EQAO Preparation and the Effects on In-Classroom Instruction

By

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Abstract

Each year the Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO) conducts a large-scale assessment of Grade 3, Grade 6 and Grade 9 students in Ontario. There is much controversy among educators and students alike regarding the purposes of EQAO. This study investigates how EQAO preparation can influence in-classroom instruction for Grade 3, Grade 6 and Grade 9 students. Using semi-structured interviews with three practicing educators, this study serves to explore how educators develop EQAO test preparation materials for their students, and explores the structures in which teachers are able to utilize their autonomy. Some key findings of the study include: understanding EQAO as a single piece of assessment, identifying the perceived validity and reliability of EQAO, and the ways in which EQAO alters the dynamic of a school. As a result, the study identifies the implications of each and its influence on teachers, school administrations, and the parents who seek accountability in public education. While acknowledging the limited scope of this research, the study proposes multi-dimensional suggestions for various stakeholders in education, by addressing the system of structure first, and the powers of influence within the education system.

Keywords: EQAO, In-Classroom Instruction, Standardized Testing, Assessment.
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Chapter 1: Introduction

1.0 Research Context and Problem

In Canada, there is no Federal Department of Education or a National System of Education. Instead, provincial and territorial governments regulate the education systems (Government of Canada, 2016). In Ontario, education is seen as a secondary system of socialization and learning to the primary responsibility of parents and/or guardians of children (Government of Canada, 2016). As education is publicly funded, the Ministry of Education of Ontario is held accountable to taxpayers and parents and/or guardians and all other stakeholders.

Prior to the 1990’s, the public trusted the province to provide education to their children. However, due to economic uncertainties during the 90’s, parents began to worry about the quality of education provided to their children (Earl, 1995). The concerns expressed by parents, galvanized the government into action and they established the Royal Commission on Learning in May 1993 to ensure good-quality education for all children becoming productive citizens and meeting the challenges of the 21st century. One of the many important recommendations by the Royal Commission on Learning was number 51, which states:

That the construction, administration, scoring and reporting of the two assessments be the responsibility of a small agency, independent of the Ministry of Education and Training, and operating at a very senior level, to be called the Office of Learning Assessment and Accountability; (Ministry of Education, 1995, para. 51).

This led to the creation of the Education Quality and Assurance Office (EQAO) in 1996 (Education Quality and Accountability Office, 2013). The purpose of this organization is to monitor student achievement through the administration of large-scale provincial assessments.
(Education Quality and Accountability Office, 2013). These tests provided public accountability for the effectiveness of the provinces publicly funded education system (Education Quality and Accountability Office, 2013). It should be noted that during the 1980’s while other “provinces and American states were expanding their assessment programs, Ontario left assessments in the hands of educators at the district level” (Earl, 1995, p. 46). This is important to note, because during this time, Ontario had the choice to develop multiple assessments that could be used for university entrance exams (like our American counterparts), but instead chose to develop provincial curriculum guidelines (Earl, 1995). It was this choice of entrusting education to the expertise of educators that later concerned the public who demanded accountability.

The EQAO is an agent of the Ontario government. However, it operates as a separate entity dealing at arm’s length with other governmental bodies. EQAO has stated that the separation of organizations allow for developing and reporting on province-wide tests which are bias free and to appraise student achievement based on the curriculum expectations set by the Ministry of Education (Ministry of Education, 2009). “The first large-scale educational assessment was for reading, writing, and mathematics expectations for Grade 3 (i.e. at the end of the primary division) and was conducted during the 1996-1997 school year” (Education Quality and Accountability Office, 2013, p. 7).

After each EQAO test is completed and the data is compiled, the organization is required to report test results to the public and make recommendations to the Ministry of Education for improvement (Ministry of Education, 2009). It is a tendency for parents to praise the government for providing public accountability for their taxes, and evidence for their children’s educational development (Education Quality and Accountability Office, 2013). Although the results of EQAO testing are readily available, it is challenging for all stakeholders to analyze the results of
the data and how they shape curriculum development and educational policy (Earl, 1995). For many, the scores on assessments, “are likely interpreted simplistically and viewed as absolute entities (like money in the bank)” (Earl, 1995, p. 54). This deficiency in the understanding and interpretation of the results can leave students frustrated with their performance, parents dissatisfied with the provision of education, and educators caught in the crossfire of both.

When educators are placed in the middle of both student and parent expectations, and they feel pressured to ensure successful results, they can revert to a practice known as “teaching to the test” (Louis, 2006, p. 132). Teaching to the test is considered item-teaching, which is where a teacher narrowly focuses their instruction around the actual items known to be found on the test of a set of look-alike items (Louis, 2006). In the long run, this style of teaching involves only short-term memory, and does not prepare students to transfer their knowledge to novel situations (Louis, 2006, p. 133). With increasing pressure placed on students to outperform their peers on large-scale testing, this method of coaching students to complete the test has become widely accepted (Monty Neill & Medina, 1989, p. 694).

1.1 Articulation of the Research Problem and The Purpose of the Study

This study explored how EQAO preparation in the elementary panel (Grade 3 and Grade 6) affect in-classroom instruction. EQAO tests are conducted in a student’s academic career three times, in Grade 3 and Grade 6 for Reading, Writing and Mathematics, and in Grade 9 for Mathematics (Ministry of Education, 2016). These assessments are conducted as independent units and they do not have any bearing on the course of tertiary education. Whereas, in the United States, multiple standardized assessments are conducted throughout a student’s academic career with the sole purpose of preparing students to complete a university admissions test – Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT). This test determines tertiary schooling options for students who
wish to further their education.

In Ontario, EQAO benchmarks student achievement and provides recommendations of improvement to the Ministry of Education, who then forward these findings to the School Boards. However, these results are released the following academic year with no bearing on Grade 3 and/or Grade 6 students’ final report card. Even though the results have no immediate effect on the promotion of students to enter the next grade, the results are published and favourably regarded as an accurate measurement of student’s achievement by parents and/or guardians (Earl, 1995). This understanding raised questions of how effective and purposeful it was for Ontario Grade 3 and/or 6 students to complete EQAO testing without a longitudinal analysis.

1.2 Research Questions

The primary question that guided the study was: how does preparation, such as direct-teaching, provision of resources, and sample tests for EQAO in Grade 3 and Grade 6 affect in-classroom instruction?

Subsidiary questions to further guide this inquiry include:

1. What resources and/or in-service support is provided for Grade 3 and Grade 6 Teachers to prepare for EQAO?
2. What technologies are developed for the promotion of student success amongst Grade 3 and Grade 6 students who will complete the EQAO examination?
3. How do EQAO results impact teacher pedagogies and future instruction?

The research aimed to raise awareness about the importance of providing teachers with sufficient resources and strategies for in-classroom instruction. The purpose of these resources and strategies were to facilitate the successful completion of EQAO for Grade 3 and Grade 6
students. By highlighting the need to equip future teachers with the appropriate tools and resources, I identified the deficiencies of the program and encouraged teacher resilience and confidence within the context of standardized testing.

1.3 Background of the Researcher

The topic of standardized testing piqued my interest as I was contemplating whether to pursue my university education in Canada or the United States. It was during this deliberation that I recognized that although my grades were important, they were not a significant part of the decision process for university admissions in the United States. The weight of admissions to a good American university relied heavily on the results of my Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT). I felt this was an unfair process, because I was ill-prepared to complete the SAT. The SAT is one of the most widely discussed methods of standardized testing conducted in the United States. When an individual scores in a higher percentile on the testing, they are considered to be “on track for college readiness” (College Board, 2016). When applying to American universities, students who score higher on the SAT tests relative to their peers, have an increased chance of obtaining admission to higher ranked universities across the country. It should be noted, that American students are prepared for the SAT from Kindergarten to Grade 12. The American curriculum is designed to teach the content that appears on the SAT test, and multiple assessments are conducted during the fall and spring of both eight and nine grade in order to measure the skills and knowledge, and help educators to redesign their teaching to better prepare students to meet the defined Grade-Level Benchmarks (College Board, 2016).

As a student of the Ontario education system, I have had limited experiences with standardized testing, which automatically placed me at a disadvantage for completing the SAT. The first being, the designed content for the SAT. I was not familiar with American history, or
the style of grammar and sentence structure, and/or the design of their questions. The second being, my exposure to completing standardized tests. When I completed my first EQAO test in Grade 3, the test had been in existence for two years. At that time, EQAO was relatively new, not widely discussed, and was downplayed as a test that had no bearing on ones final grades in Grade 3 – it was just something we did. I remembered we did not have any practice booklets or lessons set aside to teach us the content that would be found on the test. I remembered EQAO as something separate and disconnected from school. If you failed the EQAO, it did not necessarily mean you failed Grade 3. My experiences in Grade 6 were similar. This time around, we had practice booklets and lessons devoted to understanding what would be on the test, but we were still reassured that EQAO had no influence on my final report card. I can recall both times receiving my results for EQAO the following academic year, and thinking to myself “what was the point?” I received my results, but did not remember what I wrote, and was it important? I had successfully completed the grade in which I was assessed. This experience left me wondering about the relevance of EQAO to my education.

In the American education system, students take multiple standardized tests throughout the course of their academic careers. These test are used as benchmarks for instruction to improve student success. They prepare students for what can be considered the final standardized test of their academic career – the SAT. This test determines a student’s probability of attending a prestigious university. In contrast, EQAO testing conducted in Ontario only measures students’ achievement at three levels throughout their educational career (Grade 3, Grade 6 and Grade 9). The measurements do not prepare students to take a final standardized test similar like that of the SAT to determine university prospects. Instead, Ontario University admissions are based on students’ final mark in Grade 12 that can be skewed negatively or positively within the course of
a school year. The discrepancy between EQAO as an academic measurement and university admissions in Ontario, calls into question the purpose of standardized testing in the Ontario education system; as EQAO does not determine a student secondary options like that of the SAT completed in the United States. Furthermore, if the EQAO test is not used in the preparation of students for a final test, the million-dollar question is – how does EQAO change the way teachers instruct their students?

As an aspiring educator, this question has become increasingly significant. As EQAO does not prepare students for a final assessment, what are the implications of the EQAO results on students, parents and teachers, and what are the perceived notions of a student and/or school that does not do well on EQAO? I am motivated to undertake this inquiry as a student that felt unprepared to complete the SAT, and as an educator seeking solutions that will effectively prepare my students for life-long learning.

1.4 Preview of the Whole Master of Teaching Research Project

The research project consists of five chapters. The first chapter, introduced and identified the research problem and the purpose for the inquiry. In Chapter Two, I reviewed the current body of knowledge surrounding EQAO testing in Ontario, by identifying what in-services resources are provided to teachers, and how the preparations for EQAO in the Grade 3 and/or 6 classrooms are impacted. This chapter developed a framework that was used to identify gaps in the literature and justified the purpose for completing an inquiry into the topic of EQAO testing and its effects on in-classroom instruction. Chapter Three allowed me to highlight and describe the research methodology used for the collection of data on the topic. It also outlined the procedures for conducting the interviews, and reviewed the strengths and limitations of the methodology. For the purpose of this research, I conducted three interviews with elementary
educators in Ontario. In Chapter Four, I reported on the findings from the conducted interview. To do this, the chapter is segmented into themes to discuss the differences (if any) between my findings and the literature review. This allowed for a clear analysis of how gaps in the literature can be supplemented with research to develop a complete understanding of the inquiry. Lastly, I discussed the implications of the research in Chapter Five. This chapter demonstrated the importance of understanding how the preparation for EQAO in Grade 3 and/or 6 classrooms influence in-classroom instructions. The implications of this research were examined from both broad (what does this mean for the educational community) and narrow perspectives (what does this mean for classroom teachers) in education. Once examined, recommendations were provided as they emerge from the research, and a call to future explorations were given to question how EQAO testing affects teaching practices.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.0 Introduction

In this chapter, I reviewed the literature in the areas focusing on the development of EQAO assessments, the validity and reliability of standardized testing and how the two shape in-classroom instruction. A portion of this chapter highlighted the importance of understanding EQAO as a snapshot assessment used to benchmark student progress and achievement. This was critical, as it laid the foundation to discuss how institutions could misuse EQAO results, to create a sense of powerlessness of teachers, and increase pressure on teachers and students to produce ideal results. Finally, I reviewed how these factors alter in-classroom instruction, and whether it was to the benefit of students.

2.1 A Brief Overview of Public Education and EQAO

In Ontario, the Ministry of Education (a Provincial government department) regulates the standards of practices for teachers and establishes the curriculum expectation at each grade level (Government of Ontario, 2015). The Ministry of Education has three priorities: increasing student achievement, closing gaps in student achievement and increasing public confidence in publicly funded education (Ministry of Education, 2016). To achieve these goals, the Ministry continually evaluates and renews curriculum expectations, and develops strategic initiatives to unlock each student’s potential that attend one of the 4,000 publicly funded elementary schools (Ministry of Education, 2016). As education is a public commodity, the Ministry of Education is accountable to three key stakeholders: taxpayers (often time parents), elected officials and teachers (Volante, 2007, p. 1). In the early 1990s, under a social-democratic government, educational expectations were adjusted to align with the present shift from the manufacturing to service industry (MacLellan, 2009, p. 58). To ensure a competitive advantage in global markets,
the quality of education in Ontario was to be measured using large-scale standardized testing (MacLellan, 2009, p. 58). Although large-scale standardized testing was not uncommon South of border, the first large-scaled standardized test (EQAO) was the first provincial assessment in 30 years “with real implications for individual students, teachers, schools and boards” (Childs & Lawson, 2003, p. 356). It can be interpreted that the introduction of EQAO was for the purpose of measuring educational achievements for comparative and competitive advantages.

2.2 Royal Commission of Learning Report on Education in Ontario

The Royal Commission of Learning (RCL) Report: For the Love of Learning is a unanimous report created to highlight opportunities to improve the quality of the Ontario education system during the economic downturn of 1995 (News Release: For the Love of Learning, 1995). This report did so by: (a) centering the concerns of parents who “want to do what is best for [their] youngsters”, (b) acknowledging that each student has an array of different needs and, (c) ensuring that the students graduating from high school are equipped to be successful (Royal Commission on Learning Report: Short Version, 1995). Although the RCL report was idealistic, it provided practical methods of achieving educational excellence (News Release: For the Love of Learning, 1995). One particular way of ensuring the quality of education in Ontario was to develop a “province-wide uniform assessment” of literacy and numeracy at the end of Grade Three, and a “literacy guarantee test” in Grade 10 (News Release: For the Love of Learning, 1995).

The purpose of the province-wide assessment was to obtain a snapshot of student’s knowledge in comparison to the provincial standards (Earl, 1995, p. 48). These assessments were used as a tool to encourage the development of improving teaching strategies and made more information available to parents about what is being taught and learned (Royal Commission on
Learning Report: Short Version, 1995). Originally, the information and the dissemination of the results were to be published in educational communities and within school boards. However, to ensure accountability to all stakeholders, the results were shared publicly (Earl, 1995, pp. 50-51).

2.2.1 Education Quality and Assurance Office (EQAO)

To administer the province-wide assessment, the Royal Commission of Learning proposed the establishment of the “Office of Learning Assessment and Accountability” (OLAA) in 1995 (News Release: For the Love of Learning, 1995). In addition to administering assessments, the organization was also responsible for monitoring system performance, and generating documents from results that would improve educational legislation (News Release: For the Love of Learning, 1995). In 1996, OLAA established the Education Quality and Assurance Office (EQAO) branch to monitor student achievement, administer large-scale provincial assessments, and provide public accountability for the effectiveness of the provinces publicly funded education system (Education Quality and Accountability Office, 2013). The first full-census assessment was for Grade 3 and 6 Mathematics, and once completed the results were made available to the public (Education Quality and Accountability Office, 2013). Since 1995, EQAO has developed numerous assessments for Grade 3 and Grade 6 students based on the Ministry of Educations curriculum expectations, and they have become significant measurements of quality education through highly publicized results (Ministry of Education, 2009). The favourability of EQAO testing in Ontario is reflected in a 2010 study where an overwhelming 88% of parents considered provincial testing important, 74% believed that EQAO results are used to improve the quality of education, and 69% believed provincial testing provides accountability to parents and other taxpayers (Education Quality and Accountability Office, 2013, pp. 21-22). These statistics gives credence to the narrative that EQAO is not only an
accurate assessment of a child’s progress, but also a comprehensive and parent-friendly assessment.

2.2.2 Reliability and validity of large-scale standardized testing

The reliability of a test refers to how consistent the scoring of a test is, and validity refers to how appropriate are the means of assessments (Volante, 2007, p. 5). EQAO tests are constructed by considering a number of factors that include: fairness and level of difficulty, demographic aspects, “pedagogical considerations and psychometric properties” (Education Quality and Accountability Office, 2013, p. 14). Each year, after the completion of the EQAO tests, the psychometric and data management teams “refine their processes and procedures to reflect best practices and ensure the EQAO test scores are valid and accurate” (Education Quality and Accountability Office, 2013, p. 16). To ensure the validity of test scores, EQAO ensures that up to “1,700 markers (mostly individuals from the education system) are hired and trained in a process to consistently grade test papers” (Office of the Auditor General of Ontario, 2009, p. 13). EQAO reports that markers consistently meet the “target of 95% for the validity to grade papers within one scoring level” (Office of the Auditor General of Ontario, 2009, p. 13). However, on a per question basis, EQAO does not often meet the “70% target of having the same grade” (Office of the Auditor General of Ontario, 2009, p. 13). In addition, to scoring discrepancies, educators highlight that the test reflects “regional, linguistic and socio-economic disparities rather than differences in the quality of teaching” (Volante, 2007, p. 7). These statistics reflect how EQAO results are helpful in providing a snapshot of students’ potential, but not a complete picture. Therefore, EQAO is likely a reliable and statistically valid assessment as it closely aligns with the provincial curriculum (Volante, 2007, p.6). It should be noted that EQAO results in Ontario are reported as “irrefutable” statistics despite the limited consideration of diversity and standard
of living in each region (News Release: For the Love of Learning, 1995). The misrepresentation of publicized statistics can result in negative effects on both students, schools, and communities.

2.3 The Effects of Standardized Testing

Some educators view standardized testing as a “catch-all” assessment that ignores socio-economic and political determinants of education (Neill, 2008, pp. 34-35). With this in mind, the results of the EQAO test can be misleading if interpreted out of context. An example of the results being misused is demonstrated through the official school ranking of Ontario through the Fraser Institute School Report Card (Neill, 2008, p. 3).

2.3.1 The Fraser Institute Report

The Fraser Institute is an independent (and registered charity) public policy think tank established in 1974 (The Fraser Institute, 2016). The formation of the institute was to study, measure and broadly communicate government policies that affect the quality of life for Canadians (The Fraser Institute, 2016). Since its inception, the institute has identified rigorous methods for quality measurement (The Fraser Institute, 2016). This has led to the coined phrase “if it matters, measure it” (The Fraser Institute, 2016). The value of measurement has extended to the development of a public document called the Report Card for each province and territory (Cowley & Easton, 2015). The purpose of the Report Card is to provide information for anyone to analyze and compare the performance of individual schools (Cowley & Easton, 2015). The data for the Report Card is based on seven indicators, all of which are province-wide tests of literacy and mathematics administered by the province’s Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO) (Cowley & Easton, 2015). Schools are then ranked on their performance on these tests. If a school’s population average on each test is higher than the provincial standard (Level 3), the school is assigned a greater value (A-) overall, and if the school’s population
average is lower than the provincial standard, the school is assigned a lower value (C-) (The Fraser Institute, 2016).

The Fraser Institute insists that each strand of EQAO corresponds with a specific weighted mean used to compare all school in Ontario for one academic year at a time (Cowley & Easton, 2016). During the weighted mean process, each level of achievement corresponded to a numerical value (Cowley & Easton, 2015). For example, Level 1 was given the value of 1, Level 2 was given 2, Level 3 was given 3, and Level 4 was given 4. These numbers correspond with the Ministry of Educations evaluation system (Cowley & Easton, 2015). The overall weighted mean was then used for the direct comparison of all schools in Ontario without the consideration of different learning needs for students, such as: students with Individual Education Plans (IEPs) or students who are English Language Learners (ELLs) (Cowley & Easton, 2016).

For example, for the academic year of 2014-2015, Arbor Glen Public School (Toronto) was ranked number one on the Fraser Institute Report card. The school’s population is characterized as 14.6% of students are enrolled in ESL and 12.2% are enrolled in Special Needs Programs (Cowley & Easton, 2016). When these statistics are compared to the last ranking school on the Fraser Institute Report card, it is seen that Ealing Public School (Hamilton) student population is characterized as 6.7% of students are enrolled in ESL and 46.7% are enrolled in Special Needs Programs (Cowley & Easton, 2016). This example demonstrates that regardless of your school’s characterization, all schools are measured using the same EQAO results. This places increasing pressure on both students, to perform on the test, and teachers to produce results.

2.3.2 Implications of the Fraser Institute Report Card

As the Fraser Institute Report Card ranks schools using objective publicly available data, it becomes increasingly clear that the EQAO assessments are used to define clear-cut winners
and losers in a process that was designed to encourage life-long learning (Royal Commission on Learning Report: Short Version, 1995). Thus, as predicted, the publicized results of EQAO create an intensified public pressure to shift the focus to controlling schools rather than improving the curriculum (Earl, 1995).

Although Cowley & Easton (2015) provided a detailed analysis of the scoring design of the Report Card there is one glaring error, the effectiveness of a school cannot be summarized with one indicator provided by the same organization. Instead, there are a variety of factors that classify a quality school environment that cannot simply be tested for on a standardized test (Earl, 1995). An example of this, is leadership within the school community. Students can take initiatives to create leadership opportunities of inclusion for their community, where there is a high influx of newcomers, but perform poorly on EQAO in relation to predominantly English-speaking criteria. This merely measures their ability to effectively master the fundamentals of the English language, but does not speak to their ability to effectively plan and organize to create a culture of inclusion which is an important factor in being good corporate citizens (Earl, 1995).

Unfortunately, a large percentage of the population accepts the results of the test without deeper consideration of what they mean (Earl, 1995). As a result, it is important to demonstrate the limitations of the EQAO results, and define them as a snapshot of students’ ability without overemphasizing standardized test scores as indicators of educational quality (Volante, 2006).

2.4 Teachers and In-Classroom Instructions

Although large-scale standardized testing is widely accepted and believed to be reliable and valid, research suggests that standardized testing brings to light a number of concerns regarding in-classroom instruction. As a high-stakes assessment is implemented, there is increasing pressure for teachers to provide results (Amrein & Berliner, 2002). In order to achieve
results, teachers modify their instruction to teach in methods that are unique and only particular to standardized testing (Amrein & Derliner, 2002). By doing so, standardized testing exaggerates student achievement, and can have effects on learning in the long run (Greene, Winters, & Foster, 2004). The measurements used to determine EQAO preparedness and how they influence in-classroom instructions are: the amount of class time spent directly on test preparation, the content of preparation instruction, and the teaching of test-taking skills (Volante, 2006).

In preparation for the EQAO, some Grade 3 and Grade 6 teachers worry about how much time should be devoted to prepare for the test (Volante, 2006). Sometimes teachers feel preparation for EQAO should only address the three strands of reading, writing and mathematics through seat-work. To do this, teachers forego instructional time of subjects like music and physical education (Volante, 2006). This can alienate a portion of children whose academic strengths lie outside of those areas (Volante, 2006, p. 132). An implication of preparing students using this method is, students who are able to articulate themselves within these three measurable strands may feel superior to those students who are not able to operate within this framework. It is interesting to note, that both sets of students can experiences negative social and emotional repercussions. Another factor is the content provided for EQAO preparation. Some teachers feel pressured to ensure results on the EQAO test that their in-classroom instruction becomes narrowly focused on items that are found on the test (Popham, 2001). Examples of these can be worksheets and test booklets that are provided by the EQAO (Popham, 2001). An implication of preparing students using this method, is that students subconsciously neglect the process of life-long learning in order to learn what is needed to be successful on tests (Beck, Hart, & Kosnik, 2002). The last factor to consider is the teaching of test skills. This method is arguably an important factor for encouraging and increasing the test results of students. This
includes discussing “tricks” for multiple-choice questions, practicing reading the questions before answering, and how to manage anxiety when taking the test (Volante, 2006, pp. 133-134). Overall, the three factors discussed are important when considering how EQAO preparation affects in-classroom instructions. It is important to understand how each factor influences classroom decisions as they determine how prepared each student is to write the EQAO test.

### 2.5 Teacher Preparedness

As previously discussed, large-scaled standardized assessments have increased over the last two decades (Childs & Lawson, 2003, p. 355). In Canada, “5 of the 10 provinces now have centrally mandated testing in the elementary grades” (Childs & Lawson, 2003, p. 355). With a rise of standardized testing in Canada, it is important that teachers (and teacher candidates alike) become familiar with the purpose of assessment, and are able to interpret the results (Childs & Lawson, 2003, p. 357). Once teachers have an understanding the requirements and expectations of EQAO, teachers can properly distinguish between appropriate and inappropriate strategies for preparing students for testing (Volante, 2006, p. 131). Appropriate preparedness for EQAO can be measured through three indicators: “the amount of class time spent directly on test preparation, the content of preparation instruction, and the teaching of test-taking skills” (Volante, Toward Appropriate Preparation for Standardized Achievement Testing, 2006, p. 131).

In 2000, Ruth Childs and Alexandra Lawson of the University of Toronto developed a questionnaire that measured the knowledge, perspective and preparedness of Ontario’s large-scaled standardized assessment – EQAO. The questionnaire was distributed to approximately 450 teacher candidates, of which 360 responded (Childs & Lawson, 2003). 215 participants were on the elementary panel, and 145 on the secondary panel (Childs & Lawson, 2003).

This survey established that of the 215 Elementary teacher candidates, 67.9% “believed
they understood the reason for the assessment”, but 49.3% believed “EQAO did not measure what they intended to measure” (Childs & Lawson, 2003, p. 362). This percentage aligned with the 44.7% of Elementary teacher candidates that disagree that “EQAO tests encourage teachers to teach the curriculum” (Childs & Lawson, 2003, p. 363). The above statistics reflects the importance of EQAO testing as a tool for teaching, but also as a hindrance of EQAO supporting the Ontario curriculum. Instead, 72.0% of teacher candidates believe that students should prepare for the EQAO test by practicing their test taking skills (Childs & Lawson, 2003, p. 363). As demonstrated through the questionnaire results, when EQAO testing does not align with the Ontario curriculum expectations, classroom instructions are adjusted to “teach to the test” by “putting items similar in format to the EQAO items on classroom tests” (Childs & Lawson, 2003, p. 363).

In addition, “85.6% of the Elementary teacher candidates admitted they would be nervous if their class was to take the EQAO test” (Childs & Lawson, 2003, p. 363). This percentage is not surprising given the previous statistics that outline the perceived discrepancy between the Ontario curriculum and materials EQAO assesses for. To correct this, Child’s and Lawson suggest that teacher candidates be introduced to EQAO assessments during their teacher education and as continual professional development to accommodate for the continual change (p. 366).

2.6 Conclusion

In this literature review, I examined the initial purpose of EQAO assessments in Ontario, how they have changed over the past two decades, and discussed the implications of this assessment for teachers. I reviewed the EQAO assessment from the perspectives of two key stakeholders, taxpayers (parents), and teachers. This chapter highlighted the importance of
accountability in education and the need to measure the quality of education through holistic lenses and not just a statistical one. This review raised questions of: is EQAO providing accurate and reliable outcomes? Or is EQAO influencing classroom instruction to inflate results due to the fear of teacher, school, and community reputations.

By focusing on the implications of the EQAO results and teacher preparedness, I was able to set a foundation that explores how deep EQAO results create stigmas and define culture in the educational community. It was my hope that this research brings awareness to the importance of providing teacher-education and in-service training to teachers, ensuring that they are empowered to develop holistic EQAO preparation programs that accurately reflect the abilities of students.
Chapter 3: Research Methodology

3.0 Introduction

In this chapter, I explain the research methodology that is used to explore my research topic; how EQAO preparation can change in-classroom instruction. The discussion began with highlighting each element of the methodology and how it aided in the collection of data. Next, I discuss the sampling procedure, how the collection of data is analyzed, and the ethical implications of the study on multiple stakeholders. Lastly, the chapter explores the limitations of the methodology and reviews measures that can be introduced to mitigate the limitations.

3.1 Research Approach & Procedure

In order to examine how the preparation of EQAO affects teacher practices in the classroom, the research methodology of utilizing a variety of quantitative methods to gather and analyze data employed. In addition, the literature review that provides a framework of understanding, data are collected through: (a) three semi-structured interviews with classroom educators, and (b) information from historical reports published by the Education Quality and Accountability Office and the Ministry of Education.

Generally speaking, qualitative methodology is geared towards the investigation of social problems through the identification and analysis of a phenomenon that cannot be analyzed through the collection of numerical data (Kothari, 2004). The qualitative method for the collection of data that was used for the purpose of the study, were semi-structured interviews of elementary educators. This methodology revealed structural and humanistic challenges involved in this study.

3.1.1 Semi-structured interviews of educators
This methodology is inquiry based and brings forth the complexity of the social and educational situations, while accurately defining the reason for the call for change (Creswell, 2013, p. 53). Semi-structured interviews provided the opportunity to observe behaviour, gather resources used by the educator, and gather information that directly influenced the decisions of classroom instruction. Each interview consisted of a set of 15 open-ended questions for the educator to answer (Appendix B). This interview took approximately 30 to 45 minutes to complete. The first five questions were demographic in nature, such as: gender, age, and years of teaching. The second set of five questions asked about the opinions and views on EQAO, such as: do you believe that EQAO is an accurate measurement tool of student success? Lastly, the third set of five questions asked about their experience with EQAO and the challenges associated with preparing students, such as: what available resources are provided to you for the preparations of students?

### 3.2 Instruments of Data Collection

For the purpose of this study, the use of qualitative methodology is to identify and analyze how teachers navigate classroom practices in an elementary grade where EQAO tests are conducted. By using qualitative methodology, the collected data provided specific information about the teaching culture and values, opinions, and behaviours and social contexts (Mack, Woodsong, MacQueen, Guest, & Namey, 2011). This data is often considered intangible, but provided insight about the roles of teachers in understanding the complexity of the present circumstances, and provide rich understandings that can be used to develop specific strategies and tangible implementation plans. (Mack, Woodsong, MacQueen, Guest, & Namey, 2011).

The use of semi-structured interviews of educators provided educators with the opportunity to share their opinions and experiences through a series of open-ended questions that
both validate their current situations, and ask for their input in developing a solution (Moriarty, 2011). This method of data collection allowed interviewees to be relaxed and comfortable, and for the interviewer to begin identifying connections between theoretical and conceptual frameworks (Moriarty, 2011).

Overall, the semi-structured interviews provided for an in-depth understanding of the educational challenges teachers face in preparing for EQAO. Each component provides a different perspective of various stakeholders associated with the process and highlights the gaps within the literature review.

3.3 Participants

In determining the participants for the study, I have selected purposive sampling. Purposive sampling enables me to focus on critical characteristics between each teacher interviewee in order to identify similar emerging theories and/or differences in educational instruction (Robinson, 2011, p. 275). For the purpose of this study, it is important to have participants that are familiar with and have worked within the Ontario education system. As a result, the following criteria are required for teacher participants.

3.3.1 Sampling criteria

The following highlights the sampling criteria that was used to select elementary educators for the purpose of conducting semi-structured interviews.

1. The teacher has taught Grades 3 or 6, and prepared students for EQAO within the minimum of three years.

2. The teacher has personal experience completing a large-scale standardized testing.
3. The teacher must be familiar with present technology used for educational purposes.

4. The teacher teaches in the Greater Toronto Area (Peel, Dufferin, Halton, Durham).

The purpose of these criteria is to explore how teachers within the Greater Toronto Area manage the requirements of the Ontario Curriculum for preparation of EQAO. It is important to conduct interviews with teachers who: (a) have taught the Grades that were being tested to analyze the degree of importance given to EQAO by these teachers, (b) have previous experience with standardized testing to consider their personal experiences of standardized testing, and how it enables them to prepare their current students, (c) have present knowledge of technology to examine how technology can play a role in preparation for the EQAO, and (d) have previously worked in the Greater Toronto Area and are familiar with the current cultures, practices and expectations of teachers, in order to discuss teaching practices.

3.3.2 Sampling procedures/recruitment

In addition to purposive sampling to obtain participants, I used snowball sampling (Robinson, 2011). The first interviewee was a colleague who recently entered the teaching profession. This educator identified other members within the educational community who might be interested in being interviewed about EQAO, and referred those individuals to me. This method is useful, as it guides my research to other individuals who can provide clarity and strategies on the phenomena of EQAO preparedness and student outcomes (Robinson, 2011).

3.3.3 Participant biographies

Barrie Albert is a Certified Teacher in Ontario. Barrie obtained his double-degree in History and English. He is presently working within the Greater Toronto Area (GTA) and is in
his third year of teaching. For the past two years, Barrie has been preparing Grade 3 students for EQAO testing. One of his Additional Qualification Courses which is Special Education, has tremendously contributed to the teaching and preparing of the various needs of his students, particularly for EQAO testing. As an Elementary Teacher, Barrie teaches most of the subject areas except for Physical Education and Music. Before becoming a teacher, he was a Camp Director for Special Needs Students. In this position, he developed and implemented programs for students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD).

Kaira Sybron works within the Greater Toronto Area (GTA) for over five years. In her role as a teacher, she has taught in the French Immersion division. In addition, she has experiences in teaching: Core French Social Studies, Science, Language Arts and prepared students for EQAO at the Grade 6 level. Kaira is activity involved in the yearly scoring of EQAO test papers. Kiara has completed her double-degree in Political Science and Economics and is a Certified Teacher in Ontario. She recently completed her Master of Science in Education focusing on assessment and curriculum development.

Gladys Morgan works within the Greater Toronto Area (GTA) for 19 years. 12 of these years were spent in preparing both Grade 3 and Grade 6 students for EQAO tests. In addition, she was an Item Writer, a Scorer and a Supervisor for EQAO both for Grade 3 and 6. Gladys is a Certified Teacher in Ontario and a recipient of a first-degree in Liberal Arts, and her Master of Education. Gladys has experience in teaching in the Elementary, Middle and High School panels. Before coming to Canada, she taught for 12 years in the Caribbean.

3.4 Data Analysis

The analysis of data is essential to understanding the social phenomena of how teachers manage the demands of curriculum expectations while preparing students to achieve successful
Upon the completion of the interviews with teacher participants, the contents of the interviews were carefully transcribed and transferred into text for thematic coding and analysis. An interpretative technique called “coding” organized the data into reoccurring themes (QSR International, 2016). Once the reoccurring themes have been identified in the transcripts, I conducted an interpretation of the themes. To do this, I carefully considered and identified relationships between two or more themes, compared the relationships and forecasted the outcomes that were grounded in the transcripts (Robinson, 2011).

3.5 Ethical Review Procedures

When conducting my research on how teachers manage curriculum expectations and EQAO preparedness for the success of their students, it was important to consider the ethical implications the study had on my participants, university and me. In order to do so, I took precautions to protect all stakeholders involved.

3.5.1 Potential harms, risks or discomfort

There were no intended harms or risks associated with the interview session. In the unlikely event that a participant felt unsafe or uncomfortable, they were given the option to; skip and not answer any question and/or, withdraw from the study completely without any adverse effects. Their participation in the study was voluntary.

3.5.2 Consent and confidentiality

Participants were provided with an information letter and consent form that highlighted the purpose and aim of the study. Before conducting the interviews, I reviewed the information sheet with each participant. Interviews were held in a private space (chosen by the participants). Participants had the choice to select whether to be audio-taped or not. For the purpose of data
collection, all participants name and any other identifying information were removed. A pseudonym was used in place of the participant’s name, and only I have access to a participant’s demographic information.

All information collected from the interviews and/or audio-tapes were kept in a locked cabinet. Electronic information was password protected and stored on an external hard-drive. When the study was completed, audiotapes, hard copies and electronic data were placed into secured storage and will be kept for five years. After that time, the information will be destroyed.

Final transcripts were made available to participants to ensure the information recorded was complete and accurate. Participants were provided with a final copy of the study.

3.6 Methodological Limitations and Strengths

The most challenging limitation of this study was the sample size of three participants from the education field. The sample size of three can lead to homogeneity of indicators, and generalizations of information that “might not represent a larger populace belief” (Robinson, 2011, p. 129). The implication for the study is that it could presented a skewed result in that the teachers chosen may not have access to adequate strategies that prepare their students for EQAO while managing various stakeholders such as the Ministry of Education, Parents and School Administration.

Despite these limitations, the strength of the research provides a real-life account and validation of the experiences teachers face on a daily basis. I believe it is the experiences of these teachers that underscore the importance of understanding and discussing how teachers create optimal learning experiences for the preparation of EQAO to ensure students’ success. It is the acknowledgement of these stories that provided strategies and opportunities for teachers to share knowledge and create successful environments for learning.
3.7 Conclusion

In conclusion, the described research methodology was essential for the collection and analysis of data for the exploration of understanding how teacher practices in the elementary panel are affected by EQAO preparation. Previously, I highlighted two methods that were used for the collection of data, its significance and the purpose of how these methods achieved the desired result. These were: semi-structural interviews, and historical perspectives. Next, I noted the characteristics needed for each participant, and emphasized what methodology would be used and why it would be advantageous for the purposes of this study. I also discussed the methodology used to transcribe the information and thematically sorted the data for the purposes of coding and identified the reoccurring themes between each participant. The compiled data was stored securely and carefully interpreted. Lastly, the limitations of the study were discussed, and despite the concerns regarding the sample size, the study provides validation for the narratives of teachers and potential opportunities to share successful teaching strategies.

In Chapter 4, I report on the findings of how teachers manage multiple stakeholders and prepare students for EQAO.
Chapter 4: Research Findings

4.0 Introduction

The following chapter highlights how teacher’s perspectives and experiences of EQAO testing influences the preparation of in-classroom instruction for Grade 3 and Grade 6. The information presented in the following chapter is collected from three qualitative interviews that sought further insight into the responsibilities and expectations of teachers when given the responsibility to prepare and administer EQAO testing.

The chapter is categorized by significant themes that were reflected in the three interviews. The findings of these interviews are linked to present scholarship within the field of education, and identify the importance of teacher autonomy and creativity for the development of in-classroom materials. The following themes to be reviewed in the chapter are: EQAO as a single piece of assessment; perceived reliability of EQAO; how purposeful EQAO is in understanding student achievement; the public and professional uses of EQAO and; teacher preparedness for EQAO.

4.1 EQAO as a Single Piece of Assessment

Assessments in education are important as they evaluate the knowledge of students based on specific expectations. For the purposes of assessment in Ontario, educators are required to provide three pieces of assessment: “for”, “as” and “of” (Ministry of Education, 2010, pp. 2-3). The three pieces of assessments evaluate students’ knowledge on the journey of learning materials. These assessments are placed at the beginning, the middle and the end of a unit in order to provide the teacher with a more complete evaluation of how students understand materials and make connections to real-life situations (Ministry of Education, 2010). It should be noted that assessments should be completed frequently and the teacher should use different
methods of assessments. For example, checklists, conferencing and peer-evaluation. These strategies provide students an opportunity to be assessed fairly in their learning based on their learning needs.

Although each participant is at a different stage in their teaching career, each participant interviewed expressed and stressed the importance of viewing EQAO as a single piece of assessment, rather than an assessment that accurately reflects students’ abilities. As a newly Certified Teacher in Ontario, Barrie describes the confusion and discrepancies between in-classroom practices and the uses of assessments in comparison to the EQAO assessment. Barrie notes:

As we’ve learned in our teaching profession, the whole reason we offer various assessments to our students is because every student performs differently. However, with EQAO it is only presented in one form. A written test…In our classroom we offer various assessments to our students because every student performs differently…some [students] maybe better with visual representations, or verbal, but the opportunity isn’t given during EQAO.

As Barrie continued to reflect on the differences between in-classroom assessments and EQAO, he concluded that EQAO testing “…is not an accurate representation of their [student’s] abilities…what if their luck draws that they have a bad day on the day of EQAO testing? It’s basically a snap shot in time for them”. Instead, Barrie makes the connection that:

…we [teachers] do multiple assignments and assessments of our students so we give them opportunities to demonstrate their thinking, using different assessment strategies…whether that is through formal assessments or anecdotal notes.

This sentiment is echoed through all the participant interviews. For example, Gladys, who has
the most years of experience of teaching in comparison to the other participants, states that “…[EQAO] did not reflect students’ real knowledge, nor was it a good assessment tool to place particular importance on”. Instead, Gladys questions the role of EQAO, as it is “not connected to the students reporting piece”. Gladys questions of EQAO is grounded in her personal experience as a parent, educator and a former employee of EQAO. The question still lingers with Gladys, “how do the outcomes of the EQAO results connect with the Grade 3 and 6 report cards”. Gladys sees EQAO testing as a separate entity that adds pressure to the teaching and learning experience of the teacher, as it does not provide tangible outcomes that will assist in students’ learning.

For Kiara, who has several years of experience teaching, preparing students, and scoring EQAO, she emphasizes that EQAO should not be used “…as a be all, end all for learning instead it should be of a baseline for learning”. Kiara further illustrates the importance of not “…teaching to the test, [because] they [students] only focus on the test learning skills, which do not actually work on long-term student learning”. In addition to encouraging long-term learning, Kiara states that:

…when you test a student in those standardized ways of reading and written communication… it doesn’t account for the other different ways of student learning…

In this reflection on teaching practices, Kiara clearly outlines that EQAO excludes different types of learners that are in the classroom, such as auditory, visual, and kinetic learners. It should be noted that the educational expectation is that all learners be considered when developing in-classroom materials and assessments. For example, “students require opportunities to communicate, interact, reflect and explore” (Schwartz & Pollishuke, 2013, p. 72). Furthermore, students who qualify for special education support can be exempted [from EQAO] by not
“participating in one or more of the three parts of the assessment (reading, writing, or mathematics)” (Demeris, Childs & Jordan, 2007, p. 615). These exemptions are granted as it “has been considered and it is determined that the student would not be able to provide evidence of learning under these conditions” (Demeris, Childs & Jordan, 2007, p. 615).

With this information in mind, it is challenging to view EQAO as a complete assessment of students’ abilities, as explored by the participants in this research. This is important to note as the Ministry of Education continues to strive for excellence by encouraging teachers to provide differentiated instruction in their classrooms in order to ensure student success. However, with EQAO it can be seen that the differentiated instructions and assessments provided in-class is not provided on a large-scale testing. The gap between the two denote mixed messages between, what is required by the EQAO office and the expectations of the Ministry of Education, who’s emphasis is striving for excellence through differentiated instruction in the classroom. This can lead to students slipping through the “cracks”, which in turn, widens the achievement gap.

4.2 Perceived Reliability and Validity by Participants

The reliability and validity of EQAO is important to determine how appropriate the assessment is in relation to the success of students. In order to assess this, two components were considered in determining the effectiveness of EQAO assessments. The following components were considered: curriculum alignment and, target scoring for EQAO test.

4.2.1 Curriculum alignment of EQAO

In Ontario, the development of curriculum is the responsibility of the Ministry of Education (Ministry of Education, 2016). The curriculum of the province establishes developmentally appropriate and relevant expectations for each student in Ontario (Ministry of Education, 2016). Curriculum documents are individually prepared based on subjects, such as
physical education and language arts. Although the Ministry of Education is responsible for the development of curriculum, School boards and schools are responsible for the implementation of curriculum (Ministry of Education, 2016). As a result, it is the duty of teachers to be cognizant of the strands and specific expectations required by the province to ensure students’ understanding of concepts taught. During the Elementary years of EQAO testing (Grade 3 and Grade 6), teachers are required to prepare students for the EQAO test, in addition, to meeting all curriculum objectives. The following are the responses of the participants of the study and their reflections on the completion of dual tasks.

Kiara expresses that it is “hard enough to get through the curriculum because of the diverse needs of the students and how teachers have to adapt the timing to each student’s needs”. For example, Kiara shares:

So one group of kids might get something faster than another group of kids, but when you know you have to get through everything for EQAO – you feel this need that…not only do you have to push through the curriculum, you have to push through everything to make sure the kids have seen at least one of each question to have something to relate to when they write the test.

The pressure as expressed by Kiara is not only to complete curriculum objectives but to provide reference questions for students to feel comfortable about writing the test. This can result in the teacher feeling obliged to teach to the test. In this reflection, Kiara notes: “one of the biggest problems is, students are not usually prepared from the years before. Example, in Grades 1 and 2. Therefore, it is the Grade 3 teacher who is held totally accountable and responsible for preparing the student. This is also the case for the Grade 6 teacher.” The question that is often asked is, if EQAO tests align with the curriculum objectives, as outlined by the Ministry of Education,
should this not reduce the pressure on teachers? The answer to this question was provided through the experiences from Gladys. Gladys believes:

EQAO testing do align with the Ontario Math and Language curriculums.

However, the alignment does not reduce the pressure on teachers to prepare students, because the EQAO test does not reflect the entire concepts taught throughout the year. Instead, EQAO questions are just samples of the broader curriculum.

Although EQAO does align with the curriculum expectations, teachers must provide examples for students to work through, ponder and have opportunities to improve their learning before the EQAO assessment. Thus, suggesting also that, educators can perceive EQAO as a valid test (because it aligns to curriculum). However, it may not necessarily validate accuracy of students’ learning. With this in mind, teachers must also provide multiple opportunities and accommodations for students on Individual Education Plans (IEPS), English Language Learners (ELL), and mainstream students during the year to meet both the curriculum objectives and the EQAO expectations.

4.2.2 Purposeful examinations

EQAO as a large-scale assessment can be considered a “key ingredient” in helping School Boards identify strengths of students and target areas for improvement, based on the quantitative result of the EQAO (Education Quality and Accountability Office, 2012). Aside from the provision of quantitative results, some educators question how purposeful the examination is for individual’s student growth and achievement (Earl & Torrance, 2000). Based on the participant interviews, one common theme that emerged, is how large-scale assessments could be valid for students’, student growth and overall learning. For example, Gladys compared
her experience of providing instruction for EQAO to that of the English Standard Exams known as General Certificate of Education (G.C.E. - Ordinary Levels). Gladys shares:

…being trained as a teacher in the English Standard System, and growing up in the Commonwealth Education system. I have seen G.C.E. examination as purposeful and relevant to the curriculum understudy. After five years of intense study, and different forms of assessment, the final tests of the G.C.E facilitates entrance to colleges and universities.

Gladys’ experiences in teaching and preparing for large-scale assessments in a different education system have provided her the opportunity to effectively compare the pros and cons of EQAO and its impacts on both students and teachers. This means students in the Commonwealth Education system know the purpose of their standardized test which is for entrance into college and/or university. In this case, students can prepare for the test and make informed decisions about their learning. Gladys also mentions that “as the questions on G.C.E. tests do not reflect the culture and diversity of the students; countries took it upon themselves to design their own large-scale examinations. In the Caribbean, it is now known as Caribbean Examination Council (CXC).”

Kiara highlights how the large-scale standardized test for America, the Standardized College Admissions Test (SAT), is similar to the English Standard Examination (G.C.E. – Ordinary Level). She notes that the SATs are a widely accepted test for the purpose of entrance into college or university. In addition to the identification of the SAT, Kiara notes that:

…for instance [compared] to the American system, where people are studying for the SATs. Kids are learning about common factors and standardized testing from Grade 1, because that is what everyone is preparing for. No one prepares for
EQAO from Grade 1. You prepare for EQAO in Grade 3 and Grade 6, Grade 9 and then Grade 10.

Kiara highlights an important point that students eagerly prepare for the SATs and any other large-scale assessment, because it can provide students with the opportunities to win scholarships and/or acceptances to higher education. As a result, families are preparing their children earlier by providing tutoring and fast-tracking of courses outside of their High School academic requirements (Buchmann, Condron, & Roscigno, 2010). In contrast to the EQAO, even though teachers and students do understand the purpose of the test, and from time to time do prepare their students to prepare the test. The result does not have any impact on students’ report, entry to High School and/or tertiary education. In some cases, students, teachers and parents look upon EQAO with distain as it is ineffective and in the words of an interviewed participants “EQAO does not serve a real purpose”. It is interesting to note that even though the results on the Grade 3 and 6 are not a part of the reporting cycle, the Grade 9 results of the Math EQAO are considered a part of a students’ final mark. With swirling inconsistency and lack of clarity surrounding the use of EQAO, money is still pumped into this assessment with no concrete evidence of how the assessment connects with the in-class instruction to ease the pressure on teachers preparing students for Grade 3 and 6 tests.

4.3 The Use of EQAO Results

The results of EQAO are published as a measurement of student success and teacher accountability. Participants were asked about their knowledge regarding the use of EQAO results, and how they influenced (if at all) their teaching instruction. The following are the experiences of two of the three participants and their experiences and understanding of the process. It should be noted that, one participant, Barrie, had limited knowledge of the
implications of funding on in-classroom practices, as he has not yet been in a position that requires such considerations.

Gladys reports that each school year, the EQAO results are reviewed by both school administration and board personnel. For example, Gladys recalls that in one of her former schools, their students were achieving low EQAO results. The School Board responded to this need by providing additional Instructional Coaches to help provide additional support through professional learning workshops. “Teachers learn how to unpack the data and using this information to drive their instructions. These intense supports help to move students from one level to another”. To further emphasize the point that EQAO results influence funding from School Boards to schools. One must also bring to the forefront, the numeracy initiative that the Peel District School Board has undertaken. The primary purpose for this initiative is to provide support to schools whose EQAO Math scores are far below the provincial level (Peel District School Board, 2017).

Kiara’s experiences echoed a similarity to that of Gladys, Kiara shares:
…at the start of every school year, we review our EQAO results to identify areas we [teachers] need to work on with their students. For my school, my administration implements top-down programs to help improve areas of weakness, which sometimes takes away from teachers controlling the class. It’s very micromanaged…In addition, you’re held accountable for how well the students did during that year…

Kiara and Gladys’ narrative demonstrate how EQAO can be used by school administration to provide programs and resources that encourage achievement. On the same token, it can also be seen that the top-down approach can reduce the professional knowledge and opinions of
teachers, and are encouraged to implement strategies that perceivably respond to the needs of students.

In Kiara’s analysis of how EQAO results can be used, Kiara shares how the results of EQAO can alter community populations. She states:

…I know that parents outside of the community take the EQAO results very seriously when choosing schools for their children to attend. Some parents will purchase homes in communities where schools are performing very high in the EQAO test. The more kids in the school, the higher the number of kids in a class. This increases the head count. The higher the head count, the higher the funding the school gets.

The larger community connection that Kiara references from her past experience, demonstrates how EQAO results can impact the socio-economic status of communities to produce inequitable outcomes in various areas (Zheng, 2006). This effect is cyclical and reproduces inequities, as funding is provided to individual schools from the School Board based on numbers, which often time results in greater advantages and accesses to quality resources.

4.4 Teacher Preparation for EQAO

Before teachers can prepare students to take the EQAO test, it is important to identify if teachers themselves are prepared to teach strategies for EQAO. It is important that teachers understand the requirements and expectations of EQAO in order to employ effective strategies for preparing students (Volante, 2006). Preparation on the teachers part for the EQAO test would include: access to past testing materials; use of assistive technology; accommodations for students with IEPs, or students with special needs; and professional development workshops on EQAO.
When Barrie was completing his Additional Qualification Course (AQC) in the Primary Division, he shared openly that he “…honestly couldn’t recall any mention of EQAO during the course”. When asked if Barrie knew of where to go in order to find resources related to EQAO, Barrie said, “no”. Barrie had to learn on his own where to access resources that could assist him in the preparation of students. Barrie’s experience may reflect the reality of many teachers who are entering the teaching profession.

4.4.1 Sharing and creativity

Barrie’s experience is one that can be offset through teacher solidarity for sharing and being creative. Participants in the study who have been teachers for several years note the importance of sharing resources and materials with one another in Grade Teams and with new teachers who enter the school. Kiara stated:

…our administration is all about collaborative inquiry, as well among teachers and co-teaching and working with our colleagues to create a cohesive program…However, because of our school schedules – our team doesn’t always share the same planning time periods. So it does make it difficult – but an expectation nonetheless.

Based on the school culture created in Kiara’s school, it appears that working in collaboration with colleagues to develop inquiry-based lessons that serve as EQAO preparation materials are important to the administration of the school. This expectation set by the school, would benefit teachers such as Barrie who have limited experience and exposure to EQAO preparation.

Gladys shares that collaboration is very important and helps reduce the anxiety teachers can feel when they realize they will be teaching Grade 3 and/or Grade 6. Gladys further stated:

…we have a lot of teachers who have worked collaboratively. The experienced
teachers, where necessary, will mentor new teachers, providing guidance and support, and working closely with them. This support system brings relief to new teachers who are nervous.

Gladys continues to explain that “…the administration also works collaboratively with teachers, because they have to ensure that teachers are on board with updated information”.

The narratives of the three participants demonstrate that a teachers’ involvement with EQAO can occur at any time in their career. For example, a teacher who has previous EQAO knowledge is in a greater position to assist in preparing students for the test. On the other hand, if the teacher has no previously experience, then he or she will most likely struggle to prepare students for the test. The difference in experiences can result in additional stress on the teacher. To ease the pressure, the teacher with no exposure to the test will be inclined to teach to the test instead of providing a holistic approach for test preparation. Thus, reducing the opportunities for students to build the skills of critical thinking and habits for lifelong learning.

4.5 Conclusion

In summary, key findings from participant interviews indicate: the disconnect between the expectations provided by the Ministry of Education and the value of EQAO; how the results of EQAO can produce inequities and; the importance of sharing resources to help teachers and students success. Chapter 5 highlights the implications of these findings and discusses strategies regarding in-classroom EQAO preparation for the support of teachers.
Chapter 5: Implications

5.0 Introduction

This chapter discusses the implications of the research findings. Within the limitations of three semi-formal interviews, the findings are used to illustrate the importance of how the education system can be influenced by parents and/or guardian(s), and the importance of teacher autonomy within the system of education. First, the findings of the study reflect on the context of the educational community, and then the individual communities found within schools. Next, the study makes some recommendations that addresses the implications of the study, and suggest areas of concern to be considered for further research.

5.1 Overview of Key Findings

The key findings of the study are explored through both a broad and narrow scope for analysis. The following findings explored through a broad lens identify the implications on the educational community; EQAO as a single piece of assessment, the perceived reliability and validity of EQAO for educators and professional development surrounding teacher preparedness for EQAO. While the following findings are explored through a narrow scope of analysis to identify the implications it can have on educators and current practices; time constraints between teaching students how to take a test, and covering curriculum, the results of EQAO and its effects on administration, school culture and classroom teaching and, the creativity and collaboration of educators to produce EQAO materials.

5.2 Implications

The following implications derived from the study and are linked to collective concepts of student learning and teacher education.
5.2.1 EQAO as a single piece of assessment

The study highlighted the importance of viewing EQAO as a single piece of assessment rather than a complete assessment of students’ ability. Many educators discussed the importance of understanding this key piece of information, as their own practices of assessing student abilities are diverse. Educators draw on various teaching pedagogies to develop classroom materials, provide teaching instruction, and create success criteria that evaluates a student’s knowledge and ability. In the educational community, these teaching strategies are called “differentiated instruction.” Differentiated instruction is essential to student learning as it acknowledges the different abilities and needs of students, and encourages students to reflect on their learning experiences. It should be noted that not all assessments conducted by educators take place over a period of time or offer students the opportunity to demonstrate their learning. As EQAO is a singularly administered large-scale test, it does not provide students with multiple opportunities to demonstrate their learning. In addition, the instructions and the methods of assessment for EQAO does not provide students who are kinetic, auditory and/or visual learners with equal opportunities to demonstrate their knowledge.

5.2.2 Perceived reliability and validity of EQAO for educators

The educators in this study expressed their concern regarding the use of EQAO tests as a benchmark of student achievement and the discussion surrounding the reliability and validity of EQAO testing became apparent. In order to assess the validity of EQAO testing, there has to be a process to reconcile it with the Ontario curriculum expectations. It is the general consensus among educators who are knowledgeable of both EQAO and Ontario curriculum that they do align. This singular understanding would conclude that EQAO is a valid test.

However, the purpose of EQAO testing should be considered through multiple lenses.
For example, because EQAO is not administered multiple times throughout the year - EQAO would be considered an unreliable test for measuring student achievement. Thus, EQAO testing is valid in that it tests students based on expectations that are found in the Ontario curriculum, but is not a reliable measurement of student achievement as it is completed every three years, at different stages of students’ development rather than within the same academic year that can assess the progress of improvement. Despite this, EQAO is a wildly accepted and supported assessment with publicly advertised results. EQAO results are used to rate the quality of a school and teacher ability to produce outstanding academic students. This gives a sense of perceived privilege in attending institutions ranked in the highest percentile. As a result, there is a misunderstanding between the publicly displayed results and the interpretation of the results for students, teachers and school boards. Consequently, it can be detrimental to a school, and teacher’s moral to publicly glorify EQAO results as a quality assessment of student achievement.

5.2.3 Professional development for teacher preparedness

In the discussion of understanding the purpose of EQAO and its effects on students’ learning, it is important to consider the preparedness of teachers to provide instruction for the large-scale assessment. Within this study, educators noted inconsistencies and the lack of clarity surrounding EQAO testing and results. For example, in the Primary/Junior level, EQAO results are not considered or placed on students’ report card. Whereas, in Grade 9 Mathematics, some schools teachers may choose to mark any component of EQAO prior to sending the tests back. In this case, the Grade 9 EQAO results are used as a part of the students’ Mathematics mark. This process could bring the test into disrepute as there is an intervention between the writer and the final marker; and teachers not utilizing this process could feel at a disadvantage. In addition, the study suggests limited information of EQAO testing and the development of test preparation is
provided to educators both during pre-service education and professional development. The lack of information and resources provided by regulatory bodies suggest that educators are not given many opportunities to learn how to develop test materials for the purpose of EQAO, and most likely defer to using strategies that teach to the test.

5.2.4 Time constraints between test preparation and Ontario Curriculum

Educators have the challenge of planning multiple lessons; lessons to review materials or lessons that focus on a new concept. In order to do this, educators must be flexible in their planning and use time-management skills to ensure the Ontario curriculum is taught and assessments are collected. While this might not seem challenging, it is important to note that educators are completing curriculum expectations in large-sized classrooms with students of various learning needs and abilities. This can be overwhelming for any classroom teacher, but especially so for teachers who must also teach EQAO preparation in Grade 3 and Grade 6. The study illustrates how educators prioritize completion of Ontario curriculum expectations over preparation for EQAO testing. Although it has been stated that EQAO does align with the Ontario curriculum, it is still of great importance that students are taught how to answer questions for a specific standardized test that does not take into consideration improvement or potential. This situation places educators in a time sensitive situation, where some educators encourage inquiry-based learning throughout the year and then switch to teaching students how to answer standardized test questions. This can be a challenging task, as it requires all students with various learning needs to be on the same page. It also results in a moral dilemma about preparing students for a test that does not count towards their report card.

5.2.5 The results of EQAO and effects on school culture
With the publicized results of EQAO, educators have commented on how the results affects their school culture. Educators have addressed how EQAO results have influenced their administrative support. For example, some administration may choose to introduce a new program to increase EQAO scores. This might subsequently minimize teacher autonomy within the classroom. If the implementation of programs are not handled with care, it can result in teachers feeling displaced and dissatisfied. This can change the culture of the school and the loss of trust between teachers and the administration. In addition to a strained teacher-administration relationship, the pressure from EQAO results can also change the dynamic among teachers. If the administration seeks to implement incentives to teachers for higher EQAO results, a competition between teachers can also be created. Although some competitions can be healthy, such competitions can result in teachers being reluctant to share resources and information, thus resulting in an increasing workload for teachers to prepare EQAO testing materials. This is an unfavourable outcome, as educators in the study have suggested that collaboration in the production of EQAO materials is vital for students’ preparation. Subsequently, schools with higher EQAO results can experience a stronger school culture, and can be more likely to develop creative and collaborative preparation materials.

5.3 Recommendations

The following section highlights the recommendations from this study as solutions to the previously identified implications. The principal recommendation of this study is to remove EQAO testing from the province of Ontario. However, due to a multitude of factors, it would be challenging to remove a publicized assessment that is perceived by the general public to provide accountability of education in Ontario. Instead, the following recommendations are suggested. As solutions are often complex and multi-dimensional, there is no one simple solution that
addresses all the challenges surrounding EQAO. The proposed solutions seek to identify key stakeholders who can implement change on both structural and individual levels.

5.3.1 Recommendations for EQAO

In order to accurately measure student achievement, it is suggested that EQAO conduct multiple assessments over the academic year of the intended grade. For example, if EQAO continues to be conducted at the Grade 3 level, the proposed recommendation would be to have an entrance test into Grade 3 and an exit test from Grade 3. This model could be replicated for Grade 6, and Grade 9. This method of testing, also falls under the desired assessments as outlined in the Growing Success document. EQAO could be transitioned into an assessment for (the entrance test into Grade 3), and assessment of (the exit test from Grade 3). The purpose of completing a large-scale test like this, would be to accurately benchmark students’ ability level prior to Grade 3, and then measuring the improvement of that student at the end of Grade 3.

Furthermore, it is recommended that EQAO develop an efficient system of adjudicating EQAO marks quickly in order to provide opportunities for the results of the test to be used. Currently, the results of students EQAO test is provided in the following academic year in which the test was taken. The delay in marking EQAO results in unused information that is intended to drive instruction. Subsequently, it is encouraged that EQAO provide quicker results and analysis for the benefit of students.

In addition to providing multiple assessments over the course of an academic year, it is recommended that EQAO also develop additional assessments that cater to the various learning needs and abilities of students. For example, EQAO could provide an interactive online instruction that can be administered to students who are visual and allow students’ to use manipulatives such as place value charts for students to use in order to process a problem. The
provision of accommodations for the EQAO testing would demonstrate and acknowledge that each student is different and that a “one size fits all” approach cannot be used in assessing the abilities of students.

5.3.2 Recommendations for the Ontario College of Teachers

Some educators are familiar with the process of EQAO testing, while others are unfamiliar. In order to reduce the gap of understanding, it is recommended that the Ontario College of Teachers implement a pre-service course and/or professional development course surrounding the creation of EQAO preparation materials. Through the provisions of providing education courses and a refresher course for those already in the field, both pre-services and experienced educators can become more knowledgeable and engaged about the history, objective of EQAO, usage, and how best to develop preparation materials for students.

5.3.3. Recommendations for school administrators

As it is the responsibility of school administrators to set the tone of school culture, it is recommended that school administrators work directly with teachers to develop initiatives that encourage holistic and inquiry-based programs not for the purpose of increasing EQAO scores, but for the purpose of developing the love for learning. In addition, to the development of new initiatives, it is important that school administrators work collaboratively with teachers to outline the goals and objectives of the new program. This conversation should include, when it will be implemented, why, and how it will be measured. These programs and initiatives should be provided in a non-hyper-EQAO setting that focuses on the results and discusses ways of improvement. They should also be used in conjunction with asset-based recognition of teaching staff, and their prior accomplishments.
5.3.4 Recommendations for teachers

Teachers are continually adjusting their teaching to meet the needs of their students. In order to do so, teachers have prioritized the curriculum over test preparation due to factors, such as time constraints. Subsequently, it is recommended that teachers continue to share their resources with others for the improvement of all students. As it can be challenging for new teachers who are entering the profession, it is especially important that veteran teachers provide opportunities of shadowing and encouraging the development of creative test preparation materials.

5.4 Areas for Further Research

As the implications of the study are limited due to scope of the research project and the number of participants, consideration for future research includes, conducting: a study on a larger-scale with multiple educators and students who have experienced EQAO testing; a longitudinal study that examines the accuracy of EQAO testing as a measure of prediction for student success; an evaluation and marking of EQAO assessments and; a study on the influence of EQAO results and the perceived value associated to public belief and confidence in the Ontario education system. The purpose of conducting future research into these areas, is to develop more literature on a large-scale assessment that takes place in Ontario, that has few scholarship in comparison to American large-scale assessments.

5.5 Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to explore the effect of EQAO preparation, in the elementary panel (Grade 3 and Grade 6), on in-classroom instruction. The exploration of the study called into question the history of EQAO, the validity and reliability of EQAO, and ultimately the purpose of large-scale assessments in Ontario. These questions were answered by
interviewing a group of educators who had experience with EQAO testing in Ontario. The results of these interviews highlighted the discrepancy between the Ministry of Education documents and the need for differentiating instruction. The large-scale EQAO testing only aligns with the Ontario curriculum, but not with any other Ministry related documents addressing students’ learning. Subsequently, it was important to consider the constructs in which teachers were providing EQAO preparation. In doing so, it was discovered that EQAO results heavily influence the actions of school boards, which then trickles down to school administration, teachers and the students. The trickle-down effect of emphasis placed on high EQAO scores have resulted in pressure being placed on the education system by the public. This can negatively influence classroom instruction, as teachers must not only cover the Ontario curriculum, but must also teach students how to complete standardized testing. This results in pressure on the teacher; who is perceived not to have enough time to complete both the curriculum and the test preparation. This also results in teaching test strategies in order to encourage student success; and ultimately reinforces the belief that EQAO is very important. The systems in place to ensure success in EQAO results are designed not for the holistic development of students through continual and regular feedback, but as tangible outcomes of our education system in Ontario. In-classroom teachers providing standardized test preparation are often pressured to alter on-going assessment practices they engage in throughout the year. In order to support classroom teachers, it is imperative that they are taken into consideration when the test is designed, implemented and administered.
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Appendix A: Letter of Consent

My Name is Deidre-Ann K. Gardener and I am a student in the Master of Teaching program at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto (OISE/UT). For the completion of this degree, I must conduct a small-scale qualitative research study that examines teaching pedagogies and practice. For the purpose of this, my research will explore how preparing for EQAO affects teaching practices in the elementary panel.

I am interested in interviewing elementary teachers who have experience in teaching Grades 3 or 6 (where EQAO testing is conducted) who are willing to share their experiences and shed light on how preparing for EQAO can shift their teaching practices.

As a participant in this study, you will be involved in a 30-45 minute interview, which consists of 15 questions. The 15 questions will be completed in 3 segments: the first being demographic information, the second your opinions of EQAO testing, and lastly your experiences of classroom practices and EQAO preparation. This interview will be audio-recorded for the purposes of transcription at a later date. It is the choice of the interviewee to select the space in which the interview will take place. If there is no preference, the interview will be conducted at a coffee shop most convenient to the interviewee.

It is unlikely that any harm or discomfort will be experienced throughout the interview session. However, if you feel uncomfortable at any time during the interview process, you may (a) skip questions that make you feel uncomfortable and/or withdraw from the study completely. As your participation in this study is voluntary, you can withdraw from the process completely, at any time without adverse effects.

I will take all appropriate steps to protect your privacy. Your participation in this study is confidential. I will not use your name or any information that would allow you to be identified. Only I will know your names and demographic information, and a pseudonym will be used in place of your name for the remaining analysis of research after the interview.

In addition, the information you provide along with the audiotapes will be kept in a locked cabinet where only I (Deidre-Ann) will have access. All electronic information will be password protected and stored on an external hard drive. Once the study has been completed, audiotapes, hard copies and electronic data will stay on file for five years. After that time, the information will be destroyed.
A copy of the transcripts of the interview will be provided to you after the interview to ensure accuracy.

Questions about the Study
If you have any questions or need more information about the study itself, please contact me (Deidre-Ann K. Gardener) by email at: deidreann.gardener@mail.utoronto.ca.

If you would like to speak to the supervisor of this study, please contact Dr. Rose Fine-Meyer by email at: rose.fine.meyer@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 from this research study at any time without penalty.

I have read the letter provided to me by Deidre-Ann K. Gardener and agree to participate in an interview for the purposes described. I agree to have the interview audio-recorded.

Signature: ________________________________________

Name of Participant (printed): _______________________________________________

Date: ______________________________________
Appendix B: Interview Protocol

Thank you again for agreeing to participate in this research study, and for making time to be interviewed today. As a reminder, the purpose of this study is to explore how preparing for EQAO affects teacher practices in the classroom. The interview will consist of 15 questions that will take approximately 30-45 minutes to complete. If at any time during the interview you feel uncomfortable, feel free to say “pass or skip” and I will move onto the next question. Also, as a general reminder, you can withdraw from the study at any time during or after the interview. I would like to take the first 5 minutes to review the consent form with you, and answer any questions you may have.

Demographic Questions
1. What is the highest degree of level of school you have completed?
2. How many have you been working in education? In what capacities and where?
4. Are you familiar with EQAO? If so, how many years of experience do you have preparing students to write the EQAO test?

Teacher Perspectives & Beliefs of EQAO
1. What are your general thoughts and/or feelings about EQAO testing in Ontario?
2. Do you believe EQAO is an accurate predictor and assessment of student success and knowledge? Why?
3. Do you feel an increasing pressure to prepare your students for EQAO from the School Administration or Parents/Guardians?
4. Do you believe that EQAO assessments align with the Ministry of Educations’ Curriculum Expectations?
5. Do you know of any available materials for EQAO preparation? And do you receive support from your school administration for EQAO preparation?

Teacher Practices
1. Does time influence your perspectives and/or decision between your teaching practices of preparing student for EQAO and meeting curriculum expectations?
2. Do you know of any EQAO resources and/or practices tests? When these are implemented in the classroom, are they integrated with class material? Or are they separate and apart?
3. Do you have the opportunity to collaborate and work with other Grade Teachers to develop EQAO materials?
4. Do you receive any training on preparing EQAO materials?
5. Do the results of EQAO testing influence your classroom funding? Or structure of how you teach from on an administrative level?
6. What changes in the future would you like to see regarding the implementation of the EQAO?

Thank you for participating in the interview