Perpetuating Inequities in Ontario Schools: A Large-Scale Practice of Assessment

By

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to explore the notion that there are prejudices in the schools system that affects non-standard English speakers and to analyze how this may affect the process of assessment. The primary question guiding this study was: How is a small sample of Junior/Intermediate teachers in the Peel District School Board (PDSB) addressing issues of inequitable assessments and culturally relevant testing in their classrooms?

Using semi-structured interviews I interviewed three teachers from PDSB. The themes uncovered in this study included, issues related to ethnicity, teacher education, and assessment practices. I found the potential for a disconnect between the inclusive teaching and learning mandate provided by the school boards and what takes place in classrooms. Moving forward I suggest that initial teacher training be enhanced to include culturally responsive approaches to assessment in both classrooms and in the full-scale assessment practices across Ontario.

Keywords: Teacher Practices. Large-scale testing, anti-racist education,
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Chapter 1: INTRODUCTION

1.0 Research Content

Canada’s education system was, “under fire in the early 1990’s as a result of pressures to produce international comparisons of achievement” (Wein, p. 402). Ontario’s response to the criticism was to establish higher standards through the development of common curricular outcomes across school districts and regions (Barlow & Robertson, 1994). In 1995, the Ontario Ministry of Education released the Common Curriculum, Grades 1-9 as mandated by the National Democratic Party (NDP) under Premier Bob Rae, only to be replaced by the Ontario Curriculum Grades 1-8 in 1997 by Mike Harris, as part of his, “Common Sense” Revolution Platform. The new curriculum promised to be more dynamic and efficient than the previous one (as cited in Globe & Mail, 2001). As stated in the Ontario Curriculum Grades 1-8, 1997, the intention of the curriculum was to outline, “the required knowledge and skills for each grade set high standards and identify what parents and the public can expect children to learn in the schools of Ontario” (p.3). The document notes:

The provisions of detail will eliminate the need for school boards to write their own expectations, will ensure consistency in curriculum across province, and will facilitate province-wide testing. Province-wide testing will be helpful to students who change schools, and will help parents in all regions to have a clear understanding of their child’s progress (p.3).

Since the introduction of the new curriculum in 1997 and the 2006 revised version along with large-scale testing, the provincial government has been increasingly proud of what it sees, announcing a steady rise in the number of children able to meet its standards (Rachel Geiss & Caroline Alfonso, 2013). They also report that this adds, “polish to Ontario’s reputation in the
global race to produce the best and the brightest” (as cited in *Globe and Mail, 2013*). In 2014, Premier Kathleen Wynn mandated the Minister of Education Liz Sandals to continue to measure progress and success rates of elementary students through the Education Quality and Accountability Office (as cited on Ontario.ca). However, when Alberta announced that it would begin to phase out its renowned Provincial Achievement Tests (PATs), a national debate was reignited over the merits of standardized testing (Geiss & Alfonso, 2013, *Globe and Mail*).

Supporters of large-scale tests, argue that there is no better way to ensure that schools perform properly and maintain accountability of the education system. They suggest that results based learning gives valuable information to help allocate extra funds where it is most needed and to provide information to parents regarding their child’s progress (Wein, 2014). In response, critics of results based curricula argue that parents want to know how their children are doing at school on an ongoing basis and that these forms of assessments in grade 3 and 6 do not give parents a true picture of their child’s progress. According to the Elementary Teachers Federation of Ontario (ETFO) website, there are also issues of, “security, timelines, validity of the tests, and uses of the data” (ETFO.ca, Issues in Education, 2015). ETFO further states that the curriculum leads to a, “disproportionate focus on literacy and numeracy at the expense of science and technology, social studies, the arts, and physical education” (ETFO.ca, Large-Scale Testing, 2015). The cost of the testing is also a contention. The most recent annual report indicates expenses of approximately $30 million in 2011-12, which, could be used towards the organization of smaller classes in all grades, more support for students with special needs and more meaningful student assessments (ETFO.ca, Issues in Education, 2015).

Scholars (Wein & Dudley-Marling, 1998) state that with the introduction of large-scale assessments and common curricula the role of teachers shifts from that of participating in the
content with students to that of efficiency experts and accuse large-scale testing of encouraging rote learning and forcing teachers to tailor their efforts to the test (Carol Anne Wien and Curt Dudley-Marling (1998). They further argue the Ontario Curriculum, Grades 1-8 puts greater emphasis on the outcome of learners, which then changes the approach to education to focus on measurable outcomes. Additionally they argue that this approach sets out a “production like schedule for teachers to follow within a set time frame and does not account for students who for a variety of reasons may not be able to learn the required material within the set time frame” (Wein, Dudley-Marling, p. 402).

1.1 Research Problem

The problem is that large-scale testing is not just a matter of practicality, efficiency, defined skills and economics. The problem is that children are holding the pencils and erasers and many of them, despite Ontario’s commitment to the improvement of the education system and its attempt towards more accountability, are being disadvantaged in the process. Research shows that students with lower social capitol are commonly excluded from meaningful teaching, learning opportunities and classroom community because teachers are commonly teaching to the test rather than the individual needs of students. Research also tells us that this exclusion, impacts their engagement in school and their academic success (Klinger, 2009). Therefore, issues of race, class, cultural linguistics and dialect influences require further exploration as they intersect with literacy assessments in classrooms and furthermore, raise questions as to what that means for teachers and students as they prepare and are prepared for large-scale testing.
1.2 Research Purpose

Dr. Rebecca Wheeler is an expert on teaching Standard English in dialectally diverse classrooms and she states, “Accurate assessment requires that we separate dialect influence from decoding error in Standard English” (Wheeler, 2012, p. 4). The purpose of my research is to narrow in on issues of race and examine the relationship between dialect influences and coding errors/code switching in literacy assessments in Ontario Schools through the lens of critical race theory and anti-racist education. It appears as though there has been little research in Canada regarding how dialect influence is directly affecting reading and writing assessments for children who come from homes where stigmatized versions of Standard English are spoken – for example African American Vernacular English (AAVE) and students from Indigenous communities. The broader purpose of this study is to explore the notion that there are prejudices held against speakers of non-standard English and to analyze where it is in the process of assessment that the literacy trajectory of these students gets determined.

1.3 Research Questions

The primary question guiding this study is: How is a small sample of Junior/Intermediate teachers in the Peel District School Board addressing issues of inequitable assessments and culturally relevant testing in their classrooms and if there are inequitable assessments happening in classrooms, can we be certain that equitable assessments are happening on a large scale?

Subsidiary questions to further guide this inquiry include:

- What indicators are teachers using to determine their assessments of reading and writing?
- Do teachers consider factors such as transfer of patterns from the students’ community dialect into school reading and writing?
• Do teachers know enough about differences in oral language between dialect influences and Standard English to accurately assess students?
• Does the presence of EQAO testing shape how teachers assess students throughout the school year?
• Is the office of the EQAO gathering information on pre-examination assessments?

1.4 Reflexive Positioning Statement

There are a variety of reasons as to why this topic of assessment and large-scale testing is of interest to me; nonetheless, the most meaningful reason is that it is personal. The past five years I have been immersed in Equity Studies, engaging in theoretical and historical contexts surrounding social justice in education and this new set of knowledges has allowed me to articulate the persistent feeling of dis-ease and discomfort that I have experienced regarding some of the inequities in the education system. As my children are being subjected to the rigors of EQAO testing and general classroom assessments, this issue cannot remain dormant. My own siblings were treated differently than I was based on the darker pigmentation of their skin. My Jamaican born spouse tells stories of the discrimination he experienced as a student and now my own school aged children, of visible minority, are experiencing a very nuanced form of racism.

From my distinct position of mixed ethnicity and as a teacher candidate and researcher, I was compelled to explore how different approaches to assessment in classrooms impact my children and other children. I wanted to further develop my knowledge in the broader field of anti-racist education, and culturally relevant pedagogies as they relate to marginalized youth in classrooms and my intention was to provide evidence and support to teachers to better understand the need to factor cultural linguistics and dialect into their assessments to bring awareness to the broad and long lasting effects of ignoring the issue.
1.5 Chapter Overview

This research project is organized into five chapters. I reviewed the literature in the areas of literacy assessment and achievement in Ontario’s elementary schools in Chapter 2. More specifically, I reviewed themes related to standardized testing and classroom practice. I considered how various forms of testing and assessment shape the pedagogical nature of classroom teaching and learning and questioned, through a framework of critical race theory, whether these forms of testing advantage some students and disadvantage others. In Chapter 3, I described the research methodology and included information about the participants, the data collection, and limitations. In Chapter 4, I reported and discussed the research findings that emerged from the semi-structured interviews and made further recommendations for future directions and in Chapter 5, I presented themes that emerged from the research study in relation to the literature. Additionally, chapter 5 discusses areas for further research. References and appendices are found at the end of this research paper.
Chapter 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

2.0 Introduction to Chapter 2

In this chapter I reviewed the literature in the areas of literacy assessment and achievement in Ontario’s elementary schools. More specifically, I reviewed themes related to standardized testing and classroom practice. I considered how various forms of testing and assessments shape the pedagogical nature of classroom teaching and learning and question, through a framework of critical race theory, whether these forms of testing advantage some students and disadvantage others. In order to understand the current processes of standardized testing in Ontario I briefly reviewed the practices in place and then I examined how the information collected from the tests is compiled, applied and interpreted. Next, I reviewed various factors that mediate teacher practice in the classrooms and finally, I reviewed research on the implications these variables and practices have on students.

2.1 Contributions of Standardized Testing in Ontario

As noted in Chapter 1, Standardized testing was established to measure the effectiveness of schools and students based on the results from the assessments. Presently, it is the Education and Quality Accountability Office (EQAO), an independent Operational Service Agency governed by a board of directors, appointed by the Lieutenant Governor, that administers and monitors the achievements of students in grades 3, 6 and 9 in the subject areas of literacy and numeracy. In order to ensure that the tests are administered fairly and consistently, EQAO publishes guides for schools to follow. According to the Ministry of Education, these results, along with individual school results, help the government determine where to allocate funding and resources. A 2009 report prepared for the EQAO illustrates that through the use of “advanced statistical techniques”, most notably hierarchical linear modeling (HLM) the
information collected has made it possible to, “begin to identify factors such as gender
differences, engagement and motivation, cognitive taxonomy, school culture and home and
community associated with student achievement and identify any gaps that exist” (EQAO
report, p. 1). The data collected has allowed for many contributions however, while public and
political calls for accountability in education are typically accepted, when it comes to defining
and measuring the data, the task becomes increasingly more challenging.

2.2 Constraints of Standardized Testing

There are many concerns with the use of large-scale assessments most notably by
teachers. They are concerned with how test scores are communicated to the general public,
which includes reporting about individual student achievement, as well as about achievement for
an individual school or school board. It is the contention of teachers and teachers unions (ETFO)
that releasing assessment statistics to the public somehow legitimizes accuracy and objectivity in
examining achievement without understanding that statistics can be misused and misinterpreted
(as cited in Canadian Journal of Educational Administration and Policy, para.5. 2005). Simner
(2000) has discussed how large-scale assessment data reporting procedures jeopardizes the
validity of results because in the reporting of the information more incorrect conclusions are
drawn. When presented in simple form, “many people fail to realize that a single score cannot
adequately sum up a complex construct such as achievement” (as cited in Canadian Journal of
Educational Administration and Policy, para.5. 2005).

Research scientist, Samuel Messick (1989) has noted, parents and the public also need to
be concerned about how the results of test scores are interpreted. Messick (1989) refers to a
concept called, ‘consequential validity’ and emphasizes that we be certain about the positive or
negative social consequences of a particular test. Further, according to Mile and Lee (2002), “if
the goal of large-scale assessments is to improve education, then the assessment instruments must be sound” (as cited in Crundwell, 2005, para.4.). Related to the above issue are concerns that many “accountability systems are built only on large scale assessments, and that the results of these are then used to influence and make education policy and curriculum decisions” (Cizek, 2005, as cited in Crundwell, 2005, para.6.). These discussions are concerned with data collection and the possibility of sampling error and measurement error along with the reporting, interpretation and validity of test scores however, as agreeable to these opinions as I am, what I find absent from the conversation is the notion of categorization. Is it possible that what is really at stake is that these tests are ultimately designed to place individuals, schools and school boards into groups that will define where people live? Is it possible that the very nature of the test process is designed to further isolate marginalized groups inside and outside of the classroom?

The hierarchical linear modeling (HLM) used by the EQAO inevitably places groups of students on top of another or rather evaluates them in a top-down fashion. Researchers, Nichols and Berliner (2007) suggest that there is an over-reliance on large-scale testing and argue that the, “testing regimes impose and embody a set of norms and expectations that drive teachers curriculum and pedagogical choices which, results in the corruption of both the tests and the education system they are created to monitor” (forward, 2007). According to (Gay, 2002; Dei et al., 2000), this privileges certain groups in society. “Membership in the white middle-class group affords individuals within this group certain privileges in society,” “while those outside of this group experience challenges. This is because society is influenced by the norms established by the dominant group” (as cited in, EduGAINS, 2013 p. 4). According to Raham (1999), these tests are able to provide information with regards to trends in achievement but more openly than ever are being used to assess school and school board performance, which begs the questions what are
the priorities of Ontario, and the ministry of education and are there non-instructional variables that need to be considered?

2.3 Non-Instructional Variables That Affect Student Achievement

Paul Axelrod (2001), states that there are pressures to redefine education, as the development of marketable skills for a competitive global economy is needed and Professor George Dei (1999) argues that the, “interests of big business and market forces are taking priority in shaping the educational agenda” (as cited in Larkin & Staton, 2001, p. 361). These pressures to perform are felt in the classroom through a variety of means but for the purpose of this paper I focused on factors such as race, gender, home culture and multilingual students as outlined by the EQAO that are commonly addressed in narratives surrounding student achievement and assessments.

2.3.1 Gender difference

Gender differences are often reported when exploring student achievements. The public is well aware that female students outperform male students in literacy, while historically males have outperformed females in mathematics and science (Klinger, et al., p. 1). However, as the gaps continue to widen in literacy, researchers are beginning to examine contextual issues outside of biology to understand what is happening. One of the factors for gaps, according to EQAO, is differing family and societal expectations for boys and girls, and how these expectations play out at home, and in children’s relationships with caregivers. For instance, one principal described the “high [parental or caregiver] expectations for girls to do well in school” and explained that there are, “not the same expectations from parents placed on boys...[the] mentality of ‘boys will be boys’ dominates in some homes” (Klinger, et al., p.30).
The focus on gender difference dominants much of the discourse surrounding achievements, however, it appears as though educators place the responsibility of the gap on parents and caregivers with the suggestion that societal norms influences their choices for their child’s education. This information is pertinent to my research because it highlights the priorities in the system that place gender as a significant marker for successes over and above as race and class. Gay (2000) and Villegas and Lucas (2002), use the terms, “Culturally Responsive Teaching” or “Culturally Responsive Pedagogy” to describe teaching that recognizes all students learn differently and that these differences may be connected to background, language, family structure and social or cultural identity (as cited in EduGAINS, p. 2.). Therefore, two questions arise; who is responsible for teaching and learning and who decided what categories get prioritized in terms of student success markers?

2.3.2 School culture

School leadership plays an integral role in maintaining a school culture that supports students and teachers. Teachers report that having a school principal who has a deep understanding of student achievement and a realistic framework for a plan of action promotes a positive culture of accountability. Specific examples of such leadership include assigning the right personnel to supporting roles (e.g., consultants, coaches), support for achieving high EQAO results and providing adequate time and opportunities for staff to learn new things. These initiatives help to create and foster a learning culture in the school that supports students’ success. While at the same time, research shows a direct link between student success and the school environment (Klinger, et al., 2009). The Safe Schools Action Team (2008) reports that students are more motivated to do well and to realize their full potential in schools that have a positive school climate, where they feel safe, included and supported.
Information from the Ministry of Educations EduGAINS website aligns with this literature and suggests that, “Although principals are not as directly involved with students as classroom teachers are in terms of day-to-day instruction and learning, they do make a difference. Further, as outlined in Ontario’s Leadership Framework, it is the responsibility of school and system leaders to be responsive to the increasingly diverse nature of Ontario communities by ensuring that schools are inclusive and welcoming of diversity, as reflected in both school climate and the classroom learning environment” (EduGAINS). On the same site, it is acknowledged that, “The institutional dimension of culturally responsive pedagogy underscores the significance of education policy and the way schooling is organized. At the school level, it means paying attention to school budget priorities, the relationship between parents and the community and how curriculum and instruction impact the conditions for student learning and student experience” (p. 3)

2.3.3 Collaboration and shared support

Researchers for the EQAO report that a common link to student success is the collaboration of teachers and administration. The presence of, “teamwork, common language and instructional practices were identified by teachers as being useful”, when reporting on school support and teachers also confirmed the, “importance of sharing strategies across divisions, trying new things and working towards achieving consistency in language and communication, particularly in schools where gaps in learning were identified” (Klinger, et al, p. 31). This research sheds light on the collaboration that teachers engage in not only for their professional benefit but also for the benefit of their students. Bird and Little (1996) suggest that the, “confidence that comes from collegial sharing and support leads to greater readiness to experiment and take risks” (as cited in Hargreaves, p. 1). Furthermore, (Campbell, 1985;
Campbell and Southworth, 1990; Nias, 1997) note that it is seen as, a way to form an important bridge between school improvement and the development of teachers (p.349). This information fits into my research by highlighting the opportunities teachers have to team teach, peer coach, engage in mentor relationships and more informally talk together in staff rooms and outside gathering places about issues of anti-racist education and critical race theories.

2.3.4 Impact of home and community

In a study prepared for the EQAO the findings, suggested that many teachers and principals feel there is a, “Disconnect between school and home, with differing priorities and degrees of follow-through (Klinger, p.30). The following excerpt is directly from the pages of the EQAO report and I included it to expose a possible gap in integrity as far as the educators are concerned. This study is also helpful within my area of research because, I think that this excerpt provides evidence of an “us” against “them” mentality that permeates throughout the system.

These educators commonly attributed responsibility to parents, describing them as, too busy to help with homework,” not seeing academics or reading as a priority and unsupportive of after school academic programs. In some schools, staff members saw the home-school connection differently; for instance, one school had a teacher who felt that parents were “keen [and] quick to volunteer,” while other staff members felt the opposite. At another school, parents were said to participate in “fun nights” but not in “curriculum nights.” In schools where parents did not have time to work with their children at home, the staff felt that, as a result, the “school need[ed] to teach the children skills that one would assume they should have learned at home.” Overall, there was a sense that although most parents valued the work that happened at school, they
were reluctant or unable to follow through by working with their children at home (e.g.,
through homework completion or home-reading programs (Klinger p, 30).

2.4 Implications for Student Assessment and Large-Scale Testing

Literacy has traditionally been viewed as reading and writing skills. This traditional
concept is still largely reflected in formal assessments of academic achievement (Cummins,
2007, p.2). It is increasingly evident, however, that traditional notions of literacy need to be
expanded to encompass 21st century literacies. The Ontario Ministry of Education’s Expert
Panel on Literacy in Grades 4 to 6, defined literacy as, “the ability to use language and images in
rich and varied forms to read, write, listen, speak, view, represent, and think critically”
(Cummins, J., Brown, K., & Sayers, D. 2007 p. 2). Yet, what happens to students whose ability
to use language is not viewed as traditional and whose home language and dialect influences the
ways in which that student is assessed? These questions lay outside of the common narratives
surrounding student achievements as noted in 1.3 and require further research to determine new
sets of criteria and assessment strategies for these students who do not fit into standard forms of
English or the assessment of the standards.

In Canada, the discourse surrounding non-standard forms of English are relatively
undocumented other than, a report surrounding the development of Aboriginal children in
Canada by Jessica Ball, from the University of Victoria. Ball (2009) admits that much of her
work is anecdotal because there are few published studies (p. 1). Her work was drawn from what
she called, “gray literature” (e.g., unpublished agency, government or community reports). Ball’s
work helps to direct my research because it illustrates a need to document what she calls
“speech-language trajectories, difficulties and secondary problems among children” (Ball. p.1).
Her work centers on Aboriginal children and she notes that, “there is little understanding of the
extent to which speech-language problems perceived in Aboriginal children are due to divergent expectations about dialect learning” (Ball, p. 18). However, Ball (2009) proposes that, “children’s use of a non-standard variety of English or French may be misinterpreted as language delay or language deficit, contributing to perceptions of alarmingly high estimates of the prevalence of speech-language pathology among Aboriginal children” (p. 18). The most salient point that Ball (2009) makes as it relates to my research is that there needs to be further study regarding dialects in order to, “inform the use of screening and assessment measures that are sensitive to dialect differences and do not yield false positive interpretations of language pathology” (p.19)

In my research I would like to apply Ball's hypothesis regarding language perceptions towards children of Caribbean/ Canadian decent, as it intersects with issues of race, class and cultural linguistics and teacher practice as they intersect with literacy assessments in classrooms. Furthermore, I will raise questions as to what that means for teachers and students as they prepare and are prepared for large-scale testing.

2.5 Critical Race Theory and Literacy Assessment

When writing about issues about race one question is ultimately always asked, why is the focus only on race? What about gender? What about class? “Are you abandoning multicultural perspectives? “ (as cited in Watt, 2016, p. 3) The salient point is that, “Race still matters” (Hacking, 2005, p.102). Intersectionality within critical race theory (CRT) points to the multidimensionality of oppressions and recognizes that race alone cannot account for disempowerment. “Intersectionality means the examination of race, sex, class, national origin, and sexual orientation, and how their combination plays out in various settings.”(Delgado et al (2001, p. 51). Derrick Bell and Alan Freeman developed critical Race Theory through their
frustration of the slow pace of racial reform in the United States (Ladson-Billings (1998, p. 10) and it provides critical analyses of race and racism from a legal point of view. Since its beginnings it has branched off to many disciplines. CRT maintains that the, “source of ‘whiteness’ is that which is rooted in the process of oppression and domination. There is a recognition that structural racism can exist without people’s conscious intention or awareness. Paradoxically, discrimination can occur even when there is the intention of equality” (Knowles and Lander, 2011, as cited in Watt, 2016, p.6). The significance of this, is that although the language around race has changed, there is a knowledge of ‘other’ or difference that is part of a collective memory and does not go away, it only grows with a meaning of superiority or of higher value placed on one over the other. There is a sense that the meaning of race is already complete and it alerts the reader (and in this context the teacher) to a particular history attached to the word ‘race’. The question becomes, if the meaning of the word changes, what part, can teachers move beyond this meaning that has been embedded deep into the collective memory and truly assess students based on ability and not race?

These questions are not easy ones to ask and they are questions that many will not be prepared to answer however, through the lens of critical race theory (CRT) perhaps a better understanding of how race directly impacts the assessment of students will follow. Gloria Ladson-Billings (2008) admits that the usefulness of CRT in understanding education inequity is still in its infancy however, for the purpose of this paper, it will work as a foundation. As critical race theory intersects with student assessments, further research needs to be done because we know this; if we continue to consider issues of race, class, gender and cultural linguistics as separate from the conversation rather than the conversation certain bodies of students will continue to be disadvantaged.
2.6 Conclusion

According to Gay (2009), if we can move to a, “place where teachers not only understand privilege and subordination with all schooling, but accept responsibility to create new ways of thinking and teaching that will up lift the achievement of children traditionally marginalized by schools, literacy teaching will transform because social equity is an integral and obligatory part of literacy teaching” (as cited in Lazar, Edwards, & McMillion, 2012).

Therefore, in light of this review, the purpose of my research was to examine the ways in which the process of assessment continues to perpetuate inequities in schools. I looked at research on the history of standardized testing and the limitations and barriers not only for students but also for teachers and administrators. This review elucidates the extent that attention has been paid to achievement scores in education and it also raises more questions about inequalities in the education system despite the Ministry’s commitment to equity. It appears that achievement scores and gender play a significant role in shaping pedagogy and take up much of the discourse.
Chapter 3: METHODOLOGY

3.0 Introduction to Chapter 3

In exploring the intersection of race, class and cultural linguistics with pedagogical practices of literacy assessment in Ontario schools, I analyzed pedagogical approaches to assessment in classrooms. In this chapter, I framed the research methodology associated with my study and I expanded upon the reasons why I assumed such approaches. I will begin this chapter by detailing my specific qualitative research approaches and subsequently my primary method of data collection. The participants of my research study will also be acknowledged. The sampling criteria, which details sampling procedures, will also be explained. My method of data analysis will be discussed within this chapter and afterwards, I acknowledge the ethical issues surrounding this issue as well as the limitations of the study before concluding the chapter.

3.1 Research Approach and Procedures

This research study was conducted using a qualitative research approach and includes a literature review and semi-structured interviews with teachers. J.W. Creswell (2007) uses a metaphor of a loom when describing qualitative research, “an intricate fabric composed of minute threads, many colors, different textures, and various blends of material” (p. 35). He further suggests that this fabric is not explained “easily or simply” (p. 35) and that “qualitative research is a process” (p. 37). According to Creswell, the process “begins with assumptions, a worldview, the possible use of a theoretical lens, and the study of research problems inquiring into the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem” (p. 37). With that in mind, this study, assumed the framework of an inquiry approach through the lens of critical race theory and it was sensitive to the people and places of the study. As well, this study included the, “voices of the participants, the reflexivity of the researcher, and a descriptions and
interpretation of the problem, and it extends the literature or signals a call to action” (Creswell, p. 37). The significance of the qualitative research approach within the context of my research is that in order truly appreciate how teachers frame their views; I needed to locate them within the context of the issue and to do that, required a face to face interview. Limiting a study to quantitative data ultimately denies the real stories of individuals and therefore should be done in conjunction with qualitative research (Creswell, 2007).

3.2 Instruments of Data Collection

The primary instrument for data collection used in this study is the semi-structured interview protocol. The intention behind the semi-structured approach disparate to a rigid structured approach is that it permits flexibility. This style sets the stage for a conversational tone in which, I, as the interviewer was more comfortable with and I was able to create a space in which the participant would feel comfortable enough to share their story. Jennifer Hochschild (2009) suggests that the style of semi-structured interviews also allows the interviewer to, “carefully triangulate among respondents; without revealing any confidences or names of previous subjects thereby allowing the interviewer to use information gleaned from a previous interview to question or push a current subject a little more deeply” (p. 1).

The interview protocol included a balanced number of direct and indirect questions. By doing this, the interviewer can, “examine the respondent’s level of certainty, comfort, and ease of explanation, or unstated assumptions about what seems obviously true or false, wealth of anecdotes or supporting evidence, and justifications for a view” (Hochschild, 2009, p. 1). For example, one of the main direct questions I asked was, “does the presence of “race” matter when teachers are assessing their students?” However, prior to that question, a conversation occurred regarding the location of the teacher’s school and any changes in demography in last ten years.
(which ultimately leads to teachers talking about the shifts and what that has meant for their teaching).

3.3 Participants

Here I reviewed the sampling criteria I established for participant recruitment, and I reviewed a range of possible avenues for teacher recruitment.

3.3.1 Sampling criteria

The participants in my study received their teaching credentials in Canada and will have been teaching a minimum of 10 years. The rationale behind this decision is that I wanted to see if there had been a shift in attitude over the past ten years with regards to demographic changes i.e., has the influx of new Canadians to the Peel region changed the ways in which teachers teach? Having a variety of backgrounds within my participant pool will make for a more authentic study and offer a range of views. The range in grade experience is to help with the analysis process when looking at or determining critical moments in time when and how children are getting assessed. The question is, if children are being assessed and ultimately labeled and categorised at an early age does that label remain throughout their educational career?

The following are the criteria used for this study because it was important to draw from a pool of people who had experience teaching over time in order to determine whether or not there was a shift in thinking/beliefs, practices and learning while at the same time, looking for teachers who had been exposed to classrooms with diverse sets of skills and ethnicities.

1. Teachers will have received their teaching credentials and qualifications from a Canadian Institution and will be in good standing with the Ontario College of Teachers.
2. Teachers will be presently employed and working within an Ontario school and teach grades between one and eight.
3. Teachers have been teaching a minimum of 10 years.

4. Teachers will derive from various backgrounds possessing a multitude of characteristics (male, female, different religious affiliations and ethnicity).

5. Teachers will have experience-teaching children who come from homes where stigmatized versions of Standard English are spoken – for example African Vernacular English, students from Aboriginal communities and East Indian Communities.

3.3.2 Recruitment procedures

Given the small-scale nature of the study and methodological parameters we had to work with, I will be relied on what is called, “convenience sampling” which, according to R. Weiss (1994) comes from the idea that it is easier, to talk to whoever is available that may be able to offer insight to the project rather than using a random survey or finding an entire range of experiences within a population. For example, friends, family and acquaintance are a suggested place to start for the beginning researcher. With that in mind, I drew on my personal network of teachers gathered over the past 15 years by attending Peel School Board meetings, professional development conferences hosted by school boards, professional associations and in particular my association within school councils. This form of sampling was more accessible for me and allowed me to contact potential teachers personally and provide them with an overview of my research study rather than having to rely on others to make connections. I provided the participant with the criteria and asked if they fit my particular criteria. I ensured that the participants were aware that this was strictly voluntary and they were under no obligation to participate.
3.3.3 Participant biographies

Teacher One is a French Immersion Teacher with the Peel District School Board, who advocates for marginalized students at her school in a variety of ways. Every year she coaches the boys’ soccer teams as well as a lunchtime running club. She completed a concurrent Bachelor of Education, at the Ontario Institute for the Study of Education (OISE).

Teacher Two is a Grade 5 teacher with the Peel District School Board and has worked for many years in the special education department in various schools throughout Peel. He is actively involved in his school, leading sports intermural, lunchtime activities (including reading clubs for boys) and has worked at building a track and field team for his current school. He has worked as a guidance counselor for nine years.

Teacher three is a senior teacher in the Peel Board District currently teaching grade 7. He is the grade seven lead teacher and is actively involved in many aspects of the school. He mentors several new teachers, he is the teacher candidate coordinator who directly liaises with York and OISE to place TCs in his school and every year coordinates the grade 7 and 8 annual trips to Ottawa and Quebec. He also has his Masters of Education and spends a lot of time (according to him) observing how teachers assess students.

3.4 Data Analysis

The analysis of the interviews began with a complete transcription of all three interviews. Once the transcriptions were complete I reviewed them again and began to make notes to aid in the process of identifying themes. Each transcript was coded individually to identify categories of data such as instructional resources and themes within categories. Next I read the categories and themes beside one another and synthesised themes where appropriate. Once the transcriptions were complete, I compared the data using a t-chart graphic organizer. Organizing
data this way helped to see those threads of complexity that Creswell speaks of and it ensured that all of the responses were accessible. At a later stage of the analysis I was able to make meaning of the themes. My belief is that nothing has meaning until we add meaning; therefore, this stage was perhaps the most important because as a researcher I had to interpret data without bias (and that is not possible). Hochschild (2009), notes that there, “is great temptation to pick and choose strong quotations that make the points the interviewer wanted to have made and to string together a set of ideas that cohere in a particular way” (p.1.) therefore, it is imperative to include everything the respondent says (and does not say) in order to get a full picture.

3.5 Ethical Review Procedures

I followed the ethical review procedures for the Master of Teaching program, at the Ontario Institute for the Studies in Education (OISE). The participants of this study were given a consent form (Appendix A), which stated the exact purpose of the study, the commitment they will need to make, exactly how their identity will be protected, and their rights as a participant to stop the interviews at any time. The form also informed the participants that their interviews will be recorded for accuracy purposes and that the data they provided would be used strictly for this study. In addition, it gave the participants the right to receive a copy of the full written report of the study upon its conclusion, if they so chose. I did not anticipate any ethical issues as the nature of the study, meaning the type of information being gleaned from participants and information gathering instruments, are not overly controversial, sensitive, or intrusive. Therefore, I did not believe it would affect the lives of the participants. Pseudonyms were used in the writing of this paper as will be in any subsequent presentations of the work. Also, all participants signed the consent form only if they wished to participate and were fully aware of what the study entailed.
3.6 Conclusion

Chapter 3 is a map of my methodological approach to provide rationale for the decisions made within the study. This chapter is also place where I was able to expand upon the intricacies of, participant recruitment, data collection and data analysis. I speak to the ethical review procedures and finally I acknowledged the limitations and strengths of the research study. The approaches taken allowed for some flexibility in acquiring information from a selected range of teacher voices and it is hoped that my findings, which are discussed in the following chapter, will help glean insight into where and why, certain bodies of students are being miss-assessed in literacy achievement.
Chapter 4: FINDINGS

4.0 Introduction to Chapter Four

The broad purpose of my research was to explore whether or not prejudices are held against speakers of non-standard English. Through this study I hoped to narrow in on where, in the process of assessment, student literacy trajectory is determined and explore the relationship between dialect influences and coding errors/code switching and literacy assessments by teachers. The previous chapters, one through three focused on highlighting the position of the researcher, the existing literature in the field, the recruitment requirements for research participants, general data gathering and analysis procedures, as well as exploring gaps in research. This chapter provides insights from teachers on the impact of large-scale state school assessments, such as EQAO and focuses on the transcript themes that emerged from the semi-structured interviews. The qualitative data that emerged from the coding reflected four main themes, and related additional information regarding the relationships between large-scale assessment programs and teachers’ approaches to pedagogical strategies. The themes uncovered were; teacher ethnicity, teacher education, assessment practices and constraints and barriers to inclusive assessment practices. These themes will guide this discussion. With each participant I was able to compare their individual experiences to the literature findings and link how their experiences relate to the larger context of assessment practice in school.

4.1 Teacher Ethnicity

The decision to include teacher ethnicity as a theme surrounding assessment may seem strange, however, it is important because issues of race can be observed to intersect with literacy assessment in the classroom. Locating the participants identity helps to ensure colonial practices of privileging one group over and other is not perpetuated. Both Jessica Ball (2009) and Dr.
Rebecca Wheeler (2012) agree that more research needs to be done in this area and unfortunately because of the constraints of this project, it will not be in these pages.

The teacher participants in this study are first generation immigrants to Canada. Participant one is of Portuguese and African American decent and identifies as Caucasian or “Racially ambiguous.” Participant two is from Jamaica and identifies as Chinese-Jamaican and Participant three came to Canada from Guyana and identifies as Indo-Guyanese. Initially I had anticipated teachers that were second or third generation Canadians of European decent and had three teachers committed to the project. Unfortunately, they all backed out of the study for various reasons. It is my thought that the study would have been a much richer conversation if more interviewees could have been included and if a broader group of participants had taken part. A comparison of diverse groups of teachers would be helpful to this study.

4.1.2 Speakers of Patois

The broader purpose of this study was to explore the notion that prejudices exist against speakers of non-standard English. An unanticipated outcome was that all three of the participants spoke a second language and in the cases of teachers two and three they both spoke the Patois of their Mother country as well. The relationship between dialect influence and coding errors/code switching was one that I had wanted to discuss with native Standard English speakers, with the hope that my suspicions of a lack of awareness around the subject would be confirmed. However, it had not occurred to me it to focus on teachers who were well aware of the issues because of their own personal experiences. Examining the relationship between the experiences of the teachers I interviewed, their understanding of spoke languages and the literature that points to the challenges students face during the assessment process, I was able to glean that each teacher felt their knowledge of another language either aided the student directly or it indirectly
aided the process of literacy assessment. The teachers were sensitive to the factors involved in teaching and learning/developing a new language therefore they could empathise with students. In chapter 2, I discussed many of the obstacles to assessment reported by teachers and administrators through the EQAO studies but what is missing from the study are solutions, things that work like having teachers who speak the same language as the students or at minimum teachers who understand the nuances of linguistics and dialect influences on literacy assessments.

4.2 Teacher Education

The participants’ pre-service education experiences directed me to a brief examination of the programs they completed in order to understand the kinds of course content they were exposed to as well as expectations set by the institution itself. For example, course averages. The aim was to see if there are connections between what is taught in teacher education programs and the reality of what is implemented in the classroom. My evaluation was founded on the participants understanding of their level of readiness based on the education they received at their respective teacher education institution.

4.2.1 Pre-Service Teacher Training

Studies indicate that new teacher training is typically more comprehensive than it used to be in the past. Arlo Kempf of Ontario Institute of Studies in Education (OISE) says that, “New teachers are better versed in supporting diverse students, they have access to a greater variety of instruction assessment techniques and they have a deeper applied understanding of education research and technology than many of their predecessors” (Kempf, 2015, p. 1). The findings in this study appear to align with Kempf since two of the participants graduated from their institutions between 15 and 20 years ago and both reported that there was little to no instruction
on ELL and ESL. The third participant, who graduated just less than ten years ago, was the only one who indicated that instruction in ELL and ESL was available to them at the time.

Each of the participants in this study attended different Institutes for their initial teacher training. Of the three participants, only one of the teachers attended a school in the Toronto area. The other two attended institutions in the United States and the Caribbean. All three completed a one-year B. Ed program that was required by the Ministry of Education at the time they attended. Teacher three also earned a Masters of Education. The three participants were asked if their teacher’s college prepared them to work with English language learners. Of the three participants, the Toronto trained teacher, teacher one, reported having attended classes specifically for ELL and ESL instruction. Teacher one, said, “I was very fortunate to have attended OISE and to have been accepted into the Inner City option in which we were immersed in inner-city communities. I was able to forge strong ties with the communities and develop a greater understanding of urban realities in order to better address diversity in my classroom now”. Teacher one also has a personal interest in linguistics and in particular French language speakers and took an additional qualification course in order to, “teach FSL and ESL to develop an awareness and understanding of classroom theory and practice in second language learners”. Teacher two, said, “There was quite a bit of discussion as well as conversations around supporting ELL’s in the classroom” however, in a follow-up conversation, teacher two reported that there was not a course dedicated to ELL at the time and teacher three said, “ there was never a course in ELL. You need a course in that to know about ELL. It would be mal practice!” Considering that non-standard English may, according to Jessica Ball (2009), be misinterpreted as language delay, one would expect that this topic would be included in courses and conversations about English language learners.
A cursory investigation into the programs offered at the teachers colleges attended by the participants, it was found that the school in the U.S. had one course dedicated to ELL and language acquisition in 2016, as well, the B.Ed. Program at OISE had one dedicated course for ELL in 2016. This information illustrates that not enough information is available for teachers in training nor is further training and education happening after teacher training. The results appear to be a mass of students unsupported.

Remarkably, all three of the participants reported that they felt comfortable and prepared to work with ELL and ESL students when they began to teach regardless of the level of instruction they received or knowledge acquired in education programs. This begs two questions; at what point in their professional career did these teachers seek further education regarding teaching English language learners, and secondly, does the gap between teacher confidence in their initial teacher training and actual procedural knowledge play a role in the assessment of students?

4.2.2 In-Service Professional Development

During the interviews, each of the participants were asked which course or courses they have taken or plan to take that will assist in teaching and facilitating English Language Learners. A follow-up to the question was whether or not the employer mandated the courses? Teacher one is the only teacher who took an additional qualification course for French as Second Language Part 1 in order to, “develop awareness and understanding of classroom theory and practice in second language learners”. This course is required to teach in the French Immersion stream therefore it was both self-initiated for professional development. The same teacher plans to take more AQ courses to enhance their learning but hints (with a hand gesture) towards personal finances as a current barrier to enrolment. Teacher two has not taken formal AQ courses in ELL
or ESL but says that, “I have taken Reading courses that have assisted in my understanding of
ELL’s as well as numerous conferences and workshops that were all self-initiated”.
Interestingly, later on in the conversation, Teacher two also alluded to the affordability of both
time and money to attend courses. Teacher three however had a different approach to acquiring
the skills needed to support the students. This teacher noted that,

I am planning on taking an ESL course but…. experience in modifying is something I
have had many years of and that is through learning more about different cultures on my
own – I am learning about Hindus and Muslims because our school is predominantly
Hindu. I am working to get to know my community, which is better than taking ELL
courses at this point.

The participants were also asked to report on resources available through their school or
school board. Two of the three teachers said that their administrators and school board provided
a wide variety of learning opportunities, but the third teacher painted an entirely different picture.
Teacher one noted, ‘at my school, we have had numerous ESL related professional development
workshops over the years. Every teacher was given a copy of the document, “Supporting English
Language Learners: A Practical Guide for Ontario Educator” and we have ESL teachers in the
school to collaborate and work with students and teachers”. Teacher two shared the same
experience noting, “There is a wide variety of support and resources within our board.
Workshops, conferences, courses, planned PD lunches, lunch and learns as well as expert staff
area all available to us”. However, Teacher three, who is part of the same board, reported that,
“They have limited resources. They may give one teacher something and they will all have to
share. Resources also depend on the number of ELL student learners there are in the school”.

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Based on the research discussed in chapter two of this report we know that leadership plays an integral role in maintaining a culture that supports its teachers (Klinger, et al, 2009). We know that providing adequate time and support for staff to learn new skills and acquire knowledge creates a positive learning environment for staff and students. The implications of the divergence between the research and the responses of the three participants point to an inconsistency in perceptions of professional development opportunities and may leave both students and teachers without the support they need.

4.2.3 Assessment Practices

Participants were asked to discuss their assessment practices in literacy as well as if their practices were shaped by the presence of EQAO testing. The intent was to deepen the connections to the literature findings found in chapter two. The findings indicate that large-scale testing does shape the nature of classroom pedagogy, due to the top down results based nature. According to (Nichols and Berlinger, 2007) this action drives curriculum and pedagogical choices at Board and local school levels.

Both teachers one and two use diagnostic, formative and summative assessment strategies to determine needs and learning achieved through the use of Oracle reading running records, Dolch/Fry words, CASI and STEP. They also use indicators such as Phonological Awareness Testing and PM Benchmarks. However, Teacher three avoided the question and asked to move on to the next question.

For the second part of the question, Teacher one and Teacher two both provided evidence that contradicts the findings of Nichols and Berlinger (2007). These teachers say that the presence of EQAO does not dominate their assessment process or shape their classrooms. Teacher one adamantly (and seemingly defensively) disagreed with the statement that large-scale
assessments shape the classroom. “I disagree. I believe that for the vast majority of teachers, the nature of their classrooms have always been characterised by high expectations and success for all, irrespective of large-scale assessment.” However, consistent with prior responses, Teacher three supported the findings of Nichols and Berlinger (2007).

Teacher three began a long diatribe that I will include in order to get a clear picture of the experience.

I agree that large scale testing shapes the nature of classroom. There is a focus on certain areas of the curriculum that forces teachers to use specified materials that were prepared by someone else. Content does not necessarily address the needs of the students in classrooms, teachers spend an enormous amount of time reviewing and doing practice quizzes and test, teachers teach to the test. What this does is, it does not encourage the thinking process. Students are not independent thinkers anymore and these kinds of tests do not address the needs of a classroom. Everything is prescribed and they don’t even know it. I have seen grade 6 teachers move on to teach grade 7 and they are lost because there are not the same kinds of structures to follow and there is more room for interpretation in grades without EQAO. Teachers are scared to teach. It does shape the classroom and anyone who says it doesn’t either is lying or they just don’t even see how they’ve been conditioned to teach. Yes it does shape how you assess because you test more frequently and secondly, there’s no flexibility in the assessment.

The divergence in responses is not surprising given that the issue of large-scale testing can be contentious. What is surprising is the level of conviction on both sides. Until now, I did
not realize how strongly people felt about the issue and how little room there is for movement on the issue.

Missing from this conversation is the acknowledgment of “race” in assessments. When all three participants were asked whether they agreed with the statistics that indicate children of colour perform at lower levels than their “white” counterparts they all agreed with a variety of comments however, when asked if they think their non-racialized colleagues assess students of colour correctly, all three asked me to delete the question and their answers from the transcript and all three said they would only discuss this “off the record.” Unfortunately for this study, this is the information I had hoped to gather, however, based on the responses, I can glean that this is a sensitive issue. It was clear that none of the participants were comfortable reporting on this issue and the overall impression was the notion, similar to what Wheeler (2009) discusses in chapter two that, “so immersed is our culture is the view that standard English is the only real language and everything else is de-graded” that students are being systematically and possibly systemically assessed incorrectly. Not only does this attitude place the participants in situations where they might feel vulnerable and unsupported by the dominant culture if they present the issue, it also contradicts the school board policies that claim they support their teachers.

4.2.4 Transfer pattern awareness in assessment practice

As noted, the purpose of this study was to explore issues of race, class and cultural linguistics and dialect influences as they intersect with literacy assessments in classrooms, and as stated in chapter 1, to raise questions as to the implications for students. When the participants were asked about their awareness and exposure to teachings about culturally relevant teaching and assessments that argue there were differences in oral language between dialect influences and Standard English, all three participants reported that code switching is a natural part of their
understanding. They all grew up in homes where versions of Standard English were spoken and where they had to “switch” to “proper” English when they themselves got to school. Teacher two noted that, “In fact, I lived the difference being from Jamaica.” The initial plan for this study was to have three participants who were not familiar with non-standard forms of English in order to detect where miss assessments might be occurring. However, hearing personal accounts from these teacher’s as to their own experiences does bring me closer to understanding why they were reluctant to discuss overall assessment practices of their colleagues. Nevertheless, it does not bring me closer to finding out if teachers are assessing students based on what Christenbury (2000) describes in Wheeler (2009) as the common practice of English teachers, “{who} routinely equate standard English with “grammar,” as if other language varieties and styles lack grammar, the systematic and rule-governed backbone of language. Yet, the child who speaks in a vernacular dialect is not making language errors; instead, she or he is speaking correctly in the language of the home discourse community (as cited in Wheeler p. 471). As noted in chapter one there needs to be a separation of dialect influence from decoding error in Standard English when students are being assessed. However, it appears that there is not enough training in ESL and ELL (whether pre-service or in-service) for teachers to become aware of this issue. It also appears through this short study that the teachers who directly and personally experienced the act of code switching are well aware of the issues, but tare not prepared to risk their positions by discussing the issue openly. Race plays a role here because all three teachers felt they were in precarious positions due to the colour of their skin, and from very nuanced indicators, knew that bringing up issues of race was dangerous.
4.3 Constraints and Barriers to Inclusive Assessment Practice

From the research provided in chapter 1 and chapter 2 regarding constraints to large-scale testing, it is clear there are many concerns coming from both teachers and teacher unions. The concerns put forth to the public are notably about how the test scores are communicated to the public and secondly the complex nature of assessing achievement. Digging deeper into various factors it was found that gender, school culture, and the relationship between home and school are also barriers to assessment practices that do not often get discussed in broader contexts.

Through the interviews for this study, the participants were asked about their understanding of the difficulties that teachers faced when attempting to teach students under the ESL umbrella. Teacher two said that “time” is the main factor. They noted that,

Time to process, time to learn academic language, vocabulary, time to understand Ontario curriculum, standards and culture etcetera and the pace of the school year is quite rapid. The goal of the teacher is to move students along academically so the pace doesn’t allow for students to work at a pace that is comfortable for them.

Teacher one was unable to provide insights into difficulties and only offered that they always provided accommodations for students and differentiated for student needs, as part of a framework for effective practice. At this point in the interview, it was clear that no matter how I phrased or re-phrased the question, the teacher was either not able to or not willing to acknowledge if difficulties existed.

Teacher 3 offered much to the conversation that aligned with literature in chapter two. Teacher 3 offered several insights to the challenges faced in a classroom when assessing students that were not included in previous chapters. They argue that,

Stigma, resistance by some teachers to modify, lack of funding, support. Some of the
things are resistance from your fellow teachers because they don’t want to modify. You’re not getting support of other colleagues. Parents. The Majority thinks this is a stigma and their child will be labeled and sorted as someone less than the others. Even when the child is born in Canada! Parents insist that their child be taken off of ELL. But if you don’t label ELL then the problem is then you don’t have ELL teachers…it’s like a quota system. It is to the persons benefit to diagnose ELL so that they can keep their jobs.

This led me to question further who is getting categorized as ELL and who is not? Are children of Caribbean or Indigenous descent just not considered ELL because they were born in Canada? This also raises the question; is there a quota system to fill?

What is notable about the response from Teacher three is the lack of mutual support that this teacher feels when working with students. Research does indicate that both teachers and students benefit from collaboration and as Bird and Little (1996) stated in Chapter two of this study, a greater support network opens up space for experimental practices and risk taking which, could translate into better assessment practices overall. Interestingly, Teacher two speaks often about time being big factor in the classroom. They felt that there was not enough time to spend with each student but more broadly, the impression that there was not enough time in a day, week, month or year to “cover” everything and do their “job”. Time, is a factor that studies indicate is needed for teachers so that they can support each other through team teaching, mentoring or even informal discussions about issues in the school (Campbell, 1985; Campbell and Southworth, 1990; Nias, 1997). Studies indicate that gender, school culture, and the relationship between home and school are barriers to assessment and it appears as though all three participants agree on these factors. However, there appears that further investigation into
the daily barriers’ teachers face before they even begin to assess their students is what these three teachers are asking for.

4.4 Chapter Overview

The research project began with an effort to identify where and how certain groups of children were being disadvantaged in the assessment process in Ontario public schools. From the experiences of all three of the participants, it is clear that more research needs to be done into pre-service teacher training, in-service teacher support, and access to resources that provide a lens of critical race theory. The findings across the study suggest that teacher education does not provide the training to properly prepare teachers to assess their student’s let alone through culturally relevant assessments because the issues are more complex. The participants insights into how large-scale testing shapes classrooms was highlighted in the four themes that emerged. The review of the participants understanding of the true nature and underlying structure of the province wide testing was vital for how they conceptualized education. The participants reflections, and in some cases tirades, provided a glimpse into the complexities that occur in and out of classrooms in regards to assessments and have helped to get closer to isolating where in the assessment process children are being disadvantaged. Through this study, I have uncovered that this topic is complex and sensitive and therefore barriers have developed within the education system that now make it difficult to have honest and open conversations. These barriers may be a factor in the inconsistent implementation of equity policies and one of these inconsistencies can be found in the area of assessment. I am left with more questions than answers that will be addressed in chapter five which will provide a summary of key findings and the significance of the findings. Chapter five also highlights the implications of this research on the researcher and the educational community.
Chapter 5: DISCUSSION

5.0 Introduction to Chapter 5

At the beginning of this study I asked the question: How is a small sample of Junior/Intermediate teachers in the Peel District School Board addressing issues of inequitable assessments and culturally relevant testing in their classrooms? I explored relevant literature regarding literacy assessment and achievement in Ontario’s elementary schools. More specifically, I reviewed themes related to standardized testing and classroom practice to consider how various forms of testing and assessments shape the pedagogical nature of classroom teaching and learning. Collecting and analyzing data from semi-structured interviews with three intermediate teachers, I found that this topic much more complex than I initially thought. There are many inconsistencies in the area of assessment broadly speaking, without introducing additional issues of race, and there were inconsistencies in the implementations of school board equity policies in schools. In this chapter I will provide a brief overview of the findings described in chapter four and then explore the broad and narrow implications for the educational community. I will provide some recommendations for future practices, as well as recommendations for improving initial teacher training and professional development in the area of assessment, as well as suggestions for directions of future research in this area.

5.1 Overview of Findings

This research project began with an effort to identify where and how certain groups of students were being disadvantaged in the assessment process in Ontario public schools and it led to an examination of teacher ethnicity, pre-service teacher education and professional development. However, it also led to an examination of non-instructional variables that affect student achievement such as school culture, gender, impact of home and community and a
discussion surrounding teacher collaboration in school. What is significant is the connection made, by the participants in this study, between teacher ethnicity and teacher collaboration in some schools. Research indicates that when teachers are able to engage in collaboration with other teachers and administration it benefits them and their students (Bird and Little, 1996). However, the findings in this study indicate that not all teachers are able to collaborate with other teachers about culturally responsive assessments. What I uncovered in this study is that all three teachers considered dialect influences in their everyday practices. And all three participants were aware of the implications for some students who are being assessed by teachers without a background in culturally responsive teaching and learning. Unfortunately, the teachers were unable or unwilling to discuss this topic opening and honestly, not only during this study, but also in schools with other teachers and administrators within the dominant culture. Issues of job security and vulnerability emerged which complicate the understanding of assessment practices, as they relate to teacher ethnicity. These teachers did not feel they could safely express their opinions without suffering professional backlash.

There are other non-instructional factors involved in the classroom and school environment that were not initially considered in this study. The factors appear to be teacher centered such as time limitations, financial restrictions for professional development and preservice teacher training. Of the three teachers I interviewed, only one reported taking a course on ELL during their time in training, while the other two reported having no instruction at all in ELL. This variation may have to do with the time period the participants went to school. The two teachers without training in ELL or ESL earned their teaching certificates in the mid 1990s whereas the teacher with exposure to ELL and ESL courses (where I presume discussions around dialect influences would occur) earned their certificate in the mid 2000s. Based on this
information it is not surprising that all three used a variety of approaches for assessing their students and that there is no required standard assessments for daily practice.

Of the many barriers, what appears to effect teachers’ work lay outside of the classroom. Time and money seem to occupy much of the conversations surrounding the teacher’s level of productivity. The teachers reported that there was not enough time in a day, month or year to give each student the support required nor was there enough time to collaborate with other teachers to develop strategies for enhancing assessment strategies in the classroom. All three reported that taking additional qualification courses, regardless of the subject content was financially restricting and time consuming. If the perception of time and money are somehow affecting how teachers perceive their full impact in a classroom, perhaps these are factors that merit further investigation?

5.2 Implications

The findings from this study have several implications both for the broader educational community and for my own professional identity and practice. These are discussed below.

5.2.1 Broad: The educational community

The Primary finding of this study was that the barriers teachers face based on their ethnicity might play a role in the inconsistent implementation of assessment and equity policies. This is somewhat troubling because literature points to teachers of the dominant group needing to be educated in culturally responsive teaching as the solution to potentially inaccurate testing, but it appears as though the education community should be providing a space for teachers who are aware of issues of race, gender and class, to speak openly and honestly about their experiences. Perhaps focusing on the knowledge of non-dominant groups of teachers might be the kind of critical approach required to disrupt the hierarchical systems embedded within the
educational institutions. This kind of approach is at the root of critical race theory where the de-centering of the dominant culture occurs (Degaldo, 2001).

The realities that the teachers in this study have experienced, do not align with the literature and mandates from the Ministry of Education with regards to research that calls for and celebrates equity and inclusion. Overall, this lack of support for teachers, whether it is in initial teacher training, or on the job training, trickles down to the students in the classroom who may be receiving inconsistent assessments.

5.2.2 Narrow: Professional identity and practice

In terms of professional identity and practice, the findings of this study have re-affirmed my belief that assessment practices is a topic that will require more attention. It is my hope to narrow the focus further and examine the barriers that seem to lie beneath the general discourse surrounding the topic. The responses from the participants in this study provided further insight into the kinds of knowledge that is not being acknowledged openly. There is evidence of some disconnect between the symbolic nature of what the Ministry of Education hopes to implement and the material consequences of what happens in the classrooms. I will continue my endeavor to find ways to bridge that gap and as a result of this study will consult with Ministry documents surrounding equity and inclusion. Coupled with that, I will be mindful of my own assessment practices when teaching and establish from the beginning what success criteria and learning outcomes best reflect my students and me. My identity as a researcher has changed as I worked through this process of managing this study. I began this research project with very little knowledge about being a qualitative researcher and had to learn quickly how to integrate my previous research habits with the expectations of the MT Program. This experience has helped me gain an appreciation and deeper understanding of the different kinds of research there are and
I realized that I enjoy what qualitative research has to offer. This kind of research allows the researcher to be more personally connected in the participant’s lives, even if it is for a short time. Having never conducted this kind of study before, I was not aware of some of the challenges that can arise and therefore, in future, I will ensure that I spend more time understanding the purpose of each interview question in order to draw out the strongest information pertinent to the project.

5.3 Recommendations

As it stands in the current collective agreement, teachers have 240 minutes over a five-day cycle. High-school teachers get 360 minutes per five-day cycle, therefore, investigating the rational behind the disparity is needed and if warranted, provide elementary teachers with more planning time. Perhaps this will allow for teachers to develop a stronger and more diverse system of assessment and time for a collective approach to critically examine all teaching materials and assessments to present to the broader educational community.

In terms of the issues of time and money, I recommend that there be workshops available in schools that allow teachers the flexibility to attend before the school year begins. Further, workshops should provide teachers with concrete materials and actions that directly relate to the Ministry’s mission of equity to apply in their classrooms in order for accountability measures to be taken.

I would recommend improvements to initial teacher training and investigation into the screening process of teacher candidates. When I came to the program with an undergraduate degree in Equity Studies, I was one of only a couple of students who had been exposed to issues of class, race, gender and disability studies and I was the only one in my cohort who had taken courses specifically on social justice issues in education. I found it quite disappointing to think that future teachers may not know about structural and institutional racism, classism and how
that impacts all students in classrooms. I strongly recommend that either a pre-requisite course in equity studies be required for entrance into teacher training programs, or that a yearlong introductory equity course be mandated for all teacher candidates. Further to that, I would recommend that all professors and instructors be required to take the same course.

5.4 Areas for Further Research

Considering the findings of this study, a significant area for further research is in initial teacher training. However, an investigation into the structural issues of race within the institution of education and how that structure continues to oppress and marginalize racialized groups and what that means for students in the classroom is in need. The area of assessment is a symptom of a much larger and systemic problem and I had initially thought that by providing concrete evidence that students were being miss-diagnosed in the assessment process teachers and the broader educational community would recognize that this issue does exist. Further research needs to occur with teachers of the dominant culture in order to have a clearer picture of what happens in a classroom when the identity of the students and the identity of the teachers do not align.

5.5 Concluding Comments

This topic of assessment and large-scale testing has interested me for many years. As noted in chapter one, it is meaningful because it is personal. The experiences my children face in the education system bring about a persistent feeling of dis-ease and discomfort and as they are being subjected to the rigors of EQAO testing and general classroom assessments, I felt that I could no longer remain silent.

From my distinct position of mixed ethnicity and as a teacher candidate and researcher,
I have been able to explore how different approaches to assessment in classrooms impact my children and other children. Further to that I was able to examine how issues of race intersect with education and culturally relevant pedagogies as they relate to marginalized youth in classrooms. My intention was to provide evidence and support to teachers to better understand the need to factor cultural linguistics and dialect into their assessments to bring awareness to the broad and long lasting effects of ignoring the issue. I think that this study did uncover important areas of research and considerations, which were meaningful to me as a research/teachers, but which I hope are though provoking for all educators.
References


http://www.mitpressjournals.org/doi/abs/10.1162/0011526053124460#.WNICYRSvblI


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Appendix A: Letter of Consent for Interview

Date: ___________________

Dear ____________________,

I am a graduate student at OISE, University of Toronto, and am currently enrolled as a Master of Teaching candidate. I am studying __________________ for the purposes of investigating an educational topic as a major assignment for our program. I think that your knowledge and experience will provide insights into this topic.

I am writing a report on this study as a requirement of the Master of Teaching Program. My course instructor who is providing support for the process this year is Dr. ___________________. My research supervisor is ____________________. The purpose of this requirement is to allow us to become familiar with a variety of ways to do research. My data collection consists of a 40 minute interview that will be tape-recorded. I would be grateful if you would allow me to interview you at a place and time convenient to you. I can conduct the interview at your office or workplace, in a public place, or anywhere else that you might prefer.

The contents of this interview will be used for my assignment, which will include a final paper, as well as informal presentations to my classmates and/or potentially at a conference or publication. I will not use your name or anything else that might identify you in my written work, oral presentations, or publications. This information remains confidential. The only people who will have access to my assignment work will be my research supervisor and my course instructor. You are free to change your mind at any time, and to withdraw even after you have consented to participate. You may decline to answer any specific questions. I will destroy the tape recording after the paper has been presented and/or published which may take up to five years after the data has been collected. There are no known risks or benefits to you for assisting in the project, and I will share with you a copy of my notes to ensure accuracy.

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

Yours sincerely,

Researcher name: _______________________________

Phone number, email: _______________________________

Instructor’s Name: ________________________________
Phone number: ___________________ Email: ___________________

Research Supervisor’s Name: ___________________________________

Phone #: ___________________ Email: ___________________

Consent Form

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

I have read the letter provided to me by ________________(name of researcher) and agree to participate in an interview for the purposes described.

Signature: __________________________

Name (printed): _______________________

Date: ___________________________
Appendix B: Interview Protocol/Questions

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 _____________ and agree to participate in an interview for the purposes described. I agree to have the interview audio-recorded.

Signature: ________________________________________

Name: (printed) __________________________________________

Date: __________________________________________
Appendix B: Interview Protocol

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this research study, and for making time to be interviewed today. This research study aims to uncover the ways in which large-scale assessment testing disadvantages students for the purpose of my Master of Teaching Research Paper. This interview will last approximately 45-60 minutes, and I will ask you a series of questions focused on your own pedagogy, experiences, beliefs and opinions. I want to remind you that you may refrain from answering any question, and you have the right to withdraw your participation from the study at any time. As I explained in the consent letter, this interview will be audio recorded. Do you have any questions before we begin?

Background Information

1. How long have you been working as a teacher?
2. Do you identify with a particular race and or ethnicity?
3. Where and when did you receive your teaching credentials and qualifications?
4. What grade(s) do you currently teach?
5. How many years of experience do you have teaching English Language Learners?

Teacher Perspectives/Beliefs

6. What are your thoughts/beliefs on large-scale testing in Ontario?
7. Would you agree or disagree that large-scale assessments shape the nature of classrooms?
8. What is your understanding of the difficulties that educators face when attempting to teach students who are English language learners?
9. How comfortable are you in speaking publically about race related issues within education?
10. How important is it that we take into consideration cultural perspectives when implementing tests and test questions?

Teacher Practices

11. What indicators do you use to determine assessments of reading and writing?
12. Do you consider factors such as transfer of patterns from the student’s community dialect into school reading and writing?

13. Have you been exposed to the teachings that say there are differences in oral language between dialect influences and Standard English?

14. Does the presence of EQAO testing shape how you assess students throughout the school year?

Supports and Challenges

15. How do your school and/or school board assist you in obtaining resources that will help you teach and facilitate English Language learners?

16. How has your teacher’s college or university prepared you in your work with English Language learners?

17. Which course(s) have you taken or plan to take that will assist you in teaching and facilitating English language learners and are these courses self-initiated or mandated by your employer?

Next Steps

19. What advice do you have for beginning teachers that will help them navigate their way into such a complex profession?

Thank you, sincerely, for your time and considered responses.