Behind the Snapshot: Teachers’ Experiences of Preparing Students in Lower Socioeconomic Status Schools for the Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test

By

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Abstract

The goal of standardized testing is purportedly to equalize the educational landscape for all students, regardless of background. However, the effects of imposing large-scale assessment on students, teachers, and the education system might not always be as positive as organizations such as Ontario’s Education Quality and Accountability Office have acknowledged. This study explored the experiences of teachers preparing students in schools with a high proportion of students from low socioeconomic backgrounds to write Ontario’s Secondary School Literacy Test (OSSLT). To determine the effects of high-stakes standardized tests in Ontario, interviews were conducted with grade ten English teachers preparing students to write the OSSLT from schools identified as having low scores on the OSSLT and Toronto District School Board’s Learning Opportunities Index. The data showed that teachers found the OSSLT to be an ineffective tool to measure literacy and implement changes in the classroom, and represented an increased emotional cost. Both teachers also acknowledged that students’ socioeconomic status and social position prevented them from being able to succeed on the OSSLT, no matter the academic interventions used by teachers and schools. These findings suggest that the increased emotional cost on teachers and low value placed on the OSSLT by teachers is leading to unethical practices in test preparation, which ultimately affects the data collected from the OSSLT, used to inform educational policy in Ontario.

Key Words: Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test, standardized testing, large-scale assessments, high-stakes testing, low socioeconomic schools, literacy
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Chapter One: Introduction

1.0 Research Context

There is a long history of standardized testing and large-scale assessments in the education systems of Western countries, such as England, Canada and the United States. Presently, the education system in every Canadian province and territory uses some form of standardized testing. Standardized tests were first introduced in Ontario in 1997 after the findings and recommendations of a comprehensive report by the Royal Commission on Learning were released in 1994 (Education Quality and Accountability Office [EQAO], 2013). The Royal Commission on Learning recommended the creation of a third-party organization to produce and administer large-scale literacy and numeracy tests (Royal Commission on Learning, 1994). In 1996, the Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO) was created to accomplish this task (EQAO, 2013) with the mandate to “[enhance] the quality and accountability of the education system in Ontario and to work with the education community” (EQAO, 2015b, n.p.).

Currently, Ontario students participate in EQAO large-scale reading, writing and mathematics assessments in grades three, six, nine and ten. These include: the Assessment of Reading, Writing and Mathematics, Primary division which is written by all grade three students; the Assessment of Reading, Writing and Mathematics, Junior Division which is written in grade six; the Grade 9 Assessment of Mathematics; and the Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test (OSSLT) which is written in grade ten (EQAO, 2009). The OSSLT serves as a graduation requirement for all students wishing to receive their Ontario Secondary School Diploma (OSSD) (EQAO, 2008; Ontario Ministry of Education, 2011). This can be a grave consequence for students who are not successful, as they either must retake the OSSLT, or they must successfully complete the Ontario Secondary School Literacy Course (OSSLC) in order to fulfill the literacy
requirements to receive their OSSD (EQAO, 2014c; Ontario Ministry of Education, 2011). For lower-achieving students, the OSSLT assessment can serve as a method of intervention. The literacy requirement put in place by the Ministry of Education act as a sieve and allow for students who do require assistance to achieve the expected standard to be identified and provided with the necessary resources. However, over the previous five OSSLT tests (2010-2015), the provincial success rate for fully participating, first-time eligible students has remained consistent between 82 and 83 percent (EQAO, 2015a). These results indicate that approximately one fifth of Ontario students are required to retake the OSSLT or commit to a semester-long course to achieve the literacy requirements in order for them to receive their OSSD.

1.1 Research Problem

Standardized testing is purportedly meant to provide an equal opportunity for all students to succeed and demonstrate the knowledge that they have acquired throughout their education. However, the effects of imposing large-scale assessment on students, teachers, and the education system might not always be as positive as organizations such as EQAO acknowledge. The EQAO’s assessments are used to provide information about all of the students in Ontario and their achievement of curriculum standards. However, the assessments conducted by EQAO may not always represent the processes of learning and assessment that take place within the classroom (Ross & Gray, 2008). The OSSLT is mostly assessed based on answers to multiple choice, short answer questions and writing passages regarding literacy content in all curriculums up to and including grade nine (EQAO, 2009), whereas classroom grades include a large number and variety of assessment methods – not limited to tests – throughout the year which target different aspects of a single subject in the Ontario curriculum (Ross & Gray, 2008). The differences in the approaches to evaluating student knowledge and comprehension of the
curriculum could limit the success of students whose strengths are unrecognized by the assessment methods used by EQAO.

The practice of standardized testing may also lead to increased pressure on educators and students to increase performance, which could result in overall decreased learning of Ontario curriculum material. With a practice so heavily reliant on the success rate of students, standardized testing can impose a heavy focus on results and marks (Klein, Devenbergen, & Brown, 2006), which has been shown to produce both positive and negative results for student success in the classroom and on the test (Brennan, Kim, Wenz-Gross, & Siperstein, 2001). Difficulty performing on standardized tests has been correlated with gender and ethnicity in that female students and ethnic minority students often perform less well on standardized tests compared to males and white/European students (Brennan et al., 2001). Pressures of large-scale assessment similar to those placed on students can also be seen in educators. Teachers have reported that the implementation of standardized tests has given them less freedom and flexibility with regards to their teaching and the ability to provide the students with an authentic learning experience (Moxey, 2005; Winkler, 2002). These feelings, combined with the pressure to increase student performance can cause educators to promote and implement the practice of “teaching to the test”, which can cause a narrowed curriculum and limit the success of students, particularly those who do not perform well on tests or in tested subjects (Herman, 1992; Ohemeng & McCall-Thomas, 2013).

The introduction of standardized testing and the EQAO in Ontario has arguably cemented the primacy of student success on large-scale assessments which, as above, can lead to the phenomenon of teachers “teaching to the test” to increase student performance, diminishing the diagnostic goals of the large-scale assessments in Ontario and inhibiting the success of certain
students (Ohemeng & McCall-Thomas, 2013; Ross & Gray, 2008). However, there has been virtually no research on Ontario teachers’ experiences in relation to EQAO tests in general and the OSSLT in particular. Knowing how Ontario secondary school educators experience and use EQAO standardized testing and the OSSLT could provide more practice-based information on the validity and reliability of these tests and their suitability as an accountability tool.

1.2 Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative study is to explore Ontario grade ten English teachers’ experiences of the OSSLT in schools with a high proportion of students from low socioeconomic backgrounds. I explored this topic by interviewing a sample of these teachers: their reported efforts to incorporate OSSLT preparation into their lesson plans; their perception of final grade correlation to OSSLT results; the reported effects of the OSSLT on themselves and its perceived effects on their students; their view of the OSSLT’s connection to Ontario’s curriculum content; and their opinions of whether student performance on the OSSLT is a reflection of their ability. I hope the study contributes a greater understanding of this experience including Ontario teachers’ beliefs of the importance of standardized testing and the OSSLT in particular, the role the OSSLT plays in their classroom and teaching, and the effect it has on students. At the present time, no qualitative study that has examined the incorporation of EQAO’s OSSLT in Ontario schools with a large population of students with low socioeconomic status and its effect on teachers.

1.3 Research Questions

The aim of this research is to answer the central question: how are some Ontario grade ten English teachers experiencing the OSSLT in schools that are low on the Learning
Opportunities Index (LOI)? In order to gather meaningful findings about this experience, it will be necessary to diversify the inquiry with other questions:

- What are teachers’ perceptions of the OSSLT as a measurement of students’ literacy skills?
- How do teachers view the alignment of OSSLT content to curriculum and policy documents?
- What are teachers’ practices of incorporating the OSSLT in their classrooms?
- How do teachers perceive the impacts of the OSSLT themselves and their students?
- How do teachers view of student performance on the OSSLT as a reflection of their teaching and its use to improve practices?

1.4 Background of the Researcher/Reflexive Positioning Statement

As a student who has been educated in the Ontario public school system and participated in each of the EQAO standardized tests, I often wonder how effective standardized testing is for all stakeholders. My view on the system of standardized testing is one that has been shaped by my experiences throughout elementary and secondary school. I was raised in a middle to high income area and attended very good public schools. Standardized tests never posed as a challenge to me as English was my first language and I am white, which research shows likely allows me to perform better on such tests. My personality also lends itself to the standardized testing system as I am a black-or-white person who prefers when there is a discernible correct answer. However, I have come to realize through personal experience and my teacher education program that this system may not benefit all types of learners. Although my experiences as a student in Ontario who has written the EQAO tests may provide me with insight into the student perspectives and experiences teachers consider when facilitating these tests, I must be careful
that my social position and positive experiences with these tests do not obstruct me from being able to understand their effects on all Ontarians.

1.5 Overview/Preview of Whole

To answer the research questions, I conducted a qualitative study using purposeful sampling to interview two Ontario grade ten English teachers about their experiences of the OSSLT in schools with low LOI scores. In Chapter Two, I perform a review of the literature related to standardized testing’s role in education, its use for accountability purposes, its role in the classroom and the relationship of these factors to the OSSLT. In Chapter Three, I discuss the methodology of the study. The fourth chapter discusses the major findings of the interviews and their significance. Finally, in Chapter Five I will discuss the broad and narrow implications of the findings and how they apply to the education community and raise questions for future research.
Chapter Two: Literature Review

2.0 Chapter Introduction

Standardized testing is a practice that has been highly commended and criticized for the impacts it has on the education system, schools, students and teachers. Throughout this chapter, I will be reviewing scholarly literature and research to determine how the Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test (OSSLT) fits into the measurement culture and the standardized testing movements, and the impacts and implications it has for stakeholders in the Ontario education system. I will begin by examining the broader history of standardized testing and its implementation in Western education systems and the implementation of standardized testing and the Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO) in Ontario. I will then discuss how standardized tests are used as a measure of accountability in the education system, how that accountability can be compromised and relate this previous research to EQAO and the OSSLT. Finally, I will examine the positive and negative impacts standardized testing has for both students and teachers, both globally, in Canada and specifically in Ontario.

2.1 Standardized Testing and Education

Standardized testing is used in a variety of disciplines for evaluation and measurement, and has been increasingly used in Western education systems since the nineteenth century when Horace Mann successfully used a common exam to test Boston students (Gallagher, 2003). Standardized testing continued to evolve and gain popularity with the belief that students should be identified and segregated based on intellectual ability (Hanson as cited in Gallagher, 2003, p. 86), the creation and variations of Binet’s intelligence tests and the Scholastic Achievement Tests (SATs) (Gallagher, 2003). The large-scale, multiple choice Alpha Army Test was used to identify suitable officers by the United States army during the First World War, and its success
lead to the spread of multiple choice standardized tests (Haladyna, Haas, & Allison, 1998). As standardized testing has become more common, recommendations for ethical and valid tests have been produced. *The Standards for Educational and Psychological Testing* is a document created and revised by the American Educational Research Association, American Psychological Association and National Council on Measurement in Education since 1966, and these standards are used in the creation of standardized tests in North America, including in Ontario (American Psychological Association, 2014; EQAO, 2014b).

EQAO’s current method used to achieve their mandate is a positivist, large-scale, criterion-referenced standardized test (Nezavdal, 2003). Standardized testing can be defined as any test where participants are required to answer the same questions and are scored on the same scale and with the same criterion (Abbott, 2015). This becomes a large-scale assessment when the test is taken by a large number of participants and used to compare across regions (EQAO, 2009). The purpose of the Ontario assessments is to report to stakeholders on students’ achievement at specific points throughout their education and for the purpose of monitoring the quality and status of the education system (EQAO, 2008; EQAO, 2014a). The standardized tests in Ontario take two forms: low-stakes testing and high-stakes testing. Low-stakes testing is any test that is used for diagnostic and accountability purposes and does not have any direct effect on the students, teachers or schools, whereas high-stakes testing may affect to influence decisions for the student, teacher, school or school board (Abbott, 2014), such as grade promotion, graduation, hiring, bonuses and increase or loss of funding (Brennan et al., 2001). In Ontario, the Grade 3 and 6 Assessments of Reading, Writing and Mathematics, and the Grade 9 Assessment of Mathematics are all considered to be low-stakes tests. The OSSLT, written in grade ten, is high-stakes, where a passing grade is needed in order for students to receive their Ontario Secondary
School Diploma. These tests use multiple choice and short answer questions in order to determine student achievement in that specific subject area (EQAO, 2009). The results allow education systems to make inferences about the quality of education given to students.

2.2 Accountability and Standardized Testing

One of the purposes of EQAO is to “report on student achievement and demonstrate the quality and accountability of Ontario’s education system […] to provide information to be used in improvement planning” (EQAO, 2014b, p. 81). Large-scale assessment allows for an organization to report on students’ performance, teachers’ effectiveness and schools’ relative success, as well as evaluate the curriculum (Urdan & Paris, 1994) in order to improve instruction and learning (Klinger & Luce-Kapler, 2007). To accomplish this, the tests must be produced and administered in a way that accurately represents the status of the education system in Ontario.

2.2.1 Validity

In order to infer information about the quality of an education system, a standardized test must have validity, “the quality of being logically or factually sound” (Validity, n.d.). Validity in standardized testing can be classified as either instructional validity or construct validity. Instructional validity represents student’s opportunity to learn the content of a test and construct validity is how well a test demonstrates a student’s abilities and achievement (Garcia, 2003). Construct underrepresentation variance and construct-irrelevant variance interfere with a test’s construct validity (Wiliam, 2010). Construct underrepresentation variance occurs when the test is not able to demonstrate differences in student abilities about a specific subject content, where construct-irrelevant variance is when the test does not assess the specific subject content by including differences in students’ backgrounds rather than quality of education received (Wiliam, 2010).
Tests are created to test one subject – unidimensional testing – which increases their construct validity (Garcia, 2003); however, unless the test is focused solely on literacy, a test will test the students’ proficiency in reading and writing in the English language and content knowledge (Visone, 2009). Interference of the construct validity of a standardized test can be also be attributed to differences socioeconomic status of different students. Test score variance based on socioeconomic differences have been found to account for approximately 69-89% of the variance (Linden, 2007; Wiliam, 2010), compared to differences in quality of education which have been attributed to approximately 8% of test score variance in the United States and 7% in the United Kingdom (Wiliam, 2010). This large construct-irrelevant variance would limit the use of standardized testing as an appropriate means for accountability in the education system.

The instructional validity of a test would be attributed to differences in the opportunities to learn provided to students and the resources to which they have access. This would limit minority students who are at greater risk of being disadvantaged and more likely to have a modified curriculum (Brennan et al., 2001). Hout, Elliott, and Frueh (2012) argue that teachers’ test preparation methods – including teaching to the test – affect instructional validity, as students’ grades can increase with these practices. If these measures of validity are not present on a standardized test, it may inhibit the success of some students on standardized tests.

2.2.2 Alignment to the classroom

If standardized tests demonstrate the quality of the education system and classroom learning, it may be expected that the standardized assessments align with those from the classroom. Assessment alignment is defined by Ross and Gray (2008) as “the degree to which internal and external assessments provide equivalent information about student performance” (p.
328). However, classroom (internal) assessments and external (EQAO, in Ontario) assessments are not equivalent in number and type(s) of assessments used. Classroom assessments use a wide variety of techniques across a large period of time, while external assessments represent a single evaluation using solely multiple choice and short answer questions (Ross & Gray, 2008). Research (Brennan et al., 2001; Ross & Gray, 2008; Ross & Kostuch, 2011) has found moderate alignment of internal and external assessments, with a correlation of approximately 0.4-0.6. Volante (2007) argues that classroom and external assessments in Ontario assessments should have a great deal of assessment alignment because they are both constructed to align with the Ontario curriculum. Alignment of students’ grades on external and classroom assessments would be further helped by the structure of Ontario report cards, which include a section for learning skills. Since learning skills are reported on the report cards, this would should eliminate teachers consciously or subconsciously compensating marks for students’ behaviour or effort (Brennan et al., 2001; Ross & Gray, 2008). However, in Ontario, it has been found that alignment for the grade three, six and nine Assessments of Mathematics and classroom assessments to have a correlation of approximately 0.4-0.5, which is described as a moderate alignment (Ross & Gray, 2008) and would be consistent with findings in areas that do not include learning skills on their report cards. The differences in report card grades and standardized test scores may be due to the intention for classroom assessments to promote student success and have been found more likely to include teacher subjectivity than standardized tests (Brennan et al., 2001). While classroom evaluations may not be highly aligned to large-scale assessments, they will not assess the same abilities because they are very different forms of evaluation.
2.3 Standardized Testing in the Classroom

Standardized testing examines students’ overall levels of achievement in certain subject areas, in Ontario’s case, reading, writing and mathematics. In a classroom context, the principle person who fosters the learning required to achieve the provincial standard is the teacher, thereby cementing the roles of the teacher and students as the stakeholders within the classroom. When standardized testing is mandated and therefore introduced into the learning environment it has the possibility to alter classroom conditions, and can have effects on both stakeholders.

2.3.1 Benefits to students

Standardized testing has been shown to provide benefits to students as it can increase student motivation and learning, limit the effects of their socioeconomic status and provide intervention in student learning when necessary. In a society focused on grades, standardized tests can promote an increase in students’ motivation to achieve curriculum standard. In general, standardized testing has been found to promote student achievement, increase student motivation and may cause students to increase focus on their education and improve their performance in school and on standardized tests (Brennan et al., 2001; Burger & Krueger, 2003; Volante, 2007). Testing has been shown to increase student learning due to the concept known as test-enhanced learning, which states that testing can promote the process of learning as well as content retention (McConnell, St-Onge, & Young, 2015). Therefore, both motivation and the process of learning can be directly stimulated by the inclusion of standardized tests.

Standardized testing may promote the principle of equal opportunity for all learners by providing all students with the same test, based on the same curriculum and graded on the same scale. Certain research has concluded that in places with large disparities in socioeconomic status, standardized testing should eliminate the range of scores caused by discrimination
because every student is provided with the opportunity to succeed and it eliminates socioeconomic bias within such a format (Grodsky, Warren, & Felts, 2008). The process of standardized testing supports student intervention for those who are not achieving the level to which they need to succeed (Garcia, 2003; Kearns, 2011). For low-stakes testing, this offers the opportunity at any point to identify a student, school or district that needs extra resources to achieve the curriculum standard. In the case of high-stakes testing, there must be a method put in place for intervention, should a student need it. Often, high-stakes tests that take place in grade ten allow for the proper interventions to be made so that a student can improve their performance, in the necessary subject areas, to reach the academic standard before the end of grade twelve (Garcia, 2003). In sum, standardized testing’s equitable testing methods and student support should allow for all students to demonstrate their knowledge and perform equally on standardized assessments.

2.3.2 Benefits to teachers

As for students, standardized testing can be seen to add a structure and increased motivation for teachers to achieve a certain standard in the classroom. In a study of six Virginia teachers, Winkler (2002) found that standardized testing adds structure to teaching, provides consistency between classrooms and schools, and typically less-experienced teachers enjoyed the inclusion of standardized testing because it provided the means for collaboration between staff. Another study of 20 New York teachers (Klein et al., 2006) found that standardized testing could be used to teach critical thinking as well as test-taking strategies. Standardized tests have also been found to increase teachers’ professional development, allowing them to reflect on and update teacher practices based on students’ standardized test results (Burger & Krueger, 2003). EQAO surveys teachers to examine their use of EQAO and teaching strategies they used in the
classroom. In a recent survey, approximately two thirds of teachers reported using the results to determine if students were achieving curriculum standard and to identify strengths and weaknesses of their programs in order to make improvements (EQAO, 2014a). In sum, the benefits that standardized testing provides to teachers allows them to more effectively plan and execute their lessons, and for students to receive similar educations across schools and districts.

2.3.3 Implications for students

There are certain implications of the inclusion of standardized testing which affect all students, while others target only certain groups. While some studies have concluded that standardized tests may increase student motivation and learning (Brennan et al., 2001; Volante, 2007), others have found that this may not be the case (Hout et al., 2012). This reduction in motivation and student learning can cause an increased drop-out rate, as seen in the United States, where high-stakes tests – often graduation requirements – have been found to have no effect on student learning, but have increased the drop-out rate by two percent (Hout et al., 2012).

The decreased student motivation may be due in part to the narrowed and structured curriculum implemented by teachers as a result of standardized testing. This limits what students are taught and which assignments and evaluations are used, in order to increase scores on standardized tests, particularly on high-stakes tests (Herman, 1992; Slomp, 2008). Standardized tests are not likely to test “higher levels of cognitive complexity” (Hout et al., 2012, pp. 33-34), and may limit “divergent thinking, creativity and intellectual work” (Volante, Cherubini, & Drake, 2008, p. 5) in the classroom. This may limit the skills students are taught, meaning that students will leave school with limited abilities in performing science experiments or writing research reports or public speaking (Volante, 2004). The test-focused curriculum may also cause
students who struggle with certain tested subjects to alienate themselves from school due to their inability to succeed on standardized tests used as graduation requirements (Brennan et al., 2001). The testing format limits the permitted answers, often featuring multiple choice and/or short answer questions (Hout et al., 2012), causing students to use standardized answers on their tests.

While some view standardized tests as a way to “even out the playing field” and eliminate any biases of the education system, some argue that various groups do experience a bias from such tests. There are certain groups of students whose success has historically been limited by standardized tests, including ethnic minorities, students with low socioeconomic backgrounds, students with low reading proficiency and English language learners (ELLs). Different studies have shown, that standardized tests may not accurately demonstrate the abilities of ethnic minorities (Brennan et al., 2001; Grodsky et al., 2008; Kearns, 2011; Ross & Kostuch, 2011; West, 2005). Standardized tests produce negative stereotypes about the intelligence of minorities, which can cause them to decrease their participation and engagement in class (Mendoza-Denton, 2014). Ogbu (1978) argued that stigmatized minorities scored lower on standardized tests than those who were not stigmatized, using the example of Koreans who do not perform well on tests in Japanese schools, but perform at expected levels for their grade in American schools. This phenomenon should not be blamed on the education system as a whole because ethnic minorities have shown higher performance on report cards than on standardized tests when compared to the majority (Brennan et al., 2001; Ross & Kostuch, 2011). Differences in test scores have been attributed to the limited success of low socioeconomic status students and their reduced access to resources and learning opportunities, and generally these students are more likely to be an ethnic minority (Grodsky et al., 2008). West (2005) found that Florida schools that were not achieving to standard on the “Annual Yearly Progress” standardized test
had a student population with 40% more poor students than average and had a large minority population; however, all students within the school received similar report card grades.

While language can act as a large barrier to native and non-native English speakers alike (Cheng, Klinger, & Zheng, 2007; Visone, 2009), standardized tests disproportionately diminish the abilities of both ELLs and students with low reading proficiency. Students with low reading levels will score lower not only on a literacy test but a subject content test like math because reading proficiency, reading speed and comprehension, all combine to affect a student’s understanding of a test question (Visone, 2009). The level of a grade ten student’s reading can vary by as much as six to ten years, meaning that reading levels can significantly inhibit a student from being able to perform to standard on a test (Visone, 2009). In North America, standardized tests are designed for students whose first language is English and who have cultural and contextual knowledge for reading texts (Cheng et al., 2007). Without proper knowledge of the test language, or low reading proficiency, standardized tests would be significantly more difficult for those students.

2.3.4 Implications for teachers

The practice of standardized testing can impact the manner in which teachers prepare and carry out their lessons in the classroom. Standardized testing is largely viewed negatively by teachers due to the limitations it places upon them and for the changes that arise in their lesson planning (Urdan & Paris, 1994). Klein et al. (2006) found that their sample of New York teachers responded to questions regarding standardized testing with 77% negative comments. Some of the reported limits on their practice include having less flexibility within the curriculum by limiting their choice and freedom of content within the classroom (Winkler, 2002), less creativity, less real and authentic teaching (Moxey, 2005), decreased teacher
motivation (Moxey, 2005; Wiliam, 2010) and loss or decrease of critical thinking in students (Klein et al., 2006; Moxey, 2005; Winkler, 2002). Due to increased importance placed upon standardized test results, accommodating students’ multiple learning styles and diverse backgrounds may be limited in favour of aligning students’ thinking methods to that which being assessed on the standardized test (Adamowycz, 2008). Research has shown that the heavy focus on standardized testing and increasing students’ achievements leads to teachers feeling large amounts of pressure, shame, guilt and embarrassment (Abrams, Pedulla, & Madaus, 2003; Smith, 1991). One study by Abrams et al. (2003) found that teachers preparing students to write a high-stakes test were twice as likely to ask not to teach the same course again, as compared to teachers of low-stakes standardized tests.

For the most part, since many teachers do not believe that standardized testing is an effective means of assessment, they have been found to be unconcerned with contaminating test scores (Urdan & Paris, 1994). Contamination of test results stems from the behaviour of “teaching to the test”, which is caused by increased pressure placed on teachers and schools to meet or exceed standards, encouraged by the “measurement culture” and need for scientific advancement of today’s society (Gallagher, 2003; Ohemeng & McCall-Thomas, 2013) and incentives when they are in place (Hout et al., 2012). The practices of test preparation have been put on a continuum of ethical and non-ethical practices (Haladyna, Nolen, & Haas, 1991). The continuum which considers practices such as teaching test-writing strategies, reminding students to check their answers or encouraging students as ethical practices, but practicing with past test questions, using commercial test preparation materials or even excusing low-achievers from writing the test as unethical teacher practices. When a group of teachers were asked if they spend a large amount of time “teaching to the test”, four out of five teachers reported they did,
and it was found that this was much more likely if they taught low-achieving students or minorities (Urdan & Paris, 1994). Novice teachers who reported more positive comments with regards to the practice of standardized testing (Winkler, 2002) were most likely to participate in the practice of “teaching to the test”. The practice of “teaching to the test” itself is a limit standardized testing imposes on teachers and students. There is overall less curriculum content and critical thinking, it limits students weak in certain subjects and students with learning styles not promoted by the implementation of standardized testing and the practice of “teaching to the test” (Herman, 1992; Ohemeng & McCall-Thomas, 2013). These implications undermine the legitimacy of test results since certain students will receive increased support on the test; therefore it is impossible to compare results among teachers or schools when students have had uncontrolled help (Urdan & Paris, 1994). The implications of standardized testing for teachers can also negatively influence lesson planning and execution, and interfere with standardized testing results.

The literature has provided different views on the benefits and implications of standardized testing for both teachers and students. Some research has shown that standardized testing is a means of providing equality between students of different cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds, and different teachers throughout their education. It has also been shown as a motivational tool to increase student and teacher success. Contrarily, research has also shown that standardized testing demonstrates social inequities among students, decreases student motivation and learning, due to the increase of “teaching to the test”.

2.4 OSSLT in the Classroom

As noted throughout, the OSSLT assesses each grade ten student’s reading and writing proficiency to evaluate whether they have the literacy skills required to obtain their Ontario
Secondary School Diploma (EQAO, 2008; Ontario Ministry of Education, 2011). As a high-stakes standardized test, it would be subject to many of the benefits and implications as discussed in the previous section. In this section, I examine the previous literature regarding impacts of the OSSLT on students and teachers. It is important to note, there is a very limited amount of research on the impacts, both positive and negative, of the OSSLT.

One study of students’ responses to the questionnaire associated with the OSSLT found that most of the variance in student achievement was among students taking the test, and not among schools (Klinger, Rogers, Anderson, Poth, & Calman, 2006). This indicates that the differences in achievement are due to differences among students, and are not related to socioeconomic status or teacher performance. However, these findings are based solely on student responses and do not have any evidence to demonstrate demographics of participants or their schools. Klinger et al.’s findings (2006) are different than those found in the United States (Brennan et al., 2001) and United Kingdom (Wiliam, 2010), which suggest that differences in schools and socioeconomic status play a much larger role in student success on a standardized test than student intelligence.

The OSSLT has been reported to have similar implications as other standardized tests, such as increased drop-out rate, limitations for ELL students and narrowed curriculum and test structure (Garcia, 2003; Klinger & Luce-Kapler, 2007; Pinto, Boler, & Norris, 2007; Volante, 2007). Jacob states that low-achieving Ontario high school students may be 25% more likely to drop-out when a standardized test is used as a graduation requirement (as cited in Volante, 2007, p. 5). According to People for Education, prior to the OSSLT being implemented in Ontario the high school dropout rate was 22%, and it increased to 29% in the five years (2001-2006) following its implementation (Volante, 2007). The OSSLT is particularly difficult for ELL
students, who have struggled to pass the OSSLT even when they are provided with accommodations (Garcia, 2003). This is demonstrated by the test results for the OSSLT of 2014-2015; those in the academic/applied streams had an 81% pass rate, including those who did not participate, while only 54% of ELL students passed, and 25% of ELLs deferred their test until the following year (EQAO, 2015a). The OSSLT has included questions with cultural bias, which limits the success of ELL and ethnic minority students and students without prior knowledge to answer such questions (Pinto et al., 2007). The test has also featured many similarities to criticisms of standardized tests by asking technical literacy questions that do not demand critical thinking and only targeting certain forms of writing, eliminating creative forms such as fiction and poetry, and focusing on formulaic writing tasks (Pinto et al., 2007). Klinger and Luce-Kapler (2007) interviewed students on their experiences writing the OSSLT; they reported using prescriptive writing structures – taught to them by their teachers – to comply with the strict rules of the test. However, students’ receiving failing results on the OSSLT have negative impacts on their self-perceptions and social position within their peer group (Kearns, 2011). These effects on students with a lower socioeconomic status would increase the oppression they feel because of their inability to succeed on the literacy test.

The research that has been done on the benefits and implications of the OSSLT on the Ontario education system has largely focused on its impacts towards Ontario students rather than teachers. The findings have indicated that the OSSLT repeats many of the negative implications of large-scale, high-stakes standardized testing that has been reported by previous literature in similar education systems across the United States and the Europe.
2.5 Chapter Conclusion

Throughout this chapter, I reviewed relevant literature pertaining to the implementation of standardized testing in Western education systems, including in Ontario. I also discussed the ability for standardized tests to be used as a tool for accountability, they must be valid and align to classroom content and assessment. The previous literature and research has shown that standardized tests and other EQAO tests, not the OSSLT, have a moderate alignment to classroom content. However, standardized tests are generally not seen to be valid sources of data as they produce interference in the forms of both construct underrepresentation and construct irrelevant variance. I then examined the impacts of standardized testing in the classroom, from the perspective of teachers and students. While research is divided on the benefits and implications towards both stakeholders, motivation, ethics, equity and opportunities to learn were discussed throughout all literature. The limited research that was focused exclusively on the implementation of the OSSLT in the classroom specifically targeted the students’ point of view. It showed that students were taught specific curriculum related to OSSLT material, it demonstrated that students with lower reading levels, including ELL students, struggled on the OSSLT and it showed that students’ self-esteem and self-perception was affected by their results.

The research on standardized testing, that has been reviewed in this chapter, is largely based in the United States, and there is a limited amount of research on Ontario teachers’ experiences with standardized testing, and more specifically the OSSLT. Previous research on standardized testing shows a variety of teachers’ opinions with regards to the inclusion of standardized testing in the classroom and use as a measure of accountability for the education system. However, it is still unclear whether or not these perceptions and experiences transfer to Ontario secondary schools administering the OSSLT.
Chapter Three: Research Methodology

3.0 Chapter Introduction

This chapter will explain the research methodology used and the literature supporting the design of this study. I begin by explaining the research approach and procedures, and I elaborate on how the data will be collected from the participants. I describe the sampling criteria and procedures that used to solicit participants for this study. Next, I discuss how the data collected from the participants was analyzed. Finally, I review ethical considerations taken into account for this study, before outlining the strengths and limitations of the research methodology used for this study.

3.1 Research Approach & Procedures

On the continuum of study designs, qualitative studies center around the use of verbal and non-verbal data, and open-ended questions, the opposite to quantitative methods which tend to use numbers and closed-ended questions (Creswell, 2009). The qualitative study allows for the researcher to explore a central theme through a variety of different methods and perspectives, interpret the data to make a conclusion about a larger phenomenon and gain in-depth knowledge about a particular issue (Creswell, 2007, 2012). This constructivist view of research involves a process where the researcher and the participants to co-create data by both identifying relevant information to the topic (Barbour, 2008; Leavy, 2014). Qualitative research also is designed to study a particular phenomenon in context. In education, Klehr (2012) states that “qualitative methods offer a strong complement to numerical measures, allowing one to more comprehensively study how teaching and learning happen in dynamic classroom contexts” (p. 123). This research method provides teachers the opportunity to share their experiences of and perspectives on standardized testing and the Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test (OSSLT) in
their classroom, since they cannot be studied through the use of test results and the Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO) currently does not gather data on teachers’ experiences of the OSSLT (EQAO, 2014a, 2015a).

In this study, I reviewed the current literature on the standardized testing and the OSSLT and in order to provide more insight on this topic I conducted semi-structured qualitative interviews with teachers on this topic. Performing qualitative research by conducting interviews does not limit the participants’ abilities to demonstrate their knowledge on a certain topic area or the data obtained from them; however, the data that is received is limited by the interviewee’s willingness to share and be truthful (Creswell, 2009, 2012). During the interviews, teachers were able to share events and knowledge that they perceived important to the questions being asked and imparted their knowledge on an area that the researcher is trying to study, without the researcher strictly dictating the focus of the conversation (Barbour, 2008; Creswell, 2012). This enabled teachers to share their experiences of the OSSLT in their classrooms, efforts to incorporate OSSLT material into lesson plan, views of student performance as a reflection of teaching ability, use for professional development, and the success of EQAO’s alignment of OSSLT content to Ministry of Education curriculum and policy documents that are enforced in Ontario classrooms.

3.2 Instruments of Data Collection

I conducted semi-structured interviews with two teachers to collect data for this study. Semi-structured interviews are the most extensively used form of interviewing in qualitative research (Brinkmann, 2014) and Fontana and Frey (2000) have described them as “one of the most powerful ways in which we try to understand our fellow human beings” (p. 645). The data obtained through semi-structured interviews is contextualized and based on the in-depth concrete
descriptions of experiences, events or perceptions of certain phenomena, not based on a speculation of why they had those experiences (Leavy, 2014). In a semi-structured interview, the dialogue is guided by a certain number of topics or open-ended questions, as predetermined by the researcher, and favors the researcher to asking follow-up questions to the interviewee to elaborate on their initial responses (Creswell, 2012). The flexibility afforded by this format allows both the researcher and the interviewee to play a role in the construction of the data, and provides consistency between interviews, making comparisons between participants easier (Barbour, 2008; Leavy, 2014; Patton, 2002). This design kept the dialogue centered around the topics in which the researcher is concerned, but gave the interviewee the opportunity to include all information they deemed relevant to the topic and allows for the point of view and realities of the interviewee’s experiences to drive the data obtained, rather than those of the researcher (Patton, 2002). This non-restrictive form of interviewing supports the interviewees’ experiences and perspectives to challenge the preconceptions and perspectives of the researcher (Barbour 2008; Creswell, 2012). The semi-structured method of interview was chosen over structured interviews, which have a prescribed set of questions, because it allowed for the participants to share their experiences, without the limits of rigid questioning and simple answers that would be derived from the structured interviews method (Arksey & Knight, 1999). For unstructured interviews, which are typically used to gather information in the form of stories, the researcher does not prepare any questions in advance, so the interview takes on a more conversational flow (Brinkmann, 2014). This style of interview was not used as it would not have provided the structure necessary to gather the information required to be able to answer the research questions.

Data for this study was collected using through semi-structured interviews with two
teachers. The teachers participated in individual interviews lasting about 60 to 75 minutes. The interviews for this study focused on how standardized testing is implemented in the classroom and how teachers use standardized testing as a pedagogical tool and a professional development tool. Included in my interview protocol (located in Appendix B) are questions regarding teachers’ perceptions of standardized testing and their experiences with it as a teacher. This design gave the teachers interviewed the opportunity to share their contextualized experiences of the OSSLT in their classrooms.

3.3 Participants

Using purposeful sampling to recruit participants for a study allows the researcher to create a homogeneous group of participants from which conclusions can be made about a phenomenon, by selecting the participants based on a common set of criteria (Creswell, 2012; DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). There are two goals with regards to a purposeful qualitative sampling, comparison and productivity. A qualitative sample is created so that the researcher is able to compare between participants (Barbour, 2008), and so those participants are able to contribute significant and relevant information about the field of study (Marshall, 1996). I will explain the criteria used to evaluate all participants’ eligibility to participate in the study and the procedures that were used to recruit them.

3.3.1 Sampling criteria

To produce a sample that is homogeneous and allows for comparison between participants, it is necessary to establish a sampling criteria. According to Miles and Huberman (1994), there are four categories on which participants can be selected: setting, actors, events and process. These categories are related to the characteristics of people being selected, a particular setting or event that participants have in common and a series of actions undertaken by the
participants. The criteria for this study will only focus on the characteristics of the participants and their setting.

In this study, all participants were currently teaching grade ten academic or applied English courses, since that is the grade and subject where the teacher would have the greatest effect on student preparation for the OSSLT. These teachers have taught in Ontario for a minimum of five years since the implementation of the OSSLT, and therefore have a substantial amount of previous experience having students write standardized tests.

All participants are teachers from schools identified with low-success rates on the 2014-2015 OSSLT and low 2014 Learning Opportunities Index (LOI) scores in Toronto District School Board (TDSB). Based on student and parent census data, the TDSB ranks schools “based on measures of external challenges affecting student success”, such as median income, families below the low income measure, families receiving social assistance, parents without high school diplomas, parents with university degrees and lone-parent families, to create an LOI for each school (Toronto District School Board [TDSB], 2014, p. 1). Schools identified with low LOI’s and with low success rates on the OSSLT were identified as possibly employing teachers who are appropriate for participation in this study. This focused the research on teachers who work with students who are historically underserved by standardized testing and the OSSLT.

3.3.2 Sampling procedures

The most common form of sampling procedure is purposeful sampling, which recruits participants who are the most knowledgeable and relevant to help the researcher learn more about the specific research topic (Creswell, 2009; Marshall, 1996). This will create a homogeneous sample of participants who will be recruited according to the criterion listed above. I also used snowball sampling, to exploit the network of teachers who any respondents
from the purposeful sampling may know.

In order to solicit participants for this study, schools in the TDSB were identified that have low success rates for fully participating first-time eligible students on the OSSLT and a low LOI score. Since there were a limited number of identified schools, I contacted the principals at the schools for recommendations of grade ten English teachers who were willing to participate in this study. I also sought out contact information of teachers within the school to invite them to participate in my study. I provided teachers with the option of recommending any colleagues who they thought would be suitable for this study, in order to increase the number of potential participants within my criteria.

3.3.3 Participant bios

TL is a high school teacher in the TDSB at [Meadowbrook]. He has been teaching in the TDSB for the last five years as a long-term occasional teacher at a variety of schools in the TDSB. His teaching qualifications include English, math, business and special education. TL taught at [Meadowbrook] for the first semester of the school year, and the end of the second semester, teaching both math and English. He was also hired during March to tutor grade ten students in small group or one-on-one settings to help them prepare for the OSSLT.

JS is a high school teacher in the TDSB at [Springfield]. He has been teaching in the TDSB for 15 years, the majority of which have been at [Springfield]. JS has taught English for his entire career, and has focused heavily on grade ten English classes. His teaching qualifications include English, history and dramatic arts. JS taught grade ten English during both semesters this year, among a wide variety of other English courses.

3.4 Data Analysis

The process of data analysis is where meaning is extracted from the data (interviews)
(Patton, 2002). The data obtained from the participants was organized, coded, generalized into themes and interpreted (Creswell, 2012). The process is inductive, therefore the large amount of data and information, beginning with the transcripts, is narrowed down to overarching themes and descriptions whose meanings can be applied to the phenomenon being studied (Creswell, 2009).

In the present study, the data was organized by transcribing the audio recordings of the interviews verbatim, this allowed for the data to be coded (Barbour, 2008). The specific information in the codes was used to develop themes that existed throughout each interview and the emerging themes and patterns were able to provide meaning with regards to the topic of this study and its research question.

3.5 Ethical Review Procedures

In qualitative research, there are ethical considerations that need to be made, such as consent, confidentiality and the impact of the study on participants (Barbour, 2008; Creswell, 2012). The type of consent required by all participants is voluntary informed consent, all participants in the study have the choice of being a willing participant in the study, have signed the corresponding consent letter (see Appendix A), and were able to withdraw their consent at any point throughout the process (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006; Morgan, Gilner, & Harmon, 2008; Patton, 2002). Voluntary consent has three aspects, information, all participants shall be aware of the purpose, procedure, risks and benefits of the study, comprehension, the legal capacity to make a decision regarding their participation in the study, and voluntariness, the participants are freely willing to participate in the study (Morgan et al., 2008). Privacy is a large ethical issue in qualitative studies, particularly issues revolving around confidentiality and anonymity (Morgan et al., 2008). The data collected from the participants must remain
confidential, including all audio-recordings and personal information, while any information they provide must remain anonymous, this was done by assigning a pseudonym to each participant (Morgan et al., 2008). A study can also present physical, psychological, legal, social or economic impacts on participants or the researchers, and it is essential that the researcher evaluate the risks and benefits of a study to ensure that the benefits outweigh any risks; this includes the types of questions and the subject matter to which they relate (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006; Morgan et al., 2008).

In order to limit the ethical complications that can arise in qualitative research, specific measures were taken during this study. All participants signed a consent form indicating that they have been informed of the purposes and procedures of the study, as well as any other questions they may have, and they were willing to participate in the study. Participants were also able to withdraw consent at any point throughout the process. In order to maintain confidentiality and anonymity all participants were provided with a pseudonym and any identifying information regarding their school, students, or otherwise was also anonymized. The audio-recording of the interview was kept on a password-protected computer and only the course supervisor and I are able to access it until the research is presented, published and/or five years have passed, at which point the audio recordings will be destroyed. There are no known risks associated with this study, however participants may not be comfortable answering certain questions, in which case they had the right to choose to not answer.

3.6 Methodological Limitations and Strengths

Qualitative research focuses on the meanings of relationships between variables rather than the statistical significance of the relationships themselves (Barbour, 2008). Qualitative interview research focuses on the contextualized point of view of participants, in order for the
researcher to construct knowledge about a certain phenomenon (Patton, 2002). This will allow teachers to detail the experiences and perceptions they have of the OSSLT in their classrooms, which are more in-depth than data gained from a survey or from observation alone (Creswell, 2012). The design of the study and the use of semi-structured interviews permits the adaptation to questions as the researcher gains new knowledge from the participants, this flexibility offers new avenues to be explored throughout the single research study (Johnson & Christensen, 2004).

Qualitative research could be considered subjective, as the researcher will have preconceptions and biases, as would the participants (Johnson & Christensen, 2004). The participants could also be giving responses that they presume the researcher wants to hear, their answers could be deceptive, or for one reason or another they are not able to communicate their descriptions effectively (Creswell, 2012). It is also important to note the small sample size being used in this study, which could pose limitations on the findings of this study; however, research shows that the purpose of the study determines if the sample size is a methodological issue (Creswell, 2012; Griffin, 2004). If the goal of the research is to produce a large generalization about a certain phenomenon than a large sample size is required; however, if one is interested in doing an in-depth study on a phenomenon than it is more advantageous to study a smaller sample size. Although the in-depth information gathered will be useful in making a conclusion about teachers’ experiences and perceptions of the OSSLT in their classrooms, the sample size may not be large enough to make a generalization for the larger population of teachers in Ontario (Johnson & Christensen, 2004).

3.7 Chapter Conclusion

In this chapter, I have reviewed the benefits of qualitative research and its use in the study of teachers’ experiences and perceptions of the OSSLT in their classrooms. I outlined the
well-documented methodology of the use of qualitative research to gain contextual data about a particular phenomenon. I established the use of semi-structured interviews and their effectiveness as a method of researching experiences and perceptions of a particular phenomenon where the participants and the researcher co-create the data. I have explained the sampling process and criteria that will be used for acquiring participants to take part in the interview process of this study. I also gave an overview of the process of analyzing the data obtained from before I discussed the ethical implications of the study and the methodological limitations and strengths of a semi-structured interview study with a small sample size. This method of qualitative research will be well suited to gain knowledge and perspectives from teachers about the OSSLT and the effect it has on their pedagogy. In the following chapter, I will outline and analyze the data that I have collected from the various participants.
Chapter 4: Research Findings

4.0 Chapter Introduction

In Chapter One, I posed the question asking how some Ontario grade ten English teachers experience the OSSLT, particularly in schools that are low on the Learning Opportunities Index (LOI). The literature relating to the standardized testing movement, its uses as an accountability tool, and positive and negative implications for students and teachers was discussed in Chapter Two. To attempt to answer the central research question, I outlined a research methodology, in Chapter Three, that allowed me to gain knowledge from teachers who have been implicated and experienced the effects of standardized testing and the Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test (OSSLT) in schools with a high proportion of students from low socioeconomic backgrounds. There was a focus placed on teachers’ experiences in schools with high populations of students with a lower socioeconomic background, developed from previous research suggesting students with low socioeconomic background struggle on standardized tests. In this chapter, I will detail the findings from interviews with two grade ten Ontario English teachers in schools identified to have a student population of low socioeconomic status. The analysis of this data was done in order to make conclusions about teachers’ experiences of the OSSLT in their classrooms. Through the analysis of this data, I was able to determine five common experiences of these teachers in preparing grade ten English students, in schools with a high proportion of students from low socioeconomic backgrounds, to write the OSSLT. I will demonstrate teachers’ perceptions of the OSSLT’s ability to measure student success, teachers’ perceptions of students’ social positions and their ability to succeed on the OSSLT, teachers’ reported efforts to prepare students for the OSSLT, teachers’ experiences using the OSSLT as a tool for professional development, and the emotional costs of the OSSLT for teachers.
Throughout this chapter, I will discuss the common experiences of grade ten English teachers preparing students for the OSSLT and the significance of these findings. I will also refer to previous research, as discussed in the literature review, to demonstrate how teachers’ experiences are similar and different to previous findings. In conclusion, I will summarize the experiences of some Ontario grade ten English teachers and the OSSLT in schools with high proportions of students with low socioeconomic status.

4.1 Effectiveness of OSSLT

Teachers in schools with high numbers of students from low socioeconomic backgrounds reported that the OSSLT was an ineffective tool to completely and holistically measure a student’s literacy skills. The participants both felt that the OSSLT, simply due to its construction, is not a method of assessment that is able to represent the totality of a student’s knowledge or literacy skills. The participants also stated that the OSSLT is only able to test certain aspects of literacy and therefore limits their students’ abilities to succeed on the high-stakes test.

4.1.1 “It’s not the full picture”

The OSSLT is an assessment, in the form of a test, that is written on a single day. The scope of the OSSLT, as perceived by the interviewees, is a “snapshot”, according to JS, which cannot represent the “full picture”, according to TL, of student literacy and knowledge. In response to the question of whether or not the OSSLT is an accurate representation of student abilities, JS answered:

Well, again it’s a yes and no. I mean, I think it’s a good idea to have that, that sort of snapshot, but again, you know there’s … much more to [literacy] than just being able to answer … questions … on a test. And I think … the kid who … did really well … on the
test, but did horribly in class is probably proof of that, this is you know just one little snapshot, and there are perhaps other ways that we could go about … getting the same information, or that information it could come from something else.

The fundamental difference in the way that students are assessed in the classroom and OSSLT assessments means that students are unable to accurately demonstrate the skills they have gained and mastered in the classroom setting. Ross and Gray (2008) noted the largest differences between classroom and external assessments are the type of assessments used and the time over which those assessments are collected. These differences were reported by both TL and JS, and caused large discrepancies in student achievement on classroom assessments and the OSSLT. The participants believed that the OSSLT is an effective diagnostic assessment that can be used by teachers and schools to help determine areas of success and areas of improvement, but both said that it was an ineffective tool to determine if students have gained the knowledge required to graduate.

4.1.2 Measuring literacy

While the Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO) (2009) only claims that the OSSLT measures a student’s reading and writing skills, it references the Ontario English curriculum (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2007) which provides a definition for literacy as the “knowledge and skills in the areas of listening and speaking, reading, writing, and viewing and representing” (p. 3) and quotes UNESCO as saying “literacy is about more than reading or writing” (p. 3). Both teachers who were interviewed stated that the literacy test determines if a student is literate based on only certain aspects of the Ontario English curriculum’s definition of literacy. When asked if they think that the OSSLT is an accurate measurement of students’ literacy levels, TL responded:
But I mean when you look at … what they’re being asked to do, it’s hard to see how someone [who] is literate couldn’t do it and I know my students who have failed it and I know … the struggles they have in my class. … I guess my point is, it’s an accurate reading on … reading and writing. I, I do think that … But, does it tell the whole story of what literacy is to me? Absolutely not.

The teachers interviewed were both aware that the OSSLT does not measure certain aspects of literacy, but did acknowledge that their students were weak in certain areas relating to literacy. The most commonly identified aspect of literacy omitted from the OSSLT is any oral aspect, which both participants reported as being a strength for many of their students. On student strengths, JS said:

Some kids are much stronger expressing themselves in the oral strand … it’s not that they don’t know it and they … don’t know how to do it, it’s just for them their facility with … spoken language might be better. Or with manipulatives … making a poster to show news rather than … writing a newspaper article.

The large differences in student strengths means that the OSSLT, by only measuring certain aspects of literacy, limits the success of certain groups of students in attempting to demonstrate their literacy abilities. The teachers also indicated that the OSSLT focuses on certain styles of responses, and limits others, particularly by avoiding questions requiring creative responses. These findings mirror those in another study focusing on the effects of the OSSLT on marginalized students, where students felt as though they could not demonstrate their abilities simply because of restrictions in format allowed by EQAO and the OSSLT (Kearns, 2011).

What both participants are referring to as an incomplete measurement of literacy, by simply measuring reading and writing ability, is construct underrepresentation, as identified by Wiliam
(2010). This concept of construct underrepresentation, combined with the fundamental
difference between classroom assessment and external assessments complicates the OSSLT as a
valid and accurate measurement of students’ literacy abilities.

4.2 Struggling Students

Teachers in schools with high proportions of students coming from low socioeconomic
backgrounds reported that their students’ prior experiences and knowledge, both academic and
non-academic, have a negative effect on students’ preparation and ability to successfully write
the OSSLT. The teachers were able to separate the role that the students’ academic abilities and
knowledge played in their ability to succeed on the OSSLT and the role of their non-academic
experiences and position in their success.

4.2.1 Position in society

Both of the schools interviewed have catchment areas that draw students from higher
proportions of households having a low socioeconomic status and their school populations were
identified as being mostly composed of immigrants and ethnic minorities. Teachers also reported
many of their students have “other issues going on”, most of which could be related to their
social status. When speaking of the community surrounding Springfield, and the effect it has on
students, JS said:

Maybe there are things going on which just … preclude … any kind of … learning, …
mental issues, … family … again, there’s lots of … violence in our community here at
the school, … the neighbourhood, you know, maybe that has an impact. You know, one
student she just, it was a house fire and she pretty much lost everything … so that’s
gonna have an impact on … the ability to work in the class, the ability to be successful on
the test, to be successful in the course.
In their interviews, both TL and JS explicitly mentioned the status of their schools reported by the Learning Opportunities Index (TDSB, 2014), when discussing the low socioeconomic statuses of their catchment areas, and these factors cannot be fully addressed in the classroom by teachers. These factors would represent a more systemic issue of our society that has led the students to this point. Low performance on standardized tests has been found to be correlated to ethnic minority status (Brennan et al., 2001; Grodsky et al., 2008; Ogbu, 1978; Ross & Kostuch, 2011; West, 2005). Both TL and JS reported that their schools have high populations of ethnic minorities and low performance on the OSSLT.

Another aspect of students’ positions in society that can affect their abilities to perform on the OSSLT, identified by teachers, is their connection to the content on the test and their limited frames of reference. JS reported that this small frame of reference “really hinders them when it comes to trying to do some of the EQAO style questions”. JS used the example of the newspaper article as being challenging for his students, who do not read the newspaper, and students were challenged when they felt they were unable to answer questions simply because of their limited frame of reference.

Students’ limited connection to the content and frame of reference was also raised as an issue when related to the subject matter of EQAO questions. Examples such as writing a paragraph about the aurora borealis, for students who have never left the city of Toronto, or writing a newspaper article about guest speakers coming to the school, in a school where they do not have guest speakers. JS illustrated similar experiences at Springfield:

It’s home, it’s school, it’s the mall, it’s family, it’s … temple or church or wherever they go and that’s it. … Some of them don’t know that there’s a lake down at the end of [the] road or if they keep following it because their frame of reference is this community …
you know if you’re writing about hockey, the piece is about hockey, most of my kids

don’t play hockey, they play cricket. Right? Or they play soccer. So, I think there’s
some difficulty there, you know, with that frame of reference.

This demonstrates that students are struggling to answer questions on the OSSLT based on their
background and success is not being limited only to levels of literacy. Studies have shown that
cultural and contextual knowledge is represented on standardized tests (Cheng et al., 2007) and
the OSSLT has included questions with cultural bias (Pinto et al., 2007), similar to what has been
reported by teachers in this study. If students are being evaluated on their ability to complete a
question based on cultural and contextual knowledge, it would limit the validity of the OSSLT
due to construct-irrelevant variance (Wiliam, 2010). It would not be fair to place the
responsibility on the students’ teachers to completely reverse the effects students’ social position
has on their OSSLT scores.

4.2.2 Struggling in the classroom

Both teachers acknowledged that students had large learning gaps and often struggled
with reading and writing at grade level, which ultimately affected students’ emotional well-
being. The teachers felt that their students came into grade ten and wrote the OSSLT at a
disadvantage compared to some other schools. Teachers also reported that the OSSLT had a
large impact on the emotional well-being of students in their classrooms and school, as it is a
large source of stress, anxiety and embarrassment for them, TL said:

I think it’s something that the kids carry with them, psychologically. You know, and I
mean imagine failing … you’re failing something, that is telling you, you’re in grade ten,
maybe nobody’s told you this before, but guess what you have this literacy test, you
failed it, I guess that means you’re illiterate. So I don’t know why you are in grade 11 now.

The emotional impact for students would be an additional consideration for teachers trying to ensure their success inside and outside of the classroom. While some research has suggested that the OSSLT, and standardized testing in general, can be viewed solely as having a negative impact on student learning (Brennan et al., 2001; Hout et al., 2012; Mendoza-Denton, 2014), TL remarked that the OSSLT was more of a “double-edged sword” for students, saying:

I don’t think what it adds, and don’t get me wrong … when I was tutoring them in that small group setting, and when they were working on it in class, I do think that helped them develop their literacy skills, of course, right? But I don’t think that it’s worth … the cost of what students have to endure, and in schools where we’re kind of deemed to be the losers.

In TL’s view, impact of the literacy test goes beyond the emotional impact, but also forces many students to take the Ontario Secondary School Literacy Course (OSSLC) after having failed, and in some cases it “really jeopardiz[es] [their] ability to graduate,” as reported by JS. A study (Hout et al., 2012) in the United States found that high-stakes standardized testing has had little effect on students’ learning, but it has increased the drop-out rate and decreased student motivation in the sample. While the scope of the present study cannot comment on students’ drop-out rate, one could presume that failure to complete the OSSLT and requiring students to complete the OSSLC, as reported by JS, would decrease student motivation, which could ultimately affect drop-out rates in Ontario.

While both teachers were able to identify that their students had little privilege when it came to their position within society, the effect of that position was viewed differently by JS,
who has taught consistently at Springfield, compared to TL, who is earlier in his career and has taught at many more schools. JS saw the OSSLT as an obstacle that is “short term pain for long term gain”, whereas TL saw the OSSLT as a system that is being used to “separate the winners from the losers”. While they both acknowledged that the OSSLT was a challenge for their students, due to their limited abilities to perform at curriculum standards, only TL explicitly stated that the test was designed to prevent some students from succeeding. Despite this, both teachers’ experiences preparing students of lower socioeconomic status for the OSSLT were influenced both by students’ prior academic and non-academic knowledge and experiences.

4.3 Setting Students Up for Success

The educators expressed the high importance of their classroom and school programs in preparing students with low socioeconomic backgrounds to be successful on the OSSLT. In order to prepare for the OSSLT, students have multiple opportunities to prepare in their English classes and in school. The approaches that are used reportedly help to compensate for students’ weaknesses and prepare them purposefully for the OSSLT.

4.3.1 Classroom promotion of success

Teachers explained that they use suggested practices of backwards design, modelling, and scaffolding to plan their lessons to teach students the skills necessary to be successful on the OSSLT. They both highlighted the need to be aware of students’ weaknesses in order to specifically target those areas to increase chances of success. However, they differed on the levels in which the OSSLT was explicitly visible in their lessons and the degree to which classroom assessment aligned with content on the literacy test. Both teachers reported teaching reading strategies and test-writing strategies to their students, TL said:
I was focusing a lot on multiple choice, initially. … And I just tried to give them … almost a bit of a strategy of like … this is how you take a multiple choice test, when you have this much time, right? And, we went over some articles, we kind of read them, and we discussed them and we tried to share … how our thinking was on it … I try to do that a lot in my classes generally, it’s like talking about our process.

According to Haladyna et al. (1991), and their continuum of ethical and non-ethical standardized test preparation practices, these practices would be considered more ethical on the continuum.

On the other end of the spectrum would be practices of directly teaching material that is on the test. JS reported that his classes focused heavily on writing the newspaper article, essay questions and supported opinion paragraphs. Some of the activities that he reported using in his classroom to prepare students for the OSSLT were teaching graphic organizers to guide students’ answers for each question format, using material from past tests, and marking all of the classroom assessments based on the OSSLT marking scheme:

So we can look at what EQAO is … sort of expecting … I would give [the marking scheme] out before I actually do any of this, right? So we can have a look at … the exemplar and the marking scheme and then every kid has that and they can look and we can see what a code 10 is, code 20, code 30, code 40. And then they can have that when they come to actually do moderated marking or they wanna look at their own work … I use the 6 and 4 because it sort of lends itself nicely to … a mark for class … And then when it comes to evaluation purposes when I actually have to … have [an assessment] for mark purposes, and this [marking scheme] is how I would do it.

These methods of preparing students should allow for students who have had this additional preparation to be more successful on the OSSLT, and disadvantage students whose teachers do
not provide them with the same level of preparation. When asked what his projections of student achievement on the OSSLT would be if he did not participate in practices of teaching to the test, JS responded: “That’s not something I really want to find out either [laughs] … I don’t think we would have the success … that we do have.” The practice of teaching to the test, as done in JS’s classroom, is a method of teachers ‘contaminating’ standardized test scores, which Urdan and Paris (1994) found was not a concern to most teachers, as they did not see the value of the standardized test for their students or their classroom, and it alleviated pressure on them to increase student scores (Abrams et al., 2003). Previous research (Winkler, 2002) indicates that novice teachers were most likely to directly teach material from the standardized test; however, based on reported practices of JS and TL, it was found to be the opposite. JS, who has over 14 years of teaching experience, taught his students material that was included on the OSSLT and assessed the material according to the marking scheme used by EQAO, while TL structured his course on increasing students’ literacy levels with no direct link to the OSSLT.

4.3.2 School promotion of success

The schools associated with the participants in this study both focused heavily on student success on the OSSLT, and in some cases used different approaches to increasing student success and achievement on the test. Both teachers reported their schools using practice OSSLT tests, either in grade nine or at the beginning of grade ten, that were used to identify specific students in need of extra help and areas that represented weaknesses for the wider student population.

At Meadowbrook, TL was paid as an long-term occasional teacher for the month leading up to the OSSLT, to have one-on-one or small group tutoring sessions with each student in grade ten, to help them prepare for the OSSLT:
Often I was grouping them based on ability … so a super weak student I might do one-on-one or with … someone else if I felt like they would be more comfortable with someone else and they would maybe help them out. And … we would work through the multiple choice, discuss our process going through it, they would try it once independently, and then that’s it. And I met them all twice. That was the first round.

The second round we focused on supported opinion, and … the short form answers. This increased instruction of the OSSLT could be considered as teaching test-taking strategies as well as directly teaching material that is on the test. TL expressed that he thought teaching test-taking strategies based on the OSSLT format was an important strategy because the format could be quite “alien” to the students. In theory, this should provide a disproportionate advantage to students at Meadowbrook receiving this increased investment in OSSLT success, and could contaminate OSSLT scores at the Ministry, school board and school levels.

At Springfield, there was not an external method of preparing students for the OSSLT, and the preparation was specifically focused to in-class activities. However, it was reported that the English department shares all their resources and uses similar strategies in their classes, such as the marking scheme, to prepare students for the test. In theory, this should allow all students within the school to have the same opportunity for success, and would eliminate discrepancies in success based on the teacher. Both schools associated with this research participated, in some manner, in coordinated efforts to improve student achievement on the OSSLT. While the schools and teachers chose to use varying methods and levels of ethics to prepare students to succeed on the OSSLT, they both demonstrated a high focus on grade ten student success on the OSSLT.
4.4 Re-Evaluating Course Design

The teachers expressed the importance of reflection on their own teaching practices as a key to being an effective educator, and the importance of students’ experiences in the classroom as the most important indicator of success, particularly in schools where the socioeconomic status of students is low. The results of the OSSLT, according to the EQAO’s framework for the OSSLT (2008), can be used by schools and school boards to set goals and target areas of improvement. However, teachers believed that reflecting on their lessons, assessments and practices increases student success on both classroom assessments and the OSSLT.

4.4.1 Using OSSLT to improve teaching practices

When teachers were asked if the OSSLT was an effective method to measure students’ literacy skills, they suggested that it should be used more diagnostically. However, the teachers who were interviewed both indicated that they reflect more on student success in their classrooms and do not rely on data collected from the OSSLT. JS indicated the principal reason behind this decision was the immediacy of feedback that teachers could receive from classroom assessments, whereas the results from the OSSLT are only available in June:

I’m not sure I want to use the test results as a way to alter the performance in class. I would want to use my classroom results … so again, maybe to reteach something, so they didn’t understand a concept and marks were low, let’s reteach it. Or, maybe we need to spend more time on this concept and maybe, again, that we need to … just change the way the order of ranking for things, right? We need to introduce something earlier … maybe something could be shortened and left a little bit later … maybe we need to spend more time on … analyzing the diagnostic piece.
The limited use of the OSSLT as a tool to evaluate classroom practices, demonstrates its ineffectiveness as a tool to be used by classroom teachers. Since the results from the OSSLT are only available in June, they are reportedly ineffective for identifying areas for improvement for the current year, contrary to research that identifies standardized tests as useful tools in improving teaching practices (Burger & Krueger, 2003). While teachers reported knowing number and identity of students who were successful on the literacy test, they did not explicitly identify any additional information provided by EQAO to indicate areas of improvement for the school. They did both identify that results and strategies for improving scores on the OSSLT are discussed among staff, which is consistent with previous research (Winkler, 2002); however, it was not possible to assess to what extent this is done formally due to recent labour disputes.

Since both schools associated with the participants have already targeted literacy as an area with room for improvement for their students, the results of the OSSLT do not appear to help educators set goals or target areas for increased student achievement, as suggested by the EQAO (2008, 2014b).

4.4.2 Using student experiences to improve teaching practices

Both teachers also expressed the greater importance of reflecting on lessons taught and perceptions of student understanding as an important practice for students to be successful in their classrooms. TL emphasized that he “questions” himself frequently and “beat [himself] up” over the decisions he made in terms of lesson planning for his classroom. Both teachers also heavily emphasized their ability to change their practices and “recreate the wheel” based on reflection from previous lessons and noticing areas of student strengths and weaknesses. When asked about his perception of reflective practices in teaching, JS responded:
Well I mean I think teaching this, that kind of profession, and if you’re trying to do … um … be effective in the classroom, you know, you have to look always … at what you’re doing, and … you have to change things. ... you might use the same or similar methodology but you’re going to change things up and you’re going to respond to, with what [students] you have … that doesn’t necessarily mean that you have to learn a new skill that’s EQAO, that could be that you had a great vacation in Europe and you’ve developed and you’ve learned something new from that, which you’re going to bring into your classroom. But if you’re not doing that I don’t think you’re going to be effective as an instructor. It doesn’t matter what you teach.

JS identified the need for teachers to adapt lessons and course content based on student engagement and understanding to ensure student success. This philosophy demonstrates the methods teachers use enact change within their classroom, which does not include use of the OSSLT. The teachers’ abilities to respond to student needs and re-evaluate the needs of students both in their current classes and in future classes represents a teacher who is continuing to evolve with their students to improve student achievement on classroom assessment, the OSSLT and in school. These teachers therefore rely more on results from within their classroom to determine students’ levels of achievement and areas of improvement in literacy, rather than data gained through the OSSLT.

4.5 Costs of OSSLT for Teachers

Teachers, in secondary schools from a low socioeconomic area, reported experiencing high amounts of pressure and stress over students’ preparation to write the OSSLT, students’ results on the OSSLT and the effects results would have on students’ futures. The teachers interviewed acknowledged that when teaching grade ten English, they experience a large sense
of responsibility towards students’ success on the OSSLT, both for the students and the school, TL said: “I can’t help but feel like I am partially responsible for that because I am their teacher”. The participants both expressed that they felt responsible for students passing or failing the OSSLT, as a result of decisions they made during lesson planning.

The teachers said they face low self-esteem and high amounts self-doubt regarding their teaching decisions, and they question themselves as to “how much of this is me? … How much of this is them? How much of this is something beyond either of our control?” They also reported a high amount of pressure for students to demonstrate improved rates of success on the OSSLT. When discussing the effects of the OSSLT on students TL reported that it separated the “winners from the losers”, which he echoed as part of the emotional cost for teachers, feeling as though the student achievement on the OSSLT also separated himself, other teachers and schools into winners and losers. As a teacher who has taught at multiple schools and prepared students for both the grade nine EQAO math test and the OSSLT, TL said that he had never experienced the same level of emotion as he did teaching in a school he felt was “stigmatized” due to its students’ low socioeconomic statuses.

It was clear that the range of emotions reportedly experienced by teachers was due to the high amounts of pressure they felt for students to succeed on the OSSLT. While it was reported that the pressure was self-imposed, and other teachers and administration reportedly did not play a role in creating the pressure, both teachers were aware of the greater implications the test results had for the school and the students. When asked if he felt pressure from school administration for his students to have a high success rate, JS reported:

Yes, there is that pressure … to … produce results. Absolutely. … If there is [pressure from administration] … I don’t perceive it that way. I think it’s much more … my own
pressure to be … successful. I mean, yes, we want those numbers to be high, as high as they can be. If we can get 100%, that would make my day … is it from admin? No, … I would think … it’s more personal. This is what I want for my classroom. Because they’re a reflection of me … and if they don’t do well then … that’s saying that I’m not good at what I do. And we can’t have that!

Teachers perceive that student achievement is a representation of their success as a teacher, and ultimately the success of the school. These emotions for teachers represent some of the hidden costs that exist in the education system through the administration of the OSSLT to Ontario students. Prior research has shown that teachers will experience shame, embarrassment and guilt (Smith, 1991) over their students’ standardized testing achievement, which often leads to increased pressure to increase student achievement and results in more unethical strategies of test preparation being used in classrooms (Abrams et al., 2003; Smith, 1991). The sense of responsibility, emotional responses and pressure that is felt by teachers is a direct result of the implementation of the OSSLT in their classrooms and represents an additional cost of the graduation requirements and accountability measures in Ontario.

4.6 Chapter Conclusion

The experiences of grade ten English teachers, preparing students to write the OSSLT, in schools drawing from areas with lower socioeconomic status students revealed five themes related to the teaching, administration and uses of the OSSLT. Teachers did not view the OSSLT as an effective tool to determine students’ literacy skills. They felt that it was simply a diagnostic tool that was unable to completely capture the true sense of students’ achievements and therefore should not be used to determine a student’s eligibility for graduation. The teachers also felt that students’ socioeconomic status and social position prevented students from being
able to succeed on the OSSLT. TL and JS reported that a combination of students’ lack of knowledge from academic and non-academic settings caused large learning gaps that they had to attempt to fill prior to students writing the OSSLT. Teachers reported that a variety of methods, in and outside of the classroom, are used to prepare students to write the OSSLT. These methods and strategies range from teaching reading and test-taking strategies to directly teaching material that is on the test and evaluating students according to EQAO’s marking scheme. While one of the intended uses of the OSSLT is to provide teachers with areas in need of improvement, TL and JS reported that they do not use the OSSLT to re-evaluate their teaching practices. However, both did note that reflective practices in teaching are important, and detailed high use of classroom assessment as a form of feedback on their teaching practices. Finally, teachers reported a high emotional cost when teaching grade ten English to students from a low socioeconomic background and preparing them to write the OSSLT. They felt that the responsibility for the students to succeed rested solely upon them, and this perception led to high amounts of pressure placed upon themselves and ultimately caused stress and anxiety.

These findings demonstrate that grade ten Ontario English teachers in schools with a high proportion of students from low socioeconomic backgrounds face many challenges and hardships integrating the OSSLT into their lessons and classrooms in such a way that it ensures student success, while also limiting the negative implications emotionally, for themselves and their students. Previous research in the field of standardized testing has shown many different implications, both positive and negative, of standardized testing in the education system. Most of the previous research has been done from an quantitative American perspective, with a limited amount of research on teachers’ experiences. This paper fills a void in the literature by including the perspectives of Ontarian teachers preparing students for a high-stakes standardized test.
In my final chapter, I will discuss the implications of these findings for teachers, schools, the Ministry of Education and the culture of high-stakes standardized testing and provide recommendations to each of the stakeholders. Finally, I will suggest areas for future research to increase our knowledge on the implications of high-stakes testing and the OSSLT for teachers of students of varying levels of socioeconomic status.
Chapter Five: Conclusion

5.0 Chapter Introduction

I began Chapter One by introducing Ontario’s standardized testing system, before posing the following question: how are some Ontario grade ten English teachers experiencing the Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test (OSSLT) in schools that are low on the Learning Opportunities Index (LOI)? Throughout my review of the literature, I demonstrated how the previous literature has tackled standardized testing, from an accountability perspective, as well as from the point of views of both teachers and students. In Chapter Three, I outlined how I used qualitative methods and semi-structured interviews of grade ten English teachers, teaching in schools in low-socioeconomic areas, to gain information in the hopes of being able to answer my research question. I was then able to discuss my findings in Chapter Four, and major themes that arose from analyzing the data. In this chapter, I will provide an overview of the key findings and their significance before elaborating on some implications and recommendations, that have arisen from these findings, for various stakeholders in the Ontario education system. I will also suggest areas for future research regarding the OSSLT, high-stakes and low-stakes testing, and the influence of the standardized testing practice in Ontario.

5.1 Overview of Key Findings and their Significance

The data collected from the teacher participants revealed five themes among teachers preparing students of low socioeconomic status for the OSSLT. These findings focused on the following areas: the limited effectiveness of the OSSLT as a measurement of literacy, students struggling to be successful on the OSSLT, methods to aid students in succeeding on the OSSLT, ineffectiveness of the OSSLT as a source of data for planning and high emotional costs of the OSSLT on teachers.
The teachers did not perceive the OSSLT to be an effective measurement of students’ literacy skills. This was due to its limitations in assessing students’ abilities to communicate and demonstrate their literacy skills beyond written evaluations. In their view, the OSSLT functions better as a snapshot and a diagnostic tool, and is not a valuable form of assessment to use as an accountability measure for the school, teachers or students.

In both schools where participants taught, the teachers reported that their students’ abilities to succeed on the OSSLT was affected by their prior academic knowledge and their cultural knowledge and experiences. They indicated that their students coming from low socioeconomic backgrounds often lacked the cultural and experiential knowledge to fully engage with material on the test. The teachers also recognized that many of their students often performed below grade-level expectations, particularly with regards to literacy skills. If many students are not succeeding on the OSSLT, it may signify that students in schools with high proportions of students from low socioeconomic backgrounds have less control over their success on the OSSLT due to factors out of their control.

The grade ten English teachers who were interviewed described the many methods they use to prepare students to successfully write the OSSLT, this included methods both inside and outside the classroom. The teachers used a variety of strategies that could be classified as ethical and non-ethical (Haladyna et al., 1991), varying from teaching students test taking strategies to scoring all student work using the OSSLT grading system. The schools also employed different strategies and programs to ensure the greatest amount of student success. These practices demonstrate the value teachers’ and schools’ place on the OSSLT, and their commitment to students’ abilities to succeed on the OSSLT.
One of the goals of standardized testing is for teachers to use it as a tool to improve their practices. Due to the low value placed on the effectiveness of the test, teachers in schools with students from low socioeconomic backgrounds reported using students’ achievement on classroom assessments to guide any changes to their pedagogy. Teachers’ reluctance to use the OSSLT to incite change in their classroom and practices opposes one of the objectives of the OSSLT and the EQAO.

Finally, the teachers interviewed reported high amounts of pressure and stress as a result of preparing students to write the OSSLT, students’ results on the test, and the effects of those results on their futures. While they both indicated that much of the pressure and stress was self-inflicted, it continued to have an effect emotionally for them. In a profession that already places a large amount of emotional burden on teachers, grade ten English teachers in schools with a high proportion of students from low socioeconomic backgrounds face an increased amount of pressure and stress to ensure that their students can graduate with an Ontario Secondary School Diploma (OSSD). It is important to be aware of this increased burden placed on teachers to avoid greater incidence of teacher burnout in grade ten English teachers, particularly those teaching in schools with high populations of students from low socioeconomic backgrounds.

5.2 Implications

In this section, I will discuss some implications, both broad and narrow, that have arisen from the findings of this research. First, I will discuss how these findings affect the educational community on the micro level, teachers, and the macro level, the Ministry of Education and the Ontario government. Subsequently, I will consider how these findings affect my professional identity and practice.
5.2.1 Broad: The educational community

Standardized testing, in this case the OSSLT, has many implications for a variety of levels of the education system. Focusing on the participants of this research first, the OSSLT may have high costs both emotionally and practically for grade ten English teachers in schools with large populations of students from low socioeconomic backgrounds. Teachers directly involved in students’ preparations for the OSSLT may be subject to higher amounts of stress, anxiety and other mental health issues. The OSSLT may also cause grade ten English teachers to focus more attention to preparing students for the OSSLT, rather than focusing on the English curriculum.

Students’ from low socioeconomic backgrounds preparing to write the OSSLT may face many of the same emotional challenges as the teachers preparing them to write the test. Students who have failed the OSSLT could face some forms of shame and embarrassment along with setbacks in terms of number of courses they can take, or it could also jeopardize their ability to receive their OSSD.

From the administrative perspective, schools in low socioeconomic areas, may be spending additional money to pay for programs to ensure student success on the OSSLT. This could be due to parents researching possible schools to enroll their children based on standardized test results. This conscious selection of schools by parents, may also cause school populations to fluctuate and administration having to focus on methods to increase student enrolment. On a larger scale, the results and the data used by the government of Ontario, the Ministry of Education and the Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO) to inform future planning may be tainted and inflated, due to the test preparation practices taken up by
teachers and schools, specifically in schools with large student populations from low socioeconomic backgrounds.

5.2.2 Narrow: Your professional identity and practice

The findings of this research have impacted the ways in which I view my roles as an educator and as a researcher. Most importantly, my findings have altered the ways in which I perceive my relationship with students. The findings suggested that students’ abilities to succeed on the OSSLT were based on both academic and non-academic factors. When planning for courses, lessons and tasks, I will need to consider students’ areas of strength and weakness, and remember that these will not always be congruent with my own. It will also be imperative for me to recognize differences between my cultural and experiential backgrounds, and those of my students, and the effects that these differences have on the knowledge we bring into the classroom and school environments. The findings also indicate that mental health issues among students, particularly involving assessment and achievement, are an aspect that should be considered among all teachers, not simply grade ten English teachers.

For schools to have high levels of success on the OSSLT, it is necessary for the burden to be spread among teachers of all departments. As a non-English teacher, I feel that it is necessary to include elements of literacy in all non-English specific classrooms to increase student success on the OSSLT. I think that another part of my role with regards to standardized testing and the OSSLT would be to educate parents and the community on the objectives, structure and implications of students’ results on the OSSLT and standardized testing. This also extends to educating parents and guardians on ways students can prepare at home for the OSSLT to increase their chances of success.
The process of conducting this research and interviews has shaped my teaching philosophy and aspirations as a teacher. First, I question whether schools are built to ensure the success of all students, or an establishment designed to let the cream rise to the top. Most importantly, it has caused me to value equity, and practices that promote it, in schools, rather than equality. Second, when I began this process, I thought that the roles of teacher and researcher did not intersect. Now, I consider the researcher to be an essential part of a good teacher. The teacher-researcher is someone who is able to actively manipulate aspects of their classroom and pedagogy to ensure that all students have the opportunity to succeed, both inside and outside the classroom.

5.3 Recommendations

The following recommendations involve actions which can be taken up by various levels within the Ontario education community along a variety of different timelines for implementation. Beginning with the smallest level, teachers in schools with high proportions of students from low socioeconomic backgrounds should immediately consider the methods they use to prepare students to write the OSSLT, with the hopes of reducing some stress, pressure, anxiety and other mental health issues among teachers directly involved with the OSSLT. Grade ten English teachers should use methods which prepare students for the format of the OSSLT, while maintaining a high amount of congruence between the OSSLT preparation and the English curriculum. All teachers who are also teaching students preparing to write the OSSLT, specifically grade ten teachers, should dedicate some time to content which is aimed at improving students’ literacy skills, in preparation for them to write the OSSLT. Teacher education programs can also play a role in the preparation for teachers to experience standardized testing. They should include and directly teach methods and strategies for teachers
to use to prepare students, no matter their socioeconomic background, for standardized testing and the OSSLT.

The collection of teachers, administrators and support staff in a school should also play a large role in student success on the OSSLT. Support staff should implement strategies to decrease students’ declining mental health both prior to and after writing the OSSLT. The increased coordination and participation of teachers from other subject areas in preparing students to write the OSSLT, as discussed previously, should also alleviate the mental and emotional issues that arise among students surrounding periods of the OSSLT. This increased participation should be coordinated by the administration as part of a school-wide two-year plan, beginning when students are in grade nine, to prepare them for success on the literacy test. This would give students the maximum amount of time to prepare for the literacy test and succeed.

At the highest levels, the Ministry of Education, the Ontario government and EQAO should update and change policies and practices regarding standardized testing in Ontario. First, all agencies should immediately halt the practice of publishing schools’ OSSLT results, and other standardized testing results. The elimination of published standardized test results should avoid the practice of parents enrolling their children in “better” schools, and schools competing over students. Following that, the EQAO should evaluate the methods used to determine a student’s literacy level, and consider updating the test to be more inclusive towards all student strengths and backgrounds. The teachers interviewed suggested that most students did not have the contextual knowledge to answer many questions on the OSSLT, and some students struggled due to the format and demands of the literacy test, specifically the heavy focus on written language. Along with this re-evaluation of the format for the OSSLT, the Ministry of Education and the Ontario government should reconsider the usefulness of the OSSLT as a high-stakes
standardized test and graduation requirement given the negative effects on students and teachers, and consider updating the Policy and Program Requirements document (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2011).

5.4 Areas for Further Research

This research aimed to fill a gap in research on standardized testing, particularly in relation to the Ontario context and the OSSLT. However, there are many opportunities available to continue to examine the implementation and effects of standardized testing in Ontario. This study examined teachers’ experiences with the OSSLT in schools with large proportions of students from low socioeconomic backgrounds, however it would be useful to directly compare the experiences of teachers preparing their students for the OSSLT in schools with high proportions of students from low socioeconomic backgrounds compared to those with high proportions of students from high socioeconomic backgrounds. This would give a better idea of teachers’ practices and experiences that are limited to a low socioeconomic context.

Ontario is a unique environment where we have both high-stakes and low-stakes standardized testing. It would be interesting to compare how test preparation practices and experiences converge and diverge based on the stakes for students. This would provide insight into the effect that the graduation requirement of the successful completion of the OSSLT has on students’ and teachers’ performances and experiences.

Lastly, research can be done into the effects on student learning and changes to policies, as a result of the implementation of standardized testing and the OSSLT in Ontario. Can we conclude that the implementation of the OSSLT has increased the literacy level in Ontario? And how is the Ontario government and Ministry of Education using the results to effect change on the Ontario education system? Exploring the quantitative effects of standardized testing in
Ontario may help to guide a discussion on the practicality and necessity of some form of standardized testing practices in Ontario’s future.

5.5 Concluding Comments

At the beginning of this journey I held a very different view of standardized testing, its benefits to education, and its implications for teachers and students. Growing up as a white female in a middle-class family, attending a school in an area with many families of high socioeconomic status helped to produce these prior perspectives. My experiences with EQAO-administered tests had all been positive, and I could see the benefits in leveling the playing field for all students by writing province-wide tests. However, having spoken with teachers who are preparing students often considered disadvantaged by the standardized testing movement, I question whether systems advocating for equality are more beneficial than systems practicing equity. I believe my research can highlight some areas of weakness in Ontario’s education system, in order to constructively continue to improve and update the system towards more innovative expectations for the education system. In conclusion, I hope that one day standardized testing will no longer be a controversial issue because it no longer places a large burden on students, teachers or the school community.
References


Appendix A: Letter of Signed Consent

Date:

Dear ______________________________,

My name is Haley Langlois and I am a student in the Master of Teaching (MT) program at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto (OISE/UT). A component of this degree program involves conducting a small-scale qualitative research study. My research will focus on teachers’ experiences of the Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test (OSSLT) in the classroom. I am interested in interviewing teachers who have experience administering the OSSLT. I think that your knowledge and experience will provide insights into this topic.

Your participation in this research will involve one roughly 60-75 minute interview, which will be transcribed and audio-recorded. I would be grateful if you would allow me to interview you at a place and time convenient for you, outside of school time. The contents of this interview will be used for my research project, which will include a final paper and informal presentations to my classmates. I may also present my research findings via conference presentations and/or through publication. You will be assigned a pseudonym to maintain your anonymity and I will not use your name or any other content that might identify you in my written work, oral presentations, or publications. This information will remain confidential. Any information that identifies your school or students will also be excluded.

The interview data will be stored on my password-protected computer and the only person who will have access to the research data will be my course instructor. You are free to change your mind about your participation at any time, and to withdraw even after you have consented to participate. You may also choose to decline to answer any specific question during the interview. I will destroy the audio recording after the paper has been presented and/or published, which may take up to a maximum of five years after the data has been collected. There are no known risks to participation.

Please sign this consent form, if you agree to be interviewed. The second copy is for your records. I am very grateful for your participation.

Sincerely,

Haley Langlois

MT Program Contact:
Dr. Angela Macdonald-Vemic, Assistant Professor – Teaching Stream
angela.macdonald@utoronto.ca
416-821-6496
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 Haley Langlois 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

Opening Script
My name is Haley Langlois. I am currently a Master of Teaching student at OISE at the University of Toronto and ultimately interested in teaching French and Science in high school. I am working on a Research Project for my program that involves interviewing educators about standardized testing in Ontario. I am hoping to learn how standardized testing is implemented in the classroom and how teachers use standardized testing as a pedagogical tool and a professional development tool. I will be asking you some questions about how you perceive standardized testing and in what ways you use it as a teacher. The interview should be about 60-75 minutes, but depending on how our conversation goes it may take up to 90 minutes.

Section 1: Background Information
1. Can you tell me about your current job title?
   o What courses are you teaching this year?
2. How long have you been teaching in Ontario?
   o How long have you been teaching grade 10 English?
   o What other courses have you previously taught?
3. How long have you worked in this school?
4. How would you describe the school community?
   o What are the students like? (SES, ethnicity, demographics)
   o How would you describe teachers’ or the school’s relationships with parents?
   o Can you tell me about the relationships among teachers?
   o How would you describe the neighbourhood?
5. Have you ever written the Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test?
   o (if yes) How was that experience for you as a student?

Segue: As you know, the purpose of this interview is to gain more knowledge on your experiences and perspectives, as a teacher, on the Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test in your classroom. For the purposes of today Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test will be referred to either as the Literacy Test or the OSSLT. Do you prefer literacy test or OSSLT?

Section 2: Teacher’s perception of final grade correlation to OSSLT results & perception of OSSLT correlation to Ontario curriculum
1. Could you describe what types of assessment and evaluations you use in your classroom?
   o Do you use COP in your classroom? (Product, observation, conversation)
   o When you use tests, what types of questions do you ask?
2. How do the assessments in your classroom relate to the assessments on the literacy test?
   o PROMPTS: similarities, differences
   o Can you tell me some of the (similarities/differences) of the literacy test compared to your classroom?
3. Do you feel that a literacy test score accurately represents a student’s learning?
   o Why or why not?
   o (if yes) Do you feel this is more true for some students over others?
     ▪ Why or why not?
4. Do you feel as though the students are able to effectively demonstrate their knowledge on the literacy test?
   - Do you feel as though the literacy test is a good determinant of literacy level? Why or why not?

5. Have you ever worked with a student who is extremely successful in the classroom environment who was not successful on the literacy test? Can you please tell me about that student?
   - What were some of the student’s strengths in class?
   - What did the student struggle with on their OSSLT?

Section 3: Reported efforts to incorporate OSSLT preparation & material into the lesson plan

6. Can you tell me about what opportunities students have to prepare for the literacy test?
   - What opportunities do you provide them with in the classroom?
   - What opportunities does the school provide them with?
   - Are there extracurricular opportunities?
   - How do you think student success would change if they did not have these opportunities to prepare for the literacy test?
   - Do you have a preparation strategy that you find to be highly successful?
   - Can you tell me about an experience where you changed your approach and it did not work?

7. Do all classes prepare for the literacy test? (IF NO) What comparison can you make between your classes preparing for the literacy test and classes who are not?
   - Similarities?
   - Differences?

8. How does the preparation for the literacy test affect your lesson planning/normal classroom routines?
   - Emotions
   - Stress levels
   - Test content

9. Can you tell me about a lesson that you planned and taught that was linked to the literacy test?
   - How did the students react to the lesson?
   - Did you use material from past literacy tests in your lessons or on your tests?

Section 4: Teacher’s view of student performance on OSSLT as a reflection of their ability to teach

10. What is your role in the OSSLT?
    - Do you feel pressure for students to have high success rates?

11. What value does the literacy test hold for you as a teacher?
    - How important are the tests for you?

12. Can you tell me about a time where your students’ test results have caused you to change your approach to the test in future years?
    - If a large number of students were to fail the test, what would be your reaction?

13. Are there any trigger points or success rates on the literacy test that would provide you with feedback of your pedagogy?
Certain percentage of students failing?
Do high scores reinforce your pedagogy?

Section 5: Teacher’s reported utilization of OSSLT results to improve results
14. Have you ever looked at your class’/school’s OSSLT results?
   o On your own?
   o As a part of a department meeting?
   o At a staff meeting?
   o Professional development meetings
15. What topics of conversations come up at these meetings? What do the meetings centre around?
   o Have you ever incorporated any of these strategies into your classroom?
16. Can you tell me about a time you have used test results to improve students’ chances of success?
17. Would you have any advice for teacher candidates/student teachers on standardized testing in the classroom?
18. Do you have any final thoughts that you would like to share?

Closing Script
That brings us to the end of my questions. Thank you for sharing your experiences working with the literacy test. I particularly appreciate… (your knowledge and expertise on this topic/your opinions on this topic/other). Do you have any questions for me at this point?