

Interpretation of End-4: Personal Development

Each student will acquire the skills, attitudes and knowledge to achieve personal highest potential.

Specification of the End 4 Criteria

The Specification of the End 4 criteria is not intended to simply repeat the statement in this Ends Policy. Specification serves the purpose of making explicit the scope and depth of the personal development values the Board of Trustees has directed the system to inculcate in every student. Therefore, the Chief Superintendent thinks it reasonable to objectify the specific components of this End Statement in order that the scope of the monitoring task and the task difficulty for data gathering can be fully addressed. This methodology of specifying the questions is a standard research approach to the measurement of human change in educational systems and other organizations.

The introduction to End 4 sets out the acquisition of skills, attitudes and knowledge necessary for the achievement of personal highest potential (Chief Superintendent's emphasis). Although these qualities appear to suggest straightforward (and measurable) human characteristics, the reality is that each of these human conditions covers an extremely broad spectrum of human functioning. One important task of accounting for progress towards these goals must therefore be to specify exactly what it means for each of our 100,000 students to "acquire" the skills, attitudes and knowledge contemplated in every one of the nine categories set out in End 4. This is a formidable task.

The magnitude of this task also raises the important issue of whether acquired knowledge of something can even exist without reference to a context. The answer to that question is a resounding "No." As Elliot Mishler's watershed paper suggests, the acquisition of knowledge, skills and attitudes always requires the specification of contexts.¹ It therefore follows that the benchmarks for confirming the acquisition of skills, attitudes and knowledge must always specify the contexts in which these attributes are demonstrated. Now the task is even more formidable:

Specify when each of 100,000 students has "acquired" the skills, attitudes and knowledge to achieve personal highest potential in nine domains in an unspecified (and potentially infinite) number of conceivable contexts.

¹ Mishler, E. (1979). "Meaning in context: Is there any other kind?" Harvard Educational Review. 49(1) pp. 1-19. Mishler's classic paper provided a powerful summary of the arguments against the quest for context-free structures in human thought. Jan Piaget and Lawrence Kohlberg had developed strong followings of disciples in the areas of cognitive development and moral development. Mishler addresses his argument to these disciples. His point is that there is no human meaning without reference to a context - an observation that exponentially compounds the difficulty of monitoring personal development even in one individual.

Another formidable challenge for monitoring End 4 may be found in the requirement to establish some notion of when each of our 100,000 students has reached his/her “personal highest potential.” Without specifying what is meant by that notion, it would be impossible to determine the requisite skills, attitudes and knowledge for that goal - and therefore impossible to monitor them. The Chief Superintendent is not aware of any literature that establishes benchmarks for the determination that the “personal highest potential” of any individual has been reached. On the contrary, there is an extremely robust social science literature that documents the destructive consequences of establishing pernicious benchmarks for human potential in minority populations, the developmentally challenged and women.

There are several other challenges for the measurement and monitoring of personal development. One is that the incidence of higher order developmental characteristics (love of learning; critical thinking; creative thinking) is very difficult to measure. Another is that thinking and behaviour often need to be differentiated for the purpose of assessing personal development. For example, what significance would we attach to the personal development of an individual who had “the ability to adapt to changing environments” (End 4, component #5) but chose not to? This phenomenon (the link between thought and behaviour) has been called “the fundamental problem of western social thought.”

Another issue concerns the highly complex matter of how to construe higher order developmental characteristics for research or monitoring purposes. For example, if we examine a personal quality like “love of learning” in a population of 100,000 students, should we construe it as a dichotomous variable or is it more appropriate to construe it as a continuous variable? The former perspective contemplates X percent of students who love learning and Y percent who do not. The latter perspective asks the infinitely more complex (and educationally generative) question, “Where, exactly, is each student on the developmental spectrum of loving learning?” These observations are not intended in any way to shirk responsibility for the massively important personal development of our students. They are, however, intended to raise consciousness about the complexity of measuring personal development in the social sciences. Without attending to these issues, no interpretation of the monitoring requirements could be counted as “reasonable.”

The following everyday examples are illustrative of the practical challenges schools face in assessing progress in developmental domains:

Example 1: How should we assess skill development in reading?



Phonemic awareness
Understanding syntax
Understanding symbolic language
Reading for understanding
Reading between the lines
Reading beyond the lines
Synthesizing values from reading
Evaluating texts for personal significance Relatively difficult to assess

Example 2: How would we assess attitude development in the following circumstances?

Self-report: I have a “good” attitude.
Self-report: I have a bad attitude.
Self-report: I demonstrate my attitude with consistent behaviour.
Observed: A “good” attitude and “good” behaviour.
Observed: A “good” attitude and “bad” behaviour.
Observed: Thoughtless attitude and “good” behaviour.
Observed: Thoughtless attitude and “bad” behaviour.
Observed: “Good” attitude in a “good” group.
Observed: “Good” attitude in a “bad” group.
Observed: “Bad” attitude in a “good” group.
Observed: “Bad” attitude in a “bad” group.

Example 3: Measuring Knowledge

To what extent would we report that students have “acquired knowledge” (for example, knowledge of the First World War) when we claim that they

Know that ... there was a First World War, and that ...?
Know when... the First World War was fought, and when ...?
Know how ... the First World War began, and how ...?
Know why ... there was a First World War, and why ...?
Know the impact of the First World War on Canada and on all other countries?
Know the impact of the First World War on men? ... on women? ... on children?
Know the significance of the First World War for the twenty-first century?

How to establish a reasonable interpretation: assessing task complexity

End-4 is a most laudable value statement. Indeed, one strong theme in the educational literature speaks to the importance of students reaching their highest potential. For more than a century, this very theme has been heavily influential in a number of ground-breaking educational reforms. The struggle for equality of educational opportunity rests on the assumption that every individual should be provided with the environment and the support necessary for optimizing his/her

human potential. The good news with respect to End-4 is that there is a massive commitment to the End-4 values in the Calgary Board of Education.