

Elwick, J. (2021).
*Making a Grade: Victorian Examinations and
the Rise of Standardized Testing.*
University of Toronto Press. 304 pages. ISBN 9781487508937

Reviewed by: Donna H. Swapp, University of Regina

In education, notions around standards and standardization are often framed in the context of globalization, free/open markets, and neoliberalism's subsidiary, new managerialism. Scholars have credited several early, pervasive influences behind the rise of the standards and standardization movement across the globe, notably Thatcher austerity measures, dubbed Thatcherism, in the UK in the 1980s; the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) policies of the Bush era in the United States in the early 2000s; and the creation of the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISSLC) standards in the US, initially conceptualized in 1996 and revised in 2008 and 2015 (Ball, 2003; Carnoy & Rhoten, 2002; Darling-Hammond, 2009; Owens & Valesky, 2022). While terms such as parental choice, competition, voucher system, and league tables dominate contemporary discourse in education, James Elwick, in his new book, *Making a Grade: Victorian Examinations and the Rise of Standardized Testing* (2021), shows us that these, in fact, are not new phenomena. Indeed, the standards and standardization movement has gained intensified traction in the last two or so decades, but, as Elwick examines, its genesis – and the foundational questions of ontology, epistemology, and philosophy that inspired its beginnings – dates to more than a century and half ago.

In nine chapters, Elwick packs a rich, informative history of examinations and the rise of standardized testing in the Victorian era. The book focuses on the British Isles, mostly England, with some discussion on the wider British empire, and covers the period between 1850 and 1900, although there is some context as early as the 1820s and a little past 1900. He divides the book into three parts including introduction, conclusion, preface, bibliography, index, appendices, and notes. The bibliographical list is particularly useful for students, educators, and practitioners wanting more details on key players shaping examinations and standardized testing in the Victorian era. Each part of the book comprises three chapters and altogether, the introduction, conclusion, and nine chapters total 200 pages.

Elwick sets out the thesis statement very early in the introduction. He writes, “[s]tandardization makes such tests into seemingly valid comparisons of knowledge, skill, and competence” (p. 3). His argument is that the exercise in and of *standardization* of testing more so than the testing (or test) itself gives standardized testing legitimacy and coercive power. As he elucidates, there are routines, rules, and techniques that govern standardized testing, such as the placement of candidates, the distance between candidates, the quiet of the examination room, and the numerical grading of the answers. He refers to these as *repertoires*, a set of collective interactions that everyone had come to learn and share. He also refers to the material objects that form part of the testing, conceivably items such as the paper itself on which the test is written, the desks and chairs on which examinees sit and write, the clock keeping time, and the test questions themselves. Collectively, these interactions and material objects constituted what Elwick refers to as the *infrastructure* that “makes possible not only standardized testing, but also trust in the results” (p. 3). So pervasive was this system, Elwick argues, that “the material objects and repertoires of exams are taken for granted and noticed only when they fail. Their very familiarity and success

make them difficult to discern as parts of a larger system” (p. 4). Herein, Elwick is troubling the often unconscious, taken for granted, and enticing assumptions about standardized testing and broader notions of education quality that remain pervasive today. He then takes up each part of this argument in the nine chapters of the book.

In part one of the book, Elwick examines the scope and substance of examinations, including debates about the purpose of schooling and how best to assess knowledge during this historical period. Chapter One chronicles the frenzied establishment, extensive adoption, and growing condemnation of examinations between 1840 and 1890, particularly the Department of Science and Art (DSA) tests. It also situates the genesis of teacher certification and teaching standards, a reality compounded by being tied to school funding and explores the spread of these exams to the British Isles and overseas. Chapter Two explores the rapid expansion of examinations in an environment tied to competition and financial remuneration. Herein, Elwick explores the rise of cheating and “teaching to the test” by the 1860s; a market-driven, results-oriented testing climate with accusations of “payment by results” by 1859; philosophical debates as early as 1837 about examinations redefining schooling and the purpose of education; and the exponential number of examinees sitting these tests from mere hundreds in the 1860s to over 100,000 by 1898. Notably, Elwick connects historical and contemporary funding schemes relative to standardized testing, arguing that such schemes under policies such as the NCLB were in fact pioneered in England. Chapter Three interrogates the subjectivity of the test questions, issues of epistemology, and self-serving intentions of test creators and administrators. Beginning with the latter, Elwick outlines the arrangement whereby simply passing a test in a particular subject qualified the test taker to then teach that subject to others and get paid for every person who passes that test. This fostered inequity and unethical behaviors among test administrators and test developers who were well paid and unwilling to relinquish control of their roles in this testing ecosystem. Further, “good coaches”, as Elwick refers to them, were incentivized to game the examination system, teaching to the test, promoting cramming by students and/or, outright, cheating. Overall, the testing environment Elwick portrays bears likeness to the one today: condemnation of this rote learning scheme as being an inaccurate measure of an individual’s abilities, proponents doubling down that the insertion of public money into education demanded such accountability, and concerns about the objectivity (or subjectivity, depending on one’s philosophical leanings) of the test questions.

In part two of the book, Elwick explores examinations from the context of the examiners, the people at the heart of how these tests were conceptualized, developed, and assessed, exploring their perceptions and the relations that engendered particular understandings, policies, and practices relative to these examinations. In Chapter Four, Elwick problematizes the decontextualized nature of testing, referring to this issue as *partition*, wherein examiners were criticized for their emphasis on test takers’ mechanical and depersonalized responses. Chapter Five details the process of standardization, with Elwick arguing this unfolded through four consecutive stages: *standards*, the level or benchmark of skills; *commensuration*, assessing all test takers by the same set of common principles; *standardization*, the system making commensurate comparisons of test takers seem reasonable and trustworthy; and *quantification*, the summary comparisons of commensurable qualities on specific scales. Importantly, Elwick problematizes the entrenched nature of the standards and standardization movement in education, arguing that “the longer a standard has been used for commensurability, the more difficult it is to discard it”, such that a standard’s “sheer longevity” makes it endure despite its shortcomings (p. 107). Elwick is problematizing the entrenched nature of the standards and standardization movement in education, despite accusations that this system fostered and reified inequities. He continues to expose this chasm in Chapter Six through ontological and epistemological enquiry, unpacking “the poverty of knowing someone only through an exam” (p. 121), an exploration that students of Kuhn, Gadamer, and Habermas would find riveting. Herein, he detailed critics’ position that the examinations were “thin descriptions” of knowledge and therefore inadequate markers of a “good education” because these tests rewarded the *display* of learning (particularly recounting facts), countered against the establishment of certification bodies and public registries for recording and displaying test results to legitimize these examinations as objective, accurate, and impartial. Tests and testing became mainstays, Elwick argues, in that “the more seriously exam results were taken, the more publicity they received, which made the exam more important, which tended to attract more people who took the exam results seriously. Over time such reactivity entrenched exams, first as important routines with which to assess performance, then as necessary ones” (p. 139).

In this way, the second part of the book offers a spatial, temporal, and relational scrutiny of a contested environment in which standardized examinations became *the* collective/overall marker of what was good and just for and in Victorian society.

The third part of the book introduces new elements but also probes deeper into previous themes. It highlights the perspectives of the examinees, the individuals sitting examinations, including discussions around women's access to these tests. Chapter Seven expands on how financial gains, detailed in the first two parts of the book, motivated subject instructors to devise strategies to game the system. Chapter Eight explores what Elwick refers to as the infamous Goffin technique, the name inspired by Robert Goffin, a science teacher who cheated on the DSA's test. Chapter Nine is particularly noteworthy. In this chapter, he details women's struggles to not only be granted access to standardized testing but to write the same tests as their male counterparts. In fact, Elwick's book explores how issues of race (taken up in chapter one) and patriarchy played out in the context of Victorian era testing and the politics around how racialized and female candidates turned the examination criteria onto itself to gain access to these tests and, particularly for women, access to the *same* examinations that men wrote. With respect to women's equal access to testing, he describes this political process as unfolding through: *surveys* – gathering research on female abilities by studying new and existing schools for girls, establishing that female intellect was equivalent to male intellect; *wedges* – then using this data to pry open doors for women to be educated and tested as equals; and *trials* – test results publicly leveraged to justify giving same access to women to sit examinations. Towards this end, Elwick asserts that proponents successfully argued that since the university's mandate was to educate “all classes and denominations of Her Majesty's subjects” (p. 184), and passing the exam the only criterion for earning a degree, then why should the race (for racialized candidates) or gender (for women) of the test taker matter? Indeed, Chapter Nine exposes how, as with other human rights issues such as housing, healthcare, employment, and voting rights, securing equal access to education has been a political struggle for women and racialized people.

In sum, James Elwick offers readers an important historical treatise into the origins of the standards and standardized testing movement. The book is significant in two major respects. Firstly, by situating the genesis of the standards and standardization movement in the 1800s, the book dispels assertions in the literature of a late 20th Century origin of this phenomenon. This distinction is important as it offers students of education a more precise, historical grounding of the practical and theoretical considerations of standardized testing in education. In this way, readers can more critically connect past and ongoing challenges relative to educational standards and standardized testing, including interrogating the entrenched pull of benchmarks and test scores as the best and most accurate gauges of knowledge and education quality, and problematizing the political ways educational standards and tests have been mobilized across history to further or disrupt various agendas. Elwick's caution that we not “mistake the map for the territory” (p. 196) is a call for such critical scrutiny. Second, and in a related manner, the book's strongest appeal is its privileging of context, in exposing for our inquiry the conditions and relations that fostered thinking and practices relative to examinations and testing in the Victorian era while alluding to important implications for our continued understanding of this phenomenon in more contemporary times. Herein, the underlying generative principles that embodied and embedded the standards and standardized testing environment, more so than the standards and standardized tests, offer analytical value. In educational inquiry, our fixation with superficial, observable entities represents a “missed opportunity... for scholars to gain a more sophisticated understanding of the world through building on, but in new directions, scholarship from the past... to bring them face-to-face with key problems in the here and now” (Eacott, 2015, p. 141). Instead, it is the dynamism of human and material relations with and within the structures, rules, and other social arrangements in each society that is generative and productive for advancing our understandings of the problems facing education today. Absent such a deliberate scrutiny of context, important ontological and epistemological elements of social phenomena remain shrouded (Riveros & Nyereyemhuka, 2020). It is by centering context that we do not mistake the map for the territory but remain open to multiple, and different, possibilities for teaching, assessing, and setting standards in education.

References

- Ball, S. J. (2003). The teacher's soul and the terrors of performativity. *Journal of Education Policy*, 18(2), 215-228.

-
- Carnoy, M., & Rhoten, D. (2002). What does globalization mean for educational change? A comparative approach. *Comparative Education Review*, 46(1), 1-9.
- Darling-Hammond, L. (2009). Standards, accountability, and school reform. *Teachers College Record*, 6, 1047–1085.
- Eacott, S. (2015). *Educational leadership relationally: A theory and methodology for educational leadership, management and administration*. Sense.
- Owens, R. G., & Valesky, T. C. (2022). *Organizational behavior in education: Leadership and school reform* (12th Ed.). Pearson.
- Riveros, A., & Nyereyemhuka, N. (2020). Conceptualizing space in educational administration and leadership research: Towards a spatial justice perspective. *International Journal of Leadership in Education*, 1-14. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13603124.2020.1842509>