

# Educational Leadership

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**What Do We Mean by Results?** Pages 58-61

## Student Assessment in Eight Countries

**Although no two countries are exactly alike in the way that they test students, many countries face similar controversies and challenges.**

*Cynthia Y. Levinson*

Perhaps as much as the curriculum wars, student testing in the United States raises basic questions about how we as a nation bring up our children. As states from California to Kentucky debate content standards, issues about what children should learn make headlines. Even the Senate voted on the quality of history standards that had been developed and then orphaned by a federal agency.

Once we make peace over what students should know, a new question captures the public attention: How do we know that they know it? Trial balloons about national assessments, launched by the U.S. Department of Education, were quickly shot down by those who feared that a national curriculum would result, as well as by those who worried about comparisons among states or racial and ethnic groups. Educators at the state and local levels debate whether to test basic skills, to experiment with performance assessments, or to rely on teachers' judgments. Even more dramatic, the high-stakes testing system in Texas is currently engaged in a lawsuit.

These issues raise further questions. Is the United States unique in the controversy surrounding its testing system? How controversial is student testing abroad?

To inquire into modes of student assessment in other countries, I conducted e-mail interviews with educators from eight countries—Australia, Brazil, Canada, the Czech Republic, England, Germany, Israel, and Japan—and asked them about the facts and the effects of their testing systems. I interviewed a total of 10 educators—three from Australia and one from each of the seven other countries. My goal was to include as many different kinds of assessment and educational systems as possible from as many continents as possible (despite extensive efforts, Africa, unfortunately, eluded me).

I soon realized that assessments in these countries vary in multiple ways. At the same time, they—and we—contend with some similar forces.



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## Just the Facts

The components of testing systems around the world could be seen as a multicolumn matching test. Does program evaluation accompany federal- or state-level tests? Criterion- or norm-referenced tests? Multiple-choice or performance-based tests? Each country has a way of connecting options to evaluate the quality of its educational system. Across five continents, the resulting testing schemes are the assessment equivalent of an English jumble sale.

I posed the following factual questions for each country:

- What is the administrative unit (national, regional, or local) that administers tests?
- Are all or just a sample of students tested?
- Who determines the test content and objectives?
- What are the type(s) of tests administered?
- How are the tests scored (norm- or criterion-referenced)?
- What are the factors by which the results are analyzed?
- How are the results used?

Testing practices are, so to speak, all over the map. Brazil, England, and Japan, for instance, conduct national-level tests, but each country does so for different reasons: Brazil for state-by-state comparisons and program evaluation, England for school accountability, and Japan for college entry. All but one country have regional tests, which differ from one jurisdiction to the next. The only examination that is common throughout the Czech Republic is conducted at the school level.

The types of tests administered are equally diverse. Unlike the United States, which relies heavily on multiple-choice tests, six countries have written examinations (sometimes along with other kinds). Again, the Czech Republic is unique among the eight countries in using only oral examinations.

Most, though not all, countries test students on their knowledge of their native language, mathematics, and at least two other core areas. Israel tests students in the most number of subjects.

Testing in Australia is conducted at the level of the six states and two territories. Similarly, the 10 provinces and three territories in Canada have jurisdiction over schooling and testing. In both countries, subjects and grade levels that are tested vary, much as they do in the United States. By national agreement, the states and territories in Australia test children in Years 3 and 5 in literacy and numeracy. The Council of Ministers of Education of Canada also has a common test in certain core areas, but Canada tests older students, 13- and 16-year-olds.

## The Issues

If educators in all these countries sat down together to talk about how they test students, we would hear a cacophony of voices. The conversations would converge, however, when discussing the issues and consequences of testing. Similar topics echo across the continents,

many of which sound familiar to U.S. educators.

I asked the following questions about the effects of testing:

- To what extent do teachers teach to the test?
- How much classroom time is spent on formal assessments?
- What other effects or controversies arise from testing?

## **Teaching to the Test**

In the United States, educators tend to use this phrase disparagingly. In most other countries, however, including the Czech Republic, England, Canada, Japan, and Australia, teaching to the test means teaching the curriculum, because the same agency that develops the test also develops the curriculum. In fact, the test is often seen as a mechanism to promote the curriculum. In England, for instance, teachers began to emphasize mental mathematics when items on this skill, already part of the curriculum, were added to the tests. In these countries, then, *teaching to the test* is turned on its head to mean something like *testing to teach*.

There are exceptions, however, even within these countries. In Canada, concern remains that "teachers can become so obsessed with increasing test scores that instruction becomes focused on test-wiseness." Educators in Israel, as in the United States, are concerned that teachers must narrow the curriculum to the portions on the test, thereby excluding the higher-order skills that should be taught but are not assessed. To support inquiry-based learning, the Ministry of Education is encouraging the development of alternative assessments "to use testing as a vehicle for educational change."

The United States, too, is trying performance assessment and tests at high standards to encourage good instruction. Some researchers<sup>1</sup> find limits to the extent to which assessments actually alter teachers' instructional practices, even when they are intended to, which raises questions about the effectiveness of leveraging teaching on the fulcrum of testing.

## **Testing Time**

Educators and parents in the United States rail against the amount of instructional time used to prepare for and administer tests. The response from Canada was similar; when I asked how much time teachers spent on testing, the answer was "Too much!" And in Japan, "unofficial" but universally administered tests at the junior high level consume considerable classroom time—up to three days each trimester. An extensive amount of time is spent in Japan on test preparation at the junior high and high school levels, but much of it occurs in private tutoring sessions.

In England, too, teachers complain about the loss of instructional time, though they blame the increased bureaucratic workload rather than the tests. Educators in the other countries did not report concerns about this topic.

## **Why Test?**

The participating countries that administer uniform, standardized tests do so for a variety of

reasons: high school entry and exit; college entry; accountability, program evaluation, or comparisons of regional systems or schools; student diagnosis; and evaluation of graduates by prospective employers. With the exception of high school entry, all these purposes have produced equivalent testing programs in the United States. As the debates abroad lead to reanalyses of the purposes of testing, the tests change, too, much as they do in the United States.

## **Centralization**

The adoption of state curriculum standards, in many cases accompanied by assessments, has swept through U.S. schools. Although different in different places, this increasing centralization of educational decision making appears to be a worldwide trend.

The most dramatic example is in the Czech Republic, where for the past 222 years college-bound students have taken the Maturita, a test developed and administered by classroom teachers. Under pressure to standardize, the school system piloted an externally developed Maturita, with a component similar to the SAT, in 1999.

Centralization is also evident in

- Australia, which is introducing national literacy and numeracy skills tests and benchmarks across the states and territories;
- Brazil, where a new national test compares states' educational programs; and
- Germany, which has no national tests and very few state-level tests. However, educators predict that "a routine general procedure of evaluation" will be implemented to respond to concerns about the lack of consistency across the states and to make the German system more consistent with other European Union school systems.

## ***Tests as Indicators of Economic Value***

In the United States, arguments about the worth of education tend to center on budgets. In the early 1990s, for instance, complaints arose about "throwing money" at education.

Investigations into the economic efficiency of government-supported education is a prominent part of the discussion about testing in other countries, too. In Brazil, England, and Germany, the educators whom I surveyed reported strong public interest in using assessments of student achievement to determine the "value added" to particular educational programs. There is also pressure in England and Canada to institute performance-related teacher pay or payment-by-results schemes.

## ***Factors of Analysis***

A sensitive issue in some countries concerns the factors by which students' test scores are analyzed. In the United States, Texas has been commended for holding schools accountable for achievement across all ethnic and socioeconomic groups.

Although some participating countries examine performance by gender, most do not report results by ethnic and socioeconomic factors. Doing so is considered "completely alien" in

Germany where, according to the educator I surveyed, an attempt would prompt students and educators to refuse to participate together. Similarly, it is illegal in Canada to ask students about their ethnicity or religion. Israel, however, analyzes the matriculation examination for a wide range of factors, including area of study (academic or technological); ethnicity (Jewish, Arab, Bedouin, or Druze); and sector (religious or nonreligious).

### ***Tests as Standard-Bearers***

Regardless of the style, jurisdictional authority, or content-area breadth of an assessment system, educators, parents, and the public look to tests, above all, as a way of measuring our expectations for our students. Two contradictory forces are at play both in the United States and abroad.

On the one hand, stiffer standardized-testing schemes increasingly accompany and support higher content standards. In Alberta, Canada, for instance, students, teachers, and administrators report that they work harder and perform better as a result of centralized testing. England is attempting to use assessments to raise the quality of vocational courses and to reduce the disparity between vocational and academic courses. And testing hurdles in Japan send students to tutoring six days a week.

On the other hand, countries recognize that standards need to be not only higher but also universal, and they have widespread concern that these goals are mutually exclusive. In Israel, for instance, discussions about making the educational program more egalitarian and increasing the percentage of students eligible to receive a full matriculation certificate that would allow them to go to college engender fears that standards will necessarily decline. In England, too, the Secretary of State for Education has promised that schools will meet all education targets by 2002, a vow that has elicited accusations that the only way to reach this goal is to lower standards. The doubts that surface in the United States—that not all students can learn to high standards—are mirrored in many other countries.

### **The Choices Are Multiple: What's a Country to Do?**

This information is only a snapshot of testing and assessment practices. Of the eight countries on five continents, all the student assessment systems, except those in Germany and Japan,

- are under scrutiny (the Czech Republic);
- are in flux (Australia, Brazil, Canada, and England); or
- have changed within the past five years (Israel).

Each country is evolving a unique assessment system that makes sense, given its own traditions and goals. But clearly, transoceanic forces are in effect. Few, if any, countries are immune to the practices of even their most distant neighbors. Although each country faces its own unique problems and cultural differences, educators across the globe may learn from one another to find the best testing practices for their students.

### **Endnote**

<sup>1</sup> Firestone, W., Winter, J., & Fitz, J. (1999, April). *Different assessments, common practice? Mathematics testing and teaching in the United States and England and Wales*. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association Conference, Montreal, Canada.

*Author's note:* The educators surveyed for this article were Geoff Masters, Executive Director, Australian Council for Educational Research; Margaret Foster, Senior Research Fellow, Australian Council for Educational Research; Helen Watt, Lecturer in Research Methods, University of Sydney (Australia); Jose Francisco Soares, Professor, Federal University of Minas Gerais (Brazil); Robert Runte, Associate Professor, Faculty of Education, University of Lethbridge (Canada); Suzy Wichterle Ort, Columbia University (Czech Republic); Jan Winter, Lecturer in Education, School of Education, University of Bristol (England/Wales); Kai-Uwe Schnabel, Max Planck Institute for Human Development (Germany); Anat Zohar, Hebrew University (Israel); and Gail Benjamin, Lecturer, Department of Anthropology, University of Pittsburgh (Japan).

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