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Mass Testing and the Underdevelopment of Inner-City Communities

Introduction

I do feel that the wonderful multi-aged, child-centered, activity-based program where my children are learning to be critical thinkers is in jeopardy ... because these tests are part (of) a political agenda to change the way we teach our children. They are designed to weed out the winners and losers.

We know that in an inner city classroom ... the tests seem nothing more than a way to say "We told you so, you cannot succeed." ... Our students are doing well. In actual fact, too well. We have too many children being prepared for university. We need to divide those that will get from those that will not. We can't all move up the ladder. So we bring in things like standards testing. (Shawn Kettner, 1999, Winnipeg parent)

The critique of standards testing that this parent articulates identifies several reasons why parents and educators are mobilizing throughout North America (at least) against one of the phenomena of global education restructuring: standardized and standards testing (Ball, 1998; Editors, 1999; Gillies, D., personal communication, May 14, 1999; McCants Pendleton, 1999). Central to the concerns of many is the role standardized testing plays in maintaining or reproducing social class differences both materially and at the ideological level. The concern of this article is the effect of mass testing on inner-city communities. I argue that mass testing has the effect of contributing to the global processes of growing class polarization and the continuing underdevelopment of urban core areas.

Provincial examinations were reintroduced in Manitoba at the S4 level (equivalent to most provinces' grade 12) in 1990. Results from the examinations account for 30% of each student's final mark. Later the planned implementation of standards testing in core subject areas throughout the province of Manitoba at the grades 3, 6, senior 1 (grade 9), and S4 levels was announced in the provincial government's 1995 *New Directions Action Plan*. However, it was not until January 1999 that students actually began taking the tests. Even then, tests were limited to S4 in English and grade 3 mathematics.

Producers and advocates of "standards testing" argue that their form of testing is fundamentally different from the notorious standardized form. As-

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sessment based on the latter, still common in the United States, consists of multiple-choice paper-and-pencil tests. More recently, tests include story-like problem-solving items in mathematics, constructed-response questions in science, and opportunities for students to discuss the theme in a group prior to the date of testing in writing assessments. Nevertheless, in this article I argue that the effects are fundamentally the same as with the new models' predecessors. Because the effects are the same, both types of testing are henceforth referred to as *mass testing*. Although it theoretically has the potential of contributing in some ways to greater social and educational equality, the real effects of mass testing are to reduce teachers' potential to respond effectively to inner-city needs.

This article proceeds as follows. First, the imposition of mass testing is located in the context of Winnipeg's inner-city core, where it is becoming increasingly more difficult to maintain health and self-respect. Second, the article refers to literature from cross-cultural education to argue for a focus on cultural specificities and materiality in education planning. Third, the problem of inner-city schooling is reviewed to argue that piecemeal reforms—mass testing or otherwise—will not substantially improve teaching and learning conditions without a transformation of the social economy as a whole. Fourth, I return to a discussion of standards testing to show how the government in Manitoba measures works to reinforce the existing tendency toward the underdevelopment of core area regions, especially schooling for young residents. Fifth, I conclude with a brief forecast of the possibilities for effective resistance to educational homogenization.

The Underdevelopment of Inner-City Winnipeg

A single person on welfare in Winnipeg receives a daily allowance of $1.53 for clothing, 36 cents for household needs, and $3.87 for food (Nairne, 1998b). The chances of a Winnipeg resident being on welfare are increasing, in keeping with the global growth in impoverishment in urban areas (Sassen, 1994). We should not view this tendency as either historically static or politically innocent. The creation of poverty is a dynamic relationship, with historical, economic, political, and spatial contexts. For example, the systemic destruction of indigenous sustainable economies, initiated by or with the collaboration of the Canadian state, still left some locally based household economies somewhat intact. Historically, the growth of an increasing economically marginalized population located in urban core areas and marginal to the central sources of wealth production did not begin to emerge until the consolidation of large corporations at the turn of the 20th century (Sugrue, 1993). However, the most recent introductions of new technology, accompanied by the relative decline in basic manufacturing jobs throughout the industrial world, has produced an "explosive" growth in new urban poor (Laxer, 1998, p. 186). As Seccombe and Livingstone (1996) observe, although there are differences between nation states in race relations policy, the correlation of economic and cultural marginalization, poverty, and residential ghettoization, and the color of people's skin and access to reasonably paid jobs is consistent and "striking" (p. 142).

Canada is experiencing this process of class polarization directly and rapidly (Laxer, 1998). Consequently, although Canada's Gross Domestic Product per capita rose from 1989 by 2.5%, an index that tracks economic well-being

declined by 8.7%, primarily due to a sharp increase in the economic risk associated with unemployment and illness (Little, 1998). Further, since 1971 Canadian GDP per capita has risen by 55%, but economic well-being has not improved since 1984. Economists Osberg and Sharpe claim the primary reason for this slow growth is "the failure of economic equality to increase" (Little, 1998, p. B7). Winnipeg is undergoing the same active processes of impoverishment, with the number of people using the city's largest food bank increasing by 70% during 1997-1998 (Mackenzie, 1998). The top 15 Winnipeg employers have cut nearly 18,000 jobs since 1991 (Nairne, 1998b).

Again consistent with global historical patterns, the production of this poverty is racialized. In this midwestern and medium-sized metropolitan area of just over 660,000, the Aboriginal[1] population is estimated to be between 45,000 and 75,000 (Maunder & Maracle, 1997). The lower figure would mean that 6.9% of the city's population is Aboriginal, representing the largest concentration of Aboriginal people in urban Canada (Nairne, 1998a). Yet in 1997 only 4.1% of the municipal government's work force of about 10,000 were Aboriginal, and there were no Aboriginal people in civic management (Maunder, 1998; O'Brien, 1998). The private sector does no better. In the heart of a region of Winnipeg heavily represented by Aboriginal residents, for example, baker Erhard Meier employs 60 people, none of whom are First Nations (Mitchell, 1998).

Both in Canada in general and Winnipeg in particular, racialized children are vastly overrepresented among the urban poor (Laxer, 1998; Mackenzie, 1998). Child poverty increased by 58% between 1989 and 1995 in Canada as a whole, while one of the major contributors to food bank increases in Winnipeg is usage by children (Mackenzie, 1998; Robertson, 1998). Outright impoverishment and its racialization has contributed to a more extensive social crisis for Aboriginal youth, as 78% of young Manitobans in the custody of public child welfare agencies are of Aboriginal ancestry (Maunder, 1998).[2] Not surprisingly, these material social conditions may have at least some effect on Aboriginal hopes for school success. In one of Winnipeg's smaller and relatively suburban school districts alone, only five of 23 grade 12 students who identified themselves as Aboriginal in 1996 graduated. Most grievously, in Manitoba in general First Nations children are 4.4 times more likely to die than other Manitoba children (Paediatric Death Review Committee, 1996).

Poverty has been residentially segregated in Winnipeg, as it has generally been in the rest of the industrialized world throughout the 20th century (Seccombe & Livingstone, 1996; Sugrue, 1993). Leo, a professor of political science at the University of Winnipeg (Leo et al., 1998), has recently led a study of "inner-city decay" in the urban core area. Leo's team identified significant cultural and economic heterogeneity in the district, but also noted that:

> Winnipeg has become a major Aboriginal population center, with Aboriginal people heavily concentrated in certain neighborhoods ... It is possible, therefore, that inner-city neighborhoods in Winnipeg are beginning to take on the characteristics of racial, as well as social ghettoization. (p. 11).

To this point the discussion of the racialization of poverty and residential segregation in Winnipeg has referred exclusively to conditions for Aboriginal

Table 1

	Family Income	Percent Below Poverty	Unemployment Rate	Percent Aboriginal	Percent Immigrant
Inner-city schools	$19,530	71.6	58.46	25.5	30.16
Winnipeg School Division	$30,700	47.4	29.7	12.7	15.3
Robert H. Smith School	$81,300	13.1	1.8	N/A	10.8

residents. This silencing of the real presence of immigrants and refugees in the city parallels the textual evidence from provincial educational policy documents. However, the significant presence of immigrant populations in the city's urban core, and the relevance of both forms of minority presence to questions of schooling, are made evident in Table 1, which contains data from a recent student demographics study in Winnipeg (Winnipeg School Division #1, 1998).

We see that most of the student population in Winnipeg's inner-city schools comes from Aboriginal and immigrant families. Family income for the richest catchment area in the division, Robert H. Smith School, is more than four times higher than in the inner city; the presence of poverty is one fifth that in the inner city; and the unemployment rate in the area is negligible. Here the presence of Aboriginal people is so low as not to be countable, compared with a condition in the inner city where it is well over one quarter that of the total population.[3] In part this dramatic discrepancy in wealth is a reflection of the colonial relation inner cities have to the balance of the urban environment. Winnipeg serves as a case study of Laxer's (1998) observation that "The explosive growth of the new urban poor provides a classic illustration of the political economy of underdevelopment" (p. 181). For example, a 1997 survey of 32 agencies and 41 businesses in the inner city revealed that when $13 million was spent on wages and salaries paid to workers and entrepreneurs in the region, $10 million left with employees, managers, and owners who live in other parts of the city (Maunder & Maracle, 1997). In sum, then, the process of beginning to interpret the meaning of mass testing for inner-city communities must begin with a concrete understanding of the political economy of these regions. As Rury and Mirel (1997) observe for the American setting, but as is also the case in Canada, "There can be little doubt that the 'urban crisis' observed in the 1960s and 1970s has worsened considerably" (p. 81).

The Meaning of Culture for Developing Sensible Education Policy and Practice
The emergence of the postmodern interest in popular culture during the previous two decades has reminded us that culture is "the active process of generating and circulating meanings and pleasures within a social system … it can be developed only from within, it cannot be imposed from without or above" (Fiske, 1989, p. 23). Culture is at the same time "lived materially by ordinary people in their specific circumstances" (Ahmed, 1997). This is not to negate the everyday meaning and relevance of, for example, oral traditions and other forms of historical memory, as well as the ongoing imprints of extended cultural affiliations. A meaningful sense of common identity with a group or individual can have roots that reach back centuries (Seccombe & Livingstone,

1996). For example, Deyhle and Swisher's (1997) exhaustive review of the literature on American Indian and Alaska Native education finds that

> Although American Indian communities have experienced tremendous social, cultural, and economic changes over the past 100 years—resulting in "traditional" versus "nontraditional" communities—ethnographic evidence suggests that child-rearing practices continue to be much the same as they have been in the past. (p. 139)

Nevertheless, in the present circumstance the real cultural values and practices of inner-city Ojibway in Winnipeg will almost surely be in some ways different from those of Ojibway from one's home reserve, for example, and that the cultural ways of Filipino-Canadians in northern Winnipeg will be constituted differently not only from friends and relatives in the Phillipines and the US, but even to some extent from those living in the city's fashionable and middle-class Lindenwoods district. Ojibway and Filipino-Canadian Winnipegers living in "the North end" may come together around, for example, trips to the laundromat, the difficulties of meeting bus schedules in –40°C weather, activities at the local community center, and a debate about the relative merits of taking a short-term, low-paying job instead of attending a neighborhood adult literacy course. They will begin to develop a distinctly neighborhood, hybrid culture. At the same time, important resonances from their distinct upbringing will remain with each group to continually shape and guide ethical daily practice.

Educational Implications of Cultural Specificity and Materiality
The significance of local cultural practices for teaching and learning has been echoed by a number of current curriculum theorists and educational psychologists (Oakes & Lipton, 1999). Cole's (1996) work, and that of researchers whose work he recounts, offer a number of examples to establish the value of developing curriculum from a close understanding of a community's everyday cultural and material practice. For example, in 1963 Cole was invited by the United Nations to review the problems educators were having with introducing "new math" to tribespeople in Liberia. Problems for village tribespeople in doing math according to standard approaches seemed insurmountable. Local teachers recounted how even if their students worked through a problem like "2 + 6 = ?" with the teachers' guidance, and then were offered the problem "3 + 5 = ?" the students would protest that the question was unfair because it contained new material not covered in the lesson. It was not until Cole had investigated the operations of the local marketplace that he received a completely different impression of the students' mathematical abilities. He was often outbargained by the cabbies, for example, who seemed to have no difficulty calculating miles, road quality, quality of the car's tires, the number of passengers, and distance in a single formula that worked to their advantage. Cole's conclusion was not only that local context was important, but that we need to study people's *practices* that involve in this case measuring, estimating, counting, and calculating before we can diagnose indigenous mathematical understanding.

A decade later, Cole collaborated with a team of researchers to conduct a memory test among the Kpella rice farmers in Liberia. Performance levels of

these nonliterate tribespeople had compared poorly with standards based on US research. The poor results led to new experiments aimed at presenting the task in such a way that there would be higher outcomes. Each experimental method failed, until Cole's team asked themselves if the results might be different if they designed the tests around the sorts of memory work that the Kpelle normally used in their everyday lives. When they inserted the items to be remembered into a story structure, the outcomes were powerfully effective. What Cole finds of interest and value in these studies is not so much the results, but rather the significance of understanding cultural differences as arising from the organization of activity in everyday life. Powell and Frankenstein (1997a, 1997b) offer multiple cases analogous to Cole's, with similar findings.

Some may assume that Cole's (1996) findings are from esoteric settings not relevant to the current context, or that they are findings so universally accepted by all good constructivists that their lessons need not detain us. However, Grant and Gomez (1996) report on a case of a group of African-American students who responded "strangely" to a question on a school district math test. The authors offer a test item that is "similar" to the actual test item: "It costs $1.50 each way to ride the bus between home and work. The weekly pass is $16.00. Which is a better deal, paying the daily fare or buying the weekly pass?" (p. 194). The test constructors expected students to assume that all employees work five days a week at one job, and therefore choose the daily pass as the correct response. However, many of the students understood the weekly pass on the assumptions that (a) more than one family member could use the pass; (b) the pass could be used on Saturday and Sunday; (c) wage-earners in the family often have several part-time jobs, including working on weekends. In the course of their everyday work teachers constantly assess students' problems in interpretations of material, and make teaching adjust-ments (Acker, 1999). The problem given above would not befuddle most teach-ers for long. Mass testing, however, reduces the possibility for this kind of interpretative work to count.

The Significance of Cultural Identity and Cultural Legacy for "Effective" Schooling
Since the beginning of public schooling for Aboriginal children in the early 19th century, First Nations political leaders and parents have called for two objectives to be simultaneously met in their children's schooling: (a) effective, nonracist schooling so that their children can at least *claim* to have equal access to employment opportunities; and (b) the maintenance of cultural identity and integrity (Dickason, 1997; Miller, 1991; Stevenson, 1991). Certainly there is a wealth of research evidence for both Aboriginal students and children of color to show that these two goals are inextricably linked. There is also ample evidence to show that when schools actually "subtract" cultural resources from students that they bring to classrooms with them, failure ensues (Valenzuela, 1999). Deyhle and Swisher (1997) inform us that the most significant phenome-non to emerge from psychologically based research in the decades up to the 1970s was the "crossover" effect, in other words, the finding that Native stu-dents who have been achieving at or above the level of White students in school at some point "cross over" and begin doing poorly. More recent re-search on the phenomenon suggests that in school situations that are suppor-tive of Aboriginal students' cultural inheritances, identity, and language, the

crossover effect does not exist. Miller Cleary and Peacock (1998) concur. Both pairs of researchers also show that students with a rich cultural identity strengthened by the home environment are more likely to succeed in school. With reference to children of African ancestry, Ladson-Billings (1994) and Dei (1996) also both claim that, to cite the former researcher, "When schools support their culture as an integral part of the school experience, students can understand that academic excellence is not the sole province of white middle-class students" (Ladson-Bilings, 1994, p. 11). Thus any debate between the need for rigorous academic achievement and the value of infusing curriculum to strengthen cultural identity is null and void.

In sum, an educational culture and framework that reflects peoples' cultural specificities and recognizes that these are constituted both by histories *and* immediate, lived material conditions (such as taking a bus several times a day) is a necessary condition for a socially just education for all. However, classrooms are also places where the process of culture-making happens every day. That is, educators need to be conscious that "good" teachers,[4] "good" curricula, and "good" classrooms do not merely reflect every community's cultural lives; they actively help make them, or help them to dismember. On the other hand, mass testing consists of items that are intelligently and professionally constructed after investments of (in the case of Canada's national testing through the SIAP tests, for example) millions of dollars. However, the tests are also based on pre-tests with students who tend to be successful in schools, who are by and large not inner-city students. They therefore embody an inherent class bias.

Understanding and respecting cultural differences and how they arise, however, is not enough. In the case of Native American children, for example, Deyhle and Swisher (1997) offer results from ample empirical studies to show that the question of power relations is at the heart of determining school success and personal development. At the most local educational level—the classroom—what a teacher, a curriculum, and a test *do* to and with children, that is, how power relations are negotiated in the classroom, is critical to understanding students' academic performance and life chances. At the same time, progressive educators and researchers need to keep in mind that teachers, curriculum and assessment procedures, and local or regional educational policies are partly determined by the contexts in which they live and work or are developed. It is true that simply to work to ignore cultural difference, to say "There's no racism here because we treat everybody the same," is a form of what Ladson-Billings (1994) calls "dysconscious racism" (p. 33) because it becomes impossible to meet the real felt needs of culturally different students. That is, teachers and others involved in the education field are so resolute in their efforts to remain "color-blind" that they become impotent to respond responsibly to healthy differences. In the end, however, as Winnipeg's Social Planning Council (1994) argued several years ago, "diversity is not the problem, systemic racism is" (p. vii).[5] To understand this dynamic adequately and the way it is playing out for inner-city education in the current period, we need to return to the field of political economy and policy formation.

The Current Political Economy of Inner-City Education in North America

Although the notion that "the poor have been always with us" is both useless for any sense of historical understanding and useful for the promotion of political and social pacification, there is some truth in suggesting that a crisis in inner-city schooling has been persistent for a while. Kantor and Brenzel's (1993) study of urban schooling in the US between 1945 and 1990 noted a consistent "failure of urban schools to respond adequately to their … social context" (p. 387). The historians concluded that the causes of this problem could not be reduced to lack of financial resources alone. For these researchers the most important difficulty was the virtual permanence of bureaucratic structures and processes that separated educators from the communities they should have been serving. However, they also found other institutional features, including irrelevant, fragmented curricula, rigid retention policies and disciplinary practices, and, critically, low teacher expectations for student success both affecting student performance in the classroom negatively and making it difficult for students to stay in school.

Since 1990 the securing of the neoliberal state on a global level and its associated further cutback in financial resources for social administration (Collier, 1997) have meant increased class sizes and intensified workloads for teachers (Robertson, 1998). In Manitoba, for example, direct provincial spending on education was reduced from 80% to less than 70% of local school boards' total expenditures, thus reducing funding of public education from 3.65% of provincial GDP to 3.01% after 1983 (Collins, 1991). This was under a largely NDP administration. Since then, under an avowedly neo-conservative administration, funding as a whole was reduced by a further $482 per student (Nairne, 1998c). Financial cutbacks have reduced both teachers' opportunity and their enthusiasm to engage in the hard work of tailoring curriculum to students' interests (Robertson, 1998). Yet when parents were forced to organize a rash of school-based fundraising drives this past fall, the provincial government's reaction was to warn its educators and parents that the provincial sales tax would have to be paid on chocolate bars, gift wraps, and other assorted commodities meant for financing better education (Martin, 1998a). Meanwhile, school principals are considering selling advertising on school Web sites, the provincial High School Athletic Association has approved selling advertisements on school uniforms, and many students are doing home marketing for *Scholastic* magazine to raise school funds (Martin, 1998c).

In the more limited sphere of inner-city education, however, US policy-makers have been active with initiatives to reform schools. Reforms have been infused with the notions that effective reform could not be dictated from above, needed to be schoolwide, and depended on teachers as the essential change agents (Anyon, 1997). The aforementioned perceived problem of bureaucratic administrations, in particular, was tackled as school-based decision-making, a new emphasis on parental involvement, and joint management by teachers and administrators became system-wide in centers like New York City, Chicago, and Philadelphia. New modes of organizing teaching and learning such as cooperative learning, curriculum integration, longer class periods, more intensive study of fewer topics, team teaching, multiage groups, and flexible scheduling were launched.

Despite all the efforts at reform, results showing marked teaching performance and student academic improvement have been meager (Anyon, 1997).

Among progressive researchers and education activists, there is now a firm consensus that schooling for inner-city youth will not be fundamentally improved until there is a concomitant change in the larger socioeconomic context (Anyon, 1997; Edelsky, 1996; Kantor & Brenzel, 1993; Rury & Mirel, 1997; Sullivan, 1989). They argue that until both teachers and students have hope that their lives will improve through their work in schools, there will not be the necessary drive to motivate sufficient improvements. It is difficult to sustain hope when decent employment is continually migrating from their communities, in other words, when the inner city is enmeshed in a process of underdevelopment and when even successful school completion does not correspond to access to employment commensurate with learned skills. Further, hope is diminished when access to good employment is limited by the pigmentation of one's skin. As Miller Cleary and Peacock (1998) observe in their book on Native American education:

> Both of us were struck by the universality of issues in American Indian education with those of other colonized indigenous people.... The piecemeal nature of programs has not been able to break through the nearly impervious nature of institutional racism in this country. In the meantime, today's American Indian students have been dropping out of school and achieving at rates strikingly similar to 1968.[6] (pp. 247, 253)

Despite changes in the political administration of a range of Western countries during this decade, from governance by the nominally most conservative parties available to the visually more centrist parties of Blair, Chretien, Clinton, Schroeder, and now Barak, we should not expect a sea change in these sober conditions soon. For one thing racism serves to defend the very cultural identities and self-definitions of most who take blind pride in the accomplishments of something called "Western civilization" (Bannerji, 1995). There is a long chain of hierarchically organized wealth accumulation supported by the ideological and political defenses that have developed over centuries (Apple, 1997). Although white working-class people are often more supportive of racial equality than common stereotypes suggest, the building of alliances with people of color and First Nations people are seriously impeded by a lack of familiarity, insufficient consciousness of the operations of racism, and a sense that unfair competition prevents white access to better employment (Seccombe & Livingstone, 1996; Solomos & Back, 1996). This antagonism penetrates the politics of inner-city education as well, as the history of suburbanite hostility toward inner-city residents has been enduring (Hobsbawm, 1995; Rury & Mirel, 1997).

Nor are conditions improving. The aforementioned hostility toward citizens of the urban core became mobilized around a number of educational issues in the US in the late 1980s, for example. Issues such as school choice, public spending, standards, and school accountability were only some that saw "fierce partisan conflict" between politicians representing either the inner city or suburban and rural legislative districts (Rury & Mirel, 1997, p. 73). In Canada even such a mainstream political effort as multiculturalism came under attack by significant intellectuals and public sentiment (Liodakis &

Satzewich, 1998). More broadly, whether we refer to a "two-nation model" (Laxer, 1998, p. 193) or a "two-thirds society" (Hobsbawm, 1995, p. 310), the case is that since 1970 political society and levels of wealth have for the foreseeable future been intentionally bifurcated throughout the Western world, with the economically marginalized becoming increasingly so, in part by deliberate, popular government policy.[7] Accompanying the strengthening of a blame-the-victim sentiment has been the increasing rise of a hate-mongering racism (Hobsbawm, 1995; Solomos & Back, 1996).[8] An integration of hatred of the "underclass" and racism have, not surprisingly, meant that "Backlash politics … helped create the conditions for the downward slide of the inner cities to their present conditions of unemployment and social despair" (Laxer, 1998, p. 192). Standards testing is one product of this culturally impoverished social order.

Mass Testing and the Underdevelopment of Inner-City Education

This article demonstrates the need to base meaningful curriculum development for cultural communities on a close understanding of their material and specific processes of culture formation. Consistent with market-oriented education initiatives throughout the world, choice and parental involvement are certainly avowed principles of multiple Manitoba curriculum documents (Ball, 1998; Manitoba Education and Training, 1995a, 1995b, 1997). However, capital's objective need in this period of globalization and the high mobility of labor power associated with it has been for a universal standardization of market-ready job skills (Kuehn, 1999). Curriculum initiatives like the Western Canadian Protocol's Foundation Document in Social Studies recognize this when a major objective includes "improving the ease of transfer from jurisdiction to jurisdiction" (Western Canadian Protocol, 1999, p. 3). At the international level initiatives such as the OECD Education Indicators have provided criteria for comparisons among national education systems (Kuehn, 1999).

When the Manitoba tests were implemented, teachers and some parents immediately reacted to the policy. These two groups began mobilizing to abolish the grade 3 tests especially. For example, the 1999 Annual General Meeting of the Manitoba Teachers' Society "condemn[ed] the practice of grade 3 exams as pedagogically unsound and abusive to grade 3 children" (Staff, 1999a, p. 5). For inner-city schools the issue was even more pressing. Commenting on the experience of administering mathematics tests to grade 3 students in his inner-city school, principal Bob Davies of Winnipeg's Fort Rouge school speaks of the frustration of implementing the tests:

> The information they provided was of little or no value for schools, parents, teachers, or principals compared to the information we collect in a whole array of ways every day. Their purpose was political … accountability. (For an inner-city school) with sixty-six to one hundred per cent turnover (of students) in a year, it's not even a measure of accountability. Who's held accountable? (personal communication, November 25, 1999).

Davis' question implies that one effect of the tests in his school is to maintain a teacher-blaming strategy held by many advocates of neo-liberal school reform (Halsey, Lauder, Brown, & Stuart Wells, 1999).

Meanwhile, parents such as Shawn Kettner (1999, quoted in the introduction to this article) and some academics have been criticizing the entire policy of standards testing and/or testing at the senior levels as well. Kettner is a leader of the newly formed parent organization Committee Against Standards Testing and a member of a coalition of English educators and other educational activists who meet under the innocent name of English Language and Literature Discussion Group to strategize for the elimination of the S4 English test. Provincial assessment policy actually became an issue in the fall 1999 general election. To date, the new Minister has eliminated the grade 3 testing and made most other provincial testing optional (Martin & Kuxhaus, 1999). Currently the Manitoba Teachers' Society is calling on its members to "not volunteer to participate in standards assessments" (Speelman, 1999, p. 2). MTS staff member Martin and Kuxhaus (1999) say, "Only a classroom teacher, familiar with the particular needs of a student, can create a measure of performance that is fair and equitable" (p. 5). All these initiatives in Manitoba join similar resistance throughout Canada judging from my recent review of teachers' organizations' Web sites.

Parents' groups in Winnipeg have resisted standards tests, in part because they are an expense the parents feel could best be used to improve the quality of schooling as they define it (Coalition, n.d.). Expensive they may be; however, education authorities realize that standards testing is less expensive than better alternatives (Robertson, 1998). "Policy borrowing," which in the current context is a metaphor for the fact that Canadian education policy has historically always been partly determined by our US neighbors, constitutes another powerful incentive to rationalize the need for standards testing. On a more global scale it appears that the state's need to control and supervise teachers' work in the context of laissez-faire education planning constitutes a managerial incentive for the tests (Apple, 1999). In the US at least, there is even an emerging private industry organized to provide low-wage intensive marking of exams (Glovin, 1999). In keeping with the mood of the times, some argue that the imposition of mass testing is part of a broader movement to promote narrow nationalism and "family values," and to help silence the voices of progressive social movements by further denying official recognition of their voices in curricula (Editors, 1999). Finally, and tellingly for the purposes of this article, mass testing is a response to the demands of suburban parents that teachers be able to defend the accuracy and objectivity of tests that will determine their children's access to specific university programs (Robertson, 1998). Once again, then, we are seeing white middle-class perceived interests unfortunately aligned in opposition to the needs of inner-city communities.

However, at least some inner-city parents' councils in Winnipeg are supporting standards testing because they believe testing is one mechanism that can expose school inequalities and provide data for reform (Gillies, D., personal communication, May 14, 1999). In a different social context, universally implemented assessment criteria might contribute to greater social and educational equality by providing a basis for concerned policy-makers to identify weaknesses and limitations in current schooling policies and practices. Indeed, a call for more academic rigor in inner-city schools, and fair and just treatment of *all* children, is a legitimate and common demand by minority school

reformers (Delpit, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 1994). However, opponents of mass testing do not oppose them in defense of low standards and academic inequalities. Nor has testing actually served the purpose of leveraging effective improvements in inner-city schooling in the past, despite its rationale (Rury & Mirel, 1997). Cole (1996) makes the well-established argument that "We know of no tests that are culture-free, only tests for which we have no good theory of how cultural variations affect performance" (p. 56). The publication of mass testing scores have yielded revealing differences in performance based on race and class. For example, the results of the recent grade 3 math tests showed that Winnipeg School Division #1 students (i.e., the division that contains most of the city's urban core) scored significantly below the provincial average of 60.7% (53.2%), whereas students from the established, largely middle-class community of Fort Garry scored the city's high of 74% (Martin, 1998b). However, US experience has shown that these differences are more likely to reinforce race- and class-stereotyping rather than adjustments to instruction that incorporate important aspects of students' home culture (Hollins, 1996).

Inherently, mass testing cannot reflect cultural specificities, not only because it is by definition universalist, but also because standards tests intentionally exclude that knowledge that is most valued by local communities (Robertson, 1998). Thus there is an inevitable bias away from pedagogy that encourages students to analyze critically their local material cultures. It is not only the content of the tests that is problematic for cultural communities, but the very process of writing them. One of the purposes for publicizing test results on a per-school basis is that the results produce competition between students and schools (Tomlinson, 1998). At an ideological level this means that values of competition and individualism are implicitly reinforced and awarded, rather than, say, values of social justice and equity. However, some Aboriginal cultural groups disparage the recognition of achievement in individualist forms, but recognize community-based successes. Although individual First Nations members may gain satisfaction from the sense of competence derived from learning new content or a new skill, a system of reward based on individual achievement can produce shame (Miller Cleary & Peacock, 1998). Thus mass testing and the consequent awarding for individualized merit is a structural limitation to some Aboriginal students' learning.

In Manitoba, teachers have opposed the implementation of standards testing for a range of reasons. They have criticized the incentive to "teach to the test" (Braun, 1999, p. 4), the use of scarce financial resources for the endeavor, the passing on of the costs of marking to teachers at the local level, the negative implications for professional ethics of being forced to turn in results related to the teaching of one's peers, and the ineffectiveness of releasing results too late for the tests to serve as diagnostic instruments (Braun, 1999; Staff, 1998, 1999b). The issues of workplace democracy (teachers do not have input into the design of the exams) and professional responsibility (teachers have the skills to design their own forms of assessment) have provided grounds for progressive critique of the government's actions (Staff, 1999b). The aforementioned linkages of mass testing with the marketization of education have been identified and challenged (Braun, 1999).

Teachers experience research findings that external examinations both warp the sorts of knowledge students have access to and undermine their own capacity to determine what that knowledge ought to be in local environments (Runte, 1998). Teachers have also publicly challenged the class distinctions evident in those tests results that have already been released (Martin, 1998b). Criticism of testing has, therefore, gone beyond professional or trade unionist concerns to conscious linkages with social justice issues. Already some public school teachers are joining with Department of English faculty at the University of Winnipeg and a local parents' group to form an anti-testing coalition (Schnitzer, D., personal communication, April 29, 1999). They are thus situated as a Manitoba site of resistance in a broadening and active North American movement (McCants Pendleton, 1999). Possible alternatives to current forms of mass testing are beyond the compass of this article. However, it is again possible to envisage progressive alternatives linking working teachers with a community-based social movement.

Conclusion

The progressive US scholar McNeil argues that "Testing is meant to produce sameness" (personal communication, April 22, 1999) whereas third world theorist Amin (1989), writing about Eurocentrism, claims that "the dominant ideology under consideration does not only propose a vision of the world. It is also a political project on a global scale: a project of homogenization" (p. 111). Over a century ago, Lord T.B. Macaulay was principally responsible for establishing a purely British system of education in India, primarily for the purposes of achieving a suitable (to British colonial rule) administration and economy (Hobsbawm, 1975). Macaulay asked, rhetorically, "Can it be denied that the education of the common people is the most effective means of protecting persons and property?" (Lloyd & Thomas, 1998, p. 18).

I argue that the attempt to homogenize what is taught and learned can only contribute to the educational underdevelopment of inner cities by refusing to recognize the educational importance of cultural specificity. Yet in a time of increasing social inequality, both locally and on a global scale, the state's need for a means to protect privileged persons and colossal accumulations of private property are as great as during Macaulay's time. However, attacks on the costs of social administration (which have included reduced central administrative and professional staffs in education) and the devolution of school administration have left dominant policy-makers with limited instruments with which to keep account and measure the value of their reduced social investments. At the same time, the turn in schooling toward the market—open boundaries, charter schooling, parents as consumers—increases the need for some form of central assessment. Standards testing is meant to accomplish Macaulay's goal at less cost than it would take to train staffs at the school level in the use of rubrics, portfolios, and student-teacher collaborative assessment, for example.

However, new forms of resistance have begun and are proving to be at least somewhat effective, as the provincial election in Manitoba has shown. That this provincial case is at least abstractly linked internationally can be seen by picking up any current issue of *Rethinking Schools* or examining the work of such organizations as the US group FairTest or the National Coalition of Education Activists. However, the real collaboration in Manitoba between

MTS leadership and the resisting social groups in civil society remains weak. Through their insistence on homogenization—an inherently racist and Eurocentric policy position—educrats have produced the grounds for alliance-building in Manitoba and elsewhere. Trust-building and working collaboration remain to be accomplished.

Notes

1. Although the term *Native* remains in use by some today, this text respects the term commonly employed by Aboriginal educators and others to mean the first dwellers of this land.
2. The reading of this statistic must also consider the historical record of discriminatory (if not culturally genocidal) practices by state authorities toward Aboriginal children.
3. Reliable sources suggest that the data on Aboriginal ancestry reported here are dramatically underrepresented. This is in part because the race and ethnicity data are circa 1991.
4. Any conception of the "good" teacher and "good" teaching is also socially and culturally constructed, as Delpit (1995) reminds us.
5. This term is somewhat problematic because its vagueness obscures as much as it clarifies.
6. That is, before a spate of reforms at least ostensibly meant to improve school conditions for Native Americans.
7. In at least one instance the electoral successes of anti-foreigner youth movements were also well financed by, for example, rich publishers (Oppenheimer, 1999).
8. One significant Canadian example is the Canadian Foundation for Individual Rights and Equality (FIRE), a BC-based organization that is opposing Aboriginal rights and land claims negotiations and is spreading across Canada. The organization was begun by a former Reform Party employee in Penticton (Goldberg, 1998).

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