

Assessing "Assessment:" A Reply to Responses

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I appreciate the thoughtful responses of my colleagues to the initial essay in this issue. Each article has enhanced and challenged the original work in notable ways. Even though the lead article focused on both assessment in public schools and in the church, my remarks in this section will be confined to faith communities. First, I will address two overarching themes that were apparent in more than one response, then I will address each response individually as it uniquely intersected with my own thinking.

To begin both Carol and David Bartlett and Holly Inglis commented on the relationship of the individual child to assessment. They saw the direct connection between formative assessment and the methods of differentiated learning. Unfortunately I don't share the optimism that the Bartletts express that teachers in the church take the time to get to know the individual interests and God-given gifts of their students. Most teaching goals for children on Sunday mornings are centered around giving prescribed answers to questions regarding the Bible narrative of the day, rather than listening to what God may be saying individually to each child. These questions of biblical literacy focus more on short-term than long-term memory, as Inglis states, and are anything but "sticky."

Small membership churches are perhaps more attentive to the needs and gifts of individual children than are large churches. With fewer children and perhaps less mobility, they can nurture gifts of leadership, attentiveness, artistic expression,

and caring that pass unnoticed in larger churches simply because of the numbers of children that must be managed on a Sunday morning or at other times during the week. Curriculum publishing has been most responsive to the needs of larger churches, as they purchase more resources, but for differentiated and transformative learning, perhaps smaller is better and more attuned to God's purposes.

This brings us to the second overarching reply, that of resources that do speak to the wonder of child's play (Brown) and the stickiness of long-term memory learning (Inglis). There are resources for children that capitalize on the way that children learn most naturally. The related programs of *Catechesis of the Good Shepherd, Young Children and Worship*, and *Godly Play* all approach the Bible, church, and the world with a sense of awe and wonder. Children and teachers are invited into the Word and wonder together about the mystery of God's intentions. If the same story is repeated more than once the teacher will notice that the depth of the children's sharing grows and changes over time. This is the type of informal formative assessment that helps children and adults to be partners in learning.

Other resources that address this type of recursion (repeating with additional layers of complexity) are programs that repeat the biblical narrative in different modalities (like Workshop Rotation) or those which advocate long-term projects that the children can continue to explore for weeks and months. What we need to let go of in order to embrace this type of education is the notion that we must cover everything in the Bible and God's world in this one hour on Sunday

morning. Instead we are asked to delve deeply rather than broadly into God's word. Thus, we need assessment that will take the time to listen to the groans and joys of being a faithful disciple more than factual questions regarding today's Bible story.

Each respondent helped me to imagine what such a view of Christian education might look like. From the Bartletts, I learned that Christian education is a celebration of what God is doing in individual lives, but also in the corporate lives of faithful Christians. They rightly pointed to the mobility of many families and the difficulties this would raise in pursuing a portfolio means of assessment. This raised the need for partnership with parents in the nurturing of children's faith. The times of celebration using the portfolios that I raised in the article are also times of family celebration—confirmation, graduation, or call to ministry. These are corporate celebrations of how God has worked in these lives whether or not the family has always been in the same church setting. If we can inspire parents to continue the task of saving artifacts of their child's faith whether or not the family remains in the same church, they can serve as a collective, long-term assessment of God's faithfulness along the journey of our baptisms.

This is an assurance that not many Sunday School teachers receive on a weekly basis. I appreciate the questions that Holly Inglis poses for teachers to consider as they prepare lessons in an effort to seek both purpose and relevance. I would add one additional question. Where is God in this lesson and how does what we're doing here further God's reign in the world? This last question takes our teaching far beyond the scope of public school teaching with the hope that our

efforts both glorify God and follow God's will for the world. This is a good question to ask when we are tempted to incorporate the popular from culture in an effort to boost attendance and enthusiasm even when it conflicts with Gospel values. A case in point here would be the use of violent gaming in church youth groups. We not only assess student learning, but teacher intent as we plan and implement the curriculum of the church.

Finally, Bill Brown's evocative essay on Child Wisdom brought home to me that the assessment we commonly face for children both within and outside of church is really an assessment of knowledge, not wisdom. All our efforts to quantify faith learning fall short if not lived out in the world. Classroom learning will always be only an approximation of the gifts that God has given us in creation and the Word made flesh. May the Holy Spirit blow through your teaching and stir the wonder of Child Wisdom for the sake of the world.