



Notes

TEACHERS, TEACHING AND PUBLIC EDUCATION UNDER PRESSURE

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In his discussion of key pressures driving the push for more external assessment in education – pressures generally shaping the policy environment in which teachers and other educators work – David Robinson (CAUT Associate Executive Director), speaking at the CTF President's Forum on External Assessment in Ottawa in July 2009, cited the usual suspects: neo-liberal economic globalization (underpinned by the ideology that the market rules); declines in public funding; and the new public management.

Among the impacts of these trends and pressures on public education has been an emphasis on test-driven accountability and on standardization of teaching and learning in general; a fostering of competition between schools and of commercialization within schools; growing privatization including public-private partnerships (see Education International, 2009) and more subtle forms of privatization such as the privatization of education policy; and more emphasis on “outputs” and less on “inputs”. In the current economic climate, a major expected output of schools is contributing to the expansion of human capital to enable countries to better compete in the information-based global economy.

Large-scale student assessment regularly takes place in most jurisdictions across Canada, a fact not lost on the Fraser Institute and other right-wing think tanks such as the Atlantic Institute for Market Studies (AIMS) which have been using the test results as the primary basis for compiling school rankings at both the elementary and secondary level in most provinces for over a decade (see Gutstein, 2010). AIMS, in cooperation with the Frontier Centre for Public Policy, recently released a report ranking all secondary schools in Western Canada including Saskatchewan. Echoing the concerns of teacher unions across the country, Saskatchewan Teachers' Federation General Secretary Gwen Dueck stresses that:

The ranking or rating of schools in a community or public forum does not serve a useful educational purpose. Rather, these kinds of reports undermine the credibility of the publicly funded educational system, programs, and staff by

encouraging readers to make unfair comparisons among schools and draw inappropriate conclusions about assessment results and the quality of teaching and learning. [emphasis added] (Saskatchewan Teachers' Federation, 2010)

The frequency of external testing at different levels (provincial/territorial, national, international) – coupled with the high visibility accorded by the mainstream media to the results, usually in the form of league tables, and the imperatives of short term political mandates – have all contributed to a focus on improving one's position within the list of rankings, as well as to a narrow focus on the tested subjects of math, science and reading.

In this era of accountability-by-numbers, the elevated status accorded to large-scale external assessments such as the OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) is symptomatic of a trend towards data-driven policy initiatives in education, and the need for regular sources of outcome data to constantly feed narrow indicators of accountability. Hargreaves and Shirley (2009) argue that we've been distracted down this "path of technocracy" in which "technocrats value what they measure instead of measuring what they value" (p. 31). They demonstrate how data in education can be misleading, misinterpreted and/or misused, stating that an "*overreliance on data distorts the system* and leads it to ignore and marginalize the importance of moral judgment and professional responsibility." (p. 31) The culture of standards-based accountability and data-driven school improvement distorts the educational process, and can result in "gaming the system", leading to "cynical, quick-fix strategies to appease administrative superiors and create the appearances of improvement that would keep politicians and the public at bay." (p. 40)

To illustrate, they cite the example of an Ontario high school which pre-tested students in advance of the grade 10 literacy test (a graduation requirement) and then focused the efforts of the English department on test preparation for the 20% of students whose marks were just below a pass.

Or the case of a primary school in London (UK) which showed dramatic achievement gains by assigning strong teachers to Year 6 (a key testing point),

drilling those teachers in test preparation procedures, and obliging them to abandon all other areas of the curriculum except the areas that were being tested. Because there was great improvement in Year 6 but none in Year 2 (Key Stage 1) where the weaker teachers remained, the school was able to register a phenomenal record in demonstrating value-added student progress between the two key stages, and so came to be counted among the most improved schools in the nation. (Hargreaves & Shirley, p. 40)

No analysis of the impact of test-driven accountability to distort educational processes would be complete without mention of the *No Child Left Behind* legislation. Adopted in 2002, NCLB embodies the U.S. obsession with standardized testing, providing numerous examples of how student test performance can be manipulated to show improvements that have little to do with real learning. Described as "George W. Bush's lasting gift to American public education", Yakabuski – in an article appropriately entitled "A teachable moment for American schools" – notes that NCLB has resulted in "everyone gaming the system":

[NCLB] made states eligible for extra federal cash if they could show continuous improvement in student scores on state-administered tests. Unfortunately, the law created a set of perverse incentives for teachers, students and bureaucrats alike. Teachers have increasingly ‘taught to the tests,’ diminishing the emphasis on other worthy material and subjects. Students have ‘learned’ what’s needed to score better on the tests. And states have lowered standards to raise student scores and get their hands on the federal moola. In other words, everyone is gaming the system. The proof is that students in almost every jurisdiction have shown eye-popping improvement on state tests, even though their scores on the federally administered National Assessment of Education Progress tests have been flat since 2002.

Yakabuski also highlights the impact of poverty on student achievement, noting that “income inequality is the elephant in the room of U.S. education policy.”

[Income inequality] goes almost entirely unmentioned as a causal factor in the low test scores of black and Hispanic students, though the efforts to single-mindedly “lift” math and reading scores are focused squarely on minorities. Minorities are no better served than any other group by a system that privileges narrow testing in math and reading to the detriment of literature, art, music, science and geography. *How does a mechanistic emphasis on teaching to the tests inspire them to learn, much less equip them to be productive 21st-century citizens, workers and human beings? If it doesn't, what is public education for anyway?* [emphasis added]

Sahlberg describes this as “a contradiction between what is measured and what is valued in the system.” (Alberta Teachers’ Association, 2010)

Hargreaves and Shirley report that 85% of educators surveyed in the U.S. agreed that NCLB was not improving schools, and that “shortly before the 2008 U.S. presidential election, the chair of the U.S. House Education and Labor Committee proclaimed that the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act had ‘become the most negative brand in America.’” (p. 1). Arguably NCLB has done more to discredit the standardization of education agenda than any other single initiative.

The anticipated shift in direction in U.S educational policy under the Obama administration has not been borne out. Indeed Karp (2010) observes that, “...instead of a dramatic break with the test, punish, and privatize policies of the Bush era, there’s been so much continuity under Obama that historian Diane Ravitch calls it ‘Bush’s third term in education.’”

A case in point is the \$4.35 billion “Race to the Top” program, a major education initiative rolled out by the Democrats in fall 2009. As the name implies, Race to the Top (RTTT) provides federal funding in the form of competitive grants to states implementing various education reforms. These reforms include participating in a national consortium to develop common standards in reading and math and then adopting those standards; rapid expansion

of charter schools; aggressive intervention for schools with low test scores, including closures, firing of staff, and various forms of state and private takeovers; and linking test scores to teacher evaluation and compensation (Karp, 2010).

The concept of merit pay tied to test results seems to have been given new life by RTTT. Understandably, there are concerns about the extent to which this trend will spill over into Canada. Michael Fullan, speaking at Ontario's Building Blocks for Education Summit in September, "dismissed merit pay outright as an effective way to motivate teachers." (Walker, 2010)

Tying teacher evaluation and remuneration to test results is problematic on numerous levels, not least of which it reinforces a competitive spirit that undermines the collegiality among teachers that is so important in the creation of professional learning communities. In an extensive review of the research on merit pay in the education and other sectors, Ben Levin (2010) argues convincingly that "linking teachers' pay to student achievement is not a desirable education policy" for many reasons:

- Very few people anywhere in the labour force are paid on the basis of measured outcomes.
- No other profession is paid on the basis of measured client outcomes.
- Most teachers oppose such schemes.
- Pay based on student achievement is highly likely to lead to displacement of other important education purposes and goals.
- There is no consensus on what the measures of merit should be.
- The measurement of merit in teaching inevitably involves a degree of error.
- The details of merit pay schemes vary widely, yet these details have great impact on how such plans are received and their effects on teachers and schools.
- Merit pay schemes in education have a long record of failure.

The first round of RTTT award winners, announced last spring, were Delaware (\$100 million) and Tennessee (\$500 million). Both states agreed to lift caps on charter schools and to base teacher evaluation and compensation on student performance. These awards are substantial, representing in each case about 7% of the total expenditures in these states for elementary and secondary education. A report by the Economic Policy Institute which found that the RTTT program is arbitrary and unfair states that, "at a time of widespread fiscal crises in the states, when receipt of Race to the Top awards can determine whether class sizes will be increased and teachers laid off, such capricious decision-making is unfortunate." (Peterson & Rothstein, 2010)

The degree to which the teaching profession has been and continues to be shaped by these external forces, to the detriment of teachers and teaching, is profound. Pasi Sahlberg, speaking at the ATA's Leadership in Educational Accountability conference in April 2008, notes that

higher external expectations through prescribed learning standards and stronger school accountability are the two main drivers of educational change today Competitive pressures, higher productivity, better efficiency and system-wide excellence are also having visible effects on schools and teachers. Schools that compete over students and related resources are shifting their *modus operandi* from moral purpose towards production and efficiency, i.e. measurable outcomes, higher test scores, and better positions in school league tables Efficiency measures have brought standards and testing to the centre of [the] lives of teachers and students in and out of their schools. (p. 3)

Hence, the dilemma facing teachers, a profession “typically driven by ethical motive or intrinsic desire”, is that it is caught between two competing forces in schools – education as public good vs. private good: “Teachers try to balance their work between the moral purpose of student-centred pedagogy within education as a public good, on one hand, and the drive for higher standards through perceived efficiency of the presentation-recitation mode of instruction and the perspective of education as a private good.” (p. 4)

If student engagement is suffering as a result, it's perhaps not surprising given that teaching to the test and to meet externally imposed accountability targets are not exactly conducive to engaging students daily in their classrooms, undermining both the joy of reading and the joy of teaching reading. Teachers are in many ways caught between a rock and a hard educational place – some might say these external forces are squeezing the human element out of teaching and learning, a serious concern if one believes that fostering caring supportive relationships with students lies at the heart of successful teaching.

Some groups such as Aboriginal students are especially vulnerable to these forces. In a recent CTF study exploring the professional experiences and knowledge of Aboriginal teachers in Canadian public schools, Verna St. Denis discusses the impact of market-driven educational reform on Aboriginal teachers' capacity to form meaningful caring relationships with their students and to generally improve the poor quality of education for Aboriginal children:

The participants in this study became teachers and remained in the teaching profession because the ethical and moral dimensions of teaching motivated them. But these dimensions can be undermined in a climate of market-driven education policies and practices that are increasingly present in educational systems. (p. 65)

St. Denis also notes that her research is consistent with other studies that have found that the moral and ethical dimensions of teaching need attention, and that teachers' morale is an important factor in effective teaching, one that appears to have been marginalized in an educational climate that defines success in terms of test scores. (p. 65)

As the title of Joel Westheimer's lecture at the 2009 CEA Whitworth Forum strongly suggests – "No child left thinking: Testing, 'accountability', and the threat to Canadian democracy" – the accountability stakes are also very high for schools in terms of the implications for teaching critical thinking and citizenship education, and ultimately for democracy. Westheimer (2008) is critical of the general thrust of education reforms in Canada, noting that "in many boards and provinces, ever more narrow curriculum frameworks emphasize preparing students for standardized assessments in math and literacy at the same time that they shortchange the social studies, history, and citizenship education Curricular approaches that spoonfeed students to succeed on narrow academic tests teach students that broader critical thinking is optional." (p. 7)

Pressures on public education resulting from underfunding and the application of market principles were addressed in a panel presentation at the 2010 CTF President's Forum in Edmonton, entitled "The funding of public education: What are the challenges?" CTF Vice-President Dianne Woloschuk discussed the growing number of contradictions that teachers have experienced in their work and in the education system as a whole "as a result of efforts aimed at a broad reform of the education system – contradictions that have a relationship with education funding." These contradictions include:

- increasing demands and expectations as schools experience proportionally fewer resources due to decreased funding.
- the trend towards centralization of funding in the hands of provincial governments which often leaves school divisions / boards in the difficult position of making cuts to programs and personnel when the funding they receive is inadequate; music and other arts programs are often sacrificed to maintain a core program focused on language arts, mathematics and the sciences.
- the diversion of public funds from the publicly-funded education system to the funding of quasi-private schools or independent schools, with the potential to create a tiered education system.

The concept of holistic education is also challenged by economic motives and market ideologies. Woloschuk notes that,

Teachers and parents both desire what is best for the child, what will support their learning, and what will help them to grow in confidence as human beings and become contributing members of society. As teachers work hard to implement inquiry learning, to differentiate instruction and assessment, and to

take many other initiatives in response to student needs, the political focus on economics and market ideologies has produced a range of practices that seem to run counter to the very objective we are purportedly pursuing, that of enhanced student learning and achievement. These practices include narrowed curricula, narrowed accountability measures, the generation and questionable interpretation and use of data, and an over-emphasis on standardized testing.

The teaching profession has serious concerns about the misuse and overuse of external standardized testing, while supporting the need for broader assessments of student learning that emphasize more than achievement in math, science and literacy as measured by test scores.

A rethinking of educational accountability, with genuine learning for all students as the overriding goal, would dispel the false notion that teachers are opposed to assessment. For example, the Alberta Teachers' Association, in a publication entitled *Real Learning First: The Teaching Profession's View of Student Assessment, Evaluation and Accountability for the 21st Century*, asserts that:

- the primary purpose of student assessment and evaluation is to support student learning, broadly conceived.
- ongoing student evaluation is an integral part of the teaching and learning process; toward this end teachers conduct two main types of evaluation: formative evaluation (assessment *for* learning) and summative evaluation (assessment *of* learning).
- students need timely constructive feedback that supports their learning.
- a variety of evaluation practices are required to determine student achievement, including performance assessments, projects, written work, demonstrations, portfolios, observations, examinations.
- data from these multiple assessments over a period of time are essential to informing teachers' judgments about student growth, development and learning.
- many factors can influence student achievement including individual learning needs, the resources available to support teaching and learning, and the socio-economic characteristics of the community.
- classroom teachers design student evaluation based on the curriculum that students have been taught – it is unfair and unethical for teachers to evaluate students on material they have not had the opportunity to learn.
- classroom teachers are in the best position to develop evaluation strategies that align with the curriculum and address individual learning needs. (Alberta Teachers' Association, 2009)

Rethinking accountability in education would also need to address the purpose and design of large-scale external standardized testing. In this regard, Hargreaves and Shirley make a case for the use of statistically valid random sampling of students for systemwide accountability in education. Despite an emerging consensus that “systemwide accountability ... can be achieved through prudent sampling rather than through a profligate and politically controlling census yet a shrinking number of governments hang on to accountability by census, even though it is subject to widespread abuse. They do it even though it is exorbitantly expensive – diverting scarce resources from teaching and learning needs elsewhere.” (pp. 102-103)

Large-scale assessment, conducted through random sampling of students, should be used to assess aspects of the quality of the education system as a whole, such as curriculum effectiveness and how well the system is meeting the needs of particular groups such as Aboriginal students, students with special needs and students from low-income families. At the same time a properly designed system could address some of the concerns related to the use of large-scale external testing as a means of sorting students and the ranking and reporting of schools and provinces based on single test results. A number of teacher organizations support the use of random sample-based assessments.

Commenting on the respective roles of external testing and classroom assessment, Gwen Dueck argues that we must strike the right balance between classroom-based assessment *for* broad-based student learning conducted by teachers, and large-scale external testing programs for monitoring and assessing the effectiveness of education systems through a process of random sampling (rather than a sweeping census approach). Drawing on the work of Andy Hargreaves and Pasi Sahlberg, she points out that,

rather than validating the current external accountability milieu we find ourselves in, what we need are new accountability policies and practices that respect the professionalism of teachers and the commitments they bring to the profession. Intelligent accountability, as they term it, builds on mutual accountability, professional responsibility and trust. An accountability framework such as this utilizes a wide variety of data. It combines internal accountability or school-based assessment as some might refer to it, which consists of school processes, self-evaluations, critical reflection and school-community interaction, with levels of external accountability that build on monitoring, sample-based assessment and thematic evaluations appropriate to each individual school and context.

Dueck frames some of the critical challenges ahead, remarking at the CTF President’s Forum on External Assessment that,

during this forum we have talked much about how we might validate the practice of ‘external assessment’ or ‘large-scale assessments’ and not enough about what we should be teaching our students. What are the critical elements of a holistic, broad based education and how do we measure those elements?

Someone in one of the small group discussions framed it this way: “What knowledge is going to be required for the future our children will experience?” To that, I pose the question: “How do we design a system that shifts our attention from outcomes to that of the inputs, process and context in which we as educators carry out our professional responsibilities and commitments?”

This is part of an important conversation about the future of teaching and learning in Canadian public schools. As public leaders in learning and as the experts in the classroom, the teaching profession clearly has much to contribute to this conversation.

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