Great teachers are open to whatever it takes to bring out the best in your children, uncover their talents and stop them ‘falling through the cracks’, whether it be through newer teaching modes or by methods of assessment that fall outside the norm.

Melbourne’s Nazareth Catholic College involved 90 Year 4 students in a mock natural-disaster scenario in which a ‘tornado’ laid waste to the school grounds and surrounds, injuring 12 students. Local fire brigades, police and emergency services were involved, and each student was given an area of responsibility such as first aid, emergency shelter, or search and rescue. The aim was to not only identify students’ existing skills in a challenging situation, but assess their ability to negotiate, work collaboratively, plan, create and problem-solve, and devise future learning accordingly.

Nazareth’s director of learning technologies (K-7) Emma Fowler says the school also uses assessments based around higher-learning areas, such as analysis and creativity in tasks that focus on collaboration, conflict resolution and other important life skills. “My role is to help children facilitate their ideas,” she says. “You can do pre-assessments that give you a snapshot, but they don’t really give you a true picture of each child. Ongoing close observation and interaction let us move their learning forward. Kids are capable of shocking us in a good way: you just have to be open and willing to see it.”

Less dramatic but similarly innovative is the approach taken by Kindergarten teacher Sally Wynne at Sydney’s Ravenswood School for Girls. Sally videos her classes and presents an end-of-term digital insight to parents that serves as a broader assessment tool. “It lets us lay out a clear picture for parents of their children’s capabilities, which is what they really want to know.”

Arden Anglican School in Sydney uses a number of diagnostic tools, observation and progressive-testing assessments to see how educators are meeting students’ needs and tailor teaching accordingly. Tiali Fraser, director of teaching & learning (K-6), says teachers work together to develop assessments that target specific aspects of learning, such as how children have grasped the teachings and absorbed concepts.

However, Arden has also taken a further step by using a questionnaire devised by the research organisation Gallup, which looks beyond the simply academic to measure Year 5 and 6 students’ levels of hope, engagement and wellbeing. Graded responses are sought for questions and statements such as, ‘I can find lots of ways around any problem’, ‘I feel safe in this school’, ‘My teachers make me feel my schoolwork is important’: ‘Were you treated with respect all day yesterday?’; and ‘Did you smile or laugh a lot yesterday?’.

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Sydney’s William Clarke College goes beyond traditional pen-and-paper assessment with its own ‘collaborative teaching mode’, in which one teacher conducts individual assessments of students while another teacher focuses on the class as a whole. Assistant deputy K-6 Felicity Grima says this type of assessment is conducted across Kindergarten to Year 4 throughout the year, and lets students with unique needs and learning styles access a more diverse range of learning experiences, while helping the school identify when additional assistance is required from the learning-support specialist team and its gifted-and-talented coordinator.

She says while the school aims for consistency in its assessments across Kindergarten to Year 4, “There are times when teachers will adopt methods that allow children to show their understanding in different ways, for example using technology to record an oral, rather than written, response. If we only used pen-and-paper assessments, we wouldn’t be letting students show their true breadth of knowledge and understanding.”