

# **Assessment for School Success: A Student-Centered Approach**

**Margaret J. Maaka**

*University of Hawaii at Manoa*

*This article examines a national educational system that is founded on the premise that the individual student is the center of all learning and teaching. By drawing on her first-hand knowledge and experiences, the author presents an overview of the New Zealand student-centered curriculum. Central to this overview is: (a) a brief discussion of the beliefs New Zealand educators and the community have about children's learning, (b) an examination of the guiding principles that underlie the assessment of children's learning and how these translate into practice, and (c) a discussion of issues of accountability at the local and national levels of the educational system.*

We believe that teachers cannot create challenging classrooms unless they understand—deeply and coherently—the psychological principles of learning and development that they must assess and foster in their students. Otherwise, teachers rely on manuals, textbooks, workbooks, and tests prescribed by others to define and structure their teaching. This is how teachers become managers of materials, classroom disciplinarians, and didactic direction-givers instead of reflective mentors in their classrooms. We hope that teachers take control of their instructional and assessment practices, through knowledge and reflection, in order to create exciting environments that promote children's self-regulated learning. (Paris & Ayres, 1994, p. 32)

In their rejection of approaches to learning and teaching that are “shackled by tradition and habit,” Paris and Ayres (1994) urged educators to loosen their imaginations and create classrooms that excite curiosity and inquiry, and invite self-assessment. For Paris and Ayres, school curricula must be child-centered, authentic, and empowering.

American educators often ask me about the New Zealand educational system and its student-centered philosophy of learning and teaching. This regard is nothing new. According to Trussell-Cullen (1996), Americans have been interested in New Zealand schools since

the 1970s, when comparative research studies began to identify New Zealand as one of the most literate countries in the world.

Although I am questioned about all aspects of New Zealand schooling, children's literacy development attracts most attention. Typically, I am asked about the essential learning areas (Ministry of Education, 1993c); teachers' beliefs about language learning and teaching (Ministry of Education, 1994b); integrated curriculum (Ministry of Education, 1994b); the Reading Recovery Program (Clay, 1993a); shared, guided, and independent reading and writing (Mooney, 1990); multicultural issues in education (Ashton-Warner, 1963; Ministry of Education, 1990); literacy skills and strategies (Ministry of Education, 1993c, 1994a); and curriculum evaluation (Ministry of Education, 1993a). Recently, I have been fielding more and more questions about the theory of student-centered assessment and its translation into practice. It is clear from ensuing conversations and from a mounting body of research that a new era of American educators are growing disenchanted with traditional methods of assessment, in particular, standardized achievement tests (Gardner, 1991; Paris, 1994; Sacks, 1997). The call for more effective methods for assessing and improving children's learning is gaining momentum in American schools (Paris & Ayres, 1994; Routman, 1996).

As a teacher educator for the past ten years, I have observed with much interest the standardized achievement tests versus authentic assessment (e.g., portfolios, student self-assessment) debate that has reverberated through the American educational system, particularly in my home state of Hawaii. Peculiar to this debate is the failure of both sides to reach agreement on the principles that should guide assessment policies and procedures for America's educational system. Unfortunately, much of the argument has centered on, "Which methods of assessment are *best*?" rather than, "Which methods of assessment *best improve children's learning and the quality of learning programs*?" This fundamental failing ensures continued debate with scant likelihood of resolution.

This article presents an overview of recently revised assessment policies and procedures for New Zealand schools. Interwoven in this discussion are my beliefs about assessment of children's learning drawn

from my teaching experiences in New Zealand elementary and secondary schools and from my experiences as a teacher educator in Hawaii. Where pertinent, I include commentary on assessment issues and trends in the American educational system. It is not my aim to promote a foreign curriculum as the panacea for the supposed assessment ills of America's educational system. Indeed, in conversations with educators, I caution against the practice of unquestioningly drawing from "successful" instructional and theoretical orientations. A hybrid or "mix and match" curriculum that does not consider or value the experiences and needs of individual students serves no good purpose (Gutierrez, Baquedano-Lopez, & Turner, 1997). My primary purpose is to stimulate discussion among those who are interested in developing a student-centered educational system in America.

## **The New Zealand Curriculum: Invitations for all Students**

### **The Mission Statement: Beyond Eloquent Rhetoric**

Whatever their other cognitive and non-cognitive facets, educational institutions—preeminently schools—ought to seek to inculcate in their students the highest degree of understanding. I call into question the desirability of performances that are merely rote, ritualized, or conventional, and in doing so, I take issue with many traditional educators who call for "basic skills," "cultural literacy," or the mandating of standardized tests. By the same token, I embrace the position that educational institutions need to reach the broadest number of students and that they must therefore be responsive to different forms of learning, performance, and understanding. (Gardner, 1991, p. 18)

The most pertinent question I ask when examining any national curriculum is; "How many of the guiding principles are 'pie in the sky' compared with what can be accomplished by schools?" Unfortunately, too many educational systems develop mission statements of eloquent rhetoric without following through with the necessary supports to enable each and every school to "live" that rhetoric. Or, worse still, they adopt practices that run counter to their recommended goals. Citizenship education in America's schools is a good example of practice contradicting theory. If one of the primary goals is to help students to

“develop the ability to make informed and reasoned decisions for the public good as citizens of a culturally diverse, democratic society in an interdependent world” (National Council of Social Studies, 1994, p. 3), teachers must question commodified practices, such as the use of standardized achievement tests, to monitor children’s learning. Rather than promoting “informed and reasoned decision making” and “cultural diversity”, there is strong evidence to suggest that these types of assessment instruments reward superficial learning (Brandt, 1994; Sacks, 1997), and are culturally biased towards white-middle class experiences (Routman, 1994; Sacks, 1997).

In recent years, the New Zealand educational system has undergone comprehensive and controversial restructuring. The primary goal of education in New Zealand is to provide a wide range of opportunities to meet the diverse needs of all students in a system without barriers to participation and life-long learning (Ministry of Education, 1993a). Gardner (1991), one of America’s foremost researchers in the field of children’s thinking, supports this stance. His assertion that schools should be responsive to different forms of learning, performance, and understanding supports the idea that all children should experience school success (see also Purkey & Novak, 1996). Although New Zealand’s primary educational goal smacks of rhetoric, I recognize two essential developments that enable schools to support each student to achieve potential, continue learning throughout life, and play a full part in society. The first is the national curriculum’s driving postulate that the individual student is the center of all teaching and learning, and the second is the expected involvement of all New Zealanders in local and national goal setting partnerships to raise educational standards. It is not surprising that these developments greatly impact assessment policies and procedures for schools.

## **At the Center is the Individual Student**

All young people in New Zealand have the right to gain, through the state schooling system, a broad, balanced education that prepares them for effective participation in society. (Ministry of Education, 1993c, p. 5)

I believe that the core of an effective educational system is knowledgeable teachers who have the expertise to encourage all children to reach their full potentials (Maaka & Lipka, 1996; Paris & Ayres, 1994; Routman, 1994, 1996). Teachers who believe in the ability, value, and responsibility of each student are more committed to developing ethical approaches that summon students to take ownership of their learning (Purkey & Novak, 1996). The effect of student ownership of learning on school success was the focus of a year-long study of an American classroom. Maaka and Lipka (1997) implemented and monitored a set of instructional practices designed to invite student/teacher co-ownership of a Hawaii sixth-grade classroom. In an environment that promoted the involvement of all students in all aspects of program planning; the collaboration of students, teachers, and parents; a variety of instructional and assessment methods, designed to cater to a range of learning needs; and the acquisition of knowledge pertaining to the lives of students, high levels of student self-esteem and motivation for learning, and the development of positive literacy habits and attitudes were observed.

Student ownership of learning is central to the New Zealand Curriculum. It is promoted across all learning areas and all levels of the educational system. A coherent progression of learning experiences, incorporating innovative teaching methods and quality resources, helps children see the connection between the acquisition of knowledge and its application to all facets of their lives. This emphasis can be seen in the English curriculum (Ministry of Education, 1994b);

All students should have equal access to the English curriculum. An inclusive curriculum, which is responsive to the wide diversity of perspectives and linguistic backgrounds in New Zealand, can enrich English education for all students. Learners not experiencing success in terms of participation and achievement should be identified so that equitable access to learning activities is assured. (p. 13)

in the social studies curriculum (Ministry of Education, 1994c);

Programmes should be consistent with human rights legislation. Social studies programmes must value, respect, acknowledge, and include the interests, perspectives, and contributions of all students regardless of gender, culture, and social and religious background. They should also create a positive learning environment, enabling students to achieve learning objectives to the best of their abilities. (p. 19)

and in the science curriculum (Hill & Edwards, 1992);

. . . the teacher must be prepared to start with the ideas that the students already have, and to accept that these ideas have validity for them. . . In this way, teacher and students will together decide on the purpose of the lesson and the activities required to fulfil that purpose. Teachers can then better direct the activities towards what they want their students to learn; and the students will be more prepared to take responsibility for their own learning because they now have a stake in the task. They, as well as the teacher, own it. (p. 7)

This strong belief in individual worth and potential is the foundation on which a range of effective practices and programs are built. Developments that invite school success for New Zealand children include collaborative approaches to learning and teaching; culturally-responsive instruction; mainstreaming or inclusion of students with special needs; various assessment methods such as teacher observation, student self-assessment, peer assessment, conferencing, portfolios, and formal tests; theme-based programs of learning and teaching that are integrated across the essential learning areas; intervention programs, such as Reading Recovery, for children having difficulties learning to read and write; English language programs for speakers of other languages; and Pacific Islands language and culture courses. One development, which should be of interest to those advocating the rights of America's indigenous peoples, merits special mention. The past two decades have witnessed the emergence of Maori language immersion programs, such as Te Kohanga Reo and Kura Kaupapa Maori. These innovative and timely programs foster and maintain the language and culture of New Zealand's indigenous people--a system of education in Maori, about Maori, and for Maori (Ministry of Education, 1990).

## **A Community of Shared Values**

New Zealand's future lies in education. We will succeed in building the future we seek only if we succeed in education. All New Zealanders--parents, education professionals, enterprise, and government--must work as a team. Education for the 21st Century is about building that team. (Ministry of Education, 1993a, p. 3)

In his call for the reform of America's schools, Levine (1995, p. 52) observed the many disgruntled participants--"from the cries of battle-weary teachers, from parents whose children aren't learning, from business people worried about their future workforce, from legislators alarmed at the growth of an economic underclass." He also referred to other participants such as educational policy makers and managers whose decision making has led to much of this dissatisfaction. The central problem, he argued was deeply ingrained approaches that treat schools as knowledge factories and teachers as technicians. Purkey and Novak (1996) extend this notion of school-as-factory by describing distinguishing characteristics such as mass production, uniform product, cost effectiveness, technological efficiency, centralized control, and workers as functionaries. This pervasive mentality precludes the likelihood of widespread, meaningful reform to the American educational system.

Despite this gloomy forecast, recent years have seen an increase in the number of educators rejecting curricular decision making that does not take into account the needs and input of the wider community (Gardner, 1991; Levine, Lowe, Peterson, & Tenorio, 1995; Purkey & Novak, 1996; Routman, 1996). In describing their inviting family school with its respect for individual uniqueness, cooperative spirit, community focus, and positive expectations, Purkey and Novak emphasized the importance of democratic interactions among members of the school and members of the larger community. Teachers, students, school administrators, staff, parents, local business people, and interested community members are seen as vital to the establishment of an effective school.

The New Zealand educational system has experienced similar trends. Traditionally, submissions from faculties of schools, colleges of education, and universities; specialists in the Ministry of Education; and other educational groups have tended to shape the New Zealand Curriculum. There is now greater acknowledgment that the formal, planned school curriculum is only one of many factors influencing learning. The diverse experiences, values, and cultural beliefs that students bring from their informal learning environments are also considered influential. With this in mind, curriculum developers placed greater emphasis on submissions from all community interest groups, including students, parents, school trustees, employers, unionists, educational administrators, teachers, researchers, and Maori and Pacific Island representatives. This collaborative direction making ensures consistency and maintenance of standards in classroom programs throughout the country, and allows for discretionary innovations stemming from the requirements and expectations of local communities.

## **Assessment in the New Zealand Curriculum**

### **Principles of Assessment for Better Learning**

The primary purpose of school-based assessment is to improve students' learning and the quality of learning programmes. (Ministry of Education, 1994a, p. 5)

Assessment is one way through which New Zealand preserves its educational standards. By providing clear learning goals (see Table 1) against which individual progress can be measured, the national curriculum is able to accomplish its primary assessment purpose of improving each student's learning and the quality of learning programs. This monitoring process includes identifying and promoting areas of strength and identifying and remedying areas of concern. The secondary purposes of assessment, which are inextricably woven with the primary, include appraising and supporting the professional development of teachers, assessing the effectiveness of schools, and monitoring overall national educational standards.



**Table 1**  
**Examples of Learning Goals—Junior (5-7 years of age) Level**  
**Curriculum (see Department of Education, 1989\*).**

|  |
|--|
| <p><b>Language and Languages</b></p> <p><i>Knowledge:</i> Knows that language can be used in various ways to meet a range of needs</p> <p><i>Skills:</i> Uses strategies of sampling, predicting, confirming, and self-correcting confidently and independently. Records ideas and information in a variety of ways</p> <p><i>Attitudes:</i> Sees language as a tool to help satisfy a natural curiosity about the world</p> <p><b>Science</b></p> <p><i>Knowledge:</i> Makes sense of own world through developing ideas about time and space. Accepts that understandings about science change</p> <p><i>Skills:</i> Makes appropriate measurements about time and space. Carries out simple investigations inside and outside of the classroom</p> <p><i>Attitudes:</i> Enjoys science activities. Is curious about and explores things in own environment</p> <p><b>Mathematics</b></p> <p><i>Knowledge:</i> Develops an understanding of comparisons, relationships, graphs, number, operations, shape, space, measurement, logic, patterning, and order</p> <p><i>Skills:</i> Shows increasing facility in using mathematical language to express ideas. Applies mathematical concepts to help solve problems in every day life</p> <p><i>Attitudes:</i> Enjoys mathematical problem solving. Sees mathematics as an opportunity to discover, explore, and create</p> <p>* This booklet outlines current policy on the keeping of school records in primary (elementary) schools. Although this booklet is still recognized as providing a sound foundation on which records can be developed, it is expected to be reviewed to ensure that the design and details are consistent with the requirements and achievement objectives outlined in each of the new curriculum statements (Ministry of Education, 1994a).</p> |
|--|

As part of a comprehensive restructuring of the national curriculum, a discussion document was distributed in 1989 calling for feedback from the New Zealand public on a set of principles of assessment for better learning (Ministry of Education, 1990). The principles were intended to guide assessment policies and procedures for monitoring and evaluating the New Zealand educational system as a whole, including schools, teachers, and individual students. Over 80 percent of the responses

agreed that the principles were an appropriate base on which to develop educational procedures. Not surprisingly, there were also those who expressed reservations, criticizing the principles on the grounds that they were naive, mediocre, unrealistic; would result in excessive demands on teacher time; neglected the importance of basic skills acquisition; and promoted a system bereft of competitive spirit.

In 1994, a handbook on assessment policy, which included a revised set of basic assessment principles, was developed and distributed to schools. It was intended to provide schools with assistance in developing school-based assessment procedures consistent with recent curriculum developments (Ministry of Education, 1994a). The following set of principles (Ministry of Education, 1990; 1994a), which has been modified for this discussion, reflects the New Zealand Curriculum's driving postulate that the individual student is the center of all teaching and learning:

- The best interests and progress of each student should be paramount. Assessment should be planned, implemented, and reported in ways which maximize the benefits for each student.
- The purpose of the assessment should be explicit to all participants. The information gained should be used to identify strengths and suggest actions to improve the educational development of each student and the quality of educational programs. The emphasis should not be on comparisons of individuals and schools.
- Where possible, assessment should be an integral part of the learning process and not separate from it. The day-to-day classroom program should provide a variety of opportunities, when appropriate, for teachers and students to collect assessment information.
- Assessment should be ongoing, accurate, and as objective as possible. When developing assessment procedures, teachers must be guided by national requirements and school assessment policies and procedures, which includes identifying specific achievement objectives against which each student's progress can be monitored.
- Assessment should involve a variety of contexts and methods according to the needs of each student and the nature of what is being assessed. Self-assessment is an appropriate starting point for assessment and each student should be encouraged to take ownership of learning by setting, evaluating, and achieving specific personal goals.

- The forms of assessment should be appropriate for the knowledge, skills, or attitudes to be assessed. Greatest emphasis should be placed on developing and assessing higher-level thinking skills such as investigating, analyzing, and discussing complex issues and problems; and applying knowledge and skills to new learning situations.
- Assessment procedures should be fair to all. Students must perceive each assessment activity as credible and be motivated to participate. Important considerations include each student's age and developmental level; ways of learning, remembering, and performing; and cultural expectations (especially if the first language is not English).
- Where possible, all parties involved should be provided with assessment feedback immediately after the event. This is essential to the credibility and impact of assessment processes.

## **The National Assessment Guidelines**

Assessment alone cannot lead to improved learning and higher standards: *You do not grow taller by being constantly measured*. It is the interweaving of curriculum, good teaching, and assessment that ensures quality of learning. We must guard against an increasing preoccupation with assessment, as though it alone will set right the perceived problems in the educational system. (Ministry of Education, 1990, p. 16)

The New Zealand Curriculum (Ministry of Education, 1993c) is a framework that defined the learning principles; identified seven essential learning areas (language and languages, mathematics, science, technology, social studies, the arts, and health and physical well-being); set out the essential skills to be developed by all students; and indicated the place of attitudes and values in the school curriculum. It also recommended effective assessment procedures, which were closely linked to the classroom.

Although New Zealand schools are required to follow the national curriculum, they are not told everything that children need to know, nor are they told how to assess children's learning (Trussell-Cullen, 1996). Prepackaged curricula, similar to those spawned by Hirsch's (1987) proposal for a national "core knowledge" curriculum, are accorded little respect by New Zealand educators. Practices that ignore the histories,

traditions, and literature of non dominant cultures (Peterson, 1995) have no place in New Zealand classrooms. Rather than dictating assessment policies and procedures, the New Zealand Curriculum provided a coherent framework on which teachers, schools, and local communities have the responsibility and freedom to build practices and programs which are appropriate to the needs of their students (Ministry of Education, 1993c). As discussed earlier, this approach is based on the belief that schools and communities that are directly involved in making decisions that impact children's learning are more likely to develop administrative qualities and pedagogy that promote school effectiveness and, in turn, success for all students.

In keeping with the principles of assessment for better learning, a wide range of tasks (Table 2) are used to monitor children's progress against locally and nationally-established learning goals (Table 1). Tables 1 and 2, for example, illustrate a joint emphasis on: (a) basic skills such as understanding fundamental principles; (b) sophisticated skills such as investigating, analyzing, and discussing complex problems; (c) application of knowledge in a variety of ways and from one area of the curriculum to another; and (d) motivational and attitudinal behaviors. This approach underscores the value of comparing student performance to absolute standards, rather than to other students.

By developing an assessment program that utilizes a variety of methods, that engages students on tasks in which they are personally invested, and that monitors student learning in familiar learning environments, teachers can cater more effectively to the learning and assessment needs of all children, particularly those who do not usually perform well on standardized achievement tests.

**Table 2**  
**An Example of an Assessment Task\*—Junior (7 years of age)**  
**Level Curriculum (see Ministry of Education, 1990, pp. 75-76).**

|  |
|--|
| <p><b>Activity One: Discussing, interviewing, collecting data, reporting</b></p> <p><i>Language:</i> Question asked: How do we keep warm in winter? Collect samples of different types of materials that our clothes are made from.</p> <p><i>Mathematics:</i> Make a survey of the clothes worn by children in the classroom. Record this information on a graph. Make a report.</p> <p><b>Activity Two: Estimating, measuring temperature and time</b></p> <p><i>Language:</i> Question asked: Which materials keep us warmest? Wrap one layer of a different material around each of several similar sized bottles--e.g., cotton, fur, felt, polyester, nylon, wool, leather (etc).</p> <p><i>Science &amp;</i> Fill the bottles with warm water.</p> <p><i>Mathematics:</i> Measure the temperature in each, using a thermometer, and record it. Estimate which bottle of water will cool first and say why. Measure the temperature every half hour and record. Which bottle of water grew cold first? Why? Which stayed warm? Why?</p> <p><b>Activity Three: Estimating, measuring temperature and time, problem solving, recording, discussing, sequencing, writing, computer work</b></p> <p><i>Science &amp;</i> Question asked: What would help keep the bottles of water warmer?</p> <p><i>Language:</i> Discussion.</p> <p><i>Science:</i> Repeat the experiment, wrapping four layers of one type of material or a combination of materials around each bottle. Are the results different? How? Why? Which material/combination kept the water warm the longest?</p> <p><i>Mathematics:</i> Put the bottles into sequence, coolest to warmest.</p> <p><i>Health Ed:</i> How is it best to dress in cold weather?</p> <p><i>Language:</i> Write or use a computer to publish the results of this experiment.</p> <p>* This task is typical of those that are part of an integrated approach to learning--it involves activities across the curriculum. Teachers are provided an opportunity to observe children's collaborative and individual problem-solving approaches to the task, as well as children's attitudes and levels of motivation exhibited as the task is undertaken. The emphasis is not solely on finding the correct answer. The task requires children to display a variety of abilities such as estimating, observing, measuring, drawing conclusions, recording, interviewing, collecting data, problem solving, discussing, sequencing, and working on a computer.</p> |
|--|

## Principles and Practices: Examples of Classroom-Based Assessment

It is important that assessment information is systematically accumulated, so that sound judgments may be made about each student's attainment of the range of knowledge, ideas, and skills described by the relevant achievement objectives. Through initial assessment, students existing knowledge, ideas, and skills can be identified; this will facilitate appropriate planning. (Ministry of Education, 1994c, p. 22)

The New Zealand Curriculum identified three broad, although not exclusive, categories of assessment (Ministry of Education, 1994a):

- Diagnostic assessment takes place at specified times during the school year or as needed. It provides information on what each student knows and can do. It enables the teacher to identify the nature or scope of real or potential strengths and difficulties, and plan learning activities designed to meet specific needs. For example, the teacher systematically observes, analyzes, and summarizes the early literacy skills and book behaviors of a young child using diagnostic reading procedures (Clay, 1993b). This record provides insights into the strategies the child uses to make meaning from texts.
- Formative assessment is an integral part of the day-to-day classroom program. It provides immediate feedback to the student and teacher and enables them to build a profile of the student's progress, and make informed decisions about the next steps in learning and teaching. For example, the teacher of a child new to school spends the first few weeks observing the child at play in directed and undirected activities both inside and outside of the classroom. This cumulative record of behaviors provides insights into the child's abilities to work independently and cooperatively.
- Summative assessment is usually structured, formal, and administered at the end of a unit of study. It enables the student and teacher to make judgments about the student's achievements in relation to targeted achievement objectives, and plan for the next learning stage. For example, the teacher sets a formal essay test requiring the child to write about a personal experience using the style and tone of a newspaper columnist. This writing sample provides insights into the child's understanding of the genre of newspaper writing.

The national curriculum requires teachers to implement a range of assessment methods which are appropriate to each learning area, and appropriate to the developmental level(s) of each student. The following

list gives a brief description of recommended practices for gathering assessment information on individual children. Each of these can be used for diagnostic, formative, or summative purposes (Ministry of Education, 1994a, pp. 16-23):

- Informal observation: The teacher monitors each child's progress throughout the day during regular classroom activities (e.g., an examination of independent reading behaviors during a sustained silent reading session).
- Formal observation: The teacher monitors each child's progress during a specified period using a formal instrument (e.g., an examination of social skills using a standardized observation schedule).
- Self-assessment by each child: Having set personal learning goals, each child monitors his or her progress using informal methods (e.g., a self-examination of prior knowledge of a unit of study by responding to the question; "What do I know about\_?") and formal methods (e.g., a self-examination of reading motivation using a survey of reading habits and attitudes).
- Peer assessment: Each child monitors his or her own contribution and others' contributions to a particular task (e.g., an examination of the ability to understand and accept the ideas of others during a science problem-solving activity).
- Conferencing: Each child monitors his or her progress through ongoing meetings with the teacher--both provide feedback to each other (e.g., an examination of writing accomplishments or difficulties during the preparation for publication phase of a writing project).
- Portfolios: Each child makes reflective observations about his or her progress throughout the year by selecting and critiquing a representative, ongoing, and changing collection of work samples (e.g., an examination of the ability to communicate ideas and emotions through an exhibit of still photography).
- Teacher-made written tests: The teacher monitors each child's progress by administering a variety of tests appropriate for particular purposes (e.g., an examination of the ability to interpret and discuss the literary qualities of a text using an essay test format).

## **The National Monitoring of Student Learning**

### **Public Accountability of the Educational System**

Just as the interweaving of curriculum, good teaching, and assessment ensures the quality of learning, so the interweaving of good management, curricula, good

teaching, community involvement, and assessment produces quality schools.  
(Ministry of Education, 1990)

As is the case with most educational systems, New Zealand's is expected to provide assurance to the government and the general public that it is performing well. Current monitoring at the national level provides information on educational matters such as student numbers, classification of students by age and class level, class sizes, subjects taken, financial provisions, qualifications and experiences of teachers, and availability and use of special services and programs (Ministry of Education, 1990). However, although each school has its own well developed system for monitoring student progress, based on national curriculum guidelines (see Table 1), there has been, until recently, little emphasis placed on monitoring the educational attainments of students nationwide. Because of this dearth of information at the national level, a monitoring system is being developed to provide the government with detailed and trustworthy information for improving education. This initiative focuses on public accountability of the educational system as a whole, an appraisal of the extent to which national requirements are being achieved by schools, the identification of satisfactory and unsatisfactory trends in performance, and the targeting of appropriate resources and practices.

The recommended approach to the national monitoring of student outcomes will use standardized procedures, will involve a small representative sample of students from throughout New Zealand (probably 5 percent) at ages 8 (year 4) and 12 (year 8), and will take place once every four years (Ministry of Education, 1993c). After data gathering and collation, the findings will be clearly communicated to interested parties, and recommendations for the improvement of student learning and the improvement of learning programs will be made in a realistic and timely manner. By having a small number of students attempt a portion of a total collection of standardized tasks, which reflect a broad range of goals for education, the data cannot be used to rank or judge individual students, teachers, or schools.

### **Standardized Achievement Tests and Educational Accountability: A Lesson from America**



Most Americans have taken standardized tests from the day they entered kindergarten. Test scores have told the gatekeepers of America's meritocracy--educators, academic institutions, and employers--that one student is bright, the other is not bright, that one is worthy academically, the other less so. Some, with luck, are able to overcome the stigma of poor performance on mental tests. But others will not. (Sacks, 1997, p. 25)

The assertion that the "interweaving of curriculum, good teaching, and assessment ensures quality of learning" (Ministry of Education, 1990, p. 16) is pertinent for American educators interested in developing a student-centered curriculum. Over the past two decades, a wealth of research has advanced our understanding of how children learn and how this learning should be facilitated and monitored. Several significant studies of children's learning have emanated from America (Gardner, 1988, 1991; Sternberg, 1988). Yet, despite convincing evidence that these advances run counter to the standardized achievement testing paradigm, Sacks (1997) claims that America remains preoccupied with the quantification, standardization, and measuring of minds. He asserts that such assessment methods impede rather than promote educational reform and that they continue to produce inaccurate and biased assessments of the abilities of many American children (see also Paris, 1994). In his search for an explanation, Sacks concludes that, "Like a drug addict who knows he should quit, America is hooked. We are a nation of standardized-testing junkies." (p. 25)

In their recommendations for the national monitoring of student outcomes, New Zealand educators steadfastly reject the practice of relying primarily on a single, nationally administered standardized measure. In a system where the interests of students are paramount, there is strong resistance to curricula that serve the needs of assessment policies and procedures and not the needs of students. Trussell-Cullen (1996) is forthright in his criticism of the testing of students at several points throughout their schooling and of the use of the results to publicly compare and call to account students, teachers, schools, school districts, and states;

The result of any testing the teacher or school may do is regarded as something for professional interpretation and use by the teacher. The results would certainly not be made public or, as in parts of the United States, be published in the newspaper. New Zealand teachers would be horrified at the thought of such crude assessment instruments being accorded so much deference and credibility. (p. 97)

This rejection of standardized achievement tests rests on a sound pedagogical foundation. It is strongly believed that the information gathered is flawed and distorts perceptions of what should be the important goals of education (Dougherty, 1994; Paris, 1994). There is also concern that crusades to raise the levels of student achievement on standardized achievement tests lead to substantial portions of the teaching day being devoted to test-related practices that result in a significant narrowing of the curriculum. Kher-Durlabhji and Lacina-Gifford (1993) document a number of time consuming, test-related practices teachers use to prepare students for formal testing situations. These include the development of teaching objectives and strategies that promote familiarization with the structures and procedures of these types of tests, the use of commercially prepared exercises designed to improve test scores, and the enhancement of student motivation for taking tests.

Paris (1994) discusses other concerns. These include the manipulation of the reporting of scores by excusing selected students from testing, the retention of older students so that they will score higher in lower grades, and the “mysterious loss” of test booklets before they are shipped to district headquarters. Other bizarre activities include the commentaries of self-proclaimed educational experts, such as newspaper editors, that bemoan the failure of education and wax philosophically about “getting better test scores”; and the advertising approaches of real estate agents who use test scores to rate neighborhoods in terms of the “quality of schools” (Haladyna, Haas, & Nolen, 1989). This “high stakes” mentality which pressures students, teachers, and schools to give improved test performances priority must raise serious questions about the quality of education. Everyone involved in the process should be asking, “If assessment does not promote better learning and better programs, what value should be placed on it?”

In the New Zealand educational system, the answer is clear. Assessment programs are expected to ensure not only high standards, but also maximum benefits to students. These two goals are accomplished by measuring a wider range of outcomes of schooling than those indicated by performance on standardized achievement tests.

### **Concluding Comment**

Just as students possess relatively untapped potential for development, educators possess relatively untapped potential for encouraging this development. (Purkey & Novak, 1996, p. 119)

Like any educational system, New Zealand's is not without its concerns. There are areas that still need attention. In particular, policies and procedures for the "appropriate" assessment of minority groups, including women, Maori students, students with limited English language proficiency, and students with disabilities need to be developed. However, despite these areas, new directions are resulting in better decisions, actions, and educational consequences. With ongoing reexamination and refinement by all interested parties, the national curriculum will increasingly provide a wide range of opportunities to meet the diverse needs of all children in a system without barriers to participation and life-long learning.

What, then, can American educators learn from the New Zealand student-centered curriculum and its assessment policies and procedures? Trussell-Cullen (1996) suggests that because the New Zealand model has successfully evolved over time and continues to develop, it can provide important information on the wide variety of ways in which children learn, as well as the wide variety of ways in which teachers can effectively assess this learning. However, he cautions against the mechanical adoption of the New Zealand model at the expense of the needs and interests of American children.

It is appropriate at this point to revisit the introductory words of Paris and Ayres (1994). Like them, I believe that it is time for a more balanced view of assessment policies and procedures for America's schools. This, however, can be accomplished only when teachers, students, parents,

school boards, policy makers, and members of the wider community arrive at a consensus on their understandings about how children learn and how this learning should be assessed and fostered. This agreement must be in place before teachers can create exciting classroom environments that promote school success for all children.

## References

- Ashton-Warner, S. (1963). *Teacher*. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster.
- Brandt, M. E. (1994). Is the Stanford any "good"? How do we judge? *The Kamehameha Journal of Education*, 5, 71-81.
- Clay, M. M. (1993a). *Reading Recovery: A guidebook for teachers in training*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Clay, M. M. (1993b). *An observation survey of early literacy achievement*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Department of Education (1989). *Keeping school records: Primary progress records*. Wellington, New Zealand: Author.
- Dougherty, B. J. (1994). The Stanford Achievement Test and tracking: A focus on mathematics. *The Kamehameha Journal of Education*, 5, 89-95.
- Gardner, H. (1988). Beyond the IQ: Education and human development. *National Forum*, 68(2), 4-7.
- Gardner, H. (1991). *The unschooled mind: How children think and how schools should teach*. New York, NY: BasicBooks.
- Gutierrez, K., Baquedano-Lopez, P., & Turner, M. G. (1997). Putting language back into language arts: When the radical middle meets the third space. *Language Arts*, 74(5), 368-378.
- Haladyna, T. M., Haas, N. S., & Nolen, S. B. (1989). *Test score pollution*. (Technical Report No. 1). Phoenix, AZ: Arizona State University West Campus.
- Hill, S., & Edwards, F. (1992). *Language and learning in secondary schools: Science*. Wellington, New Zealand: Learning Media.
- Hirsch, E. D. (1987). *Cultural literacy*. Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin.
- Kher-Durlabhji, T. M., & Lacina-Gifford, L. J. (1993). Quest for test success: A survey of teachers' score enhancing strategies. *National Association of Laboratory Schools Journal*, 17(4), 18-26.
- Levine, D. (1995). Building a vision of curriculum reform. In D. Levine, R. Lowe, B. Peterson, & R. Tenorio (Eds.), *Rethinking schools: An agenda for change* (pp. 52-60). New York, NY: The New Press.

- Levine, D., Lowe, R., Peterson, B., & Tenorio, E. (1995). Beyond pizza sales: Parent involvement in the 1990s. In D. Levine, R. Lowe, B. Peterson, & R. Tenorio (Eds.), *Rethinking schools: An agenda for change* (pp. 235-239). New York, NY: The New Press.
- Maaka, M. J., & Lipka, P. A. (1996). Inviting success in the elementary classroom: The first steps from theory to practice. *Journal of Invitational Theory and Practice*, 4(1), 51-62.
- Maaka, M. J., & Lipka, P. A. (1997, March). "I used to think reading sucked!": Promoting positive literacy habits and attitudes in the elementary school classroom. Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association, San Diego, CA.
- Ministry of Education. (1990). *Tomorrow's standards: The report of the ministerial party on assessment for better learning*. Wellington, New Zealand: Learning Media.
- Ministry of Education. (1993a). *Education for the 21st century: A discussion document*. Wellington, New Zealand: Learning Media.
- Ministry of Education. (1993c). *The New Zealand Curriculum framework (Te Anga Marautanga o Aotearoa)*. Wellington, New Zealand: Learning Media.
- Ministry of Education. (1994a). *Assessment: Policy to practice*. Wellington, New Zealand: Learning Media.
- Ministry of Education. (1994b). *English in the New Zealand Curriculum*. Wellington, New Zealand: Learning Media.
- Ministry of Education. (1994c). *Social Studies in the New Zealand Curriculum (Draft)*. Wellington, New Zealand: Learning Media.
- Mooney, M. E. (1990). *Reading to, with, and by children*. Katonah, NY: Richard C. Owen.
- National Council for the Social Studies. (1994). *Expectations for excellence: Curriculum standards for social studies* (Bulletin 89). Washington, DC: Author.
- Paris, S. G. (1994). The dark side of standardized testing and the promise of portfolios. *The Kamehameha Journal of Education*, 5, 173-187.
- Paris, S. G., & Ayres, L. R. (1994). *Becoming reflective students and teachers with portfolios and authentic assessment*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Society.
- Peterson, B. (1995). What should children learn?: A teacher looks at E. D. Hirsch. In D. Levine, R. Lowe, B. Peterson, & R. Tenorio (Eds.), *Rethinking schools: An agenda for change* (pp. 52-60). New York, NY: The New Press.

- Psychological Corporation. (1993, Spring). *Interpreting the reports*. San Antonio, TX: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.
- Purkey, W. W., & Novak, J. M. (1996). *Inviting school success: A self-concept approach to teaching and learning*. (3rd ed.). Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.
- Routman, R. (1994). *Invitations: Changing as teachers and learners, K-12*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Routman, R. (1996). *Literacy at the crossroads*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Sacks, P. (1997, March/April). Standardized testing: Meritocracy's crooked yardstick. *Change*, 25-31.
- Sternberg, R. J. (1988). Beyond IQ testing. *National Forum*, 68(2), 8-11.
- Trussell-Cullen, A. (1996). *Inside New Zealand classrooms*. Katonah, NY: Richard C. Owens.

*Correspond with: Margaret J. Maaka, Ph.D., College of Education  
University of Hawaii at Manoa, 1776 University Avenue, Honolulu,  
Hawaii 96822. e-mail: marg@hawaii.edu*