Standardized Testing: A Call for Repositioning and Revitalizing by Decolonizing Assessment

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Standardized testing is a topic that is both politicized and emotional. While it can be seen as a measure of meeting educational standards within a neoliberal marketplace, or as a tool that robs creativity and critical thinking, it could also be seen as a tool of colonialism and oppression when it comes to the experiences of equity-deserving student populations. Kemp & Dei (2006) contend that simplistic views of testing as either universally useful or detrimental fail to grasp the complicated reality of testing in practice. In the name of educational accountability, children are subjected to testing that is limited in its scope and deficient in serving the needs of its most vulnerable students. When seen through a decolonizing lens, it becomes harder to justify standardized testing. Schools function within a neoliberal construct that values competition and profits, where students represent numbers. It is time to reevaluate a testing culture where policymakers and educators question their purpose, intent, and outcome. This paper will explore an alternative pathway to standardized testing as seen through decolonizing approaches.

Purpose

The purpose of this paper is to critically examine the role that standardized testing plays in the schema of educational accountability and its potential place in the lives of minoritized, racialized, and under-resourced elementary school children by looking at the EQAO (Educational Quality and Accountability Office) test. The objective is to identify how standardized testing works on a set of faulty assumptions that each student is the same and therefore, will be tested on the same criterion, and manner, and perform in the same way. When it comes to certain equity-seeking student populations such as Indigenous, Black, English Language Learners (ELLs), and other socioeconomically disadvantaged students, they are not a homogenous group. A cookie-cutter assessment style presumes sameness; in fact, Selwyn (2019), asserts that there is no such thing as a 'standardized' child.

The neoliberal viewpoint regards students as human capital where "the world is intensely competitive economically and students—as future workers—must be given the requisite skills and dispositions to compete efficiently and effectively" (Apple, 2005, p. 214). Another consideration is how coloniality in educational contexts is dehumanizing, which normalizes and naturalizes attitudes and practices that regard students as subordinate employees or objects (Reyes, 2019). When we reject the factory model of education and embrace an inquiry-based, outcome-based, or experiential model, we understand how to better frame this discussion.

Synthesis

Introducing a culture of accountability for standardized testing involves fostering an environment where individuals take ownership of their academic performance and collectively strive for excellence in assessment outcomes. The literature suggests that the government is committed to high-quality education measures and believes in its right to subject students to

standardized tests as a large-scale assessment. Parker (2017) argued neoliberal education policies marginalize individuals. The neoliberal mandate has transformed what was once a political concept into an economic one. Jang & Sinclair (2017) looked at assessments, initiatives, and policies concluding that there is a culture of accountability for providing data to be reported versus a culture of assessment where schoolteachers can make their judgments in terms of how to assess.

  Those who support standardized testing affirm that testing can establish a universal standard, showcase student progress, and ensure that educational stakeholders are held accountable (Tunnell, 2022). Supporters of standardized testing affirm its utility in assessing student progress and identifying areas of support. Zwaagstra (2011) defended standardized testing as the most accurate, objective, and fool-proof way that academic achievement can be transferred to the public. Parental support in Ontario is strong; the Leger poll revealed that 80% of Ontario kindergarten to grade 12 parents supported standardized testing despite the anti-testing stance from the Ontario Teachers' Federation, the Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario, the Ontario English Catholic Teachers' Association, the Ontario Secondary School Teachers' Federation and L'Association des enseignantes et des enseignants franco-ontariens (MacPherson 2022).

  Piazza (2017) noted that tests are used to cover racist views of intelligence such as the IQ test claiming that no amount of instruction will make them intelligent voters. Piazza identified that tests were harmful to schools that served students of colour and lower-income children. Scores correlated with family income, neighbourhood, educational levels of parents, and access to resources which are factors that measure wealth that exist outside of schools. Moreover, high-stakes standardized tests function as a proxy for whiteness. Testing perhaps allows parents to avoid the stigma of openly supporting segregation by enrolling their children in schools with a Caucasian and wealthier population, and it provides a rationale for their support of segregation inside schools. Au (2021) argued that high-stakes testing supports whiteness through racial segregation, suppressing the notion of intercultural education. Related to these ideas, low-income marginalized students of colour suffer the consequences of standardized testing as Cunningham (2019) argued that standardized tests are more malicious than benign and that such tests erase other ways of knowing in favour of the dominant society. These tests should not be used to judge intelligence and success. Students of colour leave their epistemologies behind to be viewed academically successful by their White peers as whiteness is the norm. Kemp & Dei (2006) assessed the reality of the deep-rooted Eurocentric ideals that guide our knowledge bases. Froese-Germain (2001) asserted that standardized testing has a net negative impact on students. Those who support standardized testing do so in the name of educational accountability and scores are misused as 'educational gatekeepers' (p. 111) to make … decisions about schools, students, and teachers.

  Tests are a challenge for English language learners (ELLS) and they are culturally biased. Less science, fine arts, and recess due to the emphasis (narrowing of curriculum) placed on mathematics and literacy creates pressure for teachers and students. Eizadirad (2019) proposed that standardized testing in Ontario might impact students' level of anxiety and self-efficacy, asserting the test is more harmful than beneficial via invisible scars and trauma which include fear of failure and lowering self-confidence, self-worth, and increasing self-doubt.

  Haladyna (2006) contended that the validity of standardized achievement test score interpretation and usage is questionable; as a result, confidence and trust in such test scores are frequently misplaced in high-stakes scenarios. Many educators claimed that test-score

interpretations and applications were insufficiently validated. Standardized achievement test scores give one valid source of information about student learning if they corroborate other information about student learning.

Eizadirad (2020) explored the impact of testing on equity and social justice in education, with a focus on marginalized and minority students' experiences. He emphasized the importance of developing assessment practices that are more responsive to students' needs and experiences, stating that typical standardized examinations may not accurately measure the entire range of information, talents, and competencies needed for kids to achieve in school.

According to Westheimer & Kahne (2004), the purpose of education is no longer to prepare pupils to be involved and active members of society. Schools have shifted to a more focused focus on vocational preparation and individual financial gain through standardized curriculum and assessment. Both elements hinder the development of critical thinking abilities, which politicians and education officials argue should be the cornerstone of education for the twenty-first century. These educational scholars criticize standardized testing by arguing that it is overly focused on narrow measures of accomplishment and fails to account for wider educational aims. They advocate for a more holistic and democratic approach to evaluation that considers students' different needs and experiences. Education must be more than just a method of generating employees; it must also promote democratic and social justice ideas.

Nezavdal (2003) stated that evaluation initiatives come from a variety of directions (teachers, schools, and school boards) and clash with EQAO objectives since these tests are autocratically created and administered. His study discussed the ideological background of provincial support for standardized tests and proposed an alternative: assessment as a social construct. Volante (2007) emphasized the need for culturally sensitive approaches to educational assessment and evaluation, in contexts that are characterized by diversity and complexity. He urged that Ontario adopt a more comprehensive framework for judging educational quality to encourage policymakers to consider various performance-based skills essential for future success.

Decolonizing Curriculum and Pedagogy

When Tuck & Yang (2012) cautioned us that "decolonization is not a metaphor," we are implored to contemplate how colonization expresses and manifests itself in our everyday lives. One need not look further than standardized testing, more precisely the EQAO, of such a concept in practice. Decolonizing pedagogies refers to "teaching and learning approaches that both acknowledge and deconstruct structures of power associated with colonization in an effort to create space for, and give legitimacy to, Indigenous ways of knowing, being and doing" (McGregor, 2012, p.13). The theoretical framework used in this paper centers on decolonizing theory which emerged from critical pedagogy and critical race theory. Could this be a strategy whereby the system could honour minoritized, racialized, and disadvantaged pupils? It involves challenging the deep-seated assumptions and values that are embedded within tests and adopting an inclusive and culturally responsive approach to assessment. Allowing multiple approaches and ways of knowing including oral traditions and other non-written forms of expression (Battiste, 2013).

Shahjahan et al. (2022) assert that decolonizing curriculum and pedagogy is "(a) recognizing constraints, (b) disrupting, and (c) making room for alternatives" (p.85). McGregor (2012) reminds readers that decolonization involves a paradigm shift from a culture of denial to the making of space for Indigenous political philosophies and knowledge systems as they

resurge, thereby shifting cultural perceptions and power relations in real ways. Decolonization is a pedagogical approach to teaching and learning; the process by which knowledge is formed and the shift of consciousness that occurs because of interaction between teacher, learner, and the knowledge they develop together. Decolonization is an important goal, and it is rooted in Eurocentric educational models that have had a negative impact on Indigenous knowledge.

The principles of a holistic approach to learning and assessment involve considering the unique needs of each student and providing individualized instruction and evaluations. We need to consider student impact, benefits of testing, student-focused consequences, quality assessment of schools (political framework), and alternative ways of knowing- epistemologies and axiologies. For example, there are flipped classrooms, experiential learning, constructivism, performance-based and mastery-based assessment. Assessments should be based on real-world scenarios that are meaningful to students, and feedback and reflection should be part of the process. Collaboration with students, parents, and other stakeholders is essential to developing assessments that support student achievement.

There are numerous steps teachers can take to address standardized testing difficulties such as teaching test-taking strategies, providing practice tests, focusing on content areas, offering one-on-one support to build testing confidence, reducing anxiety by creating a positive space, and using technology such as educational games and simulations to help improve content. Teachers could also attend professional development opportunities for the implementation of practices to learn about the problems associated with standardized testing and how to overcome them.

According to Sleeter (2005), multicultural education is based on transformational intellectual knowledge drawn from diverse populations' experiences and cultures. Beyond the Eurocentrism found in textbooks and school curricula, transformative intellectual understanding exists. It also combines oppressed and marginalized communities' knowledge and experiences. Sleeter distinguishes between standards-driven curriculum planning and standards-conscious curriculum planning; the former uses standards as a platform to teach pupils "big ideas" and "concepts." While employing the standards as a teaching tool, the latter includes students' and teachers' knowledge and interests. Culturally relevant assessments should be employed to evaluate students' academic achievement.

Educators could use the Medicine Wheel model to help change their teaching methods, moving away from traditional, linear models (Bell, 2014). This model is more appropriate for Indigenous education, as it views learning as a dynamic process that takes place simultaneously in the head, heart, body, and spirit. Indigenous Elders, specialists, students, and community members must be willing to help us make this change, and aspiring instructors must be receptive to Indigenizing their teaching methods when approached in a way that takes all four of these factors into account.

Reyes (2019) identified a praxis of "Re-We-Me:" (Re)humanize, (re)member, and (re)vision. A decolonialist pedagogy is (re)humanizing and values-centered. It acknowledges that each student's cultural, social, and educational background shapes them. It believes in pupils' vast capacities to learn, imagine, create, and love in ways that are consistent with their cultural and social histories. It acknowledges that colonial conditions are ubiquitous and, for historically marginalized students, traumatizing, and cause pain (Reyes, 2019).

Zinga & Styres (2019), demonstrated how the teacher's positionality, as well as deliberate and mindful choices in curriculum, course content, and classroom practices, help students reflect on their own positionality and the ways networks and relations of power and

privilege play a role in learning and teaching. They presented practical examples of decolonizing and anti-oppressive pedagogies in higher education contexts from the viewpoints of one Indigenous and one non-Indigenous instructor.

Conclusion

Students are more than a number; they are multi-dimensional and multi-faceted. Instead of relying solely on test scores to measure student achievement, multiple measures such as teacher observations, portfolios, and project-based assessments could be used. This would offer a more comprehensive and accurate picture of learning.

The research affirmed the fact that educational accountability is a complex web of invested stakeholders each contending for their own specific interests. They are battling within a neoliberal marketplace that values profits over people. Teachers have access to resources and information on how to shift assessment towards a decolonization model. Before transformational large-scale change happens, we need to create opportunities for small-scale changes in local school boards across the province. We need to listen to the students and parents of equity-deserving populations and forge ahead with confidence. The shift will require critically examining the ways that colonialism and systemic oppression have shaped educational systems and structures. Additionally, we need to investigate issues such as unequal access to education, discrimination in policies and decision-making, and the ways in which dominant Eurocentric Western curricula and pedagogies have excluded Indigenous epistemologies. To achieve this, we need to focus on dismantling colonialism and creating something more equitable, inclusive, and respectful. We hope all stakeholders will accept the call to reposition and revitalize standardized testing.

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