

The other side of GPAC²



When organizing or participating in a dual career PhD programme, we all meet in Maastricht, having research in mind. Currently, I am fully absorbed by organizing the workshop weeks, inviting reviewers and planning the activities for the upcoming workshops in June. One of the highlights of the days here, when we all informally meet, is lunch. That is when we get to know the fellows and their work and life outside of Maastricht. I keep being positively surprised by the variety of activities our fellows do, the importance of the jobs and also the amazing skills the fellows have to balance their life, work and PhD. One of the great examples is Derek Copp. He started his PhD only 3 years ago in March, and he will defend his final research to the committee this June. With the final central exam period of the secondary schools taking place right now, we can certainly learn from his study, as he covers the topic of the use of testing in schools. This is hot topic in The Netherlands, it is relevant in Canada and surely in many other places as well. As GPAC2 director however, I am maybe even more interested in his ability to finish his PhD in 3 years, a period in which he and his wife saw their family grow from a 1 kid home to a household with 3 young kids. Surely we can benefit from his tips and tricks. Enjoy the reading,

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The Other Side of GPAC2
May 2015: Derek Copp

1. Next June you will defend your PhD on teacher responses to test scores. The aim is to review to what extent test scores, for instance PISA tests, or in the Netherlands CITO tests, are useful to improve the quality of classroom teaching. What made you decide to raise this question?

I am a teacher myself, and I have administered provincial tests and also overseen PISA tests in my school. So I am aware of both the expense of these assessments and the instructional time that is lost. I wanted to see if these costs are warranted by teachers getting useful information they could use to improve their teaching. This is a program evaluation question, to see if the provincial ministries in Canada were living up to their own goals.

Yet it should be said that international tests like PISA do not have the same effects at the teacher level, and for good reasons. PISA tests are done using a sample style so most teachers and most students will never write them and so never pay close attention to the results. They also only occur every 3 years, so it is an intermittent assessment. The last factor that makes PISA tests less conducive to classroom-level improvements is the fact that there is no easy way to prepare your class for this kind of assessment. It covers three

instructional domains and the test itself is a closely guarded secret. There is no way a teacher could 'teach to the test' in these circumstances. To be fair PISA tests are geared toward policy makers and not teachers.

Provincial tests in Canada are very different, and as a result, teachers do react to them in significant ways: they are annual in several grades and subjects; the content covered (in some cases) is quite similar from year to year; every student in a tested grade and subject writes the assessment; and the results produced give data from the provincial level, right down to schools and teachers. This makes provincial tests a better target for instructional strategies aimed at improving these scores. The distinction I wanted to make was I wanted to know if they actually improved instruction, not simply test scores.

2. Today, in the Netherlands the kids from group 8 (11-12 year old kids) write their final CITO. Yet, a policy change has been implemented, which makes the tests redundant. Teachers are supposed to give school advice (on secondary educational track to follow) now based on their assessment of the child, before this final CITO test is written. What do you think of this change, and do you believe there is a value in testing your children?

This is not a unique situation. There are several jurisdictions that have, through shifting policy, put large-scale tests on shakier ground. For example here in the province of Manitoba they have begun using an outcome-based report card across the province that covers much of the same material that had been a part of the reporting from their provincial assessments. Teachers now are wondering why they are still doing the assessments. In the situation you speak about, it sounds like the policy shift has been made to a similar result: that teachers' classroom assessments can serve to inform parents and students about their academic standing just as well, or perhaps even better, than a large-scale test which has a lot of pressure attached to it. Good teachers using multiple methods of assessment and are able to reduce the potential stress of testing and reporting. Large-scale tests, by their very nature, increase pressure on students and teachers, and are 'snapshot' measurements. Both multiple measures and long term evaluations are more accurate in the eyes of many researchers, and most teachers.

That said, I have never thought that large-scale tests have no value, it is simply that they as they are currently design, the assessments are expected to do too many things for any single instrument to effectively accomplish. PISA is an effective measurement for international comparison purposes, but it is intermittent and a sample style test, which makes it much less onerous to administer, and it may have little useful data for the classroom teacher. If you want an accurate reflection of an individual student's growth, you would need a census style test, but perhaps one that isn't administered all at once under a veil of secrecy and with stakes attached for either students or teachers.

3. You were top performer in the GPAC2 programme. You started your PhD programme in 2012, and designed you research in year one, collected your own data in the second year, and completed and submitted the final manuscript after 3 years. Combining this all with a full time job, as well as caring for your family and raising 3 children. We all would love to know what the golden rule is to make this work, can you shed some light on the success and failure choices you made?

Completing this was a major undertaking, and I have no golden rule to make it easier. I have relied on support from my family (especially) and my colleagues at work. Without this, I would not be done in this relatively short time.

A second factor is having a supervision team that pushes you to reach high standards, but has a grasp of what you are trying to achieve, and thus they know when you have reached the destination. My team (Professor Jo Ritzen, Professor Jan van den Brakel, and Professor Louis Volante) have provided advice, support, suggestions and encouragement. This has made completion in 3 years possible.

Finally, and since I am not one to toot my own horn, this comes last, the work. Be focused (any deviations are costly), take advantage of the time you do have (make the most of late nights, weekends, holidays), and try to clarify in your own mind how you envision the project happening, step by step. The journey will deviate from your charted course in serious ways, but you can always adjust your expectations to suit your reality.

I am convinced that no one knows how hard a PhD is or fully understands what is involved before they begin, so all of us in the middle of it can feel overwhelmed at times. My rules of thumb were: 1. Focus; 2. Use your time wisely; and 3. Be clear what you want to be presenting in Maastricht in 6 months time, and do your best to get there.