**Project-Based Learning is the Future of Summative Assessments in New York State**

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**Abstract**

New York State has been administering regents’ exams as graduation requirements since 1878 and they still continue to flood districts in June to this day. Students have a series of regent’s summative assessments that they need to pass in order to graduate while also passing the course with an average of 65. There are many disadvantages to this, but to keep it simple, this paper is attempting to prove through multiple ways and means of research and studies that the old pen and paper summative exams are not the future of New York State graduation requirements. Soon, educators will use a series of formative assessments using inquiry-based learning that highlights student-oriented learning and discussion that prepares students for project-based learning which is the new summative assessment. Soon, students will begin completing different projects, especially in the field of social studies that will be placed into a portfolio and will be able to be showcased when the student is attempting to apply for colleges/universities or join the workforce. These results will not only help with graduation rates, but will also set up students for success after graduation.

**Introduction**

Since the nineteenth century, New York State has been administering exit exams for high school graduates to pass called regents exams. From there, certain subjects/disciplines have been added or taken away depending on what political party controlled the means and ways of the Department of Education here in the state. Many of these exams that have stuck around have been altered and changed in multiple ways and the Social Studies regents’ are no exception. Since the turn of the millennial, these exams have been changed twice with both the Global and U.S. History assessments altering most recently in 2019. The main cause for action for these exams is the simple fact that students are either not performing well, or these ends of the year assessments are not preparing the students graduating from these districts for the real world. Educators are more the less, teaching to the test which has been a phenomenon ever since summative assessments reached public education. Candidates must receive a 65% or higher pending accommodations in order to pass and there are a few regents’ that are needed in order to receive a New York State regents diploma following graduation. These are Biology, Algebra I, Global 10, U.S. History, English 11, and a language other than English (“History of New York State Assessments,” 2023). The basis of this paper is to exemplify that summative regents’ exams are too out of date and there are much better tools to use in order to asses the students that are graduating from New York State districts all across the province. This paper will attempt to achieve the goal of presenting valid and reliable alternatives to these exams that are not preparing our youth for their futures.

**Defining Formative & Summative Assessments**

The first goal would be to define what formative and summative assessments are. “Formative assessments as those intended to enrich the learning process by providing nonjudgmental feedback; they are assessments for learning than assessments of learning,” (Kibble 2017). “Summative assessments are usually applied at the end of a period of instruction to measure the outcome of student learning. They are high stakes for all concerned, most obviously for the learners who are being judged but also in a sense that the data may be used to drive course improvement,” (Kibble 2017). Essentially, formative is a low stakes assessment while summative is a high stakes assessment. The New York State regents’ exams are obviously summative assessments with them being administered at the conclusion of a course, but it is expected that educators provide their students both formative and summative assessments throughout the school year. In his article, Kibble describes the process of learning begins with formative assessments. These are part of the learning process and to achieve the goal of passing summative exams, one must have practice that is low stakes with nonjudgmental feedback (2017). The key here is to administer an assessment that is not so memory based, and is actually application because as mentioned earlier, now more than ever, teachers are teaching to the test. Studies show that “teachers working in states that mandate social studies tests spend significantly more time teaching social studies than teachers who work in non-tested states,” (Fitchett & Meuwissen 2018). Specifically, Social Studies can be altered to an application summative assessment rather than a memory-based exam because the current Global and U.S. exams are forcing teachers to teach to the test. We can not blame them either because schools rely heavily on the funding that comes from students passing these regents exams. Especially the ones that are required the graduate high school. Schools are in jeopardy of being shut down if scores do not reach certain heights because of how public funding is set up (Fitchett & Meuwissen 2018).

**Memorizing Multiple Choice Questions is not Culturally Responsive**

Besides teaching to the test, we should be asking the continuous question of what is wrong with the Global 10 and U.S. regents’ exams before we analyze a way to fix them. Getting an “A” on an exam simply is not good enough. New standards and tests are always put out to bring substantial change to the Social Studies world put every time it seems to fall short (Grant 2001). The job of our content area in Social Studies is to bring substantial change to our society and bring out better citizenry for our students graduating with diplomas (Fitchett & Meuwissen 2018). Instead of application, these summative regents’ exams, especially in social studies are geared towards lower level thinking with nearly no connections made across the board (Grant 2001). What is the more influential option on our youth, memorizing the World Wars occurred in the twentieth century, or an application assessment that forces students to implement what they know and learned to create something? Data from the National Educational Longitudinal Survey (NELS), analyzes the impact of high school graduation exams on student achievement and dropout rates. Graduation tests have been around for more than a century now in various states and through surveys conducted to students and educators, landmark research was discovered. It was achieved in this study that graduation tests have no significant impact on 12th grade math or reading achievement. Although these graduation summative assessments do not have a major impact on the average student dropping out of high school, it does however have an extreme impact on struggling students as well as students who have a lower socio-economic status (Jacob 2001). To go along with the study from the NELS, history and government regents’ exams have been studied utilizing interpretive and quasi-statistical methods to determine if there is in fact an absence in cultural-responsive teaching/assessing in these exams. For the most part, after data was collected, the majority of the exams were not culturally responsive and thus not reaching all students. These exams, as the study shows, often masked marginalized cultures and groups across many years, doing no one justice. Although the use of diverse ideas, critical thinking and problem solving was present in these exams, it was difficult to see many if any documents were of culturally responsive approval (Swartz 2012). Teachers teaching to the test, followed by simply low-level thinking memorization tests, with these exams having no true impact on increasing graduation rates, and finalizing with assessments that are not culturally responsive that take a toll on students of low socio-economic status. All of these issues lead to one solution: CHANGE!

**Using Primary Sources in the Formative Assessment Journey**

There are many ways in which New York State can go about changing or altering their summative assessment and the question of should there be more or less teacher autonomy is really up for discussion. Standards and required summative assessments truly shy teachers from having much of any autonomy That is why these standards/objectives should be suggested which they are under the C3 framework that is being used across the country currently. First, educators should take a look at the formative assessment journey which uses low-stakes practice assessments during each and every class in order to build up knowledge of content area. These can look like quizzes, source analysis’, little projects, games etc. The authors of the formative assessment journey being offered to educators focus on a formative assessment journey in their research discussing the idea that these low stakes assignments should all be attached and linked in some way which will lead to students being more successful and growing in their learning process. A total of nine formative assessments were designed and introduced to a set of modules. These assessments given in the research are extremely diverse being word searches, little quizzes, hands on activities and even some self-assessment. Students were monitored with how they felt about the formative assessment journey being administered from module to module. A total of 144 students in the first year and 127 second year students responded to the questionnaire about how they felt about the journey they took each module throughout their respected year. The results discovered that a big majority of students both years discussed the ideas of formative assessments and how they helped as well as the teaching tools used throughout the semesters (Evans et al., 2013). Educators in the content area of social studies can utilize the formative assessment journey while using what they have since the dawn of the subject area; primary and secondary sources. Assessment scores increase immensely when teachers have students practice with documents, pictures, graphs, political cartoons etc. (Cowgill 2015). These are the same sources that students would see on the regents’ exams whether it be Global or U.S. History. Teachers can take the research found in the formative assessment journey and still use current teaching techniques with primary and secondary sources to achieve success in the social studies environment. The next issue of this paper will aim to explain ideas which can be used to replace the regents’ exams in Social Studies. The formative assessment journey and use of sources will help us recognize how these ideas can make an impact on the future of assessment in our field.

**Inquiry-Based Learning**

The future of public education, especially summative assessments in the social studies is inquiry-based learning (IBL) aligned with project-based assessments (PBA). IBL is asking a series of essential or compelling questions to students and having them research these and create conclusions based on their research using evidence. In a series of studies, three authors examine the impact on inquiry-based learning in the classroom where students are continuously struggling to be engaged with the tradition form of teaching. The research question being addressed was “What are the perceived influences of the inquiry-based learning professional learning program on student engagement?” Interviews were conducted with both primary and secondary teachers who had previously participated in professional development on inquiry-based pedagogies as well as their students who undertook inquiry-based projects on infrastructure programs in their local communities. These interviews (around 30-minutes in duration) were asked the essential question above, but were also asked in-depth inquiries pertaining to their experiences with inquiry-based learning in terms of professional development and the negative/positive impacts of the pedagogical use. It was discovered that although this study primarily focused on STEM-based learning, while answering the question above, educators and their students saw a major positive impact in using inquiry-based learning in the classroom. This was especially true when implementing the pedagogy to a hands-on activity as the one used in this research. Thus, combining inquiry-based learning with project-based learning was a success for increasing student outcomes. The future of our field is using IBL in order to achieve student success. Educators can utilize the formative journey plan as well as utilize primary and secondary sources that are not going away when it comes to our discipline and answer questions using research, (Attard & Berger 2021). The easiest way to describe a classroom with IBL is one that is student-oriented and focuses on students inquiring about essential questions on certain topics for different units. Students can work together, but in this type of classroom, the educator in the room is the facilitator of knowledge as opposed to the holder of knowledge which we as teachers have been since the dawn of education. There should be a clear connection between IBL in the classroom and PBL as the summative assessment that is being given.

**Project-Based Learning**

Essentially, regents’ exams in the state of New York should be changed to project-based. This will allow students to showcase their skills with something productive as opposed to just passing a pen and paper test. The best analogy that can be made here is when I go to a mechanic, I’d like the person that knows how to fix a vehicle, not someone who just knows how to pass a test. The “PBL” for being a mechanic is can you figure out what is wrong with the car, and can you fix it? If the answer is yes to both of these, then we can move forward and there is no paper and pen test needed. Studies reaffirm the methodology that educators in preschool, elementary and secondary schools can use project-based assessment as a way to review learning outcomes for students. It’s noted that Holm reaches to research where this phenomenon has already been researched and has led to ideas like project-based assessment needing those driving essential questions where students identify worldly issues, and are student centered. The study took many different publications of peer reviewed articles that had overviewed project-based learning and the traditional lecture-based learning style and compared them. It is a myth that only lectures and direct instruction can open the door for students to gain mastery on content area because as the study shows, project-based learning/assessments that have those driving questions, and are mostly student oriented where they can research worldly issues are more effective with student outcomes than the traditional style of teaching (Holm 2011). This is especially true for those courses/disciplines that have standardized exams where it is only thought that direct instruction can be used to achieve content mastery. It is concluded at the ending of the study that project-based instruction/assessments while used in pre-kindergarten to 12th grade yields improvement in content learning, higher levels of engagement and a more positive outlook to disciplines within the subject. The future of our field is projects and showcasing what students can do with using inquiry-based learning and project-based learning. Now exam scores do sometimes show that we are preparing students for the next level as it is seen that New York State with regents scores are on average bringing students to higher grade level scores than other states in the region (Bishop et al., 2000). This study does outline how regents’ exams are preparing students for the next level more than other states in the region are. That said, students being able to showcase their skills with portfolio’s/different projects will show that students are ready for next level education/work. This will pull New York State even farther in their lead in terms of public education. Projects will also pull the gap closer with students of low socio-economic status. They’re able to showcase their skills as opposed to having to take a pen and paper test that relies on their schools funding. This is obviously extremely inappropriate for public education and it should be tolerated no further!

**Conclusion**

The claims and research shown in this paper will not be enough to pull New York State to cutting regents exams and focusing on inquiry-based learning and project-based assessments. New York State makes too much money on these summative assessments, especially with review books, publishers and what not. The conversation is rolling though that there should be an alternative that will help students achieve a higher success rate and be prepared for the next level because the multiple forms of research and studies presented here exemplify it. New York State should listen to the majority of the opinion and make a transition period where students graduating high school will have to perform a series of projects approved by curriculum directors/district personal for different courses. These students can then keep their “portfolios” of projects in which they have completed and excelled on and showcase that at the next level because let’s face it. When it comes to getting into a college or getting a job, they truly just look to see if you passed something, not the actual score you got. Due to that, giving employers or universities something to judge you on based on your work ethic and how much you know about something is much more important. That is why this paper is presenting that New York State do away with regents’ exams and move closer to inquiry-based learning that will reinforce student engagement in and outside of the classroom and for summative assessments, use project-based learning in order to achieve success. This will be a step in the right direction for public schools in all fields, including the discipline of social studies.

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