

Competition: A product of the curse?

In this month's *Blast from the past*, Pages 6 and 7 following, D. Royce Sadler provides some interesting reflections on competition and whether Christians should both engage in it and embrace it into their lives and particularly the life of the church. (You might like to read it first before continuing.) It is a thought provoking article and I would like to further the conversation.

Standards-referenced

The Genesis passage is very helpful in articulating the whole approach to Christian assessment being standards-referenced. In education, standards-referenced assessment is not new. Since the 1980s, NSW has engaged in the basic skills tests, which measures student performance against standards in the form of pre-tested questions on an achievement scale with band cut-offs. Students are matched against the standard and only in comparison to that performance against each other.

The HSC has adopted standards-referenced reporting and the School Certificate program is heading that way in all subjects not just those currently tested externally. The use of ever-expanding variations of assessment methodology, provide reliable methods of assessing student performance against standards. It should be noted that these standards still have a touch of "normality" about them being based on the performance of students in a particular cohort at a particular time.

The implications for teachers of this movement to standards-referenced assessment is that they no longer have to rely on the competition of student against student to achieve the best results by beating other students. Teachers and students can focus on the standards and on raising performance to meet these standards. As in Christian communities, cooperation and harmony of purpose can be a goal so that each person does his or her best against the standard. But nothing in this life is perfect. The competition for university places, based on ranking within the HSC process, means that students still feel the pressure of competition against each other and, unfortunately, against students within their own school to get a better course rank that will influence the school-based assessment mark.

The world and the spirit

The Genesis reference has more to offer than the author has contributed. There is no place for competition in the Garden. It is the advent of sin and separation that sets humans against God and his creation. Indeed, creation suffers from human sin and yearns to be also brought back into harmony with the creator. In the post-fall world, competition is a way of life and survival of the fittest takes on new meaning. It is that survival instinct that breeds competitiveness and the challenge for Christians is how to cope with it. Cooperation, harmony and self-sacrifice are not the world's way; they come by the Spirit igniting those human qualities that reflect the very nature of the creator. While cooperation, harmony and self-sacrifice might not be exclusive to Christians, they are characteristics of God who in the unity of relationship, Father, Son and Spirit experience no competition.

For Christian teachers in all schools, the challenge is to be *in* the world but not *of* the world. When it come to competition, there is no reason to agonise over voluntary involvement in, or viewing of, competitive games, but to move the debate to a higher level about whether our relationships, teaching pedagogy and school policies and procedures promote competition or cooperation. Are students and staff rewarded for working together or for winning which creates losers?

In some public schools, and I suspect non-government as well, merit appointment and promotion can be about winning school-based opportunities to demonstrate performance and about competing with other teachers who pose a threat to appointments and promotions. When reading some teacher's applications I wonder when they ever find time to teach. The sooner we have teaching standards to eliminate some of this form of competition the better. And is the Senior Executive Service any better? Short-term performance contracts create winners and losers amongst senior officers, who need to be cooperating and setting joint, not individual, goals to move an organisation, and just part of it, forward.

Christians have an alternative way to competition, but they must demonstrate it by their lives and in their areas of responsibility if they are to win the right to promote it in the world.

John Gore