



CARLO RICCI and PAT WHITTINGTON

EQAO's Grade Six Standardized Assessment: What does this have to do with learning?

Rachel is in grade six in the public school system in Ontario. And this year, Rachel has been doing what thousands of other Ontario children are doing and have in grade six: learning about fractions and decimals, experimenting with electricity, writing book reports, and studying the First Nations cultures of North America. And, in addition, she will be expected to write the Education Quality and Accountability Office's (EQAO) grade six standardized assessment. Three years ago, when Rachel wrote the Grade three assessment, Rachel's mother, Pat, explains she "only half paid attention to the EQAO process." For her and for her husband, this was just another test that Rachel would be subjected to over the course of her schooling, — so, other than a very slight rise in anxiety on Rachel's part, the three of them didn't give it much thought.

This year, though, their attitudes were considerably different. None of them saw the point of the assessments and they decided together that Rachel should not have to write it.

Unfortunately, as all parties found out, choosing not to write the EQAO test was not an option.

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First, some background about EQAO. Mike Harris' Conservative government implemented the standardized assessment system in June 1996 to ensure "greater accountability and better quality in Ontario's publicly funded school system" (EQAO, 2006, "About the EQAO," 1). At that time, Pat did not pay much attention to the announcements since her (then) only child was still a couple of years away from starting school, and the government's rationale, that the assessments would result in "greater accountability and better quality" in education, seemed plausible to her.

Pat's first suspicions that EQAO was not the answer to public education's problems arose almost immediately after Rachel wrote the grade three test. A school board representative came to a parent meeting to explain why the assessments were being done. Over the course of her explanation, she compared the EQAO process to measuring corn by the side of the road in a test field. She went on to patiently explain that no harm is done to the corn when it is measured and corn grows neither faster nor slower as a result of being measured. She continued: So it is with our children; they are not affected in the least by the testing imposed upon them, and since children are not affected by the testing, why not do it.

Pat remembers being convinced by this line of thinking. She bought the speaker's rationale arguing for assessments (basically, that the absence of harm equals good). However, Pat was not convinced for long. When she arrived home and processed what the speaker had said, she realized the absurdity of it all: "She had compared my children to corn."

Pat enrolled in a graduate course taught by Carlo in the spring of 2004: in that forum, in direct contrast to the propaganda distributed by the Ministry of Education regarding the benefits of EQAO, teacher and students learned more about the concept of these assessments and explored the pitfalls of standardized testing.

During the course of the discussion, Carlo explained to the class how parents could request that their child not participate

in the EQAO testing. Since Pat's children were then in grade four and kindergarten, she mentally filed the information away and secretly hoped that the EQAO would disappear before one of her children would have to take a test. If EQAO was still there when her children had to write, then she would do as she always does with tests: downplay the event and the marks.

In 2006, as the EQAO spring deadline approached, Pat and Carlo were again in a graduate course together (Carlo as teacher and Pat as the student).

Pat was pleasantly surprised to hear Carlo again repeat that Rachel did not have to write the test, since parents had the right to make that choice on behalf of their children.¹ After

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class, Pat mentioned to Carlo that she would explain to Rachel that she did not have to write the assessment, although at the time Pat was fairly certain that Rachel would want to write the EQAO test. In Pat's words: "Although a confident child, Rachel respects authority and likes her teacher; I was sure that she would not want to let Madame down by not writing the assessment. Of course, I was wrong."

When Pat asked Rachel what she thought of EQAO, Rachel replied that she was not sure why they were writing the test since it counted for nothing and was not going to be used in any way other than to evaluate the school and the teacher. She thought that not writing the test would be a way to show that she did not support it and wanted her mother to further investigate that possibility, to which Pat agreed.

However, when Pat checked with a school principal about EQAO guidelines, she was dismayed to discover that all students in publicly funded schools are mandated to participate. Pat emailed her finding to Carlo, who, believing that the principal was mistaken, suggested that she call EQAO directly. Unfortunately, follow-up calls from both Carlo and Pat to EQAO yielded similar results. EQAO's position was that students were expected to write the assessment and that the EQAO test is a part of the curriculum. During Carlo's conversation with EQAO he asked, "and what if they don't write?" The response was that

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when the students receive their Individual Student Reports it would say that the student did not write. So, although the official stance is that students are mandated to write, the consequences for not writing, as we see it, are actually minimal for individual students.

Pat was excited and felt that she had made inroads with the EQAO operator that she spoke with; unfortunately her excitement was tempered by trepidation after she approached Rachel's very conservative and by-the-book principal. Pat used a light touch when she broached the topic and merely asked the principal for her reaction to the request. Predictably, the principal was clearly baffled by their family decision and asked why Rachel wouldn't want to write the test. After all, the EQAO website does say that the assessment "is designed to be challenging yet enjoyable for students" (EQAO, 2006, "Frequently asked questions from parents," 5) Pat said, "I guess the principal thought Rachel would be missing out on a bunch of fun!" Clearly the principal had never questioned either the purpose of or the need for the assessment, and, when Carlo explained Rachel's reasons for not writing the test, referred the question on to the school board.

Teachers have demonstrated an overwhelming stand against EQAO and standardized testing. For example, a report on the Ontario College of Teachers' annual survey in a September 2005 issue of *Professionally Speaking*, indicates that "As with previous surveys, teachers remain dead set against standardized testing. Seventy one per cent say that standardized testing is the least helpful education initiative. No other issue comes close." (Jamieson, 36) And in the same issue of the magazine, Marilyn A. Laframboise Chair of the OCT says:

Ask what more can be done to improve learning and teachers have ready answers. More help for at-risk, immigrant and special students. More phys ed, music and art programs. Mentoring programs for new teachers. More specially trained literacy and numeracy teachers. And get rid of standardized testing — please! (p.10)

In spite of clear concern over standardized testing as illustrated by the responses of Ontario teachers, in Rachel's case the board determined that, short of an exemption from EQAO, if she were to step foot in the school during the three weeks in which the testing materials were there, she would have to write. Since EQAO had

told Pat that the decision was the board's and the school's to make, Pat could see the discussion going nowhere quickly.

With only two days to go before the test, Pat suggested to the principal that Rachel could indeed be present but spend the six hours drawing on her booklet, staring out the window, or doing anything but answering the questions. The principal sounded shocked that Pat would suggest such action (or inaction), and said that she did not recommend that, since the school board would not look kindly upon it!

In the end, and much to her younger brother's surprise, Rachel did not want to miss three weeks of school, nor did she want to deface the booklets or daydream the time away. She decided to give an honest effort on the assessment--and Pat supported her decision. Carlo, in disbelief at how little power parents have over their own children's education, encouraged Pat to contact her superintendent, the local trustee, and the media, but with only a few days remaining before the test days, Pat and her family decided not to pursue the issue at that time. However, the existence of EQAO itself and forcing students to write these assessments continues to nag at Pat. "After all," Pat said, "I have a grade two student this year who will be expected to write the grade assessment next year."

EQAO — In a nutshell

In the 2003-2004 school year, EQAO cost provincial taxpayers close to the staggering sum of \$40 million. (EQAO, 2004, p. 33) That's the equivalent of over \$8,000 for each of the province's 4880 schools in that same year.

So, what do we get for our \$40,000,000? This is how EQAO describes itself, according to the website:

EQAO ensures greater accountability and better quality in Ontario's publicly funded school system. An arm's-length agency of the provincial government, EQAO provides parents, teachers and the public with accurate and reliable information. EQAO also makes recommendations for improvement that educators, parents, policy-makers and others in the education community can use to improve learning and teaching. (2006, "About EQAO," 1)

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These three points are each repeated several times, although there is never any discussion of how EQAO achieves these goals, if they actually have achieved them, or what the effects are on the children in the school system — the people actually doing the learning and EQAO's primary focus and concern, according to the website.

A point-by-point challenge of EQAO's mission statement as detailed above is beyond the scope of this essay, but suffice it to say that we do not take as a given that each or any of these three points is inherently positive; in fact, we submit that these points, when dissected, are not even desirable goals in a public education system. However, even though we are not planning to go into detail about the points mentioned above, in what follows we would like to share some of our more pressing concerns about EQAO.

The EQAO website describes how the office came into being as a result of a recommendation of the Ontario Royal Commission on Learning (RCL) in 1995. After public consultations, the Commission determined that province-wide assessments would respond to an apparent public request for greater accountability and quality in the public education system.

In the preface to its report, the RCL describes the members' collective "unshakeable bias": "All of us happen to love learning" (1). Their vision of learning is described further on as something that happens "to each of us all the time, wherever we are" (5). After this very open and encouraging description, the Commission prescribes the ways that learning is valid. Skills learned in school, according to the members, cannot really be learned or "productively practiced without careful teacher monitoring. Putting kids in a group to do a project without careful instruction and on-going guidance, and leaving them entirely to their own devices is hardly a recipe for successful learning" (7). The other qualifier placed on learning is that there must be "improved, continual assessment methods, with feedback carefully designed to be used to improve the performance of both the individual student and the system itself" (2). So much for learning all the time, wherever you are!

We do not believe that outside assessment will help students know what they need to do to improve, as EQAO apparently (2006), because we don't believe that learning is an activity

that has a beginning and an end; learning is a continuous, fluid activity.

The overemphasis on standardized testing even goes against the balance that the Commission tried to achieve between teacher-based and standardized assessments:

The quality of learning is not easily or effectively tested with simple quantitative measures.... Testing for real understanding, for a student's capacity to think and reason, takes far more sophistication than this.... In the end, no one knows the student's capacities, or is in a position to assess them in all their nuances and complexity, better than the classroom teacher. (3-4)

Another point emphasized in both the Commission's report and on the EQAO website is the increased information going to the student, parent, and educator about each child as a result of the standardized tests:

EQAO's assessments give parents valuable information about the strengths and areas for improvement in their child's learning. Parents and educators can use this data, along with information on the student's performance in the classroom, to determine the steps that need to be taken to ensure the student's success. In this way, parents can support teachers and schools in planning for their child's success in learning. (2006, "Frequently asked questions from parents," 1)

Pat's personal experience with the grade three test was that the minimal information parents received was useless. About six months elapsed between when the test was written and when parents received the results. When parents finally did receive the results, there was only a number for the various elements tested. Surely, even EQAO does not consider this to be "clear and timely information" (2006, "Outcomes of an accountable system," 2) about Rachel's learning. In that time, Rachel's abilities and interests changed, and how she answered questions on test day was no longer valid for her. There was no follow-up at school to review questions that were either unanswered or poorly answered. There was no follow up to even see what Rachel thought of the results and how they impacted her as a learner and a person. As well, in some cases, EQAO results that are different from a child's

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normal grades and/or the parent's perception could cause significant issues at home; proper follow up is crucial, from an ethical perspective, to ensure that no trauma comes from the receipt of the results.

The final criticism about the EQAO assessments has to do with the claims that "all EQAO assessment materials are reviewed by educators and experts to ensure that they are fair, appropriate and free of bias" .(2006, "Frequently asked questions by parents," 8) A quick review of the sample texts on the website shows the opposite. One story dealt extensively with the production of maple syrup on Grandfather's farm (EQAO, n.d.) The questions that followed asked for excruciating detail about the process and the story. Obviously children who are familiar with the process of making maple syrup will do better than those who are not. What about children who have recently arrived from other countries who do not know what maple syrup is, or children who live above the tree line in Northern Ontario who have never seen a tree? How confusing and frustrating it must be to have to try to answer questions on a topic that they have absolutely no connection with, and how devastating for their confidence and sense of self to get a below-average score as a result of their efforts.

Carlo has written extensively on EQAO and his position can easily be referenced. Topics of his past articles include: the flaws of standardized testing (Ricci, 2004, Winter); the impossibility of comparing one year to the next because of changes (Ricci, 2004, Fall); the narrowing of the curriculum (Ricci, 2004, October-December); the anxieties and frustrations of standardized testing (Ricci, 2005, May) and so on. But what does Pat think about EQAO, particularly after this experience? "Whereas before I did not think much of the process but found it a benign growth on the education system, I now understand it to be a malignant tumour that needs to be excised. The waste of money and time, both in and out of the classroom, should be a concern to the very taxpayers that EQAO claims, I think fraudulently, want and benefit from the assessment system. None of EQAO's claims are supported with proof or even explanation."

Parker Palmer best describes her vision of public education maintaining that:

Education at its best — this profound human transaction called teaching and learning — is not just about getting information or getting a job. Education is about healing and wholeness. It is about empowerment, liberation, transcendence, about renewing the vitality of life. It is about finding and claiming ourselves and our place in the world. (quoted in hooks, 2003, p. 43)

We all have an obligation to ensure that every person in society has the opportunity to access such education; removing the standardized assessments inflicted on our children through EQAO is just one step toward this goal. And we are hopeful that we will reach the goal. We agree with Freire, (quoted in hooks, 2003) where in the introduction to *Teaching community* he writes, “It is imperative that we maintain hope even when the harshness of reality may suggest the opposite.”

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NOTES

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ENDNOTE

¹ This turns out not to be the case now and whether it was ever the case could not definitively be verified. There are different responses to this question from different people, and so the question as to whether or not parents could request their child not write the test remains unanswered. What we do know for sure, after our collective experience is that refusing to take the test is clearly not an option now.