Notice of the Final Oral Examination
for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy
of

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“Effects on Teachers of the Elimination of Grade 12 Provincial Exams in Chemistry, Biology, and Physics in a British Columbia School District”

Department of Curriculum and Instruction

Tuesday, June 23, 2015
1:00PM
MacLaurin Building
Room A341

Supervisory Committee:
Dr. David Blades, Department of Curriculum and Instruction, University of Victoria (Supervisor)
Dr. Helen Raptis, Department of Curriculum and Instruction, UVic (Member)
Dr. Christopher Lalonde, Department of Psychology, UVic (Outside Member)

External Examiner:
Dr. Samson Nashon, Department of Curriculum and Pedagogy, University of British Columbia

Chair of Oral Examination:
Dr. Richard Keeler, Department of Physics and Astronomy, UVic

Dr. David Capson, Dean, Faculty of Graduate Studies
From 1983 until 2011 Grade 12 students in the province of British Columbia (Canada) were required to write course-ending provincial exams in a wide variety of academic subjects, including Biology 12, Chemistry 12, and Physics 12. These exams may be considered “high stakes” in that they counted for 40% of a student’s mark, were used in part determine post-secondary admissions and scholarships, and publicly-available exam results were used in highly publicized school “ranking” systems. A large volume of research literature suggests high stakes exams of this nature dictate the manner in which courses are delivered as teachers feel obliged to “teach to the test” in order to maximize the grades students receive on these exams.

A major gap in the literature appears to be an examination of the effects on teacher behaviors and practices when a long-standing high-stakes testing program is eliminated. The decision made by the British Columbia Ministry of Education to remove provincial exams at the Grade 12 level in August of 2011 created a unique and original opportunity to examine teacher pedagogical practices following the removal of subject-specific exams. Specifically, the question considered in this investigation centered upon the effect(s) the elimination of provincial exams in Biology 12, Chemistry 12, and Physics 12 had on the pedagogy and work environment of teachers in one British Columbia school district.

This investigation followed case study methodology. The primary source of data was interviews with teachers who had experience teaching the three aforementioned courses in both the time of mandatory exams and following exam elimination. Interviews were semi-structured and focussed on the effects of the removal of Grade 12 exams on teacher pedagogy and general practices, classroom resource and time allocation, relations with colleagues, perceived student responses to courses, and exam data usage.

The findings suggest that, contrary to popular discourse, exam-generated data is not a valuable pedagogical resource for teachers and a high-stakes exam is not required to ensure full curricular coverage by teachers. In fact, the results suggest curricular coverage is enhanced in the absence of a high-stakes exam. Further, not having to spend classroom and external time preparing students for exams has allowed teachers to implement and explore a greater diversity of pedagogical avenues not seen in the time of exams. Teachers also spoke of reduced pressures in the absence of an exam. Finally, findings of this investigation suggest the presence of an exam greatly affected the way teachers both assessed and motivated students, effects that continue to have repercussions following elimination of provincial exams.