

Standardized Testing: A Study
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Abstract:

This paper looks at the resistance to and the advisability of provincial standardized testing. I have experience in quite a few provinces and have seen standardized testing in different forms. In an offshore school in China I saw them take our standardized tests to a new level and I would say they have moved way past accountability into a kind of mania about it there. So I have attempted to meld my own professional experiences with the research I found on testing and arrived at a research based position on standardized testing. Regardless of what our views are on testing, the fact is that it is here and probably here to stay. So I have ended this paper with some suggestions about how to minimize the effects of high stakes, stressful provincial and standardized tests on students.

Introduction

Accountability and transparency! These are words used to justify high stakes standardized tests. No longer do we trust teachers with the education of our children, we want to see what they have learned and how they compare to other students in other provinces and countries. A growing body of literature suggests what teachers have known for a long time: standardized tests do not really test the deep knowledge of students and they do not help students learn better. In fact they may even damage the student's ability to learn a subject well as teachers move away from best practices and strive to teach what may (or may not) be on the provincial test.

Additionally, some researchers (Kohn, 2013) state that writing and interpreting standardized test is more difficult than it may seem. It is not a simple literacy or numeracy test when you add in all the factors that can sway the results and may, in fact, be a test of socioeconomic status, skill in taking the test itself, or lack of learning disorders. Despite evidence (Kohn, 2000) that these tests may damage our education systems, there is a perceived need to keep administrators and teachers

accountable to government. Perhaps there is a way to help minimize the damage to our students as we move through the minefield of politics on our quest to educate our country's youth and there may even be a way for us to provide deeper thinking skills for students as they take standardized tests.

Reasons for standardized provincial testing

The drive to test students in a standardized way seems to be increasing. A need for universities to be sure of the ability of the students they are accepting, employers to know that their employees have basic reading, writing, and math skills, and for governments to know how their country/province/municipality will measure up against others. There is also the acknowledgement, as mentioned by my colleague S. Gillespie, that not all teachers teach well and not everyone is actually teaching to the curriculum (personal communication, March 23, 2015), or is skilled at assessing their students. There are, unfortunately, some teachers who are not.

The lack of trust in teachers and in the system of education is a complicated problem that started around the late 1960's (Popham, 2011, pg 4). With a new mistrust of teachers and what they were teaching their students, some of the American states introduced minimum competency tests in order to ensure that students were meeting minimal requirements for graduation (Popham, 2011). This has morphed into a "scoreboard-induced motivation" (Popham, 2011, pg. 13) where people avidly watch various school's scores to be published and "School administrators at all levels were evaluated almost exclusively on the basis of students' scores on standardized achievement tests" as well as teachers and schools (Popham, 2011, pg. 13). We have created quite a destructive system where the attention has shifted away from actual learning to the ability to take tests well. This has not served our students well and as the objective of education is not to merely be able to take tests and develop strategies for taking tests but to

develop real world and critical thinking skills that will serve people throughout their lives, this has been very damaging.

To test or not to test

In an ideal world, students would come to class with an open mind, ready and eager to learn. Our government would support and trust teachers to effectively teach children and youth. Teachers would have experience and confidence in teaching different types of learners and would make all their lessons interesting and engaging. Assessments would be meaningful, thorough, and would be both interesting, engaging and accessible. Education bodies would create amazing curriculum based on the interests and learning styles of all students. Parents would support and respect what their child's teacher was doing and everyone would all get along. However, in this world this is not the case and the reality is less than ideal.

Problem with testing: issues in standardized testing

The ways that standardized tests are bad for students and bad for learning are well documented. As Alfie Kohn says in his Vimeo interview with Saskatchewan's Dr. Marc Spooner, "You can do far better assessment and far better teaching when you don't have a provincial test" (Kohn, 2013). He believes that the important thing in education is finding authentic assessments and that provincial tests miss the mark, instead focusing on a 'corporate style, test driven, heavy handed approach' that "dumb down the learning into something that can be quantified" (Kohn, 2013). Kohn's (2013) research found that teachers who know they are going to be judged by a provincial standard teach in a different, more "Drill sergeant" way than those that are focused on authentic, deep learning of their students with no fear of punishment or judgement. Popham (2013) agrees, stating: "As many beleaguered educators will comment, "If our chief job is to raise test scores, why waste time teaching content that's not even tested?"

(Popham, 2013, pg. 19). Todd Farley (2009) also agrees in his book “Making the Grades: My misadventures in the standardized testing industry.” when he mentions that students are being scored on standardized tests in a way that is incomprehensible, highlighting the problems with rubrics being used to score tests. In his very amusing book, Farley (2009) takes the reader on a journey through the test scorer’s world where people (often unqualified) are given a rubric and asked to make decisions about students whom they’ve never met based on one test that they’ve taken. He feels that the teachers in the classroom who teach them every day have better information about their students than do the faceless scorers behind the computer screen (Farley, 2009).

Added to all of this is the problem of actually scoring the tests and creating a good test that assesses student’s ability to do what you want them to be able to do at the end of a course of studies. Both Popham (2001) and Farley (2009) mention that the way tests are designed, written, and marked are unfair, unclear, unreliable and often both creating and marking are arbitrary. Anyone who has taught a class of English as a second language students and has had to administer a provincial exam knows this is true. ESL students naturally struggle with words that native language speakers know without having to think too hard. The only way to soften the effects of a standardized test on ESL students is to find out what is going to be on the test ahead of time and make sure the words that are on the test are known by the students ahead of time. Simple words like ‘nightmare’ may not be known to an ESL student, as we learned in China during a mid-term exam administered by a department head that was new to teaching. Mark J. Garrison takes it one step further in his book “A Measure of Failure: The Political origins of standardized testing” when he points out the deep political reasons for testing and insinuates that the real reason for these tests is the need to maintain the status quo in our

society (2009). The idea that socioeconomically advantaged students will have better test scores is an idea that is accepted by almost all teachers, including myself. This is also true of English as a Second Language (ESL) students who naturally struggle with wording and concepts on provincial tests (Menken, 2008). Much more research needs to be done to address these inequities.

From my own experience, I agree with the researchers who find that teachers who teach students knowing that a provincial test looms changes the teacher's pedagogy. I have taught in provinces where a standardized test was not connected to my teaching (in Ontario and Quebec) and I have taught in places where the provincial test was testing content I had just taught students. Back when I was a new teacher in both Ontario (who had the EQAO test far removed from my history curriculum) and northern Quebec (the provincial tests did not apply to the Inuit), I can say I taught in a different, more effective way, which focused on student learning, enjoyment of learning, and the skills they needed in life because there was no worry about provincial testing. I feel that my teaching changed a great deal when under the gun of the BC provincial Social Studies test when I was in China and the BC provincial examinable course in Science 10 when I was teaching in British Columbia. I am finding the same thing true of Alberta, where we are gearing the entire Social Studies program in Grade 10, 11 and 12 to the diploma exams in Grade 12. One of the issues in China is that the provincial exams were not the only ones we had to worry about. Every course had been set up to standardized testing, the department head from every department created tests and exams for every course and no teacher made their own test for any unit, midterm or final. Under this new paradigm, I became a teacher who used a standard PowerPoint/lecture style of teaching, something I had never done before. I felt I needed to cover the curriculum points to a T so that I wasn't blamed when the students

failed the exam. I imagined, especially at first, that at least I was ‘teaching them’ to the best of my abilities. However, test scores proved to me that I hadn’t taught them very well and in the second year I switched to a project based learning method. Fighting against convention was difficult but with the support of my administrator, I persevered (without the support of my department head, the parents and the students themselves, this was an uphill struggle). The next test showed some improvement and by the end of the course, my students were doing better than most of the other classes and I had teachers come in to my class to see what I was doing.

Teachers are not the only people who are against standardized and high stakes testing, parents are starting to speak out against it as well. Speaking out against the PARCC (Partnership for the Assessment of Readiness for College and Career) exams in the USA, parents are starting to see that the tests are damaging their child’s enjoyment of learning and school, their self-esteem and their education (The Other PARCC-Parents Advocating Refusal on High-Stakes Testing video on <https://vimeo.com/120619448>). Jia Lee agrees with them in her speech to the US Senate when she declares herself to be a conscientious objector to tests that are pandering to corporate interests (2015). She strongly believes that these tests are hurting students and should be removed.

In defense of standardized testing

If testing has all of these problems, why do we do it? It adds stress to students, makes it very difficult for ESL students to get a diploma, and stunts the education process in schools so how do politicians, parents and administrators of the tests justify it? Rothman & Elmore (1999) answer this question in their book “Testing, teaching, and learning: A guide for states and school districts.” They advocate for setting standards in schools, greater accountability for both teachers and students, providing clear expectations for both so that they will work harder, and

this will lead to higher levels of learning (pg. 16). They also feel that using standardized assessment methods will help teachers diagnose problems early on so that students can then move on to meet expectations (pg. 17). Ontario education agrees with this and it is one of their reasons for doing the EQAO (Education Equality and Accountability Office) test early on in the student's high school career instead of at the end.

Definitely in places like China, standardized testing is not just accepted but expected. However, in other countries the idea of standardized testing is not just about accountability, although that certainly is part of it (a teacher in China will lose pay if a student fails a test), but it is also about creating an elite group of academics. In China, the school I taught in was very proud of finding and developing an elite group of students who could make it into the top universities of the world. The students who could not make it were sorted out like chaff by standardized testing. I think this may not have been wholly embraced or even understood by our young, inexperienced teachers, but the idea of testing caught hold and became a sort of mania. Every department had a test for every unit and it was all standardized. As an administrator, I witnessed one of the departments take standardization a step further and actually started administering standardized lesson plans every day. All teachers in that department were required to teach in a certain way, a certain set of ideas presented in a particular way. If the students did not demonstrate comprehension, there was no re-teaching. Instead the class moved on to the next mandated lesson. If a student failed the test, the student was completely at fault. It was rationalized that the student simply didn't work hard enough to be able to pass. This fit very well into the cultural beliefs in China about working harder if you fail. It would not occur to a Chinese student to blame his or her teacher if he failed, the assumption would be that it was

because the student's work ethic was lacking. This kind of scapegoating doesn't just exist in China. It is well documented throughout the education world (Hargis, 1990, pg. 57).

Testing is here! Probably to stay

Whether or not provincial testing is good for students are not is moot at this point. We can complain all we want, produce all the research we want, and know in our hearts all we need to that standardized testing is bad for students, bad for learning and not a good way to really assess deep learning. Standardized provincial tests are here. In Ontario they have the Education Equality and Accountability Office (EQAO) tests that are mandatory for all students who want to graduate from an Ontario high school. The EQAO test is for literacy and numeracy and is designed to make sure each student has the basic skills in reading, writing and math that they need to in order to say they graduated from Ontario. In BC they have provincial exams scattered through secondary grades. In grade 10 students write their Science, English, and Math exams, in grade 11 Social Studies, in grade 12 you have either Communications or English. (Handbook of procedures-Exam schedule). In Alberta they have the Provincial Achievement Test (PAT) exams in grade 6 and 9 and the diploma exams in grade 12 which are supposed to be a culmination of knowledge throughout the courses one takes in high school. A core problem with all of those standardized tests is that they rely on easy-to-mark multiple choice questions which do not truly test a deep knowledge or understanding. In BC particularly, the Social Studies exam seems to be based on an arbitrary choosing of a smattering of historical trivia that a student may or may not have picked up throughout the grade 11 course. The Science exam in BC is no better although that test seems more of a test of the students grasp of scientific vocabulary rather than a deep knowledge of how science works. This has led many teachers to teach to the test instead of focusing on the deep knowledge and skills a student will need to carry on with their academic

career or the habits of mind and critical thinking skills we hope students carry with them in their life. With this being the case, how does a teacher or an administrator try to lessen the damage to a student's mark and their self-esteem, and perhaps their future academic career?

Lessening the Damage

In Ontario I witnessed the English department take large blocks of time out of their normal schedule to prep students for the EQAO exam and they successfully raised the school's average test scores doing this. Throughout Ontario booklets are circulated to help all subject teachers prepare students for the EQAO literacy test by incorporating literacy strategies in all courses. In China I saw teachers offering well-attended after-school tutorials to help students prepare for the provincial exams. I also noticed that many teachers spent the two years before the provincial exams giving provincial exam-like tests that would help students prepare for the types of questions that would be on the test. From my experience, this did not raise tests scores and may have actually lessened the learning that happened in the classrooms.

One of the administrators that I worked with said at an Assessment and Evaluation committee meeting that one does not raise test scores by doing more tests, one raises test scores by actually teaching the material that is in the curriculum in a better way. (McCahill, 2014) This was lost on a lot of teachers, as they were caught up in a test mania that was created by the provincial tests that so captured the attention of the Ministry inspectors who came through every year. "Good teachers have always known that effective learning requires practice and very specific performance feedback to build success" (Tankersley, 2007, p. 16). Tankersley advocates for teachers to learn exactly what is going to be on the high stakes test and then teaching students exactly what they need to know to pass the tests they need to take (p. 152).

Others who are interested in fixing the standardized testing paradigm advocate for teaching both parents and educators how to evaluate whether the tests are valuable and helpful to their children and students. James Popham points out that parental advocacy for change is quite politically powerful (Popham, 2001, p. 153) and parents will fight very effectively if they are educated about the testing policies in their area and want things to change. This has certainly been true in both New Jersey and New York, where parents are advocating for refusing the high stakes PARCC test in their state because they now feel that it is harmful to their children (The Other PARCC - Parents Advocating Refusal on High-Stakes Testing).

Conclusion

Standardized testing has limitations and problems that stem from problematic testing methods, trivia type questions and an inability to really test what matters when we are educating students. However, it is likely here to stay so it is essential for educators, administrators and parents to learn how to lessen the damaging effects from testing. Teaching to the test by ensuring students are prepared with solid test taking strategies and content knowledge is likely to improve test scores and reduce anxiety. Encouraging parental advocacy by educating them about issues around standardized testing may ultimately result in the political will to replace standardized tests with more impactful assessments. Many teachers and administrators are forced to take valuable learning time away from courses in order to prepare students for the testing in their province and this situation is less than ideal. Rich and meaningful teaching and learning will be much more likely when summative assessments allow students to fully express their ideas, are deeply connected to the learning experience they have had in the classroom, and are a real measure of what they have learned.

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