

# **Evaluating the Grade ten Exam**

## **I. Introduction: Setting the Stage**

This report outlines a project which occurred within the context of a combined undergraduate/graduate seminar (ANTH 409A/RMES 500Q) in applied anthropology at the University of British Columbia in the spring semester of 2006. The seminar focused on contemporary issues in applied anthropology, with a particular emphasis on collaborative research. Students in the seminar were split into four research teams, each of which would engage in a collaborative research project to gain insight in a particular topic of study, while at the same time gaining a hands-on feel for both applied anthropology and collaborative research. This report describes the planning, methodology, process, findings, and difficulties that arose in a project examining the impacts of standardized grade ten examinations in the province of British Columbia.

Our team did not receive conformation to begin interviewing until March 13, 2006, and it was not until the third week of the month that we had arranged the specifics and began the interview process. This left us with a little over a week with which to conduct our entire interview process. While we made many good contacts during this time, it was not possible for us to get as broad of a contribution as we would have liked. Given the structure of the UBC ethics review that had been submitted we did not have clearance to speak with students. Thus our information regarding student impacts and responses to the exams focuses upon teachers' observations. As with all studies, our findings have been shaped by various dimensions of the research process. The contacts that we were able to make in the time allotted provided more opportunity for discussing how these tests have, are, and likely will continue to affect alternative school and

aboriginal students. We conducted no interviews with educators or administrators that focused on other student minorities, such as ESL.

We did not tape our interviews. They took place in the schools in the form of semi-structured conversations with ten specific points of discussion (these ten interview questions appear in the appendix). During the interviews hand notes were taken by the student researcher, which were typed up onto the computer that day. During the transcription from hand notes to computer minor alterations were made resulting from the translation from short hand to long hand, et cetera.

Sample size is a potential concern if one understands the objective of this study as a large scale survey. This is not the case. This is an ethnographic study that aimed at presenting a local level understanding of the emerging impacts of the new grade ten exams. There may well be educators and administrators who have an entirely different conception of how these exams are impacting the students they work with in particular, and the student body more generally. However, we did not encounter them during our study.

## **II. Background Information and Interview Preparation**

Last spring (2005), grade ten British Columbia students were the first of their age group to face standardized provincial examinations required for graduation. The exams are part of a project by the ministry of education to reshape the provincial education system in line with their conception of ‘accountability.’ This project is oriented around four main goals: improving student achievement, increasing access to education for all students, encouraging the growth of students into productive, fully participating members

of society, and improving accountability for the education system. The exams are seen to solve the problem of accountability. By categorizing students and therefore classes and schools by a single score, ‘problem’ areas are evident and easily classified.<sup>1</sup>

Students must take the exams in math, science and English and they make up 20% of the year’s mark. Although they have two years to take the exams, they must complete them before graduation in grade ten. In addition to the new grade ten exams most students will also write grade twelve exams. The exams are constructed in the typical standardized manner. The questions are largely multiple choice, although this varies for the English tests which have significant writing components.<sup>2</sup>

The exams are part of a wave of standardized testing which has become increasingly popular in the United States and is becoming more so in Canada. They were readily employed in the 1970’s to measure student achievement but were phased out due to concerns about inadequate cultural sensitivity. Despite these worries the tests were brought back in Canada in the 1990’s because of concerns that the country’s education system was lagging behind those of other developed countries.<sup>3</sup>

There are undoubtedly advantages to the tests. On the surface they seem to provide a simple solution to a number of problems within education. Certainly, they allow for the measurement of student achievement over time and in relation to other provinces and internationally. Also they target areas that need improvement, in terms of actual curriculum and the individual needs of students and schools.

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<sup>1</sup> Bond, Shirley. “Message from the Minister and Accountability Statement” Ministry of Education. Electronic document: <http://www.bcbudget.gov.bc.ca/2006/sp/educ>. February 6, 2006.

<sup>2</sup> Claire (interview, March 24, 2006)

<sup>3</sup> “Student Achievement: What should we really be testing?” Canadian Council on Learning. Electronic document: <http://www.ccl-cca.ca/english/resources/carnet.asp>. October 13, 2005.

But other elements must be factored into the success of the system, beyond simply test scores. The exams do not attest to the capacity of the system to integrate all its students, with different backgrounds and needs. They do not take into account different learning styles or mental abilities. Typically students from higher socio-economic backgrounds achieve higher scores than their poor contemporaries with less social capital. And so the tests benefit those sectors of society which are already advantaged, reinforcing divisions and neo-liberal norms.<sup>4</sup>

A principle goal of the ministry's project is to increase aboriginal student performance and to create an education system that is in tune with their traditions and experience. This goal is in conjunction with their ambition to increase access to education for all students.<sup>5</sup> One might question whether a narrow, standardized testing system can address these goals. Quite the opposite, it would seem that exams enforce the existing norms by rewarding certain types of knowledge to which aboriginal and other minority and special needs groups typically do not have equitable access.

Other opposition to standardized exams is based on their tendency to transform the curriculum. Emphasis is placed on certain subjects and types of knowledge. There is less of a focus on critical thinking; rather the ability to successfully complete multiple choice exams is applauded. There have been worries lately that the Canadian education system is lacking in terms of physical fitness, history and critical thinking but instead of measuring improvements in these areas, standardized examinations have increased the focus on math, science and English.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> FairTest: The National Center for Fair & Open Testing. Electronic Document: <http://www.fairtest.org/facts/Limits%20of%20Tests.html>. Accessed March 1, 2006.

<sup>5</sup> Bond, February 6, 2006

<sup>6</sup> "Student Achievement: What should we really be testing?" October 13, 2005

It is important to note that the majority of the information used for this background section was gleaned from materials recommended by our collaborative research partners. Once we had researched standardized testing internationally, and in British Columbia particularly, we formulated our interview questions which were then revised by our research partners. After the questions had been agreed upon we awaited VSB and UBC Ethics Board approval. These were both granted in early March but due to an inopportune spring break, we only began interviewing in the last week of the month. Given the very brief time period we had in which to conduct interviews, we split up for greater efficiency and a larger sampling. The next sections will summarize our findings and provide some contextualization of the interview process and methodology.

### **III. Educator's Responses to Standardized Grade ten Exams**

With interview questions, consent forms, and notebooks in hand, our research team split up to investigate the impacts of standardized grade ten exams on educators, students, and pedagogy in the Lower Mainland. After our initial preparations, the interview process proved to be yet another learning experience. The educators interviewed felt that these exams not only present a new challenge for members of the student body, but for teachers as well. In this section we will discuss the educator's responses to these exams.

Many teachers felt that these exams simply weren't necessary and questioned their institution in the first place. Janice, a councillor at a school in the north east of Vancouver wondered if any VSB teachers had been consulted prior to the institution of

these exams. The teachers at this NE Van School did not want them. Claire, a teacher at a Westside secondary school, remarked on the whiteness and healthiness of her students. Although there is a sizable population of African refugees, the school is primarily White and Asian and kids come from affluent homes. There are relatively few special needs, aboriginal and ESL students. Claire feels that the tests have likely been instituted to fulfil an increasing administrative desire for accountability from the government, as well as the desire to rank schools hierarchically.

Emily is a researcher at the University of British Columbia who studies education and evaluation. She has done considerable research, especially in the United States, on high-stakes standardized exams. She also brings her perspective as a parent of an elementary school student to bear on the issue. Her research has forced her to question the viability and effectiveness of standardized exams. She, like Claire, blames the exams on the government's desire to increase accountability. Emily argues that to increase accountability with quantitative measures you need more indicators of success. Consequently, to hold schools accountable you need more tests at more grade levels. The ministry claims that teachers teach more and students learn more with standardized exams, but Emily insists that there are other ways to do this. She asserts that the solution of standardized exams to meet a greater need for accountability is too simplistic a response. She elaborated that in BC, the exams may have been fuelled by the friction between the teachers union and the ministry. The government lacks trust in the province's teachers and so they have placed importance on something outside of teachers' control. There are no empirical reasons for the exams; Emily claims that support of the exams is

more the result of an ideology, a commitment to certain ideas than any empirical evidence.

Educators and administrators we interviewed identify a number of serious problems stemming from the expansion of standardized exams. Several of the teachers interviewed asserted that these exams fail to recognize the diversity present in their students. For example, alternative school students are writing the same science and English exams as mini-school and IB students in the province. Many of these teachers felt that getting out of grade 12 is now easier than getting out of grade ten.

Simon, a teacher interviewed in an alternative school argued that these exams should match the curriculum that schools are carrying. He argued that all standardized tests should come in multiple forms: regional, rural, alternative, et cetera. Simon explained that students do better on exams designed by teachers who know what they are learning. For his students, for example, he can not teach grade ten science with the standard science probe ten text; the reading comprehension level necessary is simply too high. Yet his students still have to take the same grade ten science exam written by all other students across the province. There are approximately 20 alternative programs in Vancouver. Most of the seats in these programs are for grade ten students. Grade ten is the minimum requirement to move on and get a job, and the new grade ten exams are making it strikingly more difficult for “weaker learners” to graduate.

Simon also pointed out that during grade ten students are in a period of transition. This point was echoed by several other teachers we interviewed. During this time students are dealing with issues of self identity, sexuality, drinking and drug use, gender

issues, independent living, teen pregnancy, and complex home-life and other social issues.

“During this intense period what do we do as teachers and administrators?”

“We make them write year long cumulative exams!” (Simon, from interview)

#### **IV. Student Impacts**

The educators we interviewed conveyed the dissatisfaction their students felt about the exams. The tests provide students with additional stress and worry and are not suited to the diverse needs of the student body.

Sherry, an Aboriginal teacher, had five Aboriginal students during the 2004/2005 school year who wrote standardized grade ten exams. Only two of these students passed all of them. Those students who failed these exams *did* fail courses and all went to summer school to repeat the courses failed. These students then returned in the fall, entering into grade 11. One student who failed the exam also failed summer school. She returned in the fall to do English ten for the third time, but in her frustration, dropped out in December. Sherry notes that this student was a young mother who had additional worries.

Sherry feels that Aboriginal students may be affected more by these exams than other students. Aboriginal students have a multitude of social issues involving home-life, work, children, et cetera. These exams “make them feel like idiots, break down their self esteem, and slow down their education process”. These students depend on having the summer off of school. They use this time to work, accumulating much-needed resources, and building their resumes, and self esteem.



At the Alternative School we visited most students had have parents who did not graduate high school. Simon points out that Aboriginal students are more transient than other students. They may move cities and then skip the test which results in failure. Many are not yet aware of the exams. Simon pointed out that a number of studies have shown that students are likely to fail courses they repeat. He believes that grade ten exams increase the rate of failure, and therefore increase the likelihood of students dropping out. He proposed an alternative model which he calls the “continuous progress model” (see below).

Grade ten is a tender time for teenagers. They are dealing with issues of self-esteem and self-discovering. Understandably, they are often at different stages developmentally. One of the main problems of the exams that Claire identified is that they do not allow for different levels of understanding/development of students at the grade ten level. She explained that between grade ten and grade twelve kids experience considerable mental development so that exams at that higher level make more sense. Boys more than girls are typically less prepared for the analytical thinking necessary as their maturity level is generally lower. Kids with less social capital, that is, social experience, are also less developmentally ready. The two years between grades ten and twelve evens out some of these discrepancies. Janice echoed this view, saying that the exams are not relevant for grade ten students. Although she does not object to exams in general, or school leaving exams. She feels that standardized provincial exams are not appropriate at the grade ten level.

Another problem raised with the exams is that they benefit those students who are already succeeding and hurt those who are not. According to Claire those with more

social capital do better. Statistically, white middle to upper class kids are those who succeed on standardized tests. They are the ones who have been brought to the ballet, who have travelled and are exposed to different ways of thinking. Girls do better than boys. Non-native students succeed more than native students and of course ESL and special needs students are also disadvantaged. Claire said that exams only make the rich richer and the poor poorer. The tests simply reinforce the divisions already present in society. She described the tests as an evil form of social engineering; they create a subclass of people, a population who cannot object, the working poor.

## **V. Pedagogical Impacts**

The educators we interviewed listed a number of pedagogical impacts that they felt were correlated with standardized grade ten exams. Among the most commonly cited were marks oriented teaching, grade inflation, and an unnecessary increase in standardized policy which neglects the social, cultural, and developmental diversity among student populations.

The issue of grade inflation was touched on by virtually all educators interviewed. Teachers are reworking curricula to prepare students for the exams. Sherry claims a student needs 67% going into the exam. Simon predicts that these exams will lead to grade inflation, and quotes the emergent slogan “62 will do”. This is meant to illustrate that students should have about 62%, or to be exact, Simon claims, 63.5%, to go into the exam with 50%. This figure comes from the fact that course work makes up 80% of the students grade, while the remaining 20% comes from the exam.

Claire explained that she not only inflated her student's marks, but manipulated them so that they would best fit the needs of her students. Being able to advance to grade eleven is based upon a combination of the exams and term marks. Claire simply changed the term marks as she saw fit in accord with the needs of her students. Sometimes it is in the student's best interest to fail. Other times the exams simply are not representative of a student's capabilities. Claire understands her need to do this as proof of the inaccuracy of the exams.

Most teachers also felt that the standardized nature of these exams was not capable of accommodating reality of student diversity. According to Sherry these exams present an overwhelming hurdle for Aboriginal students. "They are a waste of time for both students and teachers," she remarked. She felt that term exams could accomplish more. These exams are standardized, and therefore reflect cultural particulars. Simon describes this as cultural hegemony which he suggests increases with standardized testing. This point of view is shared by his colleague Irene, who feels that in the end these exams only measure a small aspect of the cognitive domain. The exams are not holistic. Valuable aspects of being a citizen is not factored in. The exams focus almost exclusively on regurgitation and contribute to validating a narrow definition of what it means to be human. Is this what we want our school system to be?, she asks. Simon points out that success in these exams depends more on certain skills such as reading and writing, rate of output/production, intellectual stamina, and the ability to sit in a desk for 3 1/2 hours, which in itself is enough of a challenge for many of his students. Simon asserted that "exams are really a narrow snapshot of what you know." Drawing my attention to an example of a poem regarding a Group of Seven painting on a grade ten

English exam, he asserted that these exams privilege dominant culture. “Standardization reflects dominant standards,” he said.

The exams also encourage standardization in lieu of accommodation. Janice explained how an important element in the success of the North East Vancouver School is its ability to accommodate for the needs of its diverse population. Janice worried that standardized exams inherently go against the ability to accommodate diversity. A uniform top-down system cannot accommodate individual needs and differences. Janice said that she is especially concerned about special needs students. Although they were allowed to use computers and have extra time on the June exams, the tests were not suited to their different capabilities. Looking at the exam results, Janice remarked on the varied reasons for student’s failure. “They all have different stories,” she said. “We work hard to meet the needs of our kids, the exams just frighten them”.

Claire also worried about special needs students’ ability to perform. In the June exams, these students were assigned a scribe, someone who they had never met, to transcribe their dictation. Claire did not think that this process was adequate or effective. The restrictiveness of the rules of the exams does not allow for students of varying needs and abilities.

A critical objection to standardized exams is that they tend to dictate the curriculum.<sup>7</sup> With increased importance placed on succeeding in the exams, exam content overrides other elements of the curriculum. Emily elaborated on this problem with standardized exams. Whether or not teachers agree with the content, skills or sequencing, even if they do not agree pedagogically, they feel compelled to teach

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<sup>7</sup> **Editors Comment:** While none of the teachers mentioned this, standardized exams force compliance to a centralized curriculum which has the effect of controlling the labour power of teaches and causing them to standardize their teaching. This ultimately undermines their professional autonomy.

accordingly so their students are not disadvantaged. Teacher's success and their student's success are dependent on the exam material being taught. Claire explains how she has had to manipulate her curriculum to accommodate teaching exam taking skills. She must take time to teach her students how to relax in the exam, how to prioritize their strengths and how to approach questions. The focus becomes the exam rather than the learning process. Consequently there is less growth and learning involved.

The educators interviewed worried about the exams promotion of values of competition and marks oriented learning. Claire described her students as being "mark obsessed," and the exams only extend this preoccupation. She has observed some parents encouraging these ideals; their philosophy is that you are your mark. She expressed the difficulty at enforcing a different value system, one where marks are not the be all and end all and she was optimistic that her students were receptive to this sort of alternative thinking. Still, these negative values are so embedded in the school system and administration that it is hard to rock the boat.

Both Janice and Claire claim that the exams were developed, in part to be able to rank schools. School standings, as ranked by the Fraser Institute are published in the newspaper. Schools want their students to succeed on the exams as their ranking depends upon it. Consequently there is pressure on teachers to boost marks and pressure on students to perform. Janice questioned how accurate this ranking system can really be. With so many factors affecting marks it is difficult to assign one number to overall school performance. Janice summarized: "We're in the people business, it's not a numbers game."

## **VII. Conclusions**

The response we gathered on the impacts of the grade ten exams were predominantly negative. The teachers and councilors we interviewed argued for a return to a more local approach. There were not opposed to testing. Rather, they saw testing as only one small aspect of a larger learning and assessment process that placed the individualized needs of students at the heart of the education system.

Simon emphasized that educators must look at what students need to move forward rather than what test designers in Victoria demand. In this respect he emphasizes what he calls “the continuous progress models,” which was also touched upon by his colleague Irene. If a student fails a course it is the Ministry’s policy that they retake it. The second time around they begin exactly the same way they did the first time. Simon and Irene suggest that this approach fails to acknowledge the portions of the course they have completed and understand. If a student ends the year with a 30% understanding of a particular course the continuous progress models would begin the second time around at 30% point. This model not only allows the student to complete the course faster the second time, but also acknowledges that they have learned something, and is therefore less destructive to self esteem. Simon recognizes that the logistics of such an approach make it difficult to implement in larger mainstream schools. He does, however, believe that the model works well in alternative schools, and believes that it could operate to reduce instances of students taking the same course several times. Through implementation of the continuous progress models in the classes he teaches students do not fail courses two or three times. The continuous progress models shores up self

esteem by focusing on what students *do* know and *did* learn, while focusing on what they need to move forward. Simon and Irene feel that this approach has allowed many of their students to move forward who may otherwise have dropped out.

Emily proposed a new kind of accountability at the school and community level. Under her scheme schools would be accountable to their constituents and community. Multiple forms of assessment could incorporate basic, low-stakes tests. Admittedly, this local level of governance would not be easy. Neither could it be easily summarized in a single score published in a newspaper. School quality reviews could be a part of this project. Schools would be responsible for their own self-study, as would teachers.

These different approaches could counter the emerging and dangerous trend towards cultural hegemony that is enforced with the exams. They would relieve both teachers and students of unnecessary added stress and aboriginal, ESL and special needs students would undoubtedly be granted a fairer advantage in this setting.

This project provided us the opportunity to experience collaborative research, to learn of its strengths, weaknesses and difficulties. It would be interesting to expand this project to include a broader range of schools. Any further study should especially attempt to incorporate the views and impressions of those most affected by the exams, the grade ten students themselves. Interviewing math and science teachers in addition to the language arts teachers we interviewed would also be important. This being said, we feel as though we have created a relevant review of the impacts of grade ten standardized exams in the Vancouver area.

## **Appendix: Interview Questions**

1. Were there students in your school that failed one or more provincial grade ten examinations at the end of the 2004/2005 school year?
2. If yes, did this failure result in any of these students failing a course?
3. If yes, did any of these students not return to school in the fall?
4. On a general level, how would you describe student response to the provincial grade 10 examinations?
5. How would you describe the response of Aboriginal, ESL, and special needs students, to the exams?
6. Was one or more designated groups of students disproportionately affected by the exams? If yes, in what way?
7. Do you think the requirement to write provincial grade 10 exams is likely to affect future graduation rates? If yes, in what way? If not, why not?
8. During your time working in education, have you noticed any changes in students that you feel may be correlated to the increase in standardized testing?
9. Have there been any outcomes from grade 10 exams that you did not expect?
10. Do you have any additional comments about the exams?