

THE 1970S BRITISH COLUMBIA ASSESSMENT PROGRAM

Jerry Mussio and Nancy Greer suggest that shift from secondary school as optional to mandatory (through age 16) “raises a number of fundamental issues for a provincial government,” among them: (1) “a provincial government, by virtue of the mandate outlined in the BNA Act, has a fundamental responsibility to indicate in some detail the basic learnings which the vast majority of students should be expected to acquire”;¹ (2) government must then “determine to what extent the principle of universal education is being realized,” e.g. “to what extent are all students in the province acquiring the basic outcomes of the provincial school system?” and (3) “What is being done to ensure that even more of our youth achieve an acceptable level of education?”²

Acknowledging that there are those who contest the “authority” of “a ministry of education” to conduct “assessment” or to specify “curriculum,” Mussio and Greer cite the “BNA Act, wherein provincial governments have been granted the authority and responsibility over education, and given the fact that provincial governments now are accountable for billion-dollar educational budgets, it is difficult to see how this involvement can be avoided.”³ “Involvement” morphs to “management” in Mussio’s and Greer’s “judgment,” specifically that “the three points raised above should be viewed as an essential component of responsible educational management at the provincial level.”⁴

“Following the termination of provincial exams in 1973,” Mussio and Greer report, “the British Columbia Ministry of Education, Science and Technology formed a Joint Committee of Evaluation to advise on the development of a long-range assessment plan for the province.”⁵ The committee was composed of teachers, school trustees, superintendents, university personnel, and ministry staff; it met for two years.⁶ The result was a “rationale” for the B.C. Assessment Program, “the fundamental purpose” of which was “to provide information as to what and how students are learning on a province-wide basis.”⁷

Each assessment included “five basic components,” the first of which was “Goal Survey,” designed to learn what “teachers and members of the public” consider suitable “goals and learning outcomes.”⁸ Such “information” will “identify priority skill areas which should be assessed and it can also provide curriculum revision committees with feedback on the appropriateness of existing curricular objectives or the desirability of adding other important outcomes.”⁹

The second “component” is “student performance,” as the B.C. Assessment Program plans to answer the question: “To what extent are all students achieving the basic objectives of the public-school system?” – a question that contained a second

one: “What percentage of students should be admitted to higher levels of schooling?”¹⁰ “Since the results of the B.C. assessment are reported for groups and not for individual students,” Mussio and Greer explain, “it is not necessary that every pupil at each grade level take the same set of exercises.”¹¹ Group results are reported at the “provincial and/or district level,” and “individual students and schools are not identified.”¹² Money matters: they note that a “writing assessment, complete with open-ended exercises, for example, is much more expensive than a mathematics assessment consisting of multiple-choice questions.”¹³ Consequently, the “assessment” of “writing” is reported at the provincial level only, then, “whereas mathematics results are reported at the district level as well.”¹⁴

The third “component” concerns “instructional practices,” a surprising expansive concept that, Mussio and Greer report, includes “program organization in the schools, texts and instructional materials, teacher background and training, methods of evaluation, and classroom activities.”¹⁵ Presumably the “inclusion of this type of survey in the assessment program ... will help to explain discrepancies between expected and actual levels of student learning,”¹⁶ although how escapes me at the moment. Mussio and Greer seem to sense the elusive nature of their statement and attempt an explanation:

It is generally recognized that certain learning outcomes cannot be assessed given the current state of the art. We can, however, assess classroom practices and availability of resources that educators consider necessary to contribute to those experiences. For example, we assume that exposure to good music and good literature contribute[s] to the intellectual and aesthetic development of children. At present it is very difficult, if not impossible, to assess the students' aesthetic development, but we can attempt to assess whether or not children in the schools ever hear good music or read good literature. It is to this end that a survey of instructional practices can also contribute.

Clear enough. But the discrepancy between expected and actual outcomes? Not even close.

The fourth “component” is “Discrepancy Analysis,” which means that “assessment test results are reported in terms of the percentage of students successfully answering each exercise,” a fact that prompts officials to convene “panels of teachers and members of the public” to “judge the results of each exercise.”¹⁷ On what basis? “Judgments of strength and weakness are based not only on the percentage of students who have correctly responded but also on the perceived importance of the concept tested by the item.”¹⁸ To assist panel members do this work, “extensive guidelines for the interpretation of district results” were “provided” by the Ministry.¹⁹

“The final phase” – here Mussio and Greer substitute a temporal term for a design one – involved the “generation of recommendations for follow-up action,”

“recommendations” really, “derived from all of the data collected in the assessment ... and directed at specific groups including the ministry, teacher training institutions, school districts, schools, and teachers.”²⁰

Following “four years of assessments completed to date in British Columbia there have been, in our view, a number of examples of positive follow-up at both the provincial and the school district level.”²¹ The results of the first assessment led to a “revision of curriculum for the elementary and secondary language arts programs,” revisions that were then “implemented starting in fall of 1979.”²² Mussio and Greer cite “other examples of follow-up in the area of curriculum,” including “modifications in the provincial mathematics guide to include a stronger consumer mathematics component, an area of weakness identified province-wide in the 1977 mathematics assessment.”²³ They reference the Aoki-led evaluation of the social studies curriculum, from which will “begin a major revision of the secondary curriculum in this area, scheduled for completion in the spring of 1981.”²⁴ They also reference “a recent science assessment” that “pointed to concern over aspects of the science program,” leading “to a number of follow-up actions, including, for the first time, the formation of a K-12 provincial science advisory committee.”²⁵

Mussio and Greer then revisit the “major purposes” of the assessment, which included “providing input on matters of curriculum” as well as the “provision of information to guide the ministry in decisions related to resource allocation and in the identification of areas within the province which may be experiencing less than satisfactory levels of performance.”²⁶ They remind that “priority for measurement will be given to those learning outcomes judged to be basic or essential to all students,” noting that “the important word here is ‘judged’ and our experience with provincial representative panels of professional and concerned lay people has borne out the fact that consensus as to what is meant by ‘basic’ and ‘essential’ is not easily obtained.”²⁷ They note that “if assessment is to proceed, this fundamental question of what to measure must be resolved.”²⁸ “Of related concern,” Mussio and Greer continue, “is the tendency to measure that which is easiest to be measured,” noting that “large-scale assessments tend to shy away from hard to measure curriculum areas such as oral communication in favor of areas such as reading and mathematics which we find amenable to traditional paper and pencil techniques,” leading “the public in particular” to regard “these areas as less important simply because we do not report on them in our assessment activities.”²⁹ They conclude: “Conscientious efforts to develop and validate other data-gathering procedures must continue to be made if large-scale assessments are to reflect adequately the scope and complexity of today's curriculum.”³⁰

“Over the past several years,” Mussio and Greer observe, “ministries of education across Canada have been facing increased pressure to establish comprehensive accountability schemes,” responses to which have been “complicated by the fact that over a relatively short period of time in history, society appears to have embraced the principle of universal education, and is now demanding for all students

literacy standards which at one time were expected of only a small segment of the student population.”³¹ But the “trend” toward “provincial assessment programs – one form of response to the demand for greater accountability – presents educators with a dilemma.”³²

On the one hand there would appear to be general agreement over the claim that a provincial educational system needs to document the progress of student learning, but on the other hand it is becoming clear that the problems associated with provincial assessment programs are not, at the present time, easy to resolve. Given that decisions can be made with or without province-wide assessment data, however, the choice is whether or not educators wish to use this vehicle to participate in or influence the decision-making process. It is our position that the answer can only be "yes" if responsible management of education is to ensue.³³

How “responsible management” could occur without teachers’ independently formulated and articulated concerns is entirely unclear.

COMMENTARY

In his commentary, the research assistant in this instance – Anton Birioukov – references material not included in the quoted material on which I rely above, specifically “how previous examinations were used as a tool to promote students into high school and the university,” but that “during the early part of the 20th century there was a relaxation of the exam policies, as teachers became better qualified.” With teachers recommending students for promotion, rather than depending external examinations,” B.C. government examinations had ended in 1973. They were soon replaced by the B.C. Assessment Program, which is sketched above. Anton adds that Mussio and Greer “voice now all too common concerns related to standardized testing (i.e., teaching to the test; reactionary decision-making, fear mongering within the public, etc.),” concerns not obvious in that final quoted passage above. Despite the dangers, Mussio and Greer promote teachers’ participation.

REFERENCES

Mussio, Jerry J. and Greer, Nancy R. 1980. The British Columbia Assessment Program: An Overview. *Canadian Journal of Education* 4, (4), 22-40.

Pinar, William F. 2015. *Educational Experience as Lived*. New York: Routledge.

Pinar, William F. and Irwin, Rita L. Eds. 2005. *Curriculum in a New Key*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

ENDNOTES

¹ 1980, 25. Instead of referencing here the canonical curriculum question – what knowledge is of most worth? – Mussio and Greer cast the curriculum question in terms of “goals” and “objectives” (Ibid.), a conceptualization Aoki and others were then dismantling: see Pinar and Irwin 2005.

² 1980, 25. With the use of the term “outcomes” the “basic principles of curriculum and instruction” – often (if mistakenly) associated with Ralph Tyler (see Pinar 2015, 99_ – are in place: objectives, design, implementation, assessment.

³ 1980, 26. Regarding the British North America Act: <https://www.britannica.com/event/British-North-America-Act>

⁴ 1980, 26. Mussio and Greer also endorse provincial (rather than school district or teacher-level) assessment: see 1980, 26.

⁵ 1980, 26.

⁶ 1980, 26.

⁷ 1980, 26. That tests – specially standardized exams – can provide that information is now widely questioned.

⁸ 1980, 26.

⁹ 1980, 26. That each of these concepts – outcomes, skills, feedback, objectives – was being questioned by curriculum studies scholars (see Pinar and Irwin 2005, 96) was evidently entirely unknown to those involved.

¹⁰ 1980, 27.

¹¹ 1980, 28.

¹² 1980, 28.

¹³ 1980, 28.

¹⁴ 1980, 28.

¹⁵ 1980, 28.

¹⁶ 1980, 28.

¹⁷ 1980, 28.

¹⁸ 1980, 28.

¹⁹ 1980, 28.

²⁰ 1980, 28-29.

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- ²¹ 1980, 29.
- ²² 1980, 29. Should Shakespeare be dropped from the language arts curriculum because students perform poorly on standardized exams? Perhaps the Holocaust should not be studied since students don't seem to derive measurable analytic "skills" from it? Assessment cannot answer the canonical curriculum question: what knowledge is of most worth? It can help "tweak" the answers one gives – to make material more accessible, for example – but the curriculum question is itself cannot be assessment-driven. It is an ethical, spiritual, political question, asked by specific individuals in certain places at certain historical moments. Whether students learn the curriculum they study is another matter altogether.
- ²³ 1980, 30. Decoding deceptive advertising practices would also seem recommended if Ministry officials have already answered (partially) the key curriculum question – what knowledge is of most worth? – by saying: surviving the capitalist economy.
- ²⁴ 1980, 30. "In launching the British Columbia Social Studies Assessment," Aoki wrote a year later, "we initiate the question: What are the possible ways of approaching the phenomenon of social studies in British Columbia?" As this open-ended question implies, "We began our evaluation work aware of the need for multiple perspectives, and of the potential of Jürgen Habermas' tri-paradigmatic framework in providing alternative orientations.... (1) empirical-analytic, (2) situational interpretative, and (3) critical theoretical)" (see Pinar and Irwin 2005, 96-97.).
- ²⁵ 1980, 30.
- ²⁶ 1980, 31.
- ²⁷ 1980, 33. Nor should it be. The canonical curriculum question is an ongoing question asked by individuals as well as groups. Consensus could be called for in moments of emergency – for instance, global warming, reconciliation with the First Peoples, the rise of right-wing populism – but, as Mussio and Greer observed, in democratic societies it will not "easily obtained."
- ²⁸ 1980, 33. If standardized assessment is to proceed, Mussio and Greer should have added.
- ²⁹ 1980, 33-34.
- ³⁰ 1980, 34.
- ³¹ 1980, 38.
- ³² 1980, 38.
- ³³ 1980, 38.