'Sharing Our Story'
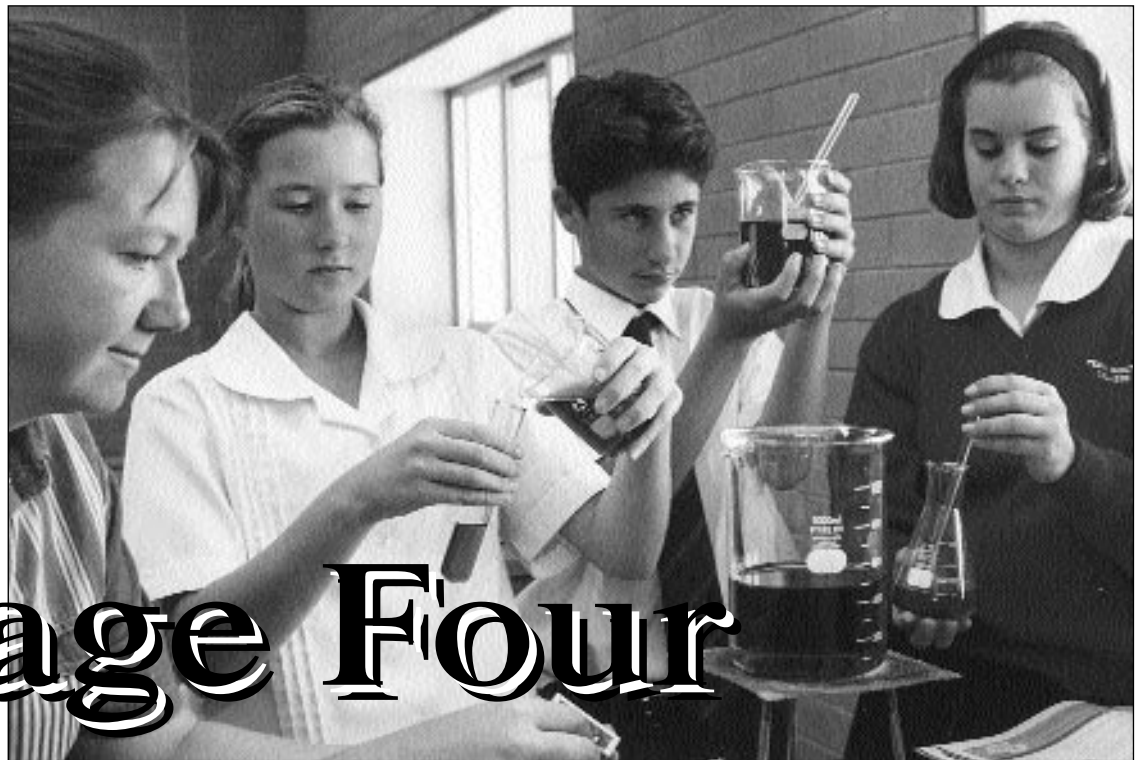
- Student Characteristics
- Teaching and Learning
- Curriculum Integration

Stage Four
Documentation

Acknowledgements

Stage Four

Introduction

As with all NSW curricula, *Sharing Our Story* is structured around six stages of schooling.

Individual students differ considerably in their backgrounds, abilities and general characteristics. However, students in any particular stage share a developmental pattern and have much in common. One of the great challenges confronting the teacher is to provide learning experiences that are *developmentally appropriate*, responding to the emerging capacities of the students themselves.

This section provides a description of students in one particular stage of schooling. The descriptions it offers are, of necessity, quite general and should be used with some caution. Teachers would readily recognise that the stages overlap and that not all the observations made here would apply to every student in this stage. Stage 4, for instance, coincides approximately with early adolescence and most of the observations made reflect that period of life. Some Stage 4 students, however, will not yet have reached adolescence; others will be developmentally well advanced.

For this reason, a synopsis of the stage on either side of the one being addressed has been provided.

Teachers are invited to reflect on the content of this section in the light of their observations and knowledge of their own students. This reflection can form an essential basis for the selection of appropriate teaching and learning activities.

The Stage 4 Student (Years 7-8)

The commencement of Stage 4 is marked by entry to the secondary school program. It also coincides, in very general terms, with the beginnings of adolescence and the gradual onset of the physical and emotional changes that mark this somewhat turbulent period of growth. The more secure world of late childhood is left behind.

Entry to high school brings new teachers, new learning arrangements, sometimes new friends, and a host of expectations. The natural curiosity that students bring to this can find an appropriate response in the R.E. classroom.

Social and Emotional Aspects

One of the great challenges of this period is the clarification of a concept of self.

During all stages of development, individuals focus on their identity, but for the adolescent the task is more complex. When the Stage 1 child asks 'Who am I?' the answer is found in name, place, family and those around him or her. The adolescent searches for more. 'What qualities do I possess?' 'What does it mean to be me?' 'How am I finding my identity in my relationships with others?'

Teachers may expect the Stage 4 students to exhibit some of the following as they move through this stage:

1. a certain moodiness and displays of temperamental behaviour; at times a student might show admirable responsibility and sense of purpose but then, quite unpredictably, demonstrate the opposite qualities;

2. some rebelliousness and lack of cooperation; a certain hostility towards some authority figures; a testing of the limits;

3. an exploring of different ways of behaving, with associated unpredictability;

4. a search for influential role models who may be found in popular and sporting culture as well as in the day-to-day school life of students;

5. an increasing reliance on the adolescent peer group which becomes the vital reference point and whose opinions and attitudes are often more highly valued than those of adults.

Intellectual Aspects

New intellectual capacities are in evidence during this stage as students move from the more concrete thinking of late childhood to the next stage of cognitive development.

By Year 7 many will exhibit a capacity to engage in formal and more abstract thinking by means of which they become more competent in developing hypotheses, making predictions, interpreting data, generalising and drawing conclusions. Of course, this is not always observable in all students, some of whom will be demonstrating characteristics of an earlier stage.

Teachers may expect Stage 4 students to exhibit some of the following:

- an increasing capacity to reflect on existing knowledge and to better understand cause and effect;

- greater ability to argue more systematically and to see situations from various points of view;

- a deeper understanding of how symbols can be connected to abstract concepts;

- an improved capacity to reflect on self; this cognitive ability has social and emotional consequences which are sometimes seen in self-consciousness, emotional vulnerability and a sense of frustration that may lead to apathy or aggression.

Faith/Moral Judgement Aspects

The growing capacity to reflect on self and to think in abstract terms, along with the importance of the adolescent peer group, contribute to development in moral reasoning and style of faith. This is seen in:

1. a capacity to comprehend images of God that go beyond the purely anthropomorphic and now embody particular qualities such as love, compassion, omnipresence …;

2. a strong conformity with the expressed religious views of other adolescents within the particular faith group, as well as those of loved and respected adults;

3. an inclination to 'compartmentalise' — that is, to see the world from the viewpoint of different groups (family, school friends, neighbourhood friends, etc.) at different times;

4. stronger consideration of the intention of the person in determining the morality of an action.

Implication for Teaching and Learning in Religious Education

1. The natural curiosity and enthusiasm of students commencing secondary schooling can be responded to by Religious Education programs that are intellectually stimulating. The disappointed observation, 'We've done all this before!' craves a creative response.

2. Teachers can assist the natural movement from concrete to more abstract thinking by stimulating the development of critical thinking (eg identifying qualities or argument, separating facts from assertions, identifying authority for certain viewpoints).

3. The new intellectual awakening of students provides an increased sophistication in understanding time in history, in appreciating alternative viewpoints and in making judgements about competing values.

4. In this context, significant social issues can be appropriately explored: justice, equity, peace, the distribution of wealth, the balance of freedom and responsibility.

5. Teachers should be conscious of the images of God that are presented. The named qualities of God, for instance, will be understood in terms of how those qualities are experienced in others.

6. Recognition of the significance of the peer group will lead to opportunities being provided for cooperative learning, negotiation of roles and responsibilities, and group work generally.

7. The importance of the peer group makes it particularly difficult for adolescent students to work and to express themselves outside the frame of reference of the group.

8. At this stage particularly, students need teachers who are tolerant and supportive yet strong enough to provide boundaries and clear guidance.

9. The fragile self-esteem of many early adolescents can be strengthened by affirmation, encouragement and the active presence of strong role models.

10. The students' growing capacity to reflect on self and on experiences can be a major consideration in devising learning experiences in Religious Education.

The Classroom of a Stage 4 Teacher

With a high proportion of 'unchurched' students in today's classes, I find that the issue of curriculum relevance has to be continually addressed.

In many cases, the values of society and the life experiences of students and parents can be at odds with the message of the Gospel. And students may lack the support that comes from close links between family, school and parish.

With the Stage 4 age group, particularly, I have found it essential to make valid connections between the call of the Kingdom and the daily life of the students.

John Honan
Xavier College, Cranebrook

Stage 4 in Context

Because individual differences amongst students are so great and stage descriptions must, of necessity, overlap, the following summaries are provided. Teachers may find it relevant to consult the expanded description of students provided for these stages.

Stage 3 (Years 5 and 6)

These children may be less spontaneous than previously but are generally more self-motivated and capable of absorbing considerable information. More sophisticated reasoning gives them greater understanding of consequences and a greater capacity for using talk to justify assertions and opinions. Values and judgements are now more strongly influenced by peers, and self-esteem is significantly enhanced by mastery of tasks.

Stage 5 (Years 9 and 10)

Confrontation and questioning characterise many students at this stage as they 'test the limits' and come to terms with massive physical and psychological change in their lives. The peer group remains very significant, providing identity and security yet demanding extreme conformity. The values and expectations of the adult world face critical questioning, and negative attitudes to organised religion are often expressed.

Consider Your Own Students

1. Which of these *characteristics* listed for this stage are most obvious amongst the children you are teaching?

2. Which characteristics do you consider most significant *in relation to teaching and learning in Religious Education?*

3. What particular *implications* seem to you to be most valid and useful?

4. What specific *teaching practices* or arrangements flow naturally from the implications you have identified?