

Making a Grade: Victorian Examinations and the Rise of Standardized Testing

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Book Review/Recension d'ouvrage

Making a Grade: Victorian Examinations and the Rise of Standardized Testing

by James Elwick

University of Toronto Press, 2021, 287 pages

ISBN: 9781487508937 (cloth)

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Standardized testing has elicited considerable rhetoric within teaching, quite apart from coverage by public presses. Issues appear to be thematic and arise routinely without resolution. Against this backdrop, James Elwick explains how the thematic issues historically arose and provides a fascinating portrait of the historical emergence of standardized testing. The book is a must read for anyone trying to make sense of the conceptual purpose of standardized testing.

The introduction clarifies that this book focuses on “mass exams” (Elwick, 2021, p. 4), which developed between 1850 and 1900. There are acknowledgements of elite exams, such as Cambridge University’s Mathematical Tripos but they are not the focus. Instead, we learn of a United Kingdom examination model being exported “to specify science curricula ... used in both India and Upper Canada (now Ontario).” (Elwick, 2021, p. 4). Perplexing questions are raised where a process-focus evolved to a results-focus that, in principle, would allow anyone to complete the testing. In Victorian times it provided a circumstance for discussion of, among other things, female schooling.

Elwick combines multiple historical elements to reveal the complex position of standardized testing, built on the development of statistics as an academic field of study

and accommodating a Victorian sense of process simplicity. At the same time, it was argued that standardized testing “tested both knowledge and morality” (Elwick, 2021, p. 10). The moral dimension, in Victorian times, conflicted with equality of sexes where questions arose of whether the roles of the sexes were morally the same or whether different sex-based standards should be used. Simultaneously, standardized testing became a proxy for establishing individuals’ capacity, whether academic ability or moral character, that could be used by third parties, thus creating the issue of making distinction between what needs to be known, by whom, and what is examinable. The book shines in clarifying the complexity of issues as standardized testing grew to an industrial level over fifty years. Issues emerged due to a variety of changes of behavior in response to testing. Were exams essentially stabilizing curricula within the education system or was it improving cognitive capacity or moral character? Against this backdrop of issues was a push to make the process of examinations more uniform and to extend the capacity to use proctored exams across the globe.

There is a brief mention of teacher training and testing of teacher candidates. Tutoring of students as preparation for standardized exams became a source of income for teachers. In time there were efforts to stabilize education funding by tying it to standardized test results. This led to payment-for-results approaches where teachers earned a stipend for each successful student they had. It also led to textbook development as a mechanism to attract students, yet it is also explained as reflecting interpretational bias that could impact test results. The issue of misconduct is addressed in detail that includes lapses by both students and teachers.

Throughout the book there are contextual historical details that connect to issues that remain today. Cambridge published the ranked scores of their highest performers and clustered scores of moderate performers. While that does not occur with standardized testing today, it is interesting to recognize the history where middle-class school rankings first appeared in 1861. It is an interesting detail when considering the publication of school-level and school-board-level results today. Teachers were also ranked, albeit this seems to have been less common. The arguments for equitable treatment, particularly of both sexes, was initially monetary where demands were made for government funding to support both sexes. The issue evolved and growing pains clearly ensued. In effect, standardization meant that results were simply that—results—regardless of any differences in the candidates. The results-focus evidently allowed crossing national boundaries more easily than

ignoring sex distinction. The latter would require societal changes to morality and the explanation is thought-provoking about the foundational purposes of education.

A challenge with the book is that in places it is difficult to determine what level of the school system is undergoing the standardized testing. University entrance testing is the initial focus, but standardized testing was also coupled to government funding and appears to have coincided with the development of a school system resembling our modern systems—with government funded schools, certification processes, and paid teachers. The coupling demonstrates a milieu where the foundation of education was moving from being oriented to an elite few to being oriented to many more youths. Additionally, the United Kingdom had a class structure that was related to education and may not be easily interpreted for other places. Elwick doubtlessly could not address the full scope of educational change and readers may find themselves wondering about the broader development of education systems during the historical period.

Readers will find this book addresses all the modern issues that surround standardized testing. While it does not offer solutions to the many issues, it does offer a resolution by way of showing how the issues are intrinsically tied to foundational concepts and values of testing. It provides historical context for how many issues arose and that demonstrates how the issues have persisted for more than a century.