Examining Teachers’ Practices with ELLs:

Equity in Assessment Through Socially and Culturally Informed Practices

By

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Abstract

This project investigates how three teachers implement socially and culturally informed assessment practices for supporting their English language learners (ELLs). Through in-depth interviews with these teachers, this qualitative research study uses the framework of culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP) to explore their everyday assessment practices. The findings are presented as three case studies. A cross-case analysis where the findings are situated within the literature is also presented. The case studies examine teachers’ assessment practices and challenges; the role of identity in assessment; their engagements and challenges with culturally relevant content; and the impact of community on assessment. These teachers provide valuable insights into what culturally relevant assessment can look like in practice; for example, connecting content to students’ cultural and linguistic identities and engaging in discussions of social justice. There must be greater dialogue about the diverse cultural and linguistic encounters shaping Toronto’s classrooms. By bringing questions of culture into discussions of assessment, this research calls for greater attention to the cultural shifts that are rapidly changing the make-up of Toronto’s schools.

Keywords: culturally relevant pedagogy; English language learners; assessment and evaluation; equity; differentiated instruction; assessment challenges; standardized assessment
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Chapter 1: INTRODUCTION

Introduction to the Research Study

“Not everything that can be counted counts and not everything that counts can be counted.”

–Albert Einstein

“There is more to a person’s life than can fit on paper.”

–Fifth-Grade Student

The second quotation above comes from Gerald Campano’s (2007) text Immigrant Students and Literacy: Reading, Writing, and Remembering. One of his fifth-grade students wrote these words in an autobiographical account of her family’s migration from Thailand to the United States (p. 71). Her observation powerfully illustrates the depth and complexity of students’ life experiences and the limitations of educational practices to consider these experiences. Campano (2007) writes about the “alienating” (p. 103) assessment practices that are often imposed on students in impersonal and supposedly neutral – but actually harmful – ways. Instead, he advocates for assessment practices that respond to student work in ways that recognize their diverse racial, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds. As Campano (2007) states, “how we respond to diversity is both informed by and informs what we value as knowledge in the classroom” (p. 9). More than just a rubric or final grade, assessment is an inherent part of classroom practice and is complexly tied to issues of power and knowledge.

Across the Toronto District School Board, students speak at least 80 different languages (TDSB, 2012). As classrooms in Toronto become more culturally and linguistically diverse, teachers must be able to respond to issues of difference in their

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everyday assessment practices. *Growing Success: Assessment, Evaluation, and Reporting in Ontario*, the Ministry of Education’s (2010) official policy document on assessment, emphasizes the need to put issues of equity and social justice at the centre of assessment. *Growing Success*’ model of assessment of, for, and as learning stresses how formative practices, such as ongoing feedback, are integral to equitable assessment (MOE, 2010). However, the question lies in *how* teachers can engage in culturally informed assessment practices that support the varying experiences and needs of a growing group of English language learners (ELLs).

**Purpose of the Study**

According to a statistic reported by the Toronto District School Board in 2013, “53% of TDSB students have a language other than English as their mother tongue or as the primary language spoken at home” (TDSB, n.d.). The purpose of this study is to examine how three teachers in the Toronto area support the diverse needs of their English language learners through culturally relevant assessment practices. Culturally relevant pedagogy is rooted in the belief that students are carriers of social and cultural knowledge (Ladson-Billings, 2009). Thus, teachers have a responsibility to be aware of the various social and cultural positions from which their students learn.

A study by Milnes and Cheng (2008) reveals the challenges teachers face in evaluating the written work of English language learners. The Ontario teachers who were interviewed admitted to raising grades based on factors such as effort in order to accommodate students who were struggling with English (Milnes & Cheng, 2008). However, teachers had different definitions for effort such as tiredness, using a thesaurus, and seeking support from private tutors (Milnes & Cheng, 2008). The teachers did not
consider how their approaches put some English language learners at a continued
disadvantage; for instance, those students whose families cannot afford private tutoring
are disadvantaged for economic reasons, rather than a question of “effort.” Many of the
teachers made homogenizing assumptions about their students and described them as
hardworking, shy, and lacking self-confidence compared to their native-English speaking
peers (Milnes & Cheng, 2008). However, Milnes and Cheng (2008) do not address how
the economic and cultural assumptions made by these teachers risk ignoring the
individual needs of a diverse population of English language learners. In light of the
absences in this earlier study, my research project examines the cultural and social
dimensions of assessment within a framework of culturally relevant pedagogy.

The Milnes and Cheng (2008) study focuses on the formal evaluation of ELLs
and does not examine teachers’ formative assessment practices. Growing Success
promotes multifaceted assessment strategies for supporting student learning through its
assessment for, as, and of learning model (MOE, 2010). Thus, this project will examine
teachers’ assessment strategies for ELLs using the Growing Success model with a focus
on formative practices (MOE, 2010). The complex social and cultural factors of everyday
assessment are largely absent from academic and professional discussions. Yet, the
changing demographics of Toronto’s classrooms make it an important site from which to
explore the relationship between culture and assessment. By bringing questions of culture
into discussions of assessment, my research hopes to articulate more equitable and

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2 “Assessment for learning” consists of giving ongoing descriptive feedback, such as
teacher-student conferences or group discussions. “Assessment as learning” involves
helping students to develop independence and self-reflection through peer and self-
assessment. “Assessment of learning” occurs when students are evaluated on their
achievement of curriculum expectations (MOE, 2010).
culturally relevant teaching strategies that are necessary to the field of education and pertinent to the work of practicing teachers.

**Research Questions**

This project answers the following questions: a) In what ways are junior/intermediate teachers (grades 4 to 10) engaging with culturally relevant assessment practices for English language learners? b) What do these practices look like? c) What challenges do teachers currently face in assessing their ELL students? This project is interested in the everyday assessment practices in which teachers and students engage and is not solely focused on the assigning of grades through methods of evaluation.

**Background of the Researcher**

My experiences as a student in Canada and a high school ESL teacher in China have inspired me to pursue this research project. These experiences have been mediated by my own positions as a Chinese Canadian, heterosexual, middle-class, able-bodied, native-English speaking, educated woman. An early incident in my education, as a grade five student, involved a teacher who made the assumption based on my race that my English language abilities could not match that of a (presumably white) native-English speaker. She suggested to my parents that I be moved to an ESL class. While I was too young to understand the racist implications of this teacher’s assessment at the time, it still conjured insecurity about my English abilities for many years. Eventually, with the encouragement of many teachers, I regained a passion for reading and writing that led me to pursue an undergraduate degree in English. Nevertheless, this experience taught me about how teachers’ uncritical assumptions can have dangerous repercussions for their students.
During my undergraduate studies, I learned that there are many systemic and ideological forms of oppression that pervade our society, some of which operate more subtly than others. I was challenged to consider my own subject positions and privileges as a woman of colour who was born and raised in the ‘developed’ West. These were admittedly very difficult conversations. In *Teaching to Transgress*, bell hooks (1994) states, “there can be, and usually is, some degree of pain involved in giving up old ways of thinking and knowing and learning new approaches” (p. 43). Yet, the feelings of pain, discomfort, shame, fear, and anger that I have experienced (and continue to experience) have made me more confident in the need to make issues of equity central to all dimensions of educational praxis, including assessment and evaluation.

In my two years as an ESL teacher in China I encountered many instances where I needed to situate myself in relation to my students. Conversations with local teachers helped me to understand that I had a responsibility to be aware of the social, political, cultural, and linguistic forces that shaped my students’ understanding of the world. As I began to learn about the diverse positions, perspectives, and needs of my students, we were able to build a more trusting and compassionate community. As a teacher-candidate and researcher working in Canada, I must now adapt to student demographics that are vastly different from my classrooms in China. But my encounters abroad helped me to realize that I have an obligation to, as Campano (2007) writes, “create a classroom community that [encourages students] to recognize the value of their own experiences” (p. 70). Thus, I arrive at this project with a sense of urgency in seeking out ethical and equitable methods for supporting Toronto’s growing population of English language learners.
Overview

Chapter 1 includes an introduction to the study. Here, I provide an explanation of the main research questions as well as the central aims of the investigation. In this chapter, I also discuss my own personal motivations for pursuing this project. Chapter 2 contains a review of literature, which defines important concepts and theories as well as discusses central issues in ELL assessment. Chapter 3 discusses the method and procedures that I have used in this study. It includes information about my criteria for participant recruitment and methods of data collection. Chapter 4 consists of my research findings, which are presented as three case studies and a cross-case analysis. Chapter 5 is composed of a discussion of my findings, implications for myself as a researcher, recommendations for the broader educational community, and suggestions for further study. Finally, all references and a list of appendices can be found at the end of this document.
Chapter 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Culturally Relevant Pedagogy

Culturally relevant pedagogy serves as the central theoretical framework for my investigation. Gloria Ladson-Billings (1994) conceptualized the term culturally relevant teaching (CRT) in her foundational text, *The Dreamkeepers: Successful Teachers of African American Children*. In this ethnographic study, Ladson-Billings describes the teaching practices and philosophies of eight exceptional teachers who work with African American students. The term culturally relevant teaching has been used interchangeably over the years with terms such as *culturally responsive teaching* (Gay, 2010; Villegas & Lucas, 2002) as well as *culturally sensitive, appropriate, and reflective* teaching. While I recognize that there are many nuances between the works of different CRT theorists, I have chosen to focus on the work of Gloria Ladson-Billings (1994; 1995; 2009) and Geneva Gay (2010) to illustrate the relevance of this theoretical paradigm for my investigation.

Ladson-Billings (2009) defines culturally relevant teaching as “a pedagogy that empowers students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically by using cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills, and attitudes” (p. 20). Within this framework, teaching is viewed as a multidimensional project that is committed to engaging with the various ways of knowing that students bring into the classroom. Similarly, Gay (2010) defines culturally responsive teaching “as using the cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of reference, and performance styles of ethnically diverse students to make learning encounters more relevant to and effective for them” (p. 31). In both definitions, CRT is dedicated to the specific abilities and needs of students from diverse sociocultural backgrounds in order to make learning more accessible, engaging, and
challenging. It should also be noted that CRT is meant to be embedded across all subject areas. For example, Ukpokodu (2011) discusses how culturally responsive teaching can and must be woven into mathematics. CRT’s commitment to issues of cultural diversity and social justice make it particularly pertinent for analyzing classrooms with English language learners, who as previously stated, speak at least 80 different languages in the Toronto District School Board alone (TDSB, 2012). As Webster and Valeo (2011) state, “CRT is particularly strong in its ability to transform attitudes and beliefs about the complexities of teaching English-language learners” (p. 108).

Theorists have also developed different criteria or aims for CRT. Ladson-Billings (1995) explains CRT in terms of three central criteria: academic success, cultural competence, and critical consciousness. The first aim requires that teachers hold high expectations for all students and support them in reaching their full potential (Ladson-Billings, 1995). In order to achieve cultural competence, the second aim, teachers must encourage their students to engage with their own social, cultural, and political knowledge (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Theorists of linguistically responsive teaching stress the importance of “facilitating and encouraging the use of students’ native languages” as a way of integrating students’ backgrounds and helping to scaffold their learning of English (Lucas, Villegas, & Freedson-Gonzalez, 2008, p. 369). Delpit further articulates the necessity of celebrating one’s language stating, “language is one of the most intimate expressions of identity, indeed, ‘the skin that we speak’” (as cited in Bonner & Adams, 2012, p. 31). Lastly, critical consciousness, the third aim of CRT, means that teachers must help students to develop the critical tools necessary to challenge dominant systems of power (Ladson-Billings, 1995).
Gay (2010) articulates similar goals but uses slightly more descriptive language. She describes CRT as validating, comprehensive, multidimensional, empowering, transformative, and emancipatory (Gay, 2010). Nevertheless, both Ladson-Billing’s (1995) and Gay’s (2010) formulations articulate a pedagogy that goes beyond the superficial endorsement of multiculturalism, sometimes referred to as the “saris, samosas, and steel bands” model (Mackey, 2002, pp. 66-7). Instead, CRT requires teachers to work collaboratively with students towards a transformative project of social awareness and activism.

With regards to assessment and evaluation, researchers of CRT and diversity in education have discussed the problems of large-scale testing and curriculum standardization in the United States (Gay, 2010; Campano, 2007) as well as in Ontario (Skerrett & Hargreaves, 2008). Through its demand for singular approaches, standardization disregards the diverse positions from which students learn and articulate their learning. Within this climate of high-stakes testing, teachers lose sight of the various learning needs of their students and fall prey to the model of teaching to the test (Gay, 2010). Educators of CRT hold the belief that rigid assessment and evaluations cannot fully capture the depth of students’ knowledge. As one teacher relates, “I don’t think anybody ever truly measures what the children know […] They never give a test that measures the children’s ability to think through difficult problems, to come up with a variety of solutions” (Ladson-Billings, 2009, p. 78). Thus, CRT practitioners recognize that there are other aspects of student knowledge that cannot be evaluated through formal testing.

In order to achieve the various elements of CRT put forth by Ladson-Billings (1994; 1995; 2009) and Gay (2010), it is also necessary to examine the way assessment
and evaluation are carried out in the everyday interactions of the classroom. Effective and equitable assessment practices are tightly intertwined with the goals of culturally relevant teaching. Students must be given productive, reassuring, and caring feedback that encourages their improvement rather than stifling them (Gay, 2010). Ladson-Billings (1995) explains that the goal is not to simply make students “feel good,” but instead to actively “attend to students’ academic needs” (p. 160). Both Ladson-Billings (2009) and Gay (2010) stress the need to use a wide-range of educational materials and assessment practices that are appropriate to students’ varying backgrounds and experiences.

Similarly, Honigsfeld and Giouroukakis (2011) encourage educators to use formative assessments for their ELLs that “include authentic, performance-based, project-based, or task-based assessment tools” so that students have “multiple opportunities to demonstrate their content and linguistic knowledge” (p. 9). In this way, educators must use diverse and flexible assessment practices. Ladson-Billings (2009) further argues that “rewarding students for a wide array of activities ensures that they understand that hard-and-fast rules do not exist for determining excellence” (p. 108). From the CRT perspective, there are many ways in which excellence and success can take shape, and as such there must be many assessment strategies that recognize their existence and legitimacy.

Effective assessment and achievement within the culturally relevant classroom is framed with the community at the centre (Campano, 2007; Ladson-Billings, 2009). Rather than individual evaluations that only heighten competition (not to mention anxiety), CRT researchers believe that teachers should employ cooperative and collaborative strategies to encourage students to demonstrate their learning (Gay, 2010; Honigsfeld & Giouroukakis, 2011). These strategies help to foster a community-centered approach to achievement and provide students with opportunities for rich discussions,
which can be especially useful for English language learners in their development of English (Honigsfeld & Giouroukakis, 2011). As Ladson-Billings (2009) states, “even when individuals achieve on their own – inside or outside of the classroom – the teachers frame that achievement in a group context” (p. 82). In this way, students can develop self-reflective (assessment as learning) skills that are rooted within a larger community. They are able to reflect on what it means to be a part of a community and what they, as individuals, can contribute.

Despite these calls for multifaceted and community-centered assessment practices, it remains difficult to determine what exactly culturally relevant assessment looks like in the day-to-day classroom. Ladson-Billings (2009) refers to a teacher who has “students nominate classmates for excellence in a variety of areas, both academic and social” (p. 107), a peer-assessment strategy that promotes the community-centered goals of CRT. Campano (2007) emphasizes the importance of “evaluation-free zones” and describes one student-teacher who encouraged “multilingual reader-response journals” where she and the students engaged in weekly correspondence (p. 95). Through this assessment for learning approach students were able to engage with their own linguistic heritage and improve on their English literacy skills (Campano, 2007). While Gay (2010) asserts that “there is no one right curriculum design, teaching style, and assessment procedure for all students” (p. 141), there needs to be greater discussion of what assessment strategies (in their comprehensive forms) might look like in a culturally relevant classroom with English language learners.
Defining “ELL”

There are many different dimensions to the meaning of the term “ELL” that must be explored. The Ontario Ministry of Education defines English language learners as:

students in provincially funded English language schools whose first language is a language other than English, or is a variety of English that is significantly different from the variety used for instruction in Ontario’s schools, and who may require focused educational supports to assist them in attaining proficiency in English. (2007, p. 8)

Ontario students can speak more than 200 different languages (People for Education, 2012, p. 12), and approximately 20% of students who attend English language schools in the province speak a first language other than English (MOE, 2010, p. 77).

It is important to keep in mind that English language learners are not always individuals who have immigrated to Canada. Canadian-born ELLs are students who grew up in culturally and linguistically distinct communities where English was not the primary language, such as Indigenous communities and French-speaking communities (MOE, 2007, pp. 8-9). Newcomer ELLs are students who moved to Canada from another country as part of planned immigration or as a result of crisis (MOE, 2007, p. 9). In 2006, recent immigrants made up 10.5% of the population of school-aged children between 5 to 16 years old in the Toronto area (Statistics Canada, 2006). Among these 789,400 children, 54.9% of them spoke a language other than English or French at home (Statistics Canada, 2006). Newcomer ELLs can begin their schooling in Canada at any point in the year (MOE, 2007). Their experience with schooling and encounters with English in their home countries can vary significantly (MOE, 2007), which presents this group of students, as well as their teachers, with unique challenges. Although the term “ELL” encompasses a large and diverse grouping of individuals, they should not be
treated monolithically. This project hopes to reveal the importance of engaging in assessment practices that recognize the heterogeneity of this population.

**ELLs and Achievement**

Many researchers have explored the achievement and graduation rates for ELLs and immigrant students in Canada over the past decade (Early, 2001; Garnett, Adamuti-Trache, & Ungerleider, 2008; Odo, D’Silva, & Gunderson, 2012; Toohey & Derwing, 2008). People for Education reported in 2012 that the average scores of ELL students on the province’s grade 6 reading, writing, and mathematics tests (EQAO) “are still significantly below the provincial average” (2012, p. 13).

In the Toronto District School Board, graduation rates vary significantly between student languages. For instance, students who speak Chinese, Hindi, Serbian, Bengali, and Tamil have the highest rates of graduation, which exceed that of English speakers (TDSB, 2012). Spanish and Somali speakers have the lowest rates of graduation at 65.3% and 65.8% compared to the TDSB average (78.6%) (TDSB, 2012). These numbers call into question the efficacy of the current assessment and evaluation practices that are being used by teachers, administrators, and researchers. Geneva Gay (2010) explains that “scores on standardized tests and grades students receive on classroom learning tasks do not explain why they are not performing at acceptable levels. These are symptoms of, not the causes of or remedies for, the problems” (p. 17). The statistics provided above are meant to illustrate the need for deeper reflection on current teaching practices and should not be attributed with students’ linguistic or cultural backgrounds (Gay, 2010). There are many systemic, institutional, and socio-emotional factors that can impact student success. For instance, Gay (2010) explains, “both immigrant and native-born students of color
also may encounter prejudices, stereotyping, and racism that have negative impacts on their self-esteem, mental health, and academic achievement” (p. 19). Furthermore, Campano (2007) importantly points out that we must consider “our own representations of a child’s success, or failure” (p. 71). Thus, while this study does not investigate the systemic and institutional forces that may cause various disparities among ELL populations, it does call for culturally relevant assessment practices that can support ELLs in their academic success.

Classroom-Based Assessment and ELLs: Experiences, Challenges, and Misconceptions

This investigation examines the strategies and approaches teachers employ to assess and evaluate English language learners in mainstream classrooms. In mainstream classrooms, ELLs are faced with the difficult task of developing everyday language skills and the language of specific curricular subjects (Lucas, Villegas, & Freedson-Gonzalez, 2008; Wang, Many, & Krumenaker, 2008). In what follows, I examine a number of areas that complicate teachers’ assessment and evaluation practices in an ELL context, such as the pressure to consider external factors (e.g. effort) in evaluating academic achievement; the difficulties of accommodating ELLs; the reluctance to assess language proficiency; and the internal assumptions teachers have of their ELLs. I illustrate the ways in which all of these assessment concerns are complexly linked to issues of culture, race, and language. Thus, culturally relevant teaching is an integral framework for examining assessment in the ELL context.

Academic Achievement and Study Skills and Work Habits

Milnes and Cheng (2008) found that most of the teachers they interviewed ignored the distinction between the evaluation of ‘achievement’ and ‘nonachievement’
factors on the Ontario Provincial Report Card when evaluating their students. Nonachievement factors included, for instance, effort, participation, and homework completion (Milnes & Cheng, 2008). Teachers believed the combination of both factors to be a strategic way of bringing up students’ grades (Milnes & Cheng, 2008). Milnes and Cheng (2008) further found that teachers “generally valued and rewarded the nonachievement factor of effort more than any other” (p. 58). Yet, teachers had different indicators of effort for their ELL students, such as “working with private tutors,” “appearing tired,” and “speaking English in the school hallways between classes” (Milnes & Cheng, 2008, p. 59). While the researchers of this study emphasize the inconsistencies in teachers’ evaluation methods, they do not address the social implications attached to these decisions, for instance, the assumption that all ELL students would have access to private tutors.

These inconsistent and uncritical assessment practices illustrate the importance of making classroom-based assessment equitable for all students. Moreover, these approaches do not adhere to the culturally relevant standard that all students must be held up to high expectations. Ladson-Billings (2009) explains that “culturally relevant teaching recognizes the need for students to experience excellence without deceiving them about their own academic achievement” (p. 108). Inconsistent assessment practices that are not rooted in students’ academic abilities do not promote student learning and do not provide students with the opportunities for success that they deserve. As Webster and Valeo (2011) state, “ELLs deserve opportunities for equitable outcomes and unbiased assessments that accurately evaluate learning” (p. 109).
**Accommodating ELLs**

In an American study on the experiences of mainstream teachers of ELLs, Wang, Many, and Krumenaker (2008) interview a grade nine social studies teacher who explained that he would allow his ELLs to take unfinished tests home. He stated, ELLs are “not capable yet in reading and writing at a level sufficient to pass the kind of test we normally give. They don’t deserve to fail” (Wang, Many, & Krumenaker, 2008, p. 75). While *Growing Success* lists the “allowance of extra time” as an appropriate method of accommodating ELLs (MOE, 2010, p. 77), it also discourages teachers from sending tests and projects home, as some students may receive more support outside of school (through family members, tutors, technology, etc.) than others. Although this was an American study, and therefore outside of the parameters of *Growing Success*, it illustrates the challenges of making equitable accommodations to assessment and evaluation strategies for ELLs (Webster & Valeo, 2011). Researchers of this American study stress the need for teachers and researchers to “consider the standards by which content teachers evaluate the work of their ESL students and assign grades in order to offer support to learners’ continual efforts” (Wang, Many, & Krumenaker, 2008, p. 80).

**Assessing Language Proficiency**

Some studies have found that teachers are reluctant or unprepared to assess the language proficiency of ELLs (Webster & Valeo, 2011; Milnes & Cheng, 2008). One teacher explained that language learning was something that ELL students “[seemed] to go away and do on their own” (Milnes & Cheng, 2008, p. 61). He and another colleague believed that they did not have to evaluate written work of their ELLs as rigorously as English teachers (Milnes & Cheng, 2008, p. 60). With the Ministry of Education’s recent publication of *STEP: Steps to English Proficiency* (2012), it is clear that all teachers are
responsible for assessing, tracking, and promoting students’ English language acquisition. In a case study of an American high school with a significant population of ELLs, Nesselrodt (2007) illustrates how the effectiveness of the school’s ESL program can be attributed to its clear mission that “every teacher is an ESL and reading teacher” (p. 450).

Lucas, Villegas, and Freedson-Gonzalez (2008) argue that there is a distinct difference between “conversational language proficiency” and “academic language proficiency,” the latter of which takes longer for English language learners to develop fluency in (p. 362). They emphasize that mainstream teachers must help their English language learners to strengthen their “academic language” in each subject area by focusing on “linguistic form and function,” such as drawing students’ attention to the past tense found in history texts (Lucas, Villegas, & Freedson-Gonzalez, 2008, p. 365). They believe that teachers should not rely on conversational English and must actively attend to “the formal elements” of the language (Lucas, Villegas, & Freedson-Gonzalez, 2008, p. 365). Many researchers believe that greater professional development is needed for teachers with regards to teaching and assessing English language proficiency for ELLs (Lucas, Villegas, & Freedson-Gonzalez, 2008; Milnes & Cheng 2008; Nesselrodt, 2007).

In contrast, Gay (2010) takes a different approach and explains that a “common misconception surrounding linguistic diversity is that language teaching and learning are primarily about form and structure, when, in fact, use is more important” (p. 84). Rather than focusing solely on the “structural features of English,” Gay (2010) stresses the impact of “social context factors” on language acquisition, such as how many opportunities students have to speak English outside of school (p. 84). Echoing Gay’s (2010) sentiment Webster and Valeo (2011) warn, “currently preservice and inservice training focuses heavily on establishing English proficiency and classroom strategies
rather than on the *who, how, and why* of English-language teaching and learning” (p. 120). The authors importantly explain that teachers should not lose sight of the multidimensional nature of teaching ELLs (Webster & Valeo, 2011). The varying opinions and approaches articulated by theorists of culturally and linguistically relevant pedagogy regarding English language acquisition illustrate the many factors that must be considered when planning for and assessing English language learners. While it is the responsibility of all educators in Ontario to be actively involved in the development of their students’ English language proficiency, it is also crucial for them to recognize that language learning is rooted in systems of power and knowledge.

*Teachers’ Assumptions*

In addition to instructional and assessment practices, teachers’ assumptions about ELLs must also be explored. Many of the teachers in the Milnes and Cheng study (2008) described their ELL students as “hard-working,” “more likely to complete homework assignments,” and more likely “to articulate strong moral values” than their non-ELL students (p. 55). Some teachers attributed their ELL students’ reluctance to participate in class discussion to “shyness” or a “lack of confidence” (Milnes & Cheng, 2008, p. 55). In creating a dichotomy between ELL and non-ELL students, teachers can perpetuate cultural stereotypes, such as the model minority myth that is usually assigned to Asian students who are seen as “academic nerds” and “high achievers” (Li, 2005, p. 70). However, the model minority myth is not applied to all ELLs. Campano (2007) shares how administrators and teachers described his Filipino students as “lazy” (p. 29) and “reluctant learner[s]” (p. 32).

These racialized assessments ignore the individual experiences and needs of a diverse population of learners. Gay (2010) describes how some teachers view immigrant
students as “overly quiet, accommodating, and reluctant to engage freely in instructional interactions” (p. 60) without considering how these behaviours are influenced by their own cultural norms. Eventually, teachers “stop trying” to engage with these students and their opportunities for learning are lost (Gay, 2010, p. 60). Students whose teachers have low expectations of them can develop “learned helplessness” and give up on learning entirely (Gay, 2010, p. 62). Webster and Valeo (2011) also stress the dangers of homogenizing students’ abilities based on their cultural backgrounds. A recent graduate from a pre-service teaching program explained how the strategies she learned tended to treat “ELLs students’ needs as a homogenous category” (Webster & Valeo, 2011, p. 114). Culturally relevant teaching demands that teachers recognize the inequities that exist within schools and the broader social environment rather than reinforcing the myth of meritocracy, which assumes that ‘hard work’ will lead to success and that ‘laziness’ cannot be remedied.

As I have illustrated here, social, economic, cultural, and linguistic issues are complexly linked to assessment and evaluation in a variety of ways. The challenges and misconceptions illustrated through these studies indicate a greater need to determine how to make assessment and evaluation culturally relevant for ELLs in ways that support their learning and development. As Toronto’s classrooms become even more heterogeneous, how do teachers, administrators, and researchers ensure that “fairness and social justice” – to use the language of Growing Success (MOE, 2010, p. 77) – are being practiced in day-to-day assessment methods?
Overview of Growing Success

Growing Success is Ontario’s official policy document on assessment, evaluation, and reporting in elementary and secondary schools for grades 1 through 12 (MOE, 2010). The document is centered on seven fundamental principles, the first of which is that assessment must be “fair, transparent, and equitable for all students” (MOE, 2010, p. 6). The second principle refers directly to ELLs by calling for practices that “support all students, including those with special education needs, those who are learning the language of instruction (English or French), and those who are First Nation, Métis, or Inuit” (MOE, 2010, p.6). The Ministry seems to express a stated commitment to issues of equity and social justice, which would reflect a culturally relevant approach to assessment. Growing Success further cites Volante who states, “fairness in assessment and evaluation is grounded in the belief that all students should be able to demonstrate their learning regardless of their socio-economic status, ethnicity, gender, geographic location, learning style, and/or need for special services” (as cited in MOE, 2010, p. 8). The Ministry’s emphasis on the role of social equity makes Growing Success an important policy document to include in this investigation of ELL assessment and culturally relevant teaching.

Growing Success defines assessment as “a set of actions undertaken by the teacher and student to gather information about student learning” (MOE, 2010, p. 30). In order to achieve equity in assessment, Growing Success puts forth an “assessment for, as, and of learning” model (MOE, 2010, p. 30). These terms are meant to replace the terms diagnostic, formative, and summative, which the Ministry argues do not adequately describe “what the information is being used for” (MOE, 2010, p. 30). Assessment for and as learning are meant to be deeply integrated with instruction to promote “a culture
in which student and teacher learn together in a collaborative relationship, each playing an active role in setting learning goals, developing success criteria, giving and receiving feedback, monitoring progress, and adjusting learning strategies” (MOE, 2010, p. 30).

Thus, this model views assessment as an inherent part of daily classroom practice that involves the active participation of all students. Given this emphasis on everyday teacher-student interactions, what does assessment of, for, and as learning look like for English language learners?

In its chapter on ELLs, Growing Success contextualizes Ontario’s ELL student population by describing the diversity of their languages, cultures, and experiences with schooling (MOE, 2010, p. 77). The chapter further explains that teachers must make appropriate modifications and accommodations that are tailored to the specific needs of ELLs (MOE, 2010). As the document states, modifications and accommodations “contribute to fairness and social justice for many students in an increasingly multicultural environment” (MOE, 2010, p. 77). Again, it acknowledges that a culturally and linguistically diverse population of learners requires greater efforts on the part of all educators and administrators to adapt learning expectations in ways that promote student success.

Conclusion

I have used this review of literature to inform my data analysis, which has been framed by the following research questions: a) In what ways are junior/intermediate teachers (grades 4 to 10) engaging with culturally relevant assessment practices for English language learners? b) What do these practices look like? c) What challenges do teachers currently face in assessing their ELL students?
Chapter 3: METHOD

Procedure

This investigation is a qualitative research study that explores three teachers’ assessment and evaluation practices for English language learners through the framework of culturally relevant pedagogy.

I have used this review of literature to inform my data analysis. The relevant literature consists of qualitative studies, Ministry documents, and theoretical works that explore culturally relevant pedagogy. Due to Canada’s constantly shifting demographics, a majority of the research studies cited here were published within the last 10 years or less in order to gain more recent information on the issues facing ELLs. I have conducted face-to-face interviews with three experienced teachers who are working in the field to gain a stronger understanding of their current assessment practices and challenges as they relate to ELLs. The Milnes and Cheng (2008) study focused on the evaluation practices of seven teachers at one Ontario private school. I have extended this existing literature by interviewing three teachers from various public school settings in the Toronto area. My project concludes with a discussion of my research findings and their implications for myself as an educator. Finally, I provide implications and recommendations for the research community and suggest areas for further study.

Instruments of Data Collection

My interviews were conducted using Turner’s (2010) general interview guide approach. According to Turner (2010), the flexibility of this approach allows for the possibility of themes to emerge that were perhaps not previously considered. In this way,
my interviews remained focused on my central research questions, but had the possibility of revealing emergent and in some cases more nuanced data.

The interviews were no more than 45 minutes in length. They were centered on pre-determined questions that addressed the following areas: professional backgrounds of participants; general assessment and evaluation practices; assessment in an ELL context; culturally relevant assessment; and the extent to which participants engage with Growing Success (see Appendix A for Interview Questions). For example, to facilitate a general conversation about teachers’ assessment practices, I asked, “Can you describe some of your most commonly used assessment practices?”

Participants

I interviewed three junior/intermediate (grades 4 to 10) teachers working in the Toronto area. I recognize that there may be English language learners who are not formally identified as such (in an IEP), but who may struggle with certain linguistic barriers in their learning. However, I searched for teachers who had experience working with students enrolled in ESL programs or who have been formally identified as ELLs. As previously stated, the issues that ELL students encounter in mainstream classrooms are very unique because they are faced with the task of learning the language of the subject area as well as everyday English. Thus, I have interviewed core-classroom teachers rather than ESL instructors whose involvement with ELLs will be markedly different. However, two of the participants have experience working with ELLs in one-on-one settings or in ESL classrooms. My decision to focus on the junior/intermediate environment comes from my own position as a J/I teacher-candidate. Moreover, much of the literature that I have encountered thus far on the issues facing ELLs has been centered
on the secondary school setting. Finally, I believe that Toronto is a crucial site for this investigation because of its large and growing population of English language learners.

**Data Collection and Analysis**

Each interview was digitally recorded and transcribed for the purpose of analysis. I used Falk and Blumenreich’s (2005) suggested strategy of *formative analysis* to ensure that I was up-to-date on themes and concerns rather than analyzing all of the data at the end of the collection process. After each interview, I wrote notes of my thoughts and questions, which I used to guide my analysis. I noted ideas and commonalities during the transcription process and listened to each interview several times to immerse myself in the data (Wellington, 2000). Most of my analysis was informed by *emergent* rather than *a priori* themes (Falk & Blumenreich, 2005, p. 117), which I later connect with the themes from my literature review. My final step entailed breaking my broad themes down into more specific codes. The entirety of the data analysis process was conducted through a lens of culturally relevant pedagogy in order to remain rooted in my central research questions.

**Ethical Review Procedures**

I followed the ethical review approval procedures for the Master of Teaching program at OISE. Participants were recruited through the method of snowball sampling and were sent a letter of consent prior to the interview date (see Appendix B for Letter of Consent for Interview). In some cases, participants were also sent the interview questions a couple of days in advance of the interview. I made myself available to answer any questions with regards to the consent form and interview process. Individuals had to read and sign the consent form in order to participate in this study. As stated on the form, they
will remain anonymous and their involvement in the study will be confidential. Participants also had the right to withdraw from the study at any time. Both the participants and I have a hard copy of the signed consent form for record keeping. All raw data has been stored safely on my personal laptop.

Limitations

Due to the parameters of the Master of Teaching program and the resulting time constraints, there are limitations associated with this study. These limitations are associated with a selective literature review, limited interview questions, small sample size, and lack of generalizability. Researcher bias is another limitation, which I will also discuss here.

While I have discussed a range of literature appropriate to the field of culturally relevant pedagogy and ELL instruction and assessment, my literature review does not provide an exhaustive overview of all pertinent theory and research. For instance, I have chosen to focus primarily on the work of Ladson-Billings (1994; 1995; 2009) and Gay (2011) to inform my discussion of culturally relevant pedagogy. Their work has impacted me most significantly over the past two years, which is why I chose to use their theoretical frameworks. However, there are many academics who have contributed to this field whose important work I do not include in this study due to the parameters of the program. I also recognize that there are many issues related to ELL instruction and assessment that I do not discuss or mention only in passing such as the differences between academic and everyday language development, or the challenges faced by English language learners who have not been formally identified.
In order to stay within the 45-minute interview structure as recommended by the program, I designed 14 questions that I believed would speak to the central concerns of this project. I realize, however, that these interview questions were limited in their scope. I recognize that my participants have a wealth of experience and knowledge that I did not have an opportunity to address in our interviews due to these time constraints. But I maintain that the participants’ responses capture the key issues of this study.

This study’s small sample size was another limitation. The results of the study were very much specific to the experiences of the three participants interviewed and the educational contexts within which they work in the city of Toronto. As a result, the findings of this study are not generalizable to the larger population. The participants’ strategies and comments are particular to the needs and experiences of the ELLs in their classrooms and may not be successful in their application for all ELLs. I also specifically sought out teachers whose practices aligned with culturally relevant pedagogy. In this way, this study does not include the voices of educators who do not agree with or who do not practice from a vision of culturally relevant pedagogy. However, I believe that the sample size was appropriate for achieving the goals set out by my research questions.

It is important to acknowledge that as the principal investigator of this study, the research presented here reflects my own interpretations of the data collected. These interpretations are informed by my own subject position, personal experiences, biases, and assumptions, some of which I briefly noted in the discussion of my background. As Campano (2007) writes, “there is always something unfinished about our investigations” (p. 117). I do not wish to position myself as the arbiter of any truths in this study. Instead, I believe that as a teacher and researcher it is important to recognize the limits to my own knowledge in order to maintain a continued desire for greater learning ahead.
Chapter 4: FINDINGS

Introduction

The following research findings were gathered and analyzed from three interviews, which were conducted over the course of two months in 2013. All of the participants are full-time teachers currently working in the Toronto area. While none of the participants stated that they had explicit training with culturally relevant pedagogy, they were sought out because their practices align with the central goals of CRP. All three participants have experience working with English language learners in different capacities and environments at the junior/intermediate level. Transcripts of their interviews were analyzed for emergent themes, which will be discussed below in three case studies and a cross-case analysis at the end of the chapter. Each case study is comprised of a description of the participant’s background and teaching context; their assessment practices and challenges; the role identity plays in their assessment practices; their engagements and challenges with culturally relevant content; and finally, the impact of community on their approaches to assessment. Their teaching experience and beliefs about supporting English language learners offered valuable insights into what culturally relevant assessment can look like in practice.

Case Study 1: Hannah

Context and Background

Hannah is a sixth grade core teacher who also works with English language learners on a withdrawal basis, which involves taking students out of the classroom to work in small groups on English language development. Hannah is in her 11th year of teaching with approximately nine years of experience teaching English language learners.
She has received extra certification in the area of teaching English as a Second Language (ESL) and has attended extensive professional development related to supporting English language learners. She works at a school with a high number of English language learners in a community with a large immigrant population. The students in her class currently are of Bangladeshi, Pakistani, Indian, Afghani, Scottish, Chinese, and Southeast Asian descent. None of the students in her core class this year are English language learners.

Assessment Practices and Challenges

In order to attend to the diverse learning needs and abilities of all the students in her class, Hannah’s assessment strategies entail such tasks as drawing pictures, drama, role play, games, and small and large group discussions. She emphasizes the need to get away from the traditional test format in order to provide students with other opportunities to show their knowledge. She explains how differentiated assessment practices are particularly important for English language learners whose understanding of the concepts may not be adequately revealed by a “pen and paper test.” As she explains, “many of the tests…pen and paper tests, I feel sometimes is not testing the intelligence but it’s testing your skill of the language and if you don’t understand the question you cannot answer the question.” Mindful of the limitations of a traditional test, Hannah sometimes rewrites questions to make them more accessible for ELL students. Hannah emphasizes assessment for learning in her everyday practices explaining that she is less concerned with “where you have arrived, but it’s how you arrived there.” She believes discussions are crucial because they provide opportunities for students to reveal their thinking in spontaneous and surprising ways.

Hannah has used Growing Success (MOE, 2010) to help inform her descriptive feedback. She chunks her feedback into manageable parts for ELL students and
“focus[es] on one concept at a time” so as to not overwhelm her students with tedious corrections.” In addition to describing in writing what the student did well, Hannah also describes where they need improvement and provides specific techniques they might use to improve. Hannah also tries to identify problems with her own assessment practices and makes adjustments accordingly.

Hannah points to the limitations of a commonly used reading comprehension assessment tool that she has used in her teaching. She explains that some of the reading passages contain information that can be inaccessible to ELL students. For example, she describes how a text about a farm might be an unfamiliar concept for a student who just arrived to Canada. As she states, “if I’ve just arrived in Canada, I’ve never visited a farm in Canada, how am I going to understand?” She believes that without adequate background knowledge, students struggle to infer and make conclusions in these assessments. Even though there seems to be some flexibility at the school regarding the implementation of this assessment tool, Hannah shares that many teachers continue to use it despite the fact that the texts have not been changed. Even with her own varied approaches to assessing her ELLs, she says that this does not mean she “would not want to learn new ways.” As she states, “absolutely, I would love to.”

Role of Identity in Assessment

Hannah brings the diverse cultural and linguistic identities of her ELL students into her assessment practices. One strategy she uses is to pair an ELL student up with another student who speaks the same language. This way she can assess the student’s understanding of the concept in a way that is uninhibited by their language ability. Her assessments encourage students to reflect on their own experiences and make connections to course content. For example, in a unit about Aboriginal peoples, Hannah asked her
students to compare their own cultures to an Aboriginal culture. Her motivation for this assignment was to ensure that “they’re always part of what they’re learning, so it’s not just about other people. But it’s to see that we learn about ourselves as we learn about other people.”

Hannah also talks openly with her students about her own identity as an English language learner. She stresses how she often puts herself in her students’ shoes having had similar experiences to them with regards to language barriers. She empathizes with the challenges her ELL students might face and states,

to think that just because the person doesn’t speak the language, *yet*. Or may not speak it fluently as you do, to take that and equate that to intelligence I find that sometimes very frustrating because again, I know that I’ve gone through that experience. So I use my experience a lot with my students.

Hannah further incorporates her own cultural identity into her teaching. In math, she has discussed the different geometrical patterns that can be found in the traditional basket weaving of her culture. In turn, she uses the classroom as a space to invite students to share mathematical strategies from their own cultures and has learned a great deal about math from these exchanges.

*Culturally Relevant Content*

Throughout her interview, Hannah emphasized how she focuses on “big ideas” with her ELL students rather than facts and grammar. In focusing on these “big ideas,” she is able to provide students with opportunities to express their thoughts and opinions. As she states, “language becomes a tool that you use to express your ideas and thoughts.” For Hannah, “thinking […] is the big important thing.” In her teaching, these “big ideas” sometimes involve challenging common assumptions about nationality and language. Once, on the first day of school, she wrote a controversial statement on the board that
equated intelligence with people from English speaking countries, and a lack of intelligence with people from non-English speaking countries. Her goal was to encourage students to see the value of knowing and speaking other languages by disproving this generalized and problematic claim. Hannah makes math culturally relevant by talking about the history of mathematics in order to draw attention to the significant contributions of other cultures that may go unrecognized in the West. Other examples of culturally relevant content that Hannah incorporates involve talking about the heterogeneity within students’ own cultures and the cultural diversity and contributions that have shaped Canada’s national identity.

When considering the topic of cultural relevance, Hannah explains the challenges of using the standardized literacy assessment she discussed above. She believes it lacks cultural relevance, which leaves ELL students unable to access the concepts. In these cases, Hannah provides extra explanations for students to have a stronger understanding of the cultural context. In her own self-created practices, however, Hannah chooses to collect stories from a variety of cultures to provide students with different perspectives in their reading material. Hannah emphasizes the discussion of “big ideas” as a tool for assessing student learning.

Role of Community in Assessment

At the start of her interview, Hannah explains how she “fell in love with the neighbourhood, with the kids, and the culture of the school.” In her classroom, she aims to make learning fun and comfortable for her ELL students. For instance, she understands that students may feel especially nervous in test situations because they are so often “judged” by the results and chooses less stressful assessment strategies instead. Games, in this case, become a useful way of making learning fun while also allowing her to
determine how and whether students are progressing. Hannah shares that her love of teaching comes from a desire to celebrate the accomplishments of all people. As she explains, “I love doing what I do because it gives me the opportunity actually to just say that, ‘You know what? We’re very similar. Truly everybody has contributed something in this world.’”

Case Study 2: Sara

Context and Background

Sara is a seventh grade core teacher in her 14th year of teaching. She estimates that she has had one dozen students at varying levels of English as a Second Language throughout her career. She minored in ESL education during her own teacher training but has not had any professional development or training related to supporting English language learners since then. She explains that her school does not have a large number of ELLs and thinks that board-level professional development is likely directed at schools with larger populations of ELLs. Currently, she has two English language learners in her core class who have lived in Canada for approximately two years. Of the 34 students in her class most are first or second generation immigrants and approximately six students were born outside of Canada. Culturally, students’ backgrounds consist of Bulgarian, English, Italian, French Canadian, Caribbean, Chinese, Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi, and Greek.

Assessment Practices and Challenges

Sara explains that she differentiates her assessment practices, stating that it is important to “give your students choice in how they […] express their knowledge.” She uses a wide variety of assessment strategies and tasks that are geared towards the specific
needs of her ELL students. For example, she reduces the number of questions on a test, reads to students, scribes for students, and has conversations with students with a checklist and “look fors” as she listens to their responses. Students are also given opportunities to express themselves through art, pictures, and diagrams without the pressure of writing words. Sara tries to format writing tasks differently for her ELL students by reducing clutter so it is easier to read. Depending on the student’s needs, Sara will sometimes simplify language and refrain from marking their spelling and grammar, choosing to have a conversation with the student about areas for improvement instead. She makes the distinction between language ability and conceptual understanding and states, “in science you’re not marking their ability to write a sentence so much as you are their ability to understand scientific concepts.”

In assessment for learning practices, such as class-created KWL charts (What do you know? What do you want to know? What have you learned?), Sara encourages all students to contribute in order to get a sense of their prior knowledge and personal interests. She also conferences with her ELL students and sets specific goals with them. In these conversations she provides descriptive feedback that focuses on specific areas of need, so as to not overwhelm the student but also encourage progress. Sara emphasizes the importance of being “flexible” when it comes to “how [students] express their knowledge.”

In some cases, Sara has used a formal language assessment with beginning English language learners. She describes this as an “old” school board assessment. When describing this assessment Sara refers to herself as being “still stuck in there.”
Role of Identity in Assessment

Student identity plays a central role in how Sara assesses her ELL students. She provides opportunities for students to write in their first languages, pairs students up with partners who speak the same language, and uses visual dictionaries for early ELLs. Sara uses her knowledge of other languages, which she admits is minimal, whenever possible and is mindful of students’ whose native languages are structurally different from English. In addition to their linguistic backgrounds, she also stresses that “there are so many other factors that go into [assessing ELLs], and the ability of a child to communicate.” For instance, she believes a student’s educational history can impact his or her performance at school. She explains,

I’ve had students from Afghanistan a number of years ago who had no or very, very little school experience at all. So even for him being in a classroom all day was – I mean he was a great kid – but it was challenging […] I remember years ago I had a girl who was from Burma who was quite young, and hadn’t been to school because her family had been on the run and been refugees and had quite a harrowing young experience. So there’s the school readiness, there’s school experience, there’s how much language they can speak in their first language, which is incredibly important.

With this in mind, she is sensitive to her students’ identities and experiences. For instance, she considers students’ cultural restrictions such as limited experiences of working with someone of the opposite gender. She encourages students to share their personal experiences, such as their families’ motivations for moving to Canada. During these discussions, students have revealed their perspectives on their home countries, sometimes expressing a fear of returning. Sara has observed that students enjoy sharing their cultural experiences and “learning about themselves.” Her sensitivity to her students’ identities extends to the physical classroom. She believes that having posters of racially diverse people and co-created anchor charts on display can allow students to see
their identities and ideas reflected in the environment. As she states, “it’s really important that kids see themselves in the classroom.”

**Culturally Relevant Content**

In her lessons, Sara tries to incorporate non-Western points of view whenever possible and to expose her students to a “history of Other,” such as the experiences of women, African Americans, and immigrants. She believes these are histories that are not often found in textbooks. Sara facilitates class discussions that are infused with social justice issues such as racism, homophobia, sexism, and ageism. She has talked about issues of gender in the migration of young French women to New France, a political strategy for populating the new colony. She also encourages students to think about Canada as a “land of immigrants” by examining their own ancestral histories of immigration. In a math context, Sara draws students’ attention to a “Chinese example that pre-dates Pascal’s triangle” in order to provide a non-Western perspective and illustrate how some histories are heard more than others. Sara notes that she tries to approach social justice topics in a “non-partisan way” and explains that by discussing different cultures and religions with her students they feel invited to share. Sara expresses a concerted effort to raise awareness of diverse viewpoints. As she states, “I think they need to know there’s a great big world that’s out there and that some things still need work but there’s been work that’s been done to get us where we are.”

Despite Sara’s commitment to focusing on issues of social justice in her classroom, she acknowledges the challenges some ELLs may face in talking about social justice issues because of the language barriers. She also shares how finding non-Western examples can be somewhat of a challenge as “there’s just not a lot out there.”
Role of Community in Assessment

Sensitivity and comfort are at the centre of Sara’s approach to building a classroom community. In order to achieve these two aims, Sara makes a point to talk about grades and academic ability. She is sensitive to students’ cultural needs and explains that she “wouldn’t ask somebody to do something that culturally they were not comfortable with.” Sara considers it a priority for her students to feel that school is a safe environment. As she says, “sometimes just making them feel really comfortable at school is the most important thing.” For Sara, establishing a sense of safety is crucial for ELLs so that they know not to be afraid to make mistakes. She also provides her ELLs with a “safe” person to sit with to help them to build relationships with their peers. Rather than allowing students to “hide,” she works on establishing a safe classroom at the start of the school year and builds relationships with them herself.

Case Study 3: Angela

Context and Background

Angela is a sixth grade core teacher who also offers half-time ESL support. She has 12 years of experience teaching full-time core classes in the junior grades, and two years experience as a full-time ESL withdrawal and support teacher for grades six through eight. She has received additional certification in ESL education and received orientation training for ESL teaching with her school board. While she has not had direct training in culturally relevant pedagogy, Angela took a workshop that was centered on creating digital picture books based on students’ personal and cultural experiences. She later implemented this learning into her own practice, which will be discussed below. Currently, she has five ELLs in her core class. Some of the backgrounds represented by
students in her core class consist of Korean, Ethiopian, Eritrean, Hungarian, and Pakistani. Her school has a large population of English language learners, many of whom arrived to Canada in the last year.

Assessment Practices and Challenges

Angela differentiates her assessment practices based on the language ability of all of her students. She uses visuals, labeling, and sorting for beginner ELLs whereas for more advanced ELLs she might ask them to respond with basic sentences and then longer and more complex paragraphs. She provides easier texts where necessary and scaffolds assessment tasks, such as giving an ELL student sentence starters on a test to guide their writing. Angela observes and conferences with her beginner ELLs and tries to use dual language books to support them in these initial stages. Angela distinguishes between her students’ language ability and content knowledge, explaining how vocabulary and language acquisition can sometimes impede what students “actually know.”

Angela describes difficulties related to assessing and supporting English language learners. For example, her experience as an ESL teacher has led her to feel that mainstream teachers often have a “huge reliance” on ESL teachers to provide the appropriate supports for their ELLs. She explains that Ontario’s ESL curriculum document is more specific and offers “concrete examples” where Growing Success (MOE, 2010) only provides general descriptions. Despite this however, Angela believes that mainstream teachers do not seem to have the time to familiarize themselves with the strategies in the ESL document. Angela describes that one of the language assessments she used to use seemed to lack specificity. As a result she has chosen to use other assessment tools even though they are not specifically designed to be ESL assessments. Angela describes her struggle to find the appropriate assessment tools as somewhat of a
“guessing game,” especially in her first year of teaching ELL students. She explains that she would like there to be more dialogue between mainstream and ESL teachers but acknowledges that time is a major issue.

**Role of Identity in Assessment**

Angela incorporates her ELL students’ native languages into her assessment practices when she can; for example, through the use of dual language books and allowing students to use their own languages in responses. She translates instructions for students despite the possible inaccuracy and provides translations of key words on students’ worksheets. For a science activity, she gave her ELL students a description of the task along with a list of key words in all of their native languages. After attending a professional development session on digital picture books, Angela worked with another teacher in the creation of a book in which student’s wrote about “what Canada means to them from their point of view.” Many students chose to write about their experiences of immigrating to Canada. Angela further attends to students’ educational backgrounds and considers whether they may have “gaps in their education” or experience in a “Western education system.” Depending on these school experiences, she explains that “some students may not feel comfortable in group work” and so she must reconsider her use of group work assessments.

**Culturally Relevant Content**

Angela integrates issues of social justice across the curriculum and tries to include multiple points of view when possible. The digital picture book project required the rewriting of a Canadian text. Rather than the “common” icons listed in this alphabet book, Angela’s students were asked to write about Canada from their own cultural positions. This project helped students to critically explore “what it means to be
Canadian” while also engaging with rhyming couplets and visual arts. Angela also explains that culturally relevant practices do not have to be “onerous or big.” She suggests having students compare Canadian events with events in other parts of the world.

One of the challenges that Angela faces is that sometimes she must navigate contentious issues. She considers how discussing the Quebec Charter of Values, for instance, may be difficult and personal for students who are Muslim. She acknowledges that some ELL students may struggle to express their personal opinions in English. She explains how she finds it more difficult to bring up personal or potentially controversial issues in a mainstream integrated classroom and says,

> It is tricky. The only time I’ve ever done this is in an ESL class setting, withdrawal setting, so it’s a lot easier because everyone is in the same boat. You have the viewpoint of the immigrant coming to Canada, so you have that commonality. In a regular classroom you have everybody so I tend to be less of a risk taker as a teacher because it is trickier, I find.

As an ESL teacher who has visited many classrooms, Angela has spoken first hand with students who have expressed feelings of isolation in the classroom. At the same time, as an observer in these different classroom contexts she has also developed an understanding of how much of an impact culturally relevant practices can have on students both emotionally and socially. As she states, “they feel validated and you see their motivation just pick up.”

*Role of Community in Assessment*

Angela describes the importance of creating a climate for students to talk about their personal experiences in class. To create such a climate, Angela explains that teachers must first establish a “warm” and “respectful” atmosphere where students feel comfortable. She also refers to the importance of providing students with “an out” if they
ever feel uncomfortable in a classroom discussion. In these moments, she recommends reminding the class about the school values of “inclusivity and acceptance.” Angela also explains that the classroom must be set up “for diverse viewpoints” before asking students to share their personal perspectives. She makes the point of telling her students “that we’re all from different places and that we will be talking about our own unique experiences.” Once this understanding is established, Angela says that she has had “a really rich and rewarding experience” with students sharing and listening to each other.

At the school level, Angela explains that some of her colleagues have been given release time to work with her on how to support their ELLs. Angela speaks highly of her colleagues and describes how there are many “brave teachers” at her school who are willing to dive into difficult issues and become involved in the lives of their ELLs.

**Cross-Case Analysis**

These findings reveal important commonalities with regards to each of the participants’ practices related to supporting English language learners through culturally relevant assessment. All three participants engage in a pedagogy that rests on the three criteria of culturally relevant teaching (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Hannah, Sara, and Angela demand *academic excellence* from their English language learners, which they display by “attend[ing] to students’ academic needs” (Ladson-Billings, 1995, p. 160). They engage in assessment practices that help them to identify areas of improvement and make sure to communicate these expectations clearly to their students. Sara and Angela actively gather information about their students’ linguistic and educational backgrounds to inform their instruction, a key component of linguistically relevant teaching (Lucas, Villegas, & Freedson-Gonzalez, 2008). As much as these three educators ensure students’ social and
emotional safety, this does not translate into practices that simply make students “feel good” (Ladson-Billings, 1995, p. 160). These educators use a wide-range of assessment practices that are appropriate to students’ varying backgrounds and experiences (Gay, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 2009) with the goal of helping them to reach their full academic potential.

By making students’ prior knowledge central to their assessment, Hannah, Sara, and Angela demonstrate their commitment to helping students develop cultural competence (Ladson-Billings, 1995). They promote discussions about social and cultural issues in their classrooms despite the linguistic challenges that some students might encounter. Their motivations for doing so seem to stem from a deep belief in the importance of making classroom conversations a space for students to talk about their personal experiences, knowledge, and opinions. Students can develop a sense of voice and agency by expressing their personal opinions. As Gay (2010) explains, “declaring one’s personal position on issues, and demanding the same of others, is also a way of recognizing ‘the person’ as a valid data source” (p. 115). For Ladson-Billings (1995), cultural competence occurs in the classroom when “teachers utilize students’ culture as a vehicle for learning” (p. 161). Such practices can be seen in the way Hannah, Sara, and Angela invite students to engage in their first languages in class and share their experiences as immigrants and non-native English speakers. They embrace the challenge of facilitating these conversations and take pleasure in witnessing students share, listen, and think critically about themselves and the world around them.

Interestingly, all three participants describe how they encourage their ELLs to directly examine and critique easy assumptions about Canadian identity and culture. Such conversations illustrate how critical consciousness can be fostered with ELLs despite
possible language barriers (Ladson-Billings, 1995). As Ladson-Billings (1995) states, “students must develop a broader sociopolitical consciousness that allows them to critique the cultural norms, values, mores, and institutions that produce and maintain social inequities” (p. 162). This is demonstrated, for instance, in the way that Hannah pushes her students to challenge the claim that intelligence is contingent on one’s English abilities. The math classroom came up in each interview as a space in which to promote critical consciousness (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Hannah and Sara reference how they discuss the various cultures that have influenced Western mathematics. These findings were especially surprising given that the “traditional approach” to mathematics often (and incorrectly) “views the teaching and learning of mathematics as solely objective and culturally-neutral” (Ukpokodu, 2011, p. 48). The participants ensure that students’ cultural identities are reflected in the math classroom and in doing so importantly challenge pedagogical practices that treat mathematics as culture-free. For Hannah, Sara, and Angela assessment is more than answering questions and correcting errors. Instead, they focus on big ideas and issues that build and strengthen the life-long skill of critical consciousness (Ladson-Billings, 1995).

The literature review highlighted some challenges that teachers encounter when they assess their ELL students. One challenge was the pressure to take external factors into account when making formal evaluations. Milnes and Cheng (2008) identified that most of their participants used study skills and work habits, such as effort, to help raise the grades of their students. In their responses, Hannah, Sara, and Angela do not identify these external factors as considerations in their assessment practices. Rather they engage in assessment practices that are tailored to the specific needs of their ELLs in caring rather than stifling (Gay, 2010) or “deceiving” ways (Ladson-Billings, 2009, p. 108).
Recent literature also revealed that some teachers were reluctant or not prepared to assess the language proficiency of their ELLs (Milnes & Cheng, 2008; Webster & Valeo, 2011). In some cases this reluctance results in subject teachers leaving language learning and assessment to English and ESL teachers (Milnes & Cheng, 2008), an issue that Angela gestures to when reflecting on her own experiences as an ESL teacher. In this study, all three participants acknowledge the difference between content knowledge and language proficiency. Hannah and Sara sometimes refrain from formally evaluating their students’ language ability in favour of focusing on their content knowledge. All three teachers, however, take on the responsibility of assessing their students’ English proficiency but are mindful of appropriate contexts and approaches for how to do so (e.g. through verbal conversations rather than marking up errors, or focusing on some errors over others). They acknowledge the importance of developing their students’ English abilities but do not lose sight of the “who, how, and why of English-language teaching and learning” (Webster & Valeo, 2011, p. 120).

Hannah, Sara, and Angela do not display internal assumptions that posit their English language learners in any one way, especially in relation to the native English speakers in their classes. Theorists of CRT have identified the ways in which educators can sometimes attribute cultural stereotypes to immigrant students and view them as “reluctant learner[s]” (Campano, 2007, p. 32) or “overly quiet” (Gay, 2010, p. 60). In the Milnes and Cheng (2008) study, educators made a range of generalized assumptions about their ELLs. Hannah, Sara, and Angela view their ELL students as unique individuals with diverse experiences and needs. Their responses reveal how student identity – with all its nuances and complexities – plays a crucial role in their assessment and instruction.
There are some key areas of difference between the participants’ responses that are worth noting. Hannah was the only teacher to talk explicitly and extensively about her own identity perhaps because of her personal experience as an English language learner. While Sara and Hannah seemed less concerned about language testing, Angela’s responses suggest that she regularly uses formal tests and assessments with her ELLs. Angela’s practices may in part be due to her experience as a full-time ESL teacher. This experience may have also allowed her to identify more challenges related to formal ELL assessment compared to the other two participants.

Nevertheless, all three participants expressed some limitations of formal or standardized assessments. Theorists of culturally relevant pedagogy are weary of the singular approaches to standardized assessment practices, as they tend to ignore the diverse positions that students inhabit (Campano, 2007; Gay, 2010). Gay (2010) discusses how teachers can sometimes ignore the needs of their students, as they feel pressured to teach to the test. Educators of CRT believe that rigid and formal assessment approaches do not fully illustrate what their students really know (Ladson-Billings, 2009). In the context of supporting ELLs, the participants revealed the limitations of assessments they have had experiences with, describing them as lacking cultural relevance (Hannah), lacking specificity (Angela), and out-dated (Sara).

These case studies reveal specific strategies and approaches for supporting ELL students through culturally relevant assessment practices. All three teachers differentiate their assessment practices to meet the needs of their students. They also ensure that cultural and social issues are central to class discussions. They invite their students to talk about their own personal experiences and believe this to be of great importance with regards to assessing the depth of their students’ knowledge as well as helping them to
develop socially and emotionally. To return to Ladson-Billings’ (2009) definition of culturally relevant teaching as “a pedagogy that empowers students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically by using cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills, and attitudes” (p. 20), it is clear that social and emotional wellbeing are central to successful CRT. Hannah, Sara, and Angela strive to create supportive environments in which their ELL students can share openly and make mistakes freely without judgment. Lucas, Villegas, and Freedson-Gonzalez (2008) explain that “a safe, welcoming classroom environment with minimal anxiety about performing in a second language is essential for ELLs to learn” (p. 364). Theorists of CRT argue that community is central to creating a culturally relevant classroom (Campano, 2007; Ladson-Billings, 2009). For Hannah community is centered on celebration, for Sara it is “sensitive” and “safe,” and for Angela it must be “warm” and “respectful.” Regardless of their differing definitions, each educator aims to foster a community that validates the diverse knowledge and experiences of their English language learners, and of all their students, in ways that allow them to develop and thrive.
Chapter 5: DISCUSSION

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to explore how three educators support the diverse needs of English language learners through culturally relevant assessment practices. The central research questions posed in this project were: a) In what ways are junior/intermediate teachers (grades 4 to 10) engaging with culturally relevant assessment practices for English language learners? b) What do these practices look like? c) What challenges do teachers currently face in assessing their ELL students? My central motivation for conducting this study emerged from my interest in examining the everyday assessment practices that teachers use to support their English language learners with an emphasis on assessment for and as learning.

The findings that emerged from the three interviews reveal that culturally relevant assessment practices for ELLs are rich, varied, and multifaceted. The case studies illustrate that all three participants demonstrate that in order for assessment to be culturally relevant, it must be differentiated to best meet the individual needs of each English language learner. Participants shared a wealth of strategies that they draw from and implement depending on such factors as students’ personal interests and strengths, level of English proficiency, and educational history. When necessary, they also provide accommodations, such as visual aids and translations, to ensure that each student has an opportunity to succeed. All three participants integrate culturally relevant content into their instruction to ensure that students can personally connect with the material explored in class. They emphasized the importance of discussing social and cultural issues in order to provide rich opportunities to assess how students think, as opposed to the facts they are able to remember. Finally, the participants also revealed the ways in which identity and
community are central to culturally relevant assessment. In each interview, they shared their commitment to constructing safe and supportive environments where students can feel free to exchange their unique experiences and knowledge.

**Implications and Recommendations**

*Implications for the Researcher*

When I first began to develop ideas and questions for this study I was not entirely sure what I was looking for. The Milnes and Cheng (2008) study raised many concerns with regards to equitable assessment for English language learners. Various texts on culturally relevant teaching helped me to establish a foundation from which to explore those concerns (Campano, 2007; Gay, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 1994; 1995; 2009). But still, I struggled to envision what the findings of this study might reveal. This uncertainty was at times unsettling and discouraging, leading me to believe that perhaps little could be said on the topic of culturally relevant assessment for ELLs. But my participants’ meaningful responses and narratives reinvigorated my curiosity.

From listening to Hannah, Sara, and Angela’s experiences, I came to understand that their assessment practices were *responses* to their students (Campano, 2007). There were no catchall strategies that always worked, only ones that often or sometimes did in certain contexts for specific students. From this I learned the significant degree to which assessment, in addition to instruction, must be responsive to the lives and identities of my students. Culturally relevant assessment has more to do with stories than statistics. The personal narratives students share in the classroom and the stories they relate about the world around them are where learning takes place. Assessment must attend to the stories students tell rather than on numerical averages and standardized evaluations.
In our conversations about assessment, my participants inevitably brought up the importance of community. Their experiences helped me to view assessment as a communal process in which all members are constantly sharing and responding to the knowledge that circulates in the classroom. Hannah, Sara, and Angela’s critical, self-reflective, and responsive approaches have had a significant impact on my philosophy of education. Now, I view teaching and learning as a process of storytelling, and I view assessment as a way of ensuring that this process is thoughtful and meaningful. The opportunity to speak with teachers on the ground about the issues they care about has helped me to become a more impassioned educator and researcher.

Implications and Recommendations for the Educational Community

In many ways this project is a response to some of the concerns raised in the Milnes and Cheng (2008) study, which does not address the social and cultural assumptions made by some of the participants. This earlier study led me to pursue a project focused around the cultural and social dimensions of assessment and evaluation to help address this gap. I used culturally relevant pedagogy both to inform my analysis and to contribute to the existing field by focusing on assessment practices and strategies, which are often absent from discussions of culturally relevant teaching. Rather than formal language evaluation, this project sheds light on three teachers’ formative assessment practices in order to highlight the significance of these everyday interactions on students’ experiences and learning. It is my hope that this project will invigorate further discussion of how to ensure that instruction and assessment are responsive to the individual needs of a growing number of English language learners in Toronto schools.

I cannot offer a prescriptive list of what specific strategies teachers should and must use because culturally relevant assessment relies on who is in the classroom. But
this does not mean that educators cannot benefit from the sharing and exchanging of strategies that they have found to work in their own experiences. The participants in this study did not have explicit training in culturally relevant teaching, but were familiar in some ways with its pedagogical objectives. Ministry resources and professional development should be dedicated to making information about culturally relevant teaching and assessment more widely accessible. With a greater understanding of what culturally relevant assessment can look like and the impact it can have on student learning, it is my hope that the educational community will begin to change their approaches to standardized assessment, which as the participants revealed, do not adequately meet the needs of their English language learners.

In the meantime, it is crucial that even when faced with the demands of standardized curricula and evaluation, educators do not lose sight of what assessment is for. With a growing number of English language learners in the Toronto area it might be easy for educators, administrators, and researchers to focus their attention on mechanisms for improving English language proficiency. As much as English language development is important, it is not everything. To return to Hannah’s statement, “thinking […] is the big important thing.” Hannah, Sara, and Angela use their assessments to help students develop life skills to express their thoughts, opinions, and experiences rather than focusing on minute facts and grammatical precision. In this way, assessment is a tool for understanding “a particular child’s strength as a person, learner, and thinker,” to use Carini’s words (as cited in Campano, 2007, p. 70). At the same time, it is important to recognize that there are limitations to any assessment strategy no matter how fair or equitable. This is because educators will always be limited in what they can fully know about the students in their classrooms (Campano, 2007). With this in mind, educators
must continually engage in reflective practices about their own knowledge with the aim of always improving on their approaches.

**Further Study**

In order for English language learners to be fully supported in their learning, it is crucial to continue this exploration of how culturally relevant assessment practices can be successfully implemented. I believe that future exploration on this topic would benefit from a greater number of research participants. Given the ongoing and self-reflective nature of culturally relevant pedagogy, I also believe that it would be tremendously useful to conduct a longitudinal study that follows the same group of educators in their development of assessment strategies and practices. Hannah’s reference to her own experiences as an English language learner raised some thought-provoking questions about the role of teacher identity in culturally relevant assessment that could also be an area worth exploring. While listening to each participant’s rich experiences, I could not help but wonder what their students might say. To further illuminate this discussion, researchers could conduct interviews with English language learners about their own experiences with culturally relevant assessment and their perceptions of their progress. Finally, research could be conducted to examine the impact of culturally relevant assessment in other kinds of classrooms, some in non-ELL contexts. I believe future research on this topic must take place in order to provide educators with a continual wealth of resources to draw from and contribute to.

**Conclusion**

Culturally relevant assessment practices are essential for teaching and supporting English language learners. These practices allow students to demonstrate and see the
value in their knowledge as they develop their English abilities (Campano, 2007). As Gay (2010) points out, “competency in more than one communication system is a strength, a resource, and a necessity to be cultivated for students living in pluralistic societies” (p. 82). The diverse languages spoken by English language learners must be celebrated within the classroom rather than viewed as a weakness to be overcome. More broadly, culturally relevant assessment helps to foster a community of learners who desire to achieve together rather than in isolation (Campano, 2007; Ladson-Billings, 2009). This kind of community values every voice and every experience that is shared and respects those that remain silent. In practicing culturally relevant assessment, teachers model what empathetic, sensitive, and meaningful responses to others can look like. This is an important skill for students to learn and take out into the world. Finding the appropriate strategies for individual learners is no easy task and demands a great deal of trial and error. But this is a necessary task in the project of ensuring that all classrooms are equitable and responsive spaces.
References


Appendix A: Interview Questions
Thank you for participating in this interview. My research topic explores teachers’ assessment practices with English language learners. This interview will be no more than 45 minutes long. I will be asking you 14 questions. Please feel free to ask for clarification at any time. Do you have any questions for me before we begin?

Professional Background:

1. How long have you been teaching?

2. What experience do you have with teaching English language learners?

3. Have you received any training or professional development specifically for supporting English language learners?

4. Have you received any training or professional development related to Culturally Relevant Pedagogy?

Introduction to Assessment and Evaluation Practices:

5. Can you describe the ways in which you assess your students so that their diverse learning needs and ways of expressing their knowledge are considered?

6. Can you describe some of your most commonly used assessment practices?

Assessment in the ELL context:

7. What differences, if any, are there in your approach to assessing English language learners and non-ELLS?

8. Can you share a specific experience you have had with assessing an English language learner?

Culturally Relevant Assessment:

9. Can you talk about the ways in which an ELL students’ linguistic background impacts your approach to assessment?
   a. Can you give specific examples?

10. Can you talk about the different cultural backgrounds of some of your students within your class?

11. How does this diversity in cultural background impact your approach to assessment?
   a. Can you give specific examples?
Role of Growing Success:

12. Growing Success is the Ministry’s new official policy document on assessment and evaluation in Ontario. Have you had any specific training on this document?
   a. If so, to what extent has this document helped to inform your general assessment practices?
   b. To what extent has this document helped to inform your assessment practices for ELLs in particular?

13. Have your assessment practices for ELLs changed at all over time? If so, how and why?
   a. Do you think Growing Success has had an impact on your shift in assessment?

Conclusion:

14. Is there anything else you would like to share with me about assessing your ELLs and/or culturally relevant pedagogy?
Appendix B: Letter of Consent for Interview

Date: __________________

Dear ____________,

I am a graduate student at University of Toronto, OISE in the Master of Teaching Program. For my major research paper, I am exploring the ways in which culture, language, and other social factors impact teachers’ assessment practices with English language learners. I think that your knowledge and experience will provide important insights into this topic.

I am writing a report on this study as a requirement of the Master of Teaching Program. My course instructor who is providing support for the process is Dr. Arlo Kempf. My research supervisor is Dr. Shelley Murphy. The purpose of this requirement is to allow us to become familiar with a variety of ways to do research. My data collection consists of one 45 minute interview that will be digitally recorded and fully transcribed. I would be grateful if you would allow me to interview you at a place and time convenient for you.

The contents of this interview will be used for my assignment, which will include a final paper, as well as informal presentations to my colleagues and/or potentially at a conference or in a publication. I will not use your name or anything else that might identify you or your school in my written work, oral presentations, or publications. This information remains confidential, and pseudonyms will be used for all names. The only people who will have access to my assignment work will be my research group, research supervisor, and my course instructor. You are free to change your mind at any time, and to withdraw even after you have consented to participate without negative consequences. You may decline to answer any specific questions. I will destroy the digital recording after the paper has been presented and/or published which may take up to five years after the data has been collected. There are no known risks or benefits to you for assisting in the project.

Please sign the attached form, if you agree to be interviewed. The second copy is for your records. Thank you very much for your time, insights, and generosity.

Yours sincerely,

Stephanie Cheung
cstephanieling.cheung@mail.utoronto.ca

Arlo Kempf
arlo.kempf@utoronto.ca
Consent Form

I acknowledge that the topic of this interview has been explained to me and that any questions that I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction. I understand that I can withdraw at any time without penalty.

I have read the letter provided to me by Stephanie Cheung and agree to participate in an interview for the purposes described.

Signature: ________________________________

Name (printed): ________________________________

Date: ________________________________