

## **The Pressure Cooker in Education: Standardized Assessment and High-Stakes**

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### **Abstract**

While assessment has been a part of education for a long time, the current increased emphasis on standardization of curriculum and assessment is unique. The author surveys varying perspectives on assessment, considers the role assessment plays vis-à-vis social studies and then evaluates arguments on both sides of the debate in light of the current high-stakes testing environment which is becoming an integral component of North American education. Finally, a discussion of the implications of increased assessment, and particularly that of high-stakes testing within the social studies curricula reveals that significant portions of important social studies outcomes are minimalized or ignored because of the emphasis on standardized testing.

*You cannot increase the size of the hog, by weighing it over and over again.*  
*Anonymous*

### **Introduction**

A major development in the field of education during the last several years has been an escalating emphasis on evaluation. The content area of social studies has not escaped this mounting pressure on assessment and has increasingly been affected by those who believe that standardization and evaluation will improve the quality of education. More and more provinces, states and nations are making assessment and testing an integral part of their educational system. While this phenomenon has caught the public's attention through the media and is largely supported by politicians, it is important for educators to evaluate the divergent views, assess the advantages and disadvantages of each position and ensure that their voices are heard in the defence of what is in the best interests of students.

### **Perspectives on Assessment**

Evaluation has traditionally been an integral part of the educational process and there have

been several rationalizations developed for assessment over time. A century ago, a standard justification for testing was that examinations were indispensable for encouraging adolescents to commit to a serious and sustained effort. When there was an examination placed ahead of them, pupils and teachers could no longer behave in an easy and casual way, with allowances made for good intentions, individual temperaments, passing indispositions or changing seasons. Pupils would pay more attention to their work and teachers would make their lessons more accurate and concise when faced with mandatory examinations (Luijten, 1991). This view was partially based on the notion that encouragement and reward of individual efforts would be difficult if evaluation did not exist. Excellence would be less demonstrable and decisions on curriculum and methods would be based on prejudice and caprice rather than solid evidence (Linn & Gronlund, 2000).

Educational evaluation was furthered by the ubiquitous measurement movement which gained momentum with the coming of the First World War and for the next half century or more, the purposes of evaluation were several and varied. For most of last century, Guba and Lincoln (1981) record that the function of evaluation was to document events, record student change, aid in decision making, seek understanding and facilitate remediation and that the purpose needed to be determined by the needs of different audiences. Over time, many educationists have also defined the purposes of evaluation. Its goal was to aid educators in their tasks of classroom planning, improve teaching and learning situations, provide feedback, and ascertain if a standard had been reached. Other purposes included selecting a given number of candidates for certain reasons, testing the efficiency of teaching; indicating the progress of student's present and future performance, and sampling performances which the student was capable (Buckman, 1988; Payne, 1997; Salvia & Ysseldyke, 2001; Scriven, 1980; Thyne, 1974).

The above purposes have been used as the traditional rationale for the use of evaluation and many of these goals still exist, but the recent emphasis on assessment has taken on a sense of urgency. The current focus in many jurisdictions across North America is on high-stakes testing, in which the measurement of results will have significant impact on students, as promotion, graduation and the qualification for scholarships are now tied to performance of these tests.

The very term "high stakes" embodies both the hopes and the fears these tests inspire. Only if the stakes are high, say their advocates on one hand - only if there is something valuable to be gained or lost - will teachers and students take the tests seriously and work hard to do their best, thus serving both their own interests and the public interest in higher achievement (Heubert & Hauser, 1999).

Supporters of high-stakes testing argue that these examinations force students, parents, teachers and school administration to take education seriously. The public ranking of schools and districts expose those students and teachers who do not do this. High-stakes tests require a clear standardized curriculum so that all students are taught the same material and then administered the same test. Thus, it is believed that the inequities in students' opportunity to learn would finally be eradicated (Nathan, 2002). Advocates also argue that anyone who opposes this form of testing is an apologist for a broken system of education. They claim that a good test is aligned with the curriculum so that the schools know whether children are actually learning the material that they are supposed to know (Semas, 2001).

Sceptics, on the other hand, worry that such policies may produce harmful consequences for individual students and perhaps society as a whole. Opponents present the anti-testing position which is based on the negative impact these tests have on the curriculum and more importantly on teachers and students. Black (1991) posits that public examinations are seen as assurances of fairness and reliability to a degree that is quite unjustified and that the public demands for external assessments arise from three main considerations. These factors include public distrust of teachers, the perceived superiority of standardized assessment over teacher-made tests and a desire for comparison between schools.

In viewing the impact that these tests have had on the curriculum, Amrein & Berliner (2003) and Neill (1999) deplore the fact that art, music, creative writing, physical education, and recess are all reduced in time or dropped from the curriculum when schools need to increase their scores on the state's test. Even in the curricular areas that are tested, schools may drop a sub-area if they are unlikely to appear on the test. Instructional time is shifted to the curriculum that will appear on the test with the anticipation that the scores will improve. This curricular reductionism is an affront to the concept of variety, individual interest, and creativity.

Kohn (1999, 2000a, 2000b) also presents a challenge to supporters of high-stakes standardized testing with a plethora of arguments in opposition to the current maelstrom of examinations. He contends that students in North America are tested at an unprecedented rate and that the variance in test scores has a higher correlation to non-instructional factors, such as the number of parents living at home, parental educational background, type of community and poverty rate, than to instructional performance. He argues further that these tests often measure superficial thinking and ignore the most important characteristics of a good learner since standardized tests cannot measure initiative, creativity, effort, irony, judgment, good will, ethical reflection and a host of other valuable dispositions and attributes. Students care only if they get the right answer rather than how they got it. Wide-range and enthusiastic exploration of ideas that once characterized classrooms can no longer survive when the emphasis is on preparation for these exams.

Rejecting the argument that these tests provide equity and fairness for students, Kohn (2000) contends that high-stakes testing marks a major retreat from fairness, accuracy, and quality. The reasons are that the tests may be biased since they require a set of skills more likely to be possessed by children from a privileged background. Along with this, the wealthier can afford test preparation courses that the poorer segments of society cannot access and thus a greater disparity is created and fairness and equity become a hollow promise.

The damaging effects these tests have on teachers include the fact that they are often distracted from a thoughtful consideration of students and unable to appreciate their individual gifts. When a teacher's primary focus is on tests and test-taking strategies, reflective attention to individual potential is difficult to sustain (Donlevy, 2000). Along with this, many quality educators are leaving the field of education because of the intense pressures placed upon them. Widely divergent results between one group of students to another are common occurrences, even though they have had the same teacher, curriculum and pedagogical methods, but parents and the public hold the teacher and school responsible for results that are less than exemplary.

Because of these pressures, a more nefarious impact is seen in the fact that for those educators that stay in the classroom, an increasing number of teachers experience ethical lapses and rely on cheating to ensure the results from the classes are not substandard. This is expressed

through a variety of methods such as giving hints or direct answers to students when asked for help on the test, and allowing more time than was allotted for the students to complete the examination. There have also been cases where teachers review the finished tests and "revise" the incorrect answers (Popham, 2001).

The most destructive effects of these tests are on the students that are required to take them. Popham (2001) believes that these high-stakes tests are doing serious educational damage to children. Many students are receiving educational experiences that are far less effective than they would have been if such programs had never existed. Specific harmful effects on students include increased anxiety, damaged self-concepts, a categorization and labelling of students and the creation of self-fulfilling prophecies (Linn & Gronlund, 2000).

Amrein & Berliner (2003) catalogue other deleterious effects as expressed in decreased student motivation, higher retention and student dropout rates and limited engagement with critical thinking. High-stakes tests also alienate students from their own learning experiences in school and deny students the opportunities to direct their own learning since they are no longer encouraged to explore the concepts and subjects that interest them. Along with these effects, many students also resort to dishonesty and cheating. The ethical values of honesty and integrity are sacrificed on the altar of improved test scores.

The notion that threats of punishment such as withholding a diploma will create a positive learning environment and radically transform beleaguered institutions has been discredited by research. High-stakes tests discourage and demoralize at least as many students and teachers as they motivate to work harder. Thus dropout rates rise, particularly for the most vulnerable students, and hurt the very students who are supposed to benefit most from them (Nathan, 2000).

The move toward high-stakes testing programs is based on several assumptions. First, tests are seen as a legitimate means of making distinctions among people on the basis of who passes and who fails. Secondly, test scores are assumed to be accurate predictors about people and their futures. If the test scores rise, it is perceived to be an indication that students must be learning more and therefore moving closer to excellence and that schools are doing a better job of educating the students because test scores are seen as an accurate reflection of education. Another assumption is that schools, governments, and test-makers know what high standards are and how to use them in tests (Hillocks, 2002). Based on these theories, the high-stakes testing movement across North America has become the norm across many jurisdictions.

This obsession with high-stakes standardized testing has not arisen in a vacuum. The ideological basis can be found in the neo-liberal value systems expressed in the current globalization phenomenon, a planetary unified global trading network operating according to a common set of rules (Smith, 2000), where the "market is the only factor to consider in structuring our lives and our institutions" (Currie, 1998, p. 9). With its tentacles reaching into virtually all aspects of life, just a few of its many effects on educational policies can be seen in the development of particular policies for evaluation and in the privileging of assessment (Burbules, 2000). Based on the philosophy that "better" education can be measured, and pushed by international organizations such as the Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and the World Bank (Cornoy, 2000), governments have reformed their educational procedures and have included the adoption and expansion of provincial and state-wide assessment along with national testing and student achievement examinations (Harrison & Kachur, 1999).

Based on the premise that improving the measurement of what people know will enhance a country's competitive economic edge (Spring, 1998), standardized examinations, especially the recent plethora of them, are viewed as excellent preparation for the business world. Standardization, easily quantifiable results, and the willingness to reshape all intervening processes to obtain them characterize the path to success in both exams and in business (Ollman, 2003). Student success is measured through standardized testing based on multiple reasons privileging market principles such as the assessment of policies and innovations which develop a more productive workforce, the supporting of better management, the fostering of a more efficient allocation of resources, the selection of students according to ability and the evaluation of the productivity of teachers (Stromquist & Monkman, 2000).

Several major corporations promote standards-based education and the accompanying high stakes standardized examinations with the ostensible goal of promoting global competitiveness. Critics charge that this is an egregious attempt at social control through the establishment of a routine, standardized schooling process which will socialize most workers to expect low level, mundane work lives that will cohere with the low skill level jobs that have proliferated with globalization and increased technology, and control through the well-established sorting mechanism provided by standardized testing (Mathison, Ross & Vinson, 2001).

### **Assessment in Social Studies**

Having reviewed the purposes of evaluation in the broad educational context, from both its adherents and opponents' perspective, attention must be given to how the subject area of social studies is being impacted by the emphasis on evaluation. Over the last two decades an increasing number of assessment programs have been dedicated to providing external accounts of student learning. Driven largely by political and economic forces, local, provincial, state and national authorities have demanded reports of student achievement in key areas. These typically include the subjects of math, language arts, science and social studies (Wilson, 1999).

In the area of social studies, it is beneficial to place assessment in an ideological context. Gaudelli (2002) presents four differing views of perennialism, essentialism, constructivism and multiculturalism and while these are not the only philosophical positions on the subject of assessment, they do represent a broad range of thought on the topic. Perennialists contend that there is an organized body of knowledge that students need to know so society might cohere around a common identity. History is the fundamental element of an exemplary social studies program and recognition of the "master narrative" is essential. Standardized tests are viewed as the method to see if students are being taught this information and poor test results are often used in an attempt to illustrate that teachers are failing to pass this cultural heritage on to students.

Essentialists argue that core knowledge and skills are vital to a successful society, because these requisite abilities allow the individual to be an economically productive member of society. The economic purposes of education from this viewpoint parallel the philosophy of globalization. The learning of basic skills are seen as essential and the skills taught in history and other social studies content areas are seen as useful if they are transferable to the workplace. Assessment is seen as an important method to determine whether these skills are being learned and if not, it proves the need to return to a "back to the basics" approach where these primary skills are taught.

The other two viewpoints perceive the role of assessment in social studies quite differently. Constructivists see education as child-centred. The curriculum must connect to the student's living experience and the proponents of this approach charge that social studies has been reduced to a mindless heap of information which must be absorbed and then regurgitated on the tests. Poor test results indicate that the social studies curriculum has no relevance in the lives of students. The multiculturalist hypothesis, largely based on critical theory, posits that the social studies curriculum has under-emphasized and distorted the contributions of historically oppressed groups for too long and emphasizes the need for social justice. Adherents see standardized examinations as a method to reproduce the dominant culture and interpret the results of the tests as proof that equity has not been achieved and that diversity needs to be infused throughout the social studies curriculum.

With this ideological background it is important to assess the arguments in favour and against standardized assessment in social studies. Advocates argue that the tests, when developed by teachers, have been constructed to reflect the objectives of the program of studies in social studies (Belyk, 1992) and thereby support the learning of these curricular goals. O'Brien (1997) states that these forms of assessment are more than mere pencil and paper tests. Rather, they provide a relevant and comprehensive evaluation of achievement and focus on critical thinking and multidisciplinary achievement as well as being an effective instructional technique. Other proponents argue that standardized assessments would improve the status of social studies in education, since these tests would force school administrators to ensure it remains an integral part of every school's curriculum (Brousseau, 1999).

Critics of assessment in social studies claim that there has been failure in an attempt to measure students' awareness of major social studies understandings, appreciations, life applications and higher order thinking skills (Alleman & Brophy, 1999). The argument continues that in life, performance is not a matter of how well one fills in blanks or selects correct answers to multiple-choice questions. Rather, a person is judged on what one can do with the attitudes, values and intellectual skills inherent in the social studies curricula such as decision-making, solving problems, critical thinking, separating fact from opinion, making sense of a barrage of data and the important task of getting along with other people. In the real world, people work in groups, not to memorize facts, but to gather, evaluate and use knowledge and skills to solve problems. Full assessment goes far beyond the narrow view of standardized testing (Biemer, 1993).

Social studies educators seek to help students become critical thinkers, problem solvers and decision makers (Yell, 1999) and since the most common testing format is the ubiquitous multiple choice question, a low level knowledge of objectives is measured rather than all the other higher order thinking objectives that are a critical element in an effective social studies classroom. Perhaps the most powerful weapon that critics of social studies wield is the results of the standardized tests themselves. They indicate that students show some familiarity with basic facts but have failed to demonstrate an in-depth understanding of the broad spectrum of skills found in the social studies curriculum (Risinger & Garcia, 1995).

Curricular reductionism is also a problem vis-à-vis social studies assessment. Although teachers have always had to work within a mandated curricular framework, the degree to which they are free to exercise their independent judgement in the implementation of the curriculum is more severely restricted with centralized testing. The teacher is constrained by having to cover course material precisely as it will appear on the examination which results in a shift from student-centred to curriculum-centred instruction. Contextualizing this problem locally, Runte (1998) observes that the Alberta social studies curriculum leaves 20 percent of

the course open to the instructor. The mere presence of centralized testing compromises this elective component, because the provincial examination must emphasize the core curriculum that all students need to be taught.

### **Evaluating the Arguments**

As one analyzes the differing interpretations of standardized testing in general and in the content area of social studies in particular, it is evident that there are strengths and weaknesses inherent in each argument. The traditional purposes of assessment were to encourage and reward effort, to improve teaching and learning practices, and to ascertain if certain standards have been reached. These are commendable goals but unfortunately more recently, standardized testing has taken on a nature different than these. It is as if the tests have themselves become an end in education rather than a means. Examinations have seemingly become the be-all and end-all of education and the teaching process. It is necessary to re-establish a connection between the examinations and the ultimate purpose of education which is the development of citizens who are socially, culturally and technically capable (Luijten, 1991).

The argument that high-stakes testing is the only way to motivate students to learn is fallacious. The question must be asked, "What should be learned?" and a narrow focus on factual knowledge that can be regurgitated on a multiple-choice test is not the answer. This is not to say that assessment is entirely wrong. It does serve some useful purposes as have been discussed, but with the current emphasis on high-stakes tests, the curriculum has been reduced to that which can be tested, and this becomes a self-perpetuating loop when what is assessed becomes what is valued, which then becomes what is taught (McEwen, 1995).

The emphasis of teachers preparing students for tests from January to the end of the school year has also become common in classrooms throughout Canada and the United States. Specific emphasis on only what is on the test, have caused teachers to become managers of students rather than facilitators of knowledge and social values and have caused the discontinuance of programs which should be taught. There is an inevitable de-skilling of students by reducing learning to the level of developing test-taking strategies. (Cheng & Couture, 2000; Kohn, 2002; Shaw, 2000; Stromquist, 2002). When assessment has impacts like these, teachers must voice opposition to such reductionary measures.

Serious consideration must be given to the argument that excessive testing creates ethical lapses in both students and teachers. The corruption of students, teachers and administrators by placing such pressure on them through exemplary performance expectations that they turn to cheating, is a damning indictment of the assessment program. If a student cheats on an exam to pass the course, or a teacher or administrator cheats to avoid public censure, it is clear that something is being learned but certainly not that which was initially intended. The high-stakes environment and its attendant pressures certainly can lead to a compromise in values which is detrimental to the cause of education and ultimately society in general.

Reviewing the opposing sides of testing in social studies, the argument for creating assessment that reflects the program of studies and focuses on critical thinking is a strong one. When the local context of Alberta examinations is surveyed, it is evident that in contrast to the producers of school-leaving examinations in many other jurisdictions, the Alberta examiners have tried to design tests that emphasize skill development, critical thinking and a generalizable understanding of the subject matter, rather than rote learning and factual memorization (Runte, 1998). The argument that it is not possible for exams to support

curriculum is contradicted by the Alberta experience. Samples of student work clearly show that students who succeed in passing the diploma exams demonstrate a wide range of skills demanded by the program of studies (Scraba, 1989). If this were the case in other jurisdictions, the move towards assessment would have a much stronger justification. Any assessment that fails to measure the major social studies understandings, appreciations, life applications, and higher order thinking is not credible. Tests that only assess low-level knowledge and do not address critical thinking, problem solving or decision-making or other skills within the broad spectrum of social studies, fall short in their attempt of appropriate evaluation.

The National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS) and other leading scholars on assessment methods have argued for assessment that is well aligned with major social studies goals, more complete in the range of objectives addressed and more authentic in the kinds of tasks included. The NCSS Advisory Committee on Testing and Evaluation recommends that evaluation focus on curriculum goals and objectives, be used to improve curriculum and instruction; measure both content and process, be chosen for diagnostic and prescriptive purposes and reflect a high degree of fairness to all people and groups. Along with this, evaluation of student achievement should be used solely to improve teaching and learning; involve a variety of instruments and approaches to measure knowledge, skills and attitudes; be congruent with objectives, and be sequential and cumulative. To support this comprehensive approach, government agencies should secure appropriate funding to support evaluation programs and professional development of teachers (Alleman & Brophy, 1999).

In considering both sides of the issue, taking a personal position on the role of assessment in education is not an easy task. It is evident that the current emphasis on high-stakes testing has gone too far, but what should the role of evaluation be? While there is a place for measurement and evaluation in social studies, it is clear that "multiple assessments are not panaceas" (Horowitz, 1995, p. 70). Testing students on an annual or even triennial basis, is a waste of time if all that is measured is low level thinking skill and memory recall. If the assessment can truly measure critical thinking and other higher order thinking skills then tests may have a place in a student's overall educational experience. But examinations should not be the sole arbiter in making high-stake decisions. Several evaluation methods are necessary since single indicators are never a complete representation of the performance of a student, teacher or school.

Social studies assessments should require students to go beyond memorizing facts and engage them in higher-level skills such as application rather than the recall of isolated facts or definitions. Other useful skills that should be evaluated include interpretation of social studies data, identification and explanation of important concepts as well as "making connections between these concepts and a position taken on contemporary public policy issues" (Brousseau, 1999, p. 358). Further, if evaluation could include tasks that are interesting and engaging to the students, as well as being multi-faceted, and assessing more than one aspect of achievement, it would improve the student's educational experience.

The emphasis on high-stakes testing is in serious need of re-thinking. While the ostensible purposes of encouraging learning, and improving education are commendable, unfortunately the results are contrary to these purposes. To force students to perform on examinations that hold such significant impact on their future and to impose this pressure-filled environment on teachers and administrators creates an atmosphere that is not conducive to learning. Evaluation, when taken to these levels promotes the very results that it is trying to prevent. Demoralization of both students and teachers, increasing numbers of students dropping out of



school and a widening of the gap between the successful and unsuccessful are the infelicitous results of this movement.

## **Implications**

A move away from high-stakes testing to an educational model, in which evaluation is still a component, but not the driving-force, would be extremely positive. First, the curriculum should again be broadened to include those subject areas that are deemed unimportant because they are not tested. There is a high correlation between participating in the performing arts such as music and drama while in school and success in later life. Subjects like these, that are not easily testable, should once again take their place as important elements of the overall curriculum. Within social studies, elements of the curriculum that have been avoided, again because these skills are not easily testable, should once again be emphasized. Process should not be sacrificed for a content-driven curriculum because that is what will appear on the test. Involvement in social issues must be balanced with transmission of knowledge.

A full range of skills, knowledge, attitudes and values must be taught. Together these should form an integral component of an effective social studies program. Skills such as decision-making, problem solving and the concept of citizenship should hold as prominent a place in the curricula as knowledge of content. While these skills are more difficult to assess, their place in the social studies classroom is as essential as the components that are more easily tested. A true social studies program cannot exist if these components are absent or only exist in a concomitant manner.

Another implication of this approach will be that students' individuality will be emphasized. Rather than a "one-size fits all" approach, pedagogical practices will focus on the needs of the individual student instead of the curricular content that will be on the examinations. Student creativity will also be highlighted, which will in turn enrich the learning experience. Options that interest the student will be explored, rather than ignored because of a looming test that may decide the student's future path. Feeling less constricted, teachers and students will be able to investigate interesting components of the curriculum that would be avoided if under pressure to perform on an examination.

A de-pressurized learning environment would also allow the teachers and administrators, those that have been trained in appropriate educational methodology, to be removed from the stress that they face under the high-stakes testing regime. The temptation to dishonesty would be removed, if they felt that their chosen life-occupations were not being threatened by those who demand exemplary test scores from children and schools. Teachers could concentrate on meeting the needs of their students if they did not feel compelled to bow to the demanding expectations of the public. Those public officials who have the authority to implement assessment procedures should rely on the advice of educational researchers whose studies show that these tests not only have a deleterious effect on student and teacher morale, but also do not achieve the purposes that they were designed to accomplish. Further information can be gleaned from teachers in the classroom on what affect these tests are having on the lived realities of both students and teachers. With this information in hand, hopefully policy-makers will realize that the current emphasis on high-stakes testing is not the panacea that it was originally perceived to be.

## **Conclusion**

Assessment has been a major part of education for many years. Only recently has the concept of high-stakes testing turned the practice of examining students into a pressure-filled experience for students, teachers as well as administrators. Globalization and its market-driven forces have pushed the need for more and more assessment. This has impacted the field of education profoundly. Each subject area taught in school has been affected and social studies is no exception. The drive for more assessment has reduced the curricular expectations to those that are testable and thus a wide spectrum of social studies skills and values have been lost in this testing mania. It is important for all educators, including those involved in the social studies, to evaluate the purposes of evaluation and to ensure their voice is heard in defence of what is in the best interests of the students. Only then will measurement and evaluation again be an important component of education, but not the driving force that it has become.

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