



President's Message

I am pleased to host the first Canadian Teachers' Federation President's Forum. After more than a decade of CTF involvement, I have always been impressed with the ability of CTF to bring divergent views together and use them to benefit students and improve teaching and learning conditions.

People with open minds are learning all the time. The President's Forum was conceived as an open discussion in which participants would have a chance to hear one perspective on a topic and to discuss and share opinions. It fits within the CTF goal and role descriptor "Fostering understanding." This brief Forum report should help.

Individuals and organizations approach educational topics and issues from their own values base seeking to attain their own objectives. Their drive to achieve will, of course, have consequences and change conditions for others. Only through open discussion can we hope to find common ground and meld approaches.

Present at the Forum we have people from a wide variety of backgrounds, roles and experiences. I hope that each and every participant uses the opportunity to participate actively in discussions. As in most parts of life it is in active participation that one finds and gives value.

J. Emily Noble



BERNARD HUGONNIER
Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD)

Bernard Hugonnier's keynote address focused on four international comparative surveys conducted by the OECD:

- PISA – Programme for International Student Assessment
- TALIS – Teaching and Learning International Survey – results from TALIS 2009 were presented
- PIAAC – Programme for International Assessment of Adult Competencies
- AHELO – International Assessment of Higher Education Learning Outcomes

PISA, launched in 2000, was described as a tool for monitoring and evaluating a country's performance and equity. In 2007 the OECD conducted an evaluation of the impact of PISA in member countries in order to:

- evaluate the relevance of PISA in participant countries and economies.
- assess the effectiveness and sustainability of PISA in participant countries and economies.
- identify the unexpected impacts of PISA.

He highlighted a number of themes emerging from an analysis of the quantitative data and qualitative data.

Among the themes from the qualitative data are that PISA has made an impact on policy in all countries studied, the impact varying from country to country. Many countries justify their reforms through their performance on PISA. In countries that perform relatively poorly, there is often a direct impact on policy development particularly after the publication of the results. The lower a country's ranking, the more awareness is raised at all levels in the system. The influence of PISA on policy formation both nationally and locally is increasing over time.



DR. RAYMOND THÈBERGE
Ministries of Education and Training, Colleges and Universities

Dr. Raymond Thèberge spoke of the prevalence of standardized testing in the Canadian context.

He identified the purposes of large scale assessments in Canada as having four functions – gatekeeping; accountability; instructional diagnosis; and monitoring student achievement. Canada's sample size in PISA is one of the largest at 22,000 students (Vs. 5,000 in the U.S.A.) permitting comparisons based on language, gender and provinces/territories. Large-scale assessments in each Canadian jurisdiction supplement national and international testing. Thèberge posits that PISA results are far less important than provincial results in guiding education policy in Canada.

"Education is an investment, not an expense"
- Raymond Thèberge

From an international perspective, PISA is part of a movement using education as a key economic driver. Thèberge also stated that low PISA scores may result in increased educational funding.

Thèberge describes the Pan-Canadian Assessment Program (PCAP) as a cyclical program administered every three years. PISA and PCAP complement each other in that they have the same structure of assessments and the scores are presented on the same scale.

Thèberge concluded with the following quote: "We must go beyond looking at the assessments themselves and look at deeper issues about how the assessments help learners and their teachers know where the learners are in their learning, where they are going, and how to get there." (*William, 2006*)

DISCUSSION FORUMS: Comparative Surveys

Discussion sessions responding to Bernard Hugonnier's presentation centred around three main themes and focused primarily on the PISA assessment. Specific examples were provided by participants to illustrate these themes.

Cost of Large Scale Assessments

The cost of the development of one of the OECD assessments (PIAAC) was identified by Mr. Hugonnier as being \$80 million Euros. The cost to participant countries includes both the expense to administer the test and the expense to the OECD for the analysis of the test. The actual dollar amount remains unknown. It was suggested that this money might better be used directly in the classroom.

Comparability

Factors impacting the comparability of tests are not always considered when results are published in the media. Some of the factors that were identified that may skew test results include:

- The content of the test in terms of cultural or language bias
- Socioeconomic conditions at the school and in the home
- The administration of the assessment including the classroom environment and potential for teaching to the test on some large-scale assessments
- The policy regarding participation of students with special needs
- The exclusion or inclusion of some students from the assessment to enhance results
- The use of test results for assessment of students for course credit or graduation or some tests in some jurisdictions may lead to more interest from participants

Purpose of the Assessment

The stated purpose of large scale assessments is to guide policy decisions on a macro level. Unfortunately, the results are often used out of context for other purposes. Results are used on a micro level to compare jurisdictions and individual schools and may also be given more importance than authentic assessments used by the classroom teacher. Comparisons of schools may meet a perceived public need to select the most desirable location for their children. It was stated, however, that the best way to select a school is to visit the school so that all of the factors not tested may be considered.

Tying funding to test results increases the stakes and serves to introduce more competition into the education system. Questions were raised as to the appropriateness of using a business model to direct education policy.

“We’ve never been able to put an all-encompassing cost of the PISA assessment, provide that to parents and tell them that we can put money into large scale assessment to identify needs but we have no money to support those needs” - Discussion group participant

DISCUSSION FORUMS: National Implications: CMEC and Beyond

*“The only answer is to be vigilant about testing and to do everything possible to prevent the labeling of schools as being of lower caliber and the flight to socially stratified schooling.”
- Discussion group participant*

Discussion groups agree that one of the results of large-scale assessments is an increase in public dialogue, and that the President's Forum provides a value-added opportunity to change the messaging around education in a globalized world. The following themes arose in the discussions.

PISA as a Policy Driver

It was agreed that PISA does to some extent drive education policy in provincial and territorial ministries. Caution needs to be used to ensure that all of the data gathered, including contextual data, is used to guide policy decisions. The distinction between the purpose of large-scale assessment and classroom assessment is being blurred and must be clarified. Standardized testing does not reflect the entire breadth of the curriculum.

Testing Methodology

The profusion of large-scale assessments creates a duplication of efforts especially if the objectives of those assessments overlap. If the purpose of a large-scale assessment is to review the education system as a whole, then random sampling of the population should be sufficient, resulting in the freeing of resources for other classroom supports.

Economics and Testing

While education is not a product-based business, the reality is that we are in an intensely competitive environment for education. Along with competition for students within the country, the attraction of foreign students is a growing part of the Canadian export of education. Once the competition is started it's impossible to control the competitive attitude. In the spirit of competition, full disclosure of results does not always occur; they tend to be used to promote systemic agendas.

“Our responsibilities and skill set as teachers is about reaching the individual potential of every child that comes our way. You can't measure the success of that potential through standardized tests.” - Discussion group participant

In general, a consensus among discussion groups is building on the need to refocus the discourse on authentic assessment that supports teaching and learning. This may be achieved through collaborative work with all the education partners.





“External assessment leads to standardization by its nature – this is a reality that we can not avoid.”

– Dennis Sinyolo

“We need to become more literate on [external] measurement.”

– David Robinson

“Education is a public good and a basic human right, to which every child youth and adult is entitled. Unfortunately, competition undermines inclusion, the very essence of education.”

– Dennis Sinyolo

“Kids enjoying going to school is a vital education statistic.”

– Discussion group participant



DENNIS SINYOLO
 Education International

Mr. Sinyolo provided a summary of some of the arguments for and against external testing. While external testing includes tests like PISA, a broader definition including any assessment that is external to the school was used.

Arguments for external assessment:

- Encourages competition and choice by focusing on learning outcomes, ranking schools and promoting the establishment of private schools.
- Provides an objective method of assessing student performance that helps define common standards, provides diagnostic feedback, and motivates teachers to complete the curriculum.

Arguments against external assessment:

- External assessments usually focus on specific learning outcomes (defined as test scores by proponents) ignoring the context and scope of the curriculum.
- A country's education system is judged on the basis of limited outcomes ignoring the concept of holistic education.
- Publication of comparison tables may lead to the stigmatization of underperforming schools.
- Promote exclusivity while teachers believe in inclusion.

Some Lessons from PISA

PISA-initiated reforms tend to focus on the need to improve performance based on efficiency, competitiveness and accountability. Publication of results in the media tends to focus exclusively on comparison tables. Adverse side effects include increased testing and incentives tied to results, causing increased stress and anxiety levels of teachers and students.



DAVID ROBINSON
 Canadian Association of University Teachers

David Robinson discussed the factors motivating external assessment, including economic globalization, decline in public funding and new public management.

Three primary economic globalization factors were cited, including cross-border delivery of education, competition for international students and trade and investment agreements.

A general decline in public funding has been accompanied by a rise in private financing in education. Some governments are looking to “alternative providers”, such as offshore, private, and on-line providers, which raises issues around the quality of education. International students are seen as a new revenue source.

Accountability, competition and specialization are business values that are becoming more prevalent as the new public management in education embraces the business model. The impact of these trends includes diminished autonomy, less involvement of teaching staff in decision-making and curriculum development, and greater emphasis on “outputs” than on “inputs”.

“In the context of a growing international trade in educational services in which quality assurance standards and procedures are a major marketing theme, Canada may be at a disadvantage in attracting foreign students and exporting programs abroad.” - CMEC Ministerial Statement on Quality Assurance for Degree Education in Canada

Assessments by teachers may hold less importance than external assessments which can then drive curriculum and threaten professional autonomy. Robinson cautioned us to increase our assessment literacy to avoid the de-professionalization of teachers.

DISCUSSION FORUMS:

International Implications - Who is served?

Discussion groups responding to Mr. Sinyolo's presentation explored a variety of topics related to the use of test results. While the topics below are not comprehensive, they represent some of the recurring themes.

Large Scale Assessments and Holistic Education

Large scale assessments are designed to ensure that all students are achieving the same outcomes. This undermines the diverse nature of a school and leads to discouragement of both teachers and their students.

"The "Olympic" approach based on competition erodes team spirit and collaboration." – Dennis Sinyolo

Constant testing does nothing to engage students in the school. One estimate from Ontario suggested that up to three months of school was dedicated to some form of assessment. This takes away from time that could be spent teaching and typically has an impact on the time available for subject areas outside of the testing regime.

Test designers do not typically account for students with high needs. These children form an integral part of the school fabric and high-stakes testing will serve to segregate rather than to include.

Use of Results

There is a need to use results from standardized assessment to inform policy making. Issues arise, however, when the results are used to rank schools and, by association, teachers.

There was division among the groups as to the effect of the publishing of results on the public's perception of teachers. Some participants agree that teachers will often be blamed for poor results while others suggested that individuals using these results place them in context and do not necessarily blame the teacher.

It was agreed in many groups that there is a need for an education program for parents and perhaps the greater public to advise them about the rationale for testing, the types and frequency of tests and the proper use of the test results.

Competition and Testing

Tying teacher remuneration to test results forms a competitive spirit that undermines the collegiality that is so important in good schools (Professional Learning Communities).

"The irony of using the business model of performance pay is that it did not work in business. Placing short-term performance goals ahead of long-term institutional goals did not work in business and will not work in education." – James Ryan (OECTA)

DISCUSSION FORUMS:

Implications for the Profession

"It's useful to compare ourselves to ourselves over time; but it's not useful to compare ourselves to others."

- Discussion group participant

Summaries of discussions identified common issues that have solidified over the course of three previous discussions. Some of the issues include the integrity of the teaching profession, the distinction between authentic assessment conducted by the teacher and external assessments, and the effects of the use and/or misuse of test results on student learning and the quality of public education. Some consistent ideas raised in this group session include:

Provinces, territories and countries, have to deal with the outcome of rankings on a regular basis. As unionists and professionals we have come up through a system where we are constantly responding and positioning ourselves to defend data that captures a fraction of the quality education students receive.

The teaching profession advocates for the best interests of teachers and students, as well as the best interests of quality public education. The public education system is one of well-established and effective principles, protocols, policies and frameworks. These ideals need to be upheld and voiced against those of proponents of the business model.

Testing is A mechanism, not THE mechanism. External testing is but one assessment tool that should not overshadow other means of assessing students and their schools. External testing is about outputs (i.e. test results). As long as governments keep the public focused on those outputs, important inputs related to classroom size, educational funding and teacher professional learning will be given less of a priority.

Changes that can come about as a response to the results of external assessments can be imposed from outside or can originate from within the school community. Change from inside the school that will improve the learning objectives of the community can be a positive outcome. However, change driven by an outside political agenda can have a negative impact.

"You can't increase the mass of a chicken by weighing it everyday." – Dennis Sinyolo

Groups are calling for a national conversation among education stakeholders. This conversation should be directed at looking for a common understanding in regard to external testing. Stakeholders should seek a common vision of the purpose of testing and how it is used to inform education policy.





THURSDAY, JULY 16, 2009



**“WHAT NOW”
Panel Response**

The concluding session of the first annual President’s Forum served as a summary of the first two days and addressed the question – “What NOW?”

Opposition to standardized testing, as Gene Lewis, Secretary General of the Elementary Teachers’ Federation of Ontario noted, is felt more by teachers than other education stakeholders since they are the ones who must deal with most of the unintended consequences of external assessments. The public profile of test scores is so high that low scores can cause many teachers to question their own competence. However, teachers are not opposed to assessments. In fact the use of assessments is an integral part of the education process. There is a role for external assessments as a source of additional information provided they are used in a proper manner and that the results are used for their intended purposes.

As Marcel Larocque, President of the Association des enseignantes et des enseignants francophones du Nouveau-Brunswick, pointed out, a major concern of standardized testing is that it ignores the context and special challenges that surround the education of students in minority settings. An example of this occurs in French language schools where core programming is taught within a distinct cultural context that is not reflected in standardized tests.

Teachers’ objections to the uses of standardized testing are based on legitimate pedagogical concerns. The Canadian Teachers’ Federation, in its 1999 publication “Standardized Testing: Undermining Equity in Education” by Bernie Froese-Germain, provided an excellent overview of these problems, and most of these are still applicable today - a decade later.

1. Many types of student ability are not captured by a standardized test.
2. Tests may be standardized, but students are not. That is, a student’s capacity to learn is affected by a host of factors not captured by the test.
3. Standardized tests designed for large number of students are, of necessity, very general in nature. This leads to a mismatch between what is taught and what is tested.
4. Standardized tests typically measure lower order recall of facts and skills, and penalize higher order thinking.
5. Because standardized tests are designed to sort individuals into groups, test questions are chosen on the basis of how well they contribute to spreading out the scores, not on their centrality to the curriculum or their predictive validity.
6. Test performance is shaped by individual characteristics not related to content knowledge.
7. Test preparation and administration take up valuable classroom time that could be used for teaching.
8. Teachers are induced to teach to the test rather than for learning with the result that curriculum is becoming increasingly test driven.

In addition to these points, financial costs of standardized testing must also be addressed. The financial costs of external assessments was raised in each discussion group in terms of funds being more effectively used to directly meet the needs of the students in the classroom.

“Tests are more about political bragging rights; and used for political purposes rather than education.”
– Gene Lewis

“The challenge to minority settings is that we must teach all mandated curriculum and we must respect our heritage and culture by including it into our daily lessons. Standardized testing does not respect this reality.”
– Marcel Larocque

“We heard that PISA has less impact on school practices and instruction than on national policies. But we know that PISA has itself led to greater use of external testing in most of our jurisdictions, and we know that those have certainly impacted school practices and instruction.”
– Ed Hancock

“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 to our students. What are the critical elements of a holistic, broad-based education and how do we measure those elements?”
– Gwen Dueck

Ed Hancock, General Secretary of the Newfoundland and Labrador Teachers' Association, calls on us to begin to do things in a different way when he states: "to quote Einstein ... 'Insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results.'" The call to move forward forces us to look at the question of "What Now?"

Assessment is a key tool for educators. However, in order for large-scale assessments to be appropriate as part of the evaluation of a school, jurisdiction or even a country, then the assessment must accurately measure the full breadth of the curriculum in the context of the school and community culture. Further, the results must be used to improve the educational experiences of students, and not for political purposes.

Gwen Dueck, General Secretary of the Saskatchewan Teachers' Federation drawing on the work of Andy Hargreaves and Pasi Sahlberg, pointed 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."

Educators agree it is imperative to maintain a holistic broad-based education system where the focus of the teacher is not just on those factors that can be easily tested by large-scale external assessments.

The challenge is to design an assessment system that shifts our focus away from outcomes based solely on test scores to one that encompasses more complex outcomes such as citizenship and cooperation. The various inputs that contribute to holistic broad-based education must also be assessed in such a system.

The continuing conversation on testing must take into account the diverse nature of education and the diverse nature of our educational partners. It's only through continued dialogue that we may reach consensus on an assessment system that will be in the best interest of all students and quality public education.

“Not everything that counts can be counted and not everything that can be counted counts.”

– Einstein

Comments from Participants

“Congratulations to CTF for being visionary in entertaining various points of view.”

“I was enthusiastically engaged!”

“This was a brilliant idea and opportunity to listen, think, discuss, reflect and work on the current and continuing controversy surrounding external assessment and the consequences, if left unchallenged.”

“With more experience on what is possible, the President’s Forum could develop into an effective think-tank, feedback mechanism, and cross-pollination of various ideas and views.”

“I enjoyed hearing from people from other provinces and countries.”

“I was not aware of all the testing that takes place and the concerns that are unique to specific areas.”

“I will recommend that the Deputy Minister, as well as colleagues from my jurisdiction attend in the future.”

“I could have listened to Dennis Sinyolo all day. He had a wealth of knowledge and information that I was pleased to add to my repertoire. ‘ll be looking at the website of EI more frequently as a result.”

“Excellent. The discussion remained at the level of ideas and policies – no personal attacks.”

“Every teacher should have the chance to participate in this type of activity.”

“The OECD perspective was important. We need to avoid just listening to ourselves.”

