty, but I am still too uncomfortable about bringing it up at a faculty meeting for fear I'd be monitored more closely.

After you have taught with the same teachers for several years or had children in their classes, you have a fairly accurate account of what they cover in their courses. Some teachers just do their own thing, stick-

ing to their favorite topics and activities; others follow the curriculum religiously. Hopefully, for most, there is a happy medium that allows for creativity within the curriculum standards. A guide is just that. It helps by offering scope and sequence to the subject area. A first-year teacher in the profession or the school system may rely on the curriculum guide more closely to provide direction for self and students within the broader educational goals.

I cannot tell you if you are right. You might ask yourself what you are substituting in the curriculum that decreases the amount of material covered each year. Is it worth it to you and the students? Do they understand better and want to continue learning? The amount of information doesn't determine the grasping of the subject as much as the excitement of the journey into that area of learning. Too much side-tracking or jumping from topic to topic can lead to confusion for students. They do need to know where they are going and how to get there in order to continue on their own life-time of learning.

Students have taught me that my agenda of important information isn't always necessary. Again this past year I became frustrated when group presentations on selected poets and their poetry didn't include what I considered essential facts and interpretations. However, at the end-of-the-year party, after grades had been reported, an eighth grade girl told me she would never forget "her" poet; it was the first time she really "got into" poetry and loved it. And I had thought she didn't "get it" at all. She will probably read more poetry in her life because of her exploration without my explanation. I had incorrectly concluded that this project took too much time with too few results to warrant repeating.

I hope that you and your faculty are more open to discussing such issues and sharing

opinions; inevitably that communication must happen. Knowledge is exploding and the means of acquiring it is beyond the comprehension of our educational predecessors. Together as Christian educators we need to search and discover the possibilities that lead to a relentless pursuit of learning; our curriculum should reflect our active roles in and for our Father's world.

I am writing this during the summer because I am always too busy during the school year. I know that you answered a question on this topic before, but I still feel as if the rewards of teaching English do not outweigh the work. I do not look forward to returning in the fall. But financially I have no alternative. I will continue to handle my responsibility, but I'd appreciate any other advice you can give. I don't want you to misunderstand either. I love teaching my subject; I just hate giving up my personal time for the paper work involved. Being single, I value my social life too much. Silent acceptance or neglect seem to be the only alternatives. Any new suggestions?

Balance in life is so important; whether single or married, you need social life and recreation, either for relaxation or for the stimulus to work. Hopefully you are spending the summer catching up on these key ingredients.

I have known English teachers who quit and found other rewarding jobs, but most learn to juggle their schedules and find satisfactory solutions. Comparing your teaching load to that of others on staff may escalate your feelings of unfairness; however, many workers have stress-filled, busy jobs twelve months of the year.

I won't repeat the suggestions I gave previously, since you obviously read them and, I hope, tried them in the classroom. I do recommend you spend some of your summer

in preparing a few rotating units so that not all of your classes turn in writing at the same time. Actually, the homework is manageable, and scheduling social events is possible. A small pile of papers isn't so depressing or burdensome. You shouldn't imprison yourself with insurmountable tasks, or this love/hate relationship you have with teaching English could turn to hatred alone. You, your students, and your teaching will all suffer if that happens.

I have been teaching English for thirty years and do not have an easy solution to this problem. Sometimes I wonder if this challenge isn't part of the intrigue. If I were given readers to grade my compositions, as some of my counterparts in public education are granted, I actually might feel deprived of this very special privilege of sharing in my students' lives. Admittedly, though, I wouldn't turn down the offer.

Encounters with an

Angel

Jerilyn Tyner

Jerilyn Tyner teaches English and Spanish at a Christian high school in Arlington, Washington.

It was just another dutifully attended elementary Christmas program until I saw her. She was in the third row of the choir. Honey blond hair curved sweetly around her perfect little oval face. She wore a pure white dress with puffed sleeves and a scooped neckline. She must have felt especially grown up tonight to be allowed to wear the pearl necklace and earrings that glowed against her skin. She never took her eyes off the director, as she sang with all her heart and soul.

The Christmas songs, traditional and modern, communicated the message of "Christmas All Around the World." As the other children came and went on the stage, costumed according to the country they represented, and blushingly spoke their lines to the delight of the audience, my "Christmas angel" kept watch in the third row of the choir. Around her was an enchanting aura of innocence.

After the program, the foyer bustled with visiting students, parents, and grandparents. I threaded my way into an alcove where I could get a drink of water, and there, quenching her thirst at the fountain, was my "angel." I smiled at her and said, "I certainly did enjoy hearing your singing in the program tonight. You did an excellent job."

"Thank you," she said, politely and coolly. We were alone in the alcove, and she looked a trifle uneasy, as if she wondered if she should be talking to a stranger.

"I'm sorry," I said, "I should have introduced myself to you. I'm Mrs. Tyner."

Instantly, her reserve melted like a popsicle in August. "Oh," she said with reverence, "you're a teacher! You teach in the high school, don't you?"

"Yes," I answered. "In a few years, perhaps you will be in my class."

"My name is Bonnie Ryan." She smiled. Her face opened to me like a trusting little flower, as she told me how much she liked to sing, how tiring it was to stand on that platform for so long, and how she hoped her new dress wasn't crushed by that boy beside her.

I had a sudden and very humbling awareness that a little one had given me her confidence. She had opened her heart to me, just because I was Mrs. Tyner, the teacher! I belonged to a special category of people—people worthy of trust. I could most likely manipulate her in any way if I so chose.

Tears prickled under my eyelids, and my heart pleaded silently, "Be careful, little angel! Don't be so quick to give your heart, lest you have it trampled and abused."

When I went home that night, I prayed hard for my Christmas angel, and even harder for myself. I am not

worthy to have such a precious treasure as a little girl's trust given to me just because I am a teacher, but, O Lord, I do long to be worthy. May I never presume I deserve a child's respect, or use my position of authority to abuse a tender spirit

Never before had I so keenly felt the warning of the Scripture, "Not many of you should presume to be teachers, my brothers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly" (James 3:1 NIV). Woe unto us, teachers, pastors, leaders, if we despise the little ones entrusted to our care!

Remember that Jesus used children as examples of the greatest in the kingdom of heaven, and solemnly warned, "... but if anyone causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a large mill-stone hung around his neck, and to be drowned in the depths of the sea" (Matthew 18:6 NIV).

What blessing will be ours if we also remember that each of these little ones has an "angel in heaven" that is continually in the presence of God. When we receive, protect, and cherish a child, we receive Jesus himself. Could there be any higher calling, any greater service, than to be stewards of such a trust?