

Standardised Testing in Australia and National Curriculum

Jennifer West

Mt Barker Waldorf School

South Australia

JWest@mtbarkerwaldorf.sa.edu.au

STANDARDISED TESTING IN AUSTRALIA

Standardized (Benchmark) testing for students in Years 3, 5, 7 and from this year, Year 9, has been a part of the educational landscape for all schools since 2002. In 2001, the Commonwealth Government introduced new accountability requirements as conditions for funding, including achievement of performance measures, with schools reporting against the literacy and numeracy performance measures for Year 3, 5 and later, Year 7 students. This meant all schools were required to conduct standardized literacy and numeracy testing for these year levels. In acknowledgment of Steiner, Montessori and other schools with a different approach, a clause was inserted: "Where a school has a longstanding, well documented, publicly stated approach to education which may provide it with grounds for being exempted from participation in a standardized assessment programme, the school should make a case to the Commonwealth for consideration by the Minister".

Whole school exemptions on the basis of this were granted to Steiner and some other schools in 2001, then new guidelines for 2002 removed this provision. Now all schools were required to offer the tests, and parents could individually withdraw their children from them. This situation continues, with the introduction in 2008 of a common national assessment, (NAPLAN), which all schools

must use. There has also been sample testing conducted or foreshadowed for science, civics and citizenship, and ICT and with the new National Curriculum, history will be added in the future.

In some Steiner schools, most if not all parents withdraw their children from the tests, other Steiner schools have the whole classes doing them. There are various reasons given to take up this testing, one being that in schools that only have primary years, it is helpful for parents to have the information of how their child is performing before they go to a mainstream school. Other schools see it as an opportunity to confirm that they are offering an effective literacy and numeracy education. For parents who withdraw their children, it is often on the basis of a philosophical objection to this type of testing.

The tests have 4 components: reading, writing, spelling, numeracy, which last for around an hour each. Each test has questions that range from below the benchmark for that year to well above. The reading test gives a text that has to be interpreted from various aspects, such as contextual understanding and grammatical knowledge. Writing requires students to generally compose a piece of narrative with reference to certain guidelines. Spelling is both correcting words and filling in missing words. Numeracy is largely multiple choice that test for skills and under-

standing of mathematical concepts such as number, space, measurement, chance, data analysis and algebra.

The anecdotal evidence for students in Steiner schools who take the tests is that they can sometimes see more possible answers than are offered, their writing test results don't necessarily reflect their ability, they are almost all above the benchmark and while students at Years 7 and 9 generally cope well with being tested, Year 3 and some Year 5 students find it the most arduous. Already at these levels there is a degree of rational, conceptual reasoning required that is foreign to our imaginative, pictorial approach. The lack of aesthetic and beautiful presentation of the test booklets is another element, although children see this on all sides today outside of school.

The introduction of a national curriculum will ensure that this standardized assessment continues and extend to other subjects. I foresee that the option of parent withdrawal may also be removed at some point in the future.

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A NATIONAL CURRICULUM FOR ALL
AUSTRALIAN SCHOOLS

In 2008, the Commonwealth Government established a National Curriculum Board (NCB) to set core content and achievement standards that are expected of students at each year of schooling,

K – 12. Four subjects were identified for the first stage – English, mathematics, science and history. Discussion papers have been written for comment by anyone (www.ncb.org.au) and a series of fora have been arranged to which a selection of teachers, administrators and parents have been invited. Early in 2009 all this will be drawn together into a national curriculum document which all schools are required to implement by 2012 as part of their funding agreement for 2009 – 2012.

Steiner, Montessori and International Baccalaureate schools have been very concerned with this, and the government has acknowledged these concerns by at first suggesting that their curriculum would remain a matter for the state registration authorities. This has since

been modified by saying provision will be made through the Commonwealth Administrative Guidelines for funding, which are not yet published, (but schools must sign the agreement).

The discussions have remained with general principles, but the fundamental thrust is a “logical” progression from simpler to more complex, centre to periphery, in a way that introduces abstract concepts early on and does not have any awareness of the changing consciousness of the developing child. It is of great concern that the government is influencing education right down into the heart of what is taught, when and how.

In April 2009 the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority

will replace the NCB. Thus curriculum, assessment and reporting will be linked under the one authority. The reporting regime is increasingly demanding and requires public reporting by individual schools of many aspects of schooling through annual reports such as School Performance Information, twice yearly reports that rank students, financial information and tracking of students between schools and after they leave school. While some of this is helpful, it is placing an increased burden on school administrations. It is justified by the government claims that parents are asking for this information and is thus used to legitimize the increased directives and accountability requirements placed on schools.