

I concede that a strength of the PAT is that the program strives to help many students succeed, despite their unique needs. Testing as an evaluation strategy has been proven to be an effective method for finding whether students understand what they have been taught, but many students struggle with testing due to their individual learning needs, such as difficulties with reading (Beauchamp, McConaghy, et al., 2000; Beauchamp & Parsons, 2000; University of Calgary, 2006). Thus, tests must be individualized to meet the needs of the students who write them so they can perform to the best of their ability. For example, a teacher may have a procedure that allows poor-performing students to retake a test to enable them to succeed and be encouraged to continue participating in the classroom (Gish, 1994; Beauchamp & Parsons, 2000). In the PAT parent guide, the Alberta Government (2013) makes note of several test accommodations for students who have special needs, which “include Braille or large-print formats, sign language, use of a reader or scribe, additional writing time, CD format, and taped responses.” (p. 3). These modifications to the traditional test structure are useful for helping students that may have otherwise been limited by their reading and writing aptitude to respond to the same questions as their peers. Likewise, the PAT leads a diverse variety of students to success by allowing multiple spellings of French words. Since 2008, Alberta’s French education documents have been updated with new spelling rules; considering that some students may be more familiar with the traditional spellings, “no student who uses either spelling convention . . . is to be penalized,” on the PAT (Alberta Government, 2013, p. 18). Flexibility with how students spell various compound words and ones with accent changes will allow those taught past spelling rules to succeed despite their changes (Alberta Government, 2013). Therefore, the PAT’s

commitment to accommodate many students' learning needs and experiences leads to greater equity in assessments.

Second, the Alberta Government's (2013) parent guide effectively informs parents about what content the PAT assesses and how it is marked. How students are evaluated, and their achievement level should be reported to parents (Beauchamp, McConaghy, et al., 2000; Beauchamp & Parsons, 2000). Parents know their children and their needs better than teachers do; therefore, by giving them information about their children's education, parents can help their children with schoolwork or advocate for their individual learning needs (Huscroft-D'Angelo, J., 2022). Regarding the parent's guide, it shares information about each of the PAT assessments, including the question types used, and the time and resources that are allotted. For example, regarding Mathematics, the Alberta Government (2013), states that "The Grade 6 Mathematics Achievement Test consists of 40 multiple-choice questions and 10 numerical-response questions. . . . [and] is developed to be completed in 75 minutes," (p. 11). This transparency allows parents to let their children know what they can expect on the PAT to help reduce their anxiety, which is important for achieving success on any test (Beauchamp, McConaghy, et al., 2000). Moreover, the guide details how PAT scores are calculated. As shown in Figure 1, the parent guide shows a set range of scores deemed to meet the provincial standards for each subject. By sharing these scores, "parents . . . can look at . . . results in relation to past results . . . to [determine whether they are providing] . . . the best possible learning opportunities for their [children]." (Alberta Government, 2013, p. 4). The information that the Alberta Government (2013) provides regarding the PAT is thus a benefit, as it allows parents to help their children perform accurately on the achievement tests.

The PAT cannot “how well students are learning,” either, because it only tests a limited range of content and marks students unfairly (Alberta Government, 2013, p. 2). If a test claims to reflect the standards of education, then it should comprehensively test all content as outlined within the curriculum. However, the parent’s guide states that it cannot test all outcomes (Alberta Government, 2013). Moreover, by comparing the test descriptions provided in the document to Alberta’s grade six curriculum, there are notable content omissions from the PAT, including French auditory testing and English source referencing (Alberta Education, 1996; Alberta Education, 1998; Alberta Education, 2000; Alberta Education, 2005; Alberta Education, 2007; Alberta Government, 2013). This evidence suggests that the PAT is ineffective at assessing students’ understanding of the grade six curriculum, as it does not test many of its outlined expectations. The PAT also does not acknowledge that cultural barriers cause some students to perform poorly on tests, despite understanding their content (Noble et al., 2012). In other words, the diction used for test questions leads students who come from low-income families, or who speak English as a second language, to misinterpret what is being asked of them (Noble et al., 2012). This is especially problematic considering that teachers, who could mitigate this inequity, are not permitted to assist students during the testing period (Alberta Government, 2017). Otherwise, a study conducted by Noble et al. (2012) shows that multiple-choice questions enable native English-speaking students who have not met learning goals to succeed, as they are more likely to choose correct answers through guessing. Given that the PAT consists mostly of multiple-choice questions, the format’s outcome discrepancies prove that the test cannot be trusted as a true assessment of achievement (Alberta Government 2013; Kohn, 2000). Therefore, the PAT does not evaluate learning, as its content coverage is limited, and its results do not reflect the understanding of students.

Finally, the PAT results are used to draw comparisons, which hurts the reputation of quality schools. Comparisons between schools based on PAT results are problematic, as they make judgements regarding how well schools teach, without factoring other potential impacts to scores, such as parents' education status (Black & Wiliam, 2010). To illustrate, if a school population comes from highly educated families, parents would be able to afford extracurricular materials to improve students' learning. Thus, "in evaluating a school, people should consider a variety of factors that are relevant to that school," rather than PAT scores alone, which discourages teachers and potentially results in less funding for a given school (Alberta Government, 2013, p. 4; Klinger & Rogers, 2011). However, despite any intentions by the Alberta Government to avoid test result comparisons, PAT scores are given to third parties such as the Fraser Institute and the C. D. Howe Institute which then use them to rank schools (Klinger & Rogers, 2011). Among these, even rankings that claim to be more objective by including socioeconomic factors omit all other influences that may affect test results (Johnson, 2010).

I maintain that the PAT program is not an effective method for assessing and improving student learning. It is true that the Alberta Government aids students to write the tests despite their special education needs; moreover, the PAT guide equips parents with tools to further prepare their children, thereby helping to make the tests equitable. However, equitability does not make a test or its application valid. The PAT does not enhance learning, as the feedback that is returned is not shaped by student-created criteria, is tardy, and is too unspecific for students to apply it to their work. Moreover, while the Alberta Government claims that the PAT is used to assess how well students have learned the Alberta curriculum, it does not test several important

skills outlined in the curriculum documents. It should also be noted that though the achievement tests may help special education students, the structure of the test content nonetheless prevents many other students from being correctly assessed. Further, the results are not only insufficient but actively contribute to unfair comparisons between schools that discredit quality education because of external factors to the test. As someone pursuing a career as a teacher who will be asked to give achievement tests to my future students, I am concerned that the PAT will negatively affect their learning. Based on the information provided by the Alberta Government, I appeal that the PAT program be reviewed to address its flaws. In particular, the Alberta Government should work to make the test unbiased toward students who speak English as a second language, and those who come from poor families. While I support testing as an assessment method, Alberta's provincial achievement testing as it is today does not benefit students' education and is an inaccurate evaluation of student learning.

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