

## Refugee children left behind as eagle lands on the moon



Yesterday, [the New York Times carried a heart-breaking story about an exceptional school principal forced from her position under \*No-Child-Left-Behind\* legislation in order for the school district to obtain federal funding.](#) It's an instructive tale about the standardized-assessment tail wagging the educational dog in the name of so-called quality assurance. I won't repeat the story here other than to say it's an article well-worth reading, and I hope it makes a dent in the ascendancy of the standardized assessment cult.

[In the article](#), the principal shares a sad story about the cultural bias of the 5<sup>th</sup>-grade reading test, which will from now on become a stock of my intercultural communication teaching. Oscar, a recent arrival to the Vermont school from a refugee camp in Africa, took the same test as all the other kids around the country who have grown up in the USA and spoken English all their lives:

Oscar needed 20 minutes to read a passage on Neil Armstrong landing his Eagle spacecraft on the moon; it should have taken 5 minutes [...] but Oscar was determined, reading out loud to himself.

The first question asked whether the passage was fact or fiction. "He said, 'Oh, Mrs. Irvine, man don't go on the moon, man don't go on the back of eagles, this is not true.'"

Oscar had understood the text and he understood the difference between factual and fictional writing. However, his lack of exposure to (American) media, meant he got the first question and, subsequently, all the other five questions, which were based on the first one, wrong.

Oscar got penalized for the fact that his knowledge of the world was quite different from that of the middle-class native-born "standard" (?) child the test designers had in mind. In the policy context of *No Child Left Behind* the school and the principal were penalized, too.

Cultural bias has been a concern for assessment researchers and practitioners since the emergence of IQ tests in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The evidence is there that standardized assessment disadvantages even

among native-born students those from non-middle class backgrounds (Mac Ruairc, 2009, is a recent study in the Irish context well-worth reading). Students from migrant backgrounds and from linguistically and culturally diverse backgrounds are further disadvantaged. Despite all the evidence and all the research, standardized assessment and the idea that it means quality spreads like a cancer from one educational system to the next.

Dear readers, share Oscar's story widely! [Many adults in the developed world believe the moon-landing is not fact but fiction](#), and it's plain to see that the fact that Oscar thought it was a story tells us nothing about his reading ability nor about the quality of the instruction he received in his school. There are thousands of such testing stories out there. How can so many wrongs add up to a right – the imagined standardized high-quality education system?



Ruairc, G. (2009). 'Dip, dip, sky blue, who's it? NOT YOU': children's experiences of standardised testing: a socio-cultural analysis *Irish Educational Studies*, 28 (1), 47-66 DOI: [10.1080/03323310802597325](https://doi.org/10.1080/03323310802597325)