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# Developing Systems of Comprehensive Student Profiling in Schools

JANE CHIA & JESSICA BALL

## Introduction

Interest in introducing a system of student profiling is gaining momentum among educators in Singapore. A few secondary schools and junior colleges are already well ahead in the design of materials and procedures. Many other schools are exploring alternative frameworks for putting a system of student profiles in place. Student profiling is both multidimensional in scope and developmental in nature. It is therefore highly compatible with the holistic and developmental aims that are increasingly being embraced by schools in Singapore.

Systems of student profiling originated in other countries with a grassroots movement among teachers seeking an avenue for involving students in assessing their own learning. They also sought a more well-rounded view of students than that yielded by scores on national examinations or results of selected school competitions.

Educators vary in their views about what should be included in student profiles and how they should be compiled. There is general agreement, however, that the profile should be designed so that it describes as clearly and broadly as possible the knowledge, skills, experiences, accomplishments, and personal traits of the student. For the purposes of the present discussion, we have adopted a broad definition of a student profile as being a collection of objective reports, subjective testimonials by teachers or fieldwork supervisors, student's personal statements, and, sometimes, representative work samples compiled by a student and his/her tutor.

It is important to note that student profiling is not a method of assessment per se, and the purpose of adopting student profiling is

not to replace methods of assessment currently in place. Rather, student profiling offers a comprehensive system for bringing together evidence of multiple aspects of a student's progress as well as several different perspectives on this progress. Relevant perspectives include the student's own view, that of the form tutor, subject teachers, leaders of extra curricular activities, other school and agency personnel involved with the student, field work supervisors (e.g., during work experience), as well as the view provided by examination results. Documentation from each of these viewpoints is brought together in a single, cohesive, readily accessible document that is added to over a student's time in school.

In recent years, the authors have been exploring with groups of in-service and pre-service teachers the use of profiling as a way of centrally involving students in monitoring and evaluating their own learning, performance, and personal development. Consensus about how profiling should be used and the mechanisms for implementing is not a goal of these explorations, however. Each school must reflect upon what is most important with respect to students' development individually and as a community, and what is feasible or desirable given the particular circumstances of the school. At the same time, however, it is desirable to have sufficient commonality in profiling documentation across schools as to be intelligible to end-users, including students, parents, potential employers, and officers in tertiary education.

This paper, summarizing our experiences of profiling in Singapore, Britain, Canada, and elsewhere, identifies issues which need to be addressed by staff in each school at all levels, including administrative, academic, and pastoral. Practical guidelines are offered here to provide a framework for planning and undertaking a profiling innovation, particularly with respect to organizational issues, personnel, resource implications, and in-service provision. At the end of the paper a reading list is provided for educators to pursue these areas in greater depth.

## I. The Process of Profiling.

1. **Student input in formative profiling.** Profiling exemplifies a student-centred approach to learning where the student is an active participant. Thus, most profiling systems include an element of formative student recording, although schools in which profiling occurs vary as to the relative weight attached to this process. Personal recording by students typically occurs during tutorial periods. Many students find this process valuable when the summative document is compiled. In some schools in Britain, personal recording systems are deliberately unstructured and deemed to be the total concern of the student, even to the extent that teachers have to be invited by the student before they are permitted to read entries in the record. Other systems provide semi-structured focus sheets for students to complete, including topics such as hobbies, interests, temporary jobs, and athletic achievements. Regardless of the system adopted, our experiences suggest that students should not be pressured into completing records too frequently, since this often has a demotivating effect.

**Individual conferences.** In schools where profiling occurs, conferences between individual students and tutors are typically held twice a year. These generally take 15-20 minutes, and involve a review of the contents of the profile to date, as well as a discussion of the student's progress, plans, and concerns across all aspects of school life. Formative profiling emphasizes genuine, supportive dialogue between students and teachers which encourages students to assess and reflect upon their learning experiences, shortcomings, and achievements. Through this dialogue, students are enabled to develop skills of self-awareness and self-evaluation.

3. **Cross-curricular recording.** Coherent development and general acceptance of a "core" profiling document used by teachers and students across subject areas tends to occur more readily when schools are organized according to a faculty system rather than on a departmental basis. Within the context of a faculty structure, identification of cross-curricular skills that should be reflected in students' profiles tends to be less

problematic than in schools with perhaps a dozen or more departments. Many profiling schemes, notably those which use a comment bank style of profile, attempt to identify personal and social skills across the curriculum. Other skills, for example numeracy, literacy, graphicacy, and physical coordination, have been much slower to gain a cross-curricular perspective, especially in schools with a large number of departments. However, the representativeness of students' profiles is enhanced by having a focus upon abilities that are common to, or transferable across subject areas, as well as on subject-specific skills.

4. **Compilation of the summative profile.** The philosophy of profiling emphasizes the formative processes of students and teachers working together to plan, monitor, and evaluate the students' progress in relation to his or her goals, rather than emphasizing an end product. Nevertheless, schools embarking on profiling must consider the summative profile, frequently called the Record of Achievement. We consider it important that the summative document should arise out of the on-going profiling process, including dialogues between students and their tutor, and should not be permitted to prescribe that formative work.

Most procedural guidelines and examples of Records of Achievement, affirm the importance of a succinct document encompassing at least the sections listed below.

- (a) A brief curriculum vitae including the student's name, address, school, date of birth, family background, courses studied in school and elsewhere, membership in clubs or teams, hobbies, interests, and goals.
- (b) A personal statement by the student, discussed with a tutor, which enlarges upon the curriculum vitae section and describes achievements and personal assets both in and out of school.
- (c) Statements from each of the student's subject teachers evolving from student-teacher discussions.

Evidence may be included that exemplifies or substantiates aspects of the objective record and testimonials contained in each of these sections. For example, supporting documents might include work experience reports, photographs, first aid or music examination certificates, awards, or representative classroom work.

**5. Format and intelligibility of the summative profile.**

Consideration must be given to the appearance of the summative profile in order to increase their value to students and their credibility for end-users. Parameters for the format of profiling documentation, both formative and summative, should be established in order to enhance clarity and intelligibility. Thus, for example, decisions need to be made about the size and length of students' profiles, the inclusion of selected academic or non-academic assessment scales and examination scores, the type of paper to be used, and so forth. These steps toward standardization should not, however, be allowed to become a straightjacket upon future refinements to the recording system. Nor should they unduly restrict variations across subject areas within the overall documentation framework.

**6. Security and retrieval of information.**

A profiling system requires secure provision for the storage and retrieval of information. Students need to be assured that their profiles are not widely accessible. We would argue in favour of a policy that the summary document of record should become the property of the student, who would be free to decide whether to show it to prospective employers or others. Schools should retain a master copy after the student leaves the school, and meet reasonable requests for duplicate copies by students who need them.

**II. Institutionalization of Profiling.**

**1. Principal's role.** Various strategies may be used to institutionalize the profiling innovation. Perhaps most importantly, the principal and administrative structure of the school must support and be congruent with the profiling

innovation. The principal needs to plan how he or she might best facilitate and support the innovation through the iterative phases of planning, implementation, evaluation, and refinement. The Heads of Departments must also be seen to be committed to profiling and actively support its implementation, occasionally bringing pressure to bear, or making decisions, in order to encourage the system to develop.

**Coordinating teacher.** Our experience suggests that, alongside an actively supportive principal, a teacher who is receptive to the philosophy of profiling and who is respected by staff should be identified as a Coordinator for the profiling initiative. The requirements involved in implementing profiling should become explicit and integral to the Coordinator's job description in order to raise the visibility of the profiling initiative and to ensure recognition the Coordinator's role in the innovation. The Coordinator should be a member of staff with a senior post in the school who is able to exert pressure where necessary. Sufficient time must be afforded to the Coordinator to undertake activities essential to staff training and profiling implementation. Although the principal will ultimately make policy decisions and allocate resources, the Coordinator will be responsible for generating "grass roots" support and understanding of profiling.

3. **Profiling committee.** The establishment of a working committee, with representatives from all the subject and pastoral areas, is often an effective vehicle for ensuring communication about and providing on-going support for the profiling initiative. This group can be helpful in formulating a profiling policy statement for the school, monitoring progress, and evaluating the innovation.
4. **Group tutors.** Group tutors are central to the processes and mechanics of a profiling system. Some responsibilities of tutors are listed below.
  - (a) Compilation and collation of the formative profiles
  - (b) Compilation and collation of the summative profiles

- (c) Regular individual student interviews
- (d) Consultation with parents
- (e) Furthering the development of students' skills of self-reflection, self-expression, and communication among students in the tutorial group, since these skills are essential to profiling.

**5. Time management.** Our experiences have shown that developing a system of profiling frequently requires changes to the structure of the school day and to the management of time generally. Many schools introduce larger blocks of time within the school day and provide for the inclusion of a time-tabled tutorial period during which students can work on profile entries alone, in groups, and with their tutor, as well as on other developmental endeavours (e.g., PCCG).

Other time implications will include allocation for meetings and in-service provision, collation and compilation of profile documentation, and the possibility of additional non-contact time for group tutors to engage in work related to student profiles (e.g., communicating with students' subject teachers, conferencing with individual students).

**6. Resources.** A prime focus for the principal as facilitator of the profiling innovation is to ensure the availability of resources which will support the initiative. The nature and magnitude of resources needed vary throughout phases of innovation, but will always include:

- (a) The provision of in-service staff development programmes
- (b) Sufficient budget allocation (e.g., for materials, training)
- (c) Clerical support
- (d) Computer hardware, software, and expertise
- (e) Time, including teacher time and management of whole school time

**Revising existing monitoring and reporting procedures.** A major aim of a profiling initiative must be that it eventually subsumes and replaces all the existing reporting procedures in a school. Meeting this aim may take as long as required to demonstrate that the system is operating satisfactorily. We have found that if profiling does not replace existing procedures and is assumed to be an additional expectation of teachers, then staff become inundated by a paper deluge which is extremely time-consuming. The outcome tends to be that staff merely pay lip service to profiling and it becomes peripheral to recording procedures that already exist, and irrelevant to students' learning experiences.

Although profiling can be used to advantage at any level of schooling, many schools in Britain, Canada, and elsewhere use profiling only during the last two years of secondary education. Nevertheless, profiling initiatives have repercussions for the whole school. Some of the issues that tend to emerge and that should be anticipated in staff discussions are listed.

- (a) When should the compilation of profiling documentation begin in the school?
- (b) Will there be comparable profiling initiatives in both primary and secondary schools? If so, how will the two profiling systems connect and be compatible?
- (c) If profiling does not begin in Secondary 1 and 2, what opportunities will be afforded to students to acquire the capacities for self-reflection, self-monitoring, and self-evaluation which are necessary for meaningful involvement in profiling?
- (d) In its design, can the students' summative profiles provide information for all prospective end-users, including the students themselves, their parents, MINDEF officers, employers and staff in tertiary institutions?

- 8. In-service provision.** In-service training and follow-up support throughout the innovative stages of profiling is of fundamental importance. Several issues have been identified by teachers with whom we have worked as being significant for staff debate and decision-making in the early and later stages of implementing profiling. These are listed below. Prescription of how to define or act upon each of these aspects of profiling is neither possible nor desirable, since these are areas that must be elaborated with reference to the needs of each school.

**Developmental training phase:**

- The philosophy of profiling
- Formative profiling and summative profiles
- Range and examples of possible formats
- Subjectivity and profiles
- Interpersonal and dialogue skills
- Use of language in profile documentation
- Identification of cross-curricular skills and qualities
- Use of profiles by those outside of schools
- Use of computers for reporting and recording information about students
- Involvement of parents in contributing to the profile
- Dissemination of profiles to parents throughout the school year

**Post-development phase:**

- Value judgements and stereotyping in profiling documentation
- Linking profiling statements to curricular aims so that the profiling scheme truly reflects learning programmes
- Familiarization of all teachers with the totality of the profiling system, both in terms of philosophy and mechanics

- Involving students meaningfully in profiling and creating a collaborative atmosphere for dialogue between students and tutors
- Reviewing and modifying the profiling system in light of experience
- Developing necessary evaluation skills
- Evaluating the in-service programme and the profiling initiative

It is evident from the foregoing inventory of areas that might be addressed that introducing, supporting, and refining a system of profiling requires wide and varied in-service training and conferencing opportunities. Indeed, once the intention to develop a profile scheme has been actively embraced by a school, it is our experience that few aspects of life in a school will escape re-examination.

A delicate balance must be achieved between overloading staff with too much information too soon, with the result that teachers feel overwhelmed, and too little activity, possibly resulting in a loss of momentum. Two further aspects of in-service provision are, first, that familiarity with the profiling initiative should become an integral part of the induction programme for newly appointed staff in a school. Second, teachers will require time to meet together in informal, open-forum groups where they can voice concerns and air ideas about the innovation.

- 9. The small-scale, gradualist approach to innovation.** In common with other system-based innovations, the development of a profiling system in a school frequently depends upon, or gives rise to, concurrent innovations. Thus, a school embarking upon profiling may need to plan and manage other innovations, for example an extension of the school-based in-service programme, changes in the role of the tutor, and changes in the management of whole institution time.

It may be an advantage to present profiling in relatively small, manageable segments. Once teachers gain mastery and

confidence in a new idea or procedure, they are often more receptive to further innovation. Where this gradualist strategy has been employed, it has often been found that the demand for further developments begin to come increasingly from teachers themselves. Occasionally there are contextual factors that prohibit gradual introduction of profiling. However, it may nevertheless be possible to pilot profiling materials and procedures with a small group of students and teachers and to create situations where staff can have first-hand experience of profiling in a carefully planned setting.

### **Concluding comment.**

Many current educational initiatives in Singapore have the aims of increasing students' active involvement in the process of learning, shifting the focus of subject teaching toward greater emphasis on transferable cognitive processes, skills, concepts, and attitudes rather than predominantly on content, and expanding the scope of education to encompass "the whole child" including personal, social, and vocational experiences and goals. These aims are reflected, for example, in the call for more teaching strategies that promote active and imaginative learning, rather than over-reliance upon memorisation. They are also reflected in the system-wide adoption of the concepts and active tutorial work involved in Pastoral Care and Career Guidance. Profiling offers an approach to assessment and reporting that contributes to achieving these aims: it is participatory and yields a more comprehensive and unified representation of a students' experiences and achievement in school than do traditional, non-participatory, exam-focused reporting mechanisms.

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