ASSESSMENT AS STEREOTYPING: EXPERIENCES OF RACIALIZED CHILDREN AND PARENTS WITH THE GRADE 3 EQAO STANDARDIZED TESTING PREPARATION AND ADMINISTRATION IN ONTARIO

By

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A thesis submitted in conformity with the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
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Abstract

This exploratory qualitative study uses Critical Theory, specifically Critical Race Theory, to examine the subjective experiences of racialized children and parents with the Grade 3 EQAO standardized testing preparation and administration in Ontario, Canada. Standardized testing as a tool for measuring accountability in schools was introduced in 1996 by the Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO) which is an arm’s length agency of the Ministry of Education. Each year EQAO assesses students in publicly funded schools in Grades 3, 6, 9, and 10 focusing on numeracy and literacy using criterion-referenced standardized tests to provide an independent gauge of students’ learning and achievement. Data was collected via audio and video recording of semi-structured interviews with eight Grade 3 children and their parent(s).

Although there are research studies conducted on EQAO testing, majority has been at the secondary level. Insights from this study contributes to filling in the gap in the field by focusing on EQAO testing in elementary schools and how it impacts racialized children and parents whose voices are often silenced within educational settings due to systemic barriers. Eight findings emerged through focused coding and thematic analysis. Findings indicate the way the Grade 3 EQAO standardized test is prepared for and administered is more harmful than beneficial. The harmful impact of standardized testing is identified under the umbrella term *invisible scars and traumatizing effects of standardized testing* particularly how EQAO testing
marginalizes racialized children and those from lower socio-economic backgrounds. Identifying external assessment as stereotyping, it is argued EQAO tests are culturally and racially biased as it promotes a Eurocentric curriculum and way of life privileging white students and those from higher socio-economic status. A shift from equality to an equity approach is recommended to tackle closing the achievement gap. The achievement gap will not be minimized in a sustainable manner without first addressing inequality of opportunity. Education alone, and quality of education, cannot be judged exclusively through standardized tests and their quantifiable indicators. Children have to be viewed as holistic beings with different social, cognitive, emotional, developmental, spiritual and academic needs.
Acknowledgments

The paradox of “the hood” is that you see good and evil in the same frame; loving community and institutional abandonment simultaneously. Looking at my life retrospectively, I continuously navigate many different spatial worlds with each setting having its own set of written and unwritten rules and codes. Along the journey, I have found inspiration, love, and constructive knowledge in people and places society has given up on and abandoned but their beautiful souls, energy, and spirits ignites every particle in my being to continue to care, to be a better person, and through my everyday decisions and actions try to make this world a better place. My interactions with people from all walks of life has made it clear to me that dismantling the “norms” in our society and questioning hierarchical inequitable power relations that currently exist are at the core of the struggle to revolutionize our minds, spirits, and imaginative souls.

Many people have opened my eyes, heart, mind, and soul to new perspectives and heightened my level of understanding and critical thinking over the years. I have to begin by thanking the almighty Allah for always being there for me no matter what. I am grateful to my parents, Kamal Eizadirad and Parvaneh Eisakhan, for being an exemplar of a beautiful marriage that demonstrates unconditional love and support every step of the way. Thanks to my grandmother Zinat (RIP) and grandfather Nosratollah for providing love, support, and insightful advice in critical times in my life. Thanks to my big brother Arsalan for always being there to bounce ideas off one another and share a good laugh. I am grateful to Pedro Rabie for being my day 1 broski and always there no matter what time it is to listen and provide support and guidance. We’ve been through so much together in every stage of our lives. I cannot wait to see our children play together as we carry this friendship and brotherhood for years to come. I am appreciative and blessed to have Shemeka Coombs in my life as my life-long partner. She has been there from the start of my post-secondary journey. Thanks for being there through thick and
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Dedications

To my loving grandparents Zinat (RIP) and Nosratollah,
my unconditionally supportive parents Kamal and Parvaneh,
my big brother Arsalan,
my best friends Pedro and Rohan,
and my beautiful soulmate Shemeka.

To all the children, youth, parents, educators, and community activists who every day in different roles and capacities fight to make this world a better place by standing up to inequitable unjust practices within institutions.

“In the hood many hearts have turned into stones as a survival mechanism. Through communities of love and resistance we can penetrate the stones, heal, hope, and create new possibilities and alternatives for sustainable change.”

Ardavan Eizadirad

“Service to others is the rent you pay for your room here on earth.”

Mohammed Ali
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Chapter 1

Introduction, Positionality, and Outline of the Study

1.0 Current Context and Recent Developments

In September 2017, an independent review of student assessment and reporting practices in publicly funded schools in Ontario was announced by the provincial government and the Premier Kathleen Wynne (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2018). This review was titled *Ontario: A Learning Province* led by 6 scholars and researchers who were identified as Ontario’s education advisers to the provincial government. The 6 members were:

- Dr. Carol Campbell, Associate Professor, Leadership and Educational Change, Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto
- Dr. Jean Clinton, Clinical Professor, Department of Psychiatry and Behavioural Neurosciences at McMaster University
- Dr. Michael Fullan, OC, Professor Emeritus and former Dean of the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto
- Dr. Andy Hargreaves, Thomas More Brennan Chair in the Lynch School of Education at Boston College
- Dr. Carl James, Jean Augustine Chair in Education, Community and Diaspora, Faculty of Education, York University
- Kahontakwas Diane Longboat, Senior Project Manager, Guiding Directions Implementation, Centre for Addiction and Mental Health; ceremonial leader, educator, teacher of Indigenous spiritual ways and healer. (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2017b)

The objective of the review was “to ensure that Ontario’s assessment and reporting practices are culturally relevant, measure a wide range of learning and better reflect student well being and equity” (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2018a, para. 2). Consultation with various community members including parents/guardians, educators, students, and community members were conducted using various formats to “modernize student assessment and reporting tools” (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2018a, para. 3). Community consultation mediums used included in-
person engagement sessions in various geographical locations in Ontario attended overall by more than 800 people, an online survey which 4100 people completed, 44 written submissions, and many other shared comments and viewpoints submitted through Twitter and webcasts.

The data was compiled and led to the production of a 106 page report released in late March 2018 titled *Ontario: A Learning Province- Finding and Recommendations from the Independent Review of Assessment and Reporting*. The report makes 18 recommendations about various ways current assessment and reporting practices in education can be modernized to be more relevant and equitable. Under a subsection titled “Large-scale Assessments,” the report describes various concerns about EQAO arising from the community consultations;

**Clarifying and renewing the role of the EQAO agency**
While EQAO has a national and international reputation for world-class assessment expertise; within Ontario, it has a very mixed perception publicly and among students, parents/guardians and educators. Views ranged from calls to abolish EQAO through to support for maintaining, but transforming it.

**Reforming the design and administration of EQAO assessments**
There was a strong consensus about the need for changes in EQAO assessments. There is a high level of concern about the current nature and impact of EQAO assessments given commitments to student equity, recognizing the culture and experiences of students, and minimizing undesirable indirect effects of assessments on students’ learning and well-being. In particular, there were concerns about whether Grade 3 was an appropriate age for large-scale assessments in light of concerns about children’s development, well-being and anxiety, whether Grade 9 was an inappropriate time as students were transitioning into the first year of secondary school and whether the OSSLT was outdated and should continue to be a one day assessment linked to a graduation requirement.

**Transforming EQAO reporting**
In an era of Open Data and Freedom of Information, it is not realistic to prevent data from becoming public; however, future reporting needs to be transformed to provide a broader range of information, advice on interpretation of that information and to minimize misuse. (Campbell, Clinton, Fullan, Hargreaves, James & Longboat, 2018, pp. 7-8)

Recommendations 7 to 17 directly and indirectly are specific to EQAO activities, policies, and/or practices. Of particular interest to this qualitative study is Recommendation 8 which states,
Recommendation 8: Undertake a redesign of provincial large-scale assessments, aligned with the curriculum refresh and taking into account developments in student learning and assessment design, including equitable, inclusive and culturally relevant practices, student choice and voice in assessments, and integration of technology. Develop a parallel implementation process to:

(1) Reform provincial large-scale assessments to:
   a. Continue but substantially modernize Grade 6 census assessments of literacy and numeracy, plus consideration of transferable skills needed to equip elementary students as they proceed in their education;
   b. Discontinue the OSSLT and design and implement a new Grade 10 census assessment of key knowledge, skills and competences, including consideration of literacy, numeracy and competences needed to equip students for success in post-secondary school destinations (e.g. apprenticeship, college, university, community living, or work). This would replace the OSSLT, but would not be linked to graduation requirements.

(2) Phase out and end over a multi-year period:
   a. the current Grade 3 EQAO assessments and make better use of the EDI to support early intervention; and
   b. the current Grade 9 EQAO assessments and the OSSLT. (Campbell et al., 2018, p. 67)

Soon after the release of these recommendations in late March 2018, which recommended phasing out “over a multi-year period” the Grade 3 EQAO assessments, EQAO responded with their own press release expressing, “agency concerned by recommendation to eliminate important source of data on early student learning” (EQAO, 2018, para. 2). The press release indicated that EQAO agrees that “further discussion is required regarding the recommendations of the Premier’s education advisors” (EQAO, 2018, para. 1) to examine the implications of these potential changes. EQAO defended the need to maintain the Grade 3 EQAO standardized tests arguing, “The removal of this assessment would result in the loss of an important source of data on early student learning—data that is used not only to improve programs in elementary schools but also to monitor the effectiveness of public expenditures on education and the results of Ontario’s Poverty Reduction Strategy” (EQAO, 2018, para. 7).

This brings us to a critical juncture in education socially and politically in relation to EQAO testing in Ontario. There is tension between the provincial government and EQAO with respect to whether or not to phase out the Grade 3 EQAO standardized testing as advised by
Premier’s education advisors or maintain it as argued by EQAO. To make matters more complex, in the June 7 2018 provincial election a new Premier was elected from a different political party. Doug Ford of the Progressive Conservatives was elected defeating Kathleen Wynne of the Liberal Party who was the Premier since 2013. It is yet to be seen what direction and approach the new Premier Doug Ford takes to tackle this issue.

This exploratory qualitative study contributes to this critical discussion at an important juncture where EQAO standardized testing practices is under scrutiny with a major decision to be made of whether or not to phase out the Grade 3 EQAO testing. By allowing voices of children and parents, whom mostly self-identify as racialized, to lead conversations in demonstrating the complexities of how Grade 3 EQAO standardized testing impacts them and their communities, we can make more informed decisions about how to make education and EQAO practices more socio-culturally relevant and equitable. This is my contribution to the field of education particularly standardized testing in elementary schools and its impact on racialized and minoritized bodies and communities. It is important to distinguish whereas the term “minority” refers to “a group of less than half of the total, a group that is sufficiently smaller in number,” the term minoritized has a focus on describing power relations referring to “groups that are different in race, religious creed, nation of origin, sexuality, and gender and as a result of social constructs have less power or representation compared to other members or groups in society” (Smith, 2016, para. 11).

1.1 Introduction

This study examines the subjective experiences of racialized children and parents with the Grade 3 Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO) standardized testing preparation and administration in Ontario. This chapter begins by outlining my spiritual journey as an educator making the connection between how a series of major events in my life
contributed to my growth, development, and perspective and attitude towards teaching and learning including the use of standardized testing in schools. It is important to situate myself in terms of my embodied life experiences and how I arrived at this topic as it reflects the Critical Theory framework I am using which acknowledges and recognizes lived experiences as a form of rich qualitative data. Background details are provided about how working with various racialized and minoritized students from elementary to post-secondary levels, I have become concerned about the impact of EQAO standardized testing on racialized students’ development going back to how they vividly remember writing the EQAO standardized test in Grade 3 and how it profoundly impacted them and made them feel. Those lived experiences and conversations inspired and motivated me to pursue the impact of EQAO standardized testing as part of my PhD studies; to further explore and examine the extent which narratives from the racialized children and parents interviewed support or oppose the dominant narrative disseminated by EQAO about the benefits and effectiveness of EQAO standardized tests for accountability purposes.

The remainder of this chapter specifically outlines the main research question which asks, “What are the experiences, opinions, and concerns of racialized children and parents regarding how the EQAO standardized test impacts their identity, family, school and the larger surrounding community in which they live?” The goal of this qualitative research study is to examine, via semi-structured interviews, whether the subjective embodied experiences of preparing and writing the Grade 3 EQAO test was a positive or negative experience for the racialized children and parents, and to further document specifically in what ways. A key feature of this study is that the conversations and discussions are led by voices of children and parents whom majority self-identify as racialized. There needs to be a focus on listening to racialized voices of children and parents, as often media representations perpetuate an individualistic lens that portrays such
identities in stereotypical roles implying they are incompetent to do well on standardized tests. Furthermore, majority of studies conducted about EQAO standardized testing in Ontario are at the high school level involving secondary students (Lock, 2001; Klinger et al., 2006; Spencer, 2006; Masood, 2008; Hori, 2013; Kearns 2016; Kempf, 2016; Singh, 2016). This exploratory qualitative study contributes to the field of standardized testing in elementary schools by focusing on racialized identities and their experiences, where currently not much data is available to examine the overall positive and negative impacts of EQAO testing. I hope this qualitative study serves as a platform to continue to engage in dialogues and conversations about the usefulness and effectiveness of standardized testing particularly in the context of administrating them to young racialized and minoritized children in elementary schools. At the end of reading this thesis, I hope readers walk away further questioning and asking themselves, where does the use of EQAO standardized testing fit in the equation for serving the needs of all students in the education system, particularly racialized students who come from marginalized communities? More importantly, for readers to reflect on to what extent EQAO standardized testing as an accountability tool helps or hinders closing the achievement amongst different social groups? This thesis will not provide all the answers to these complex questions, but can provide an insightful glimpse into the complex lived experiences and circumstantial everyday realities faced by racialized and minoritized children and parents about how a simple test in elementary school has a profound ripple effect in their lives impacting who they are and how they are perceived both at the micro level and at the macro institutional level reflecting their school identity and local community.

This chapter concludes with a brief outline of each chapter and what it entails. The overall structure of the thesis is also explained and how certain components are put together with intentionality such as Chapter 4 where the research findings, implications, further areas to
explore, and recommendations are intertwined into one super chapter constructing a dialogue to allow voices of the children and parents to be at the centre of the conversations supplementing the theory, rather than their voices being on the margins and the theory at the centre. This partial deviance away from how a typical PhD thesis is structured and how the content is presented in linear compartmentalized pre-determined chapters is an act of subversion and resistance (Eizadirad & Portelli, 2018) challenging hierarchical power relations embedded within post-secondary institutions that often marginalize embodied lived experiences as not academic enough to be considered worthy knowledge and instead often give currency and privilege to quantitative data and theoretical knowledge (Lather, 1986).

1.2 My Spiritual Journey as an Educator

I firmly believe understanding where an author or researcher is coming from in terms of their background and experiences contributes to better interpreting his/her viewpoints and their stance on examining the topic or issue being studied. Therefore, I start this thesis with an outline of my spiritual journey as an educator in the process explaining how certain major events, both positive and negative, contributed to my growth and development as a human being molding my educational approach and praxis (Freire, 1970) to teaching and learning. My unique lived experiences across different socio-spatial locations which include both positive and negative events, some which I had control over and others which I did not, have impacted me in transformational ways in the process molding my values, ethics, and morals towards education both within the classroom and in the larger context of the communities which I belong to. My passion for being an educator and a community activist at various levels, ranging from working with elementary to post-secondary students as well as working with various non-profit grassroots organizations in racialized communities in the City of Toronto, stems from the belief that
educators play a pivotal role in cultivating student and adult potential and empowering them to be agents of social change in their lives and in their communities.

My journey began in Iran where I was born in Rasht, the capital city of Gilan province. I was the second child born into a family of four having an older brother who is four years older than me. I was raised in a supportive and loving two parent household. In Iran, my dad worked for the government as an agricultural engineer and as a result we would relocate frequently depending on the project that my dad was working on. My mom stayed at home to raise me and my brother as we were from a higher socio-economic status and there was no need for her to work. Life seemed simple and everything was going well, until my parents gave me the abrupt news in early 1998 that they were planning to relocate to Toronto, Canada. Being in Grade 3 at the time, immigrating to a new country permanently was a complex topic to holistically grasp and understand its magnitude. I became angry and frustrated that I had to say goodbye to many family members and friends not knowing when I might see them again.

In October 1998 my family and I left Iran and travelled to Toronto to start a new life with eight suitcases sponsored by my uncle and aunt. I was about ten years old and started Grade 4 upon arrival to Canada. As a young child, I did not understand many things such as why my parents decided to leave Iran to start a new life somewhere else when we were living a comfortable life back home. It was a difficult transition for me and my family due to changes in our lifestyle accompanied with language barriers. My dad was not able to find a career in his professional field as his educational background and professional work experiences were not accepted as an equivalency and hence he settled for doing alternative precarious jobs to support our family. My mom also began working in the fast-food industry to support the family. Although at the time as a young child I could see the symptoms of stress in my family, I did not
holistically understand the extent of sacrifices and adjustments my parents were making in terms of their lifestyle.

With maturity comes wisdom and as I grew older through reflection and contemplation I began to understand, realize, and respect my parents so much for what they had sacrificed to start a new life in Canada. They sacrificed a comfortable lifestyle in order to be able to live in a country that aligns with their personal values, morals, and ethics such as democracy and freedom of self-expression. As well, they wanted their children to have better opportunities in life and to live in a more democratic country that offered them their human rights. My parents’ actions demonstrated to me the importance of listening to your heart and soul and willing to take risks to pursue one’s aspirations. By wanting to provide a better future for me and my brother, as well as certain personal freedoms for themselves, they risked it all including a lifestyle associated with middle to upper socio-economic status to start from scratch knowing that it will not be easy and nothing is guaranteed. What amazes me up until this day is my parents’ positive attitude towards the hardships they experienced as part of settling in Canada. We would now be considered a middle-class family but it took many sacrifices and hardships to get there. My parents are my role models as they have demonstrated to me the importance of always being grateful and to embrace the difficult times as part of the pathway to achieving one’s goals and attaining success. These various life experiences as a collective, including my family’s journey to Canada from Iran, has made me realize that happiness cannot be bought but rather co-exists in our interactions with the world and the meaningful relationships we build and maintain throughout our lifetime with others.

As an educator I often volunteer to coach basketball and other sports in schools and communities that I am involved in such as the Jane and Finch community. My philosophy is that all educators at some point in their career should coach a team or lead a student club because
they would get to see children in a completely different light, particularly kids who are labelled by the system as “trouble-makers” or “low achievers.” Through the game of basketball I have connected with many students on a whole new level, where not only do we acknowledge each other’s passion for the sport, but more importantly recognize the importance of working together to accomplish a collective goal that puts the team ahead of our own self-interests. This journey involves allowing one another to make mistakes both as players and as a coach, acknowledge our vulnerabilities, take risks, learn from making mistakes, and move towards being better prepared and more knowledgeable human beings as a means to better ourselves on the basketball court and beyond in the context of our lives within the meaningful relationships we create and maintain with others. These skills are transferrable to the classroom. Just as importantly, this process of co-learning and collaborating is not always linear and smooth. It is unique each time depending on the personalities of the individuals, the needs of the student-athletes, their unique autobiographical life histories and experiences, the current developmental stage and maturity of the children/students, the socio-spatial context of the school and the surrounding community, and the power dynamics embedded within the space we utilize and interact within. Meaningful learning can take multiple pathways and it will bear fruit at different times for each individual.

I find teachers often penalize students harshly for making mistakes, whether by deducting marks on tests or assignments or attempting to correct their behaviours, to the extent that it disengages students from their school experiences and creates doubt in students’ minds about their competencies and potential. In many cases, frustrated students express themselves through behaviours that challenge the teacher and other authorities in positions of power. Consequentially, for not conforming to established routines and standards, students are labelled as “incompetent” or “at-risk” (Noguera, 2003; Masood 2008) when the problem lies within hierarchical power relations embedded within schools that judge students exclusively based on
narrow definitions of success such as their intellectual capabilities measured by how they perform on tests and assignments. We need a shift towards understanding students from a holistic interdisciplinary perspective that “integrates body, mind, emotions, and spirit” (Miller, 2000, p. 110). My philosophy as an educator is that we need to explore how we can constructively share more power and control with students, to let them act on their ideas and to lead, while simultaneously being available and approachable for help and assistance in the background in a learning environment that is safe, supportive, and empowering.

Backtracking to my own high school experiences, the start of Grade 12 was a dark period in my life where a couple of major negative events occurred within a short span of time profoundly impacting my development, growth, and level of maturity. The first event was the passing away of my grandmother due to cancer which was the first time I had to deal with death on a personal level. This had a profound impact on me as it made me question the purpose of life and why people suffer. I would contemplate these questions daily and read many religious and spiritual books in order to make sense of death. What I came to realize is that death is part of the cycle of life and that once we accept it, we can live more in tune within each moment by appreciating all experiences whether positive or negative for their essence and what they invoke in us. As a means of coping with my grandmother’s death, I played lots of basketball and I got a tattoo in her memory even though at the time I was under the age of consent to get a tattoo. I did it anyway knowing that my parents opposed having tattoos due to cultural and religious values.

Shortly after receiving the news of my grandmother’s death, I found out my best friend was arrested and placed in jail awaiting trial for committing numerous illegal activities. I knew what he had done was wrong and he had to face the consequences but seeing him behind bars and how it impacted him and his family tore me apart. Not being able to talk to him on a daily basis and do the things we used to do made me angry and sad. I would compensate by writing
him letters, visit him in jail, and attend as many court dates as possible. We would both get small
joys out of our informal interactions such as simple eye contacts and hand gestures during trials
at court. I learned through such experiences and his stories from jail that freedom is a privilege. I
learned not to take things for granted, even small things such as being able to eat whenever you
want. It was during this phase in my life that I began writing poetry as a means of channeling the
tsunami of emotions I was experiencing from within. Listening to poetry and spoken word
moved my soul and spirit by acknowledging the pains and emotions I was experiencing. I found
inspiration in poetry and began writing to constructively express my thoughts, feelings, and
emotions to channel my energy into a positive outlet rather than allowing it to burst into
arguments with others in my life such as teachers at school.

This process of healing, mourning, learning, and coping with loss and death was not
smooth and linear. What was happening in my life outside of school largely impacted my
behaviour and mannerism in school with my teachers and those in positions of authority. I was
being more resistant and disruptive than usual. In retrospect, this could be attributed to the range
of feelings and emotions I was trying to make sense of as a young teenager as well as the
physical changes my body was experiencing going through puberty. These factors collectively
influenced my decision-making especially when I found myself in an intense situation where I
had to make a quick judgement under peer pressure. Not being able to think straight, I was
involved with an opportunistic theft where a couple of the members of our varsity high school
basketball team stole some items from another school we were visiting as part of attending a
basketball tournament. Eventually, the police were involved and they were able to piece together
what happened. This incident brought negative attention to a school which had an established
identity of being a great academic school. As a consequence for my actions, I was offered a
choice by the administrators; to serve a lengthy suspension of thirty plus days or transfer schools
and start fresh at a new school without any note going under my student file regarding the theft incident. I chose the latter.

It was not easy breaking the news to my parents of what took place and why I needed to transfer schools midway through the school year. They had sacrificed so much for me to receive a quality education and I was disappointing them. In retrospect, although difficult, those events built resiliency in me and gave me an opportunity to mature and gain insight and knowledge about life, who I am, and what I wanted to accomplish. Above all, these events contributed to making me become a more spiritual person where I began living in the moment, feeling and appreciating interconnectedness to all life forms known and unknown, and gaining faith in understanding “everything happens for a reason.” When one door closes, another one opens. I responded to the situation by focusing extra hard on my academic aspirations. This translated to having to take a full course-load my last semester in my new high school in addition to taking a class at night school to get all the necessary credits to graduate in time that year and be able to apply for various university programs. Hard work paid off as I was accepted into York University where I began pursuing a career in teaching as I wanted to make a difference in others’ lives.

As a life-long learner, I have learned so much from people from all walks of life ranging from children and youth to adults and seniors. I am grateful that my path intersected with theirs. Some of the most valuable lessons I have learned did not take place within the walls of a classroom but in the larger context of the community through creation of meaningful bonds and connections with people who shared their perspective and life experiences with me. By maintaining an open mind and heart and by allowing others’ character and colourful souls to speak to me through our interactions and conversations, I continue to experience growth and gain insight by gaining new perspectives, knowledges and experiences.
My lived experiences profoundly shape my praxis as an educator. Freire (1970) defines praxis as “reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it” (p. 51). Freire (1970) argues that it is through “conscientization,” (p. 67) a process of developing critical awareness about one’s social reality through reflection and action, that objects come to see themselves as subjects beholding agency and having capacity to make a liberatory change at the micro and macro level. Conscious of my autobiographical history and life experiences such as being an immigrant and English as a Second Language (ESL) learner, I make extra efforts as a teacher to reach out to immigrant and ESL students to understand their biographical life stories and how they enter the learning space physically, socially, spiritually, and emotionally. Providing various mediums for students to share and express their stories and simultaneously sharing my own journey and vulnerabilities, allows me as an educator to build a connection and rapport with the students. This process allows the teacher/student duo to acknowledge they are not alone in experiencing difficulties. As well, it empowers the students by acknowledging their lived experiences as a form of valid and worthy knowledge that demonstrates strength and resiliency.

In a curriculum that often exclusively values content that can be quantified and assessed “objectively,” it is important educators seek to understand students holistically including their socio-emotional well-being relative to their life experiences (Portelli & Vilbert, 2002; Au, 2010; Miller, 2016). As Miller (2000) states, “soulful learning seeks to restore a balance between our outer and inner lives” (p. 5). As I continue to work in numerous racialized neighbourhoods in the City of Toronto as an educator, I strive to blur the hierarchical and dichotomous binary of teacher/student and work towards forming a community of learners within my classroom where collectively as life-long learners we horizontally share the power and work collaboratively to achieve co-constructed goals for the betterment of our well beings, and the larger needs of the community and the planet which we co-exist within.
As an educator and a life-long learner, it is significant that we all do our best in our various roles and capacities on a daily basis to create empowering, loving, and supportive learning environments where children, youth and adults do not lose interest in education due to systematic barriers but rather become encouraged to make a difference in their own lives and in their communities by keeping an open mind and heart and pursuing their passions. As educators we have to deviate from obsession with control and excessive assessment and testing to seeing individuals holistically, in the process allowing learners to lead, express their thoughts, feelings, and emotions, invite them to think, and challenge them to solve problems both within the classroom and in the larger context of their neighbourhoods and/or the world. At the core of my praxis as an educator and a community activist is the importance of using education as a tool to inspire, motivate, empower, and bring social consciousness to individuals and collective groups to resist and challenge injustice and inequity in its various forms and processes at the micro and macro level (Freire, 1970). For me, this is best accomplished when we make education socio-culturally relevant and responsive to the lives of learners. As Ladson-Billings (1995) points out, culturally relevant pedagogy is an education “model that not only addresses student achievement but also helps students to accept and affirm their cultural identity while developing critical perspectives that challenge inequities that schools (and other institutions) perpetuate” (p. 469).

1.3 Background: What Gravitated Me Towards Studying the Impact of Standardized Testing

As an educator and as a community activist for the past 10 years, I have worked in numerous Toronto racialized communities labelled “at-risk” by media representations, particularly in Jane and Finch and Scarborough (Eizadirad, 2017) involving initiatives with a focus on advocacy and social justice advancement for minoritized and racialized identities through education, leadership, and coaching. I have had the privilege of teaching and learning
with kids, youth, and young adults ranging from elementary aged children to post-secondary students from all walks of life. Being a racialized person, I found many children, youth, parents, and community members felt more comfortable turning to me to express some of their needs and concerns about various issues impacting them in the classroom, the school, and/or in the community outside of school. Reflecting my life experiences, I have identified that one of the silenced issues in educational inequity is the impact of standardized testing on racialized students and parents (Au, 2010; Dei, 2008; Kearns, 2016; James, 2012; Pinto, 2016). This is a process that begins with the use of EQAO standardized testing in elementary schools in Grade 3 and is continued as children grow and mature and attend high school and post-secondary institutions. In particular, I am concerned about the organization and impact of provincial standardized testing introduced in Ontario in 1996 by EQAO which is an arm’s length agency of the Ministry of Education (EQAO, 2012). Each year EQAO assesses students in all Ontario publicly funded schools in Grades 3, 6, 9, and 10 focusing on numeracy and literacy using criterion-referenced census-style standardized tests as a means of providing “an independent gauge of children’s learning and achievement” (EQAO, 2012, p. 1). For all assessments, questions are linked to the Ontario Curriculum expectations and include a range of multiple choice, true and false, and open-ended response questions. The following school year, each student receives a personalized report that “describes his or her achievement on the test” in relation to Ontario’s provincial curriculum expectations ranging from Level 1 being “below grade expectations” to Level 4 being “above grade expectations” (EQAO, 2012, p. 8). As well, each school and school board receives a detailed report about overall achievement of their student population and how they are doing collectively as a school board. According to EQAO (2012), the cost of administering the EQAO was “$32 million dollars” for the 2010-2011 school year (p. 19).
When I inquired about the short and long term impact of EQAO standardized testing through everyday conversations with many racialized children, youth, young adults, and parents, many expressed that writing EQAO standardized tests was nerve-wrecking for them and in some cases traumatizing by the amount of pressure they felt coupled with their fear of failure. I was astonished by the high number of people who in retrospect vividly remembered their experience writing the EQAO test in elementary school and described it as negative and detrimental to their development and growth. Many racialized identities explained how taking EQAO tests had a long-term lasting negative impact of making them feel “stupid” or “incompetent” and/or created fear in them associated with test-taking anxiety. As a result, it became important to me to conduct an exploratory qualitative research study to further more holistically capture the impact of Grade 3 EQAO standardized test preparation and administration on racialized children and parents as told through their voices.

1.4 Research Questions

This exploratory qualitative research study asks, “What are the experiences, opinions, and concerns of racialized children and parents regarding how the EQAO standardized test impacts their identity, family, school and the larger surrounding community in which they live?” A key feature of this study is that it is led by the voices of racialized Grade 3 children and parents. This study provides the participants with a medium, semi-structured interviews, to express their lived experiences, opinions, and concerns regarding how the EQAO standardized test impacts their identity, family, school, and the larger surrounding community in which they live and specifically in what ways. By examining participants’ voices and experiences through focused coding and thematic analysis (Clarke & Braun, 2017) from a Critical Theory framework, specifically Critical Race Theory (Lopez, 2003; Knoester & Au, 2017), we can better understand and further explore the short and long-term effects of institutional policy enactment related to
preparation and administration of EQAO standardized tests on racialized children in elementary schools and their parents. Supporting secondary questions which will be explored to varying degrees as part of pursuing the main question include:

   a) What are the benefits and social costs associated with EQAO preparation and administration in Grade 3?
   b) How does EQAO preparation conceptualize academic success?
   c) What values are reinforced and legitimized through EQAO preparation?
   d) How does EQAO preparation impact students’ engagement towards learning?
   e) How does EQAO preparation and its emphasis on numeracy and literacy disadvantage other subjects?
   f) How do EQAO results shape the role and perceived capability and competencies of administrators, teachers, parents and students?
   g) How does interpretation of EQAO results impact the perceived image of the school and its surrounding community?

1.5 Rationale and Significance of the Study

Although there has been research on standardized testing in Ontario, majority has been conducted at the secondary high school level (Lock, 2001; Klinger et al., 2006; Spencer, 2006; Masood, 2008; Hori, 2013; Kearns 2016; Kempf, 2016; Singh, 2016). I contribute to filling in the gap in the field of education by exploring the impact of standardized testing on racialized children in elementary schools and their parents. From a timing perspective, this study is significant because we are currently at a political juncture exploring and discussing whether or not to cancel the Grade 3 EQAO standardized testing as advised by the Premier’s education advisors or maintain it as argued by EQAO. Kohn (2000) makes the developmental argument that,
Students below fourth grade simply should not be subjected to standardize examinations; first, because it is difficult, if not impossible, to devise such an assessment in which they can communicate the depth of their understanding; and second, because skills develop rapidly and differentially in young children, which means that expecting all second graders to have acquired the same skills or knowledge creates unrealistic expectations and leads to one-size-fits-all teaching. (p. 13)

Exploring the extent of accurateness to Kohn’s (2000) developmental argument, this qualitative study seeks to provide an opportunity for racialized Grade 3 children and their parents to express how EQAO test preparation and administration impacts their identities and life experiences including the impact on their self-confidence, level of engagement with school activities, and their growth and socio-emotional development. This is important given that racialized students have specific experiences with schooling in general and test-taking in particular (Anyon, 1980; Colour of Justice Network; 2007; Curtis, Livingstone & Smaller, 1992; Dei, Holmes, Mazzuca, McIsaac & Campbell, 1995; Dei, 2008; Eizadirad, Martinez & Ruminot, 2016; hooks, 2003; Hori, 2013; Kearns, 2016; Ladson-Billings; 1994; Masood, 2008; Sharma, 2009).

Through semi-structured interviews with eight Grade 3 children and their parents, majority whom self-identify as racialized, I explore in depth the benefits and social costs associated with the EQAO standardized test preparation and administration. I further historicize and contextualize how EQAO standardized testing is normalized and legitimized within the Ontario education system as a tool to measure and demonstrate accountability to the public. As well, I explore how enactment of EQAO standardized testing policy impacts various social groups in different ways, particularly racialized children and parents, whose voices are often silenced within educational settings due to various systemic barriers (Kumashiro, 2004). Findings from this study can help make a more informed decision about whether or not to cancel or phase out the Grade 3 EQAO standardized testing or if kept how to alter its current policies and practices to make it more equitable and socio-culturally relevant.
1.6 Outline of the Chapters and Structure of the Thesis

This exploratory qualitative study is structured and presented thematically in five chapters;

Chapter 1: Introduction, Positionality, and Outline of the Study

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Chapter 3: Research Methodology, Paradigm, and Methods

Chapter 4: Research Findings, Implications, Further Areas to Explore, and Recommendations

Chapter 5: Conclusion and Where Do We Go From Here

These five chapters are identified and put together sequentially with intentionality as it provides a simple yet cohesive structure that is easy to follow and presents the findings in a manner that brings to life the “subaltern voices” (Spivak, 1988, p. 66) of the participants. Life experiences of racialized children and parents describing their embodied experiences writing the Grade 3 EQAO standardized test is centred as worthy knowledge and deconstructed through a Critical Theory lens, specifically Critical Race Theory, discussing the overall impact and effectiveness of the use of standardized testing on young children in elementary schools.

Chapter 1 begins with outlining my life journey as an educator including some of the major events that influenced and facilitated my growth and maturity. As well, my background in terms of how I gravitated towards studying the impact of EQAO standardized testing on young children is discussed. Chapter 1 further identifies the main research question, supplementary secondary questions, rationale and significance of the study, and how findings from this study can contribute to filling in the research gap in the field affiliated with the use of standardized testing on racialized children and parents in elementary schools.
Chapter 2 provides a literature review on experiences of racialized and minoritized students with standardized testing and access to opportunities in the context of Toronto. The chapter then outlines the history of EQAO standardized testing in Ontario. The chapter begins with a macro perspective historicizing progress over time in the form of a symbiotic trilateral relationship between the development and establishment of the Ontario curriculum, the Tyler Rationale, and EQAO standardized testing. The chapter then shifts to cover a Canadian historical lens that traces roots of EQAO standardized testing to larger changes in education under the governance power of various political parties leading up to the introduction, administration, normalization, and legitimization of EQAO standardized testing as a tool to measure accountability in publicly funded schools. Chapter 2 further outlines and tracks the evolution of EQAO in terms of its governing structure and changes in its implementation over time since its inception in 1996. The chapter concludes by examining EQAO standardized tests from multiple perspectives including; reporting of EQAO results, monetary costs associated with implementation of EQAO tests, ranking of schools and correlation with property values, teacher unions’ stance on EQAO testing in schools, a developmental perspective on the usefulness of EQAO standardized testing with young children, and an overview outlining theoretical pros and cons associated with using standardized testing in schools and its impact on various stakeholders particularly students, teachers, administrators, and policymakers.

Chapter 3 outlines the research methodology and methods used to collect, analyze, and identify findings from the data. The chapter begins by outlining major characteristics of Critical Theory and Critical Race Theory as conceptual frameworks, and how they are used as a lens to analyze and interpret the data collected via audio and video recording of semi-structured interviews. Strengths and limitations of using semi-structured interviews as an instrument for data collection are discussed from multiple perspectives. More specifically, the process and
selection criteria for participant recruitment are explained outlining the use of purposeful sampling to recruit eight children and their parents as participants from different communities. As well, procedural steps to getting ethical clearance from the University of Toronto are explained along with how participants were provided with informed consent and assurance of confidentiality throughout the research project. Chapter 3 also explains when and where the interviews took place as well as what steps were taken to ensure credibility, dependability, and transferability of the data and the emerging findings. It also explains how thematic analysis is used to code and group the interview responses to facilitate identification of major themes leading to the emerging findings. Chapter 3 concludes with a biographical sketch of each child participant in order for readers to get to know them better beyond a superficial level.

Chapter 4 is a hybrid chapter which identifies eight major findings arising from the thematic analysis of the data generated from transcription of interview responses. Directly following the listing of each finding, three major components affiliated with each finding are discussed which include implications, further areas to explore, and recommendations. This unique format for Chapter 4 was selected with intentionality to allow voices of the children and parents to be at the centre of the conversations leading this exploratory qualitative study.

Chapter 5 is the concluding chapter which interconnects the various discussions full circle by summarizing key findings and major themes identified and discussed relative to the main research question which asks, “What are the experiences, opinions, and concerns of racialized children and parents regarding how the EQAO standardized test impacts their identity, family, school and the larger surrounding community in which they live?” As a means of making some of the information discussed throughout the earlier chapters more accessible for practical reasons, the eight findings and some of the recommendations are listed under one sub-section as part of the concluding chapter. Chapter 5 concludes with an overview of the significance of this
study and its contribution to the field of standardized testing in elementary schools, specifically with respect to experiences of racialized children and parents. More importantly, the chapter raises questions about future directions to be explored to better serve the needs of racialized children within the education system from an equity perspective. A decolonized approach and model of education (Smith, 1999) is suggested as a means of minimizing the detrimental effects associated with the use of standardized testing on racialized children in elementary schools.

1.7 Key Terms

**Critical Theory**: Critical Theory includes “theories that view knowledge in social constructionist terms as rooted in subjective experiences and power relations” (Brown & Strega, 2005, p. 68). Furthermore, “Critical research rejects the ideas of value-free science that underpin both qualitative and quantitative approaches to research. Instead, it positions itself as about critiquing and transforming social relations. Critical researchers view reality as both objective and subjective: objective in terms of the real forces that impinge on the lives of groups and individuals, and subjective in terms of the various individual and group interpretations of these forces and the experiences they engender.” (Brown & Strega, 2005, p. 9)

**Critical Race Theory (CRT)**: CRT is “[A] conceptual framework useful in understanding how racism operates, including within institutions such as schools, by paying careful attention to the differential resources and opportunities available to students of different races, as opposed to the more common form of racial theorizing, focusing on individual acts of hatred or racism.” (Knoester & Au, 2017, p. 4)
**Equality:** “The achievement of equal status in society in terms of access to opportunities, support, rewards and economic and social power for all without regard to race, colour, creed, culture, ethnicity, linguistic origin, disability, socio-economic class, age, ancestry, nationality, place of origin, religion, sex, gender identity, gender expression, sexual orientation, family status, and marital status.” (TDSB, 2017b, p. 72)

**Equity:** “The provision of opportunities for equality for all by responding to the needs of individuals. Equity of treatment is not the same as equal treatment because it includes acknowledging historical and present systemic discrimination against identified groups and removing barriers, eliminating discrimination and remedying the impact of past discrimination.” (TDSB, 2017b, p. 72)

**Hegemony:** Derived from the works of Antonio Gramsci; “The term hegemony applies to the process whereby ideas, structures, and actions come to be seen by the majority of people as wholly natural, preordained, and working for their own good when in fact these ideas, structures, and actions are constructed and transmitted by powerful minority interests to protect the status quo that serves these interests so well. The subtle cruelty of hegemony is that over time it becomes deeply embedded, part of the natural air we breathe. One cannot peel back the layers of oppression and identify a group or groups of people as the instigators of a conscious conspiracy to keep people silent and disenfranchised. Instead, the ideas and practices of hegemony become part and parcel of everyday life- the stock opinions, conventional wisdom, or commonsense ways of seeing and ordering the world that people take for granted.” (Weiner, 2014, p. 40)
**Minoritized:** Whereas the term “minority” refers to “a group of less than half of the total, a group that is sufficiently smaller in number”, the term minoritized has a focus on describing power relations referring to “groups that are different in race, religious creed, nation of origin, sexuality, and gender and as a result of social constructs have less power or representation compared to other members or groups in society.” (Smith, 2016, para. 11)

**Praxis:** Derived from the works of Paulo Freire; “Reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it” (Freire, 1970, p. 51). Freire (1970) argues it is through “conscientization,” (p. 67) a process of developing critical awareness about one’s social reality through reflection and action, that objects come to see themselves as subjects beholding agency and having capacity to make liberatory change at the micro and macro level.

**Neoliberalism:** “Neoliberalism is the dominant political and ideological paradigm of our time, embodied by policies and processes that place political control in a handful of private interests. Its defining characteristics include a shift of shared concern for the common good between the state and citizens to a relationship based on economics whereby citizen roles are limited to “taxpayers” in the social order, and a predominant consensual discourse whereby contestation and dissent are compromised. Resulting social policies reflect managerialism, privatisation and a preponderance of punitive accountability mechanisms.” (Pinto, 2015, p. 142)
**Paradigm:** “This is the philosophical stance taken by the researcher that provides a basic set of beliefs that guides action. It defines, for its holder the nature of the world, the individual's place in it, and the range of possible relationships to that world.” (Creswell, 2007, p. 248) Denzin and Lincoln (2000) further call this the "net that contains the researcher's epistemological, ontological, and methodological premises." (p. 13)

**Racialized/ Racialization:** “Race is a socially constructed way of judging, categorizing and creating difference among people based on physical characteristics such as skin colour, eye, lips and nose shape, hair texture and body shape. The process of social construction of race is termed “racialization.” This is the “process by which societies construct races as real, different and unequal in ways that matter to economic, political and social life. Despite the fact that there are no biological “races”, the social construction of race is a powerful force with real consequences for individuals. Someone’s “race” can also extend to specific traits which are deemed to be “abnormal” and of less worth. Individuals may have prejudices related to various racialized characteristics. In addition to physical features, these characteristics could include accent, dialect or manner of speech, name, clothing and grooming, diet, beliefs and practices, leisure preferences, and places of origin.” (TDSB, 2017b, p. 75)

**Socio-Culturally Relevant Pedagogy:** A form of meaningful teaching and learning that takes into consideration “both micro- and macro-analyses, including: teacher-student interpersonal contexts, teacher and student expectations, institutional contexts, and the societal context. This work is important for its break with the cultural deficit or cultural disadvantage explanations which led to compensatory educational interventions. Next step for positing effective pedagogical practice is a theoretical model that not only addresses student achievement but also helps students to accept and affirm their cultural identity while developing critical
perspectives that challenge inequities that schools (and other institutions) perpetuate.” (Ladson-Billings, 1995, p. 469)

**Socio-Economic Status:** “The economic, social and political relationships in which people operate in a given social order. These relationships reflect the areas of income level, education, access to goods and services, type of occupation, sense of ownership or entitlement and other indicators of social rank or class.” (TDSB, 2017b, p. 75)

**Subaltern:** Derived from the works of Antonio Gramsci; referring to oppressed subjects or social groups or more generally those of inferior rank (Spivak, 1988).

**Systemic Discrimination:** “A pattern of discrimination that arises out of apparently neutral institutional policies or practices, that is reinforced by institutional structures and power dynamics, and that results in the differential and unequal treatment of members of certain groups.” (TDSB, 2017b, p. 76)
Chapter 2

Literature Review

2.0 Introduction

Chapter 2 begins with a literature review on experiences of racialized and minoritized students with standardized testing and access to opportunities in the context of Toronto, Ontario. Similarities and differences in context are discussed with respect to standardized testing in Ontario compared to the United States. Chapter 2 then focuses on outlining the history of EQAO standardized testing in Ontario historicizing progress over time in the form of a symbiotic trilateral relationship between the development and establishment of the Ontario curriculum, the Tyler Rationale, and EQAO standardized testing. The chapter further covers a Canadian historical lens that traces roots of EQAO standardized testing to changes in education under the governance power of various political parties leading up to the introduction, administration, normalization, and legitimization of EQAO standardized testing as a tool to measure accountability in publicly funded schools. The chapter concludes by examining EQAO standardized tests from multiple perspectives.

2.1 Experiences of Racialized and Minoritized Students with Standardized Testing and Access to Opportunities

Anyon (1980) and Bourdieu and Passeron’s (1977) work can serve as the platform to critically examine the reproduction of social class through standardized testing; specifically how formal and informal practices in schools and their associated power relations contribute to maintenance of a dominant, hegemonic culture which benefits and privileges white affluent students at the expense of marginalization to racialized students and those from lower socio-economic backgrounds. Anyon (1980) conducted a classical ethnography where she observed “work tasks and interaction in five elementary schools in contrasting social class communities”
and noticed major differences in “classroom experience and curriculum knowledge among the schools.” (p. 67) She concluded that that there is a “hidden curriculum in school work” that reproduces social class through development of specific symbolic capital that “yields social and cultural power.” (p. 69); whereas in the working-class schools the work was guided by “preparation for future wage labour that is mechanical and routine,” in contrast, in affluent schools the children were given opportunities “to develop skills of linguistic, artistic, and scientific expression and creative collaboration of ideas into concrete form.” (p. 88) Similarly, Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) in *Reproduction in Education, Society, and Culture* emphasize schooling reproduces certain knowledges that benefits dominant classes while marginalizing the working class. Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) argue that often those with greater socio-economic status are rewarded with the voice of authority and legitimization of their knowledge and identities as learning content in schools reflect their social and cultural capitals.

McNeil (2000) makes the argument that standardized testing “in the name of “equity” imposes a sameness and in the name of “objectivity” relies on a narrow set of numerical indicators” to judge success (p. 4). Standardized tests homogenize the needs of all students within a school, expecting all students to do well regardless of their socioeconomic status and access to opportunities and social support systems. As Nezavdal (2003) points out,

[S]tandardized tests seek to assess individuals, young people who bring a different range of experiences to the classroom, through a most peculiar claim; that all students can learn differently and come from inequitable backgrounds but be evaluated in the same way, at the same time, by the same test- designed of course, by those who are the social power-holders. (p. 69)

Standardized tests fail to take into consideration systemic discrimination in education such as reproduction of Eurocentric knowledge and lack of representation within the curriculum content for racialized and minoritized students (McIntosh, 1988) leading to higher drop-out rates for non-European student populations (Colour of Justice Network, 2007; Dei et al., 1995; James, 2012).
“Closing the achievement gap” both in the context of United States and Canada has become a popular buzz word often used by educational policymakers and politicians yet what is often not talked about are the disparities in the opportunity gap which as a process leads to the achievement gap as an outcome. Reporting on Ontario schools, Curtis et al. (1992) point out that, “Working-class kids always have, on average, lower reading scores, higher grade failures, higher drop-out rates and much poorer employment opportunities.” (p. 7) Race is a significant factor that impacts one’s access to opportunities (Block & Galabuzi, 2011) including educational success, particularly when systemic discrimination is embedded within the fabric of institutional policies and practices.

Racial tensions were high in Toronto, Ontario and it reached its tipping point in May 1992 following two incidents; the shooting and killing of a 22 year old black man named Raymond Lawrence by a white police officer who was wearing plain clothes in the streets of Toronto and the acquittal of four white police officers caught on video brutally beating black driver Rodney King in the streets of Los Angeles (Paradkar, 2017). On May 4 1992 people took to the streets to protest and resist the systemic discrimination racialized bodies were experiencing living in Ontario and to show solidarity with the people in Los Angeles who were experiencing similar issues in a different context where the systemic discrimination was more explicit and magnified. The protests in Toronto occurred along Yonge Street and escalated and became violent involving “looting, fires, smashing of windows, and pelting of police” leading to “30 people arrested and 37 police officers injured” (Paradkar, 2017, para. 4). Immediately after the incident, the Premier at the time, Bob Rae, assigned Stephen Lewis as his Advisor on Race Relations, and delegated him to consult local communities and produce a report shortly with recommendations to work towards solutions. The following month on June 9 1992, Stephen Lewis produced his report titled Report of the Advisor on Race Relations to the Premier of
*Ontario, Bob Rae.* Lewis (1992) outlines that in the span of one month he held “seventy meetings with individuals and groups in Metro Toronto, Ottawa, Windsor and beyond, supplemented by innumerable phone conversations” (p. 1). As one of his key observations, Lewis (1992) states,

First, what we are dealing with, at root, and fundamentally, is anti-Black racism. While it is obviously true that every visible minority community experiences the indignities and wounds of systemic discrimination throughout Southern Ontario, it is the Black community which is the focus. It is Blacks who are being shot, it is Black youth that is unemployed in excessive numbers, it is Black students who are being inappropriately streamed in schools, it is Black kids who are disproportionately dropping-out, it is housing communities with large concentrations of Black residents where the sense of vulnerability and disadvantage is most acute, it is Black employees, professional and non-professional, on whom the doors of upward equity slam shut. Just as the soothing balm of “multiculturalism” cannot mask racism, so racism cannot mask its primary target. (p. 2)

Lewis is describing how systemic discrimination, specifically anti-Black racism, within institutions trickles down to impact the daily lives of racialized bodies and communities leading to inequality of outcome in various settings including the education system. The various examples mentioned in the report demonstrate that race plays a key role in accessing opportunities.

Fast forward to 2008 and similar findings were expressed by Roy McMurtry and Alvin Curling (2008) in their report titled *Review of the Roots of Youth Violence.* Youth and gun violence were a hot topic in Toronto following the death of 15-year-old grade nine student Jordan Manners on May 23 2007 at C.W. Jefferys Collegiate Institute, a public high school located within the boundaries of the Jane and Finch neighborhood (Eizadirad, 2016; James 2012). Manners died in the school hallway as a result of a gun shot wound to the chest. This incident was the first of its kind in the City of Toronto where a student had died within a school. According to O’Grady, Parnaby, and Schikschnet (2010), within forty-eight hours narratives
within the media began framing the killing as “a tragedy that had its roots in the very nature of Toronto’s black, urban ‘underclass’” (p. 56).

In the aftermath of Jordan Manner’s death, the Premier at the time Dalton McGuinty, approached Honourable Roy McMurtry and Dr. Alvin Curling to “spend a year seeking to find out where it (youth violence) is coming from- its roots- and what might be done to address them to make Ontario safer in the long term” (p. 1). This led to the 2008 publication of Review of the Roots of Youth Violence. The report identifies numerous immediate risk factors that “create that state of desperation and put a youth in the immediate path of violence” (p. 5). The immediate risk factors identified are;

- having a deep sense of alienation and low self-esteem;
- having little empathy for others and suffer from impulsivity;
- believing that they are oppressed, held down, unfairly treated and neither belong nor have a stake in the broader society;
- believing that they have no way to be heard through other channels; and
- having no sense of hope. (pp. 5–6)

The report goes on to outline “the roots” of youth violence, referring to “the major conditions in which the immediate risk factors grow and flourish” (p. 6). These include poverty, racism, poor community planning and design, issues in the education system, family issues, health issues, lack of youth voice, lack of economic opportunity for youth, and issues in the justice system. As Eizadirad (2016) states, “Review of the Roots of Youth Violence report dares to speak the truth by naming race and racism and putting a face to it in terms of institutional practices” (p. 178). The report predominantly names racism and poverty as major systemic barriers contributing to youth gravitating toward violence; “Alienation, lack of hope or empathy, and other immediate risk factors are powerfully, but far from exclusively, driven by the intersection of racism and poverty.” (p. 19) Importantly, Dei (2000) deconstructs what racism is and how it works by emphasizing, “Racism is more than an ideology and structure. It is a process.” (p. 36) Review of
the Roots of Youth Violence reiterates this definition of racism and guides the discussion toward examining the consequences arising from consistent exposure to racism:

But while race is not something that can create the immediate risk factors for violence involving youth, racism is. Racism strikes at the core of self-identity, eats away the heart and casts a shadow on the soul. It is cruel and hurtful and alienating. It makes real all doubts about getting a fair chance in this society. It is a serious obstacle imposed for a reason the victim has no control over and can do nothing about. (p. 9)

The report also emphasizes that the most harmful impacts are experienced within neighbourhoods plagued with poverty, making the connection that “when poverty is racialized, and then ghettoized and associated with violence, the potential for the stigmatization of specific groups is high.” (p. 4) From this vantage point, we can begin to understand how unequal power relations and practices are perpetuated through racialization of specific social groups and neighborhoods leading to inequality of opportunity.

Ricci (2004) argues that “standardized testing can have a negative impact on the quality of education students are receiving and the effects can be particularly detrimental to children whose race, culture, or first language is not that of the majority.” (p. 346) This is the reality within the TDSB as “schools with high dropout rates are those with the highest number of racialized students.” (Colour of Poverty, 2011, p. 4) According to Brown (2009), in the TDSB which is the largest and one of the most diverse school boards in Canada with 583 schools and serving more than 246,000 students, “students of African ascendance experience a 38% dropout rate and students from Central and South America had a 37% dropout rate” (p. 4).

Kearns (2011) found similar findings at the secondary level with high school students who failed the Grade 10 Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test (OSSLT) administered by EQAO. She interviewed sixteen youth who failed the OSSLT and found,
Youth who pass the OSSLT are privileged, rewarded, deemed to be good future citizens and active contributors to society, whereas those who fail are named as different, deemed not up to the standard, are considered to be not thriving, and, therefore, must work harder to become good future citizens. (p. 123)

More importantly, “the literacy test was alienating for some youth because it undermined some of their positive identity-confirming experiences, and forced them to negotiate a negative label” such as being “illiterate.” (p. 124) Kearn’s (2011) study depicts how standardized tests inscribe a negative label on to students which is powerful enough to create self-doubt in them and their motivation to succeed in school. The language of “at-risk” (Masood, 2008) and other negative labels such as “illiterate” blames the individual “as the holder of the ‘at-riskness’ as opposed to multiple and complex, social, political, and economic factors” (Kearns, 2016, p. 127).

Similar concerns can be raised for newly arrived immigrants and ESL learners who are struggling to master the dominant language used as part of administration of EQAO standardized tests. Toplak and Wiener (2000) examined “whether the demands placed on the children are consistent with what we know about the cognitive development of 8-9 year old children” and concluded “although the Grade 3 Assessment is based on the Ontario Curriculum, many items exceed what should be expected from a typical Grade 3 student when children’s cognition is considered” (p. 65). Toplak and Wiener (2000) argue,

A fair test of reading in the third grade should, therefore, rely heavily on skills in sounding out words (decoding) and reading simple passages, and less heavily on making inferences and extending ideas from the text. The Grade 3 Assessment clearly falls short from the perspective of this developmental model. There is a heavy emphasis on text comprehension and inferences in the Grade 3 Assessment, and very little on reading and identifying words. (p.71)

Toplak and Wiener (2000) further point to shortcomings with the math component of EQAO testing which requires mastery of English language to comprehend the word problems. They state, “The over-reliance on reading in both the Mathematics and Mathematics Investigations booklets makes the Grade 3 a test of mathematics achievement and a test of reading, in which
one skill cannot be demonstrated adequately without mastery of the other” (p. 74). Therefore, some children might have the necessary mathematical skills to achieve at a Level 3 or higher but due to not comprehending the question clearly they could get the answer wrong. This contributes to lowering their self-esteem and self-confidence. As Bower and Thomas (2013) state, “Assessment can disempower students by making them feel inadequate and generating feelings of avoidance.” (p. 128)

Although theoretically standardized tests are supposed to help identify inequities in the education system and areas for improvement at the individual level as well as broader areas in school and school board district levels (Nagy, 2000; Volante 2006), in practice it has not led to closing the achievement gap along the lines of race and socio-economic status over the years (Hori, 2013; Dei, 2008; James, 2012). Examining the historical impact of standardized testing in the United States over time, Au (2013) explains,

The historical roots of high-stakes, standardised testing in racism, nativism, and eugenics raises a critical question: why is it that, now over 100 years after the first standardised tests were administered in the United States, we have virtually the same test-based achievement gaps along the lines of race and economic class? (p. 12)

Although the context is different to a certain degrees between how standardized tests are used in Canada in comparison to the United States (EQAO, 2015), the outcome of racialized students doing more poorly relative to their white counterparts within the education system remains a persistent pattern in both countries. Canada is a country with a population of approximately 36.28 million people (United Nations Statistics Division, 2018) consisting of ten provinces and three territories. Ontario is Canada’s largest province and it “represents approximately one-third of the nation’s population” (Pinto, 2016, p. 96). In Canada, there is “no Federal Department of Education or a National System of Education” (Gardener, 2017, p. 7). Instead, each province and territory has its own exclusive legal jurisdiction over educational policies and practices (Volante,
Educational policies for governance are established at the provincial level and communicated to local schools boards. Local school boards and individual schools have the authority and flexibility to implement Ministry of Education approved policies and practices using various approaches to achieve the intended outcome-based results. Sattler (2012) explains that “the multi-level structuring of education governance addresses such issues such as geographic boundaries of school districts, administration and management of schools, locus of decision-making, role of parents and the community in school planning, type of school management, and the degree of state involvement and intervention in education decisions.” (p. 3)

This multi-faceted approach to governance of education in Canada provides provinces, territories, and school districts with the power to be flexible in using different approaches and strategies to address local needs of students within their unique spatial geographies relative to the needs of the larger surrounding community.

Nezavdal (2003) critiques standardized testing as ineffective arguing that standardized assessments are “a social construct” (p. 69). He goes on to explain, “these norms are not incidentally held but deliberately upheld to stream students to propel some forward while systematically impeding others.” (p. 67) The use of standardized test policies as a normalized accountability tool in schools at all levels has “not improved reading and math achievement across states and have not significantly narrowed national and state level achievement gaps between white students and non-whites students or gaps between rich and poor students” (Au, 2013, p. 11; Curtis et al., 1992; Dei, 2008; Hori, 2013; James, 2012; Lewis, 1992; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Masood, 2008; McNeil, 2000; Pinto, 2016; Ricci, 2004).

Hori (2013) argues standardized tests have not assisted in closing the achievement gap in Toronto and it has instead contributed to intensifying and widening the achievement gap by systemically closing accessibility to certain opportunities for racialized students and those from
lower socio-economic status. In his report controversially titled *vi-o-lence = The Toronto District School Board*, Hori (2013) argues “the Toronto District School Board commits structural violence against its most marginalized students” (p. 1). Hori (2013) defines structural violence as “unequal distribution of power” which leads to uneven distribution of resources and consequentially in the long term to “unequal life chances” (p. 6) in terms of upward social mobility. Using the Fraser Institute ranking of schools which is a score out of ten, Hori maps on a graph TDSB’s 73 secondary schools’ ranking averages calculated over a five year period from 2007 to 2011. The overall rating of schools takes into account the following factors; average level achieved by students on the Grade 9 academic and applied mathematics tests administered by EQAO, the percentage of eligible Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test (OSSLT) writers who successfully completed the test on their first attempt or on a subsequent attempt administered by EQAO, and the percentage of tests below provincial standards which refers to overall percentage of students who wrote EQAO administered tests, whether the math test in Grade 9 or the Grade 10 OSSLT test, who were below the Level 3 provincial standard of performance. Hori (2013) concludes,

> Toronto has a very visible socio-economic divide between its residents. As a matter of fact, most of the schools which had ratings above 6 were located in affluent neighbourhoods. On the other hand, the worst schools were located in the low-income areas. Toronto is generally presented as one city; however, the truth of the matter is that there are 3 different cities within Toronto. David Hulchanski’s 3 cities report captures the divisions and segregations which define the city of Toronto. (p. 18)

Hori is referring to a study conducted by David Hulchanski (2007) titled *The Three Cities within Toronto* which provides the means to contextualize development of different neighbourhoods across the city spatially relative to important factors such as level of income, race, and socio-economic status. The study provides a comprehensive examination of income polarization among Toronto’s neighbourhoods from 1970 to 2005 taking into consideration
neighbourhood demographics. Findings indicate the emergence of three distinct cities within Toronto based on income change (See Figure 2). “City #1” makes up 20% of the city and is generally found in the downtown core of the city in close proximity to the city’s subway lines. The neighborhoods under “City #1” are identified as predominantly high-income areas where the average individual income has increased by 20% or more relative to the Toronto Census Metropolitan Area average in 1970. “City #2” makes up 40% of the city and is characterized my middle-income neighborhoods. Individual incomes in “City #2” have fairly remained the same having undergone an increase or decrease of less than 20%. “City #3” makes up 40% of the city and the individual incomes in these areas have undergone a decrease of 20% or more. Other than income, there are other major differences between “City #1” and “City #3” particularly in terms of number of immigrants and visible minorities living in the areas. Eight-two percent of “City #1” is white compared to 34% of residents in “City #3”. As well, percentage of foreign-born people in “City #1” declined from 35% to 28% between 1971 and 2006, whereas in “City #3” the number of immigrants increased dramatically from 31% in 1971 to 61% in 2006 (p. 11).

Hulchanski’s (2007) data demonstrates drastic differences in long-term neighbourhood trends in Toronto, and more importantly deconstructs the fallacy that neighbourhoods simply evolve “naturally”. Long-term trends from the study, supported with data, demonstrate investments and resources are distributed inequitably throughout neighbourhoods in City of Toronto. Neighbourhoods composed of majority white residents are privileged at the expense of neglecting neighbourhoods composed of majority working class racialized immigrants.
Hulchanski’s (2007) findings assist in contextualizing why it is significant to further examine experiences of racialized children and parents with EQAO standardized tests, as their socio-spatial location and access to opportunities and social services can impact the quality of education they receive in the schools located in their respective communities. Racialized children and parents’ experiences with standardized tests will be unique and by listening to their voices describing their experiences it can provide us with new insights and understandings to assist in establishing more equitable institutional policies and practices to close the achievement gap between racialized students and their white counterparts.

Hori (2013) uses Hulchanski’s (2007) report as a foundational framework to explore whether the same argument about inequitable spatial developments across neighbourhoods can be applied to quality of education received by students attending different schools in various neighbourhoods in the City of Toronto. Hori (2013) conducts a comparative spatial analysis
where he maps the overall rating of secondary schools as ranked by the Fraser Institute and looks for spatial patterns relative to whether the schools are labelled as low or high achieving. In order to provide some context, it is important to note in 2005 the City of Toronto identified thirteen “Priority Neighbourhoods” to receive extra attention for the purpose of neighbourhood improvements in various capacities. In March 2014, the city expanded the program to 31 neighbourhoods and renamed them from “Priority Neighbourhoods” to “Neighbourhood Improvement Areas” (City of Toronto, 2018). Given that Hori’s study was conducted in 2013, he makes reference to “Priority Neighbourhoods” as part of his findings.

After mapping the overall ranking of schools across various neighbourhoods and searching for spatial patterns, Hori (2013) concludes “the most vulnerable individuals in Toronto (the socioeconomically and ethnically marginalized youth who live in the 13 priority neighbourhoods) attend the worst high schools in Toronto” (p. 1). It is important to contextualize what Hori (2013) means by using the phrase “worst”; he is referring to schools based on how they perform on standardized tests, a statistic that has high currency value in the public’s eye as often schools are judged based on their overall EQAO test scores. He supports this claim by pointing out that under-performing schools with the lowest rankings are predominantly located in “Priority Neighbourhoods” which spatially are located in Hulchanski’s City #3 where the demographics of the neighbourhood is predominantly made up of immigrants and racialized and visible minorities whose individual incomes have undergone a decrease of 20% or more. On the other hand, schools that had an overall school ranking of 6 or higher by the Fraser Institute were located in affluent high-income neighbourhoods which spatially are located in Hulchanski’s City #1 where demographics of the neighbourhoods is 82% white and whose average individual incomes increased by 20% or more relative to the Toronto Census Metropolitan Area average in 1970. Hori (2013) concludes “TDSB provides a low quality of education to its most
disadvantaged students, while providing a higher quality of education to its most privileged students” (p. 28) further reproducing social class disparities. Hori (2013) identifies this disparity in quality of education received by students from different socio-economic classes as a form of systemic structural violence as “education serves as a tool to oppress the most vulnerable individuals, and it serves as a tool to maintain, reproduce, and engender socioeconomic disparities” (p. 29). This process is labelled as “structurally violent” at a systemic level because “it denies students upward social mobility and therefore socioeconomically marginalized and racially excluded students get streamed towards less desired labour jobs” (p. 37).

Hori (2013) and Hulchanski’s (2007) findings collectively provide a holistic picture of the disparities and inequities that exist across neighbourhoods in the City of Toronto, and how racialized identities and communities are marginalized with respect to access to quality education, opportunities, and social services, while neighbourhoods occupied by predominantly white bodies and those from higher socio-economic status are privileged. This provides the groundwork for this exploratory qualitative study to further pursue how race influences experiences of racialized Grade 3 children and their parents with EQAO. The main research question of this study asks, “What are the experiences, opinions, and concerns of racialized children and parents regarding how the EQAO standardized test impacts their identity, family, school and the larger surrounding community in which they live?” Voices of the children and parents interviewed can shed light on how to make education more equitable in a manner that would meet the unique needs of racialized children and parents given their circumstances and neighbourhood living conditions.

Williams, Jones, and Bailey (2013) similarly conducted a spatial analysis collecting and compiling data from multiple sources including the Department of Justice Canada, Toronto Census Tract, TDSB Learning Opportunities Index, and the Fraser Institute. The authors
aggregated all data collected by postal code and found major disparities between neighbourhoods located in City #1 and City #3 (Hulchanski, 2007). For example, a comparison of the Jane and Finch neighbourhood, with postal code starting with M3N located spatially in City #3 and being one of the identified “Priority Neighbourhoods”, compared to the Rosedale neighbourhood with postal code starting with M4T located spatially in City #1 and being an affluent neighbourhood, showed major disparities in neighbourhood incarceration costs, police expenditures, percentage of families with one parents, total population 15 years and over with no certificate, diploma or degree, unemployment rate, median income, TDSB Learning Opportunities Index school rankings, and Fraser Institute school rankings (See Figures 3 and 4 for specific numerical and statistical differences).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Priority Neighbourhood: Jane Finch</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Incarceration Costs (2008)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Police Expenditures (2011)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage of families with one parent: 39% (+22%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total population 15 years and over with no certificate, diploma or degree: 47% (+27%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unemployment: 12.1% (+5.4%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Median income (All private households): $37,056 (- $27,072)</td>
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<tr>
<td>TDSB Learning Opportunities Index School Rankings (2011)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Westview Centennial Secondary School (1/109)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brookview Middle School (15/479)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shoreham Public School (3/479)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Driftwood Public School (9/479)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fraser Report Rankings (Secondary Schools 2011-12)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Westview Centennial Secondary School (696/725)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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Figure 2. Jane and Finch Neighbourhood (Williams et al., 2013).
Findings by Hulchanski (2007), Hori (2013), and Williams et al. (2013) using comparative spatial analysis indicate that all neighbourhoods are not treated equally at a systemic level; white identities and spaces are privileged at the expense of marginalization and oppression to racialized identities and communities (Eizadirad, 2017).

Polanyi, Wilson, Mustachi, Ekra, and Kerr (2017) provide more recent statistics about how the aforementioned disparities across race, class, and socio-economic status continue to persist relative to child poverty rates across different neighbourhoods in Toronto. They point out, between 2010 and 2015, low-income rates among children have decreased significantly in many downtown and southern Etobicoke neighbourhoods, while low-income rates have remained the same or increased in a number of Scarborough and other inner-suburb neighbourhoods. (p. 19)

Polanyi et al.’s (2017) study outlines how racialized neighbourhoods continue to be marginalized and oppressed through institutional systemic discrimination which consequentially impacts children’s learning and achievement levels in schools. Similar statistics emphasizing disparities
between racialized and non-racialized neighbourhoods were outlined more than a decade ago by The Colour of Justice Network in 2007 stating, “racialized communities experience ongoing, disproportionate levels of poverty” supported by the fact that “between 1980 and 2000, while the poverty rate for the non-racialized European heritage population in Toronto decreased by 28 percent, the poverty among racialized families rose by 361 percent” (The Colour of Justice Network, 2007, p. 1). This indicates resources are distributed inequitably privileging white bodies and spaces at the expense of social exclusion and marginalization of racialized Others. This is troubling given that “more than half of Toronto’s population identify as racialized (51.5%)” (Polanyi et al., 2017, p. 1) and as Block and Galabuzi (2011) in their report titled Canada’s Colour Coded Labour Market: The Gap for Racialized Workers point out, “Racialized Canadians earn only 81.4 cents for every dollar paid to non-racialized Canadians” (p. 11). These disparities at the systemic level along the lines of race, class, and socio-economic has real life implications and consequences. As the Racial Justice Report Card for Ontario (2014) states, “Statistics show that racialized children, and in particular First Nations and African Canadian children, are significantly over-represented in CAS [Children’s Aid Society] care and federal and provincial correctional institutions” (p. 3). As well, “Racialized and immigrant workers tend to be overrepresented in precarious, temporary types of employment and thus are more likely to lack dental insurance coverage” (p. 8).

Returning to standardized testing as an accountability tool, Bower and Thomas (2013) emphasize how the current administration of standardized tests leads to reproduction of social classes without anyone being held accountable or responsible for shortcomings of the education system. They argue that,

Standardized testing provides a technology for stratification as it allows administrators and politicians to wash their hands of any responsibility for endemic social inequality. It does this not by sorting students on the basis of merit but by reproducing existing class
inequalities, by privileging elite cultural capital as well as positivistic and rationalistic forms of knowledge. (p. 172)

Bower and Thomas (2013) expand on Froese-Germain’s (2001) argument about how “standardized testing provides a technology for stratification” (p. 172) by further intensifying educational inequity through test bias and misuse of test scores. Froese-Germain (2001) identifies three major negative consequences of standardized testing that disadvantages racialized students and those from lower SES;

- Language bias that centers the hegemonic language as the means for testing particularly disadvantaging those whose first language is not English,
- Content that ignores cultural experiences, perspectives, and knowledge of children from racial and ethnic minorities, low-income families, and inner-city and rural children,
- The individual dimension of problem solving referring to the different learning styles (not different abilities), often associated with such factors such as race, ethnicity, income level, and gender not considered in test design with the assumption being that all individuals perceive information and solve problems in the same way. (p. 116)

Disadvantages constructed by externally administered standardized tests have real life implications and consequences on the lives of racialized students and their families both in school and outside of school within their community. Implications of the “structural violence” (Hori, 2013, p. 4) enacted in schools through the use of standardized tests and its domino effect of streaming students into non-academic fields has contributed to;

The over-representation of socioeconomically marginalized and racially excluded youths in the prison, the over-representation of socioeconomically marginalized and racially excluded youth in non-academic, special education, skill-oriented and essential curriculums in Secondary schools, and the under-representation of socioeconomically marginalized and racially excluded students in gifted and academic curriculums in Secondary schools. (Hori, 2013, p. 42)

It is significant to question how did these patterns of “over-representation” of racialized bodies in non-academic fields begin, what processes did it involve, and why has such patterns persisted over time and continue to exist? Specifically, what role do educational institutions, specifically standardized tests, play in perpetuating and/or disrupting such existing inequities? As part of
pursuing answers for the aforementioned questions, in the next section a historical overview is provided examining the social conditions and processes that led to the introduction and normalization of EQAO standardized tests as an accountability tool in Ontario.

2.2 Symbiotic Relationship between Curriculum, Tyler Rationale and EQAO Standardized Testing

There is a trilateral symbiotic relationship between curriculum, the Tyler rationale, and the implementation and practical use of EQAO standardized testing in schools. This relationship is symbiotic (Ydesen, 2014) because all three components need each other to survive and legitimize one another; the curriculum and the Tyler rationale facilitate the justification and need for one another and create the socio-cultural and political niche to legitimize use of EQAO standardized testing as a tool for accountability purposes.

The relationship between curriculum and standardized testing is facilitated by the Tyler Rationale. Pinar, Reynolds, Slattery and Taubman, (1995) in their foundational book titled *Understanding Curriculum: An Introduction to the Study of Historical and Contemporary Curriculum Discourses* provide a holistic interdisciplinary analysis of how over time the meaning of the word *curriculum* has changed and re-conceptualized based on different schools of thought and societal expectations. Their timeline of curriculum examination begins with an early historical focus on curriculum development as a field and transitions to explore more modern use of curriculum in dominant discourses in the 20th century (Pinar et al., 1995). Pinar et al. (1995) argue that “curriculum reconceptualization” (p. 17) has occurred in more recent years where curriculum is deconstructed from specific theoretical vantage points and disciplines including but not limited to understanding “curriculum as historical and political text” and now more than ever the importance of “understanding curriculum as racial text” (p. 23). Although Pinar et al. (1995) explore curriculum as other “texts”, I agree with them on the importance of
examining “curriculum as racial text” in the context of schooling in North America specifically Ontario, where neoliberal market-driven ideologies about education exclusively place blame on individuals for underachieving including performance on standardized tests and consequentially contribute to an over-representation of racialized bodies in non-academic fields (Block & Galabuzi, 2011; Hori, 2013; Portelli & Sharma, 2014; Pinto, 2015). Under the current celebratory multiculturalism metanarratives and associated policies, there is a disregard for the salience of race in defining social order in society (Giroux; 2003). Centering “curriculum as racial text” as the entry point to analyze the experiences of racialized children and parents provides the medium to map in what ways EQAO standardized test impacts their identity, family, school and the larger surrounding community in which they live and whether such narratives support or oppose the dominant narrative disseminated by EQAO about the benefits and effectiveness of EQAO standardized tests for accountability outcomes. This is particularly important at a time where neutrality and colour-blindness is promoted as part of the normalized school culture and implementation of educational policies (Giroux, 2003; Portelli & Sharma, 2014).

Understanding curriculum as racial text involves critically questioning the power dynamics in implementation of curriculum and standardized testing and making visible the processes involved in perpetuation of subtle racism within schools enacted through educational policies and practices (James, 2012; Lopez, 2003; Noguera, 2003; Kumashiro, 2004; Dei, 2008; McLaren, 2015; Knoester & Au, 2017). We have to constantly ask who does the current enactment of curriculum and standardized testing policies and practices benefit and which identities does it oppress and marginalize and at what costs (Masood, 2008; Kearns, 2011)? This exploratory qualitative study with its focus on Grade 3 EQAO standardized testing within Ontario schools, supplemented with the methodology of using semi-structured interviews, aims
to capture holistically the subjective embodied lived experiences of racialized Grade 3 students and their parents and how they are impacted by preparing and writing the standardized test. Findings from this study can serve as a step towards further understanding “curriculum as racial text” (Pinar et al., 1995, p. 23) in the context of Ontario in the 21st century.

Egan (1978) examines the historical root of the word *curriculum* and outlines changes in its meaning over time and how it was used in the field of curriculum development for different purposes. Egan (1978) explains that *curriculum* is “a Latin word carried directly over into English,” (p. 10) rooted in the Latin word *currere* literally meaning being “a running,” “a race,” “a course” which can be interpreted as “the course to be run” (p. 10). From this perspective, *curriculum* is the content that students study in a course which is considered important to master, and by end of “the course” students are expected to demonstrate mastery of knowledge and understanding of the content presented to them. Important questions that arise from viewing *curriculum* as a “course to be run” are “What should the curriculum contain?” and “What is the best way to organize these contents?” (Egan, 1978, p. 11) Egan (1978) argues it was not until many decades later that societies began considering the significance of “How should things be taught?” (p. 12) which was the beginning of a transitional shift towards considering teacher pedagogy rather than an absolute focus on content. This symbolized a monumental shift from obsession with *what* questions to *how* questions. Transition to “How should things be taught?” led to exploring curriculum in relation to various factors ranging from the way the classroom space is set-up to using differentiated instruction to address specific student needs, interests, and preferred learning styles. As a collective, these teaching strategies attempted to personalize learning to maximize teaching effectiveness. The role of the teacher was changed from “*teacher as master*” to “*teacher as facilitator*” (Egan, 1978, p. 14; Giroux, 2007; hooks, 2003; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Kincheloe & McLaren, 2002).
Ralph Tyler is well-known for his contribution to the field of *Curriculum Development* for the central questions he identified as significant for effective curriculum development. His work is referred to by many scholars as “the Bible of curriculum making” (Pinar et al., 1995, p. 33) due to its profound impact in establishment of the field of Curriculum Development as a discipline. The questions identified by Ralph Tyler became known as the *Tyler Rationale* within the field of Curriculum Studies and Curriculum Development. Tyler outlines four important questions:

1) What educational purposes should the school seek to attain? [Objectives]
2) What educational experiences can be provided that are likely to attain these purposes? [Design]
3) How can these educational experiences be effectively organized? [Scope and Sequence]
4) How can we determine whether these purposes are being attained? [Evaluation]

(Kliebard, 1970, pp. 259-260)

Kliebard (1970) states that Tyler’s questions can be “reformulated into the familiar four-step process by which a curriculum is developed; stating objectives, selecting experiences, organizing experiences, and evaluating” (p. 260). Eizadirad et al. (2016) argue that Tyler’s approach towards educational objectives aligns with a technocratic approach to understanding education in schools coinciding “with the paradigm of social functionalism which views education as scientific, observable, and a measurable phenomenon; a process that is quantifiable” (p. 67).

According to this paradigm, the learning process is prompted by a rationale curriculum (Tyler, 1949) structured in learning objectives, observable behaviours, and a system of assessment and evaluation. The Tyler Rationale serves as a step by step instruction guide to develop an efficient curriculum for a given course. This begins with selecting content and defining objectives, followed by selecting, creating, and organizing learning experiences in terms of their scope, depth, and sequence, and finally evaluating mastery of the content presented as part of the curriculum through student assessments such as standardized testing or other methods.
The evaluation process, stated in question four above, is also known as the checking step for mastery of content. Tyler (1969) states, “evaluation needs to be conducted to find out the extent to which students are actually developing the patterns of behavior that the curriculum was designed to help them learn” (p. 32). This is where the justification for the use of tests, including EQAO standardized tests, arises as a technocratic evaluation apparatus to check the extent to which students have mastered the curriculum content (Apple, 2004; Au, 2010; Eizadirad et al., 2016; James, 2012). The Tyler Rationale has been used in designing the Ontario subject specific curriculum documents produced by Ministry of Education beginning in the 1990s outlining what content should be mastered by students by the end of each grade. According to the Ontario Ministry of Education website (2018c), “The Ministry of Education is responsible for the development of curriculum. School boards and schools are responsible for the implementation of curriculum” (para.1). The website further states,

Curriculum policy documents identify what students must know and be able to do at the end of every grade or course in every subject in Ontario publicly funded schools. Curriculum documents are made up of three components:

- The front matter provides critical foundational information about the curriculum itself and about how learning connects to Ministry of Education policies, programs, and priorities.
- The curriculum expectations (overall and specific expectations) are the knowledge and skills that students are expected to demonstrate in each subject at each grade level by the end of the grade.
- Additional supports, glossaries and overviews are included to provide further guidance and information to support the implementation of the curriculum. (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2018c, para. 3)

Grey (2017) explains how due to political pressure to produce better student achievement results on international comparison tests, the Ontario government responded by establishing “higher standards through the development of common curricular outcomes across schools district and regions” (p. 7). This resulted in publication of Common Curriculum Grades 1-9 document by Ontario Ministry of Education in 1995. Shortly after in 1997, the Common
Curriculum document was replaced with subject specific curriculum documents titled the *Ontario Curriculum Grades 1-8*. Grey (2017) outlines, “the new curriculum promised to be more dynamic and efficient than the previous one” (p. 7). The Ontario Curriculum Grades 1-8 (1997), states the intention of the new curriculum is to explicitly outline “the required knowledge and skills for each grade set high standards and identify what parents and the public can expect children to learn in the schools of Ontario” (p. 3). The document further states,

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

Similar to the Tyler Rationale, the Ontario subject specific curriculum documents outline prescribed curriculum objectives by identifying and listing overall and specific expectations to be achieved by end of each grade. The checking of student mastery of the objectives, through demonstration of knowledge, understanding, and critical application of theory to practical situations, is done through various evaluation and assessment methods including the use of EQAO standardized tests for accountability purposes to parents and the general public. Hence, learning becomes quantifiable and measured over time to judge students and their competencies in mastering the content of the curriculum and its prescribed overall and specific expectations (Portelli & Vilbert, 2002). This is where standardized tests fit in as a technocratic apparatus as part of the trilateral symbiotic relationship with the curriculum and the Tyler Rationale to demonstrate the level of achievement students attain (Eizadirad et al., 2016). Scores on EQAO standardized tests are emphasized by government officials and the Ministry of Education for accountability purposes to parents and the general public.

> According to the Education and Quality Accountability Office (EQAO) website (2018a), under *About the Agency*,


EQAO is an independent agency that creates and administers large-scale assessments to measure Ontario students’ achievement in reading, writing and math at key stages of their education. All EQAO assessments are developed by Ontario educators to align with *The Ontario Curriculum*. The assessments evaluate student achievement objectively and in relation to a common provincial standard. (para. 1)

The trilateral symbiotic relationship between the Ontario curriculum, the Tyler Rationale, and the use of EQAO standardized tests becomes clear through the above description which justifies the use of “large-scale assessments” for measuring student achievements (the Tyler Rationale) relative to the “Ontario curriculum” and its prescribed overall and specific expectations to be achieved by end of each grade. In order to legitimize the assessment process in the eyes of the public as reliable and trustworthy, EQAO emphasizes it is an “independent agency” and that assessments are done “objectively” for accountability purposes relative to a “common provincial standard”. Furthermore, the EQAO website (2018b) explicitly outlines various beneficial *Accountability Outcomes* for taxpayers, students, parents and teachers associated with the implementation of EQAO standardized tests in schools;

**For Taxpayers**
- Increase, through a base of clear and reliable information, public ability to make judgments about the quality of education available across Ontario
- Report on the success of our students measured against accepted, understandable standards in order to evaluate and improve learning
- Ability to analyze student achievement in Ontario in relation to national and international standards
- Improve public understanding of the ways in which students' knowledge and skills are assessed
- Report to the general public on the state of Ontario's schools, with data on achievement, and the contextual factors that influence student learning

**For Students**
- Provide students with clear and timely information on their progress
- Reinforce student successes and identify areas where attention is needed
- Provide information and direction which give students insight to plan for their future
- Demonstrate to students that the knowledge and skills required of them are consistent across the province
- Strengthen students' involvement in continuous learning and improvement
For Parents
- Make parents increasingly aware of content taught and standards expected in our schools
- Create opportunities for timely intervention to support student improvement
- Clarify expectations for students’ academic performance at key ages and stages through which parents can evaluate their children's progress
- Give parents information they can use when talking to teachers about their children's progress

For Teachers
- Help teachers to ascertain students' knowledge and skills, so they may intervene appropriately to foster improvement
- Recognize the importance of the teacher's daily observations and records in both good teaching and good classroom assessment
- Model and publicize excellent assessment practices which can serve as examples for daily classroom evaluation and help teachers improve their assessment skills
- Provide common language and examples of student achievement to ensure straightforward reporting
- Address public criticism of the education system by providing teachers with clear and credible data on student achievement and strategies for improvement. (EQAO, 2018b, para. 1-4)

By listing exclusively positive benefits associated with administering EQAO standardized tests, EQAO seeks to legitimize implementation of standardized tests in schools by emphasizing “accountability outcomes” for taxpayers, students, parents, and teachers (EQAO, 2018b).

2.3 Congruency or Disjunction? EQAO in Theory versus EQAO in Practice

EQAO provides many documents on their website (http://www.eqao.com/en/) available for the public to download to inform them about the agency, its goals, objectives, processes, and findings from EQAO student achievement results. Within the recently EQAO produced document titled Highlights of the Provincial Results (2017a) for the 2016-2017 school year, there is a subsection which outlines the overall objective of EQAO tests. It states,

EQAO’s tests measure student achievement in reading, writing and mathematics in relation to Ontario Curriculum expectations. The resulting data provide accountability and a gauge of quality in Ontario’s publicly funded education system. By providing this important evidence about learning, EQAO acts as a catalyst for increasing the success of Ontario students. (p. 4)
This exploratory qualitative research study with its focus on Grade 3 EQAO standardized testing within Ontario schools seeks to further explore and examine the extent which narratives from the racialized children and parents interviewed support or oppose the dominant narrative disseminated by EQAO about the benefits and effectiveness of EQAO standardized tests for “accountability outcomes”. The goal is to explore whether there is an alignment and congruency in theory and practice or whether there are disconnects and disjuncture between the narrative told by EQAO relative to the lived experiences of racialized Grade 3 children and their parents interviewed.

The next subsection examines the political and socio-cultural contextual factors that placed pressure on various political parties in power to make changes in education to reform the educational policies and practices at the institutional level. The socio-political atmosphere at the time coupled with the suggested reform changes collectively gave birth to the macro implementation and legitimization of EQAO standardized testing in Ontario for accountability purposes beginning in the 1990s.

2.4 Education under Scrutiny: Royal Commission on Learning and the Birth of EQAO and the Accountability Movement in Ontario

Leading up to the 1990s, the province of Ontario had “no history of large-scale assessment and none with high-stakes for students, schools, and districts” (Volante, 2007, p. 2). The education system became under scrutiny by taxpayers, media outlets, policy-makers, and parents in the early 1990s being blamed as ineffective due to the compounding provincial government debt and the rising unemployment rate (Gidney, 1999). As Kempf (2016) points out, this mounting government pressure was “part of a larger push for accountability with taxpayer dollars on the one hand, and the call to for schools to get back to basics on the other” (p. 36). Schools were blamed for not preparing students adequately for the emergence of a knowledge-
based economy. Public polls indicated majority of taxpayers and parents felt the education system was failing students by not being responsive to economical needs of a changing Canadian society in a manner that would keep Canada competitive internationally, particularly when globalization and unemployment were on the rise (Royal Commission On Learning, 1995; Ungerleider, 2003). This placed pressure on government officials and politicians to seek new changes and educational reforms as a means of restoring public confidence in the education system. The pressure for educational reform reached its climax when media outlets began emphasizing how Ontario students were doing poorly on international standardized tests in comparison to students from other provinces (Gidney, 1999; Morgan, 2006; Pinto, 2016).

In Ontario, three dominant political parties have been in power at various intervals. These include the New Democratic Party (NDP), the Liberals, and the Progressive-Conservatives. The NDP is typically the most left-leaning party, the Liberals the centrist, and the Progressive-Conservatives the most right leaning party. This is important to keep in mind as we examine the drastic educational reforms introduced and implemented by the various political parties in Ontario beginning in the mid 1990s which led to the normalization of the accountability paradigm and the legitimization of province-wide standardized testing supported by the establishment of the Education Quality and Accountability Office in 1996. According to Morgan (2006), “In 1986, after 30 years of Conservative rule, a Liberal government came into power in Ontario led by David Peterson. It was defeated shortly afterwards by the New Democratic Party (NDP) in 1990” (p. 129) led by Bob Rae. After a thirty year Conservative dominance, there was an opening for other political parties to lead government and propose changes. Under the NDP government, on February 3rd 1993 Dave Cooke was appointed Minister of Education and shortly after began implementing new changes to restructure the education system as a means of restoring public confidence in Ontario’s education system. Changes introduced included
“appointment of consultants to review potential amalgamations” (Sattler, 2012, p. 8) of various school boards to reduce education expenditures, and implementation of “province-wide achievement tests for Grade 9 students in reading and writing and public reporting of the results” (Gidney, 1999, p. 223). As well, as a response to the public outcry and pressure to improve the education system, in May 1993, the NDP launched the Royal Commission on Learning (RCOL) which “initiated an opening of public opportunity structures that allowed for public input into educational governance” (Morgan, 2006, p. 129). It was one-of-a kind comprehensive examination of education in Ontario since the 1968 Hall-Dennis report titled Living and Learning which reported on the overall aims and objectives of education in Ontario schools and how it can be improved. The putting together of the RCOL report involved consultation with “more than 4700 groups and individuals” through various mediums (Sattler, 2012, p. 9). The RCOL was to prepare recommendations about changes in “laws, policies, and procedures necessary and desirable to improve the efficiency, effectiveness, relevance, and accountability of education in Ontario” as a means to ensure that “Ontario youth are well-prepared for the challenges of the 21st century” (Royal Commission on Learning, 1994, pp. vi-vii).

The RCOL utilized a series of guiding questions to examine four key areas in education; a shared vision, program, accountability, and education governance. The Commission released its findings in January 1995 in a 550 page report titled For the Love of Learning which made 167 recommendations in numerous areas related to curriculum, report cards, funding, and addressing the needs of specific student populations including Aboriginals, students with special needs, and minority groups. One of the primary focus areas of the recommendations was accountability. Under the subsection titled “Large-Scale Assessment of Student Achievement and the Effectiveness of School Programs,” the Commission recommended establishment of the Office of Learning Assessment and Accountability as an independent arm’s length testing agency to
operate as a “watchdog for system performance” responsible for annual “construction, administration, scoring, and reporting” of standardized tests (Royal Commission on Learning, 1994, p. 256). At the elementary level, Recommendation 50 from the RCOL, suggested “all students be given two uniform assessments at the end of grade 3, one in literacy and one in numeracy, based on specific learner outcomes and standards that are well known to teachers, parents, and to students themselves” (Royal Commission on Learning, 1994, p. 256). At the secondary level, the Commission recommended that in Grade 11 “a literacy test be given to students, which they must pass before receiving their secondary school diploma” (Royal Commission on Learning, 1994, p. 256). The secondary school literacy test would be a high-stakes test as successful passing of it would be a requirement for graduation and receiving the Ontario Secondary School Diploma (Volante, 2007).

In 1995, the Progressive Conservative Party led by Mike Harris campaigned to fix the inadequacies in government and to introduce necessary reforms to make government policies and practices more “efficient” and relevant to the needs of the increasingly competitive and globalized knowledge-based Canadian economy. His political campaign slogan was called the Common Sense Revolution “coined as an election strategy to woo voters disenchanted by rising taxes, spiralling deficits and debt, and the intrusion of big government in their lives” (Basu, 2004, p. 623). Harris’s Progressive Conservative Party defeated the NDP and achieved a majority government (Gidney, 1999; Morgan, 2006). Harris’s approach to reform was authoritarian and aggressive compared to the NDP. It was guided by a philosophy of reducing the cost of education through “cut spending and downsize of school board budgets” which in 1996 resulted in an “expenditure reduction of $400 million from school board budgets” translating to a “dramatic $1 billion cut from the system” on a yearly basis (Sattler, 2012, p. 11). Harris’s aggressive cost reduction and downsizing in education led to increased tensions between
the government, teachers, and teacher unions as it caused elimination of various social programs and laying off of teachers and support staffs. The Harris years became known as the dark ages in education in Ontario where education at all levels was drastically altered and changed due to major funding reduction for “efficiency” purposes.

Two major changes occurred under the Harris government which continue to have long-lasting effects even today. The first change is the introduction of Bill 104 titled the Fewer School Boards Act which “reduced the number of school boards from 129 to 72 with a corresponding decrease in the number of [school] trustees from 1900 to 700” (Sattler, 2012, pp. 11-12). The second major change, which was more controversial, is the introduction of Bill 160 titled the Education Quality Improvement Act which “centralized financial control at the provincial level by removing education funding from the residential property tax-base and eliminating school boards’ local taxing power” (Sattler, 2012, p. 11). As Basu (2004) points out, as a result of the new changes, “the six cities and boroughs that made up the Municipality of Metropolitan Toronto were amalgamated into a single city of Toronto and the six boards of education were similarly merged into the new Toronto District School Board (TDSB) as part of a fundamental realignment of taxation and spending between the province of Ontario and its municipal government” (p. 626). These drastic changes provided the niche for the introduction and implementation of an accountability system centred on outcome-based results supplemented with the use of fear tactics by the government. The government informed school boards that it was illegal to operate on a deficit budget and obligated school boards to publish annual reports on their finances disclosing their spending (Gidney, 1999; Sattler, 2012). This placed school boards and schools under centralized surveillance by the government. Pinto (2016) outlines the overall significant changes implemented by Mike Harris’s Progressive Conservative Party in education during his eight years in power. The sweeping education reforms “resulted in standardized and
prescriptive curriculum, a reduction in number of years in secondary school with different graduation requirements, a new tracking system for students starting in grade nine, and standardized report cards” (Pinto, 2016, pp. 97-98).

In 2003, the Progressive Conservatives were defeated by the Liberals led by Dalton McGuinty and succeeded by Kathleen Wynne in 2013 (Pinto, 2016). The Liberals maintained the changes established and implemented by Mike Harris in education. In further demonstrating accountability to the public and restoring public confidence in the education system, the Liberals invested money into various specific programs to “improve literacy and numeracy outcomes” on EQAO standardized tests and increase the overall “high school graduation rates” (Pinto, 2016, p. 97). Liberals constantly make reference to the increase in high school graduation rates under their time in power as a proud thermometer statistic that symbolizes “the strength of the education system” (Ministry of Education, 2017b, para. 6). According to an article published on May 8 2017 on the Ontario Ministry of Education website (2017b) titled High School Graduation Rate Climbs to All-time High, “Ontario’s unprecedented investments in education have pushed the high school graduation rate to a historic new high, as more students than ever before are obtaining a high school diploma and gaining the skills and experience required for the jobs of tomorrow” (para. 1). The article further states, “In 2016, the five year graduation rate increased to 86.5 percent- up more than 18 percentage points compared to the 2004 rate of 68 percent” (para. 2). The Liberals are very proud of this statistic that on the Ministry of Education’s home webpage (Ministry of Education, 2018b), located at the centre, is a line graph titled “Ontario’s Graduation Rate” which displays how the provincial four-year and five-year graduation rates has steadily increased from 2004 to 2016 while the Liberals have been in power.

Although at the surface level the gradual increase in high school graduation rates during an extensive time period when the Liberals have been in power appears to be a great statistic to
be emphasized to the general public, however, it does not tell a complete story to assist us in “understanding curriculum as racial text” (Pinar et al., 1995, p. 23) and whether or not the unique needs of all students from various social groups is being met equitably by the education system and its policies and practices. In order to understand “curriculum as racial text,” we must critically question and ask for specific graduation rates for unique social groups such as Indigenous, Black/ African, Latino, and Middle Eastern students and how each group is doing compared to the overall provincial graduation rate given Ontario’s multicultural classrooms where immigrants from various parts of the world are learning together. Another critical perspective to consider is how each school is doing relative to its student demographics such as total number of racialized students, English as Second Language (ESL) learners, and students identified with exceptionalities. This holistic approach to understanding and contextualizing the overall graduation rate of a school tells a much more specific story that contains details about how students are doing, where the inequities exist, and what we can do to better address the needs of specific student populations. By centring race as the main factor and lens to examine curriculum and graduation rates, we can begin to understand graduation rates as racial texts and whether or not specific institutional policies and practices such as EQAO standardized testing contribute to perpetuating subtle racism leading to marginalization and oppression of certain identities. This can occur by labelling students who do poorly on standardized tests as “low achievers” or “illiterate” (Masood, 2008; Kearns, 2016) or in the long term getting them “pushed out” (Dei et al., 1995; James, 2012) from attending school. As educators and researchers, we have to constantly ask who does the current enactment of curriculum and EQAO standardized testing benefit and who does it oppress (Kearns, 2011; Pinto, 2016) and at what costs?

Examining the timeline of educational reforms implemented from the mid-1990s up until now in Ontario under three different political parties at various intervals, there is a common
thread that all political parties view education through an economic market-driven lens. All parties invested in demonstrating accountability to the general public by introducing and maintaining policies and programs that increased outcome-based results ranging from improvements in EQAO standardized test scores to increases in high school graduation rates (Sattler, 2012). The premise of the economic market-driven model of education is maximizing human capital of students to prepare them for the needs of the labour market (Apple, 2004; Portelli & Vilbert, 2002). Therefore, EQAO standardized tests and improvement in scores becomes a symbolic political tool for the government and politicians to demonstrate accountability by “monitoring and reporting to the public on the performance of the education system by the use of test results” (Basu, 2004, p. 625).

2.5 2016-2017 Provincial Results and Five Year Patterns

The Grade 3 and 6 EQAO test results are not available for the 2014-2015 school year due to the work to rule campaign by elementary school teachers which resulted not administering the EQAO standardized tests because of lack of progress in labour negotiations with the Liberal government. According to the EQAO document (2017a), Highlights of the Provincial Results for 2016-2017 school year, “there are 132 992 Grade 3 students across the province who write the EQAO test in Reading, Writing, and Mathematics” (p. 1). For 2016-2017, the percentage of Grade 3 students at or above the expected provincial Level 3 achievement level was 74% in Reading, 73% in Writing, and 62% in Mathematics (EQAO, 2017a, p. 1). EQAO also aggregated data over a five year period to report five year patterns of student achievement going back to the 2012-2013 school year. Listed are some of the five year patterns for the Grade 3 primary division:

- Percentage of students performing at or above the provincial standard in reading has steadily increased, from 68% to 74%.
Percentage of students performing at or above the provincial standard in writing has decreased from 77% to 73%.
- Percentage of students performing at or above the provincial standard in mathematics has decreased, from 67% to 62%.
- Percentage of Grade 3 English language learners performing at or above the provincial standard has increased by eight percentage points in reading and decreased by four percentage points in writing, while it has decreased by five percentage points in mathematics. This pattern is similar to that for the overall Grade 3 student population.
- Percentage of Grade 3 students with special education needs performing at or above the provincial standard has increased by seven percentage points in reading and one percentage point in writing; in mathematics, it has decreased by five percentage points, from 34% to 29%. (EQAO, 2017b, pp. 26-31)

Although these statistics can be useful indicators “to provide students, parents, teachers and administrators with a clear and comprehensive picture of student achievement and a basis for targeted improvement planning at the individual, school, school board and provincial levels,” (EQAO, 2017a, p. 4) it is significant to further ask, similar to earlier when examining graduation rates in Ontario, whether the numbers tell the whole story and capture the complexities that goes into understanding student achievement and curriculum as racial text.

2.6 EQAO Establishment and Evolution: Normalization of Standardized Testing Culture in Ontario Schools

Based on the recommendations of the RCOL report, EQAO was established in 1996 as an arms-length agency of the government of Ontario responsible for creating and implementing annual criterion-referenced standardized tests as a means of providing “an independent gauge of children’s learning and achievement” (EQAO, 2012, p. 1) across the province of Ontario.

Comparing standardized testing in Ontario to other provinces and territories in Canada, Pinto (2016) points out Ontario is “the only Canadian province in which such assessment is not executed directly by the government” (p. 98). Typically standardized tests fall under two categories; norm-referenced or criterion referenced. Kohn (2000) distinguishes between the two by explaining, “In contrast to a test that’s “criterion-referenced”, which means it compares each
individual to a set of standards, one that’s norm-referenced compares each individual to everyone else, and the result is usually (but not always) reported as a percentile” (p. 14). EQAO standardized testing is criterion-referenced and uses the prescriptive Ontario curriculum expectations as the benchmark to assess students.

The establishment of EQAO occurred with the implementation of Bill 30 in 1996 known as the *Education Quality and Accountability Office Act* (Education Quality and Accountability Office Act, 1996). Under section 3 of the *Education Quality and Accountability Office Act*, the specific objectives of the EQAO agency are outlined and listed;

1. To evaluate the quality and effectiveness of elementary and secondary school education.
2. To develop tests and require or undertake the administering and marking of tests of pupils in elementary and secondary schools.
3. To develop systems for evaluating the quality and effectiveness of elementary and secondary school education.
4. To research and collect information on assessing academic achievement.
5. To evaluate the public accountability of boards and to collect information on strategies for improving that accountability.
6. To report to the public and to the Minister of Education and Training on the results of tests and generally on the quality and effectiveness of elementary and secondary school education and on the public accountability of boards.
7. To make recommendations, in its reports to the public and to the Minister of Education and Training, on any matter related to the quality or effectiveness of elementary and secondary school education or to the public accountability of boards. (Education Quality and Accountability Office Act, 1996, c. 11, s. 3)

The words “evaluate/evaluating,” “quality,” “effectiveness,” and “accountability” are constantly repeated throughout the above listed objectives of the EQAO agency. This aligns with the market-driven technocratic view of education where “effectiveness” and “quality” of the education system is measured, quantified, and “evaluated” based on performance of students on outcome-based criterion-referenced standardized tests to demonstrate “accountability” to the general public (Eizadirad et al., 2016).
2.7 Governing Structure of EQAO

EQAO in 1997 created a twenty page document outlining its by-laws categorized into eleven specific articles which “relate generally to the transaction of the business and affairs of the EQAO” (EQAO, 1997, p. 1). In terms of its governing structure, EQAO is managed by “a nine member Board of Directors appointed by the Ontario cabinet” (Pinto, 2016, p. 98) and a seven member Executive Team led by a Chief Executive Officer (EQAO, 2018c). The Board of Directors has a Chair who is currently Dave Cooke, who in mid-1990s was the Minister of Education and fundamental in establishing the RCOL which one of its recommendations led to the creation and establishment of the EQAO agency. The Board of Directors also has a Vice Chair who is currently Gerry Connelly. She is a “former director of education of the Toronto District School Board and director of the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Branch of the Ontario Ministry of Education” (EQAO, 2018c, para. 4). The Chief Executive Officer “is responsible for the operation of the Office, the implementation of policies established by the board of directors and the performance of such other functions as assigned by the board of directors” (Education Quality and Accountability Office Act, 1996, c. 11, s. 16). The Chief Executive Officer is currently Norah Marsh and she “reports directly to the Board and to the Minister of Education” (Pinto, 2016, p. 98).

2.8 Implementation of Large-Scale EQAO Standardized Testing in Ontario

According to the EQAO document (2013), *EQAO: Ontario’s Provincial Assessment Program- Its History and Influence*, the main objective of the agency is “to monitor students’ achievement at key points in their learning as a way of assuring the public that all students were being assessed in the same way and according to an established set of standards” (p. 5). Grade 3, 6, 9, and 10 are chosen as key points for students to be assessed in various subjects. The launch of annual yearly large scale EQAO census style criterion-referenced assessments began in 1996-
1997 school year where all Grade 3 children in Ontario wrote the EQAO test in domains of Reading, Writing, and Mathematics “which required approximately 12 hours of testing over two weeks” by completion of three test booklets; two for language and one for math (EQAO, 2013, p. 7). The administration of Grade 6 EQAO tests began in 1998-1999 school year taking the same amount of time as the Grade 3 testing. End of Grade 3 was chosen for administration of the first set of EQAO standardized tests as it represented end of schooling in the primary division referring to Grades 1 to 3, and Grade 6 was chosen for administration of second set of EQAO standardized tests because it represented end of schooling in the junior division referring to Grades 4 to 6. In 2004, after a systemic review of its practices, EQAO reduced the amount of testing time by half from twelve to six hours which gave students two hours to complete each testing booklet. The Grade 9 Assessment of Mathematics began in 2000-2001 with administration of different set of tests for applied and academic streams consisting of two test booklets. Lastly, the high-stakes Grade 10 Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test (OSSLT), which is evaluated on a pass or fail criteria and passing is a requirement for obtaining one’s Ontario Secondary School Diploma, was implemented in 2002 consisting of two booklets.

EQAO standardized tests continue to be implemented today in Grades 3, 6, 9, and 10 in Ontario. Recently, EQAO has invested in a platform called EQAO Online which is a multi-year project to move EQAO’s provincial student assessments from paper-and-pencil to computer-based as a means of modernizing (EQAO, 2017). In October 2016, students in Grade 10 were given the opportunity to complete the Grade 10 OSSLT online. Students were informed if they pass the test online they would not have to write it again in paper-and-pencil format at a later time in the school year. Being in a high school that day to assist in administering the test, it did not take long before many students began encountering various computer problems. These problems included individualized passwords not working to give students access to start the test,
pages taking long to upload or refresh, and/or pages freezing while students were typing their answers. These issues caused students to be logged out of the test and have to wait long periods for a test administrator to manually log them back in to continue finishing the test. Within hours, EQAO issued a statement cancelling the online test due to “technical issues” (Shum & Miller, 2016, para. 1).

2.9 High Stakes versus Low Stakes Standardized Tests

Standardized tests can be categorized into high-stakes or low-stakes tests based on consequences associated with the test. According to Langlois (2017), “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 such as grade promotion, graduation, hiring, bonuses and increase or loss of funding” (p. 8). In Ontario, Grade 3 and 6 Assessments of Reading, Writing and Mathematics and the Grade 9 Assessment of Mathematics are considered low-stakes tests. The Grade 3 and 6 tests do not count as part of a student’s mark or report card and does not influence advancement to the next grade (EQAO, 2011). The Grade 9 EQAO Mathematics test can count up to thirty percent of the student’s final mark depending on the discretion of the teacher (EQAO, 2011). On the other hand, the Grade 10 OSSLT) is a high stakes test “where a passing grade is needed in order for students to receive their Ontario Secondary School Diploma” (Langlois, 2017, p. 9). Upon failing the OSSLT multiple times, students who are near completion of the required credits to receive their Ontario Secondary School Diploma can take a Ministry of Education designed Literacy course, which lasts a semester offered at their respective schools, to gain a pass designation for the OSSLT.
2.10 Reporting of EQAO Results: Individual, School, and School Board Results

For all EQAO assessments, questions are linked to the Ontario curriculum expectations and include a range of multiple choice, true and false, and open-ended response questions. For EQAO tests in the primary division, children write the tests in late May or early June near end of the school year in Grade 3 and receive their results in late September or early October the following school year at the start of Grade 4 (EQAO, 2011). Pinto (2016) explains that “completed tests are sent to EQAO for marking by 1700 markers hired and trained by EQAO” (p. 99). Each student receives an Individual Student Report (ISR) which “describes his or her achievement on the test” (EQAO, 2012, p. 8) ranging from Level 1 being below grade expectations to Level 4 being above grade expectations in relation to the Ontario provincial curriculum standards. According to EQAO (2011), “these are the same achievement levels teachers use in the classroom and on reports cards to evaluate a child’s progress” and “the provincial standard is a Level 3 which corresponds to a B- or B+” (EQAO, 2011, p. 2). If students meet or exceed the Level 3 achievement level it is inferred they have mastered and demonstrated most or all of the required skills expected of them by the end of Grade 3 (EQAO, 2011).

In September along with each student receiving their ISR outlining their personalized achievement levels in the domains tested, each school receives a detailed report about overall achievement of their students in grades tested and a compiled report outlining their respective school board district results (EQAO, 2011). Being an educator with the Toronto District School Board and having spoken to many principals over the years, EQAO results and score improvements are a major area of focus as part of the School Improvement Plan developed at the start of the school year in September by school administrators and teachers targeting specific Numeracy and Literacy goals. Each school within the TDSB has to develop and comply with a
Board Improvement Plan for Student Achievement and Well Being (BIPSA) (TDSB, 2015). As part of BIPSA, when schools start in September, administrators and staff are responsible for establishing professional learning teams, update evidence of needs in different areas for the School Improvement Plan, and deconstruct EQAO data from the previous year. In October, schools continue to develop their School Improvement Plans with a specialized focus on Numeracy and Literacy. As a strategy, in early October specific students are identified in Grade 3 and 6 known as marker students, to be the focus of attention by the teachers with the collective goal of moving those specific students at least one level higher in their EQAO scores by providing them with extra help and support. The goal is to help the identified marker students improve but also to increase the overall EQAO achievement scores of the school since all children in Grade 3 and 6 are expected to participate in writing the EQAO test.

Throughout the school year each student’s abilities and competencies are monitored by teachers. If teachers strongly feel that a student is functioning below grade level consistently, they can initiate the process of getting them assessed to qualify for an Individual Education Plan (IEP). According to the TDSB Special Education in Ontario document (2017c), an IEP “is a written plan describing the special education program and/or services required by a particular student. It identifies any accommodations and special education services needed to assist the student in achieving his or her learning expectations.” (p. 153) An IEP outlines “learning expectations that are modified from or alternative to the expectations given in the curriculum policy document for the appropriate grade and subject or course.” (p. 153) Students with IEPs who write the EQAO test are given the same accommodations and/or modifications outlined in their IEP relative to their unique needs. Examples of accommodations are extra time, writing in a less crowded or quieter space, and having a teacher transcribe and write oral responses of a student to questions on the EQAO test.
2.11 The Fraser Institute: Ranking of Schools and Correlation with Property Values

According to Eizadirad et al. (2016), “Despite the fact that many initiatives are being implemented to respond to students’ needs rather than to test needs, the efficiency of the educational system including its plans, programs, resources and technical efforts are still indirectly evaluated predominantly through EQAO test results.” (p. 90) This is exemplified by the importance given to annual ranking of schools calculated based on overall school EQAO test results published by the Fraser Institute. The Fraser Institute “provides a detailed report on how each school is doing in academics compared to other ranked schools. It also shows whether the school’s results are improving, declining, or just staying steady over the most recent five years.” (Fraser Institute, 2018, para. 1) Many parents, particularly affluent parents from higher socio-economic backgrounds, use public ranking of schools to select which schools to enroll their children in (Ricci, 2004; Morgan, 2006; Hori, 2013; Kempf, 2016; Pinto, 2016; Knoester & Au, 2017). The emphasis on school rankings places immense pressure on schools, particularly administrators and specific grade teachers whose students write the EQAO test, to invest in improving their school’s test results. It induces socio-emotional stress on teachers to demonstrate and produce improved results as often the school’s identity and quality of education offered is judged through EQAO test results. This can lead to teaching to the test and narrowing of the curriculum by focusing more on subjects that are tested at the expense of marginalization to the Arts and Health and Physical Education (Miller, 2000; Portelli & Konecny, 2013). This pressurized environment to get improved results, by any means necessary, creates an intense perceived high stakes environment even though at the absolute level the Grade 3, 6, and 9 EQAO tests are considered low-stakes (Masood, 2008; Au; 2010; Kearns, 2016; Kempf, 2016; Pinto, 2016).
Gardener (2017) outlines that “the Fraser Institute is an independent and registered charity public policy think tank established in 1974” and “the formation of the institute was to study, measure and broadly communicate government policies that affect the quality of life for Canadians” (p. 19). The Fraser Institute website (2018) states it “ranks schools using objective, publicly-available data such as average scores on province-wide tests” (para.2). As Gardener (2017) further explains, “data for the [Fraser Institute] Report Card is based on seven indicators, all of which are province-wide tests of literacy and mathematics administered by the province’s Education Quality and Accountability Office” (p. 19). This ranking process does not take into account each school’s unique student population and contextual factors “such as those students with Individual Education Plans or students who are English Language Learners” (Gardener, 2017, p. 20). Morgan (2006) also raises the point that there is opposition and resistance from teacher unions against publication of school ranking based exclusively on EQAO standardized test results as it “creates a competitive environment in Ontario’s education system” and it “pits both schools and school boards against one another” (p. 134) creating a competitive atmosphere that is not conducive to the learning needs of students.

EQAO test scores have gained so much currency in ranking and judging schools that increases or decreases in property values are highly correlated to school rankings (Morgan, 2006; ETFO, 2010; Pinto, 2016). The Fraser Institute produces two separate list of rankings one for elementary schools and another one for high schools. Kohn (2011) argues, “Don’t let anyone tell you that standardized tests are not accurate measures. The truth of the matter is they offer a remarkably precise method for gauging the size of the houses near the school where the test was administered.” (p. 349) Real estate agents selling properties often emphasize school rankings to attract homebuyers which feeds into the cycle of parents making inferences about the quality of education offered at a school based on EQAO scores (Hori, 2013; Pinto, 2016; Kempf, 2016;
Langlois, 2017). This greatly disadvantages and marginalizes schools that are ranked low on the list because it can contribute to lower student enrollment and less funding since “school funding is tied to school enrolment and if enrolment falls, then the money allocated to the schools under the per-pupil funding formula also falls” (Morgan, 2006, p. 134).

2.12 Monetary Costs Associated with Administering EQAO Standardized Tests

In 2010-2011, the cost of administering EQAO tests was $32 million dollars (EQAO, 2012, p. 19) which equates to $17 per student. According to Kempf (2016), “when calculated to reflect only students in those grades [who participate in writing the test], rather than all of the province’s 2,031,195 students, the province spends almost $60 per student per test” (p. 18). The EQAO document (2012) *The Power of Ontario’s Provincial Testing Program* outlines, EQAO’s budget is equivalent to 0.15% of the average per-pupil funding allocation by the Ministry of Education and represents a drop in the education bucket. It is a minimal and appropriate cost to perform an independent check on the use of tax dollars in our publicly funded education system. (p. 19)

EQAO uses the phrase “check on the use of tax dollars” which aligns with the market-driven economical view of education as technocratic, measurable, and quantifiable through standardized testing. This perspective heavily emphasizes outcome-based education. The assumption is that the pulse and heartbeat of the education system in terms of its quality and effectiveness can be measured through results from EQAO standardized tests.

2.13 Teacher Unions Opposing Standardized Testing

Ontario provincial teacher unions, the Elementary Teachers’ Federation of Ontario (ETFO) and the Ontario Secondary School Teachers’ Federation (OSSTF), have publicly criticized and opposed the practice of EQAO standardized testing in schools. ETFO “is the professional and protective organization representing 78,000 teachers, occasional teachers and educational professionals employed in Ontario’s public elementary schools” (ETFO, 2018, para.
1) OSSTF consists of approximately 60,000 members including “teachers, educational assistants, continuing education teachers and instructors, psychologists, secretaries, speech-language pathologists, social workers, plan support personnel, attendance counselors, and many other education professionals” (OSSTF, 2018, para. 1). Both unions since the introduction of EQAO standardized tests in Ontario schools have taken a political stance opposing the practice. They communicate their stance by distributing educational memos, documents, and various texts to their members and the public outlining negative impacts of standardized testing on teaching and student learning and the negative consequences that arise from ranking schools based on EQAO scores.

ETFO in 2010 produced a video titled “Is EQAO Failing Our Children?” (ETFO, 2010) The video is approximately 10 minutes and described by ETFO “as their most popular video ever” (ETFO, 2010, para. 1). Within the video various scholars, researchers, teachers and parents express their concerns about the harmful impacts of EQAO standardized testing at the macro institutional level and at the micro-level within schools, classroom environments, and on the teachers and the students. Some of the criticisms of EQAO standardized testing include teaching to the test, diminishing of teachable moments and interconnectivity of subjects across various domains, narrowing of the curriculum to areas being tested, impact on property values and student enrolment, and the amount of socio-emotional stress placed on administrators, teachers, and students as many judgements and inferences are made based on the performance of students on EQAO tests. What is missing within the perspectives represented are voices of children, particularly racialized children in elementary schools and how EQAO standardized tests impacts their identities and communities. As mentioned earlier, this exploratory study seeks to examine the experiences, opinions, and concerns of racialized children and parents regarding how the EQAO standardized test impacts their identity, family, school and the larger surrounding
community in which they live. A key feature and entry point to this analysis is “understanding curriculum as racial text,” (Pinar et al., 1995, p. 23) specifically how race influences students experience with EQAO and whether or not these narratives support or oppose the dominant narrative disseminated by EQAO about the benefits and effectiveness of EQAO standardized tests for accountability outcomes.

In May 2015, in a document sent out to ETFO members by the union providing central collective bargaining updates, there was a sub-section titled “EQA-NO: Members Share Their Thoughts About Standardized Testing” (ETFO, 2015, p. 2). At the time, there was labour unrest and teacher contract negotiations were not going smoothly with the Liberal government. The document updated members that EQAO testing at the elementary level, which is typically administered in the month of June, was “cancelled in public school boards during this school year due to job action by ETFO members” (ETFO, 2015, p. 1). The document further described the reasoning for ETFO teachers not administrating the EQAO tests;

As educators, we know that genuine learning is driven by two things: students’ natural curiosity and our ability to harness that curiosity in the classroom. Genuine learning is, by definition, not standardized. It is risky, complex, unpredictable and original. That’s why standardized testing regimes like EQAO don’t ultimately help students succeed- it’s impossible to measure and attach a meaningful number to the quality of our students’ original thoughts and personal growth. (ETFO, 2015, p. 2)

Following the aforementioned statement there was a list outlining shortcomings of EQAO standardized testing as expressed by ETFO members:

- It subtracts from valuable instruction time
- It provides minimal useful feedback to classroom teachers
- It leads to a neglect of non-verbal ways of learning, like music and art
- It channels instructional resources to literacy and numeracy at the expense of other curriculum areas
- It penalizes students who think in non-standard ways
- It gives control over delivery of the curriculum to Ministry bureaucrats rather than educational practitioners
- It assumes that what students need to know ten years from now is already known and can be tested
- It reduces teacher creativity and the appeal of teaching as a profession
- It disadvantages large numbers of students based on language, culture, ethnicity, race and social class
- It creates unnecessary stress and negative attitudes toward learning
- It blocks instructional innovations that can’t be evaluated by a test score. (ETFO, 2015, p. 2)

Both elementary and secondary teacher unions in Ontario continuously express that EQAO standardized testing is not an effective use of financial resources by the government, and that classroom-based assessment by teachers over the period of the school year from September to June is the most effective source of information about student learning. The unions further argue that the information gathered by EQAO standardized tests over a one week period of testing is not representative of the students’ holistic abilities and competencies as it is only a snapshot of the learning that takes place within an entire school year.

2.14 Grade 3 EQAO Standardized Testing: A Developmental Perspective

Although EQAO standardized tests are administered in Grade 3, 6, 9, and 10 and there has been vast amounts of research on standardized testing in Ontario, majority of it has been conducted at the secondary high school level (Lock, 2001; Klinger et al., 2006; Spencer, 2006; Masood, 2008; Hori, 2013; Kearns 2016; Kempf, 2016; Langlois, 2017). There is a gap in the research focusing on the impact of Grade 3 EQAO standardized testing as told from the perspective of racialized children and parents in the context of Ontario. This could partially be attributed to the greater risk and complexity of gaining ethical clearance to interview and work with young children. Nonetheless, it is an important topic and an area that needs further examination as currently all Grade 3 students attending public schools in Ontario are impacted by writing EQAO standardized tests. Ontario Ministry of Education (2014) document How Does Learning Happen? Ontario's Pedagogy for the Early Years states, “children’s early experience last a lifetime” because “During our first years of life, the brain develops at an astounding rate.
Scientists now know this process is not just genetic but is dramatically influenced by our early experiences with people and our surroundings.” (p. 4)

This exploratory qualitative study, with a focus on Grade 3 EQAO standardized testing coupled with the use of semi-structured interviews as an instrument for data collection, seeks to capture the subjective embodied lived experiences of minoritized and racialized Grade 3 students and their parents and how they are impacted by preparing and writing the EQAO standardized test. This study is a step towards better understanding the impact of EQAO standardized testing at the elementary level, particularly on racialized children and communities. While the pros and cons of standardized testing can be debated at length, another angle to examine EQAO standardized testing from is the intersection of race with the developmental needs of children in the early years while in elementary school. In other words, is Grade 3 as a developmental stage where children are still growing, maturing, and developing physically, socially, psychologically, emotionally, morally, and spiritually an appropriate age to administer standardized tests?

Fiore (2012) argues that, “One particular test or score does not paint a full, clear picture of a complex, developing child” and this is “supported by research that states that standardized testing of children under the age of 8 is scientifically invalid and contributes to detrimental labeling that can permanently damage a child’s educational future” (p. 5). Fiore (2012) emphasizes, beyond examining the pros and cons of standardized testing for its effectiveness, that it is just as important to consider the developmental stage of each child when evaluating and assessing their capabilities, because “recognizing the developmental appropriateness of assessment and research is fundamental to practices that protect children from less than ideal classroom activity and, in the worst cases, harm” (p. 187).

One of the commonly cited harms of exposing young children to standardized testing is complications arising from stress rooted in fear of failure and anxiety about the impact of the test
on their educational outcomes such as marks or advancement to the next grade (Au, 2010; Kempf, 2013; Kearns, 2016; FairTest, 2017). This refers to the subjective perceived and embodied stress experienced by the children from their perspective. For example, even though the Grade 3 EQAO standardized test does not count towards student report card marks or their advancement to the next grade, the emphasis placed on the importance of the test by the vast amount of time and effort dedicated to prepare for the test by teachers and administrators gives students the impression that if they don’t do well they are disappointing themselves, their parents, teacher(s), and potentially the perceived image of the school, hence creating a highly pressurized and stressful learning environment. Pinto (2016) points out, “students who abstain from the test without a valid reason automatically receive a score of zero, thus pulling down the aggregate performance for that entire school” (p. 105). Whereas a medical issue with a note from a doctor can be a valid reason for being exempt from writing the EQAO test, opting out of the test as a political stance or as a form of resistance is not considered a valid excuse. Regardless of the reasons, “exempted students are assessed as not achieving the provincial Level 3 standard,” (Pinto, 2016, p. 105) and their scores included in the process of compiling the school’s final results. On top of this, EQAO “investigates districts that exceed its threshold of 6% exempt in any one assessment,” (Pinto, 2016, p. 106) and in certain cases such as in 2010, five schools were asked for justification in surpassing the 6% threshold and required to produce an action plan to reduce EQAO exemption rates in their school for the following school year (Pinto, 2016).

Weale (2017) reports that a survey was conducted in the United Kingdom (UK) to explore the impact of Standardized Assessment Tests (SATs) on primary school children. SATs are UK’s version of EQAO standardized tests which focuses on English and Mathematics testing for accountability purposes. The standardized tests are administered to children seven and eleven years old. What stands out is that “8 out of the 10 primary school leaders reported an increase in
mental health issues among primary school children around the time of the exams” (Weale, 2017, para. 2). This included symptoms such as increased signs of stress and anxiety with “some suffering sleeplessness and panic attacks” (Para. 1). Specific examples of stress experienced by students, as observed and reported by teachers and administrators who participated in the survey, included one child losing all their eyelashes due to stress and some children sobbing while doing the tests and given a time out to recollect themselves before returning to their seats to complete the test (Weale, 2017). Overall, responses from 1200 teachers who participated in the survey indicate that many teachers felt there has been an increase over the years “in general cases of stress, anxiety, and panic attacks,” and “an increase in fear of academic failure and depression” (Weale, 2017, para. 7) amongst children since 2014.

FairTest (https://www.fairtest.org/), The National Center for Fair and Open Testing, is a national organization in the United States which “advances quality education and equal opportunity by promoting fair, open, valid and educationally beneficial evaluations of students, teachers and schools” (FairTest, 2018, para. 1). FairTest, through its weekly online newsletters, compiles and expresses relevant news about standardized testing locally, nationally, and internationally and “works to end the misuses and flaws of testing practices that impede those goals” (FairTest, 2018, para. 1). Examining the use of standardized testing on young children from a developmental perspective, FairTest (2017) has produced an information sheet titled “Fact Sheet for Families on Testing and Young Children.” This factsheet is educational and intended for parents and activists outlining the harmful effects of using standardized testing on young children. It explains that “emphasis on testing has negative impact on children’s healthy development and learning” (FairTest, 2017, p. 1). Other reasons listed to justify FairTest’s stance on misuse of standardized testing on young children includes;
- Deprived of these engaging activities, children may lose interest in school and learning. 
- Parents, teachers, and mental health professionals report many more symptoms of test stress among young children, including nausea, crying, panic attacks, tantrums, headaches, sleeplessness, depression, and refusal to go to school. 
- Test stress is especially harmful to more vulnerable children, such as those with special needs or children whose first language is not English. 
- Testing may make children feel “dumb,” especially when tested on materials that are developmentally inappropriate. (FairTest, 2017, p. 1)

This study seeks to explore whether the same impacts are replicated in the context of Ontario as told by the voices of racialized children and parents. Although the developmental argument is similar in context both in the United States and Canada, we need a more specific lens that looks at the intersectionality of race and development of children in Ontario supported with research data. Russo (2012) points out, “By placing unrealistic demands upon children who are not developmentally ready, we are asking teachers to spend most of their time attempting to push children in ways that may set them up to fail.” (p. 144)

2.15 Effects of Standardized Testing; Pros and Cons

According to Public Attitudes Toward Education in Ontario 2015: The 19th OISE Survey of Educational Issues, under the subsection “Province-wide Testing and Elementary Students,” Hart and Kempf (2015) point out,

Every-student testing in grades 3 and 6 has continued to attract opposition. In particular, the Elementary Teachers’ Federation of Ontario (ETFO) has long opposed the policy. Only a small minority, of the public and parents, 14% in 2015, has opposed any form of province-wide testing. Supporters of provincial assessment generally favour every-student testing over testing only a sample of students. In 2015, however, there seems to have been some shift in opinion, with support for every-student testing falling slightly below 50% for the first time, with almost one in five favouring the sampling approach. (p. 3)

As the survey findings indicate, as of 2015, there has been a shift in the general public from a parents’ perspective with respect to the appropriateness and effectiveness of millions of dollars spent every year testing every student in Grade 3 and 6 in domains of Reading, Writing, and Mathematics. More research is required in this area to explore why there is a public shift in
opinion and what it can be attributed to. Through semi-structured interviews with racialized parents whose children wrote the Grade 3 EQAO standardized test, this qualitative study seeks to further explore the embodied experiences of the parents and their opinion on effectiveness of EQAO census-style standardized tests.

Hamilton, Stecher and Klein (2002) outline a comprehensive list of various positive and negative effects associated with the use of standardized testing in schools particularly as it impacts students, teachers, administrators, and policymakers (pp. 86-87). Although the mentioned effects on various educational stakeholders, as listed below in chart format, is not exhaustive in nature, it serves as a baseline reference guide to further contextualize how standardized tests can have multiple positive and negative effects. The goal is to present both sides of the argument, pros and cons of standardized testing, in seeking to explore, “What are the experiences, opinions, and concerns of racialized children and parents regarding how the EQAO standardized test impacts their identity, family, school and the larger surrounding community in which they live?”

### Effects on Students

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Positive Effects</th>
<th>Negative Effects</th>
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<tr>
<td>Provide students with better information about their own knowledge and skills</td>
<td>Frustrate students and discourage them from trying</td>
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<tr>
<td>Motivate students to work harder in school</td>
<td>Make students more competitive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Send clearer signals to students about what to study</td>
<td>Cause students to devalue grade and school assessments</td>
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<tr>
<td>Help students associate personal effort with rewards</td>
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### Effects on Teachers

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<tr>
<th>Positive Effects</th>
<th>Negative Effects</th>
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<tr>
<td>Support better diagnosis of individual student needs</td>
<td>Encourage teachers to focus more on specific test content than on curriculum standards</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Help teachers identify areas of strength and weakness in their curriculum</td>
<td>Lead teachers to engage in appropriate test preparation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Help teachers identify content not mastered by students and redirect instruction</td>
<td>Devalue teachers’ sense of professional worth</td>
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<tr>
<td>Motivate teachers to work harder and smarter</td>
<td>Entice teachers to cheat when preparing or</td>
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</table>
Motivate teachers to align instruction with standards
Encourage teachers to participate in professional development to improve instruction

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<tr>
<th>Effects on Administrators</th>
<th>Positive Effects</th>
<th>Negative Effects</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Cause administrators to examine school policies related to curriculum and instruction</td>
<td>Lead administrators to enact policies to increase test scores but not necessarily increase learning</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Help administrators judge the quality of their programs</td>
<td>Cause administrators to reallocate resources to tested subjects at the expense of other subjects</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lead administrators to change school policies to improve curriculum and instruction</td>
<td>Lead administrators to waste resources on test preparation</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Help administrators make better resource allocation decisions, e.g. provide professional development</td>
<td>Distract administrators from other school needs and problems</td>
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<tr>
<th>Effects on Policymakers</th>
<th>Positive Effects</th>
<th>Negative Effects</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Help policymakers to judge the effectiveness of educational policies</td>
<td>Provide misleading information that leads policymakers to sub-optimum decisions</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Improve policymakers’ ability to monitor school system performance</td>
<td>Foster a “blame the victims” spirit among policymakers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Foster better allocation of educational resources</td>
<td>Encourage a simplistic view of education and its goals</td>
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In the last twenty years, there has been a rise in extensive research exploring the negative impact of standardized testing on multiple stakeholders (Ladson-Billings, 1994; Sacks, 1999; Earl & Torrance, 2000; Kohn, 2000; McNeil 2000; Portelli & Vilbert, 2002; Ricci, 2004; Spencer, 2006; Volante, 2007; Sharma, 2009; James, 2012; Kearns 2016; Kempf, 2016; Knoester & Au, 2017). These concerns as related to the impact of standardized testing on racialized students and parents are discussed in more depth in the upcoming sections of the next chapter.
2.16 Conclusion

Chapter 2 began with a literature review outlining empirical studies that examined experiences of racialized students with standardized testing and access to opportunities. It then shifted to provide a historical analysis of the trilateral symbiotic relationship between curriculum development, the Tyler Rationale, and the use of standardized testing in schools. A Canadian historical timeline was presented leading up to the introduction and administration of EQAO standardized tests for socio-political reasons affiliated with demonstrating accountability to the general public. EQAO governance and structure was discussed as well as changes in EQAO administration practices and procedures since its establishment in 1996 in Ontario. The second half of the chapter discussed the pros and cons of using standardized testing in schools and how it impacts various educational stakeholders including students, teachers, administrators and policymakers. The discussion was narrowed to the use of standardized testing in terms of appropriateness from a developmental perspective as well as overall effectiveness when administered to young racialized children in elementary schools. To conclude, it was outlined how this exploratory qualitative study by focusing on capturing the voices of racialized Grade 3 children and parents regarding their experiences preparing and writing the EQAO test contributes to filling in the gap in the research. Findings from this study contribute to the field of standardized testing on racialized children in elementary schools, an area where more data is needed to get schools to serve the best interests and needs of students in a context-specific equitable manner.

The next chapter discusses the research methodology, paradigm, and methods of this qualitative research study and how they collectively interact in a dynamic dialogical manner to explain the strengths and limitations of the study including processes such as gaining ethical clearance to conduct the research, how research participants were recruited through purposeful
sampling, data collection via semi-structured interviews, and identification of emerging findings through thematic analysis.
Chapter 3

Research Methodology, Paradigm, and Methods

3.0 Introduction

Chapter 3 outlines the research methodology, paradigm, and methods used to collect, interpret, analyze, and identify findings from the data. The chapter begins by outlining major characteristics of Critical Theory and how it is used as a conceptual framework to interpret the data obtained via semi-structured interviews that were audio and video recorded with the Grade 3 children and their parents. Strengths and limitations of using semi-structured interviews as an instrument for data collection is further discussed. More specifically, the process and criteria of how participants were purposefully recruited are explained along with procedural steps such as how ethical clearance from University of Toronto was obtained to conduct the research and how participants were given informed consent and assurance of confidentiality. Chapter 3 also explains when and where the interviews took place as well as what steps were taken to ensure credibility, dependability, and transferability of the data and the emerging findings. It also explains how thematic analysis was used to code and group the interview responses into major themes which facilitated identification of the findings. Chapter 3 concludes with a biographical sketch of each child participant for the readers to get to know them and their identities better beyond a superficial level. Overall, Chapter 3 outlines the methodological approach, research paradigm, and methods for conducting this exploratory qualitative study and why such unique approach coupled with Critical Theory, specifically Critical Race Theory, provides new insights and understandings about the use of EQAO standardized testing on racialized children and parents in elementary schools. This is an important area to explore given the diverse classrooms in Ontario where students and parents from all over the world come together to learn, and the
current political atmosphere where EQAO standardized testing is under scrutiny in relation to whether the Grade 3 EQAO tests should be maintained, altered, or phased out completely.

Wolfer (2007) outlines four objectives for conducting qualitative social research; description, exploration, explanation, and evaluation. These are not mutually exclusive categories and often overlap when examining specific social phenomena such as the effects of standardized testing on racialized children and parents. I agree with Wolfer (2007) that “almost all research has a descriptive component aimed at defining or describing the sample and the social situation being studied” (p. 14). Using Critical Theory, specifically Critical Race Theory, the goal of this qualitative research study is to examine via semi-structured interviews whether the subjective embodied experiences of preparing and writing the Grade 3 EQAO test was a positive or negative experience for racialized children and parents, and to further document specifically in what ways.

Reflecting on Wolfer’s (2007) four objectives for conducting qualitative research, this qualitative study involves all four objectives which include to varying degrees some description, exploration, explanation, and evaluation. In terms of description, exploration, and explanation, this study seeks to describe in depth and details the experiences of racialized Grade 3 students and their parents preparing and writing the EQAO standardized test, and explore and explain whether the experience was positive or negative relative to the dominant narrative told and disseminated by EQAO through its website and documents produced. With respect to evaluation, this study seeks to evaluate the appropriateness and effectiveness of Grade 3 EQAO standardized tests by listening to the voices of racialized children and parents about how they are impacted by it.
3.1 Methodology and Research Paradigm: Critical Theory & Critical Race Theory

As a researcher concerned with “redressing oppression and committed to social justice,” (Brown & Strega, 2005, p. 11) I use Critical Theory (Lather, 1986; Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Brown & Strega, 2005; Creswell, 2007) as my research methodology and paradigm to explore the power dynamics embedded in EQAO test preparation and administration in elementary schools and its consequential impact on racialized Grade 3 students and their parents. I utilize Creswell’s (2007) definition of a paradigm which is “[T]he philosophical stance taken by the researcher that provides a basic set of beliefs that guides action. It defines, for its holder the nature of the world, the individual's place in it, and the range of possible relationships to that world.” (p. 248) Denzin and Lincoln (2000) further refer to paradigm as the “net that contains the researcher's epistemological, ontological, and methodological premises.” (p. 13) Characteristics of Critical Theory as a paradigm are deconstructed in detail in the upcoming sections of this chapter. Distinguishing differences between methodology and methods, Pole and Morrison (2003) state,

Where methods are the tools used for data collection and methodology refers to the general theoretical and philosophical underpinnings of the research, then the link exists in the capacity of the method to yield data which will facilitate analysis within a methodology. (p. 6)

I adopt Brown and Strega’s (2005) definition of Critical Theory as a conceptual framework which operationalizes Critical Theory as “theories that view knowledge in social constructionist terms as rooted in subjective experiences and power relations” (p. 68). From this vantage point, lived experiences are a form of valuable knowledge which provide insights into how educational policy is enacted in elementary schools within specific power relations impacting children and parents differently in their respective schools and communities given their identities. This social constructionist approach from a Critical Theory lens with an emphasis
on the connection between subjective experiences and power relations aligns with what Lather (1986) calls “research as praxis” where research inquiry is characterized by “negotiation, reciprocity, and empowerment” (p. 257). Describing differences between “research as praxis” and positivist methodological inquiries, Lather (1986) points out,

"Rather than the illusory "value-free" knowledge of the positivists, praxis-oriented inquirers seek emancipatory knowledge. Emancipatory knowledge increases awareness of the contradictions hidden or distorted by everyday understandings, and in doing so it directs attention to the possibilities for social transformation inherent in the present configuration of social processes." (p. 259)

This exploratory qualitative research study seeks to be emancipatory in nature, for participants in the study as well as the readers, to the extent it increases awareness about the experiences, opinions, and concerns of racialized children and parents regarding how the EQAO standardized test impacts their identity, family, school and the larger surrounding community in which they live. The combination of Critical Theory as methodology, specifically Critical Race Theory, and semi-structured interviews as methods with a focus on capturing the voices of racialized Grade 3 children and their parents has not been done before in the context of Ontario based on my findings, and hence it has potential for blossoming of new insights and understandings.

The research approach for conducting this qualitative study is unique because it goes beyond simply crunching and interpreting statistics in a simplistic, linear, and quantitative manner and instead works with a more holistic, complex, in-depth approach “capable of grasping the messy complexities of people’s lives, especially the lives of those on the margins” (Brown & Strega, 2005, p. 11) from an interdisciplinary lens led by voices of racialized children and parents who are often marginalized within the school system due to systemic barriers (Dei, 2008; James, 2012; Kumashiro, 2004; Lopez, 2003; McLaren, 2015). Brown and Strega (2005) distinguish differences between doing research on the marginalized versus doing research with the marginalized by explaining:
Research from the margins is not research on the marginalized but research by, for, and with them/us. It is research that takes seriously and seeks to trouble the connections between how knowledge is created, what knowledge is produced, and who is entitled to engage in these processes. It seeks to reclaim and incorporate the personal and political context of knowledge construction. It attempts to foster oppositional discourses, ways of talking about research, and research processes that explicitly and implicitly challenge relations of domination and subordination. (p. 7)

At the core of this study is the interconnection of “the personal and the political” led by voices of racialized children and parents “from the margins” as it relates to the use of EQAO standardized testing in elementary schools. The goal is to complexify understanding of EQAO standardized testing discourses from multiple perspectives by fostering “oppositional discourses” including the pros and cons of standardized testing and its short and long term effects on racialized children and parents.

Central to this inquiry process is a critique of the power relations and processes associated with preparation, administration, and legitimization of EQAO standardized testing in elementary schools. I use the works of Kincheloe and McLaren (2002) who emphasize “critical social theory is concerned in particular with issues of power and justice and the way that the economy, matters of race, class, and gender, ideologies, discourses, education, religion and other social institutions and cultural dynamics interact to construct a social system” (p. 90). Similarly, Brown and Strega (2005) describe the characteristics of critical research by stating,

Critical research rejects the ideas of value-free science that underpin both qualitative and quantitative approaches to research. Instead, it positions itself as about critiquing and transforming social relations. Critical researchers view reality as both objective and subjective: objective in terms of the real forces that impinge on the lives of groups and individuals, and subjective in terms of the various individual and group interpretations of these forces and the experiences they engender. (p. 9)

This study acknowledges that each experience of the participants, as racialized children and parents, is unique and needs to be contextualized relative to their unique identities and the social
relations and power dynamics within the realm of the schools and the communities which the parents live and are situated within spatially.


Critical theory analyzes competing, power interests between groups and individuals within a society, identifying who gains and who loses in a specific situation. In this context, to seek critical enlightenment is to uncover the winners and losers in particular social arrangements and the process by which such power operates. (pp. 90-91)

As an extension of critical enlightenment, this study explores through semi-structured interviews how EQAO preparation and administration privileges certain identities and knowledges while simultaneously oppressing and marginalizing other identities. Some of the important factors examined as part of the analysis include gender, race, socio-economic status, and spatial locations of neighbourhoods.

Another major characteristic of Critical Theory is critical emancipation. According to Kincheloe and McLaren (2002),

Those who seek emancipation attempt to gain the power to control their own lives in solidarity with a justice-oriented community. Here, critical research attempts to expose the forces that prevent individuals and groups from shaping the decisions that crucially affect their lives. (p. 91)

Critical Theory works towards critical emancipation by centering “subaltern voices” (Spivak, 1988, p. 66) of the marginalized at the core of its analysis and interpretation relative to how power is enacted in schools at the systemic institutional level. Building on the works of Antonio Gramsci, Spivak develops the term “subaltern” to refer to oppressed subjects or social groups and/or more generally those of inferior rank in a given society (Spivak, 1988). Critical Theory works to identify systemic barriers by listening to voices and concerns expressed by marginalized and racialized identities to engage in dialogical conversations from multiple
perspectives about how to challenge and change oppressive policies and practices and their harmful effects. Critical emancipation explores the impact of hierarchical power relations on specific identities by asking new questions from new perspectives within a “dialogical framework” (Freire, 1970, p. 17). Freire (1970) explains in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*,

In order to understand the meaning of dialogical practice, we have to put aside the simplistic understanding of dialogue as a mere technique. Dialogue does not represent a somewhat false path that I attempt to elaborate on and realize in the sense of involving the ingenuity of the other. On the contrary, dialogue characterizes an epistemological relationship. Thus, in this sense, dialogue is a way of knowing and should never be viewed as a mere tactic to involve students in a particular task. We have to make this point very clear. I engage in dialogue not necessarily because I like the other person. I engage in dialogue because I recognize the social and not merely the individualistic character of the process of knowing. In this sense, dialogue presents itself as an indispensable component of the process of both learning and knowing. (p.17)

Within a framework that recognizes dialogue as “an indispensable component of the process of both learning and knowing” many silenced and unanswered questions pertaining to the effects of EQAO standardized testing on racialized children and parents at the elementary level needs to be raised and discussed as a means of arriving at new understandings. Asking new questions from multiple competing perspectives will lead beyond binaries and linear modes of thinking, such as whether EQAO standardized testing is good or bad, to engaging in higher critical thinking that inquires, “What are the experiences, opinions, and concerns of racialized children and parents regarding how the EQAO standardized test impacts their identity, family, school and the larger surrounding community in which they live?” This allows us to further understand “curriculum as racial text” (Pinar et al., 1995, p. 23) in the context of today’s classrooms in Ontario.

The third major characteristic of Critical Theory is a reconceptualized critical theory of power: hegemony. This refers to the works of Antonio Gramsci and his concept of hegemony (Gramsci, 1995; 2000). According to Kincheloe and McLaren (2002), Gramsci understood that,
Dominant power is not always exercised simply by physical force but via socio-psychological attempts to win people’s consent to domination through cultural institutions such as the media, the schools, the family, and the church. The hegemonic field, with its bounded socio-psychological horizon, garners consent to an inequitable power matrix—a set of relations that are legitimated by their depiction as natural and inevitable. (p. 93)

From a reconceptualized critical theory of power, this study critiques how standardized testing is normalized and legitimized through “people’s consent” as a dominant tool to measure accountability in schools. More specifically, contextual factors are examined such as various social, cultural, and political conditions that created the niche that harnessed “people’s consent” to enact mandatory standardized testing in Grades 3, 6, 9, and 10 administered by EQAO. For Gramsci, hegemony is characterized by “the combination of force and consent” (Gramsci, 2000, p. 423) and is socio-culturally constructed through a dynamic process that unconsciously and consciously influences social relations through normalization and legitimization of a narrow set of ideologies as “common sense” often told from the perspective of the dominant class and those in positions of authority.

For the purpose of this study, hegemony is operationalized using Weiner’s (2014) definition derived from the works of Gramsci:

The term hegemony applies to the process whereby ideas, structures, and actions come to be seen by the majority of people as wholly natural, preordained, and working for their own good when in fact these ideas, structures, and actions are constructed and transmitted by powerful minority interests to protect the status quo that serves these interests so well. The subtle cruelty of hegemony is that over time it becomes deeply embedded, part of the natural air we breathe. One cannot peel back the layers of oppression and identify a group or groups of people as the instigators of a conscious conspiracy to keep people silent and disenfranchised. Instead, the ideas and practices of hegemony become part and parcel of everyday life— the stock opinions, conventional wisdom, or commonsense ways of seeing and ordering the world that people take for granted. (p. 40)

Hegemony provides a lens to critique current normalized and legitimized standardized testing policy in elementary schools, and the processes involved, where all Grade 3 students attending publicly funded schools in Ontario participate in writing the EQAO test to demonstrate
accountability to the general public. Central to this analysis is how individuals and social groups accept this practice without critically questioning its motives and whose interests it serves which consequentially legitimizes standardized testing as a “commonsense” approach to demonstrating accountability.

Madison (2012) makes an important point that “The central feature of Gramsci’s notion of hegemony is that it operates without force. We give consent because we are interpolated and prescribed to believe that the interest of the power bloc is really our interest. It becomes our worldview, and through hegemony we are in complicity with our own subordination.” (p. 65)

Weiner (2014) concurs with Madison by emphasizing,

[H]egemony, although correctly associated with domination and oppression, is effective in normalizing power relations- social, economic, sexual, cultural- at the level of imagination because it offers people a significant degree of comfort and familiarity. In short, hegemonic thinking can feel good, in spite of its oppressive thrust, because it protects thinkers from appearing strange or different on one hand, while on the other it keeps them unaware of how their conformity in thought and practice might be working against their own or group interests. When being different (thinking against the grain of accepted ideas attitudes, and/or interests) in and of itself exposes a person to ridicule, imprisonment, or some other form of social exclusion, then for many the natural “choice” is to stay within acceptable conventions, even if to do so is to become complicit in one’s own dehumanization. (pp. 40-41)

With majority of children and parents being interviewed as participants self-identifying as racialized, Critical Race Theory is used as a relevant conceptual framework to examine and interpret the data collected via semi-structured interviews. I use Knoester and Au’s (2017) definition of Critical Race Theory which they outline as “a conceptual framework useful in understanding how racism operates, including within institutions such as schools, by paying careful attention to the differential resources and opportunities available to students of different races, as opposed to the more common form of racial theorizing, focusing on individual acts of hatred or racism.” (p. 4) From this vantage point, each interview with the child and their parents is treated as a unique case study offering a window into the complexities of how they are
impacted by EQAO standardized tests both in terms of preparation and administration. The participants’ lived experiences, told by their voices, are contextualized and critiqued relative to the dominant narrative told by EQAO about the usefulness and effectiveness of EQAO standardized tests. As Lopez (2003) indicates, a key characteristic of Critical Race Theory (CRT) “is the privileging of stories and counterstories particularly the stories that are told by people of color. CRT scholars believe there are two differing accounts of reality: the dominant reality that “looks ordinary and natural” to most individuals, and a racial reality that has been filtered out, suppressed, and censored.” (p. 84)

From a CRT perspective, one has to ask, how is racism embedded within the DNA and social fabric of our educational institutions via its neutral policies and practices such as the practice of EQAO standardized testing, yet appearing undetectable to the naked eye without critical analysis? Knoester and Au (2017) deconstruct how to identify subtle racism within educational institutions by explaining,

[A] key tenet of Critical Race Theory is that such inequality is regularly obscured under the guise of race-less or race-neutral laws and policies and is instead framed around individual equality as expressed through concepts such as meritocracy – that success is purely the result of individual hard work and not the function of social, historical, or institutional processes. Thus, within a Critical Race framework, it becomes important to consider issues surrounding segregation, desegregation, and re-segregation of schools as part of a larger conversation about white material advantage and the material disadvantage of communities of color, often under the guise of non-race specific and sometimes rhetorically anti-racist policies. (p. 4)

Overall, this study uses Critical Theory, specifically Critical Race Theory, as a paradigm to interrogate and critique data collected via semi-structured interviews led by voices of racialized Grade 3 children and their parents about their experiences with EQAO tests relative to the dominant normalized and legitimized narrative told by EQAO. The objective of the study is to explore, critique, validate, and challenge from multiple perspectives in a dialogical manner the hegemonic discourse that legitimizes the use of standardizing testing in elementary schools for
the purpose of efficiency and accountability. As Madison (2012) emphasizes, the application of Critical Theory to studying social issues “takes us beneath surface appearances, disrupts the status quo, and unsettles both neutrality and taken-for-granted assumptions by bringing to light underlying and obscure operations of power and control.” (p. 5)

3.2 Methods

Creswell (2007) explains that “Qualitative research begins with assumptions, a worldview, the possible use of a theoretical lens, and the study of research problems inquiring into the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem” (p. 37). For this study, semi-structured interviews with eight Grade 3 children and their parents were conducted, mostly racialized, to capture the depth and details of their subjective embodied experiences preparing and writing the EQAO standardized test. The interviews were conducted between June to August 2017 at mutually agreed locations through purposeful sampling involving my community connections via teaching and sports. Children wrote the Grade 3 EQAO test in their respective schools between May 23 to June 5 2017. It was important to interview the children shortly after having written the test to capture more clearly and with more depth the details about their experiences. This was done with intentionality as waiting longer to conduct interviews with young children had the potentiality of them forgetting details about their experiences. After completion of all interviews, which were audio and video recorded, responses from the participants were transcribed for emerging themes which were coded, grouped, and interpreted through a CRT lens to explore new insights and understandings about the experience of racialized children and parents with EQAO testing. This involved centering race as a key feature of interpreting their experiences working towards “understanding curriculum as racial text” (Pinar et al., 1995, p. 23).
My methods approach combined formal and informal observations as part of audio and video recording of the semi-structured interviews to bring to life the lived realities and experiences of racialized children and their parents and how they are impacted by EQAO preparation and administration. While the formal part of the interview involved children and parents responding to various questions pertaining to before, during, and after writing the EQAO test, my informal observations included making note of the mood of the child and parents, ways the child might be influenced by the presence of their parent(s) or the videographer, and when participants would make pauses in their responses. Other non-verbal communication noted as part of my informal observations included body language and tone of voice. This assisted in more accurately analyzing participants’ responses when re-watching and transcribing the interviews. Pole and Morrison (2003) point out, critical theorists are not “concerned with presenting a distanced, scientific and objective account of the social world, but with an account that recognizes the subjective reality of the experiences of those people who constitute and construct the social world” (p. 5). From this vantage point, the subjective interpretation of the children and their parents about their experiences matter and should be a central part of the discussion about seeking to better understand the appropriateness and effectiveness of EQAO standardized testing in elementary schools. Yet, within the operation of school boards and day-to-day functioning of schools, the hierarchical power dynamics and relations often marginalize and silence voices of racialized children and parents deeming their negative experiences as exceptional cases and not the norm for those participating in writing EQAO tests. Children and parents’ voices on school matters such as effectiveness of EQAO standardized testing are typically not an integral component of policy development and enactment in schools. Yet, as Lather (1986) importantly remind us;
For praxis to be possible, not only must theory illuminate the lived experience of progressive social groups; it must also be illuminated by their struggles. Theory adequate to the task of changing the world must be open-ended, nondogmatic, informing, and grounded in the circumstances of everyday life; and, moreover, it must be premised on a deep respect for the intellectual and political capacities of the dispossessed. (p. 262)

Agreeing with Lather’s (1986) stance on effective research praxis as “grounded in the circumstances of everyday life,” this qualitative study uses a variety of open-ended questions as part of the semi-structured interview with racialized children and parents to capture the complexities associated with preparing and writing the Grade 3 EQAO standardized test.

3.3 Instruments of Data Collection: Semi-Structured Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were the main medium for data collection for this exploratory qualitative research study. Semi-structured interviews were audio and video recorded to capture body language and facial expressions of the children and their parents as these are important unconscious means of communicating particularly as it applies to children who are still developing and maturing physically, socially, emotionally, and cognitively. Another reason for video recording of interviews is to work with the footage to create a short film for a more general audience at a later stage. Being able to video record the interviews provided the advantage of re-watching the interviews as part of transcription, interpretation, and analysis of the data. It also provided visual cues to contextualize and deconstruct interviewee’s responses relative to their mood, tone of voice, facial and body expressions, and influence of parent(s) and researcher being present. My conventions for the transcription included transcribing the entire interview word by word from start to finish without alterations. Round brackets were used to describe respondent’s non-verbal communication reflecting how respondents spoke in relation to sounds, facial expressions, and pauses. Periods were used to punctuate end of thoughts relative to the question asked as well as minor pauses in the flow of the conversation with long responses. I started new sentences with the start of each new question. Commas were used to capture short pauses with
specific length being described within the parenthesis to help contextualize interpretation and analysis. Connected codes were italicized to assist me in identifying themes. Kincheloe and McLaren (2002) point out, “Critical ethnographers should record body language carefully because the meaning of an action is not in the language, it is rather in the action and bodily states” (p. 120). This speaks to the importance of capturing body language and tone of voice in assisting in accurate interpretation of interviewee’s responses in terms of intended meaning of statements made in response to the questions asked as part of the semi-structured interview.

Glesne (2015) uses the analogy of “interviewing as the process of getting words to fly” (p. 67) to describe the dynamic process between interviewer and interviewee(s). Glesne (2015) explains, “As the interviewer, you are not a research machine, but you do “pitch” questions at your respondents with the intent of making words fly.” (p. 67) Glesne (2015) uses a sports analogy, particularly “pitching” in baseball, to emphasize the importance of asking appropriate relevant interview questions that can elicit in-depth and insightful responses from the participants being interviewed. I would add to Glesne’s (2015) baseball analogy of “pitching” the visual imagery of fishing; questions become what you put on your “hook” to fish or in other words to engage the interviewee(s) and get them to open up about their experiences, opinions, emotions and values as part of a meaningful reciprocal dialogue between the interviewer and the interviewee(s). Madison (2012) emphasizes that,

The ethnographic interview opens realms of meaning that permeate beyond rote information or dining the “truth of the matter”. The interviewer is not an object, but a subject with agency, history, and his or her own idiosyncratic command of a story. Interviewer and interviewee are in partnership and dialogue as they construct memory, meaning, and experience together. (p. 28)

This ethnographic perspective is in contrast to positivist paradigms of research where the interviewer is a photographer who seeks to capture information in the form of a freeze frame image of an object. From an ethnographic interview (Madison, 2012), the interviewer and the
The interviewee are in a dynamic dialogical interaction; dance partners trying to find the right rhythm through engaging in relevant and appropriate discussions which symbolically can spark movement and new insights about the complexities of the social phenomena under examination. The objective of the ethnographic interviewer is to represent a moving “subject” in time and space in a complex manner that takes into consideration relevant personal and political factors as well as spatial power dynamics. As Madison (2012) explains, “The interview is a window to individual subjectivity and collective belonging; I am because we are, and we are because I am.” (p. 28)

One of the major strengths of using semi-structured interviews to collect data is that it provides flexibility for conversations to go in multiple directions based on unique identities of the interviewees including their personal values, opinions, beliefs and lived experiences (Creswell, 2007; Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Galletta, 2013). It also provides the time to go in depth in discussing complex topics, issues, and/or questions that each interviewee finds more relevant and significant to their unique lives accompanied with follow-up questions by the interviewer where necessary. As well, the interview can go in unexpected directions not anticipated by the interviewer. Singh (2016) points out, “semi-structured interview gives the participant an opportunity to bring up issues that the researcher may not have previously considered, thereby adding to the depth of the research” (p. 38).

Galletta (2013) points out that “the semi-structured interview provides a repertoire of possibilities” (p. 24). The interviewer can ask various types of questions as part of the semi-structured interview which can include “behaviour or experience questions, opinion or value questions, feeling questions, knowledge questions, sensory questions, and background/demographic questions” (Madison, 2012, p. 28). I included all of the aforementioned types of questions when designing the semi-structured interview questions for this study. The
order and sequence in which the interview questions are asked are just as important. Galletta (2013) explains that “the arrangement of questions may be structured to yield considerable and often multi-dimensional streams of data” (p. 24). As a result, I created two separate lists of questions; one for parents and another one for the child. Questions were worded using age-appropriate language and structurally organized relative to time; before, during, and after writing the Grade 3 EQAO standardized test (See Appendix E and F).

Reciprocity is a key characteristic of an effective semi-structured interview if it is to yield in-depth responses from the participants relative to the social phenomena under examination (Lather, 1986; Brown & Strega, 2005; Galletta, 2013). Lather (1986) defines reciprocity as consciously designed “give-and-take, a mutual negotiation of meaning and power” (p. 263). Lather (1986) further explains that reciprocity “operates at two primary points; the junctures between researcher and researched and between data and theory” (p. 263). Galletta (2013) reaffirms the importance of reciprocity as a process between the “researcher and researched” by emphasizing reciprocity “creates space for the researcher to probe a participant’s responses for clarification, meaning making, and critical reflection” (p. 24).

3.4 Participant Selection, Criteria, and Sample Size

Wolfer (2007) explains that “Qualitative research is aimed at a more in-depth understanding of a research issue” and that “this type of research usually involves small sample sizes because the researcher is not interested in generalizing to a wider population, but instead focused on a more detailed exploration of the topic” (p. 13). From a Critical Theory perspective, Brown and Strega (2005) emphasize that “the goals for anti-oppressive research are very different as involving people is done more for community building, empowerment, and a better understanding than for goals of representativeness or validity” (p. 269). This is the case with this exploratory qualitative research study as its main research objective is “a more detailed
exploration” and in-depth understanding of the experiences of racialized Grade 3 children and their parents with EQAO standardized testing.

Galletta (2013) points out that “Qualitative research does not involve random sampling of participants in the statistical sense” (p. 33). Similarly, discussing sampling in anti-oppressive research, Brown and Strega (2005) explain,

Sampling in anti-oppressive research is seldom random. Sampling is a power-laden decision and seen as one of many political acts in research. In this, ideally, an outsider researcher is never the sole source of invitations to participate. Ideally it is a community of participants/insider researchers who do the inviting/including. (p. 269)

Galletta (2013) outlines a list of significant questions researchers should ask themselves when recruiting participants for one’s qualitative research involving the use of semi-structured interviews as a medium for data collection. These questions are;

- What individuals are most likely to offer responses relevant to your research question?
- Where might there be gaps in locating diverse perspectives and experiences as it relates to your research question?
- How will you fill in those gaps? (p. 33)

I utilized Galletta’s (2013) questions as a guide to purposefully recruit participants based on a range of differences so that their responses would help “fill in those gaps” relative to “diverse perspectives and experiences”.

I began the participant recruitment process in September 2016 by outlining my selection criteria. The main criteria required to be considered a potential research participant was that the child had to be in Grade 3, self-identify as racialized, attending a publicly funded school in Ontario, and participating in writing the EQAO standardized test. My goal was to interview between five to ten racialized Grade 3 students and their parents; a combination of male and females attending schools in the Greater Toronto Area. I intended to recruit children who attended different schools located spatially in different neighbourhoods to capture a range of different perspectives and experiences. Being racialized was an important selection criteria as
there was no studies that I found that focused on experiences of Grade 3 children as told by their voices in relation to how they experienced EQAO. Similar to Singh (2016), I purposefully chose a smaller sample size to focus on depth and “on the nuances that are prevalent in the data collected as well as the areas in which there are silences and pauses in order to capture the individual experience” (p. 38).

According to Wolfer (2007), purposeful sampling is appropriate “when researchers want to focus on specific cases for further in-depth examination” (p. 209). A sample size of five to ten children and their parents made the study manageable, feasible, and allowed time for “in depth examination”. I recruited participants through my community networks via education and sports differing in gender, race, and socio-economic status to get different responses “in terms of their socioeconomic perspectives and demographic compositions” (Tollefson, 2008, p. 175) reflecting the diversity in today’s classrooms in Ontario. I stopped the interviews at eight participants as I reached data saturation and the themes began to repeat themselves (Singh, 2016). The credibility of the data was enhanced through multiple data collection techniques, known as triangulation, to identify emerging themes and findings. Triangulation and how it was used is discussed with more depth in upcoming sections of this chapter.

3.5 Recruitment of Participants; Ethics, Informed Consent, and Confidentiality

Parents and their children who met the selection criteria were contacted through purposeful sampling based on my community connections and networks. Similar to Tollefson (2008), “in order to facilitate the creation of a safe environment for genuine dialogue, free from the politics and history of any given site, my goal was to ensure that all participants came from different schools” (p. 175). If I was not able to reach my target number of five to ten children from different schools and neighbourhood areas, via my own community networks in education and sports, the next step in the action plan was to use referrals and word of mouth to recruit more
participants. I was able to recruit eight children and their parent(s) as participants via purposeful sampling within my own community networks.

Creswell (2007) points out that,

> We always need to be sensitive to the potential of our research to disturb the site and potentially (and often unintentionally) exploit the vulnerable populations we study, such as young children or underrepresented or marginalized groups. Along with this comes a need to be sensitive to any power imbalances our presence may establish at a site that could further marginalize the people under study. We do not want to place the participants at further risk as a result of our research. (p. 44)

As a means of being conscious to not exploit vulnerable populations such as racialized children and their parents as well as those from a lower socioeconomic status, I approached research participants by describing my research project and its objectives in detail using age appropriate language. I provided the parents and the child each with a separate information letter titled *Information Letter for Parents as Participants* (See Appendix A) and *Information Letter for Child as Participant* (See Appendix B). I specifically used child friendly language in the *Information Letter for Child as Participant* to better assist the child in understanding what the research project entailed and what was required of him/her as a participant. This reflected my perspective and ontology from a Critical Theory paradigm that the child should be part of the decision-making process as reality is subjective and co-constructed within different contexts (Brown & Strega, 2005).

The information letters explained the overview and purpose of the research project, the degree of involvement expected of the participants in terms of time and type of activity, any potential risks or harm the participants may experience, and how the data will be used (Galletta, 2013). If the parent(s) and the child both agreed to participate in the research after reviewing the information letters and having had the opportunity to ask questions, we proceeded to the next set of forms titled *Permission to Interview and Consent for Parents* (See Appendix C) and
Permission to Interview and Consent for Child (See Appendix D). This step involved signing an informed consent form separately by the parent(s) and the child face to face with the researcher. The child, through their willingness to participate voluntarily and with proxy consent from their parents, signed the permission to interview and consent form which stated;

- With full knowledge, I agree of my own free will, to participate in this study.
- I agree to have my interview audio and video recorded.
- I agree to the use of anonymous quotations in any thesis or publication that comes of this research.

The parent(s) completed a separate form agreeing to the same identical aforementioned statements above.

Overall, all research participants through intentional purposeful sampling were approached for voluntary participation in the research study and were given information letters and informed consent forms to read, complete, and sign confirming their participation. I reminded participants at various intervals that they can opt out of the study at any time without any penalties, even after completion of the interview. I also offered to provide a translator, if requested, to mitigate language barriers for those who English is not their primary language spoken at home. The option of having a translator available was mentioned on multiple occasions including during the administration of information letters, informed consent forms, and the semi-structured interview but all participants respectfully declined.

Identifiable data such as the name of the child, the school they attend, and name of their parents were given pseudonyms to ensure anonymity and confidentiality. I explained to participants that the perceived risks of being part of this qualitative research study are minimal as they are mainly engaging in a semi-structured interview at a mutually agreed upon location. I expressed although they may feel uncomfortable having their comments from the interview analyzed and published in academic journals or books, all identifying information will be
removed to protect their identity and no one will be able to connect and know who they are as participants in the study.

I further expanded that I will conduct member-checks to ensure my interpretations of their responses as part of the data analysis aligns with intentionality of their statements describing their lived experiences preparing and writing the EQAO standardized test. I further outlined I do not foresee direct benefits from their involvement in the study, but the interview will provide them with an opportunity to voice their concerns and speak freely about their experiences of how they are impacted by EQAO test preparation and administration. This has the potential to reaffirm, challenge, disrupt, or resist the dominant discourse told by EQAO about the benefits of EQAO standardized testing in elementary schools.

3.6 The Interview: Location and Duration

Madison (2012) makes an important point that “as a qualitative researcher, you must consider how you enter the terrain of your subjects in ways that are appropriate, ethical, and effective” (p. 24). Therefore, a mutually agreed upon location was chosen by the research participants to conduct the semi-structured interview. As a researcher, I wanted to create the least disruption to the lives of the participants given their busy family, school, and work schedules. I wanted to be accommodating and make the process as convenient as possible for the participants as they were giving up time in their busy schedules to be part of the research study without any monetary compensation. Six of the participants selected their home and the other two selected a nearby school to their home as the most convenient place to conduct the interview. I travelled to the mutually agreed upon locations with my videographer who assisted me in audio and video recording the interviews. The strength of this approach was that it allowed me to transcribe the interviews at a later point by re-watching the interviews and I would get access to visuals of participants’ non-verbal cues to help me contextualize and interpret their responses. I had to
work proactively to ensure my videographer was available on the same day and time as the family which was going to be interviewed. To minimize the presence of the videographer being interpreted as intrusive, parents and children were notified well in advance as part of the informed consent about the recording of the interview so they would not be surprised. The day before the interview, I called the family being interviewed to confirm time and location as well as remind them of the interview being recorded. Although initially I thought perhaps recording the interview, along with the equipment such as the microphone, might be interpreted as intrusive by the children, surprisingly it was received by interest and fascination. Numerous children asked questions about the microphone during sound checks. The camera and the microphone became a hands-on tool which seemed to engage the children and the parents as part of the interview process. The children were very enthusiastic about being recorded by the camera solo during the middle segment of the interview where the presence of the parent(s) was removed to minimize their influence on children’s responses. I ensured semi-structured interviews with the child and the parent(s) were given as much time needed to gather in depth details to the open-ended questions asked. Participants were provided with multiple opportunities to ask questions before, during, and after the interview. Overall, the interviews ranged from 45 to 60 minutes in duration.

3.7 Data Analysis

I use Green, Willis, Hughes, Small, Welch, Gibbs and Daly’s (2007) framework for data analysis which describes four key stages to generating qualitative evidence as part of a research study. The four stages include “data immersion, coding, creating categories, and identifying themes” (p. 547). The first step is data immersion and it involves capturing the information from the semi-structured interviews in a detailed and holistic manner. This means going beyond simply transcribing the participant’s responses. It involves making note of “the details that make
up the interview context including hesitations, confidence in answering questions, the tone of participants as well as the shared experiences of researcher and participants” (Green et al., 2007, p. 547). Video recording of the interviews provided the opportunity to re-watch the interviews multiple times and make note of body language and tone of voice of participants when responding to the questions. Video recording of interviews would be more of a concern if researcher has no prior rapport or relationship with the interview participants. Given that I had prior rapport and a certain level of trust established with all the participants through my community connections via teaching and sports, the concern of being recorded as being intrusive was somewhat minimized.

The second stage of data analysis is coding the responses after transcription. It involves “the process of examining and organising the information contained in each interview and the whole dataset. It forces the researcher to begin to make judgements and tag blocks of transcripts.” (Green et al., 2007, p. 548) Coding requires “effectively conducting a detailed, taxonomic process of sorting and tagging data.” (Green et al., 2007, p. 548) I went through the participants’ responses line by line and began focused coding (Clarke & Braun, 2017) and tagging the data relative to participants’ identities, occupation, school demographics, neighbourhood location, and various other significant factors such as race, gender, and socioeconomic status. This was a malleable process led by voices of the children and parents. I summarized the information in a chart to make the data more manageable to facilitate identification of categories and themes.

The third stage of data analysis is creation of categories and it involves grouping codes and tags by relevance and relatable connections to “categorise the ways in which research participants speak about aspects of the issue under investigation.” (Green et al., 2007, p. 548) Green et al. (2007) explain, “Analytic categories are ‘saturated’ when there is sufficient
information for the experience to be seen as coherent and explicable.” (p. 548) Therefore, codes are strategically grouped based on interconnections and their ability to explain a cohesive interpretation of a series of data (Clarke & Braun, 2017). After transcription of all interviews, I re-read the transcripts multiple times and grouped the identified codes into categories based on re-occurring themes expressed by participants relative to their experiences preparing and writing the Grade 3 EQAO standardized test. I further separated the emerging codes based on whether the content was expressed by the children or the parents.

The final stage of data analysis is identification of themes. It is important to acknowledge that, “A theme is more than a category. The generation of themes requires moving beyond a description of a range of categories; it involves shifting to an explanation or, even better, an interpretation of the issue under investigation.” (Green et al., 2007, p. 548) This final step in the analysis brings together all previously explained stages to holistically produce what is known as thematic analysis (Clarke & Braun, 2017). Clarke and Braun (2017) operationalize thematic analysis as “a method for identifying, analyzing, and interpreting patterns of meaning (‘themes’) within qualitative data” (p. 297). They distinguish the difference between codes and themes by explaining,

Codes are the smallest units of analysis that capture interesting features of the data (potentially) relevant to the research question. Codes are the building blocks for themes, (larger) patterns of meaning, underpinned by a central organizing concept - a shared core idea. Themes provide a framework for organizing and reporting the researcher’s analytic observations. The aim of TA [thematic analysis] is not simply to summarize the data content, but to identify, and interpret, key, but not necessarily all, features of the data, guided by the research question. (p. 297)

Thematic analysis functions as the glue or gel that paints the big picture understanding of the issue under study relative to the research question. I made interconnections between identified codes and categories from the interview transcripts using Critical Theory, specifically CRT, to identify eight thematic findings. Identified categories were divided based on whether it
was the children or parents’ perspective as well based on timing relative to before, during, and after writing the EQAO test. Eight themes emerged from the identified categories which included:

- Fear of failure from the children’s perspective
- Relevance of the test from both the child and the parents’ perspective
- Importance of the EQAO tests from both the child and the parents’ perspective
- Timing of the test
- Type of feedback provided on the test
- Assessment for improvement
- Impact on teacher pedagogy and delivery of the curriculum
- Limited definition of success

The eight thematic findings collectively and holistically explain the embodied subjective experiences of racialized children and their parents about how they are impacted by writing the Grade 3 EQAO standardized test.

3.8 Credibility, Dependability, and Transferability

According to Brown and Strega (2005), “Qualitative researchers see social reality as subjective, and their research practices involve observing and interpreting the meanings of social reality as various groups and individuals experience them.” (p. 9) Recognizing “social reality as subjective,” I used purposeful sampling to recruit research participants for semi-structured interviews. I selected participants who attend different schools and spatially live in different neighbourhoods to capture various lived experiences reflecting diversity of children and parents that make up today’s classrooms in Ontario (Tollefson, 2008). In describing differences in quantitative and qualitative approaches to doing research, Creswell (2007) points out, “Instead of using quantitative terms such as “internal validity,” “external validity,” “generalizability,” and “objectivity,” the qualitative researcher may employ terms such as “credibility,” “transferability,” “dependability,” and “confirmability.”” (p. 18) Using Critical Theory, specifically CRT, as my research paradigm for this exploratory qualitative study, I agree with
Creswell (2007), and pursue to establish “credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability” as key measuring sticks for evaluating the depth and breadth of the identified research findings. In the following subsections, each of the aforementioned terms will be described in detail and further explained in how I achieved each relative to the purpose and objective of the study.

Credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability are interconnected under the umbrella term “trustworthiness” of the data collected (Tollefson, 2008). Prior to going more in depth in discussing each of these terms, it is important to acknowledge epistemological assumptions associated with the Critical Theory paradigm which recognizes all “knowledge as partial, multiple, situated, and subjugated” (Brown & Strega, 2005, p. 66). From this theoretical stance, “knowledge is understood as situated by one’s social location as a result of privileges and oppression that one has experienced” (Brown & Strega, 2005, p. 66). Therefore, a key focus point of the data collected, via the semi-structured interviews, is capturing the details of the participants’ lived experiences of preparing and writing the Grade 3 EQAO standardized test. As a researcher, I was not interested in judging or categorizing the participants’ experiences as right, wrong, or ideal, but more interested in capturing the detailed complexities involved in each unique experience relative to the identity of each participant and other relevant factors. It was significant to document both the parents and children’s’ perspectives as they each have a unique interpretation of their subjective experiences relative to their identities and the power relations embedded within their respective schools and communities. Kincheloe and McLaren (2002) reaffirm the importance of considering power relations when deconstructing lived experiences from a Critical Theory lens. They go on to state, “Critical research traditions have arrived at the point where they recognize that claims to truth are always discursively situated and implicated in relations of power.” (p. 118)
In order to establish trustworthiness through credibility, I recruited participants through purposeful sampling. Purposeful sampling is a non-probability sampling technique whose main purpose is not random selection of participants, but rather conscious selection of participants as key figures who can provide insightful new perspectives towards examining a social issue or topic. Wolfer (2007) explains, “just because it [purposeful sampling] can’t be generalized to a broad population doesn’t’ mean that the sample doesn’t produce useful information.” (p. 207)

With respect to all the participants interviewed, I had prior rapport with either the parent(s) or the child directly through connections in the teaching community and/or involvement with basketball sport initiatives. As an accepted member, as an insider to a certain extent, it allowed me as a researcher to engage in more honest, open, genuine dialogical conversations with the participants as part of the semi-structured interview. This rapport and prior relationship with the participants facilitated the blurring of dichotomized binaries and its associated hierarchical power relations between the researcher and the researched (Smith, 1999; Giroux, 2007). This was exemplified by many participants feeling comfortable to invite and welcome me and the videographer into their homes to conduct the interviews. Overall, as a researcher I felt my presence was less likely perceived as a threat and the pressure on research subjects to put on a performance to appeal to my role as a researcher was somewhat minimized by having prior rapport with them.

Other strategies used to ensure credibility of the data included the use of triangulation, participant member checks for accurate interpretation of their responses, and video recording of interviews to capture facial expressions, body language, and tone of voice for more accurate data analysis and interpretation. These strategies are not exhaustive in nature but work complementary with each other to holistically establish and increase credibility and trustworthiness of the data. Triangulation is known as using different approaches and techniques
for gathering data. Key feature of triangulation is that it cross-examines events and experiences from multiple perspectives to ensure findings are credible and dependable (Wolfer, 2007). Creswell (2007) refers to triangulation as using “multiple sources of data” (p. 38). Creswell (2007) explains,

Qualitative researchers typically gather multiple forms of data, such as interviews, observations, and documents, rather than rely on a single data source. Then the researchers review all of the data and make sense of them, organizing them into categories or themes that cut across all of the data sources. (p. 38)

One of the primary reasons for video recording the interviews was the importance of visually capturing body language, facial expressions, and tone of voice of participants as these are important unconscious indicators of communication. Being able to video record the interviews and re-watch it and compare it to notes I made during the interview assisted in more accurately interpreting the interviewee’s responses relative to factors such as their mood and influence of parent(s) and the researcher being present. I recognized sometimes children looked at their parents for validation of their responses particularly when the questions were more complex or sometimes parents tried to guide their children’s unclear responses by assisting them in finishing their thoughts. As a means of neutralizing the parental effect on the children and their responses, I divided the interview into three parts. I began the interview with the parent(s) and the child together responding to a series of questions. For the second part of the interview, I removed the parent(s) and had the child individually respond to a series of questions. I concluded the interview with the parent(s) re-joining the interview with the child. This approach to conducting the interview was important as I wanted to capture different perspectives associated with subjective experiences of preparing and writing the Grade 3 EQAO standardized test. Creswell (2007) explains, “In the entire qualitative research process, the researchers keep a focus on learning the meaning that the participants hold about the problem or issue, not the meaning
that the researchers bring to the research or writers from the literature.” (p. 39) Therefore, as a researcher I recognized each voice has a unique story to tell which can lead to new understandings and insights.

In order to further ensure credibility with the data collected I conducted member-checks with the participants after completion of interviews by consulting them about my interpretation of their statements and the emerging themes. This provided an opportunity for the participants to give input, critique assumptions made by the researcher, and provide new perspectives on factors unnoticed. This was an important step in the research process from a Critical Theory paradigm as the researcher and participants co-construct reality through a collaborative approach that takes into consideration unequal power relations and tries to neutralize its impact to the extent possible. Member-checks also assist in ensuring that researcher’s bias does not confound the lens of interpretation and that the voices of participants lead the discussions and findings.

Dependability in qualitative research is referred to as the reliability of the research findings and the processes involved in arriving at the findings. I concur with Tollefson (2008) that,

In a qualitative paradigm, my goal is not to isolate and control variables, ensuring that my results will be replicable in other settings. It is rather to make sure that outside readers would concur that, given the data collected, the results make sense- they are consistent and dependable. The question then is not whether findings will be found again but whether the results are consistent with the data collected [italics in the original]. (p. 186)

To ensure dependability as a process and outcome for this exploratory qualitative study, I began by explicitly locating myself to the participants in terms of positionality to the research topic under examination. I provided contextual information about my lived experiences and what has contributed to my gravitation towards studying the impact of standardized testing professionally and academically. Providing information about researcher positionality is vital in allowing participants and readers to judge the dependability and reliability of the study “because it forces
us to acknowledge our own power, privilege, and biases just as we are denouncing the power structures that surround our subjects.” (Madison, 2012, p. 8)

Locating self as a researcher relative to the research topic is a significant component of anti-oppressive research methodologies including Critical Theory paradigms where “neutrality and objectivity do not exist in research since all research is conducted and observed through human epistemological lenses” (Brown & Strega, 2005, p. 97). Emphasizing the importance of “reflexivity” as an integral part of the research process contributing to higher research reliability, Brown and Strega (2005) point out,

By inviting researchers to consider politics of location as a serious form of enquiry, to map the ways in which we are socially and historically constituted, intertwined, and intersect with(in) the world and in relationship to subjects of our research, reflexivity requires a resistance to theoretical generalizations and monolithic truth claims. (p. 136)

From a Critical Theory stance, power embedded within relationships between the researcher and the researched have to be taken into consideration when interpreting data through reflexivity. Reflexivity requires a constant effort to find interconnections between relationships and how they are anchored by power relations in specific contexts. Madison (2012) call this “reflexive ethnography”: it is a “turning back” (p. 8) on ourselves as researchers.

Pierre Bourdieu is considered one of the founders and advocates of reflexive sociology. Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992) in their book titled An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology explain that “Social science is reflexive in the sense that the knowledge it generates is “injected” back into the reality it describes” (p. 37). Hence, they argue theoretical underpinnings from research should have practical implications in the lives of those researched in a manner that is empowering and emancipatory. Similarly, Paulo Freire (1970) argues that it is through “conscientization,” (p. 67) a process of developing critical awareness about one’s social reality
through reflection and action, that objects come to see themselves as subjects beholding agency and having capacity to make a change at the micro and macro level.

Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992) outline three types of biases that “may blur the sociological gaze” (p. 39) of the researcher. These include:

a) Social origins and coordinates of the individual researcher including class, gender, ethnicity, etc.

b) Position that the analyst occupies, not in the broader social structure, but in the microcosm of the academic field; must consider relevant fields of power.

c) The intellectualist bias which entices us to construe the world as a spectacle, as a set of significations to be interpreted rather than as concrete problems to be solved practically. (p. 39)

Reflexive sociology not only entails critiquing one’s own researcher bias and positionality of power and privilege, but also going further to critique the larger gaze of one’s academic field and its associated hegemonic theoretical claims for “truths” in interpreting and analyzing data. As Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992) advocate, it is significant to break away from constructed categories that are normalized and legitimized truths within a discipline perpetuated by its “experts,” and work towards analyzing data from an interdisciplinary holistic lens that at times is conflicting, messy, and complex. Expanding on the works of Bourdieu, Grenfell (2014) states, “reflexivity in Bourdieu’s intertwined empirical and theoretical work is the moving representation of an object through the constant (re)formulation - expression of its use and its meaning” (p. 199).

Transferability of a qualitative study is referred to as its external validity (Tollefson, 2008). Findings from this study contribute to filling in the research gap in the field of standardized testing on racialized and minoritized children in elementary schools. Findings from the data generate fruitful discussions from multiple perspectives that are beneficial to parents and professionals working with children in numerous capacities. The target audience includes educators in schools and community settings, administrators, parents, caregivers, early childhood
educators, child and youth care workers, social workers, and researchers. Brown and Strega (2005) point out, “Research that results in social change, particularly in relation to the material realities of the participants, is considered the primary criteria of validity as long as it is emancipatory in nature” (p. 51). Transferability of findings from this study is not concerned with what positivist paradigms call “generalizability” to the larger population through random sampling, but rather what Tollefson (2008) calls “case-to-case transfer” (p. 186); that having described the processes involved in detail such as purposeful sampling and reflexivity “outside readers can determine for themselves whether my findings are of any use in their context” (p. 187).

3.9 Significance and Limitations

Although there has been research on standardized testing in Ontario, majority has been conducted at the secondary level (Lock, 2001; Klinger et al., 2006; Spencer, 2006; Masood, 2008; Hori, 2013; Kearns 2016; Kempf, 2016; Singh, 2016). Hence, there is a lack of research focusing on experiences of racialized Grade 3 children and their parents with EQAO preparation and administration at the elementary level. Therefore, this exploratory qualitative research study provides various opportunities for racialized Grade 3 children and their parents in the context of Ontario to express the extent to which EQAO preparation and administration impacts their identities and lived experiences relative to the school they attend and the community in which they live.

My research findings are relevant as they come at a critical time when on September 6th 2017, Premier of Ontario at the time Kathleen Wynne, announced the creation of a panel of experts to review and “explore ways to more effectively assess whether students in kindergarten through Grade 12 are learning the skills they need for their futures, in both the workplace and as citizens” (Gordon, 2017, para. 3). Part of this process involves “looking at the role, relevance and
timing of standardized tests administered by the province as well as what parents read on their children’s report cards” (Gordon, 2017, para. 4). Gordon (2017) further reports “the shakeup comes at a time of growing concern that the [education] system is too focused on EQAO tests which critics say don’t broadly reflect the many skills that students need to keep learning- such as creativity and critical thinking” (para. 5). Interestingly, according to the Public Attitudes Toward Education in Ontario 2015: The 19th OISE Survey of Educational Issues, under the subsection “The Impact of Testing,” Hart and Kempf (2015) report that, “A majority [of the public and parents] think tested subjects get a lot more (37%) or somewhat more (30%) attention than subjects not tested” (p. 3). As well, “a majority of the public (57%) and parents (56%) agree that if a school has good scores on province wide tests for reading, writing, and mathematics, parents should assume the school is doing a good job overall” (Hart & Kempf, 2015, p. 4).

As mentioned earlier, we are currently at a critical juncture in education, particularly with respect to the practice of EQAO testing, socially and politically. There is tension between the provincial government and EQAO with respect to whether or not to cancel the Grade 3 EQAO standardized testing as advised by the Premier’s education advisors or maintain it as argued by EQAO. The concerns with the use of standardized testing in terms of its relevance and effectiveness intersects and interconnects with equity concerns associated with the achievement gap outlined in the Toronto District School Board report published in December 2017 titled Enhancing Equity Task Force: Report and Recommendations (TDSB, 2017b). The TDSB Enhancing Equity Task Force report includes suggestions on how to create more equitable practices in the education system in various areas to address the needs of marginalized and racialized students who are underachieving. Some practical examples include investing in alternative programs and access to resources to gain better results on EQAO scores and improvements in student achievement. Yet, although the TDSB report seeks to minimize the
achievement gap, it does not critique or question the effectiveness of EQAO standardized tests as tools to measure student learning and achievement. The assumption is that EQAO standardized testing is an effective tool and the focus needs to be on improving the outcomes.

What the announcement by Premier Kathleen Wynne and the TDSB Enhancing Equity Task Force report emphasize is the importance of re-evaluating many current practices in education including the effectiveness of EQAO standardized testing and exploring alternative solutions to measuring accountability and improving student achievement from different social groups. This study can be part of the larger discussion about how to arrive at new understandings and insights about how to support racialized Grade 3 children and their parents with pressures arising from performing well on EQAO standardized tests by listening to their voices and concerns. The findings can have larger implications for administrators and policy makers when it comes to introducing new policies, practices, and initiatives or revising current ones to support student learning from an equity lens. As Brown and Strega (2005) emphasize,

Recognizing that knowledge is socially constructed means understanding that knowledge doesn’t exist “out there” but is embedded in people and the power relations between us. It recognizes that “truth” is a verb; it is created, it is multiple: truth does not exist, it is made. Therefore, in anti-oppressive research, we are not looking for a “truth”; we are looking for meaning, for understanding, for the power to change. (p. 261)

A multi-level approach to analyzing the responses of participants from the interviews “embedded in people and the power relations between us” goes beyond simply crunching numbers and interpreting data in a simplistic linear manner. It combines qualitative data in a dynamic, dialogical, mixed methods manner to bring to life the lived experiences of racialized children and parents impacted by EQAO standardized testing contextualized through a CRT lens that highlights internal and external challenges of the school-community interface. This interdisciplinary and holistic approach to doing anti-oppressive research allows for historicizing and contextualization of racialized children and parents’ subjective experiences including the
complexities embedded within power relations. It also avoids homogenization of all experiences into one metanarrative.

Limitations of this qualitative study are its small sample size and that majority of families interviewed can be described as middle-class with both parents working. From an intersectionality perspective, although majority of the parents are racialized, many of them work within the education system, and can be described as middle-class based on incomes earned. This does not mean that the data collected cannot yield significant new insights and understandings about standardized testing and its impact on racialized Grade 3 children and parents, but it is important to keep these factors in mind when contextualizing the findings in relation to specific power relations. Working with different demographics and a larger sample size are areas to be considered for future research as they hold potential to shed more light into the complexities and power relations that normalize and legitimize standardized testing in elementary schools as a tool for measuring accountability.

3.10 Biographical Sketch of Participants

Overall, I interviewed five male and three female Grade 3 children as participants along with their respective parent(s). Each student attended a different public school geographically. Hence, no two students attended the same school. Each interview ranged between 45 to 60 minutes in duration. Questions asked were organized thematically relative to time focusing on before, during, and after writing the EQAO standardized test. Interviews were conducted at a mutually agreed upon location that was convenient for the research participants; six were conducted at participant’s homes and two at a nearby school. I travelled to the various interview sites with my videographer who assisted in audio and video recording the interviews.

In the following subsection, some background information about each interview and participant will be provided including some of the conversations that took place. The
conversations presented are descriptive in nature and without analysis. The objective is to provide some biographical information about the children and their parent(s) to get to know them better in terms of their identity, personalities, and circumstances. This serves as a precursor to build rapport with the participants before going into interpreting and analyzing their responses as part of the next chapter. As well, the biographical description of the participants without analysis serves to ensure participants’ voices and identities are at the centre of the study instead of on the margins (McLaren, 2015). Pseudonyms are given to the participants to ensure confidentiality.

**Laila**

Laila was born in January 2008 and at the time of the interview was ten years old. She self-identifies as female and a visible racialized person. She has a white mother who is an elementary school teacher and an African father who is a businessman that travels frequently. Laila was born in Canada and speaks English and French. She attends a Catholic public school located in the southwest downtown region of Toronto which offers classes from Kindergarten to Grade 6. The school is located within a neighbourhood associated with affluent higher socio-economic status. It is a uniformed school where students have to wear a combination of white and navy blue garments. Laila does not like having to wear a uniform to school as she cannot choose whatever she wants when getting ready for school. On the other hand, her mother thinks uniforms are great as it makes getting ready for school easier with fewer decisions to be made in the mornings. Laila is enrolled in the French Immersion program and as a result only had to write the Mathematics component of the Grade 3 EQAO standardized test. Laila has a female teacher and there are approximately twenty students in her class. Laila’s favourite subjects are art, gym, and science and her least favourite subject is writing. When asked what she likes about school, she stated “the fact that I have many friends.” When asked what she doesn’t like about school, she stated “I feel at times I am being more excluded compared to other years.” I was able to
recruit Laila as a research participant having previously taught at a school where her mother was also a teacher. The interview took place at Laila’s place of residence which is a house with her mother present.

**Deshaun**

Deshaun was born in May 2008 and at the time of the interview was nine years old. He self-identifies as male and a visible racialized person having parents that are from Jamaica and Saint Vincent and the Grenadines. His mother is a chef and his father is unemployed. Deshaun was born in Canada and only speaks English. He attends a public school in the northwest region of Toronto which offers classes from Kindergarten to Grade 5. The school is located within a neighbourhood associated with low socio-economic status. Deshaun has a female teacher and there are approximately twenty students in his class. His favourite subject is math and his least favourite subject is reading because “it takes too long.” Deshaun’s hobbies and interests are riding his bike and scooter, playing outside, and going to the park to play games. When asked what he likes about school he responded “that I get recess and I get to learn.” When asked whether he likes his teacher he responded “a little bit.” Deshaun explained that “Her voice could be better. She yells a lot because the students keep fooling around.” In response to what she likes about the school Deshaun attends, his mother stated, “I like that they are very adamant about the children being there present and not late for school. I like the fact that they have meetings that involve the community and they have fundraisers. I like that they have Future Aces program there, breakfast club, and after school programs.” I was able to recruit Deshaun as a research participant having previously known his mother through community events in their neighbourhood associated with officiating basketball. The interview took place at Deshaun’s place of residence which is a government subsidized housing complex provided by Toronto
Community Housing Corporation. The interview was conducted on the balcony with his mother present.

**Jordan**

Jordan was born in December 2008 and at the time of the interview was nine years old. He self-identifies as male and a visible racialized person born to second generation Canadian Caribbean parents. He lives with his mother and step-father who recently got married. Jordan’s mother works with the school board as an Education Resource Facilitator at an elementary school and his step-father works as an elementary school teacher. They work at different schools. Jordan was born in Canada and speaks English and a little bit of French. He attends a public school in the southeast region of Toronto which offers classes from Kindergarten to Grade 5. He changed schools at the start of Grade 3. In response to why they changed schools, his mother explained,

> He particularly had a rough time when he first started school. He was actually in the French Immersion program to begin with, and he wasn’t doing well, not because of the program itself, but he was having a lot of behavioural difficulties. We decided to take him out hoping that maybe that was why he was frustrated taking both French and English. He started to do a bit better, but we found once he is in the school he is at now, which is a smaller school, more of a community where everyone knows you and all the teachers know all the students, he is doing a lot better and he hasn’t had as much difficulties in school compared to when he was in a much larger school.

Jordan’s current school is located within a neighbourhood associated with mixed socio-economic status; certain pockets within the neighbourhood are high socio-economic status whereas other pockets are low socio-economic status. Jordan is in a split Grade 2/3 class which has both Grade 2 and Grade 3 students learning together in one class. He has a female teacher and there are approximately twenty-four students in his class. His favourite subject is computers and his least favourite subject is art. In response to why he doesn’t like art, Jordan stated, “Because you get dirty sometimes, and sometimes if you make a mess, most of the class is so tired to clean up, we
don’t wanna clean up.” When asked about his experiences at the two different schools, Jordan responded “I like my new school. I like how we have three recesses and the third recess is longer. In my old school we would have computer lab for a short amount of time. At my new school we have computer lab for a long time, for a whole period until lunch.” I was able to recruit Jordan as a research participant having previously known his step-father through community events in their neighbourhood associated with officiating basketball. The interview took place at Jordan’s place of residence which is a house with his mother and step-father present.

**Kobe**

Kobe was born in December 2008 and at the time of the interview was nine years old. He self-identifies as male and a visible racialized person born to second generation Canadian parents who have Caribbean and English roots. His mother is an elementary school principal and his father is a newly promoted middle school vice-principal. They work at different schools. Kobe was born in Canada and speaks English and some French. Kobe has an older brother as a sibling who is currently in high school. Kobe attends a public school in the west region of Toronto which offers classes from Kindergarten to Grade 8. The school is located within a neighbourhood associated with upper middle to high socio-economic status. When asked what he likes about school, Kobe stated “I like my friends. Everyone seems pretty friendly. I like the teachers and I like gym!” In response to what he dislikes about school, Kobe stated, “I like to play a lot of stuff at home which I can’t play with at school like board games and car games.” Kobe’s favourite subject is gym and his least favourite subject is language specifically writing. Kobe’s hobbies and interests are soccer, basketball, baseball and badminton. In response to what they like and dislike about the school Kobe attends, his mother stated, “Because he is a French Immersion student he has two teachers. One day he gets the English teacher and the next day he
has the French teacher. His French teacher is strong in terms of engagement and types of assessment she does. The English teacher I didn’t find as strong. They sort of have a disjointed math program, so I think it is ok but I wouldn’t rave about it.” Kobe’s father expanded by stating, “One of the things we found is that the reading program is really weak, like it took them at least six or seven months to be able to identify what level he [Kobe] was reading at. Long time!” I was able to recruit Kobe as a research participant having previously known his father through a community grassroots non-profit educational organization we were both involved with in the Jane and Finch community. The interview took place at Kobe’s place of residence which is a house with his mother and father present.

**Madison**

Madison was born in August 2008 and at the time of the interview was nine years old. She self-identifies as female and white being born to Canadian parents. She was born in Canada and speaks English and some French. Madison lives with her mother in a single-parent household and has an older sister as a sibling who is two years older than her. Her mother is divorced and works as a self-employed consultant. Madison attends a public school located in Oakville which offers classes from Kindergarten to Grade 8. The school is located within a neighbourhood associated with upper middle class to high socio-economic status. Madison is in a split Grade 2/3 class which has both Grade 2 and Grade 3 students learning together in one class. She has a female teacher and there are approximately twenty-four students in her class. When asked what she likes and dislikes about Madison’s school, her mother stated,

I thought Madison’s teacher was very caring and interested in doing the right things for her students. They had a split grade so a 2/3 split grade. That’s the second year in a row that Madison has been in a split grade and I think that can cause challenges in terms of, you know, learning and getting through the curriculum. I think the school tries to teach the curriculum. I know they have an EA [Educational Assistant] in the class to help with the class size and the challenges they have.
Madison has an Individual Education Plan (IEP). I inquired how long Madison has had an IEP and what kind of accommodations she receives. Her mother explained, “She has had it for a little over a year. It changed a bit this year. We’ve found some things that work a little bit better. She got her own computer this year for dictating.” She went on expand,

Madison does a lot more self-directed learning than most of the other students so she spends a lot of time on the computer and they’ve given Madison her own computer with a dictation device so she can do her journals and what not. Also some ear phones for external noise. Bright lights bother her too.

Madison’s favourite subject is math. Her least favourite subjects are language, art and gym because as she explains, “I’m not really…like…I am not an artist and I don’t like going to gym because it’s always so loud and every single time I go to gym I always get a headache before I go there because everybody in my class is like really loud.” When asked what she likes about school Madison stated,

I like having a lot of friends and playing with them and I like umm having indoor recesses because it’s really fun and because me and my friend we always play this Penguin game and it’s like Connect 4 and it’s really fun. I like learning about math because math is my favourite strength in school and umm I like it because it’s my favourite thing and I like counting money and I like making patterns and we do puzzles.

When asked about her hobbies and interests Madison stated,

Mostly going on the computer playing Dreambox and sometimes Scratch. I normally play ball or like basketball and soccer but I’ve been roofing lots of them so we barely have any balls. Outside of school, I like playing with my bike and with my babysitter because she is so much fun. Oh ya and I got a new skateboard and I’m starting to learn how to do that!

I was able to recruit Madison as a research participant having previously known her mother through community events in their neighbourhood associated with officiating basketball. The interview took place at Madison’s place of residence which is a house with her mother present.
Malcolm

Malcolm was born in December 2008 and at the time of the interview was nine years old. He self-identifies as male and a visible racialized person as his mother is Trinidadian and his father is Nigerian. He lives with his mother and step-father. His mother is an eye-specialist assistant. His step-father is Jamaican and an elementary school teacher. Malcolm was born in Canada and speaks English and a little bit of Spanish. He has a one year old new born sister as a sibling. He attends a public school in the west region of Toronto which offers classes from Kindergarten to Grade 5. Malcolm’s school is located within a neighbourhood associated with middle class socio-economic status. Malcolm has a male teacher. His favourite subject is math “because it’s easy.” His least favourite subject is science. When asked what he likes about school, Malcolm explained, “It’s fun and they have games that we can play and they have math that I like.” Expanding on what he does not like about school, Malcolm stated, “Most people they don’t do what the teacher says. Sometimes I actually tell them to stop so we can play a game or something.” Malcolm’s hobbies and interests are playing video games, taking care of his new born sister, and playing the piano. In response to what’s his opinion of the school Malcolm attends, his step-father stated,

This year his teacher is a male teacher. It’s the first time his teacher is a male from a South Asian background. His teacher was very interested in Malcolm. He always wanted to figure out what Malcolm is doing and why he is doing things so he was in contact with us as the parents very often almost on a weekly basis. The teacher also called us during report card time so this year is very good. He was very involved and it seems like he really cares about Malcolm’s education and he helped him a lot with his grades and it was reflected when he got his report card.

I was able to recruit Malcolm as a research participant having previously known his step-father through community events in their neighbourhood associated with teaching and officiating basketball. The interview took place at a nearby school site with his step-father present.
Christopher

Christopher was born in April 2008 and at the time of the interview was nine years old. He self-identifies as male and a visible racialized person. His mother is Ecuadorian and works as a dental assistant and his father is Jamaican. He lives with both his parents and has a younger brother and an older sister as siblings. Christopher was born in Canada and speaks English and a little bit of Spanish. He attends a public school in the northwest region of Toronto which offers classes from Kindergarten to Grade 5. Christopher’s school is located within a neighbourhood associated with mixed socio-economic status; certain pockets within the neighbourhood are middle class whereas other pockets are affiliated with lower socio-economic status. Christopher has a female teacher and is in a split 3/4 class which has both Grade 3 and Grade 4 students learning together in one class. There are approximately twenty two students in his class. His favourite subject is math and his least favourite subject is language. When asked what he likes about school, Christopher stated, “We get to play and then we get games and teachers who help us and all that.” Expanding on what he dislikes about school, Christopher stated, “We don’t get nap time like in Kindergarten.” Christopher’s hobbies and interests are playing basketball and playing with his younger brother. In response to what she likes about Christopher’s school, his mother stated, “I like that they have a strong community and I like that the staff, they try to communicate as much as possible with the parents, so it’s very high communication.” I was able to recruit Christopher as a research participant having previously taught him in an alternative summer school program he was enrolled in. The interview took place at a nearby school site with his mother present.

Chantel

Chantel was born in July 2008 and at the time of the interview was nine years old. She self-identifies as female and a visible racialized person born to second generation Canadian
parents with Caribbean roots. She was born in Canada and speaks only English. She has a younger brother as a sibling. Chantel lives with her mother in a single-parent household. Her mother is unemployed and a stay at home mother but in the summer worked seasonally as a camp counsellor in downtown Toronto. Chantel attends a public school located in North York area of Toronto which offers classes from Kindergarten to Grade 6. The school is located within a neighbourhood associated with high socio-economic status. Chantel is in a split 2/3 class which has both Grade 2 and Grade 3 students learning together in one class. There are approximately thirty students in her class. She has a female teacher and it’s the same teacher she had in Grade 1. Chantel has an Individual Education Plan which was initiated at the beginning of Grade 3 by her current teacher. When asked what she likes and dislikes about Chantel’s school, her mother stated,

It’s a good school. Her teacher really cares about her education. Her Grade 2 teacher didn’t really. Not to say she didn’t care but she didn’t really take an interest, but nonetheless she’s been there for the last 3 years. So yea, it’s a good school. The community is more of a richer school. We live around a lot of rich people so they help a lot in the community. They give back to the school and as a single mother if I can’t do something for them than the school is more than welcome to help with all of that.

Contrasting Chantel’s Grade 2 and Grade 3 teachers, Chantel’s mother expressed,

Her Grade 2 teacher did not really focus the way her Grade 3 teacher does. Chantel was having trouble with certain things in Grade 1 and that teacher tried to get me involved with her education, because I’m like so for education, so she tried to get me to help so I assumed that because she was really good at keeping up with that her next teacher would be too. Her Grade 2 teacher never really spoke to me about Chantel’s education. I would always ask her how Chantel is doing and she would just say she’s fine, that’s it. She would never tell me any details or whatever, so when the report cards came home, it never made any sense, whereas in Grade 3 I am getting weekly updates from her teacher.

Chantel’s favourite subject is gym. Her least favourite subject is math. Her hobbies and interests are watching television, playing soccer, doing cartwheels around the house, skipping, and playing with her younger brother. I was able to recruit Chantel as a participant having previously taught Chantel in an alternative summer school program she was enrolled in. The interview took
place at Chantel’s place of residence which is a government subsidized housing complex provided by Toronto Community Housing Corporation with her mother present.

3.11 Conclusion

Overall, Chapter 3 explained how Critical Theory, specifically CRT, supplemented with the use of semi-structured interviews as an instrument for data collection is used to collect, interpret, analyze, and identify emerging findings. More specifically, the chapter explained how participants were recruited through purposeful sampling, when and where the interviews took place, how the data was analyzed using thematic analysis, and what steps were taken to ensure credibility, dependability, and transferability of the data collected. The chapter concluded with a biographical sketch of participants for the readers to get to know them better and to prepare the readers for a more in depth analysis of their responses as part of the following chapter.

Chapter 4 is titled Research Findings, Implications, Further Areas to Explore, and Recommendations. It is an interactive dialogical chapter that entails many components. At the core is the identification and explanation of eight research findings that emerged from the thematic analysis of the data collected from the interviews. After each identified finding is explained, relevant implications and further areas to explore are discussed. Each finding concludes with action-oriented suggestions listed as recommendations.
Chapter 4

Research Findings, Implications, Further Areas to Explore, and Recommendations

4.0 Introduction

The objective of this study is to explore and further understand “What are the experiences, opinions, and concerns of racialized children and parents regarding how the EQAO standardized test impacts their identity, family, school and the larger surrounding community in which they live?” in Ontario. Chapter 4 is a hybrid chapter which identifies eight major findings emerging from thematic analysis of the data generated from the interviews. Directly following the identification and explanation of each finding, three major affiliated components are discussed which include implications, further areas to explore, and recommendations. Although the findings and implications are presented separately, it is significant to emphasize they are holistically interconnected and impact each other directly and indirectly through a domino effect. Structurally and thematically, after each finding is described, it is supplemented with a few quotations from either the children and/or the parents. This format was implemented with intentionality in order for voices of racialized children and parents to be at the centre of the conversations leading this exploratory qualitative study. This partial deviance away from how a typical PhD thesis is structured and presented in linear compartmentalized pre-determined chapters is an act of subversion and resistance (Smith 1999; Eizadirad & Portelli, 2018). The intentional practical restructuring of Chapter 4 challenges current hierarchical power relations embedded within post-secondary institutions that often marginalize embodied lived experiences in the form of qualitative data, labelling it as not academic enough, and instead give more currency and privilege to quantitative data and theoretical knowledge (Lather, 1986). It is
through listening and examining the “subaltern voices” (Spivak, 1988, p. 66) of racialized children and parents that we can further explore and trace the short and long term micro and macro impact of institutional policies and practices associated with EQAO standardized testing in elementary schools and make informed decisions about whether to phase out the Grade 3 EQAO testing or how to alter it to make it more equitable.

4.1A Finding #1

Most children experienced high intensity socio-emotionally induced stress and anxiety subjectively attributing it to fear of failure and poor performance. The level of stress and anxiety was so severe in some cases that the child could not sleep the night before the test or refused entering the classroom on test day to participate in writing the EQAO test.

I felt nervous and scared. I didn’t know if it’s gonna go on my report card or not. I felt it’s gonna go on my report card so I didn’t wanna go to class cause if I got most of my answers wrong, I would have to do Grade 3 all over again.

Jordan

I couldn’t understand why it’s here [on the test] when I haven’t done it yet.

Madison

One of the most reoccurring themes that emerged from the interviews with the Grade 3 children was the induced stress and anxiety they experienced from the socio-emotional impact of preparing for the EQAO test from the start of the school year to when they had to write it in late May or early June. Children recognized the importance of the test as constant references were made to it starting from September by teachers and administrators in their respective schools to ensure they were prepared for the EQAO test. Common preparation techniques experienced by children interviewed were doing practice questions in class with reference to EQAO expectations, completing EQAO booklets from previous years as practice, and receiving
informational school letters intended for their parents emphasizing importance of the children being available to participate in writing the EQAO test. The informational letters also outlined various tips to assist parents in ensuring their child is optimally ready to partake in the test. Examples of suggestions included packing healthy snacks and ensuring their child goes to bed early the night before the start of EQAO testing.

When asked what was different in Grade 3 compared to Grade 2, Deshaun explicitly stated “The EQAO test.” When I further probed by asking how does the EQAO test make it different, Deshaun explained, “It’s because we didn’t have something that hard in Grade 1 or 2.” Similarly, in response to the same question about differences in Grade 3 compared to Grade 2, Kobe stated that “nothing was different except for the EQAO.” Kobe further explained, “I have never done a test that big, like that long.” These responses indicate that the children felt that the EQAO standardized test was a major event they participated in. From their subjective viewpoints, the EQAO test in its length, format, structure, and time allocated to prepare for it was drastically different compared to their other routine experiences in school.

Although students were reminded by their teachers and school administrators, and at times by their parents, that the EQAO test did not impact their report card marks or advancement to Grade 4, the emphasis that was placed on the importance of the test in terms of constant reference to it and the amount of time dedicated to prepare for it, created the niche and the unintended consequence of placing extensive pressure on the children to do well. Children expressed they felt that the EQAO test was an indicator, similar to a thermometer, of how smart they were and to what extent they had mastered the curriculum content they had learned up to that point in their life in Reading, Writing, and Mathematics. Children further explained they felt pressured to do well to justify their identity as smart, worrying that if they did poor they are judged and it would be representative of their families, teacher, school, and community. Hence,
most students stated being highly anxious and even scared about writing the test due to fear of failure. In one extreme case, Jordan would not enter the class on the first day of EQAO testing to participate in writing the test due to feeling scared and nervous. The school administrators had to call Jordan’s mother to speak to him over the phone to calm his nerves and reassure him that he is not going to be judged regardless of how he does. Jordan’s mother explained the incident;

On the first day he wouldn’t go to class and the school ended up having to call me to help out the situation. It did help. It was just reassuring him not to worry too much and just do his best. As the week went on, he did start to loosen up and not be so worried or stressed about it.

After hearing reassuring words from his mother, Jordan felt somewhat comfortable enough to walk into the classroom willingly and participate in writing the EQAO test. When asked about the reasoning for not wanting to enter the classroom, Jordan stated,

I felt nervous and scared. I didn’t know if it’s gonna go on my report card or not. I felt it’s gonna go on my report card so I didn’t wanna go to class cause if I got most of my answers wrong, I would have to do Grade 3 all over again.

Similarly, I asked other children how they felt during EQAO testing week particularly on the first day of testing. Christopher stated, “The first day of the test I felt very nervous.” When asked to rate the intensity of his emotions on a scale of one to ten, with one being not nervous at all and ten being extremely nervous, Christopher expressed an eight. Another child who expressed experiencing severe anxiety and anxiousness was Madison who has an IEP. As part of her IEP accommodations, she often engages in self-directed learning with help from an Educational Assistant (EA) in the classroom. Madison receives her own computer from the school which has a dictation program that assists her in writing and doing her homework such as journal responses. She is also allowed to wear headphones in class to tune out external noise as noise and bright lights give her headaches. In regards to how she felt about the EQAO test, Madison stated, “I felt like (pause) really really really worried and um (pause) I kinda felt like a
little bit frustrated with all the pressure I had to do, like, I never had to do that much work in one day."

Madison expresses that compared to other routine activities she does in the classroom, she “never had to do that much work in one day,” having to complete various EQAO booklets within a limited allocated time. She explained this drastically differs from her routine experience in school where she learns at her own pace as a form of accommodation. I followed up by asking Madison who is putting pressure on her to do well on the test. Madison stated, “One of my (pause) Ms. Alvi, cause she’s telling me you have to do this and that, and all at the same time, and I can’t, like I can’t do all that at the same time.” Madison was frustrated with the change in her routine schedule and the expectations that she had to complete a certain amount of work within a limited allocated time. Madison’s mother put things into perspective by further explaining Madison’s identified exceptionalities and the support services she receives from the school and her teachers;

I think Madison gets lots of flexibility at school in terms of, you know, if she needs to stop doing something, she can do something different. She does a lot of self-directed learning. So to have to actually sit and do something that is different, I think there is a lot of pressure there.

In order to better understand the magnitude of pressure Madison felt, I asked her to rate her level of anxiousness having to write the EQAO test on a scale of one to ten, with one being not anxious at all and ten being extremely anxious. She expressed loudly, “10 out of 10!” I followed up by asking Madison’s mother to explain what she observed in Madison in terms of changes in emotions or behaviours leading up to EQAO testing week. At this point in the interview, Madison eagerly wanted to jump in and respond to the question first before her mother. Madison expressed,
So I’ve been having a lot of emotions to the EQAO (pause) like I’ve been having a lot of problems with it, because I was really worried because I was not sure if I am going to be passing it or not. Like (pause) I am not used to getting so much work in one day because we have to do it until 5\textsuperscript{th} period and we only have one period off but after when I was done, I felt much better.

Madison’s mom further expanded and contextualized her response by explaining,

Madison worries so we work through some anxiety pieces there. When something is a little bit different, you know, it really affects her so she thought about it a lot at nighttime and worrying about it coming up. I think because of how much prep work they did with her to umm help her be successful in her testing (pause) umm it became, you know, a big deal at the school and it became a big deal to Madison too. She worried about it a lot at nighttime.

With regards to administration of EQAO tests, Madison and other students with similar exceptionalities associated with writing difficulties, are often taken out of their regular classroom and placed into a separate room where they work one on one with another teacher or EA to complete the EQAO test booklets. With Madison, the EA read out the questions to her, followed by Madison responding orally and her EA transcribing and writing her responses into the EQAO booklet for her. Madison explained this process was very frustrating as she was worried and nervous about communicating clearly. When asked, how is the EQAO test similar or different to other things she does in school, Madison said, “I couldn’t understand why it’s here [on the test] when I haven’t done it yet.” It appeared that the entire experience from the preparation, to the lead up and administration of the test, on multiple levels was traumatizing for Madison as it had caused her to experience severe intense negative emotions such as anger, frustration, and sadness associated with worrying about doing poorly on the test and fear of failure and being judged as not smart. This was exemplified when I asked Madison how she felt after finishing writing the EQAO test, which she quickly with enthusiasm and a big smile stated, “I felt happy that it was over and that I didn’t have to do it anymore!”
Other Grade 3 children interviewed had similar responses in describing their emotions leading up to the test and during the week EQAO tests were administered. When asked how she felt emotionally on a scale of one to ten, with one being not nervous at all and ten being extremely nervous, Chantel who also has an IEP, responded “a 9 because I thought I was gonna fail.” Once again, the negative emotions experienced were associated with fear of failure and the imaginative perceived consequences that can arise from doing poorly. This can be attributed to the EQAO test being highly emphasized and constantly made reference to throughout the school year by teachers and administrators beginning from September. This is not to infer that all teachers and administrators are in favour of the test, but they work within the power dynamics affiliated with standardized testing policy enactment. This translates into pressure placed upon them to improve EQAO test scores to avoid being labelled as a “bad” school. This is further explored in more depth later on as part of other identified findings. Hence, even though children are reminded by their teachers and parents that their performance on EQAO tests does not impact their report card marks or advancement to Grade 4, the atmosphere around the importance of the test contributes to children feeling extremely pressurized, anxious, nervous, and scared about doing poorly and failing.

As a researcher, I wanted to go beyond simply identifying the emotions felt by Grade 3 children as they prepared and participated in writing the EQAO test. I was also interested in what they thought of the test in terms of its format, structure, and relevance as often their voices are not heard in a meaningful constructive manner as part of policy development due to their young age. I asked Chantel what she liked about the EQAO test, which she responded by stating, “Um…nothing!” causing her mother and her to burst into laughter. As a follow up, I asked what she didn’t like about the test which she stated, “Everything. It was everything. I don’t like EQAO because it’s boring. All you ever do is sit there with a pencil and answer questions.” In gauging
the relevance of the test, I asked Christopher to rate the effectiveness of the test in helping him as a student on a scale of one to ten which he expressed, “To be honest, a 2, because it’s not like it’s gonna go on your report card or something.” With Christopher, because he recognized it did not impact his report card mark, he perceived the EQAO test as less relevant. I wondered whether his perception of the lack of influence of the test on his report card mark had any impact on how much effort he put into completing the test. Similarly, I asked Kobe how the test helped him and if so in what ways, which he responded, “Not really.” Malcolm described the test as “boring.” When asked what he would change about the test if he had the power to do so, Malcolm expressed, “Umm I would change a few things like I would actually make it more fun and more colourful so they could do the test quickly and they don’t get bored doing it.”

From the above aforementioned responses from the children describing the EQAO test, it can be inferred that most did not find the EQAO test engaging or highly relevant in helping them. Descriptive words such as “bored” and “boring” were commonly used by many of the children interviewed to refer to length and format of the test which is predominantly multiple choice, true and false, and short answer questions. Laila expressed that although she was excited about doing the test, those feelings changed quickly once she began the test. Laila explained, “It [feeling of excitement] died after a few minutes, (pause) after like 30 minutes, because it got harder and harder every question I did.” Laila’s excitement diminished quickly due to difficulty of the questions on the EQAO test which consequentially impacted her self-confidence. Her sense of excitement was replaced with feeling nervous, anxious, and worried about doing poorly and failing.

4.1B Implications

Responses of the Grade 3 children interviewed in terms of what they expressed as negative socio-emotionally induced stress, anxiety, and fear of failure associated with writing the
EQAO test confirms and aligns with what The National Center for Fair and Open Testing (FairTest) identifies as negative harmful effects of using standardized testing on young children impacting their “healthy development and learning” (FairTest, 2017, p. 1). Examples of negative physical and psychological impacts expressed by the interviewed children included losing sleep by worrying about doing poorly, experiencing overwhelming anxiety and nervousness demonstrated by crying and needing reassurance from loved ones such as parents to enter the classroom to take the EQAO test, feeling excluded by being taken out of the regular classroom to be prepped for and write the EQAO test, and fear of failure and being labelled as “dumb.”

Majority of the children perceived writing the EQAO test as a significant event compared to their other routine academic experiences in school due to constant reference made to it and the amount of pressure they felt to do well on the test. Regardless of what the children were told about the non-impact of the test on their marks and advancement to Grade 4, majority of them did not believe it, demonstrated by their fear of failure and their own subjective perceived consequences associated with doing poorly on the test such as having to do Grade 3 all over again.

The socio-emotional impact of preparing and writing the Grade 3 EQAO test does not stop as soon as the last EQAO booklet is completed and the pencil is requested to be placed down once the allocated time has finished. We are naive to assume that is the case since events in life that arouse severe negative emotions typically have long lasting impact later into life (Curtis et al., 1992; Eizadirad, 2016; James, 2012; Ontario Ministry of Education, 2014). With respect to young children, Ontario Ministry of Education document (2014) How Does Learning Happen? Ontario's Pedagogy for the Early Years emphasizes, “positive experiences in early childhood set the foundation for lifelong learning, behaviour, health and well-being,” (p. 10) and “high-quality early childhood programs recognize the connection between emotional well-being and social and cognitive development and the importance of focusing on these holistically” (p.
Hence, the severe intense emotions experienced by racialized Grade 3 children writing the EQAO test in a highly pressurized environment can have a negative impact on their social and emotional development. EQAO testing does not take into account the socio-emotional developmental stage of each child relative to their lived experiences and life circumstances and how this holistically can influence their performance on the test. EQAO standardized tests function under homogenizing assumptions focusing exclusively on outcomes (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Kumashiro, 2000; Kohn, 2000; Dei, 2008; James, 2012; Eizadirad et al., 2016; Kempf, 2016). The assumption is all children should attain a certain level of achievement by the end of Grade 3 regardless of their unique identities and individualistic developmental needs and life circumstances.

The narratives of children and parents interviewed express that there are more long-term effects associated with writing EQAO standardized tests. I categorize these long-term negative effects associated with preparing and writing standardized tests at a young age under the umbrella term *invisible scars and traumatizing effects of standardized testing*. Although it is easier to identify temporary physical displays of stress and anxiety experienced by children during EQAO testing week, long-term socio-emotional, spiritual, and psychological impact of doing poorly on standardized tests is not visible until later as we actively listen to narratives of children and explore the domino-effect on their identity development and larger school experiences associated with their level of self-confidence, amount of effort they put into completing tasks, and overall level of engagement with school activities and initiatives.

One of the implications of placing such high importance on EQAO tests and doing well on them is the rise of test-taking anxiety amongst young children which can have a spill-over effect into the rest of their lives as they mature and attend high school and post-secondary institutions. If students do not feel great about themselves, in terms of their self-confidence as a
result of doing poorly on a standardized test, it can lead to “a self-fulfilling prophecy on continuing lower achievement” (Ontario Teachers’ Federation, 2011, p. 10) self-identifying as “dumb” or not as smart compared to their peers. This can occur at two stages; immediately after completion of the test based on their subjective self-perception of how they did on the test relative to how difficult they found the questions and at the start of Grade 4 when they receive their EQAO results back and it does not align with how well they thought they did retrospectively and in comparison to their peers. Kobe’s mother who is an elementary school principal states,

Imagine, these kids get their results in Grade 4 and no one ever has a conversation about the results. So you have a child who might get a Level 1 who will now feel like ‘oh I am probably not very smart’ and the parents might think ‘my child is not very smart’ depending on how they interpret it. That’s not constructive, ever!

The negative psychological and emotional impact can consequentially lead to lack of motivation, reduced effort in completing tasks, and simply not caring about school-related activities such as assigned homework. This can become part of a vicious cycle that perpetuates the “self-fulfilling prophecy” where the young child is labelled as “at risk” (Masood, 2008) by the education system because they continuously fail to achieve the benchmark of excellence constructed by Ministry of Education standards equivalent to achieving at a Level 3 or higher. Russo (2012) makes an important developmental argument stating, “By placing unrealistic demands upon children who are not developmentally ready, we are asking teachers to spend most of their time attempting to push children in ways that may set them up to fail.” (pp. 143-144) The problem may not be that the child is not knowledgeable, but rather that EQAO standardized tests as a medium and in its format, is not congruent with providing an ideal and effective avenue for all children relative to their developmental stage to optimally express what they know. As a result, “testing may make children feel ‘dumb’ especially when tested on
materials that are developmentally inappropriate” (FairTest, 2017, p. 1). As Stiggins (2014), an assessment expert, argues “Branding them [children] with unflattering labels, as our assessment systems often do, is unwise, unfair, counterproductive, and harmful.” (p. 9)

If schools are going to continue with the use of standardized testing on young children in elementary schools, we as caring and concerned adults in our various roles and capacities need to work towards mitigating the invisible scars and traumatizing scars of standardized testing. One approach is investment in mental health and mindfulness initiatives to help children express how they feel, process and express their emotions constructively, and utilize positive coping mechanisms as outlets for stress, anxiety, and fear of failure induced from preparing and writing highly anticipated and publicized tests such as the Grade 3 EQAO test. Overall, we need a culture change beyond simply judging students’ intellectual and academic competencies based on outcome-based standardized tests towards a more holistic interdisciplinary understanding of students that takes into consideration their physical, social, emotional, spiritual, and psychological development. As Miller (2000) puts it, “In the mechanical school the focus is on testing and grades, often at the expense of learning. The learning in the soulful school, however, is holistic learning that integrates body, mind, emotions, and spirit.” (p. 110)

Having documented some of the negative impacts of the Grade 3 EQAO standardized testing on children socio-emotionally, as told through their voices, the critical question we must ask is whether the current way the Grade 3 EQAO test is prepared for and administered is helping children or hindering them in their holistic development and objective of achieving at their full potential? More specifically, who is benefiting from the current EQAO standardized testing practices and who is marginalized and oppressed? These questions will further be explored in the following upcoming subsections of this chapter to gain a better understanding of
the bigger picture and the larger impact of EQAO test preparation and administration on other stakeholders in education.

4.1C Further Areas to Explore

Since this qualitative study is exploratory in nature due to its small sample size, school boards and schools should invest in more avenues in various formats such as surveys, interviews, and focus groups to listen to voices of children and youth with respect to how they are impacted preparing and writing EQAO standardized tests. Stiggins (2014) raises an important point that “Powerful roadblocks to learning can rise from the very process of assessing and evaluating the performance of the learner, depending on how the learner interprets what is happening to him or her.” (p. 27) Therefore, we need to give importance to subjective experiences of racialized students and their interpretation of “what is happening to him or her”. Consultations with racialized students and parents should be done regionally within neighbourhoods and communities which historically have done poorly on EQAO standardized tests based on their overall school scores as well as within neighbourhoods which have consistently done well. This provides a comparative method to explore and contrast relevant experiential and community factors that impact student performance on EQAO standardized tests beyond examining individualistic student effort. Data collected can be used to explore other important relevant factors such as school culture and climate, available opportunities such as sport teams, clubs and leadership initiatives, and accessibility to support services and extra help amongst other factors that can assist in engaging children and facilitating their optimal development.

Longitudinal studies administered by approved external organizations can be another approach to invest in better understanding the long term impact of standardized testing on young children in a context-specific manner relative to geography, race, gender, and socio-economic status. Tracking the same cohort of children must go beyond simply examining how they did in
Grade 3 compared to the other years EQAO standardized tests are administered. To gain a more complex and holistic understanding of the impact of EQAO standardized testing on children, longitudinal studies should track specific cohort of students based on contextual factors relative to their lived experiences with a focus on specific factors such as race, geography, gender, socio-economic status, teacher pedagogy, access to support services, etc. This will provide more insightful findings in how specific identities are impacted by outcome-based EQAO standardized tests. Data collected using this approach will allow educational researchers to make connections between in-school factors and the larger community factors that interact and intersect dynamically to influence the child holistically in terms of motivation, access to opportunities, and engagement in school.

**4.1D Recommendations**

I therefore recommend school boards and schools to immediately invest in mitigating the documented short and long term *invisible scars and traumatizing effects of standardized testing* by investing in more mental health and mindfulness initiatives. This will facilitate positive socio-emotional development in children and increase their emotional intelligence which includes children learning to acknowledge what emotions they are experiencing and why, how to process and express their emotions constructively, and how to use positive coping mechanisms as outlets to mitigate the stress, anxiety, and fear of failure associated with test-taking.

I therefore recommend school boards and schools to invest in creating more avenues and mediums, such as focus groups and online surveys, to engage children participating in writing EQAO standardized tests to express how they are socio-emotionally, spiritually, and psychologically impacted by the process before, during, and after writing the tests. The post impact examination should have a special one year time frame particularly exploring the direct impact on children’s identities when they receive their EQAO results in Grade 4.
I therefore recommend school boards and schools to invest in tracking cohort of students through longitudinal and intersectional studies administered by neutral external organizations to further explore the impacts of standardized testing on young children based on contextual factors with a focus on specific factors including race, geography, gender, socio-economic status, teacher pedagogy, and access to support services. Data generated will provide more holistic insightful findings in terms of how specific identities are impacted by outcome-based EQAO standardized tests.

4.2A Finding #2

Most parents expressed, based on changes they observed in emotions and behaviours of their child preparing and writing the Grade 3 EQAO test, that the test is more harmful than beneficial. All parents tried to counter and mitigate the test induced anxiety, stress, and fear of failure in their child. Strategies used included encouraging their child to try their best, having informal conversations with them about the non-impact of test results on their marks and advancement to Grade 4, and doing practice questions to familiarize them with types of questions on the test to reduce their test-taking anxiety.

Finding #3

Parents from higher socio-economic status had a better understanding of EQAO standardized testing and its purpose as a political accountability tool including how the test is administered and how the results are used. Whereas most parents preferred the Grade 3 EQAO test to be eliminated entirely, some parents including those who work within the educational system, were in favour of maintaining the test, but strongly felt it requires changes in its content and format to be effective and socio-culturally relevant to the identities, knowledge, skills, and lived experiences of racialized 21st century learners.
Students are getting labelled. You are breaking down kids and their self-esteem and that’s not what we are supposed to be doing as educators.  

Jordan’s mother

The driver of education has to be the children, and if EQAO is not anchored in that, then there is a problem.

Kobe’s mother

All parents interviewed expressed they observed higher levels of stress and anxiety in their child leading up to and during EQAO testing week. Most parents tried to counter and mitigate the test induced anxiety, stress, and fear of failure in their child using various approaches which included encouraging their child to try their best, having informal conversations with them about the non-impact of test results on their marks and advancement to Grade 4, and doing practice questions to familiarize them with types of questions on the test to reduce their test-taking anxiety. Most parents expressed, based on changes they observed in emotions and behaviours of their child preparing and writing the Grade 3 EQAO test, that the test is more harmful than beneficial.

In response to what were some of the mood, emotional or behavioural changes they observed in their child during EQAO testing week and how they tried to support their child, here are what some of the parents expressed;

Chantel’s mother: She was more stressed out. Just the way she was acting at school. It was just more like she wasn’t paying attention. She was worried about the wrong things and then like at home she was quiet.

Christopher’s mother: He was nervous I would say but at the end of the day I told him and reminded him to just do your best. It’s just like any other test. I know at school they’re already preparing them so they don’t need another person over their head. So what I do is I ask how his day was, what he did, what he learned, and what he practiced. Basically that’s it. I just leave it.

Madison’s mother: Well even just the way that, umm (pause), it just was very intimidating for Madison to have to umm (pause), just the way that her brain works like in terms of having to face all of that in one particular week and all the pressure. If the questions didn’t go well, I think there was, you know, a sense of failure or not attaining something she was supposed to, even though at home we are ok with whatever.
Laila’s mother who is also a teacher: I think as a parent I wouldn’t put so much emphasis on the test. I wouldn’t stress the kids about it. I told Laila to do the best you can.

Malcolm’s step-father who is also a teacher: We had a few conversations about the test just talking about how you need to write these tests and it’s not really that much (pause) and don’t pressure yourself too much. Don’t worry about it too much. Just do your best.

The above aforementioned responses indicate parents visibly observed a heightened level of stress and anxiety in their child from pressure to do well on the EQAO standardized test associated with fear of failing or being labelled as “dumb” or “illiterate.”

Although children were constantly reminded by their parents “not to worry” and “just do their best”, they still felt highly nervous, anxious, and fearful of getting poor results. An important question to ask is where does this pressure to do well on EQAO standardized tests originate from and how is it placed on the children? The responses of the children and parents, as a collective, indicate the environment co-constructed by school administrators, the amount of time devoted to preparing for the test, and the way EQAO is talked about amongst peers and older Grade 4 children contributes to Grade 3 children feeling intense pressure to do well and legitimize their identity. Grade 3 becomes the “EQAO year”. Children fear that they will be judged by their peers, parents, teacher(s), and administrators, counter to what they have been told about the non-impact of the test in terms of its consequences.

The journey of placing high importance on the EQAO test begins in September at the start of Grade 3. All children interviewed expressed that their teacher(s) briefly explained to them at the beginning of the school year what the EQAO test is and when it will take place. Administrators also sent home an information letter conveying the same message to the parents. When parents were asked if they received any communication from the school about the EQAO test since September, they expressed;
Madison’s mother: Yea, so we got a couple of notices saying that it was coming and the weeks it was going to happen to try to make sure that we were in school and available to participate and umm (pause) that’s pretty much it. I mean we knew about it, umm (pause), just because the kids are coming home and talking about when it’s gonna be and the prep that they were doing for it.

Malcolm’s step-father: Yea throughout the entire year actually. We were in contact with the teacher and he talked about that it was an EQAO year. They notified us when the EQAO will take place and some of the things we can do. Also he would send homework home to help him prepare for the EQAO.

Christopher’s mother: Yes, there was. It was for parents to come in to give them some information. Due to (pause), because I have two other kids, I’ve gone through it so I didn’t go to it because it’s mostly the same information.

The parental approach to supporting their child and trying to mitigate the stress and anxiety associated with EQAO test-taking differed based on socio-economic status (SES). Parents from higher SES, some which worked in the school system in various roles, had a more comprehensive understanding about what the EQAO test is, what purpose it serves, and awareness about the socio-political power dynamics associated with administrating and using EQAO test results. This can be attributed to having an insider role in the education system and recognizing the unique impact of EQAO standardized testing on various stakeholders within a hierarchical power structure (Ricci, 2004; Dei, 2008; Sharma, 2009; Gardener, 2017).

In response to what is the EQAO test and why their child writes it, Kobe’s father who is a school administrator in the capacity of a vice-principal stated,

I think the standard understanding is that it’s a standardized test so that we, as parents and educators, can have some common understanding of where kids are at in comparison to other kids across the province in Reading, Writing, and Mathematics.

Similarly, Christopher’s mother stated,

What I was told is that it’s feedback for the government and for the school to see, umm (pause), where their education is standing, how high the language is or how high the math is, and hopefully with that information they can help out for the following year to improve.
Parents from higher SES were able to state the purpose of EQAO testing in a manner that aligns with the narrative told by EQAO as an organization through its website and reproduction of various official documents available and accessible for download online (EQAO, 2018b).

According to EQAO (2017a),

EQAO’s tests measure student achievement in reading, writing and mathematics in relation to *Ontario Curriculum* expectations. The resulting data provide accountability and a gauge of quality in Ontario’s publicly funded education system. By providing this important evidence about learning, EQAO acts as a catalyst for increasing the success of Ontario students. (p. 4)

In addition to having a better theoretical understanding of the purpose of EQAO testing, parents from higher SES were highly critical of the EQAO test and its effectiveness in being “a catalyst for increasing the success of Ontario students.” Interestingly, they did not resort to removing their child from participating in writing the EQAO test as an act of resistance. Paradoxically, some parents who were highly critical of the effectiveness of EQAO tests took the initiative to do more preparation with their child, outside of what their child’s teacher was doing, to further prepare their child for the test and help reduce test-taking anxiety and stress. These strategies included printing and photocopying previous years test questions and/or modelling how to respond to questions similar to the format on EQAO tests that asks to “show your work” and “explain your thinking”. Jordan’s mother, who works in the school system as an Educational Resource Facilitator providing support services to different students, expressed that she did review questions at home with Jordan to better prepare him for the EQAO test. She went on to explain, “In the beginning, he was definitely nervous. Even when we were doing review with him at home, he would get upset quickly.” Similarly, Kobe’s mother who is an elementary school principal photocopied practice booklets for Kobe on her own so he can work on them at home. I asked why she did this even though she was not in favour of the EQAO test which she responded by stating,
One of the reasons we did the practice booklets is I knew the teacher wasn’t doing it and as a principal lots of teachers do that to sort of alleviate anxiety. So I had Kobe write a practice test but then I gave him the answers so he can evaluate his answers and he could understand how he was being scored. So even though his answers were correct in many cases, he wouldn’t get the highest score, unless he did particular things, so he learned what those things were. I have limited doubt he did better on the EQAO because of that. We did that a few times. Another thing we did was, he wrote positive affirmations about himself, and we put it in his pocket and prior to writing the test he said those things about himself. That was a strategy I used as a school principal as well because I read a lot of research on positive psychology and the impact of feeling good when you are about to write a test.

Being an insider who works in a position of authority as a principal in the school system, Kobe’s mother understood getting answers correct on the EQAO test does not guarantee receiving a Level 4 score, especially with questions that indicate “show your work” or “explain your thinking”. In order to achieve a Level 4 score, it is required students demonstrate the appropriate steps and processes involved in arriving at their answers. This demonstrated Kobe’s mother’s cultural capital (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Kearns, 2016) associated with working in the education system and understanding the ins and outs and power dynamics of how EQAO booklets are marked and scored. From her perspective, the extra effort she put in preparing Kobe for the EQAO test was well intended to alleviate and mitigate the anxiety and psychological stress Kobe would experience writing a highly emphasized standardized test. I asked Kobe’s mother, as a parent and an administrator, to what extent she felt the EQAO test helped Kobe in any capacity. She stated, “I think it [the EQAO test] definitely did not help him and I think had we not managed it the way we did, it would have done exactly the opposite by hurting him.”

According to Kobe’s mother, her extra preparation efforts at home were intended to “manage” the negative harmful impacts of writing the EQAO test.

In wanting to hear other parents’ perspectives, I asked others what they thought about the relevance of the Grade 3 EQAO test in helping their child. Laila’s mother, who is also an elementary school teacher stated,
I would say get rid of it [EQAO standardized testing] because it doesn’t follow the way they are learning in school. In school they are learning very hands-on using manipulatives or you know lots of anchor charts and success criterias and stuff on the wall to refer to, yet, when you get to EQAO testing, everything comes down. It’s all cleared off and you have no reference points so it kind of goes against the grain of what is actually taught.

Laila’s mother expresses that as a teacher and a parent, she feels there are disconnects between how the elementary curriculum is typically delivered pedagogically throughout the school year compared to how the EQAO test is administered. Whereas typically throughout the schools year, children are allowed to ask for help, collaborate with peers, learn from making mistakes, co-construct success criterias, and have reference points in the form of pictures and posters in the classroom to guide their learning, this is not the case when EQAO tests are administered.

Jordan’s mother expressed and echoed similar concerns to what Laila and Kobe’s mother mentioned about the ineffectiveness of the EQAO test by stating,

I don’t think it [EQAO testing] helps the children. I don’t see any benefits. We were worried about him because we know he doesn’t do well with that kind of stuff. Anytime you hear the word test, it makes kids, and everybody go kind of nervous. Even for me, I never did well on tests, and I don’t think tests really reflect a child’s abilities for the entire school year, especially this EQAO test. You have to evaluate kids in different elements. You have to evaluate them in their social element. Are they socializing with other kids? How do they respond to other kids and their teachers? And stuff like that as well as academics. I don’t think it should be all academic based. That’s not what schools are supposed to be. You have to look at everything as a whole. Doing these tests over three days doesn’t show you how a child is. There are some kids that don’t do well on tests. They can’t. They have a lot of anxiety. They are stressed about it and they don’t perform to the best of their abilities. Whereas if you sat down and had a conversation with them, they would probably give you a lot more information and do really well. I think teachers do a great job of trying to do that during the whole year, but I find when it’s the Grade 3 and 6 EQAO testing, the teachers are not able to do their job as well as they would like to, because everything is so focused on EQAO testing and so it doesn’t give teachers a lot of time to evaluate students in their entire element and give them the chance, you know, to show you that they do understand what they are asking them to do. Students are getting labelled. You are breaking down kids and their self-esteem and that’s not what we are supposed to be doing as educators.

Jordan’s mother emphasizes that standardized tests do not appeal to the strengths of all children and their preferred learning styles because it doesn’t “evaluate kids in different
elements.” Performing poorly on EQAO tests can make children feel bad about themselves and their abilities which can lower their self-esteem and confidence, particularly for racialized children who are facing systemic barriers within the education system (Dei, 2008; James, 2012). A cartoon image that visually exemplifies this point is the image of various animals lining up in front of a teacher sitting behind a desk with a caption stating, “For a fair selection, everybody has to take the same exam: Please climb that tree” (See Image 1). This cartoon image demonstrates the irony that just because you use the same method to evaluate all students, it does not mean that it is fair. Not everyone will perform well because their strengths and competencies do not align with how they are being assessed to judge their potential.


In contrast to parents from higher SES, parents from lower SES had a limited understanding of what EQAO testing is and what purpose it serves. In response to what is EQAO testing, Deshaun’s mother stated, “It’s a nationwide math test. I took it when I was in Grade 3. I don’t know if they do it in another grade. I just know that it’s a math test.” Deshaun’s mother was not familiar that EQAO standardized tests assess children in domains of Reading, Writing, and Mathematics and that it is only a provincial test. Similarly, in response to the same question, Chantel’s mother stated,
I believe it’s just on reading and writing I think. I remember taking it in Grade 9 and in Grade 6 and in Grade 3 or something like that, so I think it’s every 3 years. I umm (pause), just think it’s on reading and writing.

Both Deshaun and Chantel’s mother make references to their own experiences writing the EQAO standardized tests when they were younger. These recollections are vague in terms of details remembering the specific domains assessed and for what purposes. In response to what the EQAO results are used for, Chantel’s mom stated,

Umm (pause) I don’t know. Just to make sure everybody is at the level they’re supposed to be. I mean they probably use it in studies for like, umm, I don’t know. They probably just use it for some sort of study.

Deshaun’s mother was also unaware when EQAO results are returned to students. She stated, “I think they should give the results right before the school year is finished. Like right on the last day of school.”

Although somewhat less knowledgeable about details of EQAO standardized testing, parents from lower SES acknowledged that the EQAO test appeared important because of the way it was treated by administrators and teachers through the informational letters they received from the school, the informal and formal communication from their child’s teacher, and the practice questions sent home as homework. Parents from lower SES lacked the cultural capital (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Kearns, 2016) and the familiarity with how EQAO booklets are scored and the larger impact it can have on the perception of the school based on overall EQAO scores. In describing how she knew EQAO scores were important to the school, Chantel’s mom expressed, “It’s different only because you’re getting letters about it (laughs). I mean that’s the only thing that makes me feel like it’s really important because they send a letter home.”

When asked whether the school had provided any communication regarding EQAO testing, Chantel’s mom indicated “yes,” but demonstrated confusion about the purpose of the
test. She stated, “I don’t really understand why we have to do it.” I pursued this question further by asking how important it is for her child, Chantel, to do well on the EQAO test. She stated,

Umm (pause) well I never thought about it until you asked me. But I noticed like with her, I think any sort of test is important just because she shows a bit of struggle with a lot of, with certain things, so any test for her specifically will be important.

Similarly, although Deshaun’s mother did not have a clear understanding of the purpose of EQAO testing, she expressed it was “very important” because “it is then going to shape, I guess, how he [Deshaun] is viewed for his intellectual skills at that level from now till when they do it again.” For Deshaun’s mother, the test was important because it validated Deshaun’s intellectual knowledge, skills and competencies and it would contribute to how Deshaun is viewed, perceived, and judged by his teachers and peers.

When asked if parents are impacted by EQAO standardized testing, Deshaun’s mother stated,

Yea, because if a child feels affected and they don’t feel confident or they don’t feel happy that they did well, it will then reflect on the parents, and the parents would feel ways for them.

Deshaun’s mother expressed that parents are also impacted by EQAO testing because they are also judged based on the score their child receives.

When asked on a scale of one to ten about the relevance of the Grade 3 EQAO test in helping Christopher learn and improve, Christopher’s mom stated,

To be honest I would say zero because, like I said, it’s only for the government and for the school and it doesn’t count for his report card. So all the stress the kids go through and everything, I think it should, like that mark should somehow count as participation or be involved with their mark on their report card so the kids get a benefit out of it.

Christopher’s mom further explained that her older daughter who is now fifteen years old and attending high school experienced similar socio-emotional stress and anxiety writing EQAO tests in elementary school. She expressed,
To be honest (pause) my first daughter is fifteen years old now so I don’t think it’s necessary to stress out the kids with this. As you could see, the kids are already stressed out and they’re nervous and some of them can’t sleep, but at the same time umm (pause) the only one who benefits is the government and the school. It’s not even used as a mark on the report card. So for me as a parent, I don’t think it’s necessary because the teachers tell us don’t stress the kids at home this or that, but at the same time, I see from both my kids that they got very stressed out.

Christopher’s mom describes that both her children were highly stressed going through preparing and writing EQAO tests in elementary school, and that in retrospect she does not find the test relevant or helpful for the healthy development of her children. Similarly, Malcolm’s step-father stated,

For me personally, the EQAO test is not really that important. I think just him [Malcolm] learning the curriculum and how to act socially within different environments is more important than the EQAO test.

From the above aforementioned responses, most of the parents feel the Grade 3 EQAO test is not a practical tool that effectively assesses the smartness of their child from a holistic lens. This was further acknowledged by Madison’s mother in responding to how important it is for Madison to do well on the EQAO test as she stated, “It’s not relevant at all. We don’t judge, you know, our kids levels of anything based on test results or grades.”

Whereas most parents preferred the Grade 3 EQAO test to be eliminated entirely considering it costs $32 million dollars annually to administer it, some parents were in favour of maintaining the test but strongly felt it requires changes in its content and format to be socio-culturally relevant to the identities, knowledge, skills, and lived experiences of all students, particularly racialized children. Below are some of the parents’ responses describing their advice to the government about what to do about EQAO tests;

Kobe’s father who is also a middle school vice-principal: I haven’t thought through what would be a good replacement for it. I think they need to get rid of it number one. Because of the impact and the ways it plays out right now like the stress on teachers, the stress on parents, the judgment and evaluation that is placed on you know the schools and the
communities based on a culturally biased and limited test in term of what data it gives us. It doesn’t give you rich data, you know, even from a teaching and learning perspective, I think the way it plays out now it does way more harm than it does good. Having said that, I do think we need to think about what kind of data we are going to use to test where kids are at and how we triangulate data to create a rich picture of where students are at in their learning.

Kobe’s mother who is also an elementary school principal: I don’t think we should have it either. I do think we should have some way where we demonstrate acquisition of knowledge for kids because that is what it’s really about. So we do need to think, really critically, around how we want to demonstrate that students have actually learned. I don’t think that EQAO does that, but we do need to think of a way where we can demonstrate that. I think the way in which EQAO is read, the way it is administrated, and the way in which it is taken up, it’s problematic. So it goes back to, who is it for, really? The driver of education has to be the children and if EQAO is not anchored in that, then there is a problem.

Madison’s mother: I would just eliminate it [EQAO testing]. I don’t think it has a positive effect. I think that if we are going to put them in school and have teachers and a reporting system that should (pause), and we have the right people in place, the right teachers in place, you know, the right leaders in place that should be an accurate indication you’re kid being at the proper level. I don’t think having a government dictated system that disrupts the school year is going to give us better results.

Jordan’s mother who is also an Educational Resource Facilitator: I wouldn’t say like get rid of tests like EQAO but I would like to see them modify it and do different things with it. Not so much in just three days but over the whole year, and maybe not emphasize so much that it’s this one big test and it’s so important. You need to bring it back to being for school purposes, and right now it’s not for that. Right now, it’s for so many other things than for the students and helping their learning and helping them improve. I think we’ve forgotten that. What are we here for? We are here for these kids and their future and we need to build them up and not break them down with tests like these. We also need to continue to grow as a community. I think we’ve lost sight and focus in what our purposes are in schools and I see it every day working in schools.

Malcolm’s step-father who is also an elementary school teacher: Just to re-evaluate the test. Make sure the test is serving its purpose. I know it’s there for a purpose but also look at the other end of it as well. Look at the social aspect of things within the school environment. Look at the teacher efficacy within the school environment. Look at the well-being within the school environment and use the test as well to judge the schools and judge the people in these schools operating these schools. Don’t just look at the test and say the score is low so this school is not up to par. You have to look at other aspects as well and by doing that you are gonna improve the school environment and the school system.
The above responses as a collective indicate there are concerns from parents, including those who work in the education system, about the usefulness and the relevance of the data EQAO tests generate, how the data is interpreted by students, parents, the government, and the general public, and how it impacts children’s development and self-perception at such a young age. The sentiment from the parents’ responses is that how EQAO tests are currently administered and how the data is utilized is more harmful than beneficial to healthy child development and improvement of student learning. The big question that arises once again is who is the test for and why do we do it? This simple yet critical question requires us to further explore the impact of EQAO standardized testing from the perspective of children and parents to ensure educational policies related to administration of standardized tests, particularly in elementary schools, function to optimize learning and development of racialized children rather than augment and impede it (Dei, 2008; James, 2012; Kohn, 2000).

4.2B Implications

Hart and Kempf (2015) in their report titled Public Attitudes toward Education in Ontario 2015: The 19th OISE Survey of Educational Issues express that, “Less than half of parents are satisfied either with schools’ contribution to the physical development of students (41%) or their social and emotional development (45%)” (p. 2). This statistic complements and supports concerns expressed by interviewed parents about how EQAO tests assess children in limited domains and the pressure placed on them to do well is counter-productive to their socio-emotional development. Stiggins similarly (2014) points out,

[L]ack of influence [of standardized tests] does not arise from the inappropriateness of the tests, but rather the insufficiency of the information they provide. We have relied on them too heavily when we should have been supplementing them with other applications of assessment that can provide the additional evidence needed to improve student learning. (p. 30)
Stiggins (2014) expresses concerns about the usefulness of data generated from standardized test results similar to what the parents interviewed indicated.

At the core of these mentioned concerns is the ineffectiveness of EQAO relative to when and how results are returned to children as well as how results are used by schools and the general public. Despres, Kuhn, Ngirumpatse and Parent (2013) with specific reference to EQAO standardized testing in Ontario point out, “Standardized testing results are disseminated at the beginning of the following school year, reducing their effectiveness as an instrument for identifying and correcting weakness at the level of the individual student” (p. 10). Their report titled Real Accountability or an Illusion of Success? A Call to Review Standardized Testing in Ontario (2013) states, “The 1995 Commission noted that standardized testing would not be very useful to individual students because the results do not come quickly enough and when they do come, they do not include sufficient feedback, including an analysis of strengths and weaknesses” (p. 10). Children write the Grade 3 EQAO standardized test near the end of the school year in late May or early June. Upon returning from a two month summer break, at the start of Grade 4 in late September or early October, children receive their result which does not include any descriptive feedback about how to improve. The results simply outline what achievement level they have obtained in Reading, Writing, and Mathematics (See Figure 4 for sample). It is a score ranging from NE which means “Not enough evidence to be assigned a Level 1” to Level 4 meaning “Exceeds provincial standard”. Level 3 is the provincial standard that students are expected to be achieving at by the end of Grade 3.
Jordan’s mother raises an important concern when she states,

When you get the results back, it’s just a number. It’s a number to who? They [the children] don’t understand what this number means. It’s not like a regular test, where you know, if you got the test back and you got a bad review, the teacher says let’s look at this and why you got this answer wrong. It’s not a test like that. When kids get the results, they don’t understand if they did well or didn’t do well.

Part of the argument of why EQAO standardized tests are ineffective is the limited data it provides in terms of descriptive feedback about what the child did well and where or in what specific areas errors were made. What further complicates the matter is the extensive time frame it takes for the children to get their results back (Ricci, 2004; Rogers, 2014). Children are receiving their results approximately three to four months after writing the test. Often times, not only have children drastically changed physically, emotionality, and intellectually from a developmental perspective over the several months, but to complicate matters even more, they often do not remember the test content. Hence, their achievement scores as indicated on their individual EQAO report is left for them and their parents to be interpreted on their own without much guidance or support. Stiggins (2014) emphasizes that,

Problems arise if the communication of results is delayed for a long time. Students don’t stop growing after they take the annual state test, so those test results that arrive weeks or even months after the test is administered no longer reflect students’ achievement status. Timely feedback is important. (pp. 72-73)
Upon receiving test results, children often ask their peers how they did to compare one another’s achievements. This sharing of one’s achievement level amongst peers can be stressful and traumatizing, particularly if one has underachieved and done poorly. Peers joking or making fun of someone for their poor performance on a standardized test can be stressful and inscribe an identity on the child as “dumb” in that specific domain. This can have long-term effects on the child. For example, a child who does poor in reading might self-identify as a poor reader and consequentially avoid reading for enjoyment for not wanting to feel embarrassed by being judged or made fun of by others. Data collected as part of student questionnaires administered to children who participate in writing the EQAO test at the Primary and Junior level indicates, “the number of students who read for enjoyment has dropped significantly over the last 10 years” (Ontario Teachers’ Federation, 2011, p. 10). As Stiggins (2014) points out,

> Students constantly evaluate their own achievement too. They attend to adults’ assessments of them, and they make key instructional decisions about how- indeed, whether- to continue with their own learning based on their own self-assessment and interpretation of the available evidence. The outcome can be hope or hopelessness, optimism or pessimism, an expectation of success or failure, regarding one’s chances of future learning success. Depending on that internal judgement, students will either gain or lose confidence, increase or decrease engagement and effort, and experience learning success or failure. Their sense of themselves in the immediate learning context drives their subsequent actions. (p. 88)

Ontario Teachers’ Federation (2011) argue that “formative assessment (assessment for/ as learning) more effectively promotes student learning than summative assessment (assessment of learning)” (p. 5). They explain that,

> Assessment for learning is continuous. It is used to monitor student performance, provide timely feedback and generally enhance the teaching-learning experience. It occurs during instruction to support the next stage of learning. (p. 5)

purpose of assessment and evaluation is to improve student learning” (Ministry of Education, 2010, p. 6). It further outlines seven fundamental principles “to ensure that assessment, evaluation, and reporting are valid and reliable and that they lead to the improvement of learning for all students” (p. 6). These fundamental principles emphasize that assessment, evaluation, and reporting:

- are fair, transparent, and equitable for all students;
- support all students, including those with special education needs, those who are learning the language of instruction (English or French), and those who are First Nation, Métis, or Inuit;
- are carefully planned to relate to the curriculum expectations and learning goals and, as much as possible, to the interests, learning styles and preferences, needs, and experiences of all students;
- are communicated clearly to students and parents at the beginning of the school year or course and at other appropriate points throughout the school year or course;
- are ongoing, varied in nature, and administered over a period of time to provide multiple opportunities for students to demonstrate the full range of their learning;
- provide ongoing descriptive feedback that is clear, specific, meaningful, and timely to support improved learning and achievement;
- develop students’ self-assessment skills to enable them to assess their own learning, set specific goals, and plan next steps for their learning. (p. 6)

Therefore, if the “primary purpose of assessment and evaluation is to improve student learning,” (Ministry of Education, 2010, p. 28) then we should be investing more in “assessment for learning” and “assessment as learning” versus “assessment of learning” which is what EQAO standardized tests do. Fiore (2012) supports this stance stating, “One particular test or score does not paint a full, clear picture of a complex, developing child” (p. 5). As part of providing children with constructive and useful descriptive feedback to facilitate their positive healthy development, we must take into consideration more than just their age and what grade they are in. We must consider their socio-emotional intelligence, social skills, and level of maturity amongst other important factors impacting their motivation, engagement, and academic performance in schools and on standardized tests (People for Education, 2013). We need a shift towards understanding and demonstrating accountability in schools from a more holistic
interdisciplinary lens. As Fiore (2012) explains, “The most appropriate assessment strategies and tools to promote children’s learning and teacher effectiveness must coordinate with the most appropriate developmental period in order for maximum learning to occur” (p. 15).

4.2C Further Areas to Explore

To align educational assessment practices in schools with primary purpose of improving student learning by investing more in “assessment of learning” and “assessment as learning,” (Ministry of Education, 2010) government officials, educational administrators, researchers, and teachers need to hold consultation meetings with parents and children in various communities to receive feedback regarding;

a) Whether the current practice of continuing to administer EQAO standardized tests in Grade 3 is effective and worth it in terms of monetary and social costs? If the majority consensus is that it is not worth it to be maintained, supported with evidence, consider eliminating and phasing out the EQAO test and explore reallocating the funds to other social support services to create a more equitable educational system. If the majority consensus is to maintain administration of EQAO tests, supported with evidence, go to step b;

b) Explore ways the current model of administrating the Grade 3 EQAO test can be altered to be more effective pedagogically and practically. This includes constructively examining the EQAO test from multiple perspectives; how the test is designed in terms of format (e.g. paper and pencil), type of questions asked (e.g. predominantly multiple choice, true and false, and short answer questions), when the test is administered, when the results are returned, what type of feedback is provided as part of individual results (descriptive feedback versus overall achievement level scores) and school results, and how the data is used by schools, school boards, and the general public.

These are not simple endeavours but areas we need to invest in improving to further make our schools and education system more equitable by addressing needs of all students across a spectrum of different identities and communities, particularly racialized children. This process will take time, energy, effort, and collaboration involving professionals across multiple sectors working with children including teachers, administrators, social workers, child and youth care practitioners, early childhood educators, educational assistants, and others. This can become a more tangible task to accomplish if there is a signed commitment in the form of a proposed
yearly plan with specific goals to work towards achieving put together by the Ministry of Education. This proposed yearly plan should be accompanied with committed funding from various relevant local organizations, the provincial government in Ontario, and the federal government in Canada.

4.2D Recommendations

I therefore recommend school boards and schools to work towards mitigating short and long-term effects associated with invisible scars and traumatizing effects of standardized testing on young children in elementary schools, particularly racialized and minoritized children, by providing workshops for parents at the local community level with a focus on teaching parents mental health and mindfulness techniques to support their child in a holistic manner instead of placing more pressure on them to perform well on standardized tests. The workshops should be offered free of charge or kept at a minimal affordable cost. They should be offered at multiple time slots for accessibility purposes. Time periods to consider are before, during, and after school on weekdays and on weekends relative to demographics of parents living in the community where the school is located. Similar to programs suggested to be offered in schools to children as part recommendations under Finding #1, the focus of workshops offered to parents should be on them learning how to read the mood of their child through their tone of voice and body language, and how they can support and facilitate an increase in their child’s emotional intelligence. This includes helping parents understand and acknowledge specific emotions in their child, how to provide mediums for their child to express their emotions constructively, recognizing emotional triggers, and how to guide their child to use positive coping mechanisms as an outlet for test-induced stress, anxiety, and fear of failure.

A great example of a communication skill to teach parents as part of parental workshops offered is checking-in with the child about their experiences at school including those related to
preparing for the EQAO standardized test. As Kobe’s dad explains, in response to how he supports Kobe’s learning throughout the school year;

I think one of the things is just checking in with him about how he is feeling about school because his experience from a social-emotional perspective is gonna impact his academics as well. So, we just talk to him about what he likes about school, you know, his friends, if he likes his teachers, and those kinds of things. And then, you know, just checking in with him on a daily basis about what he did at school and if he has any homework and how we can support him with his homework.

This approach is effective as it goes beyond simply asking, “How was your day?” which often yields one word decontextualized responses from the child such as “Good.” Asking more specific open-ended questions allows for open dialogue and communication between parents and the child.

To address concerns associated with ineffective timing of when EQAO results are returned to children, I therefore recommend as a test trial for a year that EQAO administers Grade 3 EQAO tests in late September at the start of Grade 4. If the objective is to assess students organically of their knowledge acquisition and mastery of content in the primary grades until end of Grade 3, it is reasonable to select start of Grade 4 to administer the EQAO test. This diminishes the opportunity for teachers to spend time prepping children and teach to the test as a means of getting children to perform better and trying to increase their overall school scores. Upon administrating EQAO tests in late September, individual student results are to be scored and returned to the children by end of January of the same school year. This provides EQAO the same turn-around marking time they are utilizing right now which is about three to four months to mark and tabulate all individual and school results.

To address concerns about how individual EQAO student results contains only raw achievement scores with limited descriptive feedback about children’s strengths, weaknesses, and where errors are made, I therefore recommend EQAO to digitalize all marked EQAO
booklets by scanning them and making them available to students and parents online via a secure website that allows them to log in with a personalized username and password. Once logged in securely, students and parents can download their individualized marked booklets and read more specific comments and suggestions as a form of descriptive feedback about how they did. This allows children and parents to visually see what questions they did well on, where they made errors, and how they can improve in the various areas. Digitalizing EQAO marked booklets and making them accessible to students and parents online with more constructive descriptive feedback will cost money to be implemented, but in the long run, not only will it save money by the amount of paper it saves but it also makes the process more effective in supporting student learning and their improvement which is one of the key goals of any type of assessment.

4.3A Finding #4

Most children did not understand why they write the Grade 3 EQAO test and how the results are used.

I don’t know.

Many students’ responses to what the EQAO test is and why they write it

In response to why they write the Grade 3 EQAO test, the children interviewed responded;

Deshaun: (long pause) I don’t …. Math. To learn math better and to write paragraphs.

Kobe: (long pause) I don’t know.

Chantel: I don’t know. To get smart?

In response to what the results are used for, the children interviewed stated;

Laila: I don’t know.

Kobe: I don’t know.
Malcolm: I think that so that we can learn more so when we go to the next grade then we will be able to be more educated and be ready for it.

Based on the above aforementioned responses, although some of the students are aware of the domains which they are assessed in by EQAO, most do not know what purpose the EQAO serves in the larger scheme of their schooling experiences and how the results are used.

4.3B Implications

The importance of the EQAO test as perceived by racialized children and consequences associated with doing poorly, both tangible and imaginable, creates a highly pressurized environment where children feel they are being judged for how smart they are even though they are confused about why they write the EQAO test and how the results are used. Jordan’s mother explains why children become confused about the EQAO, its purpose, and how the results are used;

There is pressure especially because it’s their first year and the kids don’t even know what it is. I think a lot of teachers say we are doing this test, but the kids actually have no idea what this test is until it actually gets closer to time. We start telling more and more about it and it kind of gives them a mixed message, because all year round you are pushing this test, and telling them you are going to do it, but when it comes time for the test, teachers tell you ‘Don’t worry I don’t want you to be nervous because this test doesn’t count towards your grade. It’s not going on your report card and you’re still gonna pass Grade 3’. So the kids are like ‘What’s the point?’ and then the kids are a little confused because they are like ‘Why do we even have to do this test? Why do I even have to try because you are saying it has no effect on me whatsoever?’ I think it is giving kids a mixed message and it’s giving the community a mixed message because you know, you try to tell your kids, you have to study and do well and try your best on all your tests, but then we have this big test and it’s like don’t worry.

Although children are somewhat aware of the importance of the test and the domains they are assessed in, they receive mixed messages about how much effort they should put into it. As Kohn (2000) points out, “there are students who take the tests but don’t take them seriously” (p. 5). This lack of effort on behalf of students who lack interest or motivation to do well on non-consequential standardized tests can lead to educators making assumptions about the
competencies of the child. The child’s poor achievement scores can be misinterpreted by educators due “to the insidious assumption that some children just can’t learn- especially if the same kids always seem to show up below the median” (Kohn, 2000, p. 16). This feeds into promotion and perpetuation of a neoliberal deficit model of education (Sharma, 2009) where students are seen in complete control of their destiny based on decisions they make and the individual effort they put into completing their school work. Yet, as Portelli and Vilbert (2002) point out, “reducing complexities to a simple matter of defining common standards and measuring student achievement against them conveniently allows us to blame the individual- the student and/or the teacher-- and ignore the larger social and political realities in which teachers, students, and schools are immersed!” (p. 13)

4.3C Further Areas to Explore

Schools should explore alternative avenues of communicating with children and parents about how EQAO results are used at the individual and school level and systemically by school boards and Ministry of Education. More importantly, schools should explore how teachers can have a conference meeting with the child and their parents, in person or via alternative methods such as by phone or email, to deconstruct and discuss individual EQAO results with the objective of helping students improve and mitigate the invisible scars and traumatizing effects of standardized testing associated with children’s self-critique of themselves and parent’s critique of their child based on EQAO scores.

4.3D Recommendations

I therefore recommend schools to host “parent-student- teacher” meetings, in person or via alternative methods such as by phone or email, to explain to children and parents how to effectively interpret EQAO results in a constructive manner to improve student learning and mitigate the invisible scars and traumatizing effects of standardized testing associated with
children’s self-critique of themselves and parent’s critique of their children based on EQAO scores. It is recommended “parent-student-teacher” meetings are conducted as soon as EQAO results are returned to children in late September or early October. As part of this conference meeting, the child, the parent(s), and the teacher should collaboratively co-construct an individualized personal action plan for the school year outlining short and long term goals for areas of improvement along with plans on how to achieve those goals. This individualized personal plan produced based on Grade 3 EQAO results should be supplemented with other teacher assessments. The goals of the action plan should be monitored relative to its progress at various intervals throughout the school year, particularly leading up to when report card marks are finalized, to facilitate students getting descriptive feedback about their strengths and areas needing improvement to increase their marks. These “check-in” meetings on the progress of the goals should be revisited with the parent(s) and the child every three months. This can be done in person at the school at various time slots or via alternative methods such as through email or over the phone to accommodate busy schedules of families.

**4.4A Finding #5**

According to the parents, EQAO standardized testing relative to its structure, format, and administration does not align with “best practices” in education associated with meaningful teaching and learning in schools.

**Finding #6**

Teacher pedagogy and delivery of curriculum is negatively impacted by Grade 3 EQAO test preparation leading to the use of previous years EQAO questions as practice and teaching to the test. This is attributed to the pressure placed on teachers and administrators to increase their school scores, as schools are judged and ranked by external organizations such as the Fraser Institute based on overall performance of their students on EQAO tests.
Because of the pressure and the impact of the results, I think schooling has changed in Grade 3 and 6 even in terms of how principals place teachers. They try to place their strongest teachers in those grades, where maybe that’s not really where you need to put your strongest teachers if we’re thinking about pedagogy or child development.

Kobe’s mother

A lot of times, they’re[teachers] teaching towards the test, not actually teaching, kind of like they’re preparing for this test the entire year, and they’re neglecting the curriculum and the other things that the kids should be learning like behaviour or the learning skills and the work habits.

Malcolm’s step father

Not only do children experience extensive amount of pressure to do well on EQAO standardized tests, but teachers and administrators also feel immense pressure to demonstrate improvement in their student and school scores as EQAO results are used by some parents and external organizations to pass judgement on overall effectiveness of schools and the quality of education they offer. Although in Ontario, teacher pay is not associated with student performance on standardized tests, the testing culture and meanings attached to school results create a highly pressurized environment to produce improvements impacting teacher pedagogy and delivery of the curriculum in classrooms. In the context of Ontario, there is a correlation between school EQAO scores and property values surrounding the school. Property values are higher for houses in close proximity to schools that have higher rankings based on EQAO results (Ricci, 2004; Pinto, 2016). This is reinforced by the Fraser Institute annual report which ranks elementary and secondary schools based on their current and past overall EQAO scores (Fraser Institute, 2018). These rankings are published and made available online to the general public.

The ranking of schools has an impact on how schools are perceived, whether they are labelled as good or bad, and consequentially the property values within the surrounding community and student enrollment. Many parents from higher SES who have the privilege of selecting where to purchase a house to live use school rankings as a guide to give their child access to a “good” quality education. As well, real estate agents who sell properties use school
rankings as a pull factor to promote and sell houses in affluent neighbourhoods which have schools with higher EQAO scores. Kobe’s mom reaffirmed this by expressing,

I think from a principal perspective, it’s very much a political tool. So we have parents who will select schools based on EQAO scores. So I’ll get calls as a principal, ‘tell me your scores’, because they’ll think it’s a good school or not a good school. I think as a parent, you know, it’s an indication of thinking your child is successful or not. That’s how most parents seem to interpret it. I don’t interpret it that way, but I know parents of Kobe’s friends, they definitely do, and if their child doesn’t do well, they feel like they’re not doing well. And I know a lot of teachers feel it’s a reflection of them as teachers.

Jordan’s mother also reaffirmed the correlation between EQAO school test scores and property values by stating, “A lot of realtors look at the results, and stuff like that, which is kind of surprising because they’re usually trying to sell homes and up the value of certain homes in certain areas which are schools that are doing well.” Kobe’s mother further explained what she has observed over the years as an administrator with the negative pressure placed on teachers to get children to do well on EQAO tests;

As a principal, the teachers were very stressed and often come to your office crying, because there is so much pressure on them as well. They would say, you know, ‘What would you like me to do to prep?’ and I would say ‘I just want the kids to feel good’. I want them to write positive affirmations about themselves. At first they thought, ‘Is this woman a lunatic?’, but they saw the impact of the kids, you know, feeling good.

Kobe’s mother was conscious of how EQAO standardized tests can label children if they end up doing poorly, so she tried to mitigate that by encouraging teachers to get children to write “positive affirmations” about themselves to gain more confidence for writing the test.

Kobe’s mother also explained how EQAO test scores impact many decisions made by administrators including which teachers are selected strategically to teach Grade 3 and 6. She emphasized,

Because of the pressure and the impact of the results, I think schooling has changed in Grade 3 and 6 even in terms of how principals place teachers. They try to place their strongest teachers in those grades, where maybe that’s not really where you need to put your strongest teachers if we’re thinking about pedagogy or child development.
Kobe’s mother expressed that, being a principal for over six years, there has not been a single year where she has not seen teachers break-down crying due to the stress and anxiety affiliated with preparing students to do well on EQAO tests. She points out there is a clear connection that EQAO preparation impacts teacher pedagogy:

Teachers are largely affected. They start preparing from September. That means they are modifying how they teach because of this test. I don’t think I’ve ever had a year of EQAO where I haven’t had teachers crying in my office. Ever!

Jordan’s mother also explained how based on her experiences providing various support services in classrooms, Grade 3 becomes dominated largely by discussions and conversations affiliated with EQAO testing. She expressed,

For kids specially being in Grade 3, I find it a lot of teachers are pushing the test. Everything is ‘oh we are going to do this today and it’s going to be on your EQAO test,’ like everything that whole year is pushed on kids about being about and on the EQAO.

Jordan’s step-father explained how a lot of the direction comes from the school principal in terms of guidance and investment in different initiatives to prepare children for EQAO tests. Working at a different school than his wife, he explained changes he is experiencing at his school due to having a new principal. He explained,

At my school this year, there is a new principal, and there is a big push for open ended questions and open concept type of thinking where I think that is more geared towards an EQAO type of test where they give you a problem and want to see what you can pull out of it. Depends on the way your school is running and who is running the show.

In further trying to capture the impact of EQAO testing on teacher pedagogy and delivery of the Grade 3 curriculum, I asked children how their teacher prepared them for the EQAO test from September leading up to the when the test was administered in their respective schools.

Below are some of their responses:

Deshaun: She gave us a (pause), like a prep booklet for EQAO and it had similar questions from previous years.
Jordan: She like makes us practice. She doesn’t give us a booklet but she shows us what it’s gonna be like practice questions.

Kobe: We did a lot of tests the months before the EQAO like practice questions.

Chantel: We did practice questions.

Christopher: She gave us like some EQAO packages from 2001 and 2008 and other stuff.

Madison: I’ve been mostly out of the class every day. Umm (pause), we got to go to the library, and get some help with some things like money, coins, shapes, and lots of other things.

A common theme was teachers using previous years EQAO booklets as practice to prepare children for the EQAO test. As well, teachers did practice questions in class to model EQAO format, and in some cases teachers also sent home more questions as homework for extra practice.

Some of the parents further expanded and contextualized how their child’s teacher prepared them for the EQAO test;

Madison’s mother: To get ready for the test, they did a lot of in-class work and they took Madison out to work with her individually. They work with them one-on-one with an EA [Educational Assistant] and then they spend a lot of time working with her one-on-one getting her ready for the testing.

Kobe’s mother: They did a lot of tests the months before the EQAO like practice questions. He had weekly homework; every week, two EQAO questions, throughout the school year from September.

Jordan’s mother: They did old EQAO booklets and we just go through it actually with them and the teacher will do a mock test just to show them. They actually do some of the questions with the kids just to show them what it’s gonna be like.

Malcolm’s step-father: Basically it was laid out. The homework was laid out. They gave suggestions of things you can do with your child and they gave you a calendar where you do these things this day and this day (pretending to point down a list).

Parents’ responses corroborated children’s explanations outlining heavy reliance by teachers on previous years EQAO booklets and practice questions to get students ready for the EQAO test.
It was important as part of this qualitative research study to explore, from child and parent perspectives, how the EQAO test fits in with the routine delivery of the Grade 3 curriculum. Hence, I asked children and parents their opinion on how EQAO tests, in terms of preparing for and writing it, was similar or different to other activities in school. Kobe’s father as a parent and a school administrator stated,

The pedagogy often changes like for a while leading up to the EQAO. Like what we know about good teaching and learning is that, you know, kids need to learn from each other, right, they need to construct knowledge, they need to be doing group work, they need to be active, but all of this stuff kind of goes out the window, because it’s like the test is coming so this afternoon we are doing EQAO prep and everybody is at their desk with a pencil and a paper and they don’t move. It really shifts, at least in the lead up time to the test. It shifts what is happening and how learning and interaction is taking place in a classroom.

Similarly, Malcolm’s step-father as a parent and an elementary school teacher stated,

A lot of times they’re teaching towards the test, not actually teaching, kind of like, they’re preparing for this test the entire year and they’re neglecting the curriculum and other things that the kids should be learning like behaviour or the learning skills and the work habits. That kind of stuff. So they neglect that just for the test in my opinion. You know it’s tough. It’s tough. I understand the pressures the teachers are under but also you know the kids are here to learn other things other than the academic piece.

Madison’s mother also expressed she feels EQAO testing impacts the school negatively the entire year. She explained,

I think in terms of the focus of the testing, it is right from the beginning of the year, right through, and you know, how it affects the school. Kids are always talking about ‘oh you’re in Grade 3 you have to do your testing this year,’ ‘oh you’re in Grade 6 you have to do your test this year,’ and the older kids and the younger kids they talk about it and it’s such a big part of (pause) it. That one week affects their curriculum so much because they are so focused on those particular results and how it affects their school.

I asked Madison’s mother to expand on what she means specifically with regards to these specific “affects” on the school. She expressed,

I think it’s a negative impact because it affects their curriculum. They stop teaching what they are supposed to teach just so that they can get better results and teach kids how to answer questions on the test. Like in Grade 3 they are at such different levels and they
spend so much time just teaching you how to answer questions. I think they teach to the test.

A common theme expressed by parents interviewed was that teachers to some extent “teach to the test.” This was confirmed by the parents who work in the school system as teachers or administrators. Both Ontario provincial teacher unions, the Elementary Teachers’ Federation of Ontario and the Ontario Secondary School Teachers’ Federation, have publicly criticized and opposed the practice of EQAO standardized testing in schools. The main reason being it impacts delivery of the curriculum in a negative way by placing stress on administrators, teachers, and the students as many judgements and inferences are made about the school such as the quality of education offered at the school and the teachers’ competencies based on performance of students on EQAO tests.

With EQAO test preparation being perceived by many of the parents interviewed as having a negative influence on delivery of the curriculum, I wondered where EQAO testing fits in the equation of “best practices” in education related to teaching and learning. Describing differences in the pedagogy of preparing for the EQAO test compared to how the curriculum is delivered the remainder of the school year, Chantel’s mother stated,

I think EQAO testing is more based on looking at thought processes and how she [Chantel] does things whereas in school the math that has been coming home is more numbers, patterns, and very straight forward. I didn’t feel there was a lot of “explain your thinking” in the homework as they do on the EQAO.

Similarly, Kobe’s mother explained how EQAO testing impacts teacher pedagogy in many different ways;

I think, from a parent perspective, she [Kobe’s teacher] had created this homework book and she had photocopied questions from EQAO booklets and that was to prepare him, but I am fairly certain if there was no such thing as an EQAO test, she wouldn’t have done that which tells you it’s not really a best practice. So I think that right now, teachers cater towards the test, where really we shouldn’t do anything in terms of preparing them, and that would give you a more authentic reading.
Pressure is placed on all stakeholders working in the education system to improve EQAO scores including principals, teachers, parents, and children. All are directly and indirectly impacted in various capacities due to meanings, interpretations, and inferences attached to EQAO test scores at the individual and community level.

4.4B Implications

Ontario Teachers’ Federation (2011) points out, “There is an enormous difference between instruction for improving student learning and instruction for improving student test scores” (p. 7). It is important to distinguish and debunk that improvement in test scores does not equate to improvement in student learning and instruction. When so much attention is placed on administrators and teachers to improve test scores, both internally within the institution of education and externally in the public sphere through ranking of schools, it pressurizes teachers to work backwards by teaching to the test.

The major event defining Grade 3 has become administration of EQAO standardized tests. Children feel apprehensive and nervous about how they will do on the test, a process that begins in September when they are informed it is an EQAO testing year. Despres et al. (2013) explain, “Pressure within a classroom may interfere with the development of an atmosphere of positive learning and discovery, particularly amongst the youngest children” (p. 10). Leading up to the testing week, more time is allocated towards EQAO preparation. Kohn (2000), who is critiquing standardized testing in the context of United States, points out,

Teachers often feel obliged to set aside other subjects for days, weeks, or (particularly in schools serving low-income students) even months at a time in order to devote themselves to boosting students’ tests scores. Indeed, both the content and the format of instruction are affected; the test essentially becomes the curriculum. (p. 29)

Private educational companies and organizations have taken advantage of pressure on schools and teachers to improve EQAO test scores by producing resources that can be purchased,
in reproducible handout format or online via games and activities, geared specifically for EQAO test preparation (See Images 2 and 3).

Image 2. *Grade 3 EQAO* (Summer Advantage, 2010).


These profitable EQAO preparation resources have become part of the hegemonic machinery that normalizes and legitimizes standardized tests as an accountability tool to measure how schools are doing. Yet, as Weiner (2014) argues, “Standardization is an ideological principle that attempts to legitimate the decontextualization of learning and teaching in the service of raising
the academic bar.” (p. 5) In other words, although as educators we might be assisting children to perform better on standardized tests, does that equate to them gaining the necessary relevant knowledge and skills to be successful in today’s society?

In Ontario, within the TDSB, EQAO results are a major source of data used in developing and finalizing School Improvement Plans with input from various grade teachers and administrators. Kobe’s mom confirmed this process and shed some light on how EQAO data is used by administrators to allocate resources. Although this can be theoretically well-intended, it may not always be the most effective way, as numbers do not accurately capture the complex lives of students and issues impacting families and communities, particularly racialized students and parents. In response to what extent EQAO is used as part of designing School Improvement Plans, Kobe’s mom expressed,

EQAO is used so much. It’s highly problematic. So we use that data, and some principals solely use that data, to dictate student performance. Now, we are trying to push back at that, meaning we have to use quantitative, qualitative, and perceptual data but for sure I think EQAO is the fail safe which is like ground zero. For example, when we have to assign reading coaches to schools, we base what schools they should go to based on EQAO scores which is a problem, because for all you know they had 3 kids who had some sort of IEPs or identifications and shouldn’t have written the test in the first place and that sunk their school scores.

The above response contextualizes how EQAO scores are used as a main indicator to allocate support services and resources to schools such as “reading coaches,” yet such scores do not always accurately capture the needs of the student demographics attending the school. As a result, resource distribution is not accurately aligned with needs of specific schools and inequitable learning conditions can be perpetuated or go unnoticed.

EQAO results are used by administrators and teachers as a baseline measure to plan school initiatives. Yet, the reality is that the next cohort of students entering Grade 3 could have
drastically different set of needs compared to the cohort of students who wrote the EQAO test the previous year. As Jordan’s step-father explains,

The School Improvement Plan is based on last year’s results and that becomes problematic. We have a staff meeting, examine the results, and the emphasis is guided by the results from last year’s Grade 3 results. There is more pressure on the principal, more pressure on the superintendents and all this comes out the can and ends up on us and ends up on them. We also target students to move them up in grade levels from let’s say level two to three.

When we attach so much currency to EQAO test scores, it diminishes the capacity to use other “best practices” such as critical pedagogy to facilitate holistic and healthy development in young children. Kohn (2000) emphasizes that, “Time spent preparing students to succeed on such tests is time that could have been spent helping them become critical, creative, curious thinkers” (p. 33). Kohn further outlines,

As excitement about learning pulls in one direction, covering the material that will be on the test pulls in the other. Thoughtful discussions about current events are especially likely to be discarded because what’s in today’s paper won’t be on the exam. Furthermore, it is far more difficult for teachers to attend to children’s social and moral development- holding class meeting, building a sense of community, allowing time for creative play, developing conflict-resolution skills, and so on- when the only thing that matters is scores on tests, that, of course, measure none of these. (p. 30)

Racialized Grade 3 students and their parents interviewed as part of this study have echoed similar concerns. They have collectively experienced teachers teaching to the test by using previous year’s EQAO booklets and doing practice questions which follows EQAO marking expectations both within the classroom and sent home as part of homework. When the test indirectly becomes the curriculum, due to the amount of currency and meaning attached to the value of the scores, even though there might be improvements in achievement level of students on these tests, it does not translate to students gaining the necessary relevant and transferrable life skills required to be successful citizens within the 21st century context such as having critical thinking and conflict resolution skills, as well as demonstrating effective oral communication
and creativity. Hence, the importance of listening to the voices of racialized children and parents as they help us question and better understand the pros and cons of the EQAO test on their identities and community, ultimately leading to whether or not we should continue with the practice of administering EQAO tests in elementary schools given the monetary and social costs, or alter its practices to make it more equitable and useful.

4.4C Further Areas to Explore

Teachers and administrators are under stress and pressure to improve student test scores as overall school performance on EQAO test scores is used to judge the identity of the school as “good” or “bad” relative to the quality of education offered (Fraser Institute, 2018). This creates a domino effect of teachers indirectly placing stress on children to be prepared to do well on EQAO tests. This is exemplified with large amount of time devoted to preparing for the EQAO test which makes it a big spectacle for the children and amongst their peers. Similar to an athlete practicing and getting ready for competition day, children are prepping all year for the EQAO test with the goal of performing to the best of their abilities during testing week.

One of the primary objectives of EQAO is to provide students, parents, schools, and school boards with data about achievement level of students and what can be done to improve their competencies in the domains assessed. Currently schools use EQAO results to co-construct improvement strategies as part of the School Improvement Plan. This includes strategies such as identifying marker students to work with individually, identifying students who might need an IEP with accommodations and/or modifications to their learning expectations, where to allocate resources and support services, and establishing new clubs or initiatives to improve student learning and achievement. A question which further needs to be explored and considered is whether a similar set of data can be collected locally at the school level without needing externally administered standardized tests?
Ontario Teachers’ Federation (2011) emphasizes, “Classroom-based formative assessment is a more reliable indicator of individual achievement and most closely aligned with the best strategies for individual student improvement. It is also the best predictor of student achievement.” (p. 5) Schools need to explore how teachers can use “assessment as learning” and “assessment for learning” throughout the school year to collect data that demonstrates “assessment of learning.” This might sound complex, but if implemented consistently across school boards, it will yield more practical data and reduce the invisible scars and traumatizing effects of standardized testing. It will save the Ministry of Education millions of dollars associated with administrating EQAO tests in various grades. The money saved can be funnelled into further providing relevant and appropriate support services to schools and students. As well, it will alleviate teachers feeling the pressure to teach to the test allowing for more organic and authentic interdisciplinary and holistic learning to take place.

To assess student achievement levels in various subjects including Reading, Writing and Mathematics, teachers should explore using growth portfolios. Growth portfolio’s objective is to track and compile examples of progress, improvement, and high achievement levels throughout the school year with input from the students and their parent(s). The portfolio can be subdivided by specific subjects. Teachers should begin the school year with a diagnostic assessment of children to identify what level they are starting the school year at. This is already being done in schools as a natural process of learning more about the students and how to tailor teaching content to reflect their needs and preferred learning styles, hence, no new funding is required to implement this initiative. Near the end of each three months period in the school year-November, February, and May- teachers should have a “parents-student- teacher” conference meeting to assess and discuss the progress of students in different subjects particularly their strengths and areas needing improvement. The aim of the “parent-student-teacher” conference is
to collaboratively decide on student work exemplars to input into the *growth portfolio* demonstrating skills and mastery of curriculum content in various subjects. This approach opens the lines of communication by giving a voice to the student and parents to be involved in the assessment process. Also, it provides more holistic and richer data about the student’s strengths and areas needing improvement spanning from September to June instead of a snapshot in a week which is what EQAO tests capture. This *growth portfolio* approach should continue and be built upon every school year as students advance to the next grade.

School administrators such as principals can use data from student *growth portfolios* at the end of Grade 3 to identify each student’s final achievement level and self-report the data into a central database created by Ministry of Education. If ethical issues with self-reporting is a concern, in early implementation stages of this new approach, EQAO can send educational officers or trainers to schools to examine the content of the *growth portfolios* collaboratively with the respective Grade 3 teachers in the school and input the data through their EQAO staff. At later stages, once the program is more established, schools can self-report the data themselves with random schools being selected for auditing to ensure proper reporting techniques are followed consistently.

Another option to consider and explore, if the decision is to maintain the current way EQAO standardized tests are administered, is switching to random testing of schools in various geographical neighbourhoods or by school boards to gain baseline data of student achievements and make inferences from the data instead of census-style testing where every student in every school is tested. It is important to keep in mind that although random testing of schools will save money in terms of administration costs, this approach is also problematic as it perpetuates similar inadequacies that currently exist with the way EQAO tests are administered. Once again, the
question to keep in mind is which approach yields the most accurate and useful data given the costs and resources it requires?

4.4D Recommendations

I therefore recommend a test trial for EQAO to collect data using *growth portfolios* to compile and track examples of progress, improvement, and high achievement levels throughout the school year with input from students and parents. Near the end of each three months period in the school year- November, February, and May- teachers should have a “parents-student-teacher” conference meeting to assess and discuss progress of students in different subjects particularly their strengths and areas needing improvement. The aim of the “parent-student-teacher” conference is to collaboratively decide on student work exemplars to input into the portfolio demonstrating skills and mastery of curriculum content in different subjects. School administrators should self-report and input all student achievement levels into a central database created by Ministry of Education or EQAO officers can collect all portfolios and input the data themselves to mitigate bias or false reporting. This portfolio approach should continue and be built upon every school year as students advance to the next grade.

I therefore recommend a test trial for EQAO to switch to random testing of schools in various geographical neighbourhoods or by school boards to gain baseline data of student achievements instead of census-style testing where every student in every school is tested.

4.5A Finding #7

Parents and children felt the government, EQAO, and schools in general need to expand the definition of success beyond academics and a microscopic focus on Reading, Writing, and Mathematics.

I would tell the government to add arts to it because it’s more fun than math and I want to see the boys draw and see them suffer.

Chantel
I think with EQAO testing, it glorifies language and math therefore, pushing other subjects to the side.

Jordan’s mother

In response to what they would change about the EQAO, the children expressed;

Chantel: I would tell the government to add arts to it because it’s more fun than math and I want to see the boys draw and see them suffer.

Kobe: More play time.

Malcolm: I would tell them that they should (pause) tell teachers to help the students a little more if it’s too hard for them because on the test they couldn’t help you.

Most of the children interviewed suggested including other subjects to be tested as part of EQAO testing. Suggested subjects included arts and physical education which they said were subjects they enjoyed more.

From a parent’s perspective, in response to what advice they would give to the government to improve EQAO testing, Jordan’s mother stated,

I think with EQAO testing, it glorifies language and math therefore, pushing other subjects to the side, and I don’t think that’s fair, because a lot of kids excel in other subjects like science or gym. I feel like why emphasize it just on these two subjects? Why is those two more important than everything else? We need to teach kids as a whole and teach them everything not ‘oh, language and math those are the most important things and that’s it, if you don’t have that, then you don’t have anything.’ You shouldn’t shut down kids that actually excel and do well in other subjects. I think we are glorifying these two elements and the kid who struggles in those two elements, we are breaking them down even more. They push it more on the students and you are taking away from them doing things that that they are good at and forcing them to do something they are not good at, and we are devaluing them and our students and it’s the whole process.

The current model of EQAO testing privileges numeracy and literacy as superior subjects at the expense of marginalization to other subjects such as “science or gym” particularly at the elementary level. This does not help in judging children in a holistic manner as it places more importance on subject areas tested at the expense of overlooking other areas that children might excel but appears less important due to the limited amount of time devoted to it. This can have a
profound impact on the confidence and engagement level of racialized children and those from lower socio-economic status who due to inequitable access to resources and services (Hulchanski, 2007; Williams et al., 2013; Polanyi et al., 2017) might start school at lower levels in domains of reading and writing.

This leads to another problematic nature of EQAO testing which does not take into account preferred learning styles of children. Explaining the difference between her two daughters who are one year apart and both participated in EQAO testing, Madison’s mother states,

Madison’s older sister does not have the same level of anxiety and she doesn’t really care about tests so she would just rush through her test so she can go outside. You know she is like that with her school work too. She’s just more interested in creating things and more artistic that way. And I know I said earlier it doesn’t matter what the test results were, but when they came back and they weren’t positive, for a second I was like (puzzled face), but after I was like, you know what, like the way that they do the test and how quick they are, we can’t use those as regulators or indicators of where are kids are really at.

Malcolm’s step-father also emphasized the importance of not taking EQAO school scores at face-value as there is a social aspect to schools which impacts student achievement that tests do not capture. He explained,

Look at the social aspect of things within the school environment. Look at the teacher efficacy within the school environment. Look at the well-being within the school environment and use the test as well to judge the schools and judge the people in these schools operating these schools. Don’t just look at the test and say the score is low so this school is not up to par. You have to look at other aspects as well and by doing that you are gonna improve the school environment and the school system.

The use of differentiated instruction to meet the needs of students’ preferred learning styles and positive school climate that is warm and welcoming are important factors that can influence student engagement. This is particularly important for racialized students in the context of Ontario as they have “lower reading sores, higher grade failures, higher drop-out rates and much poorer employment opportunities” (Curtis et al., 1992, p. 7; Dei, 2008; Block & Galabuzi, 2011;
James, 2012; Kearns, 2016). Standardized EQAO tests do not capture these processes and exclusively focus on outcomes in terms of quantitative achievement levels.

4.5B Implications

The emphasis on subjects that are tested by EQAO, predominantly Reading, Writing and Mathematics, leads to hierarchization of subjects with numeracy and literacy prioritized as superior relative to other subjects such as Arts and Health and Physical education. This contributes to marginalization of a holistic model of education that takes into consideration domains beyond academics as part of overall healthy development of children. A common change that occurs in schools as a means of improving achievement scores of children on standardized tests is programs and clubs with a focus on numeracy and literacy are prioritized and given more funding and resources. On the other hand, programs and clubs not affiliated with tested subjects such as Arts and/or Physical Education are limited, and in extreme cases, eliminated and replaced with their funding given to other programs that focus on knowledges assessed on standardized tests.

Obsession with quantitative forms of assessment that support efficiency and accountability discourses undervalues higher level thinking, knowledges, and skills that cannot be quantified. Gunzenhauser (2003) argues that standardized testing promotes a unique positivist philosophy of education. He goes on to state,

The phenomenon of high-stakes testing, and standards movement from which it springs, emerges from a particular philosophy- a behaviorist, positivist philosophy that places great emphasis on what can be measured quantitatively. This is a philosophy that not only has implications for education but builds from a philosophy of reality and the ability of science to perceive that reality. (p. 53)

The assumption within the “positivist philosophy” is that numbers can measure learning accurately and consistently. This is problematic as it exclusively focuses on “outputs,” and hence
subjects, skills, and learning experiences that cannot be quantified are excluded from being assessed.

Kearns (2016) critiques the current state of standardized testing by pointing out, “Literacy is not multiple when it is reduced to a written test score, and requires a particular cultural capital to pass” (p. 125). The hegemonizing of “worthy” knowledge to domains that can be measured quantitatively is detrimental to students- their passion for learning and their sense of self-esteem and self-confidence- especially for racialized students who do not perform well on performance based assessments in those specific domains (Masood, 2008). As a result, many students become disengaged from their schooling experience, potentially leading to greater drop-out rates or further poor performance in subsequent assessments due to not caring about marks since their school experiences does not reflect their passions, interests, and lived experiences (Dei, 2008; James, 2012; Kempf, 2016).

Portelli and Konecny (2013) make the connection between neoliberal ideologies and the hierarchization of domains of knowledge in education by pointing out, The way of life that has emerged from neoliberalism is not consistent with the soul of democracy, for it has put aside the power of the humanities and thoughtful social sciences in favour of privileging standardization and promoting empirical evidence to the exclusion of the domains of the moral, critical, spiritual, artistic, and philosophical. Evidence has been reduced to one kind, empirical, and no other forms of evidence qualify as such. (p. 93)

Within this neoliberal paradigm, “improvement” and “success” are bracketed and viewed from a limited lens. This is not to say that numeracy and literacy are not important, but rather that “measuring achievement in literacy and numeracy to the exclusion of other domains can result in the diversion of resources from those domains, to the narrowing of school curricula, and to a focus on rote learning and test preparation” (People for Education, 2013, p. 3). Similarly, Despres et al. (2013) emphasize, “Success in numeracy and literacy, as measured through
standardized tests, provides a limited perspective on the successes and failures of the education system’s performance in relation to these broader objectives.” (p. 14)

Freire (1998) in *Pedagogy of Freedom: Ethics, Democracy, and Civic Courage* points out, “education is ideological,” (p. xiii) and “what empirical studies often neglect to point out is how easily statistics can be manipulated to take away the human face of the subjects of study through a process that not only dehumanizes but also distorts and falsifies reality” (p. xxv). The fear of remaining competitive in a globalized world pressurizes communities, governments, and nations to conform to spending more funding and resources on “worthy” knowledges to demonstrate on the international stage the high quality education offered in their countries. Although these neoliberal ideologies are presented as ideal solutions to improving education for all, what is often silenced and not mentioned is the devastating impact of such policies and practices on certain identities and their local communities, particularly indigenous communities and their local, oral, and land-based knowledges and way of life, especially in the context of Canada.

The ideologies of neoliberalism and its promotion for standardization function as a colonizing tool pressurizing and controlling indigenous populations to conform to evidence-based outcomes or risk being perished through violence. Canada and its treatment of Aboriginals, who were the founders of the land, can serve as a prime example of how Native identities were appropriated through standardization of language; including the forced attendance of Aboriginal students to residential schools to be assimilated into Canadian culture, the exclusion and dismissal of oral culture and spirituality as “worthy” knowledge within the official curriculum of schools at all levels, and the horrendous disciplining of Aboriginal students to speak “proper” English as a means of demonstrating their progress towards being “civilized” and adapting to “modern” conditions of Canadian society (Smith, 1999). In essence, the curriculum is
directly driven by standardization which dictates and inscribes on to others what type of learning and knowledges need to be taught and learned, including within indigenous communities, which traditionally and historically have lived life and learned in different ways relative to their own values, morals, and ethics. As Ricci (2004) emphasizes, “the curriculum ignores student needs by implementing a standard curriculum that is expected to fit all students” (p. 359). This results in the promotion of a one-size-fits-all curriculum. The curriculum also ignores the unique needs of communities and their local contexts. Instead, standardization promotes competition which directly opposes the indigenous notion of cooperation and collective and shared responsibility. Standardization also promotes rewards and punishment; those who conform are rewarded with access to economical avenues leading to a higher income whereas those who fail to conform and get poor results risk their survival by having limited access to a sustainable well-paid income.

4.5C Further Areas to Explore

The Ministry of Education and EQAO in partnership need to explore how they can work collaboratively with schools, non-profits, and external organizations across different communities and neighbourhoods to advance a more holistic model of education that takes into consideration assessing various subjects and contextual factors that impact student learning, level of achievement, and healthy child development. This process begins by expanding the definition of success and redefining it in broader terms (Dei, 2008; Miller, 2000; People for Education, 2018). Rebranding success in the public sphere and within education institutions requires transition to a holistic model of education that encompasses academic and non-academic components. As Dei (2008) suggests in Schooling as Community,

We must define success broadly to include the academic, moral, social, spiritual, and cultural development of the learner. Similarly, failure cannot be the flip side of success. The success of some students cannot be justifiably served for consumption in terms of explaining the failure of others. (p. 360)
Rebranding success to include Howard Gardner’s Theory of Multiple Intelligences (Gardner, 1983) would be a great starting point to empower children in their early years to find their strengths, build their self-confidence, and provide them with constructive descriptive feedback on areas to improve. Lowe (2016) states, “Gardner’s theory argues that every individual possesses all eight intelligences- linguistic, logical-mathematical, spatial, bodily-kinesthetic, musical, interpersonal, intrapersonal and naturalist- but the strength of these intelligences in each person varies.” (p. 17) Gardner (1983) strongly opposed the use of Intelligence Quotient (IQ) tests and other standardized tests arguing they are limited tools in capturing authentically and effectively the complex competencies students have across multiple domains.

Portelli and Vilbert (2002) suggest a shift away from standardized testing towards a “curriculum of life” defined as “a curriculum that is grounded in the immediate daily world of students as well as in the larger social political context of their lives” (p. 4). They operationalize “curriculum of life”:

The curriculum of life is rooted in the school and community world to which the students belong, addressing questions of who we are and how we live well together; it extends into the larger world of possibilities beyond school and community bounds; and it addresses questions about the larger social and political contexts in which these worlds are embedded. (p. 15)

Organizations such as People for Education and FairTest can work collaboratively with EQAO to further construct and implement more authentic assessment techniques to measure indicators of school success and student achievement. People for Education is “an independent, non-partisan, charitable organization working to support and advance public education through research policy, and public engagement” (People for Education, 2018, para. 1). They have begun a multi-year project looking at identifying “key domains that are essential for student success” (para. 3). They have narrowed their search to five specific domains which are; Health,
Citizenship, Creativity, Social-Emotional Learning, and Quality Learning Environments (People for Education, 2018). Collaboration, dialogue, and cooperation with external organizations such as People for Education can begin the process of designing more effective assessment tools which recognizes children as complex beings who need much more than foundational skills in literacy and numeracy for long-term success in the 21st century.

**4.5D Recommendations**

I therefore recommend the Ontario Ministry of Education to advise EQAO to implement the use of *growth portfolios* as an authentic assessment tool to track and compile examples of student progress, improvement, and achievement levels for every subject in elementary schools. This includes Language, French, Mathematics, Science and Technology, Social Studies, Health and Physical Education, and the Arts. Non-academic areas should also be identified and tracked as part of implementation of *growth portfolios*.

I therefore recommend the Canadian federal, provincial, and local governments in collaboration with Ministry of Education, EQAO, school boards, and external organizations to commit funding and resources to host an annual two-day provincial conference on *Student Success in Elementary Years and Beyond*. One of the major focuses of the conference should be on authentic assessments of children in the early years. The conference would create collaborative opportunities to bridge theory with practice involving educational stakeholders and practitioners from different fields who directly and indirectly work with young elementary-aged children. This includes, but is not limited to, researchers, teachers, early childhood educators, social workers, psychologists, child and youth care workers, special needs assistants, educational assistants, and community leaders and activists. It is imperative the cost of attending the conference is kept to a reasonable and affordable price to allow individuals from all walks of life
to attend the conference as a means of engaging with multiple voices and lived experiences to explore *Student Success in Elementary Years and Beyond*.

**4.6A Finding #8**

Racialized children and parents expressed that the EQAO test is culturally and racially biased as it promotes a Eurocentric curriculum and way of life. They felt the content of EQAO standardized tests reflects lived experiences of families from higher socio-economic status and lacks relevant connections to the identity and lived experiences of racialized students and families from lower socio-economic status.

The test is geared for a specific type of student and there is so many diverse students so it’s kind of not an equal playing field.

Malcolm’s step-father

I think the government has to be prepared to identify and challenge systemic barriers. It’s not an easy thing to do, but I think unless they are prepared to do that, I don’t think that we can get education to where it needs to go.

Kobe’s mother

Addressing the achievement gap between students from higher socio-economic status and those from lower socio-economic status through equitable practices is one of the top priorities of the current education system at all levels (TDSB, 2017b). A key question this exploratory research study tries to address is whether EQAO standardized testing as an accountability tool and the way it is currently administered helps to address identified inequities within the education system or is it further perpetuating and widening the already existing inequities and the achievement gap?

Within this subsection, Critical Race Theory (CRT) is used to deconstruct responses of children and parents interviewed who self-identified as racialized. I use Knoester and Au’s (2017) definition of CRT;
Critical Race Theory is a conceptual framework useful in understanding how racism operates, including within institutions such as schools, by paying careful attention to the differential resources and opportunities available to students of different races, as opposed to the more common form of racial theorizing, focusing on individual acts of hatred or racism. (p. 4)

Knoester and Au (2017) further explain that,

[A] key tenet of Critical Race Theory is that such inequality is regularly obscured under the guise of race-less or race-neutral laws and policies and is instead framed around individual equality as expressed through concepts such as meritocracy-that success is purely the result of individual hard work and not the function of social, historical, or institutional process. (p. 4)

The notion of “meritocracy” contributes to advancing a deficit model of education in today’s schools blaming the student for their failure without examining systemic barriers such as access to resources and social support services (Giroux, 2003; Hulchanski, 2007).

Although my sample size of participants is small involving eight children and their respective parent(s), all participants except one child and parent, self-identified as racialized. Their lived experiences as a form of valuable embodied knowledge provides significant and insightful counter-narratives to explore the impact of EQAO standardized testing on racialized identities. I want to emphasize that when I use the term racialized, it is beyond the binary of black and white. It focuses on power dynamics at the institutional level. I use Block and Galabuzi’s (2011) definition of racialization which is defined as,

The process through which groups come to be designated as different and on that basis subjected to differential and unequal treatment. In the present context, racialized groups include those who may experience differential treatment on the basis of race, ethnicity, language, economics, [and] religion. (p. 19)

At the core of racialization and being a racialized person is navigating inequitable power dynamics at the institutional and societal level in the form of systemic barriers related to accessibility to opportunities and services.

Baszile (2009) explains the importance of listening to counter-stories from a CRT lens;
They are told from the perspective of the marginalized and are intended to challenge the universality and often the efficacy of the majoritarian story, not simply in its context but also in its very structure. The story-counterstory frame not only works to uncover subjugated knowledge but it also allows one to see and examine the relationship between the stories and the role race and other subjectivities play in shaping their differences. (pp. 10-11)

Counter-stories provide an expressive voice to racialized beings to share their subaltern knowledge (Spivak, 1988).

Racialized parents interviewed expressed that one of the positive aspects of EQAO testing is that it can assist schools with identifying areas needing further improvement. Administrators and teachers can deconstruct their school’s EQAO data to allocate certain resources and support services to specific students or classrooms to assist with greater student achievement. On the other hand, relative to the issue of accessibility to resources, parents interviewed felt the current model of education and EQAO administration creates competition amongst schools to compete for limited resources available whether in terms of funding or tangible resources such as district coaches or computers. Jordan’s step-father explained from a teacher perspective that,

Hand to hand with EQAO, it pits different areas against each other. Resources kind of fall under the same category where schools right down the street here who might not have a lot of resources or money won’t be able to have a nice computer lab, lots of field trips or food programs. Schools that are in more affluent neighbourhoods who have a lot more money and whose parent councils are twenty-five people or more are more involved and there is all this fundraising happening, you know. The balance needs to come down a bit across all boards, especially if the board wants everybody to move up together. I think personally they are creating a big gap between the upper class versus middle to bottom class. I think resources are one of the key factors. More resources need to be pumped into the schools that need it and there needs to be more emphasis on giving them more opportunities to do well.

Laila’s mother who is also a teacher echoed similar concerns. She stated in response to how to improve schools that the focus has to be on more equitable funding and allocation of resources to different schools. She expressed, “Ways to improve school would be with funding.
Also to think about the areas schools are in and the different types of funding and funding models they get. This is just not equal amongst schools.”

The current model of EQAO administration is based on the assumption and the metanarrative that EQAO standardized tests capture student achievement levels accurately with over-emphasis on its positive impact as told by EQAO. At the institutional level, Ministry of Education or the EQAO does not engage in much discussion about negative or harmful effects of EQAO testing on children. Yet, as Ricci (2004) states, “By not examining the students holistically, but merely statistically, students suffer and society suffers” (pp. 355-356). From an equity lens, is writing the test beneficial to all students given their unique needs, personalities, and lived experiences? I asked racialized parents for their opinion on this issue, and below is some of their responses;

Kobe’s mother: There is a huge disadvantage for young people who might have some form of a disability. For example, we might have kids who struggle with severe anxiety and having them sit and write a test will make them very anxious. So in a regular school, they might chunk it, meaning they give small parts or let them write it in a different context so they are comfortable. But you would think they just shouldn’t have to write the test, but if you don’t write the test, the child gets an automatic zero which means the average of the school goes down. So you will find this very precarious position of administrators and teachers who don’t want to get a lower mark because of the reflection of the school and the political piece. They make children write it who probably shouldn’t be writing a test like that. There is all kinds of accommodations meaning you can give someone a quiet space with an assistant in the room, and while I think that is a great accommodation which might make them perform better intellectually, kids being excluded from a classroom to write this test away from their peer group is often enough to trigger anxiety because they feel different.

Deshaun’s mother: On one hand, it’s good because you want to make the comparison of where everybody’s level is at. The only downfall to that is just that some children have different learning abilities, ways that they learn or ways that they apply what they’ve learned, so it might not be in the same format that standardized testing is given.

Kobe and Deshaun’s mother provide great examples of how for certain identities, the EQAO test and the way it is administered is counter-productive and harmful as it makes them feel excluded and different, further triggering socio-emotional anxiety and stress associated with test-taking.
Similarly, Malcolm’s step-father who is a teacher, expressed he feels the EQAO test is geared towards white students and it privileges them because the test content is predominantly Eurocentric. He goes on to state, “This test [the Grade 3 EQAO test] is not geared towards all students. It’s geared towards a specific type of student”. I followed up by asking Malcolm’s step-father who is the typical student that the EQAO standardized test is “geared for” in his opinion. He responded by stating, “It’s the middle class, probably white (pause), yea, it’s middle class white students it’s basically based for.” When asked what he thinks of how EQAO results are used, he stated,

A lot of times the results are used to rate the school, rate the teachers as well, and uhhh (pause) it’s for the Ministry. The Ministry uses it for their statistics and numbers and things of that nature. For the academia it’s effective, but for the human aspect, I don’t think so because the test is geared for a specific type of student and there is so many diverse students here so it’s kind of not an equal playing field.

Reflecting on his experiences administering different sets of EQAO tests over the years, Kobe’s father who is currently a vice-principal stated,

Some of the standardized testing that I’ve seen done (pause) like it’s always Eurocentric. So I remember a reading assessment we used to give to kids in Grade 6 and it was about (pause) one of the questions was about sheep farming and the kids in the community where I was teaching knew nothing about sheep farming so it was very difficult for them to make sense of the question, not because they didn’t know how to read or answer a question, but because they didn’t have the context to make sense of it.

Kobe’s father emphasizes that it is not that children do not “know how to read or answer a question” but rather the test question sometimes does not reflect the lived experiences of children in the community. Another example can be a question about snow where a newly immigrated child to Canada from a drastically different part of the world where it does not snow will have a difficult time answering that question. Kobe’s mother also jumped in and gave her opinion as a parent and principal;

Anyone who is economically advantaged, I think the testing is more culturally relevant to them. So an example would be there was a question about swimming across the lake at a
cottage. So you know only a certain economic group would know and has access to swimming across a lake on a cottage. So anyone who is reading that question and has actually swam across a lake at a cottage is going to feel a little bit more relaxed and have (pause) you know a connection whereas someone who hasn’t won’t. So I think there is absolutely a cultural bias!

Overall, racialized parents who worked in the education system felt EQAO questions privilege white affluent students and their Eurocentric values and experiences. Jordan’s step-father, also as a parent and a teacher expressed,

It’s basically, from my perspective, a standardized test that basically the board and the province want to see what the areas (pause) like how well different areas are doing based on this test that is kind of focused towards one group of people who I would say more so are white.

Jordan’s step-father, similar to Malcolm and Kobe’s father, expressed concerns about how EQAO questions can marginalize racialized identities due to lack of relevance of the questions to the students’ lived experiences and community circumstances. He went on to state,

It’s almost as if they want to put everybody inside this box and most people don’t fit in that box. The language for the test is a lot different than most kids would know; you know, it’s kind of geared towards kids who experience more things, have a little more money, and a little more privileged. For example, how many inner city kids can tell you where Algonquin Park is or where Markham is? Even for math, there are kids who never had more than twenty dollars on their hands and you’re asking them complex questions. Culturally it is not reflective of most cultures, especially in a city like Toronto.

Collectively the aforementioned responses from the racialized parents expresses that EQAO tests function under a one-size-fits-all approach making the assumption that all students have certain experiences when this is not the case. Parents expressed that the scenarios that are made reference to as part of EQAO questions often reflects the lifestyle and experiences of those from higher socio-economic status, hence disadvantaging racialized identities and those from lower socio-economic status as the content is less relatable to them.
4.6B Implications

Several initiatives have emerged in recent years to try to mitigate the high dropout rates amongst racialized students in TDSB schools. In Toronto, the idea of an Africentric Alternative School was proposed, debated, and implemented (Dei, 2008). The school began operating in September 2009 with ninety elementary students enrolled into its unique program. The Africentric Alternative School is not exclusively restricted to Black students or teachers, but the teachers are predominantly of African descent and the curriculum is based on an African paradigm and Seven Principles of Ngusu Saba which focuses on nurturing a strong sense of community and African culture. Africentric Alternative School continues to operate today and the Africentric curriculum has been expanded as part of Grade 9 and 10 courses in two high schools in Toronto.

Stiggins (2014) raises a critical question that asks, “Should we assess what is easy to measure or what is important?” (p. 76) Ball (1990) warns us that, “policy is clearly a matter of authoritative allocation of values,” and that “values do not float free of their social context” (p. 3). It is significant to continuously question “commonsense” assumptions about standardization and its benefits, and ask whose values and knowledges are established as the norm and used as a baseline measure for judgement and comparison in education through standardized testing? Whose interests does standardized testing serve and at what costs? Price (2003) raises an important point by stating,

While all tests have biases, standardized tests are biased in standardized ways. Standardized tests list towards specific views and knowledge-sets in both intended and unintended ways- but by their very nature they exclude a diversity of interpretations in support of hegemonic views. (p. 718)

Similarly, Tupper and Cappello (2008) critique standardized testing for its shortcomings by emphasizing, “Mainstream education is an extension of colonization insofar as it has been used
to promote a dominant narrative of the past and privilege certain ways of knowing” (p. 563). It is important to critically analyze, how through standardized testing, certain knowledges are normalized and legitimized, and consequentially a hierarchy of knowledges constructed that marginalizes indigenous, oral, and non-hegemonic epistemologies and languages (Eizadirad et al., 2016).

Returning to further examine the field of education and the harmful impacts of EQAO standardized testing on racialized identities and those from lower socio-economic status, I expand on Nezavdal’s (2003) theoretical framework of “assessment as a social construct” (p. 69) and Hori’s (2013) definition of “structural violence” (p. 4) to argue externally administered standardized tests such as EQAO function as a tool for stereotyping of racialized students. 

*External assessment as stereotyping* is structurally violent for racialized children and those from lower socio-economic status as it serves to diminish their self-confidence, create doubt in their competencies, and in the long term leads to lower access to opportunities for upward social mobility through streaming into applied fields, over-representation in special education, and overall access to lower quality education (Curtis et al., 1992; Dei, 2008; James, 2012; Hori, 2013). *External assessment as stereotyping* functions at three levels:

a) *Stereotypes and constructs the racialized student as a low achiever from a young age.* This can occur in two dynamic ways; psychologically and/or socio-emotionally by the student through self-evaluation about themselves leading to a self-fulfilling prophecy or by the teacher and/or administrators in Grade 4 upon receiving and returning student results through their direct and indirect actions interacting with the child in the classroom and in the larger context of the school. The first set of EQAO standardized tests are administered at the end of Grade 3 when children are still developing and experiencing many changes physically, psychologically, and socio-emotionally. The labelling of the child as an “under-achiever” or “at-risk” in the mind of the child and the teacher according to their achievement level on the Grade 3 EQAO test can serve as a starting point to manifest the stereotype. This feeds into the students being judged through a deficit lens (Portelli & Sharma, 2014) that blames them for their own failure without examining from a holistic lens their unique identities and life circumstances such as level of accessibility to resources, opportunities, and social support services (Hulchanski, 2007). As Au (2013) argues, standardized tests advance “an ideology of meritocracy that
fundamentally masks structural inequalities related to race and economic class” (p. 7). Similarly, Curtis et al. (1992) in their report titled *Stacking the Deck: The Streaming of Working-Class Kids in Ontario Schools* point out how deficit thinking has implications for working-class children as “Explicit streaming in elementary school is carried out through the placement of kids labelled “behavioural,” “slow learning,” and “learning disabled” in classes of special education” (p. 53).

b) *Perpetuates and re-confirms the stereotype of the racialized student being a low achiever with poor intellectual skills, a trend that continues as the student goes on to middle school and high school.* Curtis et al. (1992) argue that “The evidence points to an educational system that segregates many students from their peers, often for long periods of time, in low expectation “behavioural” programmes on the basis of subjective reporting and culturally-biased testing. Such students come disproportionately from the families of the working class, and ethnic/racial minorities” (p. 64). Placing children in behavioural and/or special education classes from an early age, with the decision profoundly influenced by standardized test results in elementary settings, can be damaging to healthy development of the child and it can further disengage them from school activities through lack of motivation, boredom, and lack of effort in completing and participating in school initiatives. As a result, from a teacher and administrator perspective, “low-achievers are perceived as a liability” and become a threat to bringing down the overall school scores which indirectly can lead to “devaluing of less successful students” (Froese-Germain, 2001, p. 118). It is the power of the stereotype planted in the early years and perpetuated through subsequent years that leads to “Students who did not meet the provincial standard early in their schooling most likely to continue not meeting the standard in later grades,” and in contrast “Students who met the provincial standard early in their schooling were most likely to also meet the standard in secondary school” (Shulman, Hinton, Zhang & Kozlow, 2014, p. 3).

c) *Challenges the stereotype of the racialized student being a low-achiever by producing positive achievement results at the expected provincial level or higher. Although this might seem positive at the surface, the constant effort of having to defend one’s intellectual abilities while navigating predominantly white elite spaces embedded with hierarchical power relations saturated with stereotypical assumptions about one’s race, culture, ethnicity, and/or socio-economic status is exhausting and socio-emotionally draining leading to subsequent poor performance, feelings of exclusion and not belonging, and/or triggering identity issues and crisis that ultimately lead to dropping out of school.* In the long term, this leads to drop-out, “push-out” (Dei et al., 1995), disengagement, and not wanting to be within a learning environment that does not make one feel good about themselves, even though they are intellectually competent compared to their peers (Ladson-Billings, 1994; Razack, 2002; hooks, 2003; Kearns, 2016). This is supported by the fact that many racialized students feel out of place attending predominantly white affluent schools, having to constantly explain their identity and culture to others with respect to stereotypes made about them.
Overall, external assessment as stereotyping refers to externally mandated standardized tests administered to students across all levels particularly at a young age in elementary schools. These standardized tests cause great damage to racialized students’ identities and their healthy development particularly minoritized, non-white students and those from lower socio-economic backgrounds. As Curtis et al. (1992) point out,

The educational potential of vast members of people continues to be wasted through streaming. It is a form of institutionalized violence that convinces many working-class people that they belong in dead-end programmes with stunted curricula, to be followed by insecure, low-paid employment. The disgust with learning, hatred of teachers, distrust of intellectual work, and generalized resistance to authority which many drop-outs acquire are not a result of their biological or cultural “deficiencies.” Rather, the main cause lies in socially discriminatory forms of schooling, and in the false promises of competition in a system which demands that many fail. (p. 99)

Bhabha (1983) states, “The objective of colonial discourse is to construe the colonised as a population of degenerate types on the basis of racial origin, in order to justify conquest and to establish systems of administration and instruction” (p. 22). Labelling children as “low achievers” or “behavioural” allows those in positions of authority in the school system to justify specific types of administration, instruction, and surveillance upon students often holding them back from their full potential. Bhabha (1983) explains,

The stereotype is not a simplification because it is a false representation of a given reality. It is a simplification because it is an arrested, fixated form of representation that, in denying the play of difference (that the negation through the Other permits), constitutes a problem for the representation of the subject in significations of psychic and social relations. (p. 26)

External assessment as stereotyping, produced through the high currency given to EQAO test scores, perpetuates deficit thinking by inscribing a negative label in the form of a “fixated form of representation” on racialized, minoritized, non-white students, and those from lower socio-economic backgrounds within the “psychic and social relations” embedded in schools. Examples of negative labels that perpetuate stereotypes are being identified as “at-risk,” “illiterate,”
“incompetent” in a given subject, or an “applied” student (Masood, 2008; Kearns, 2016). Others view the student through the lens of the stereotype produced through judgement inferred from standardized test scores. Consequentially, the negative ideologies affiliated with such negative labels impacts how racialized students interact and build relations with others in schools including peers, teachers, and administrators (Dei, 2008; James, 2012). The real-life consequences and implications are limited access to opportunities and consequentially in the long term diminished pathways for upward social mobility (Hulchanski, 2007; Hori, 2013; Williams et al., 2013; Polanyi et al., 2017).

We are currently focusing too much attention on equality of outcome symbolized by standardized test scores as a signifier of overall student achievement. As long as we continue to abandon examining the processes that lead to the outcome, vis-a-vis the opportunity gap, the achievement gap will not close and instead further intensify. As Curtis et al. (1992) argue, “the school system convinces many working-class kids that they are stupid, incapable, incompetent, and that their aim in life should be to show up at work on time while being polite to their bosses. This is part of the violence that streaming does to working-class kids” (p. 3). This aligns with what Anyon (1980) found as part of her ethnographic study where she spent time in working-class and affluent schools and concluded that students in affluent schools receive more challenging and interdisciplinary curriculum that promotes higher level thinking, whereas students in working-class schools receive lower level thinking curriculum that focuses on rote memorization and learning appropriate behaviours and mannerism.

Another consequence of having limited access to opportunities for upward social mobility is continuously living in poverty. Polanyi et al. (2017) in their report titled, Unequal City: The Hidden Divide among Toronto’s Children and Youth: 2017 Toronto Child and Family Poverty Report Card, use 2016 census data to outline how specific racialized social groups and
those from lower socio-economic status are disadvantaged systemically compared to their white and affluent counter-parts. They provide the following statistics;

- Indigenous families with children in the City of Toronto experience an extremely high poverty rate of 84%.
- Children in racialized families are more than twice as likely to be living in poverty compared to children in non-racialized families (25.3% compared to 11.4%) in the Toronto region.
- Almost one in two children who are of West Asian (46.8%) or Arab (46.7%) background live in poverty in the Toronto region. This is more than four times the rate of poverty of children in non-racialized families.
- Almost one in two Toronto region children who arrived in Canada between 2011 and 2016 (47.2%) live in poverty. This is almost three times the rate of poverty experienced by children in non-immigrant families.
- Child poverty rates for children who are second and third generation Canadian remain particularly high for Black and Latin American families in the Toronto region.
- 37.8% of children in lone-parent families in the Toronto region live in poverty, while the rate for children in female lone-parent households is 40%, more than twice the poverty rate of two-parent families.
- The gap in child poverty rates across Toronto neighbourhoods remains stark, ranging from 4.1% in Kingsway South to 60.1% in Thorncliffe Park.
- Thirteen city wards have areas of child poverty where rates are 50% or more. (p. 1)

These statistics contextualize how unequitable living circumstances and distribution of resources and social services across spatial geographies makes it unrealistic to expect all children to achieve at the same level, as they do not all have access to the same privileges given their unique identities and the neighbourhood they live in.

4.6C Further Areas to Explore

We need to shift our focus to realigning the opportunity gap in a more equitable manner as a long term sustainable approach and strategy to closing the achievement gap between racialized and non-racialized students and those from higher and lower SES. This approach goes beyond a microscopic focus on outcome-based standardized test results to considering synergic collaborative efforts between schools and outside organizations in the community offering holistic services to address the inequities that currently exist at a systemic level. We must continue to engage in dialogue about whether standardized testing is contributing to closing the
achievement gap or further perpetuating and intensifying the disparity between the haves and the have-nots. As Nezavdal (2003) states, “Educating students is about maximizing learning by meeting needs, by propelling passions, and by nurturing human curiosity, not closing doors forever because of one test,” (p. 72) and that “we must strive towards a reconciliation of the split between teaching, teacher education, and policy making.” (p. 76)

TDSB’s Enhancing Equity Task Force Report and Recommendations released in December 2017 is a good starting point to acknowledge some of the current systemic barriers that exist within the educational system and work towards identifying specific areas needing change to create more equitable policies and practices. The report states,

The Enhancing Equity Task Force’s mandate is to support the TDSB as it seeks to ensure that the framework of “equity for all” infuses every aspect of the Board’s work, for students and staff alike. Equity is a question of fundamental human rights; it is also the foundation for excellence for all students, and for student achievement, well-being, and belonging. (p. 4)

Under the subheading “Recommendations,” as a means of aligning TDSB’s practices with the mandate and vision of “equity for all”, the Task Force “made recommendations in the following six areas, so as to”;

1) Ensure equitable educational access, experiences, and opportunities for all students in all schools;
2) Make students whole: effectively addressing school incidents and complaints;
3) Ensure equitable access to funding and resources among schools;
4) Meaningfully engage students, families, and communities in building a culture of equity at school;
5) Ensure equity in staff employment, transfer, and promotion; and,
6) Provide professional learning on equity, anti-racism, and anti-oppression for all. (p. 5)

These identified six areas can serve as starting reference points where new changes can be implemented to make education policies and practices more equitable for racialized and minoritized students. Yet, interestingly the practice of EQAO preparation, administration, and use of data by schools was not questioned as part of the report. This is an area that needs to be
further explored, knowing that the current practice is further perpetuating inequities in the achievement gap. There needs to be a Task Force Committee which exclusively examines through community consultations with students, parents, teachers, administrators and community members the larger impact of EQAO testing on educational stakeholders, with the core question being whether EQAO preparation and administration should be altered or completely eliminated.

When asked for suggestions on how to improve schools from the perspective of a parent and an administrator, Kobe’s father stated,

I think we need two things. One, we need schools and teachers and administrators who are not racist or classist or sexist because those things are systems that play out in schooling that dramatically impact the outcomes of kids and not necessarily intentionally, as people who support these systems, but without a critical consciousness we feed into a system that continues to maintain those inequities. So we need educators who are able to challenge those things, so we need to, you know, do professional learning around that training and some people need to go and other people need to come in to shift those kind of structures. The other thing that needs to happen is we need think of a more equity based as opposed to an equality based model for education so that we can do things, like in a school with high needs, like some of the communities we know of, that are high needs, there needs to be a different model. We need to be able to pull the best teachers in the city to work in those communities, because the needs are so much greater and there are structures that are currently in place that don’t allow us to get rid of people that are detrimental to particular communities. In some communities, really, it’s a life or death situation, because if some of these young people do not have access to quality education, we know where they will end up. So we have to do much more radical moves to impact change in those communities. We can’t play within the same rules and norms. We need to be able to step outside of that to think critically about how we are going to ensure all those young people have access to education that is critical to their livelihood really in the long run.

As Kobe’s father reiterates investing in closing the opportunity gap as a means of addressing the current disparity in the achievement gap has its challenges within an education system that operates within hierarchical power relations resisting dramatic change.

One effective approach that some schools are using to close the opportunity gap is synergic collaboration with external organizations including grassroots non-profit organizations at the local community level involving practitioners from other sectors that work with children,
youth, and young adults to provide socio-culturally relevant and holistic services relative to their student population and community demographics. Two effective programs that function as synergic collaborations offering holistic services which serve as models for “best practices” in contributing to closing the achievement gap are TDSB’s *Model Schools for Inner Cities (MSIC)* and *Youth Association for Academics, Athletics, and Character Education (YAAACE) Summer Institute*.

TDSB’s *Model Schools for Inner Cities (MSIC)* “is a board wide initiative that addresses the impacts of poverty on students’ achievement and well-being.” (TDSB, 2017b, p. 64) The program began in 2006 with selection of 3 schools based on the Learning Opportunity Index (LOI) and over time has grown to be implemented within 150 schools serving over 56,000 students. According to the TDSB (2017a), “The LOI ranks each school based on measures of external challenges affecting student success. The school with the greatest level of external challenges is ranked number one and is described as highest on the index.” (p. 2) There is a separate list created for elementary and secondary schools. MSIC allocates a budget ranging from $10,000 to $14,000 for selected schools ranked near the top of the LOI (TDSB, 2018). Schools have flexibility to plan, outline, and document how the money is used in specific identified areas to increase opportunities for student success. The five identified areas which the money can be used towards are:

1. Innovative teaching and learning practices
2. Providing support services to meet social, emotional and physical well-being of students
3. Establishing schools as the heart of the community
4. Researching, reviewing and evaluating students and programs
5. An ongoing commitment to share successful practice. (TDSB, 2018, para. 2)

Examples of services offered as part of *MSIC* initiatives include hearing and vision screenings for students, parent workshops, after school recreation programs in partnerships with other
agencies, nutrition, snack, and lunch programs, and addition of specialized staff such as teaching and learning coaches or community support workers assigned to work with cluster of schools.

Another program that exemplifies offering holistic services to students to close the opportunity gap is the *YAAACE Summer Institute*. YAAACE is a grassroots community non-profit organization co-founded by Devon Jones who is an elementary special education teacher in the Jane and Finch community. The objective of YAAACE is to help marginalized, racialized, and poor children and youth from under resourced communities through “year round comprehensive programming and activities” (YAAACE, 2018, para. 1). Lalani (2016) reports that, “The summer program was created in part to address educational attrition during the summer months which many students experience, while also providing a fun and safe environment. It takes in around 300 students from Kindergarten to Grade 8 each summer for a relatively affordable price of $150” (YAAACE, 2018, para. 9). YAAACE has collaborative partnerships with many organizations and agencies including the TDSB, Toronto Police Services, Canadian Tire Jumpstart, Service Canada, Black Creek Community Health Centre, and Michael “Pinball” Clemons Foundation to offer comprehensive programs and services to members of the Jane and Finch community whom predominantly are racialized, minoritized, and from lower SES (Williams et al., 2013).

The TDSB supports educational programs offered by YAAACE through providing Ontario Certified Teachers to work at the summer camp which is known as the Summer Institute. Students are grouped by age, grade, and maturity level and led by a TDSB teacher and multiple counsellors who are high school youth for seven weeks. The Summer Institute follows a school within a camp model where students receive educational instruction within a classroom for part of the day in a fun, hands-on, inquiry-based, experiential manner and the remaining time participate in recreational and cooperative learning activities such as swimming, basketball,
music, and arts and crafts. One day a week is devoted to outdoor experiential learning through field trips. As well, partnerships with external organizations such as University of Waterloo allows children who attend *YAAACE Summer Institute* to have their eyes checked and if needed provided with glasses free of charge.

YAAACE strives to close the achievement gap by focusing on minimizing the opportunity gap through its Social Inclusion Strategy. According to YAAACE (2018),

YAAACE’s social inclusion strategy is a socio-mechanism co-constructed by frontline workers, educators, researchers, academics, law enforcement personnel and stakeholders with a vested interest in children, youth and community. The objective of the social inclusion strategy is to nurture and incubate the vast potential of children and youth becoming twenty first century learners and global citizens. The program design pivots on the provision of comprehensive year round programming (academics, athletics, recreation, technology and the arts). The operational framework is as follows: outreach and wraparound; arts, athletics and expanded opportunities; academic intervention and support (the Weekend Academy and Summer Institute); research and curriculum development (specifically, the creation of a curriculum that targets reflective education and seeks to mitigate negative environmental factors that compromise academic engagement for students in racialized communities. (para. 3)

Through “comprehensive year round programming,” YAAACE via its “social inclusion strategy” seeks to neutralize the negative social conditions and circumstances plaguing the Jane and Finch neighbourhood impacting the predominantly racialized population of the community manifested through inequitable access to resources and social support services. As of 2011, 65 percent of the Jane and Finch population are visible minorities (City of Toronto, 2018). YAAACE seeks to shatter the stereotypes associated with the neighbourhood and its residents as being dangerous and violent (Williams et al., 2013; Eizadirad, 2017). By engaging members of the Jane and Finch community, particularly the racialized, minoritized, and lower SES demographic in various educational and sport programs offered year round, YAAACE creates sustainable change within the community by providing access to quality programs at an affordable and minimal cost. This type of holistic and interdisciplinary programming is what is
needed to minimize the achievement gap via focusing on aligning the opportunity gap between those from lower and higher SES.

4.6D Recommendations

I therefore recommend the TDSB to set yearly timelines to review their findings and update the public on new changes proposed and implemented in the six specific identified areas as part of their *Enhancing Equity Task Force Report and Recommendations* to ensure “equity for all” (TDSB, 2017b, p. 4). It is recommended for the TDSB to work closely with the recently renewed provincial Anti-Racism Directorate Office which has outlined a three year strategic plan that “targets systemic racism by building an anti-racism approach into the way government develops policies, makes decisions, evaluates programs, and monitors outcomes. It calls for a proactive, collaborative effort from all government ministries and community partners to work toward racial equity” (Ontario Anti-Racism Directorate, 2016, para. 34). The Ontario 3 year Anti-Racism Strategic Plan outlines various approaches and strategies that can be utilized by school boards via synergic collaborations to ensure better equity for specific social groups including racialized students. The plan groups initiatives under four categories; Policy, Research and Evaluation, Sustainability and Accountability, Public Education and Awareness, and Community Collaboration (Ontario Anti-Racism Directorate, 2016). Some of the relevant action-oriented suggestions listed under these four categories that can be implemented as part of school board policies and practices are; disaggregated race-based data collection, passing on anti-racism legislation, publicly reporting on progress of goals, public education and awareness about various social issues, an anti-racism conference, and most importantly implementation of population specific anti-racism initiatives. The three population specific areas that the strategic plan identifies as a priority to focus on are anti-Black racism, indigenous-focused anti-racism, and Ontario public service anti-racism. As part of implementing indigenous-focused anti-racism,
school boards and schools should look for opportunities to enact new changes that align with the Truth and Reconciliation 94 Calls to Action (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015).

I therefore recommend the Ministry of Education, school boards, and schools to invest in creating and maintaining more sustainable long term synergic collaborations with external organizations including grassroots non-profit organizations at the local community level involving practitioners from other sectors that work with children, youth, and young adults to provide socio-culturally relevant holistic services relative to student identities and needs of the local community. Two effective programs that can serve as “best practices” to be replicated having shown results in closing the achievement gap through minimizing the opportunity gap are TDSB’s Model Schools for Inner Cities and Youth Association for Academics, Athletics, and Character Education’s Summer Institute. It is encouraged for family of schools, which are schools located in close proximity to each other, to share their best practices by hosting two meetings throughout the school year. This can be done as a conference call or as part of professional development for teachers and administrators.

I therefore recommend local governments, teacher unions, grassroots organizations, school board districts, and schools to sign a memorandum of understanding to pressure the Ministry of Education to prevent public ranking of schools by external organizations such as the Fraser Institute as it leads to misleadingly labelling schools.

4.7 Concluding Comments

Overall, this chapter outlined and identified eight major findings that emerged from thematic analysis of the data generated from the semi-structured interviews with the racialized children and their parents. The data was analyzed and interpreted from a Critical Theory paradigm specifically Critical Race Theory. The main question which guided the analysis was,
“What are the experiences, opinions, and concerns of racialized children and parents regarding how the EQAO standardized test impacts their identity, family, school and the larger surrounding community in which they live?” After explaining each identified finding, three relevant areas were discussed which included implications, further areas to explore, and recommendations.
Chapter 5

Conclusion

5.1 Overview and Conclusions

Chapter 1 outlined my life journey as an educator including some of the major positive and negative events that influenced and facilitated my growth and maturity. As well, it explained what sparked my interest and led me to explore the impact of EQAO standardized testing on racialized children and their parents in elementary schools. Chapter 1 further identified the main research question of the study and supplementary secondary questions, as well as the rationale and significance of the study.

Chapter 2 provided a literature review focusing on experiences of racialized and minoritized students with standardized testing and access to opportunities. Furthermore, the chapter outlined the history of EQAO standardized testing in Ontario, historicizing progress and changes over time in the form of a symbiotic trilateral relationship between the development and establishment of the Ontario curriculum, the Tyler Rationale, and EQAO standardized testing. Through a Canadian historical lens the chapter further traced the roots of EQAO standardized testing to larger changes in education in Ontario under the governance power of various political parties leading up to the introduction, administration, normalization, and legitimization of EQAO standardized testing as a tool to measure accountability in publicly funded schools starting in 1996. The chapter concluded by examining EQAO standardized tests from multiple perspectives.

Chapter 3 outlined the research methodology and methods used to collect, analyze, and identify findings from the data. The chapter outlined major characteristics of Critical Theory as a research paradigm specifically Critical Race Theory as a conceptual framework to interpret interview responses. Strengths and limitations of using semi-structured interviews as an instrument for data collection were discussed. More specifically, the process and selection
criteria for participant recruitment were explained including the use of purposeful sampling. As well, procedural steps to getting ethical clearance from the University of Toronto were explained along with how participants were provided with informed consent and assurance of confidentiality throughout the research project. Furthermore, Chapter 3 explained when and where the interviews took place as well as what steps were taken to ensure credibility, dependability, and transferability of the data and the emerging findings. It also explained how thematic analysis was used to code and categorize the interview responses to facilitate identification of the eight major findings. Chapter 3 concluded with a biographical sketch of each child participant for the readers to get to know them better.

Chapter 4 as a hybrid chapter identified eight major findings that emerged from the thematic analysis of the data generated from the transcript of the interview responses. Directly following the listing of each finding, three major components were discussed which included implications, further areas to explore, and recommendations. This unique format was selected with intentionality to allow subaltern voices of the racialized children and parents to be at the centre of the conversations leading this exploratory qualitative study. This partial deviance from how a typical PhD thesis is structured and how the content is presented in linear compartmentalized pre-determined chapters is an act of subversion and resistance (Eizadirad & Portelli, 2018) challenging hierarchical power relations embedded within post-secondary institutions that often marginalize embodied lived experiences as not academic enough.

Chapter 5 is the concluding chapter which brings the various discussions and conversations full circle by summarizing the key findings and recommendations identified and discussing their interconnectedness relative to the original question of this study which asked, “What are the experiences, opinions, and concerns of racialized children and parents regarding how the EQAO standardized test impacts their identity, family, school and the larger surrounding
community in which they live?” in Ontario. More importantly, the chapter raises questions about future directions to be explored to better serve the needs of racialized children from lower socio-economic backgrounds within the education system from an equity perspective and how to minimize the detrimental effects associated with the use of standardized testing on young children in elementary schools.

Overall, eight findings were identified that emerged from the subaltern voices of the racialized children and parents interviewed who shared their lived experiences with respect to preparation and administration of EQAO standardized tests. These are:

1) Most children experienced high intensity socio-emotionally induced stress and anxiety subjectively attributing it to fear of failure and poor performance. The level of stress and anxiety was so severe in some cases that the child could not sleep the night before the test or refused entering the classroom on test day to participate in writing the EQAO test.

2) Most parents expressed, based on changes they observed in emotions and behaviours of their child preparing and writing the Grade 3 EQAO test that the test is more harmful than beneficial. All parents tried to counter and mitigate the test induced anxiety, stress, and fear of failure in their child. Strategies used included encouraging their child to try their best, having informal conversations with them about the non-impact of test results on their marks and advancement to Grade 4, and doing practice questions to familiarize them with types of questions on the test and to reduce their test-taking anxiety.

3) Parents from higher socio-economic status had a better understanding of EQAO standardized testing and its purpose as a political accountability tool including how the test is administered and how the results are used. Whereas most parents preferred the Grade 3 EQAO test to be eliminated entirely, some parents including those who work within the educational system, were in favour of maintaining the test, but strongly felt it requires changes in its content and format to be effective and socio-culturally relevant to the identities, knowledge, skills, and lived experiences of 21st century learners.

4) Most children did not understand why they write the Grade 3 EQAO test and how the results are used.

5) According to the parents, EQAO standardized testing relative to its structure, format, and administration does not align with “best practices” in education associated with meaningful teaching and learning in schools.
6) Teacher pedagogy and delivery of curriculum is negatively impacted by Grade 3 EQAO test preparation leading to the use of previous years EQAO questions as practice and teaching to the test. This is attributed to the pressure placed on teachers and administrators to increase their school scores, as schools are judged and ranked by external organizations such as the Fraser Institute based on overall performance of their students on EQAO tests.

7) Parents and children felt the government, EQAO, and schools in general need to expand the definition of success beyond academics and a microscopic focus on Reading, Writing, and Mathematics.

8) Racialized children and parents expressed that the EQAO test is culturally and racially biased as it promotes a Eurocentric curriculum and way of life. They felt the content of EQAO standardized tests reflects lived experiences of families from higher socio-economic status and lacks relevant connections to the identity and lived experiences of racialized students and families from lower socio-economic status.

Overall, taken as a collective, findings from the voices of racialized children and parents indicate that the Grade 3 EQAO standardized tests is more harmful than beneficial. The harmful impacts of standardized testing are identified under the umbrella term the invisible scars and traumatizing effects of standardized testing which include examples such as perpetuation of fear of failure, lowering of self-confidence and self-worth, development of test-taking anxiety, increase in stress and anxiety, trouble sleeping, and creation of self-doubt. One of the key findings of the study is how EQAO testing negatively impacts racialized students. Identifying external assessment as stereotyping, it is argued EQAO tests are culturally and racially biased as it promotes a Eurocentric curriculum and way of life privileging white students and those from higher socio-economic status while simultaneously lacking relevant connections to the identity and lived experiences of racialized students and families from lower socio-economic status.

It is argued we need to invest in equitable practices that close the opportunity gap as a means of achieving the outcome oriented goal of closing the achievement gap. This requires a policy and praxis shift from equality to an equity lens.

The significant findings identified as part of this exploratory study contribute to research in the field associated with standardized testing of racialized children in elementary schools. The
findings holistically reveal that racialized children experience high intensity socio-emotionally induced stress and anxiety attributing it to fear of failure and poor performance, teacher pedagogy, and delivery of the curriculum impacted by pressures placed on teachers and administrators to increase their EQAO school scores as schools are judged and ranked based on overall EQAO scores. Through external assessment as stereotyping, students who do poorly on EQAO tests are labelled as “illiterate” or “low achievers.” This process is “structurally violent” because “it denies students upward social mobility and therefore socioeconomically marginalized and racially excluded students get streamed towards less desired labour jobs” (Hori, 2013, p. 37).

The current normalized and legitimized neoliberal market-driven model of education, with its reliance on standardized testing as an accountability tool, homogenizes the needs of all students and communities by disregarding them as holistic beings and dynamic communities and instead judges them predominantly by results and performance on standardized tests (Portelli & Vilbert, 2002; Miller, 2016). As a whole, standardization penetrates all spheres of education, managing education from a neoliberal business model while paradoxically proclaiming efficiency and accountability. It is significant that we, as educators and caring adults, continuously question hegemonic assumptions about how learning should be assessed, in a way that is empowering to students rather than harmful. Particular attention needs to be given to engaging in dialogue about standardization in education from every facet ranging from the curriculum content to assessment of learning. The discussion needs to shift from an equality paradigm to an equity lens that asks, “Whose values and knowledges are established as the “norm” and consequentially utilized as a baseline measure for judgement and comparison?” and “Whose interests does this approach serve and at what costs?”

Currently the symbiotic fusion of the Ontario curriculum, the Tyler Rationale, and EQAO standardized testing in Ontario constructs a narrow definition of success that is based on a
market-driven ideology of education supplemented by efficiency and accountability discourses. This model is counter-productive as it has harmful effects on marginalized students including racialized, indigenous, ESL learners, and students from lower socio-economic status. It has led to intensifying and widening of the achievement gap in education rather than closing it.

Questioning and critiquing this market-driven model of education from an equity and social justice lens is at the core of the power struggle to revolutionize our minds, imaginations, and educational systems in order to open it up to new alternatives and possibilities.

To conclude, if we want to close the achievement gap between different social groups in the education system and to specifically address the systemic barriers that are present and persistent in schools for racialized identities and communities, we need to invest in programs and policies that view education as symbiotic with the larger community and other institutions outside of schools (Dei, 2008; Williams et al., 2013; Miller, 2016). We cannot address the achievement gap without first addressing the inequality of opportunity that plagues our educational system and further marginalizes our most vulnerable student populations. As long as schools continue to operate under a one-size-fits-all mandate and schools located in higher socio-economic status communities continue to get access to better funding, opportunities, resources, and social support services, the achievement gap will continue to exist and further intensify, particularly as it impacts racialized children. By investing in creating equality of opportunity for racialized, indigenous, gendered, ESL learners, and students from lower socio-economic backgrounds through collaborative alternative programs such as Model Schools for Inner Cities and Youth Association of Academic, Athletic, and Character Education, we can work towards building confidence in students and empower them to make a difference in their own lives and in their communities. This kind of difference and alternative approach to improving student
achievement goes beyond a test score and has real life implications for all living within the school-community space.

Education alone, and quality of education, cannot be judged exclusively through standardized tests and their quantifiable indicators. Students have to be seen as holistic beings with different social, emotional, academic, and psychological needs (Miller, 2016). More alternative programs that offer holistic services such as TDSB’s Model Schools for Inner Cities and The Summer Institute offered by Youth Association for Academics, Athletics, and Character Education are required as exemplars of modern programs that are effective in meeting the needs of students through a social inclusion strategy focusing on factors such as student motivation, health, emotional well-being, and systemic challenges in the local community. As Ricci (2004) states,

A test-driven curriculum that imposes a monoculture of training will limit the biodiversity of ideas, knowledge, culture, and history. By limiting the biodiversity of ideas in schools, the less chance we have of critically challenging the status quo and thinking of creative alternatives to the injustices that need to be challenged within our society. We must fight for the biodiversity of learning and eliminate a test-driven, monocultural training environment. (p. 359)

Equity and social justice need to be at the centre of introducing and implementing new alternative programs to address closing the achievement gap. We need to deviate away from standardization and instead work towards promoting “biodiversity of ideas, knowledge, culture, and history”. This will assist in shattering the one-size-fits-all approach to teaching and learning and instead work towards creating alternative programs designed to address specific needs of racialized children and communities.

5.2 Where Do We Go From Here? Working Towards a Decolonized Education Model

The following recommendations are provided to address and mitigate the concerns expressed by racialized children and parents interviewed about the negative impact of EQAO
standardized testing, and to promote systemic change by investing in more equitable practices relating to the use of standardized testing in elementary schools;

1) School boards and schools should immediately invest in mitigating the short and long term invisible scars and traumatizing effects of standardized testing by investing in offering more mental health and mindfulness initiatives for racialized children and parents.

2) School boards and schools should immediately invest in creating more avenues and mediums, such as focus groups and online surveys, to engage racialized children participating in writing EQAO standardized tests to express how they are socio-emotionally, spiritually, and psychologically impacted by the process before, during, and after writing the tests. The post impact examination should have a special one year time frame particularly exploring the direct impact on children’s identities when they receive their EQAO results in Grade 4.

3) School boards and schools should explore tracking cohort of students through longitudinal and intersectional studies administered by neutral external organizations to further examine the impacts of standardized testing on young children based on contextual factors with a focus on specific factors including geography, race, gender, socio-economic status, teacher pedagogy, and access to support services.

4) To address concerns associated with ineffective timing of when EQAO results are returned to children, a test trial for a year should be conducted where EQAO administers Grade 3 EQAO tests in late September at the start of Grade 4. If the objective is to assess students organically of their knowledge acquisition and mastery of content in the primary grades until end of Grade 3, it is reasonable to select start of Grade 4 to administer the EQAO test. This diminishes the opportunity for teachers to spend time prepping children and teach to the test as a means of getting children to perform better and to increase overall school scores. Upon administrating EQAO tests in late September, individual student results are to be scored and returned to the children by end of January of the same school year. This provides EQAO the same turn-around marking time they are utilizing now which is about three to four months to mark and tabulate all individual and school results.

5) To address concerns about how individual EQAO student results contains only raw achievement scores with limited descriptive feedback about children’s strengths, weaknesses, and where errors are made, EQAO should digitalize all marked EQAO booklets by scanning them and making them available to students and parents online through a secure website that allows them to log in with a personalized username and password. Once logged in securely, students and parents can download their individualized marked booklets and read more specific comments and suggestions as a form of feedback about how they did. This allows children and parents to visually see what questions they did well on, where they
made errors, and how they can improve in the various areas. Digitalizing EQAO marked booklets and making them accessible to students and parents online with more constructive descriptive feedback will cost money to be implemented, but in the long run, not only will it save money by the amount of paper it saves, it also makes the process more effective in supporting student learning and their improvement which is one of the key goals of any type of assessment.

6) Schools should begin to host “parent-student-teacher” meetings, in person or via alternative methods such as by phone or email, to explain to children and parents how to effectively interpret EQAO results in a constructive manner to improve student learning and mitigate the *invisible scars and traumatizing effects of standardized testing* associated with children’s self-critique of themselves and parent’s critique of their children based on EQAO scores. It is recommended “parent-student-teacher” meetings are conducted as soon as EQAO results are returned to children in late September or early October. As part of this conference meeting, the child, the parent(s), and the teacher should collaboratively co-construct an individualized personal action plan for the school year outlining short and long term goals for areas of improvement along with plans on how to achieve those goals. This individualized personal plan produced based on Grade 3 EQAO results should be supplemented with other teacher assessments. The goals of the action plan should be monitored relative to its progress at various intervals throughout the school year, particularly leading up to when report card marks are finalized, to facilitate students getting descriptive feedback about their strengths and areas needing improvement to increase their marks. These “check-in” meetings on the progress of the goals should be revisited with the parent(s) and the child every three months.

7) EQAO should collect data using *growth portfolios* to compile and track examples of progress, improvement, and high achievement levels throughout the school year with input from students and parents. Near the end of each three months period in the school year- November, February, and May- teachers should have a “parents-student-teacher” conference meeting to assess and discuss progress of students in different subjects particularly their strengths and areas needing improvement. The aim of the “parent-student-teacher” conference is to collaboratively decide on student work exemplars to input into the portfolio demonstrating skills and mastery of curriculum content in different subjects. School administrators should self-report and input all student achievement levels into a central database created by Ministry of Education, or EQAO officers can collect all portfolios and input the data themselves to mitigate bias or false reporting. This portfolio approach should continue and be built upon every school year as students advance to the next grade.

8) EQAO should consider conducting a test trial to switch to random testing of schools in various geographical neighbourhoods or by school boards to gain baseline data of student achievements instead of census-style testing where every student in every school is tested.
9) The Canadian federal, provincial, and local governments in collaboration with Ministry of Education, EQAO, school boards, and external organizations should commit funding and resources to host an annual two-day provincial conference on Student Success in Elementary Years and Beyond. One of the major focuses of the conference will be on authentic assessments of racialized children in the early years. The conference would create collaborative opportunities to bridge theory with practice involving educational stakeholders and practitioners from different fields who directly and indirectly work with young elementary-aged children. This includes, but is not limited to, researchers, teachers, early childhood educators, social workers, psychologists, child and youth care workers, special needs assistants, educational assistants, and community leaders and activists.

10) The TDSB should set yearly timelines to review their findings and update the public on new changes proposed and implemented in the six specific identified areas as part of their Enhancing Equity Task Force Report and Recommendations to ensure “equity for all” (TDSB, 2017, p. 4). It is recommended for the TDSB to work closely with the recently renewed provincial Anti-Racism Directorate Office which has outlined a three year strategic plan that targets systemic racism. Some of the relevant action-oriented suggestions listed under these four categories that can be implemented as part of school board policies and practices are; disaggregated race-based data collection, passing on anti-racism legislation, publicly reporting on progress of goals, public education and awareness about various social issues, an anti-racism conference, and most importantly implementation of population specific anti-racism initiatives.

11) The Ministry of Education, school boards, and schools should invest in creating and maintaining sustainable long term synergic collaborations with external organizations including grassroots non-profit organizations at the local community level involving practitioners from other sectors that work with children, youth, and young adults to provide socio-culturally relevant holistic services relative to student identities and needs of the local community. Two effective programs that can serve as “best practices” to be replicated having shown results in closing the achievement gap through minimizing the opportunity gap are TDSB’s Model Schools for Inner Cities and Youth Association for Academics, Athletics, and Character Education’s Summer Institute. It is encouraged for family of schools, which are schools located in close proximity to each other, to share their best practices by hosting two meetings throughout the school year. This can be done as a conference call or as part of professional development for teachers and administrators.

12) Local governments, teacher unions, grassroots organizations, school board districts, and schools should sign a memorandum of understanding to pressure the Ministry of Education to prevent public ranking of schools by external organizations such as the Fraser Institute as it leads to misleadingly labelling schools.
This exploratory qualitative study concludes with reflecting on where we can go from here to better serve the needs of racialized, minoritized, and students from lower socio-economic backgrounds at the elementary level as it relates to the use of standardized testing. It is suggested that investing in decolonizing education is an important step in the right direction if we want to make the institution of education more equitable and socially just. A decolonized education model begins with assessing the needs of students and the local communities; how students socio-emotionally and culturally enter the learning environment and the power dynamics embedded in the community and the learning space. This involves practices such as validating the histories and lived experiences of students as a form of valuable knowledge, recognizing their interests, passions and their preferred learning styles, and recognizing what resources are available and which ones can be secured through cooperation and collaboration with external organizations. Above all, a decolonized education focuses on providing support to teachers in numerous ways in order for them to assess in multiple ways and in different contexts the potential and competencies of students in relation to their unique needs, learning styles, and personalities.

The objective of a decolonized education model would be to internally motivate students to care about themselves and their communities through empowerment, reflexivity, and a sense of shared responsibility. This translates into cultivating unique student potentials and cultural capitals in relation to their identities and strengths and further empowering them to be agents of social change. The process involves allowing students to express themselves and makes mistakes- including their anger, frustration, and happiness- invite them to think, and most importantly challenge them to solve problems both in the classroom and in the larger context of their communities and the world. This is accomplished through horizontal sharing of power and control where all community members including the students recognize that they have a role to
play in their own success and success of others. Within this paradigm, success manifests itself in many forms and it is context-specific accompanied with themes of love, cooperation, reciprocity, and sacrifice; components which cannot be measured quantitatively but rather qualitatively over time through students’ thoughts, words, actions, and deeds. Each student is guided to be the best they can be, to compete with himself/herself, and to contribute to the betterment of their community and the nation instead of competing with other students locally, nationally, and internationally for the sake of rankings, rewards, and marks.

The emphasis on community and shared responsibility is significantly different from the standardized testing accountability paradigm; whereas “there is a threat implicit in accountability model” (Ungerleider, 2003, p. 283) in the form of shame, punishment, or fear of failure, the shared responsibility model encourages all educational stakeholders including parents, teachers, administrators, and all community members to play an active role in developing students holistically recognizing that meaningful teaching and learning takes place beyond the walls of the classroom within and through many spaces within the community. As Kobe’s mother states,

I think the government [and all institutions including schools] has to be prepared to identify and challenge systemic barriers. It’s not an easy thing to do but I think unless they are prepared to do that I don’t think we can get education to where it needs to go.

As Kobe’s mother expresses, the process of making education more equitable begins with a willingness of the government, and I would add other institutions, to acknowledge there are systemic barriers within their policies and practices and that something needs to be done about it through a collective approach. It requires commitment, effort, and energy from various stakeholders to collectively and collaboratively as a community of learners work towards creating sustainable change with equity and social justice at the heart of the decisions and new actions being implemented to close the achievement gap. Minimizing the opportunity gap through investing in a decolonized education model is a great place to start the change.
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Appendix A: Information Letter for Parents as Participants

UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO
OISE | ONTARIO INSTITUTE
FOR STUDIES IN EDUCATION

Information Letter for Parents as Participants

Date

Dear (Name of potential Adult Participant),

I am writing to you with regard to a new research study on the impact of grade 3 standardized testing on students and their parents. The Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO) was established in 1996 as an agency of the Government of Ontario responsible for creating criterion-referenced standardized tests as a means of providing an independent gauge of children’s learning and achievement across the province. My Ph.D. thesis, From ABC to EQAO: Exploring the Impact of Grade 3 EQAO Preparation and Administration on Students and Parents, will critically explore the effects of Grade 3 literacy and numeracy testing practices on subjective experiences of students and parents in the context of Toronto, Canada.

Although there has been extensive research on standardized testing in Ontario, Canada majority of it has been conducted at the secondary level. The purpose of this research project is to fill the gap in the current research by focusing specifically on the grade 3 provincial EQAO standardized testing. The principal investigator is myself, Ardavan Eizadirad, an educator and PhD candidate in the Department of Curriculum, Teaching and Learning at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto (OISE/UT). My thesis supervisor is Dr. Peter Trifonas, a tenured professor in the Department of Curriculum, Teaching, and Learning (CTL) at OISE/UT.

I feel that it is the responsibility of educational researchers to critically analyze whether or not systemic changes in government policy such as standardized testing are helping or hindering students to achieve to their optimal potential. It is my hope that findings from my research, led by voices of students and parents such as yourself, will help contribute to a better understanding of the social conditions and opportunities needed to redress any inequities at the school and government policy level in regards to the use of standardized testing in schools, particularly at the primary level. I hope to trace the effects of standardized testing through grade 3 students and their parents’ lived experiences. To this end, I hope to ask you and your child questions about your experiences with standardized testing in schools: What are your experiences with the Grade 3 EQAO testing? What issues does EQAO testing raise for you? The interview will be video recorded as it is important to capture body language and emotional expressions, particularly when dealing with grade 3 children when they are responding to questions as it will assist in contextualizing the data. This data will then be used to inform an analysis of emerging themes in relation to what practices help or hinder student success.
It is my hope to be able to speak with you and your child for no more than one hour as part of the interview which will be conducted the week after the EQAO test is administered to your child in May/June 2017. Part of the interview will be separate with you, then your child, and will conclude by asking some questions together from both of you.

Should you agree to be interviewed, your identity would remain strictly confidential and a pseudonym would be used in any writing I do for my research. You would also have the opportunity to withdraw from the study at any time without any penalties and all data associated with you and your child will be destroyed immediately. We can arrange a mutually agreeable time and place to conduct the interview.

If you are interested in pursuing this discussion further, please do not hesitate to contact me at the phone number or e-mail below. Thank you very much for your time and consideration. I look forward to meeting and speaking with you.

This research study has been approved by the Research Ethics Board of the University of Toronto. The Office of Research Ethics can be contacted by email at ethics.review@utoronto.ca or by phone at 416-946-3273 if you have questions about your rights as research participants. As well, the research study you are participating in may be reviewed for quality assurance to make sure that the required laws and guidelines are followed. If chosen, representative(s) of the Human Research Ethics Program (HREP) may access study-related data and/or consent materials as part of the review. All information accessed by the HREP will be upheld to the same level of confidentiality that has been stated by the research team.

Sincerely,

PhD Candidate
Department of Curriculum, Teaching, and Learning
OISE/University of Toronto
Appendix B: Information Letter for Child as Participant

Date

Dear (Name of potential Child Participant),

I am writing to you about a new research study on the impact of grade 3 standardized testing on students and their parents. I am interested in students' thoughts, ideas, and subjective experiences about and with EQAO standardized testing in your school. The work is for my Ph.D. thesis called From ABC to EQAO; Exploring the Impact of Grade 3 EQAO Preparation and Administration on Students and Parents, The main investigator is myself, Ardavan Eizadirad, an educator and PhD student at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto (OISE/UT). My thesis supervisor is Dr. Peter Trifonas, a professor in the Department of Curriculum, Teaching, and Learning (CTL) at OISE/UT.

In order to conduct this research, I hope to ask you and your parent(s) questions about your experiences with EQAO standardized testing: What are your experiences with the Grade 3 EQAO testing? What are your experiences with preparation for the test? How do you cope with the pressure and the stress of doing well on the test? Your responses will then be used to look for emerging themes and insights regarding the impact of EQAO standardized testing in schools.

It is my hope to be able to speak with you and your parent(s) for no more than one hour as part of the interview which will be conducted the week after the EQAO test is completed by you at your school in May/June 2017. Part of the interview will be separate with you, then your parent(s), and will conclude by asking some questions together from both of you.

The interviews will be video recorded to capture your body language and face expressions to better understand the meaning of your responses. Your identity and the name of your school will remain strictly confidential and a fake name will be used in any writing I do for my research to represent you. You also have the opportunity to withdraw from the study at any time without any consequences and all data associated with you will be destroyed immediately. We can arrange a mutually agreeable time and place with your parent(s) to conduct the interview. Thank you very much for your time and consideration. I look forward to meeting and speaking with you.
The Office of Research Ethics can be contacted by email at ethics.review@utoronto.ca or by phone at 416-946-3273 if you have questions about your rights as research participants. As well, the research study you are participating in may be reviewed for quality assurance to make sure that the required laws and guidelines are followed. If chosen, representative(s) of the Human Research Ethics Program (HREP) may access study-related data and/or consent materials as part of the review. All information accessed by the HREP will be upheld to the same level of confidentiality that has been stated by the research team.

Sincerely,

PhD Candidate
Department of Curriculum, Teaching, and Learning
OISE/University of Toronto
Appendix C: Permission to Interview and Consent for Parents

UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO
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FOR STUDIES IN EDUCATION

Permission to Interview and Consent for Parents

Research Project Title: *From ABC to EQAO; Exploring the Impact of Grade 3 EQAO Preparation and Administration on Students and Parents*

Researcher: Ardavan Eizadirad, B.A., B.Ed. and M. Ed.
PhD Candidate
Department of Curriculum, Teaching and Learning
Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto

Supervisor: Dr. Peter Trifonas
Tenured Professor
Department of Curriculum, Teaching and Learning
Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto

Here is a consent form, a copy of which will be left with you for your records and reference. If you would like more details about the research project, feel free to contact me. Please take the time to read this carefully and to understand any accompanying information. By signing this informed consent form, you are not waiving your legal rights or releasing the investigator or the involved institution from their legal and professional responsibilities.

I have read the information presented in the information letter about a study being conducted by Ardavan Eizadirad of the Department of Curriculum, Teaching and Learning at OISE, University of Toronto. I have had the opportunity to ask any questions related to this study, to receive satisfactory answers to my questions, and any additional details I wanted.

As a reminder, The Office of Research Ethics can be contacted by email at ethics.review@utoronto.ca or by phone at 416-946-3273, if you have questions about your rights as research participants. As well the research ethics program may have confidential access to data to help ensure participant protection procedures are followed.

I am aware that my interview is being video recorded to ensure an accurate recording of my responses which includes capturing my body language and emotional expressions to assist in contextualizing the data. I am also aware that excerpts from the interview may be included in the thesis and/or publications produced from this research, with the understanding that the quotations will be anonymous using pseudonyms.
I am informed that I may withdraw my consent at any time and withdraw without penalty by advising the researcher and all data associated with me will be destroyed immediately. I understand that this research project has been approved by the Research Ethics Board of the University of Toronto.

With full knowledge, I agree of my own free will, to participate in this study.

☐ YES  ☐ NO

I agree to have my interview audio and video recorded.

☐ YES  ☐ NO

I agree to the use of anonymous quotations in any thesis or publication that comes of this research.

☐ YES  ☐ NO

Participant Name: ____________________________ (Please print)

Phone Number: ____________________________

Email: ____________________________

Participant Signature: ____________________________

Date: ____________________________

Researcher Name: ____________________________ (Please print)

Researcher Signature: ____________________________

Date: ____________________________
Appendix D: Permission to Interview and Consent for Child

Permission to Interview and Consent for Child

Child Participant Consent Form (Proxy Consent through Parents)

Research Project Title:  
*From ABC to EQAO; Exploring the Impact of Grade 3 EQAO Preparation and Administration on Students and Parents*

Researcher:  
Ardavan Eizadirad, B.A., B.Ed. and M. Ed.  
PhD Candidate  
Department of Curriculum, Teaching and Learning  
Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto

Supervisor:  
Dr. Peter Trifonas  
Tenured Professor  
Department of Curriculum, Teaching and Learning  
Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto

Here is a consent form, a copy of which will be left with you for your records and reference. If you would like more details about the research project, feel free to contact me. Please take the time to read this carefully and to understand any accompanying information. By signing this informed consent form, you are not waiving your legal rights or releasing the investigator or the involved institution from their legal and professional responsibilities.

I have read the information presented in the information letter about a study being conducted by Ardavan Eizadirad of the Department of Curriculum, Teaching and Learning at OISE, University of Toronto. I have had the opportunity to ask any questions related to this study, to receive satisfactory answers to my questions, and any additional details I wanted.

As a reminder, The Office of Research Ethics can be contacted by email at *ethics.review@utoronto.ca* or by phone at 416-946-3273, if you have questions about your rights as research participants. As well the research ethics program may have confidential access to data to help ensure participant protection procedures are followed.
I am aware that my child will participate in the study if he/she agrees to participate and I agree to his/her participation.

I am aware that my child’s interview is being audio and video recorded to ensure an accurate recording of their responses which includes capturing their body language and emotional expressions to assist in contextualizing the data. I am also aware that excerpts from the interview may be included in the thesis and/or publications produced from this research, with the understanding that the quotations will be anonymous using pseudonyms.

I am informed that I may withdraw my consent at any time and withdraw without penalty by advising the researcher and all data associated with me and my child will be destroyed immediately. I understand that this research project has been approved by the Research Ethics Board of the University of Toronto.

With full knowledge, I agree of my own free will, to participate in this study.

☐ YES  ☐ NO

I agree to have my child’s interview audio and video recorded.

☐ YES  ☐ NO

I agree to the use of anonymous quotations in any thesis or publication that comes of this research.

☐ YES  ☐ NO

Child’s Name: _____________________________

Child’s Signature: __________________________

Child's Birth Date: __________________________

Gender of Child: ___ Male  ___ Female

Parent Name: ____________________________ (Please print)

Parent Signature: _________________________

Date: ___________________________________

Researcher Name: _________________________ (Please print)

Researcher Signature: _____________________

Date: ___________________________________
Appendix E: Interview Guide for Parents

Before:
Can you tell me a little about your child’s school and its surrounding community?
Where you born in Canada? If not, how long have you been in Canada?
Is English your mother tongue language? What other languages can you speak?
What is your opinion of your child’s school and school teacher? What do you like? What do you dislike?
What is different in Grade 3 compared to other years of your child being in school?
Have you received any communication from your child’s teacher or school regarding EQAO testing? If so, what have you learned about EQAO testing in Grade 3?
Based on your understanding, what is the EQAO test? Why does your child write it in Grade 3?
What have you observed in your child in terms of emotions and behaviours in relation to preparing for the EQAO test?
How do you support your child’s learning at school?
How do you support your child to prepare for the EQAO test?
What do you think the results of EQAO are used for?

During:
How important is it that your child does well?
How did you feel on the first EQAO test day?
How did your child feel on the first EQAO test day? Any differences before and after he/she got home?
What is the mood of your child? What does he/she do when home after writing the test?
How are you supporting your child this week to do well on the EQAO test?
Is your child stressed? Any changes in behaviour or attitude during testing week?
What is your child’s opinion about the test?
In your opinion, how is the EQAO test different or similar to other things your child does in school?
Have standardized tests come up in family talks as a point of concern or anxiety?
Do you think your child likes writing the EQAO test? Why or why not?

After:
How do you think your child did on the EQAO test?
How are parents affected by standardized tests?
What is your opinion of the EQAO test? Strengths? Weaknesses?
Would you change anything about the test? What? Why?
How do you think the EQAO test helps your child as a student?
Do you see any positive or negative changes in the school’s curriculum or procedures as a result of EQAO standardized testing?
What advice would you give other parents to prepare their children for the EQAO test?
If you could tell the government about ways to improve schools, what would you say?
What would you tell the government about the EQAO test in particular? Why?
Appendix F: Interview Guide with Grade 3 Student

Before:
Can you tell me a little about your school and its surrounding community?
Where you born in Canada? If not, how long have you been in Canada?
Is English your mother tongue language? What other languages can you speak?
What do you like about school? What do you dislike about school?
What is your favourite subject? What is your least favourite subject?
What do you like to do in your spare time?
What is different in Grade 3 compared to your other years in school?
Based on your understanding, what is the EQAO test? Why do you write it?
How does your teacher explain EQAO testing to you?
How do you feel about writing the EQAO test this year?
How do you prepare for the EQAO?
How does your teacher prepare you for the EQAO test?
How do your parents prepare you for the EQAO test?

During:
How did you feel on the first EQAO test day? When you got the first booklet?
What was the typical day and routine during test week?
How was this test different or similar to other things you do in school?
What is the mood in the school during EQAO testing days?
What are you doing to prepare to do well on the EQAO test?
What do you do when you get home after writing the EQAO test?
What are your teacher and parents doing to support you to do well on the EQAO test during test week?
Do you like writing the EQAO test? Why or why not?

After:
How do you think you did on the EQAO test?
What is your opinion of the EQAO test? Strengths? Weaknesses?
Would you change anything about the test? What? Why?
How do you think the EQAO test helps you as a student?
Next time, for example when you have to write the EQAO test again in Grade 6, how would you prepare differently for the EQAO test?
What do you think the EQAO results are used for?
What advice would you give to Grade 2 students to prepare for the EQAO test next year?
If you could tell the government about ways to improve schools, what would you say?
What would you tell the government about the EQAO test in particular? Why?
Appendix G: Acronyms and Definitions

BIPSA= Board Improvement Plan for Student Achievement and Well Being
CRT= Critical Race Theory
EA= Educational Assistant
EQAO= Education Quality and Accountability Office
ERF= Educational Resource Facilitator
ESL= English as a Second Language
ETFO= Elementary Teachers’ Federation of Ontario
FairTest= The National Center for Fair and Open Testing
IEP= Individual Education Plan
IQ= Intelligence Quotient
ISR= Individual Student Report
LOI= Learning Opportunity Index
MSIC= Model Schools for Inner Cities
NDP= New Democratic Party
OSSD= Ontario Secondary School Diploma
OSSLT= Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test
OSSTF= Ontario Secondary School Teachers’ Federation
RCOL= Royal Commission on Learning
SES= Socio-Economic Status
SIP= School Improvement Plan
TDSB= Toronto District School Board
TA= Thematic Analysis
YAAACE= Youth Association for Academics, Athletics, and Character Education