

Vernaculars of testing: An introduction to the Special Issue

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The use of standardised testing, particularly of literacy and numeracy, has become a common policy initiative throughout many education jurisdictions in the Western world. National and international testing, particularly of literacy and numeracy, has become a fixture in school calendars and the education experience of students in many countries. TIMMS, PIRLS, PISA and the various national tests such as NAPLAN, NAEP and SATs have all contributed to testing becoming a, if not the, compelling language of education quality across national boundaries. These tests generally have a similar aim, to improve the quality of education systems through producing data that can be used to make schools and teachers accountable.

The use of testing data, and the appeal of accountability and transparency, are part of a wider ensemble of changes to education that follow a “somewhat common trajectory... most evident in the English speaking countries of England, USA, Australia and New Zealand” as well as Canada (Angus, 2012, p. 233). This trajectory “emphasises market arrangements, centralised testing regimes, publication of results, strict school and teacher accountability procedures, centralised curriculum and standards and a managerial approach to school governance” (Angus, 2012, p. 233). While testing is the focus of this issue, it is important to see the proliferation of testing regimes as part of a larger shift in the values rationalities of schooling in many countries. Rizvi and Lingard argue that as education “has been reconstituted as central to the economic competitiveness of nations in the context of a global economy, many educational systems have instituted high-stakes, standardized testing to try to drive up educational standards” (2010, p. 98).

The history of standardised testing being used to measure student achievement and draw conclusions regarding the effectiveness of schools and teachers is a long one. Prior to 1900 standardised testing was developed and implemented in some US school districts in order to “attempt to measure the achievement of students” as a guide to the “effectiveness of teaching” (Callahan, 1964, p. 99). These early tests became tied to Taylorist logics of scientific management and efficiency as proof of the contribution of schools and teachers to society, and in 1911 economist-reformer Simon Patten “demanded that schools provide evidence of their contribution to society or have their budgets cut” (Callahan, 1964, p. 48).

So, while using standardised tests to measure student achievement, and by extension, teacher effectiveness is not new, there is little doubt that the reach and scope of the tests is greater than before. This is most likely a combination of the recasting of education within productive or economic logics that have supplanted the logics of social or democratic good as evident in the 1970s as the compelling case for schooling, combined with the effectiveness of technology in collecting, sorting and analysing large scale data relatively quickly.

In 1971 Bernstein identified three “message systems” of schooling; curriculum pedagogy and evaluation” (Bernstein, 1971). He argued that these three message systems encapsulate social and cultural beliefs about “the educational knowledge it considers to be public” (Bernstein, 1971). In other words, they are a system of transfer of expectations, communicating what is happening in schools (the practice of schooling) via explicit sign systems while being influenced by the cultural and social expectations of what should be happening. Rizvi and Lingard (2010) extend Bernstein’s argument to suggest that the proliferation, centrality and commonality of standardised tests indicates that they have become the fourth sign system in globalised education systems and practices. The logics of “testing and accountability” have become messages systems that central policymakers use “to steer their system using standardised testing regimes, both national and international” (Rizvi & Lingard, 2010, p. 94).

However, there is often a tendency to see the various testing regimes through a lens of homogeneity, as if all testing is commonly designed, implemented and experienced around the world in the same ways. The purpose of this Special Edition is to examine the effects of testing within particular ‘vernaculars’ or contexts around the world. While there may be similarities, one of the key features of globalised education is that while the pressures to reform might be similar throughout the globe, the results or impacts “always have a vernacular character as they build incrementally on what has gone before in specific educational systems” (Rizvi & Lingard, 2010, p. 97).

The collection of papers comprising this Special Edition focus on contextualising testing in a specific educational system, either in a national context or a clearly defined provincial context; including explaining the goals of these testing programs, how these tests are structured and administered, the discernible impacts, and/or what the future of high-stakes testing appears to hold. These papers vary in style, from policy sociology, to empirical work and to historico-comparative studies. The important aspect that brings this collection of papers together is their engagement with explaining what the effects of high-stakes testing in different contexts.

PAPERS

In “Hiding Behind High-Stakes Testing: Meritocracy, Objectivity and Inequality in U.S. Education” Au examines the history of high-stakes testing in the U.S. and the legacy of eugenics and IQ testing in schools. Au argues that standardised testing in the U.S. is derived from Binet’s intelligence testing that “conceived of as hereditary and fixed, laying the groundwork to use standardised testing to justify the sorting and ranking of different people by race, ethnicity, gender, and class according to supposedly inborn, biologically innate intelligence” (p.2). The journey from standardised to high-stakes test, that Au characterises in the No Child Left Behind Act, “took on the dual role of legitimating and masking structural race and class inequalities”(p8).

Au’s powerful argument challenges the notion that standardised tests in the US are objective and valid measures of achievement that can challenge class privilege. Instead, he argues that the “common sense” promise of testing to close the achievement gap in the U.S. has not done so, in that “testing policies have not significantly narrowed national and state level achievement gaps” (p4). Furthermore, despite the claim that testing would challenge inequality through the promotion of a meritocracy, where individuals would be assessed on their merits, little has shifted the achievement gap of racial and economic disadvantage. Au concludes by arguing that the common sense idea of testing in the U.S. as an objective measure of ability is untenable.

The second paper “Accountability synopticism: How a think tank and the media developed a quasi-market for school choice in British Columbia” sees Simmonds and Webb investigate the effect of a school rankings protocol on school enrolment in British Columbia, Canada. This school ranking rubric has been devised by the Fraser Institute, a “think-tank” with a vision of “a free and prosperous world where individuals benefit from greater choice, competitive markets, and personal responsibility” (p3). The Fraser Institute uses “key performance indicators (KPIs)” including test results to rank schools “that changed how schools were perceived by the public” (p1).

Using a Foucaultian frame to outline the normalising and disciplining of conduct in schools through this panoptic surveillance, Simmonds and Webb argue that the publication of this rankings system creates a high-stakes testing regime “used by non-elected agents to create a marketplace for privatization and school choice where there had not been one previously” (p2). In their findings they outline that these rankings have impacted on enrolment patterns in British Columbia, as more students move from public to private schooling. For them, what is at stake “is the erosion of school cultures that value and serve different kinds of students in different kinds of ways” to be replaced by instrumental rationalities driven by Fraser Institute’s KPIs (p14).

In “Markets, managerialism and teachers’ work: the invisible hand of high stakes testing in England” Stephenson and Wood trace the historical record of testing in England. They argue that the experience of testing in England has had a widespread impact for students, parents, school communities and those working in schools. Focusing specifically on the experiences of teachers, they argue that teachers work has been, and

is being, reconfigured through both a decline in public spending and the “perceived imperative to perform highly in international league tables that has narrowed the focus of teaching and learning” (p1). They argue that teacher identities in England are being changed by a twin pincer movement of marketisation and managerialism that are dependent on high-stakes testing data to create impetus.

Using labour process theory, Stephenson and Wood go on to argue that teaching has historically been resistant to processes of management because it has been a process without an object suitable for measuring. Testing, with the added layer of national inspection, has seen “test scores perform a similar, although not equivalent function to price in the market for school education” (p6). The result of this according to the authors has been profound, ranging from a teaching focus on testing, short-term results and a return to a Taylorist logic of teaching that burns teachers out and reduces teacher “professional confidence and solidarity” (p12). They conclude by arguing that there are other options for England, which “sees the professional capital of teachers as a driver for improvement and incremental change” (p13).

NAPLAN, the Australian literacy and numeracy testing program has been conducted since 2008. Since that time it has been controversial, with much media attention focused on the testing regime. The paper “NAPLAN, MySchool and Accountability: Teacher Perceptions of the Effects of Testing” explores teachers perceptions of the impact that the testing, and the publication of school results online, has had on learning in school communities. NAPLAN is a testing program designed to improve school and teacher accountability, and in its construction the Australian Government was advised by Joel Klein, then the Chancellor of New York schools. This is an example of policy convergence, where education policies move from one jurisdiction to another, often with little regard paid to the evidence of the impact of those policies. That said, there are differences in the design of NAPLAN when compared to testing regimes in the US and England, leaving some commentators to argue that NAPLAN does not constitute a high-stakes assessment at all.

Teachers reported that NAPLAN was having a significant impact on their work. This paper argues that for many teachers these effects were negative, and that these effects make it “doubtful we will see the desired systemic improvement in literacy and numeracy learning” (p16). In responding to questions regarding the positive impact, negative impacts and impact on student learning, the teachers reported that NAPLAN was having the same unintended consequences found in international research, including pressure to teach to the test, a narrowing curriculum focus, increased student, teacher and family anxiety and the return of teacher centred pedagogies. While teachers also reported some positives, including better coordination of literacy and numeracy approaches at the school level, Thompson concludes that these results “highlight a basic problem of accountability measures; learning does not occur at the policy level, it occurs in localised contexts mediated by various specificities” and that this may make improved student achievement less, not more, likely.

In “Testing Capitalism: Perpetuating Privilege Behind the Masks of Merit and Objectivity” Thomas focuses on the US state of South Carolina and experiences of accountability through the SAT tests. In particular, Thomas asserts that “standards, testing, and accountability are the new gods of the political and corporate elite” (p4) used to create disciplined and compliant actors within schools. Furthermore, in South Carolina, he argues that these tests act to create or widen achievement gaps and marginalising those below the standard.

In documenting the SAT experience in South Carolina, Thomas challenges the various narratives about the test, such as their claims to accuracy, objectivity and validity. He argues that the comparison of South Carolina to North Carolina and Mississippi ignores the fact that they are comparing different samples - “SC’s average SAT scores are drawn from a population closer to the norm of SC students than the unique and elite population of students in MS taking the SAT; in other words, average SAT scores in MS should be higher than in SC” (p8). Thomas argues that the answer to structural problems such as high levels of poverty and disadvantage in South Carolina, and the comparison of different samples, has too often been “More accountability, different standards, and more tests” with little or no impact on student achievement and student disadvantage (p9). Thomas concludes by arguing that the anger over test results is misguided, in fact it is the tests themselves that are the problem.

O’Neill’s paper “Rationalising National Assessment in New Zealand” addresses the impact of a different form of education governance through assessment in New Zealand, government regulated national standards of literacy and numeracy achievement. While New Zealand does not have a national testing regime, the publication of national standards by schools functions as a de facto accountability measure. These national standards were designed to “facilitate ‘voice’ and ‘choice’... to ensure that every child had the ‘the opportunity to succeed’” (p3). These standards were presented as “a robust alternative to national testing regimes that had proven harmful elsewhere” (p3).

Howeve, O’Neill highlights that in practice these standards have been used to create a public school ranking tool. Despite NZ schools and policy being historically committed to “assessment for learning principles” there has been a collision of differing rationalities around assessment, between the ‘right to know’ against the right to learn (p4). The public release of school data by the NZ Education Ministry has seen an “interactive ‘School Report’” created that “contained aggregate national standards data together with school contextual information” in order to compare schools (p3-4). O’Neill’s argument is that while NZ may claim to have avoided negatives associated with national testing regimes, in practice they have created a high-stakes accountability regime through standards that has seen “the populist rationality of 2008... largely been replaced by the crude realpolitik rationalisation of national standards” (p11).

Concluding the special issue is Professor Bob Lingard, whose work on globalising education policy, local vernaculars and testing as the co-author of *Globalizing Education Policy*, provided the impetus for this Special Issue. Lingard responds to

this collection of papers and the themes and issues raised of the “local vernaculars” of testing and assessment within specific contexts examined.

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