Issues in Reporting Assessment

Discussion paper 20

Abstract: This paper is about some of the issues associated with reporting in schools. Provided are a number of suggestions which may form partial solutions to problems which arise.

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Note: This Discussion Paper has been produced by a member of the Assessment Unit of the Board of Secondary School Studies. It is recommended to the teaching profession for consideration in the formulation of curriculum and assessment policy within secondary schools. It should not be taken as representing Board policy, and is being circulated within the teaching profession to obtain reactions to its contents.

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Introduction

A number of significant issues are associated with reporting by schools. However, the three issues considered in this paper are:

• achievement labels and their appropriate use;
• reporting times chosen by schools; and
• assessment for dual purposes.

The paper includes for each issue a number of suggestions for changes to practices now existent in some schools.

Achievement labels and their appropriate use

Board policy stipulates that the official nomenclature of ‘Very High Achievement’ to ‘Very Limited Achievement’ be used in reporting exit student achievement on Board Certificates, as well as during the pre-exit monitoring and reviewing procedures for certification. The ROSBA recommendations suggest using these labels to report both overall student achievement and achievement on each of the broad criteria of the subject. The requirements of the Board coupled with the ROSBA recommendations have influenced some schools to perceive these labels as appropriate for all reporting and recording processes in a school. Consequently, School Progress Reports and School Exit Certificates often express achievement for both the broad criteria of the subject and the overall (global) achievement, in terms of the official exit labels. In some schools the official labels are used also to report:

• global achievement for a particular module of work after it has been completed;
• global achievement on individual instruments; and
• achievement on individual assessment items.

For example, a student may have an assessment reported using one of the official labels for a mid-semester test, for an assignment, or for a unit test. In some cases, assessment instruments have been structured so that ‘VLA’ tasks are placed at the beginning of an assessment instrument, then ‘LA’ tasks, proceeding through
to ‘VHA’ tasks at the end. Students are then classified according to their performance on various ‘groups’ of tasks on the instrument.

The use of the official labels for reporting student achievement for modules of work, assessment instruments and assessment items arises for a number of reasons. One reason relates to a lack of understanding of the underlying conditions that should be satisfied before the labels are used. These conditions are associated with summative assessment and it is implicit when a student is awarded a particular Level of Achievement that:

i. information has been collected over an extended time frame;

ii. the information has been collected from a number of instruments; and

iii. the resultant global Level of Achievement is a consequence of reviewing and judging these assessments collectively, against exit criteria and standards.

This relationship between the labels and the conditions for summative assessment has never been defined explicitly. Further, Board policy states only when use of the official labels is required, not the converse. In addition, there has been a tradition and expectation of collapsing information into concise forms, and schools naturally see the official labels as a ready-made form to use.

Some adverse consequences have arisen from the use of the official labels to report student achievement at exit and other times, achievement on individual criteria and global achievement, and achievement for modules of work, individual instruments or items.

Board syllabuses and work programs define the conditions for awarding the various exit Levels of Achievement. The meanings of the official categories from ‘Very High Achievement’ to ‘Very Limited Achievement’ when used in Progress Reports are not generally provided by the school as part of the Report. Students are left questioning whether the Levels of Achievement awarded in Progress Reports relate to the exit standards or to interim standards, and if the latter, what these interim standards are.

Another problem concerns the number of distinguishable standards for each criterion. There has been a tendency in some cases to create five standards of performance per criterion (whether or not five standards exist) and, further, label those standards VLA to VHA. The existence of five categories relating to global achievement does not imply that for all criteria of performance, there should normally be exactly five standards. Often where five standards (labeled VLA to VHA) on criteria are used, the one descriptor represents, for example, both standards of LA and SA.

The practice of using these official labels at interim times has fostered, for some students, unrealistic expectations in terms of the prediction of their exit Levels of Achievement, and often a belief that they have been stereotyped by the interim Levels of Achievement awarded. Use of the labels for individual instruments has also encouraged some people to believe that global achievement is obtained by some averaging process on the individual achievements, in a manner comparable to numerical averaging.

The common practice of using the official labels to report achievement on short modules of work, on individual tests, or on items, also dilutes the concept of summative assessment. This dilution of the concept occurs in these situations because a summative assessment judgment is no longer the result of comparing a number of assessments of a student’s achievement collected over an extended time period, with set criteria and standards. That is, the time and/or quantity conditions for summative assessment may not be satisfied. Collapsing information about standards on a number of criteria into a single result for a particular test or module of work, has repercussions later in the derivation of a global Level of Achievement. This exit assessment is to be derived from a consideration of achievement on the broad criteria of the subject. The collapsing process runs the risk of submerging completely any visible connections between criteria and the global Level of Achievement, and pays only lip-service to criteria-based assessment.

Presented below are suggestions about practices which may help to avoid some of the above consequences.
I. Use the official labels to report global achievement only. Do not use the labels to report standards of achievement on the component criteria of global achievement or for modules of work, individual instruments and items. Use the labels to report exit global achievement only. However, this solution does not appear to take account of Board requirements associated with monitoring and reviewing practices, which require interim Levels of Achievement for students. It probably would not find great support among students and parents who expect and desire some indication of prospective exit performances, even when it is known that these prospective levels may not reflect the final performance.

II. An alternative is to use the labels to report global achievement only, but at both exit and at interim reporting times. In this case however, schools should include a rider in Progress Reports, which states that award of a certain interim Level of Achievement does not automatically guarantee an equivalent achievement level at exit. The rider might read as follows: ‘This Level of Achievement is the best approximation that can be provided at this time based on the work covered and the present quality of performance by the student. However, award of a certain interim Level of Achievement does not guarantee the same Level of Achievement automatically at exit. This exit and interim Levels of Achievement may not always correspond because: (a) where subjects, or parts thereof, are developmental in nature, it is to be expected that exit standards are ordinarily more sophisticated (or at a higher level) than interim standards, and (b) an exit judgment takes into account all mandatory and other significant aspects of a course. At earlier times in the course when interim Levels of Achievement are awarded, not all mandatory and significant aspects of the course will have been studied.’

III. Record information on achievement in a subject against criteria, not against test instruments.

IV. When labelling achievement on each broad criterion of the subject, do not use VHA, HA,…Use an alternative coding such as S₁ to Sₙ or A,B,C,…, (preferably not numbers), to describe the standards on the individual criteria. Ensure the codes have meaning. Such practices would release criteria from automatically having ‘five standards’.

V. Publicise the rules for combining performances on individual criteria to obtain each global Level of Achievement. Such changes would help to clarify how the global achievement is obtained.

VI. Do not label individual items in test instruments as VLA, LA, SA,…as this is inconsistent with conditions i and ii associated with the labels; that is, the information is collected over time, from a number of assessments. Analyse and code items or groups of items in terms of standards on criteria.

**Reporting Times Chosen by Schools**

For many schools, a general pattern for official progressive reporting in each year is as follows:

- near or at end of first term;
- end of first semester;
- end of second semester.

Of course, many departments within schools report unofficially on and to students at more frequent intervals. This unofficial reporting takes the form of formal feedback provided with individual assessment instruments and tasks, and the day-to-day feedback which is integral to the teaching–learning situation. Some school departments have introduced a ‘semi-official reporting’ scheme which requires students to show their parents results of assessments for a module of work and so on, and to obtain a parental signature and often comments on the work.

The ends of term or semester have been chosen by most schools as official reporting times for a number of reasons. The ROSBA recommendations concerned with reporting cite ends-of-semester as possible reporting times. Another factor influencing practice is the flexibility principle operating within the Senior school. This principle operates with the semester as the basic time unit and allows students to choose among Board Subjects, Board-Registered School Subjects, School Subjects and subjects studied at other
institutions e.g. TAFE. Students are able to study the first three types of subjects for one to four semesters. Reporting times have traditionally been strongly associated with the timing of school holidays. The previous Radford system of assessment is another residual influence. It required official summative assessments at the ends of semesters (for the Senior school). This consolidated the position of the end of semester as a convenient reporting time for all sections of the school. The re-positioning of school holidays to coincide with end of semesters further entrenched these times as appropriate for reporting.

Discussion Paper 8, *Developing an Assessment Policy within a School* (Sadler, 1986), suggests that long-term benefits might accrue to both students and teachers if school reports were not so tightly coupled with the timing of tests. Staggering of official progressive reporting for different grades within a school, throughout the year and/or semester could provide one solution to the time problem which confronts teachers testing and reporting for all classes at the one time. Another alternative is staggering of official progressive reporting for different departments within a school, throughout each year and/or semester. The times chosen would reflect subject structure, (and the sequence of learning experiences over the year), needs of students and parents, and consideration of the other departments of the school. Severing the nexus between assessment and reporting times could help to equalise teachers’ work loads and allow assessment to become a more natural element of teaching and learning.

**Assessment for Dual Purposes**

The two purposes of assessment, formative and summative, are discussed in Discussion Paper 6, *Formative and Summative Assessment — A Complementary Approach* (McMeniman, 1986). The intended outcomes may arise through the use of separate instruments (often called ‘formative’ or ‘summative’ instruments), or they may evolve from the one instrument or task being used for the dual purposes. A common practice in some subjects presently is to provide little or no formative assessment to accompany ‘summative instruments’. Educationally, such information is still valuable. Further, combining both purposes when assessing might lead to decreased formal testing for formative purposes, and more time for teaching and learning.

**Conclusion**

Many issues are associated with reporting in schools. Some current practices connected with the three issues considered in this paper have potentially adverse consequences. These consequences are described, and alternate practices are suggested as a means of avoiding or mitigating the effect of these consequences.

**References**


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