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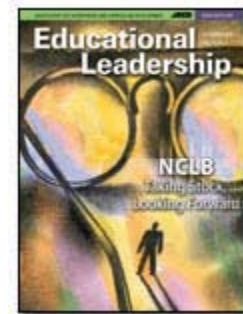
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Assessment Around the World

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How does NCLB fit in an international context? Here's what's happening in the rest of the world.



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Standardized testing is controversial everywhere, regardless of its purpose. Most countries use testing for tracking and for selecting students for admission into academic secondary schools or universities, but generally not for holding educators accountable. Many countries don't even administer standardized tests until the later grades. In fact, most Canadian universities don't require the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) or other standardized admissions tests—except for students applying with a U.S. high school diploma! (Ghosh, 2004)

In a recent collection of studies of education systems worldwide, which I edited,¹ numerous experts discussed current education policies in their countries, including the role that standardized testing plays in their public schools (Rotberg, 2004). I draw on these overviews here to set No Child Left Behind (NCLB) in the context of testing across the globe.

The current preoccupation with test-based accountability in the United States is founded on several misperceptions about other countries' practices as well as about international test score comparisons and the extent to which test scores are valid indicators of the quality of education or the state of the economy. These assumptions have dominated U.S. public policy dialogue for decades.

Assumption: The rest of the developed world is one (high-achieving) country.

Much of the rhetoric about international test score comparisons treats the rest of the developed world as though it were one mythical country that does a better job of educating students than the United States does. However, the rhetoric does not recognize the significant differences in student academic achievement among developed countries; the level and distribution of education funding; the extent to which schools track students by academic ability; secondary school and university enrollment rates; and perhaps most important, the quality of education that each country offers low-income students, minority students, students with disabilities, language-minority students, and recent immigrants.

Assumption: Other countries have found the "right" way to improve student achievement.

Many people in the United States assume that other countries have centralized education systems and that the resulting standardization is the magic bullet for improving student achievement. This assumption ignores the fact that many countries question that policy. France, for example, is reassessing its highly centralized education system because it doesn't meet the needs of an increasingly diverse immigrant population. Many other countries, such as China, Israel, and Sweden, are moving from a centralized to a decentralized system of governance. Australia, Canada, and Germany—countries with long-standing decentralized systems—envision little

change. In addition, no evidence supports the contention that organizational structure, whether centralized or decentralized, bears any relationship to academic achievement or the ability to compete in the global economy.

Assumption: International test score rankings are valid measures of the quality of education.

Data do not support the causal relationships that many people establish on the basis of international rankings. If a country ranks high on a given international comparison, people assume that its schools must be "good"; if the country ranks low, its schools must be "bad." The problem is, international test score comparisons are virtually impossible to interpret, not only because of enormous differences among nations in poverty rates and in societal values and objectives, but also because of major sampling problems, which make it difficult to ensure that comparable samples of students, schools, and regions are being tested across countries.

Assumption: A country's ranking on test score comparisons predicts its ability to compete in the global economy.

This assumption has been repeated in various guises for the past 40 years, with little evidence to support it. The fact is, many countries typically perceived as high-scoring on international test score comparisons—such as Austria, France, Sweden, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom—are not the United States' main economic competitors. The United States outsources technical jobs because U.S. consumers are unwilling to accept higher prices and U.S. workers are unwilling to accept lower wages to compete with computer programmers in India or with computer manufacturers in China. These two countries enroll only about one-third of a given age group by the final years of secondary school. Moreover, the education systems of Western European countries and Japan have not immunized their economies against competition from less developed countries with significantly lower rates of literacy and lower enrollment in secondary and higher education.

Assumption: Testing can help the United States address the problems that poverty has created.

The rhetoric about NCLB ignores the overwhelming impact of poverty, the primary correlate of low academic achievement in every country (Grissmer, Kirby, Berends, & Williamson, 1994). Although the size of the achievement gap among students from different socioeconomic backgrounds may vary among countries, the existence of this gap is universal.

The link between poverty and achievement is higher in the United States than in many other industrialized countries. This is not surprising, given the fact that the United States has both larger income gaps between rich and poor (Blackburn, 1997) and fewer social support systems than most industrialized countries do. But high-stakes testing, accountability requirements, and centralization cannot cure the problems associated with poverty. As one educator put it,

We believe that schools solve the problem of poverty, and now this program [NCLB] assumes that tests solve the problem of schools. By implication, that means tests are supposed to solve the problem of poverty. (Rotberg, Bernstein, & Ritter, 2001, p. 14)

Assumption: Countries that score high on international test score comparisons hold their educators accountable for students' scores on standardized tests.

In reality, few countries hold educators accountable for students' test scores. Many of the countries that the United States most admires for their rankings on international comparisons—for example, Canada, Finland, France, Japan, and Sweden—do *not* use tests to hold educators accountable. Some do not even administer standardized tests until secondary school.

It is ironic that many countries throughout the world are attempting to reduce their emphasis on rote learning, whereas current testing pressures in the United States promote just that kind of learning. NCLB supporters believe that because the legislation makes schools' "failures" public, it encourages educators to try harder to focus on important academic subject matter and pay more attention to marginalized students. Those opposed to NCLB are concerned that the pressure to

raise test scores will encourage educators to narrow the curriculum and make questionable decisions about student assignments and grade retention. For example, schools may be reluctant to recommend their highest-achieving students to gifted programs in other schools because they would lose the advantage of these students' test scores. Schools may also focus on students who are close to meeting proficiency goals rather than on the lowest-achieving students. Moreover, NCLB may further increase attrition rates of the most qualified teachers and principals, especially in high-poverty schools, because these educators may not wish to be publicly associated with schools designated as "needing improvement."

Testing Practices in Other Countries

Do other countries use tests to evaluate educators' performance? What role does testing play internationally in tracking students and providing access to universities? How strong is the link in other countries between testing and classroom practice? The following examples from England, Turkey, Germany, Singapore, Japan, and China illustrate how these countries manage these issues.

England

Like the United States, England holds educators accountable for students' scores on standardized tests, although major differences exist between the two countries' accountability systems. England has a national curriculum, which serves as the basis for its tests and avoids the problem so prevalent in many U.S. school districts where, in the absence of a clear curriculum, the tests *become* the curriculum. England's national curriculum is one of Europe's most prescriptive. Tests are administered at several points throughout the students' schooling, beginning in early elementary school, with the scores used to rank primary and secondary schools.

The initial versions of the tests were designed to be "authentic," to give a fuller picture of a student's learning and avoid the problems inherent in paper-and-pencil standardized tests. But these tests took up so much time and left so many students unsupervised as the teacher tested students individually that paper-and-pencil tests eventually replaced them.

The test-based accountability policy remains highly controversial and raises issues similar to those currently discussed in the United States. A major question is the validity of using test scores, which are strongly influenced by students' socioeconomic status, to evaluate the quality of education. This problem is endemic in national and international test score comparisons.

England has continued its tradition of administering examinations at age 16 to determine which students will move on to A-level (advanced level) upper secondary schools. Examination results at the end of upper secondary school then determine the universities that a student can attend and the student's area of specialty. Students used to be tested at age 11 to determine admission to highly selective "grammar schools," which served as a pipeline to selective universities. In an attempt to make the education system more egalitarian, England replaced the grammar schools with comprehensive schools. However, this move may have had the opposite effect by encouraging affluent families, particularly in center cities, to move out of the state system into private schools.

Turkey

Turkey's heavily bureaucratic and centralized education system is modeled after the French system. It has been called "more French than the French system" (Simsek & Yildirim, 2004, p. 155) because French schools have undergone changes in the past 20 years that have not taken place in Turkish schools. However, Turkey's attempts to reduce the emphasis on rote learning have had limited success.

Turkey is a developing country with limited resources, high poverty rates, and relatively low access to secondary and higher education. It also has one of the highest birthrates in the world,

which stretches the country's scarce education resources thin. These factors affect how national examinations play out in the country.

Examinations in Turkey are first administered at the end of basic education, although they influence what schools teach long before that. These exams determine admission into the prestigious Anatolian and science high schools, which accept approximately one-quarter of the students who take the exam. Students who wish to enter a university must take another nationwide exam at the end of high school; but because demand outweighs available spaces, acceptance rates are low (around 20 percent). Because of these conditions, Turkish students experience "some of the world's worst exam anxiety" (Simsek & Yildirim, 2004, p. 165).

Germany

Germany has a highly stratified education system that tracks students, generally beginning in grade 5, into three types of schools: the *Gymnasium*, which provides an academic, university-track education; the *Realschule*, which provides a general and vocational/technical education and occasionally permits transfer to a Gymnasium; and the *Hauptschule*, which provides a lower-level general and vocational education that often leads to unemployment. Teachers and parents—not an examination—determine a child's placement.

Because socioeconomic status highly correlates with academic achievement, affluent students are disproportionately represented in the Gymnasium, whereas the children of migrant workers are often tracked into the Hauptschule. The 2003 Program for International Assessment (PISA) study showed that the performance of German students correlates more highly with socioeconomic status than does the performance of students from almost any other country, suggesting that Germany's tracking system magnifies the effects of socioeconomic status (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2004).

Students attending the Gymnasium through grade 13 receive a school-leaving certificate called the *Abitur*, which fewer than one-quarter of German students receive. The Abitur provides access to universities after students pass a final examination.

Singapore

In Singapore, educators are only held accountable for their students' test scores in the sense that secondary schools and junior colleges are ranked in publicly reported "league tables"; the 40 highest-ranked secondary schools receive cash awards. But this "accountability" system bears little resemblance to NCLB. In addition to test scores and a "value-added" measure, the rankings include a measure of how students in each school performed on a physical fitness test, combined with the percentage of overweight students in the school.

The main purpose of testing in Singapore is to determine student placement in the education system and access to elite academic programs—not to evaluate teachers. The system is heavily tracked; in a 10-year span, students are "streamed" three times. The goal is to make the system as efficient as possible in training students to contribute to the national economy.

The Singaporean system places enormous pressure on students to score well in the national examinations, which play a major role in determining students' futures. At the same time, Singapore is attempting to reduce its emphasis on rote learning and pay greater attention to critical thinking, problem solving, and creativity. Singapore's traditional classroom practices, however, have been difficult to change because many believe that a flexible learning environment is inconsistent with the demands of an examination system that requires students to memorize large amounts of material.

Japan

Japan has a highly competitive examination system, but it doesn't hold educators accountable for students' scores on standardized tests. Indeed, Japan specifically excludes student achievement

on these tests as a criterion for the self-evaluations that Japanese schools conduct.

In Japanese public schools, elementary and lower secondary students do not take high-stakes tests nor are they assigned to schools by achievement. The examination pressures begin between lower and upper secondary school, when examination results determine the upper secondary school that students will enter. The pressures that students applying to universities face have been well publicized, as have the supplementary schools (*juku*) that many Japanese students attend to study for the examinations. In recent years, because of a dramatically declining population, Japanese students have not had a problem gaining admission into higher education institutions. However, competition for admission to the most prestigious universities remains severe because graduates of these universities usually fill the top jobs in government and industry.

Japan, like Singapore, is attempting to increase the flexibility of the learning environment to cultivate “Japanese people with ‘rich humanity’ and ‘rich creativity’ by letting individual abilities grow” (Watanabe, 2004, p. 237). One component of this reform has been to reduce the school week from six to five days to give students more time to explore nature and participate in community-based activities. However, many families appear to be using this “free” time to increase their children's participation in *juku*.

Although the response to Japan's reforms has generally been positive, conservative politicians and some parents are concerned about changing an education system that they believe played a major role in the country's rapid economic growth after World War II, about encouraging individualism at the expense of Japan's traditional values of cooperation and consensus, about weakening nationalism, and—perhaps most important to parents—about making any changes that might decrease their children's test scores and chances of gaining admission into prestigious universities.

China

For many centuries, the Chinese have viewed their country's examination system, which dates back to the Shui dynasty in 603 CE, as the main route out of poverty for a child from a low-income family. However, like Singapore and Japan, China is attempting to reduce its reliance on rote learning. Realizing that examinations inevitably drive classroom practice, China has revised its highly competitive university entrance exams by requiring students to integrate knowledge from a wide range of fields. For example, a recent exam question on the increased number of private cars in China required students to draw on the diverse fields of statistics, comparative analysis, supply and production, urban traffic, pollution, and social studies.

China's reforms in classroom and examination practices have occurred in an exceptionally short period of time. China's practice of building on traditional culture—or “holding new wine with the old bottle” (Cheng, 2004, p. 16)—appears to have contributed to its unusual success in implementing change. China's reforms, however, are not without controversy. The new teaching approaches have not reached the majority of schools in China's decentralized education system, with its increasing gaps in school quality between the country's rich and poor areas. Some Chinese are concerned that if examinations reduce their emphasis on memorization, children from poor families will be at an even greater disadvantage than before because they will be tested on skills that their schools have not taught them.

Chinese students face a highly competitive and stressful examination system. Yet China, like many other countries, has concluded that national exams are the best way to ensure objectivity and avoid the favoritism that might occur if the system permitted greater subjectivity in university admissions decisions.

Another Assumption—Dispelled

People generally assume that the education policies most visible today will continue unabated into

the future. However, evidence shows that many policies are cyclical or gradually weaken until they have little influence. Well before NCLB, some states' test-based accountability programs began with great fanfare only to become largely irrelevant to school policies. It was simply considered educationally unwise—and politically incorrect—to acknowledge large failure rates, with the burden falling disproportionately on students in high-poverty schools.

Despite its current dominance in U.S. education policy, NCLB may well suffer the same fate. Opinions differ, of course, on whether weakening test-based accountability would be a positive or negative outcome. If test-based accountability does lose its centrality to U.S. policy, however, we would move closer to education practices in other countries, few of which assess educators' performance on the basis of their students' standardized test scores.

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Endnote

¹ This article draws on *Balancing Change and Tradition in Global Education Reform*. Alison Wolf of King's College, University of London contributed the chapter on England; Hasan Simsek and Ali Yildirim from Middle East Technical University, Ankara, contributed the chapter on Turkey; Barbara Kehm from the University of Kassel contributed the chapter on Germany; Batia P. Horsky from Nanyang Technological University in Singapore and Phyllis Ghim-Lian Chew from the National Institute of Education contributed the chapter on Singapore; Ryo Watanabe from Japan's National Institute for Educational Policy Research contributed the chapter on Japan; and Kai-ming Cheng from the University of Hong Kong contributed the chapter on China.

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