

A leadership challenge paper in support of UNESCO Futures of Education 2050

**The Future of Large-Scale Assessment in Ontario Schools:  
From the Probable to the Preferred Future**

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This paper was completed in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the course, Strategic Foresight in School Leadership (LHA6006) offered in July, 2020, Ontario Institute for Studies in Education. The views and opinions expressed in this paper are those expressed by the author and should not be attributed to the Department of Leadership, Higher and Adult Education, Ontario Institute for Studies in Education.  
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## Introduction

In a world where we are increasingly interconnected, people are moving between countries, studying abroad, and competing with businesses and workers from around the world, the search for common standards regarding knowledge, skills, and accreditation is ongoing. While educational opportunities vary by country, region, and often socioeconomic status and gender; governments and corporations want to ensure students (as future workers) have the skills needed to keep the economy strong. The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) has become a leader in international educational large-scale assessment. Their Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) is administered to fifteen-year-olds in over seventy countries and the rankings are broadcast by media organizations around the world. Since students from around the world are all writing the same test, the question remains: does PISA accurately measure students' knowledge across languages and cultures or are there biases toward certain students to do well?

On a smaller scale, the Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO), an arms-length Crown Corporation in Ontario, administers several large-scale literacy and numeracy assessments to Ontario public school students in Grades 3, 6, 9, and 10. In 2018-19, there were approximately two million students enrolled in public and Catholic schools in Ontario. (Government of Ontario, 2020) Ontario is a diverse province with representation from almost every cultural group existing in Canada; it also has a diverse geography with students living in the both the far north and south, in remote areas and in some of the country's largest cities. The experiences of students and their families are diverse, yet all students must complete the same EQAO tests. The Ontario government's recent labour battle with teachers, along with the increased financial investment into mathematics at the elementary and secondary panels tells us

that the current government will only be escalating the pressure and demands for increased math scores at the provincial and international level. However, EQAO tests are not authentic assessments of students' skills and since every student completes the same tests, are not responsive to each student's ways of knowing and individual needs. An authentic assessment that measures students' skills in real situations and which reflects their experiences and ways of knowing the world would give a more accurate result. In order for this to change, our society must first stop the attacks on education and educators and acknowledge the real reasons that test scores are not improving – that the tests unfairly favour certain students over others and that a one size fits all test does not give the information we need to create a successful education system.

### **Causal Layered Analysis**

*What is the LITANY about large scale assessment?*

Large scale assessment like the Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test (OSSLT), administered by EQAO, is high profile and high stakes. Results are published across the province, broken down by school, and are used by the ministry, media publications, and educational supporters and critics to either highlight what is right with our education system or what is wrong. Normally, high stakes testing measures skills that are thought to be important or essential for next steps in life. In the United States, the Scholastic Achievement Test (SAT's) are used as a measuring tool for university/ college admission. All students must write the test and score a minimum number in various categories to be considered for college programs. Like the SAT's, the OSSLT is a high stakes test; all students working toward an Ontario Secondary School Diploma (OSSD), must complete the literacy credential to earn their diploma. In addition, the provincial success rate has not changed dramatically in past five years. In 2015, the

provincial success rate was 82% and in 2019, the success rate was 80% (EQAQO 2018-19 Report). Although there is a slight decline, the change is not significant enough to warrant the conclusion that literacy rates in Ontario are declining; however, that is the message that is being conveyed to the public. More money and resources must be put toward literacy development so our students can be successful in the workforce, but the message is that the only way to ensure this will occur is to tighten up on assessment standards and teacher practices. If literacy rates are declining, it must be the fault of teachers who need further monitoring.

*What is the SYSTEM related to the ideas related to large scale assessment?*

While large scale assessment has been used for decades in Canadian education, the focus was on ensuring that students knew a minimum amount of content to earn their credits. However, this has evolved as all EQAQO testing, with the exception of the OSSLT, is not high stakes; it is used to take the temperature of students' numeracy and literacy skills and to ensure that the education agenda is warranted and that Ontario's education system remains highly ranked in the world. (EQAQO)

Education is one of the largest portfolios the provincial government is responsible for. The projected 2020-21 education budget is \$25.5 billion (Technical Paper 2020-21). When such a large portion of the provincial budget is spent on public education, the government wants to show the public that its money is being spent wisely and that they are getting good 'bang for their buck' when it comes to student success rates. Economic accountability is a large factor in using EQAQO testing as a measuring tool for Ontario's education system. In 2019, the Ontario government increased the scope of EQAQO's mandate by adding additional responsibilities to its portfolio. One particular change was the implementation of a mathematics competency test for all new Ontario Certified Teachers before they can teach in a classroom. (EQAQO) This addition

demonstrates the increased requirements demanded of teachers. Although the claim is for transparency and accountability, the real message being sent by Ontario's government is that teachers cannot be trusted and that they are not doing their jobs; that is the reason why student scores are not improving.

*What is the WORLDVIEW which the conversation about large scale assessment represents?*

Western society has seen a shift in the past several decades in which those in positions of authority (i.e. ministers, educators, law enforcement officers) are viewed as untrustworthy as opposed to adults that the community can trust to be professionals. With this decrease of trust comes a culture of accountability. (Addey, 2019) In a world that is highly digitized, it is easier to gather information, statistics, grades, and create data sets that are available to the public almost instantly. The availability of instant information has produced a demand and expectation that the public see results from their tax dollars and that educators are responsible to work magic and increase student results in a short time period.

Which brings us to the other worldview in play: that young people today are not the same caliber as those from generations past, that they lack the work ethic, knowledge, and skills needed to be productive adults. For today's students to be competitive in an ever-evolving global economy, they need a comprehensive curriculum, more education than ever before, and clear and consistent measurement of their learning. Increasingly, students and parents are mark driven; many students refuse to complete assignments if it 'doesn't count' and parents are increasingly demanding answers from teachers about the validity of their child's grades. This has resulted in a culture of increased accountability for teachers and stress, but also entitlement, from parents and students.

*What are the MYTHS and METAPHORS about large scale assessment?*

The underlying myth about large scale/ standardized assessment is we can judge the quality of education, teachers, schools by their test scores. While large scale assessments can take a temperature of systemic student achievement, “standardized tests tend to be limited to measuring forgettable facts while ignoring the higher-level creative and critical thinking... the tests are a contrived and unrealistic form of assessment that measures what matters least.” (Bower, 2013) The question needs to be asked: can standardized tests authentically assess students’ knowledge and skills across cultures or are these tests biased toward students from marginalized populations? Since “the strongest predictor of student performance on achievement tests is socio-economic status,” the myth is that standardized tests measure the quality of a school system while they most accurately measure the affluence of specific neighbourhoods and regions. (Bower, 2013)

### **Disruption**

With the current large-scale assessment model, Ontario will continue to spend billions of dollars on education annually in addition to 32 million dollars on EQAO testing, yet student results will remain stagnant or slowly decline. (EQAO) A disruption and shift in thinking needs to occur to if an alternative future is to be realized. We must ask ourselves who our students are and how can their learning be best measured. *Growing Success*, which has been the basis of evaluation and assessment in Ontario schools since 2010, directs teachers to use differentiated instruction (consisting of content, process, environment, and assessment) as well as a variety of assessment practices (observations, conversations, and product) when evaluating student learning. (*Growing Success*, 2010) This document is based on educational research and the understanding that all students learn differently, have different ways of knowing and

demonstrating learning, and that teachers need to adapt their practice to meet the students – not the students adapting to meet the teacher. Yet, EQAO still assesses student learning in only one way – a high stakes test that is the same for all students. There is no conversation or observation, only a product. This practice is in direct contrast to what teachers are told to do in their classrooms.

The current model of assessment implemented by EQAO needs to change. Just as students in a classroom are given multiple opportunities to demonstrate their learning in multiple ways, any large-scale tests need to be differentiated by student experience. To ensure that process and assessment is culturally responsive and that EQAO has access to authentic results of student learning, various options of assessment need to be provided so schools can use the content/ format that is best suited to each student. As long as the skill being measured has a clear, common definition and look-for, the results from student to student, school to school, region to region will be able to be compared effectively.

### **Preferred Future**

*What is the SYSTEM related to the ideas related to culturally responsive assessment?*

In a world where everything is searchable on the Internet, what you know is not as important as how you use what you know. Traditional standardized tests with knowledge based questions are not applicable to today's world as students can search out answers online to just about any question they may have; what we need to be testing in order to justify if our schools are teaching the required skills, is if students can decipher the information and decide what to do with it. Because there is no correct answer as to HOW to use information, there should be no one way to assess it. The ability to problem solve and use skills creatively is essential for a rapidly

progressing world; assessments that challenge students to use these skills in situations they will actually face is more authentic than a paper test.

*What is the WORLDVIEW which the conversation about culturally responsive assessment represents?*

Differentiating assessment practices to be culturally responsive would involve consultation and cooperation with the local community and other stakeholders; this grassroots approach will build trust between the school and families/ community members. Once they understand that their ways of knowing are being valued by the school community and being taken into consideration when assessing students, this trust will begin to build from the local community up to the province. This will be a slow process; however, once societal and education values are seen to be in alignment, standardized assessment as a way of accountability will not be necessary. This leaves teachers open to use their professional judgment concerning process, content, and assessment that best represents what is valued by students and their families.

*What are the MYTHS and METAPHORS about culturally responsive assessment?*

The concern many people have with alternative assessment models (as opposed to standardized testing) is that one person has an unfair advantage over another because one assessment is 'easier.' The concept that equality equals fairness is outdated as modern thinking recognizes that *equality* and *equity* are different concepts. Since 2010, *Growing Success* has promoted differentiated instruction and assessment as the equitable approach to learning. Recognizing that there is not just one way of demonstrating learning is essential to ensuring all students have equal access to be successful. In North America, the process to obtain a driver's licence involves authentic assessment; a person may be able to write a test to show they know



the rules of the road, but we require applicants to actually demonstrate their learning in real life situations. If this is accepted practice for driving a car, why is it not acceptable in schools?

Another myth regarding non-standardized assessment is that in order to assess across large regions, we need to measure ‘apples to apples’, while non-standardized assessment is measuring ‘apples to oranges.’ The reason that literacy and numeracy skills, as well as global competencies are often the focus of large scale assessments is that they are transferrable skills that are used in almost every situation in life; therefore, it is a moot argument to insist that there is only one way to measure them. The baseline is that there be an universal definition of each so that each sub-skill can be measured accurately even if the task is different.

### **Conclusion**

It is clear that literacy and numeracy scores in Ontario schools have been relatively unchanged for over a decade. One must ask why this is the case; does this mean that our students’ skills have declined, or does it mean that EQAO tests do not adequately measure students’ learning? With the diverse cultures, experiences, and ways of knowing that exist in Ontario’s classrooms, a one size fits all test does not meet the needs of the students involved nor the society that funds it. One must look at these large-scale assessments and question whose voices are represented and whose are missing? Those students who do not see themselves in the assessments are immediately at a disadvantage and despite their knowledge and skills, they will not be recognized by society as someone who can contribute. Ensuring a system of accountability and measurement that responds to the needs of students and that is culturally responsive is essential if we want Ontario’s youth to be prepared for this global economy.

While there is some agreement about what skills are essential for all students now and in the future, how these skills look and are supported internationally differs widely. Literacy and numeracy skills as well as global competencies are the foci of PISA and the OECD; however, there is still some disagreement about what particular literacy and numeracy skills are essential as well as which competencies are essentially ‘global.’ (Addey, 2019) This is the reason that UNESCO Futures of Education – Learning to Become is engaging voices from all over the world regarding the future of education globally over the next thirty years.

The mandate of the International Commission on the Futures of Education is to collectively reflect on how education might need to be re-thought in a world of increasing complexity, uncertainty, and precarity... (and) will include in its report a consideration of the longstanding UNESCO commitment to a pluralistic, integrated and humanistic approach to education and knowledge as public goods.  
(UNESCO)

Ensuring accountability and assessment that is humanistic, that respects the changing demographics, economic and environmental situations and ways of knowing that are experienced by students globally is essential to face a rapidly changing future where people need to be adaptable and proactive. Assessment that empowers students whose voices have not been heard is essential, so they feel they have opportunities, that they engage in their learning, so they are not left behind as the rest of the world rapidly propels forward. By abandoning traditional large-scale assessment methods and developing adaptable learning opportunities that better represent students’ realities, education systems will better prepare ALL students to participate in the world now and in 2050.

It is through conversations, collaboration, thoughtful and smarter assessment methods that leverage students’ strengths rather than force them to conform to traditional western learning methods that will build trust in the education systems – both at the classroom and societal levels.

When all students have positive learning experiences and feel empowered to take ownership of their learning, creativity through different perspectives will develop so that we can face adversity “in a world of increasing complexity, uncertainty, and precarity.”

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