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OUR SCHOOLS

The Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives

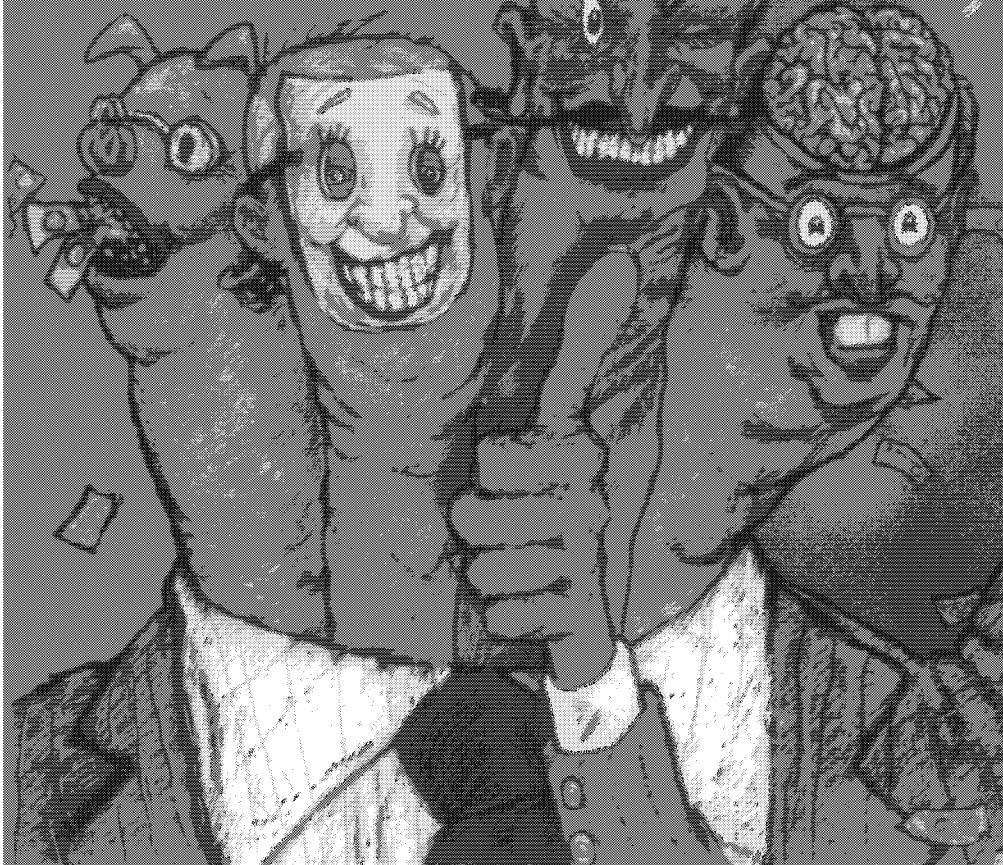
OUR SELVES

Ontario's incredible
shrinking textbook market

Troubling questions about
BC's electronic Student
Information System

Provide or perish in
Canadian universities

The Many Faces of Privatization





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industry, better textbooks within the current structure, or different teaching methods? Though I can't say for certain since the situation is rather complicated, I think a bit of all three would do the trick. A few things I would like to see include:

- Policy reform at the federal and provincial levels encourages small, independent publishers to enter and remain in the Ontario textbook market through grants and financial incentives.
- Support for teacher training that addresses the issue of textbooks, empowering them to interact with textbooks in an "oppositional" way with students in order to address the problems and consequences discussed.
- Curriculum reform that explicitly supports critical thinking (for those in the know, "deep sense" critical thinking) and encourages a classroom environment where the type of critical interaction described can take place with all curriculum artifacts, including textbooks.
- Creation and use of textbooks that take alternate forms. Some examples might include textbooks that take a subversive position using irony (similar to *America: The Book*) or the use of narrative-based texts as advocated by Matthew Lipman of the Institute for Philosophy for Children. An example of this approach is the graphic novel, *Enter Avariz* by Marc Ngui (2002, Conundrum Press) which could be used in a politics class.

Laura Pinto is a PHD candidate at the University of Toronto. She is currently president of the Ontario Business Educators' Association. This article drew on her experiences as author of two textbooks, high school teacher, marketing manager, and policy-maker.

ENDNOTES

¹ Data by textbook division (elementary, secondary, higher education) is not available.

² Course profiles are documents that were developed by the Ministry of Education between 1998 and 2000 to provide teaching/learning suggestions to complement the new curriculum (available online at <http://www.edu.gov.on.ca>). They consisted of lesson plans and blackline master handouts linked to curriculum expectations for virtually every new secondary school course.

Carlo Ricci

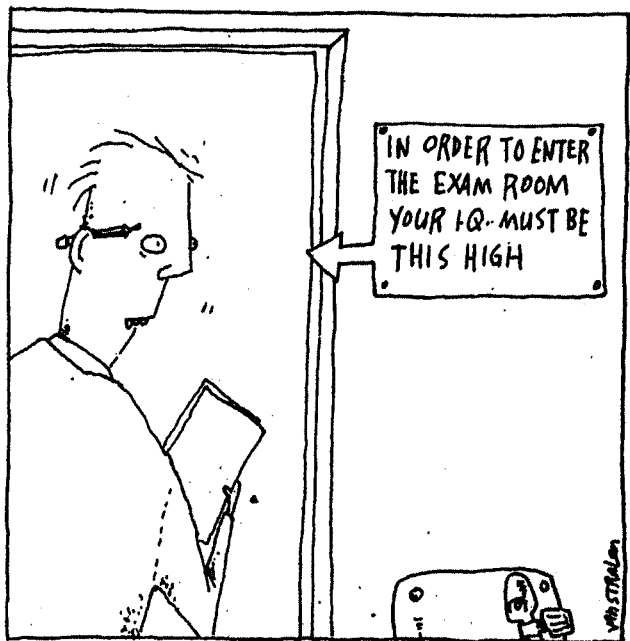
Ontario's 2005 EQAO scores up, artificially?

On October 27 and 28, 2004, 186,409 students in 674 publicly funded schools in Ontario wrote the Ontario Secondary Schools Literacy Test (OSSLT). Of those, 147,781 were writing it for the first time. The others were those students that had previously failed the reading, writing or both sections of the test. The test is administered by the Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO), an arms-length agency of the provincial government. The OSSLT is a high-stakes test because students must pass it or the Ontario Secondary School Literacy Course (OSSLC) as one of the 32 requirements for graduation. The OSSLC was introduced as an alternative to fulfilling the OSSLT requirement when it became apparent that large numbers of students needed an alternative.

On May 5, 2005, EQAO issued a news release on its website (www.eqao.com) highlighting the test results. The headline screamed "School Literacy Strategies Lead to 82% Student Success Rate: Number of Students Passing the High-School Literacy Test Increases Again This Year." On this point they are correct. The fact is that test scores have gone up; however, the truth is that literacy likely has not. EQAO reported that the pass rates reached 82% in 2004 compared to 77% the previous year. As well,

- Of the 147,781 who wrote the test for the first time 82% were successful.
- Of the 38,628 students who retook the test, 62% passed.
- Between February 2002 and October 2004, the success rate for boys increased to 79% from 70%. The pass rate for girls rose to 86% from 80%.
- In addition, 57% of students with special needs succeeded in 2004, up from 40% two years earlier.
- The results of students who speak English as a second language improved to a 50% pass rate from 37%.

In sum, overall Ontario's Grade 10 literacy test scores have increased by 5 percentage points, ESL scores increased by 13 percentage points, students in applied level English courses improved their pass rate by 18 percentage points. Students enrolled in academic English courses now have a 94% pass rate, a seven-point improvement in the past two years of the test, and the number of special needs students who passed last year rose 17 percentage points.



This still leaves a large gap between those taking academic English and those in the applied, ESL, and special needs classes. As well, it remains unethical to limit the choices ESL students face just because they fail to pass a flawed literacy test in English — language and literacy are not the same things. How well would you do on a test in a foreign language? Would you consider yourself illiterate?

The fact is that test scores have gone up; however, the truth is that literacy likely has not.

I have been eagerly listening to and reading news reports, waiting for someone to mention other explanations that could account for the rise in test scores, and I have been disappointed. For one, EQAO and the media are pointing out the growth in test scores from 2002 to 2004. This can be misleading because the test was first administered in 2000 (a practice run), and we are not given the full range for comparison.

Another glaring gap is that we do not know what the pass rate was set at this year in relation to previous years. We do, however, know that it fluctuates from year to year. As well, one principal that I was talking to suggested that his belief is that the test is getting easier as time goes on. Furthermore, we cannot ignore the impact that coaching is having on the scores: students, teachers, parents, administrators are all being coached on how to successfully write and pass the test. It is important to point out that passing the test and literacy are not the same thing. Many educators that I have discussed this with say they were told to teach how to write the test and not focus as much on broader features of literacy, because teaching them how to write the test will raise the scores. For example: by coaching students to make sure their summary is 100 words and includes a main point and two supporting details. This has nothing to do with literacy but everything to do with EQAO's arbitrary criteria. Lessons like these artificially raise test scores.

As well, when I marked for EQAO (see Winter 2004 issue of *Our Schools/Our Selves* for a detailed revelation of my experience) we were given new directions to follow throughout the week, any of which could have had a significant impact on final test scores. For

example, there was confusion about whether we were to consider, when we were marking their final work, student notes that they had scribbled throughout the booklet while they were writing their test. Clearly, including this would have a significant impact. As well, my fellow markers and I pointed out some limitations in the rubrics, which if corrected or changed would also impact the scores. If they were not, the flaws remain. Markers are rigorously and painstakingly trained and this may also have an impact on test scores. For example, when I was there we were not officially tested and sent home if we failed their standardized test that qualifies markers: this is what I am told now happens. This can also impact test scores. There is so much that can happen in such a complex system that can clandestinely, deceptively and significantly alter tests scores.

Perhaps one of the most significant changes is the reported change in rules. On September 24, 2004, the *Toronto Star* reported that,

Moreover, the Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO) will let students pass the Grade 10 test if their combined scores in reading and writing hit a certain level, rather than requiring students to pass each part separately — a change that will begin on the test slated for next month... Before this year, to pass the test you needed to pass both the reading and writing components. This year passing either reading or the writing is considered a pass. (Brown)

So, it is conceivable that this highly significant rule change impacted overall test scores. The higher scores are likely a result of a simple rule change that we have not been told of since the scores were released: not by EQAO, not by politicians and not by the media. Has everyone forgotten about this rule change or are they just trying to suppress it being reported? Given this information, no wonder the scores have gone up.

Clearly, the scores will differ significantly if students have to pass both the reading and writing components of the test, than if they do not. In April 29, 2004 on the 2003 OSSLT results, a Canadian Press article published in the *Toronto Star* reported that,

Less than half of the 36,545 students in the applied stream — 49% — passed both portions of the test and 22% failed both portions, compared with the 98,709 students in the academic stream, 90% of whom passed and two per cent failed. Students must pass both portions to successfully complete the test. (Canadian Press)

Given this change, therefore, it is unethical for the Minister of Education and the Premier to try and take the credit for rising literacy scores and not remind the public of the rule change; since, the credit for rising literacy scores, in large part, clearly belongs to the rule change. We demand to know: What would the scores be if the rules did not change? As well, as pointed out, even without this change, other factors could have easily had a significant impact on scores.

In addition, let's not forget that since 82% passed that means 18% or approximately 33,553 students failed and are at risk of dropping out. Even more unacceptable is how certain target groups such as ESL and special needs students are being punished by this process. The OSSLT makes an already vulnerable group become even more at risk of failing or dropping out of school altogether.

Since the test was first administered, in 2000, the test did not count: in 2001, it did. In 2002 and 2003 the test was operated under certain rules that are different from the 2004 rules and that will again be different from the 2005 rules. For example, in September 2004, EQAO announced that they are going to cut standardized tests by half. What this means for the OSSLT is that it will be written in one half-day rather than two half-days, reducing it to 2.5 hours from 5 hours. Given all these rule changes is the test reliable and are the inferences we make valid? Can we compare the test scores from year to year? Interestingly, in a September 24, 2004 article in the *Toronto Star* about cutting the time spent on standardized testing in

It is unethical for the Minister of Education and the Premier to try and take the credit for rising literacy scores and not remind the public of the rule change.

half, Marguerite Jackson, chief executive officer of the EQAO, was quoted saying the following:

We met with schools, school boards and the public and looked at other jurisdictions, and we determined we didn't need all that time; it was a burdensome interference on schools, (Brown)

And,

We decided we could provide the public with accountability, with less imposition on schools. (Brown)

I in turn responded with the following letter to the editor that was published on September 27, 2004:

I am glad to read that Marguerite Jackson, chief executive officer of the Education Quality and Accountability Office, was quoted in the *Star* admitting what many of us have been saying all along. Standardized testing is a “burdensome interference on schools” and an “imposition.” They have gotten rid of half of the test and now we have to continue lobbying until they get rid of the other half. (Ricci)

This leaves us with Elliot Eisner’s (1998) wise, poignant, and I believe, correct comment: “it is perfectly possible for a schools faculty to raise test scores and at the same time to diminish the quality of education.” When it comes to the EQAO and the Ontario government the message should be: stop playing games with our children!!

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Susan Picard

Who Owns the A?

I still have a picture of her, slightly out of focus, hair dyed black, crimson lips pierced, and dark eyes looking at me through a camera that she held herself. It was part of a gift, the other part a plastic sandwich bag full of broken, slightly burned cookies that she dug from out of the bottom of her backpack. “Merry Christmas,” she said morosely as she crossed my name off a list she carried with her. “Thank-you,” I replied, completely surprised, not knowing what else to say. Later, as I sat at my desk watching the class interact, I tried to eat one of those cookies, pondering the strange gift from my ninth grade semi-goth, knowing that this act had completed the task of her getting under my skin, into my heart. This isn’t a happy-ever-after story, but neither does it have a tragic ending. However when viewed in the context of a classroom, with a window on the larger world, it matters in ways I couldn’t have expected. Each day as teachers we are given remarkable gifts from our students, opportunities that had we the time to consider them fully, would allow us a perspective on the world that could shake us to the core.