

## Speaking of Children: Testing One, Two, Three

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**The word distracted is derived from the Latin root *tract*, meaning “to draw.” Based on this information, the reader can tell the literal meaning of to distract is:**

A to be unhappy with.

B to draw poorly.

C to draw away.

D to be confused.

If you can answer this question you may be “smarter than a fifth grader,” but do you know how to prepare a nutritious meal, play a musical instrument, or speak to God through prayer? Some skills are just easier to test in the classroom. Our children are completing another year in an educational system which values some skills as worthy of evaluation and standards, while neglecting others. What are the purposes of testing and assessment? Can churches reach out to children who are anxious in a culture of evaluation? Are there places where the church could learn from schools how to assess learning? These will be some of the questions that are addressed in this essay.

Evaluation in education is not a new concept. As long as there have been teachers, there has been evaluation. The sages of Proverbs looked for evidence of wise behavior in the life of the community. Jesus certainly tested the disciples by sending them out in pairs to practice calling others to the Kingdom of God and then assessed their work after they returned (Luke 10:1-20). Peter and Paul both have to report to the church in Jerusalem to assess and justify their work to the Gentiles (Acts 11 and 15). As can be seen even from these few examples God uses the authority of others to assess learning and to maintain certain standards of practice.

Going back to our public schools, then we see these same purposes of the evaluation of student learning and school effectiveness, being the basis of the current emphasis on standardized testing. In this case however, there is also an

economic dimension that bases government funding on student test scores. This adds a dimension of anxiety to students, teachers, and administration, which makes the evaluation become the center of learning. Educators refer to this as “teaching to the test” so that only skills that are found on the test are worthy of teaching. So, “No Child Left Behind” seems to really mean, no child with gifts in verbal or mathematical learning will be left behind if they perform well on measures of evaluation. In some ways this then makes the test the aim of education. But is this what we want our children to know?

Many educational reformers have tried to pin down the aim of education in an effort to widen the vision of policy makers to the possibilities of children’s learning. Howard Gardner proposed a return to the aims of Aristotle (truth, beauty, and goodness) in his book, *The Disciplined Mind*.<sup>ii</sup> Nel Noddings proposed the pursuit of happiness as an aim for American education.<sup>iii</sup> If any or all of these were to become our aim for the education of our children, rather than the current unspoken aim, which seems to be related to earnings and consumption, they would necessitate a change in the way we do assessment. Truth, beauty, goodness, and happiness can not be measured in the same way that a skill-based set of learning outcomes can.

Looking back at the biblical precedents above, we can see that there are a variety of ways of doing assessment. I will address three that are already in current use in public school settings and imagine what they might look like applied to the aims in the previous paragraph. They are: summative evaluation, standards learning, and formative assessment.

Summative evaluation is about looking back on what has already been learned and making some value judgments on the degree of proficiency. For children this might often occur at the end of a semester or a year of schooling or perhaps even as the child exits one level of schooling to another. This latter might occur in the transition from grade school to middle school for instance. Testing is certainly one means to get at this proficiency, but it is not the only means. Let’s look at the Gardner/Aristotle aims once again. To measure truth, beauty, and goodness,

would be difficult in a testing situation, but they might perhaps be assessed by targeting particular assignments or performances that could become the child's portfolio that would show progress in these things. To measure goodness and Noddings' suggestion of happiness, one might interview the child and/or use conduct grades to assess progress in these areas. Jesus' listening and assessment of the mission of the seventy who were sent out might fit within this category as they had just completed the task assigned. They report back to their teacher. Jesus in turn gives them feedback on their efforts and chastens them to remember the ultimate aim of their mission. Summative evaluation cannot operate in isolation. It relies on agreed upon standards of learning to ascertain what is true, beautiful, good, or pleasurable.

Standard criteria offer schools an independent set of knowledge and behavior to use as a measuring rod in developing and using curriculum. Basically this is a list of things that we think are important for children to know before they graduate and a timeline of when they will be taught. For the aims above this might mean that the criteria would broaden to knowledge of certain historical events, the creative process used in various art forms, and the ability to interact and communicate with others in addition to those skills currently found on many of these lists. When Peter and Paul faced the Jerusalem Council with regard to their ministry to the Gentiles, they were actually breaking some standards that had been set within the Jewish tradition for interaction with those of other faiths. The council had to assess these actions and decide whether to approve them or perhaps even change their standards in the light of new knowledge revealed by God.

Our final type of assessment is formative assessment. This is what teachers use constantly in the classroom to aid children to grow in their knowledge of particular subject matter. It can be as informal as asking a few questions before beginning to teach a new concept in order to see what the children already know or it could take the more concrete form of a quiz or survey to gain data about individual student knowledge. Formative assessment helps the teacher to match the learning needed with the individual child. It may lead to peer coaching, small group

placement or the choosing of a particular curriculum resource. This form of assessment lends itself well to the aims we have been exploring as it allows the child to pursue the quest for truth, beauty, goodness, and happiness at their own pace and through individualized attention. Perhaps the quest for wisdom as found in Proverbs and Ecclesiastes would be the closest model to this form of assessment as the sage tailors his or her response to where the follower most needs help in living the faithful life.

While we in the church might advocate for a reassessment of the aims of education in the light of this conversation, we may have little impact on a system that has so much support from the government and business sectors. In addition to advocacy, though, there are other things that we can do on behalf of the children who spend the majority of their day in this current climate of testing. The church can reassess its own aims for learning. It can provide a place where other abilities are lifted up and used in God's service. The church can also find ways of assessing its own programs, so that it knows whether or not the teaching offered will draw children closer to God. Let's look at each of these in turn.

What is our aim of Christian education in the church? Should we embrace one or more of those proposed for public education above? Richard Osmer, in his book, *The Teaching Ministry of Congregations* aligns himself with Paul rather than Aristotle in his claim that our aims should be faith, hope, and love.<sup>iv</sup> I have also just mentioned a possible other candidate from our Christian tradition, that of drawing closer to God. If we embraced these aims, our education would certainly still include a basic knowledge of the Bible, but be broadened to helping all children of God to address God in prayer, to face fear and anxiety with hope, and to fulfill the Great Commandment by loving God and neighbor. This is certainly not something that a school system would take on as the basis for education, but it is what we are uniquely called to do as the church. What would an education designed with these aims look like for the child?

A child raised in a church that took these aims seriously would be seen as a unique creation of God, one who both learns and grows in the faith and already models for adults what loving God is about.<sup>v</sup> This child would be valued as a gift of God, yet be held to particular standards of moral conduct as fellow sinners. She or he would certainly be made in the image of God and yet may have particular needs because of the child's vulnerability. This child would both offer and receive faith, hope, and love to the congregation of which they are a part. The church would then become a place of both sanctuary and challenge for the child to seek and use the gifts that God has uniquely given them in drawing themselves and others closer to God.

So, ministry with children would not treat each child as identical to another. The abilities that are valued in school might also be upheld in the church, but the church is not restricted to abilities that can be measured by standardized testing.<sup>vi</sup> A child's ability to sing songs of worship, to serve God through hands-on acts of justice, and to be kind to the other would be lifted up and worthy of notice. Adults, youth and children would engage in conversations around how God is working in their lives rather than simply be receptacles for information transmission.

But, how are we to measure such lofty plans in the life of the church? How will we know that we are indeed accomplishing these aims? This is where the church can learn something from the school. We have long neglected the assessment of learning and our Christian educational programs in the church, so that we continue to educate in the same way from year to year by habit more than intention. What if we were to build in some sort of summative evaluation, standards criteria, and formative assessment into our Christian education program around these aims. What might it look like?

A church, which instituted such an assessment plan, might begin by having conversations with key leaders around core concepts and practices of faith, hope, love, and drawing closer to God. This conversation might revolve around such questions as, "What might we be able to teach that would lead to these aims? What

are particular components of our life and practice as a church that we want to make sure that all children understand and can live out? What habits and attitudes do we want to cultivate that will help children to continue their journey as a follower of Jesus Christ?"

What could easily result from conversations around these questions would be a set of standard criteria that inform volunteer teachers of some of the expectations that the church has for them in this important role. It might also inspire their creativity towards design of particular projects that could become a part of a child's faith portfolio, such as a faith statement or a drawing of the child's concept of Jesus Christ or the recording of a child's prayer or memory verse recitation. These formative projects could be accumulated over time by the church or family to then be used as a summative evaluation at turning points such as Confirmation, high school graduation, or the calling to ministry. This way the church could see whether or not the efforts they have made to nurture the faith of children have led toward the aims of God's kingdom.

So we both begin and end with a question about distractions. How do you know if your children's ministry is helping children to draw closer to God or drawing them away from God? I wonder what your church will do to find the answer to this question.

Questions for Discussion:

1. What have been your own experiences around testing and evaluation? What would you identify as the aim of these measures of assessment?
2. Choose the aim for schools that you believe is most important in reforming education? How would you assess this aim? Repeat this activity changing the setting to your church.
3. How does your church view children in general using some of the qualities of the child listed in the essay? What are some ways that your church lives out

this perception of children in its life as a congregation? What might you do differently in light of this essay?

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<sup>i</sup> One of many sample test questions for the California Standardized Tests for the fifth grade, available at <http://www.cde.ca.gov/ta/tg/sr/documents/cstrtqela5.pdf>, question CSR 10856.220

<sup>ii</sup> Howard Gardner, *The Disciplined Mind: What All Students Should Understand*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1999, 16.

<sup>iii</sup> Nel Noddings, "The Aims of Education," in *The Curriculum Studies Reader, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition*. New York: RoutledgeFalmer, 2004, 331-344.

<sup>iv</sup> Richard Robert Osmer. *The Teaching Ministry of Congregations*. Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 2005, 35.

<sup>v</sup> I draw on the work of Marcia Bunge and others here who have classified six ways that the church has historically viewed children: gifts of God, moral agents, developing beings, complete in the image of God, models of faith, orphans in need of care. Marcia Bunge, "The Dignity and complexity of Children: Constructing Christian Theologies of Childhood," in *Nurturing Child and Adolescent Spirituality: Perspectives from the World's Religious Traditions*, Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2006.

<sup>vi</sup> There are some churches that value standardized testing as a way of measuring student progress. The United Methodist Church in Jamaica, for instance, offers non-mandatory testing each year for all ages from young children to young adults. Natoya Thomas, our Jamaican exchange student this semester, indicates that children and youth often want to know their own progress and thus pay to take the tests, which include items that ask the child to write a memory verse or compose a prayer in addition to knowledge questions around biblical stories.