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## External assessment as stereotyping: Experiences of racialized Grade 3 children, parents and educators with standardized testing in elementary schools

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### Introduction

This article reflects the qualitative case study data collected via semi-structured interviews to examine subjective experiences of racialized children, parents, and educators with the Grade 3 Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO) standardized test preparation and administration in Ontario, Canada. As an educator having worked with various students from elementary to post-secondary levels, I became concerned about the impact of EQAO standardized testing on racialized students' development symbolized by how vividly they remembered writing EQAO tests in their early years of schooling and how it profoundly impacted and made them feel. These conversations about the pros and cons of standardized testing with various students inspired me to further pursue the impact of EQAO standardized testing; to explore, compare, and contrast the extent which narratives from racialized children, parents, and educators interviewed support or oppose the dominant narrative disseminated by EQAO about the benefits and effectiveness of EQAO standardized tests for accountability purposes.

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 and by extension racialized, focuses 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). Majority of studies about EQAO standardized testing in Ontario are conducted at the high school level focusing on experiences of secondary students (Hori, 2013; Kearns, 2011; Masood, 2008). This study contributes to the field of standardized testing in the early years by focusing on racialized identities and their experiences where currently there is not much data available. This article provides an insightful glimpse into the lived experiences and everyday

realities faced by racialized children, parents, and educators. This is particularly important in the current socio-political context where the Ministry of Education in Ontario recently announced 200 million dollars over four years to improve EQAO math scores in elementary schools while simultaneously the provincial Conservative government is implementing massive education cuts at all levels.

### **Justification for EQAO: Accountability to the public**

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, and findings. In an EQAO document titled *Highlights of the Provincial Results (2017)*, 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 study seeks to provide an opportunity for racialized children, parents, and educators to express how EQAO test preparation and administration impacts their identities and life experience. This is important given that racialized students have specific experiences with schooling in general and test-taking in particular historically and in terms of outcomes (Anyon, 1980; Colour of Poverty – Colour of Change, 2019; Curtis et al., 1992; Dei, 2008; Dei et al., 1995; Eizadirad, 2019; Eizadirad et al., 2016; Ladson-Billings, 1994).

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). 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. 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).

EQAO standardized tests are criterion-referenced and use the prescriptive Ontario curriculum expectations as the benchmark to assess students. 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). Grades 3, 6, 9, and 10 are chosen as key points for students to be assessed in various subjects. The launch of annual 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 h of testing over two weeks” by completion of three test booklets; two for language and one for math (EQAO, 2013, p. 7). 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. EQAO standardized tests continue to be implemented today in Grades 3, 6, 9, and 10 in Ontario and costs annually about 32 million dollars to administer.

EQAO uses the phrase “check on the use of tax dollars” (EQAO, 2012, p. 19) to symbolize the importance of maintaining the use of standardized testing in schools which aligns with the market-driven economical view of education as technocratic, measurable, and quantifiable. 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. Currently, EQAO test scores and by extension schools rankings produced by the Fraser Institute (<https://www.fraserinstitute.org/school-performance>) exclusively calculated based on EQAO results have gained so much currency in judging schools that increases or decreases in property values in local communities are driven and highly correlated to school rankings (Elementary Teachers’ Federation of Ontario, 2010; Pinto, 2016). 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 standardized test scores (Hori, 2013; Kempf, 2016; Pinto, 2016).

## **Experiences of racialized and minoritized students with standardized testing and access to opportunities**

Anyon (1980) and Bourdieu and Passeron (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 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) emphasize schooling reproduces certain knowledges and cultural capitals that privilege dominant classes while marginalizing the working class; 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’ relying 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. This is a one-size-fits-all approach to education from an equality paradigm. 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). These are systemic trends that continue to currently exist going into 2020 (Colour of Poverty – Colour of Change, 2019).

Race is a significant factor that impacts one’s access to opportunities (Eizadirad, 2019; Block & Galabuzi, 2011). As Ricci (2004) argues, “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 case within the Toronto District School Board as “schools with high dropout rates are those with the highest number of racialized students” (Colour of Poverty – Colour of Change, 2019, 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 16 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). Kearns’s (2011) study depicts how standardized tests, as a process and an outcome, can inscribe a negative label on to students which is powerful enough to create self-doubt in them and impact their motivation to succeed in school. This internal negotiation of an identity associated with poor academic competencies has the potential to lead to school disengagement and subsequent dropping out.

### **Participant recruitment and data collection**

Qualitative data was collected via semi-structured interviews with eight racialized families, each with a Grade 3 child and at least one parent present at the interview; a combination of male and females attending eight separate schools in the Greater Toronto Area. The selection criteria required to be a participant for the study included; the child had to be in Grade 3, attend a publicly funded school and write the EQAO standardized test, and the parent self-identify themselves and their child as racialized (See Table 1: Profile of Participants). I intentionally recruited children who attended different schools in different neighborhoods to capture a range of experiences reflecting the diversity of classes in Toronto. Participants were recruited via purposeful sampling and community networks and the data analyzed via thematic analysis. Interviews were conducted between June to August of 2017 at a place of convenience chosen by the parent(s) either at their home or at a nearby school. Interviews focused on the subjective

**Table 1.** Profile of participants.

Name	Birthday	Gender	Individual education plan (IEP)	Parent's occupation	Parent's ethnicity	Languages spoken by child	Type of neighborhood (based on neighborhood average income and irrespective of the overall income of the family interviewed)	Type of school attending	Interests
Laila	January 2008	Female	No	Mother-elementary school teacher Father-businessman Mother-chef Father-unemployed	Mother-Canadian Father-African Mother-Saint Vincent and the Grenadines Father-Jamaican Mother-Caribbean Step Father-Caribbean	English and French	Affluent higher socio-economic status	Catholic; Kindergarten to Grade 6; Uniformed	Art, gym and science
Deshawn	May 2008	Male	No	Mother-education resource facilitator Step Father-elementary school teacher	Father-Jamaican Mother-Caribbean Step Father-Caribbean	English and French	Low socio-economic status	Kindergarten to Grade 5	Math, riding his bike and scooter, and playing outside
Jordan	December 2008	Male	No	Mother-elementary school principal Father-elementary school vice principal	Mother; Caribbean and English roots Father-Caribbean and English roots	English and French	Mixed socio-economic status	Kindergarten to Grade 5; changed schools for the start of Grade 3; in a split Grade 2/3 class	Computers
Kobe	December 2008	Male	No	Mother-elementary school principal Father-elementary school vice principal	Single parent household Mother-Canadian	English and French	Upper middle to high socio-economic status	Kindergarten to Grade 8;	Gym, soccer, basketball, board games, and car games
Madison	August 2008	Female	Yes	Single parent household Mother-self-employed consultant Father unknown. Not in communication with the child or the mother.	Mother-Trinidadian Step Father-Jamaican	English and Spanish	Upper middle class to high socio-economic status	Kindergarten to Grade 8; split Grade 2/3 class; has an Individual Education Plan with identified accommodations	Math, playing computer games, and biking
Malcolm	December 2008	Male	No	Mother-eye-specialist Step Father-elementary school teacher assistant	Mother-Ecuadorian Father-Jamaican	English, French, and Spanish	Middle class socio-economic status	Kindergarten to Grade 5	Math, video games, and playing the piano
Christopher	April 2008	Male	No	Mother-dental assistant Father-self-employed businessman	Mother-Ecuadorian Father-Jamaican	English and Spanish	Mixed socio-economic status	Kindergarten to Grade 5; in a split Grade 3/4 class	Basketball and math
Chantel	July 2008	Female	Yes	Single parent household Mother-camp counselor Father-Unknown. Not in communication with the child or the mother.	Single parent household Mother-Caribbean	English	High socio-economic status	Kindergarten to Grade 6; in a split Grade 2/3 class	Gym, watching television, and soccer,

experience of the participants associated with before, during, and after writing the EQAO test. Interviews were audio and video recorded to capture body language and facial expressions as these are important unconscious means of communication. I use culturally specific pseudonyms for confidentially purposes to refer to the participants throughout the remainder of this paper. Overall, the interviews ranged from 45 to 60 min in duration.

### **Thematic data analysis**

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.

I use Green et al.'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 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). The second stage 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). 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, neighborhood location, and various other significant factors such as race, gender, and neighborhood socioeconomic status (See Table 1). 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). 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 the participants.

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). Major themes identified which will be discussed in depth in the following section are highly intense socio-emotional stress and anxiety and fear of failure as these were constantly described by the children, parents, and educators describing their experiences with EQAO standardized testing.

### **Emerging themes: Stress, anxiety, and fear of failure**

One of the major emerging themes was that most children experienced high intensity socio-emotionally induced stress and anxiety attributing it to fear of failure and poor performance. Some of the major negative physical and psychological impacts expressed by the children were losing sleep by worrying about doing poorly, experiencing overwhelming anxiety and nervousness demonstrated by crying and needing reassurance from 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 labeled as “dumb.” Furthermore, all parents interviewed expressed observing higher levels of stress and anxiety in their child leading up to and during EQAO testing week. All parents tried to counter and mitigate the test induced anxiety, stress, and fear of failure in their child using strategies such as 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.

Children recognized the importance of the test as constant references were made to it starting from September by teachers and administrators to ensure they were prepared and present for the test. Grade 3 became known to the students as the EQAO year, being the first time they write a highly publicized formal standardized test. Common preparation techniques used by classroom teachers included doing practice questions with reference to EQAO expectations, completing EQAO booklets from previous years, and informational school letters from Principals emphasizing importance of the children being present to write the EQAO test. 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. As a theme, the children expressed that 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 children 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 the next grade, the emphasis placed on the importance of the test through constant references to it and the amount of time dedicated to prepare for it, created extensive pressure on the children to do well. Children explained they felt pressure to do well to justify their identity as smart, worrying that if they did poorly 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. These words were constantly repeated as part of the interviews explaining the children's' feelings toward preparing for the test. In one extreme case, Jordan would not enter the class on the first day of EQAO testing to participate in writing the test. 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.

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 Individual Education Plan (IEP). 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" (Toronto District School Board, 2017, p. 153). As part of her IEP, Madison often engages in self-directed learning with help from an Educational Assistant 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. Thompson, 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 explaining Madison’s identified exceptionalities and the support services she regularly 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 behaviors 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<sup>th</sup> period and we only have one period off but after when I was done, I felt much better.

Madison’s mother expanded on 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 to complete the EQAO test booklets. If students do not write the test, including students with identified exceptionalities, the school receives a score of zero for that student which impacts the overall school scores. With Madison, the teacher read out the questions to her, Madison responded orally, and the teacher transcribed her responses into the EQAO booklet. 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 frustration and fear associated with worrying about doing poorly on the test and being judged.

Other Grade 3 children interviewed had similar responses in describing their emotions leading up to the test and during EQAO testing week. 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 favor of the test, but they work within the power dynamics affiliated with standardized testing policy enactment. This translates into pressure being placed upon educators and administrators to improve overall EQAO test scores to avoid being labeled as a “bad” school or receive a poor school ranking based on EQAO scores.

### **External assessment as stereotyping**

Reflecting on the racialized experience with standardized testing as described by the participants interviewed and making connections to the emerging themes identified, a theoretical argument is presented in this section identifying *external assessment as stereotyping*. It is argued that the implementation of standardized testing for accountability purposes beginning in 1996 and as a means of producing data to close the achievement gap between various social groups has failed, and instead contributed to reproducing, and at times intensifying a racial and socially stratified

Canadian society privileging White identities and those from higher socio-economic status. Although the foundation of the theory presented is rooted in the data collected via semi-structured interviews focusing on experiences of racialized children, the theory is further supported by alarming statistics in different institutions outlining persistent systemic inequities impacting racialized identities.

The narratives expressed by children and parents interviewed indicate 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 older 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.

Based on the emerging themes, EQAO testing in the early years is more harmful than beneficial for the holistic development of young children. Particularly, dissecting the harmful impacts of EQAO standardized testing on racialized identities and those from lower socio-economic status, I argue externally administered standardized tests such as EQAO function as a tool for stereotyping racialized identities. *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, perpetuate fear of test-taking, 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 (Colour of Poverty – Colour of Change, 2019; 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-assessment 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. Labeling 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 student being judged through a deficit lens (Portelli & Sharma, 2014), a liability to the school reputation and school rankings, that blames them for their failure without examining holistically their unique identities, life circumstances, and systemic barriers impacting their academic performance such as level of accessibility to resources, opportunities, and social support services (Hulchanski, 2007). As Au (2010) 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 ‘behavioral’ programs 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 behavioral and/or special education classes from an early age, with the decision profoundly influenced by standardized test results in the early years 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 et al., 2014, p. 3).
- c. *Challenges the stereotype of the racialized student being a low-achiever by producing positive achievement results. 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 can contribute 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 (hooks, 2003; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Razack, 2002). 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 such as their hair and food and other cultural and racial practices about themselves to their peers with respect to stereotypes made about them. This trend and harmful impact of the stereotype manifests itself systemically via statistics where in Ontario in 2015, there was a 69% high school graduation rate for Black students and 50% for Indigenous students, versus 84% for White students (Colour of Poverty-Colour of Change, 2019, p. 1).

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, when so much currency and meaning is attached to quantifiable standardized test results. 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)

This trend has continued from the 1990s to now in Ontario. According to the Colour of Poverty – Colour of Change (2019) Fact Sheet on “Racialized Poverty in Education and Learning”:

- Black and Indigenous students are more likely to be streamed into non-academic programs than White or some of the other racialized students. In 2015 the Toronto District School Board reported that 53% of Black students and 48% of Indigenous students, compared to 81% of White students, were enrolled in Academic programs of study; while 39% of Black students and 41% of Indigenous students, compared to 16% of White students, were in Applied programs.
- Black, Indigenous, and Eastern Mediterranean/Southwest Asian students were disproportionately expelled from TDSB primary/secondary schools. Black students were 12% of TDSB student population but represented 48% of all expulsions; Indigenous students were 0.3% of the population but faced 1% of all expulsions; Eastern Mediterranean/Southwest Asian students were 4% of the population but faced 8% expulsions. (p. 1)

Labeling children as “low achievers” or “behavioral” allows those in positions of authority in the school system to justify specific types of administration, instruction, and surveillance upon students’ identities, often holding them back from their full potential due to not fitting in with normalized standards. *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 (Bhabha, 1983; Eizadirad, 2019). Current examples of negative labels used in schools that perpetuate stereotypes include students being referred to as “at-risk,” “illiterate,” “behavioral,” or being an “applied” student when discussing their potential to succeed relative to assigned school work (Kearns, 2011; Masood, 2008). This language is rooted in deficit thinking, viewing the root cause of failure in students rather than the system.

### **Implications and future areas to explore**

Stiggins (2014) raises a critical question that asks, “Should we assess what is easy to measure or what is important?” (p. 76). It is significant to continuously question “common sense” 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. 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 concluded that students in affluent schools receive more challenging and interdisciplinary curriculum that promotes hands-on learning and higher level critical thinking, whereas students in working-class schools receive a curriculum that focuses on rote memorization and character development via an emphasis on behavior and mannerism. This is a trend that is driven by emphasis on school rankings where the quality of education offered in schools is often predominantly judged by scores on standardized tests.

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 (Eizadirad, 2020). 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 addressing community needs. In other words, we have to be conscious of the community and the school interface; what happens in the community impacts the learning conditions in the school and vice versa. Therefore, a place-based approach to understanding education and community is more effective than a one-size-fits-all approach. 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).

## Conclusion

Overall, this paper reflected the qualitative data collected via semi-structured interviews to highlight the unique subjective experiences of racialized children, parents, and educators with the Grade 3 EQAO standardized test preparation and administration in Ontario. The theory of *external assessment as stereotyping* was presented outlining how it operates at three levels beginning in the early years marginalizing and oppressing racialized identities via the interpretations and socially constructed labels created from standardized test results.

It is suggested that a shift from equality to an equity approach is needed to constructively tackle closing the achievement gap in schools. The achievement gap will not be minimized without addressing inequality of opportunity. This has to be beyond investing in superficial one on one

initiatives. We have to move away from judging schools, and the quality of education they offer through standardized tests scores and their quantifiable indicators. We have to deter from viewing children from a deficit lens and transition to view them from a strength-based lens; as holistic beings with different social, cognitive, emotional, developmental, spiritual and academic needs situated within communities that face unique systemic barriers. Meeting the needs of students and local communities from a place-based approach should be a priority of schools and externally administered standardized tests are ineffective tools in identifying those needs. Let's work with and from within communities, to capture the essence of quality education and mitigate barriers impeding student success versus judging schools by externally mandated standardized tests which homogenize the needs of all students and communities using a one-size-fits all approach. The reality is that the exact same effort by all students does not yield the same results. Let's work toward improving the system and quit blaming students as the sole factor for their failures!

### **Notes on contributor**

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