High-stakes Standardized Testing and Marginalized Youth: An Examination of the Impact on Those Who Fail

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Abstract

This study examines the impact of high-stakes, large-scale, standardized literacy testing on youth who have failed the Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test. Interviews with youth indicate that the unintended impact of high-stakes testing is more problematic than policy makers and educators may realize. In contrast to literacy policy's aims to help promote the "well-being" of all learners and "equity" within the educational system, youth attest to feeling "shame" and show further marginalization due to this testing mechanism. These findings suggest that it is necessary to broaden the dialogue about the impact of high-stakes standardized literacy testing and its effects.

Key Words: high-stakes standardized testing; literacy; equity; marginalized youth

Résumé

Cette étude examine l'impact des tests normalisés en littératie, à grande échelle et aux enjeux élevés, sur les jeunes qui ont échoué au Test provincial de compétences linguistiques. Les entretiens avec ces jeunes indiquent que l'impact involontaire des enjeux liés au test est plus problématique que les législateurs et les éducateurs ne peuvent se rendre compte. Contrairement aux objectifs de la politique en littératie pour aider à promouvoir le «bien-être» de tous les apprenants et l'«équité» dans le système éducatif, les jeunes témoignent d'un sentiment de «honte» et montrent une plus grande marginalisation due à ce système de test. Ces résultats suggèrent qu'il est nécessaire d'élargir le dialogue sur l'impact des enjeux élevés liés aux tests normalisés en littératie et leurs effets.

Mots clés: enjeux élevés des tests standardisés, littératie, équité, jeunesse marginalisée

Educational Policy, High-Stakes Standardized Testing and the Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test (OSSLT)

Introduction

Current educational policy practices reflect local and global pressures to have a "literate" workforce.[1] Education reforms that target youth as a population in need of testing, monitoring, and improvement have emerged in Ontario, other Canadian provinces, and in other countries such as Australia, Britain, New Zealand and the United States (Lesko, 2001; Lipman, 2004; Te Riele, 2006; Thomson, 2002). High-stakes standardized tests "are increasingly seen as a means of raising academic standards, holding educators and students accountable for meeting those standards, and boosting public confidence in schools" (Heubert & Hauser, 1999, p. 1).

As part of its response to calls to hold educational systems accountable for producing literate youth and better equipped citizens, the Ontario government created the Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO) to produce and implement the Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test (OSSLT). Since the 2001–2002 school year, the OSSLT has been administered to all Grade 10 students in the province of Ontario. In addition to being a standardized literacy test, the OSSLT is classified as a high-stakes test because it is a mandatory graduation requirement for all Ontario high school students. Youth who are not successful on their first attempt at writing the OSSLT can take it a second time the following year, and, if they are still not successful, they can take a specific literacy course to try to obtain their literacy graduation requirement.

EQAO policy maintains that the reason for collecting large-scale data through a high stakes standardized test is because "it is in all of our interests that students maximize their potential to become active, productive contributors of society. Knowing that students are accomplishing their goals calls for evidence. Collecting this evidence has been central to EQAO's role" (EQAO, 2007). In the EQAO's estimation, then, the data gathered through the OSSLT benefits society as a whole. The EQAO further stipulates that its implementation of educational policies will benefit students themselves and maintains that it "values the well-being of learners above all other interests" (EQAO, 2004).

One of the guiding principles of EQAO's standardized testing mandate is to increase equity in the educational system. As outlined in the policy document:

> It is essential that the EQAO assessments be used to seek excellence and equity for every student in the system. Doing so requires a willingness to analyze the data and determine where inequities lie, within each school and each school district, and then to focus efforts on those who are not mastering the foundational skills. Using results in this way – to identity skills requiring additional classroom attention or students who require support – will allow us to close the gap between those who are meeting the expectations of curriculum and those who are not … to tackle the gap between students who are thriving and those who are not. (EQAO, 2007)

[1] I have placed quotations marks around "literate" to show that there is debate about what literacy means. According to the New London Group (1996), who researched multiliteracies, and post colonial thinkers such as Lopez-Gopar (2007), who questioned the dominance of print text and the devaluation of oral traditions and aboriginal knowledges, literacy is seen as much broader than anything that can be reduced to a paper and pencil text or a test score.

Data collection can be used to identify youth and the gap in their performance can be closed by providing extra support. EQAO reasons that its standardized test will identify youth who are not *thriving* so that they can be brought up to the same level as those who are thriving, thus, a much more equitable educational system will unfold. Overall, both locally and globally, the discourse of standardized testing to monitor student achievement, raise standards, and increase accountability also stipulates that these measures be used to redress inequalities in students' opportunities to learn (Klinger, Rogers, Anderson, Poth, & Calman, 2006; Mazzeo, 2001).

This study sought to examine the impact of large-scale standardized testing as a high-stakes graduation requirement on youth. I interviewed 16 youth who failed the OSSLT. I chose to focus on youth who failed the test because they are the ones who are presumed to benefit the most from the test findings. I examined the aims of the policy and contrasted them with the youth voices in my study to reveal the feelings of youth about this experience and the unintended effects this testing mechanism has on them.

Approaches to the Investigation: Youth Voices and Anti-oppressive Educators

The voices of youth are seen as integral to the discussion of educational policies directly affecting their lives, identities, and possibilities (Archer & Yamashita, 2003; Lipman, 2004; Lytle & Cochran-Smith, 1992; Thomson, 2004). I am committed to responding to the concerns and needs of those I teach. As Kumashiro (2002) pointed out:

> Even well-intentioned educators might be disposing of some of the very students they are trying to address. Antioppressive educators have an ethical responsibility to reflect constantly on students they may be disposing of, and on how to rework their practices. (p. 203)

This study builds upon the work of several critical policy theorists, including Lipman (2004), Lesko (2001), Thomson (2002), and Te Riele (2006), who examined the impact of educational policies on youth. I concur with Lipman (2004), who noted "policies are discourses—values, practices, ways of talking that shape consciousness and produce social identities" (p. 15).

Marginalized Youth and Standardized Testing

There is a considerable amount of literature on how social inequalities along racial, social class, and gendered lines are reproduced and sustained through school practices (Fine & Weis, 2001; Kozol, 1992; Thomson, 2002). Arguably, standardized testing (re)produces these inequalities (Lipman, 2004; McNeil, 2000). For example, educational researchers have consistently identified economic factors as having a positive or negative impact on student achievement (Brownell et al., 2006; Kohn, 2000). As confirmed in a recent report from the Manitoba Centre for Health and Policy, when it comes to testing and educational outcomes, "children from families of lower socio-economic status (SES) don't do as well in school as those from wealthier families" (Roos et al., 2006, p. 1). This trend holds true for most students; specifically, "each step up the socioeconomic ladder is associated with better outcomes" (Roos et al., 2006, p. 1). The Manitoba Centre for Health and Policy also confirmed that by the time students reach secondary school, those with lower SES are more likely to leave school early, fail standardized tests or not write them, or be behind in school levels (as cited in Roos et al., 2006).

Ungerleider (2006) says "in Canada approximately 70 percent of the variation in student learning is not attributable to school factors but to student, family and community characteristics" (p.877).

Given the numerous factors that influence the outcomes of individual students' educational journeys, what impact does standardized testing have on youth? In 1999, Reay and Wiliam (1999) wrote that there "is virtually no literature which engages students' perspectives" because it is assumed that "assessments have minimal impact on [youth] subjectivities or that youth concerns…are merely a backdrop to the assessment process" (pp. 344–345). Reay and William have maintained that youth voices are not an integral part of the public dialogue on standardized testing in England and Wales; youth are the target of policy initiatives, but their perspectives are not taken into account. More recently, a few researchers have uncovered how students feel about or are made to feel about standardized testing. Archer and Yamashita (2003) revealed how immigrant youth, who are considered "at risk," are made to feel particularly unwelcome by the educational system through standardized testing. Te Riele (2006) recognizes how the identification of being "at risk," through a variety of educational mechanisms, sometimes produces the feelings of not being good enough, which leads to some youth feeling as though they do not belong in schools, or question their school class placement.

All of the student interviewees in my study were or became classified as "at risk" within the education system because they failed the OSSLT. In schools, the term *at risk* is used to describe youth who may be "at risk" of not passing a test, a course, or graduating from high school. Youth are also classified to be "at risk" because of class, race, ethnicity, gender, community circumstances, language, ability, and "risk" of early school leaving. Kelly contended that this term constructs young people labeled thusly as "deficient" (as cited in Te Riele, 2006, p. 131). For this reason, many theorists prefer the term *marginalization* instead of "at risk." The language of "at risk," as opposed to marginalization, holds individual youth accountable for his or her "at riskness" instead of the complex, social, political, gendered, racial, and economic factors that contribute to one's particular situation (Gonzalez, 2001; James & Taylor, 2008; Thomson, 2002).

Marginalization is not a static process, but a complex one. Te Riele (2006) has reminded us that:

> An individual student may be marginalized by some aspects of schooling but not others, may like some teachers, peers, subjects, but not others, and may behave differently in response to marginalization from other students. For each student a different combination of school factors, interacting with out-of-school factors, is responsible for their marginalization. (p. 135)

The youth I interviewed are all marginalized in that they failed the literacy test. They have diverse experiences with school and have different and shared class, linguistic, social, political, gendered, and racial identities. Given the fact that Ontario's provincial Department of Education has only recently implemented large-scale standardized testing, the voices of youth have not yet been adequately represented in the area of large-scale, high-stakes standardized literacy testing. By interviewing youth, by collecting their narratives, and by seeking to understand and give voice to their perceptions, some of this complexity can be further elucidated.

Klinger and Luce-Kapler (2007) examined successful and unsuccessful students' perceptions of the large-scale testing process, test-taking preparation, and students' understanding of literacy. As a result of their investigation, they have suggested that the

differences between successful and unsuccessful youth needs further inquiry and consideration, especially with regard to the discrepancy between academic youth—university-streamed students who generally pass and have access to a range of test-taking strategies—and applied youth—college or workplace-streamed students who fail more often and do not seem to have the same range of strategies in a high-stakes standardized test-taking situation (Klinger & Luce-Kapler, 2007). Cheng, Klinger, and Zang (2007) also drew attention to the fact that many English-as-a Second-Language (ESL) and English Literacy Development (ELD) youth fail the OSSLT more often.

My study's results confirm that there is indeed a discrepancy between the test success of academic youth and the test success for applied, ESL, and ELD youth. These results extend the previous findings by paying particular attention to the voices of youth who have failed the OSSLT, revealing how they felt (and are made to feel) by the testing mechanism's findings, and the implications this has for their "well-being" and "equity" in the educational system.

Method

This study with youth is part of a larger doctoral thesis, *Equity, Literacy Testing and Marginalized Youth: The Social Construction of "Illiterate" Identities* (Kearns, 2008). Once I had obtained ethical permission from my respective university and the school board, the interviewees were recruited using a snowball sampling technique.

I used in-depth, semi-structured, qualitative interviews as my research method (Glesne, 2006; Kvale, 1996; Mason, 2006). Interviews were my method of choice, for they are not only a mode of inquiry, but also a way to further my "interest in understanding the experience of other people and the meaning they make from that experience" (Seidman, 1998, p. 3). In collecting data, I listened to, transcribed, and documented the voices of 16 youth who had failed the literacy test at least once.

The recruitment process required a number of measures. Many teachers and administrators, who I interviewed for their perceptions on the OSSLT, encouraged me to come to their schools and to interview their students. All but one of the youth were attending school regularly and on a full-time basis at the time of the interviews. In addition to contacting the student who had left school early with the help of an educator who thought he would be important to interview, I was able to introduce myself to five different high school classes in two different urban schools in Toronto and ask for volunteers for my study. Given that many of the recruits were under the age of consent, which is 18 years old, parental or guardian permission was required for the youth to participate. Many students, even those who did not fail, were eager talk about their experiences with the OSSLT, but the study was designed to interview only those students who experienced literacy test failure. Once the youth volunteers had contacted me, I was able to make arrangements to meet the students at a convenient time and place. For those youth in school, the interviews took place at school during the day: before or after school, or during lunch; the youth who left school was interviewed at his guardian's home.

To give a context to the literacy test scores and the areas in which the youth lived, both schools had lower than average OSSLT scores, and almost 50% poverty rates (United Way, 2004). The student who had left school early also lived in an area with 50% poverty rates. The schools were racially and ethnically diverse, with a high concentration of first generation Canadians. My interviewees' backgrounds reflect this reality: three of my interviewees were White, one youth was Black, another identified as "White" but had Aboriginal ancestry; the

remaining youth were first generation Canadians from Afghanistan, China, Congo-Brazzaville, India, Iran, Iraq, Pakistan, Russia, and South Korea.

Data was collected through 11 individual semi-structured student interviews with girls and boys, aged 15 to 18. All of the youth who failed were not taking academic or university level classes, but college or general stream classes. I have given the students pseudonyms so that it is easier to identify them in this text. Four of my interviewees had written the OSSLT once and failed once: Andrew, Matthew, Bob, and Tammy. Three had written the test a second time and passed: Madihah, Paveena, and Hadyah. One had written the test for a second time and failed and was looking at the prospect of taking the Literacy course: Louise. Three youth had failed the literacy test twice and were almost finished taking the Literacy course: Nadira, Kanak, and Lina.

Data was also collected during one focus group interview consisting of five students who were 18 to 19 years of age, who had failed the English literacy test once, and who were all in the same English as a Second Language class at one urban high school. Lane, Ester, Mohamed, Wojtek, and Michelle had been in Canada for less than three years and had failed the literacy test once. The focus group configuration grew out of the students' request to be interviewed with their friends in the class. In consultation with their English teacher, it was agreed that the students relied on one another for linguistic support as they tried to communicate in English, which was actually a third or fourth language for most of these English language learners, and that they would be comfortable sharing with one another and myself. The five students who volunteered to be part of the study were used to working in groups in the class and eagerly wanted to share this experience together as well. It seemed respectful on my part to acknowledge their request given they were all of the age of consent, and understood that though I could not guarantee their confidentiality, there were no known adverse affects in the type of discussion that was to take place.

Although two different procedures were used, individual and focus group interviews, the interviews consisted of semi-structured questions. The questions guiding the youth interviews included:

- What do/did you like/dislike about high school?
- Have you written the literacy test? (When? How many times?)
- What was your experience with it?
- How did you feel before the test? What was the day of the test like? What was the second day of the test like?
- How was this test different or similar to things you do in school?
- Do you remember the day you got your test result back? What was that like?
- Did you speak to a/any of your friend(s), parent(s), teacher(s) about the test?
- Did the test results change the way you feel about school?
- Did the test results change how you are perceived at school?
- What do you think about the literacy test? What do some your friends think of the test?
- Would you change anything about the test? What? Why?
- What kind of work are you doing now or do you want to have after school?
- Is school important to you? Is school important to your family?
- Is the test important to your family?
- Can you tell me a little about the community you live in?

- What do you like to do in your spare time? Do you like to read, use computers, watch T.V (how and for how long to you do these activities)?
- If you could tell the government about ways to improve schools, what would you say?
- What would you tell the government about the literacy test in particular? Why?
- What does a high school diploma represent to you?

The analysis of the interviews proceeded in stages. In the larger work (Kearns, 2008), I was able to create sketches of individual participants that included information on their age, background, likes/dislikes of school, how they used different media, and so on. I also described the interview itself and detailed the overall findings on their literacy test experiences. Given the patterns that clearly emerged from all the interviews, I was able to thematize the data. However, for the purposes of this paper, I have chosen the themes that are most conducive to analyzing policy through a comparison of what government policy says about the test and its impact on learning, the well-being of youth, and on equity with the experiences of those whom the policy effects.

Findings: Youth Voices

Several themes emerged from my discussion with differently located youth during the individual and focus group interviews I conducted. Here, I present some of the themes as they relate to the well-being of students and equity within the educational system. The youths' well-being and the impact of test failure on youth identities is highlighted by the number of students who experienced shock at test failure, and more so by all the students asserting that they felt degraded, humiliated, stressed, and shamed by the test results. They further maintained that standardized testing brought about a real sense that there was a lack of care and concern for their well-being and that of their peers. The notion of the OSSLT being equitable or helping to promote 'equity' is also considered in relation to marginalized youth as the youth in my study have experienced "equity" policy as punitive.

"I thought I was going to do good"

The majority of youth I interviewed were surprised and even shocked to find out that they were not up to the government standard of literacy. Tammy, a first timer test-taker stated:

> I was excited to see what I would get and I was shocked because I thought I was going to be happy…have a smile on my face, but I was kind of disappointed…I just don't understand how I failed [the OSSLT]…I felt confident. I thought I was going to do good. It seemed easy. I'm good in English. So, I wasn't expecting to fail it.

Tammy felt she was successful in her applied level English classes, had a good grasp of the curriculum at her level, and obtained very good marks; however, her schooling experiences had not prepared her for high-stakes, large scale standardized literacy test failure or success.

Even second time test-takers were not able to predict their results before receiving official notice from the EQAO. Louise explained how she felt after waiting a year and taking the test for a second time: "I got my results two weeks ago and I found out that I failed. I was pretty upset about it…I thought that this is easy, you know. I thought I did my best. I thought I did good, but it turned out that I didn't." Lina, who failed the test twice and at the time of her

interview was taking the course, concurred: "I seriously thought I was gonna pass because of the first time experience, but no I didn't…it was the same thing …horrible." Many students believed they had done well or ought to have done well and were shocked by the official EQAO findings.

The interviewees' shock and surprise are a result of a mismatch between what the test results say about youth and how they perceive(d) themselves prior to the test. Kanak, who failed the literacy test twice and was taking the literacy course, said: "I couldn't understand [my literacy test failure]. Like I am doing ok in my [regular] English classes…why does this test you know, say I didn't understand it [English]." Louise, who also took classes at the applied level, bemoaned the fact that her literacy abilities are different from the negative findings of the test as well: "I got a seventy percent in English first term, and a sixty-eight second term, and I still failed [the literacy test]." Certainly, the difference between some youths' school success and test failure is hard for youth to comprehend, which adds to their shock when receiving results.

"It's degrading knowing that I didn't pass"

Some youth not only expressed "shock" and lack of understanding at the test results, but felt "shame," "degraded," "humiliated," "stressed," "a little less smart," "like a loser," and expressed "fear," upon learning that they had failed. Paveena said: "Before writing the test I was really scared." After writing the test, she said: "I was scared because I did it, but I didn't know if I was going to pass." When I asked her what it was like to get her test results back, she said she had "cried." Other youth found the whole experience of failing demeaning. Bob said he did not perceive school any differently after failing the test, but found the test "was kind of degrading. It makes me feel a little less smart, knowing that I failed." He went on to say that "some of the smarter kids may have laughed at me, but it doesn't bother me." When I asked Bob how the test made him feel, he responded: "bored and stressed out…It's degrading knowing that I didn't pass. It's not that I'm not degraded by me not trying, it's just being degraded by me not passing." Lina explained the feelings evoked when one fails the literacy test, saying "you feel ashamed…it's embarrassing, disappointing as well." Madihah, who failed the literacy test once, but was successful on her second attempt over a year later, added that "this literacy test makes you feel really bad about yourself. You have a different perspective about yourself after taking the test;" she continues, explaining it makes people feel "like a loser."

"I enjoyed English…was I good at it?"

Repeatedly in the data, youth said they experienced self-doubt about their abilities as a direct result of their test failure. Kanak said: "I enjoyed English, but my self-esteem really went down after the test… I really had to think over whether I was good at it or not." Madiha also interpreted the official communication from EQAO as a sign that she was not up to acceptable standards. She said: "I work really hard and when I see these results from the government or who marks that stuff, I feel like 'wow maybe I am not at an acceptable level…maybe I should not take academic courses.'" Several youth doubted their school success because they were not successful on a standardized test. The power of the test results made some students feel as though they did not belong in courses they previously enjoyed, and even caused some of them to question their school class placement.

"I'm going to get even more stressed out"

As a result of failing the OSSLT, some students not only questioned their efforts in school, but also became concerned about their future. Bob noted that when students write a "normal test" they "just [go] on with [their] lives." This does not appear to be the case if they fail the OSSLT. Bob continued: "Now I have to do it next year and I'm going to get even more stressed out." It is stressful, not only because students have to write it again, but because it makes them think that "if you failed once you might fail again…or else you have to take the course and you might not graduate."

Many youth in the study worried that their long-term life chances would be affected by the OSSLT. Madihah explained how the test constrains youths' hopes for the future. She said test failure "is like taking your future away, like if you failed it, then you don't get your diploma; this literacy test took your life, your future." Again, youth not only felt the immediate impact of the test, but also saw their futures in jeopardy as a result of OSSLT failure.

"I'm pretty sure this literacy test is not* [what] *makes me good at reading and writing"

Youth also noticed a lack of care and concern for their well-being. Madihah pointed to a discrepancy between those who taught her and those who evaluated her on a standardized test. She stated that she had strong oral skills and could demonstrate her knowledge in that way in a classroom, but admitted to having to work harder in written contexts, while clearly showing that she was willing to put in the extra time and effort. She continued on, reflecting on the role of school and teachers in helping her to become literate and the impact of being evaluated by strangers:

> In the high school, teachers motivate their students, encourage them … you know you have to believe in yourself, be strong, but this literacy test makes you feel really bad. … I'm pretty sure this literacy test is not [what] makes me good at reading and writing, 'cause it is only two days … my teachers are really helping me with that, like step by step…asking me if I really want help, this is the one that makes me progress in English but it is not the literacy test. No, no way! … those who are marking it, they are not going to know who this person is… like the teachers they know their students, right, but for those who are marking it, they have no idea. They don't know their wishes, and hopes and dreams…It's a really bad idea to do this test. It is not going to make you special…it's just really not fair.

This youth experienced a real difference between classroom literacy and standardized test literacy. She saw classes and teachers as helpful in supporting her and the long-term process of becoming increasingly literate in multiple and complex ways. Her sense of self was affirmed in a relationship with a teacher in the classroom, whereas she perceived a real lack of care from the anonymous feedback of a marker. The OSSLT and the literacy technology that accompanies it were not perceived as helpful.

Youth experienced meaningful literacy opportunities in English classrooms. As Ellis (2005) confirmed, youth experience opportunities for "positive identity formation" at school when they feel supported and are given the opportunity to feel good about themselves. In an interview, Lina stated:

> I really like English cause you learn a lot and you get to write about yourself and like your experiences and stuff. In our English class this year get to write a lot of personal essays and summaries about yourself and it's pretty good.

When one is asked to tell and share stories about oneself, one is made to feel valuable and validated. Literacy is seen as a process that takes place over time in a supportive environment and in relationship with others. The youth in this study showed an awareness that "literacy is and must be a social undertaking, to be sought in pluralist classrooms… as diverse persons strive to create themselves in their freedom" (Greene, 1995, p. 121).

"Some kids are failing more"

Youth in my study also reveal how ethnicity and English language fluency matter in standardized testing. Tammy said:

> Some kids are failing more I've noticed…cause I've asked my friends if they've passed and they said no, and I was shocked. Okay, I'm not the only one that failed, so I noticed that some of us failed...my friends…they are Black too.

Some youth said they thought their English language learning was a reason for their test failure; "I think I failed because English is not my first language," said Hadyah. When I asked Madihah about her friends' experiences with the test, she said: "most of the people I know failed. That's all I know, most of the people failed." Madihah's friends were from different ethnic backgrounds and most were recent immigrants to Canada and English language learners.

"I don't find it helpful"

According to my interviewees, the test and the literacy course did not benefit them; they experienced the test and course as punitive, as something to "get over" and not as helpful as their "regular" courses. Paveena maintained: "I seriously don't like it [the literacy test]. I don't find it helpful. [It's] a waste of time. I just don't find it helpful — just the way you have to summarize, grammar and all that you could do that in English class and improve." Louise said: "I like school classes… [but] I don't honestly like the literacy test." Louise also strongly took issue with the process. She said: "You shouldn't make kids keep writing it and writing it, because maybe some students will feel dumb or stupid or feel less about themselves…it's not really good for teens to feel that low." Louise not only saw the process of the literacy test as problematic for herself and her peers, but also viewed the literacy course as punitive:

> It makes me upset that I failed, because now I have to do a course next year. I have to go behind a year. … I wanted to take a different subject, instead of this course, now I have no choice in what I want to take cause I have to take that. So, I mean it makes me upset, it makes me pissed off."

Louise saw the course as limiting her course options, and went as far to say that she did not want to be "seen" at school taking the course and even planned to "take it at night school." She

articulated her frustration by describing the literacy test, the course, and the process as "retarded."

Students who are currently taking the course reiterated some of these sentiments. Lina stated:

> Because of the test I failed I have to take this course… I don't think it's helpful at all; it's the same thing we learn in our English classes…It's no help to me at all. I think it's just a waste of time. ..I don't think [the course] is helpful. It didn't help me anyway.

The high-stakes test reverts to a literacy course that is not as 'helpful' as previous English classes. In contrast, Lina stated, "I really like English cause you learn a lot and you get to write about yourself and your experiences." As Lina attested, when one is asked to tell and share stories about oneself, one is made to feel valuable and validated in school situations.

Kanak, who had been navigating the literacy bureaucracy for over three years as a result of two test failures and who had almost completed the literacy course at the time of the interview, said: "I didn't understand it [the literacy test]. I mean what was the point of this? I still don't know. What was the point? If it helps me to like graduate well then whatever, then I'll just do it [complete the course]." Graduation is a goal that all students in my interviews said they valued and most seemed willing to work to fulfill the graduation requirements, whatever they were.

"School is important"

The voices of the youth I interviewed contradict the popular perception that youth deemed "at risk" do not value school.[2] All the youth I interviewed who failed the literacy test recognized the importance of school for their future. Tammy stated: "School is important to me….'cause in order to become someone or do something you have to get good marks in school and pass." Nadira added: "If you don't have it [a high school diploma] you won't be able to do anything in life, so I think education is really important." Andrew, who was not in school at the time of his interview, acknowledged that "[you] need it [your high school diploma] to get a job. Unless you are going into a trade and some trades won't even take you unless you have Grade 11." School is seen as a place to become someone. It is perceived as a place that offers the possibility of social and personal mobility. As Wexler (1992) aptly noted, youth are struggling to become "somebody;" youth are "not struggling to become nobody" (p. 7).

Discussion: A Consideration of Youth Voices

The youth in this study perceived the EQAO assessments as inequitable and unhelpful to their learning or "well-being." Youth maintained that they were successful at the school curriculum that was appropriate to them, either academic or applied (or ESL or special

[2] TeRiele (2006), Thompson (2002), and Dei et al. (1997) noted that "at risk" youth are often depicted as not valuing school. Instead policy makers and educators have to look at how marginalized youth experience school and feel unvalued by some school practices or cultures.

education) and were unaware that they were not "thriving" prior to EQAO's OSSLT judgments. According to the youth interviewed, the OSSLT failure dealt them quite a shock—the ramifications of which have seriously challenged their self-esteem, their relationships with school classes, and their perceptions of their abilities in English. Those taking the literacy course as a result of two test failures did not view the literacy course as helpful. All the youth found the OSSLT less meaningful in comparison to their "regular" English classes. The data suggests an unintended discrepancy between the policy intent and the policy as it is lived by those youth marginalized by the OSSLT literacy test.

Youth Identities and Their "Well-being"

The data indicates that youth are surprised and shocked upon learning about their test failure, which suggests that students who fail the literacy test have a different perception of what it means to be literate and successful than the standards upheld by this high-stakes, large-scale literacy test. The test results were difficult for many of my interviewees to understand; the judgments of the anonymous markers seem harsh and arbitrary to many of them.

The OSSLT reinforces the marginalization of some youth, such as ethnically diverse groups who live in communities with high concentrations of poverty. 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 by passing the literacy test or course.

The test results alter youths' perceptions of themselves: they question themselves, their abilities, experience themselves as inferior to others, or consciously oppose an inferior label given to them by a large testing agency. Instead of contributing to the "well-being" of learners, the OSSLT failure the youth in my study have experienced seems to (re)produce an inequitable separation and differentiation between and amongst students; those who pass are privileged and those who fail are named "illiterate" and are marginalized by a systemic practice that treats all students the same.

As the youth clearly have attested to degradation, shame, humiliation, self-doubt, and issues of self-esteem as a result of test failure, it is worth paying attention to these very real feelings and experiences. Lesko (2001) maintained that the voices of youth cannot simply be dismissed as "irrational," or "whining" because they do not share in the institutional power of education (p. 184). Lesko further argued that if we dismiss youth's concerns with regard to their experiences of school and schooling, we may be reproducing an 'inferior' or "colonial image of adolescence as emotional, becoming, naturally dependent, and confused" (p. 173). The power of emotions is real. Boler (1999) explained that educational systems no longer use harsh corporal punishment for youth, but regulate youth by using *pastoral power*, which uses emotional controls such as humiliation, embarrassment, and shame to shape youth (p. 126).

The youth in my study, who were different than the white, English-speaking, middle class, academic stream student and/or male, are regulated by the OSSLT, and were identified and made to feel inferior to others. Pastoral power was further experienced by the youth in my study who were stressed and degraded by their test failure; they all wanted to find ways to navigate the new literacy technology, acquire the EQAO-defined literacy, and pass the OSSLT. As a result of these emotional controls, many tried to find ways to improve their chances of passing the test and graduating from high school. For example, Hadyah told herself she "should read a lot of

books." Good literacy practices are taken up as part of youths' self-regulation. The power to conform was so great that Andrew, who may be seen to have been resisting school since he had left it, is also regulated by the literacy technology: "I know I gotta work on that [literacy]…I just think I should study some more and try to get it next time."

For Foucault (1994), the process of self-formation and subjectification requires that youth reflect on themselves, examine themselves and transform themselves. They do so in accordance with a set of expectations and fear of reprisal; youth try to acquire the EQAO standard of literacy, whether they find it useful or not, because they fear not graduating. As Kanak said, "you just 'got to do it.'" In Foucault's (1994) words, "power exists only as it is exercised by some on others, only when it is put into action … the exercise of power is a 'conduct of conducts' and a management of possibilities" (pp. 340–341). In the youths' estimation, the OSSLT was much more powerful than any one test in a class, or any other course, because it directly impacted their choices as well as their immediate and future possibilities.

Lesko (2001) pointed to the use of time as another aspect of control of youth in schools. Youth who embody the norm of a white, middle class, and masculine school system are rewarded, whereas youth who are considered to different than the norm, not up to the norm, or who are on the margins are given more work than their peers (Lesko, 2001, p. 63). The OSSLT may be seen as problematic in this regard because students navigate the OSSLT for at least two years. For some the time span was at least three years: between test-taking, test failure, the chance to take the test once more but receiving the test results back a considerable time later, and then having to rearrange their schedules if they needed to take the literacy course, which they did not see as being as beneficial as their 'regular' English class. They also complained that test failure regulated their choices and regulated their time as it required test preparation, practice sessions, extra courses, and so on.

The youth narratives illustrate how the literacy test penalizes students and punishes them by making them feel bad about themselves. Wexler's (1992) framework might name literacy testing as an "alienating method of identity formation" as opposed to one where there is a "shared creation of identity by ongoing and mutually contingent interaction" (p. 34). Wexler has noted alienating forces operating on youths' identity formation in large institutions and bureaucracies because it is they that have the power to name youths' identities. In this study, the negative test results produced a new social identity for youth that caused them to question what they thought: "I thought I was doing well…maybe I'm not…"

Wexler (1992) also noted the potential for alienation when youth perceive a lack of care and concern for their well-being, maintaining that "non-caring is active, and …students feel… rejected" (p. 38) by these alienating forces in school. In these ways, the literacy test was alienating for some youth involved in this study because it undermined some of their positive identity-confirming experiences, and forced them to negotiate a negative label. Youth articulated a lack of care for themselves and their peers as they attested to the harm the new literacy technology has created. Students also articulated an experience of alienation when they named the negative emotions they felt, and when they constructed a binary opposition between their school literacy practices and the experience of a high-stakes, large-scale standardized literacy test.

One might also make the important distinction between summative assessments and assessments *for* and *of* learning and be wary of conflating the two. Standardized summative assessment simply measures a one-time (or two day) snapshot of a student. In contrast, assessment *for* and *of* learning allows students to show what they know in multiple ways,

including written and oral tasks, to improve with feedback and to work towards creating an authentic depiction of learning (Cooper, 2010). Those in assessment debates may suggest that the language of assessment *for* and *of* learning is used by the EQAO when it speaks about helping students "thrive" and their "well-being" but that high-stakes and/or standardized testing cannot adequately represent what youth know because they continue to privilege only print texts. In so doing, summative assessments cannot allow youth to create rich and authentic performance tasks that encompass several modalities (oral and written) to be assessed and evaluated (Cooper, 2010).

Equity within the System

If we ignore how the OSSLT constructs illiterate youth and the potential negative effects it has on youth identity formation, then we fail to recognize what Weir (1996) has invited us to notice, namely, that systems of oppression work through educational institutions that define themselves through exclusion. Social justice in education is often framed around inclusive and exclusive educational practices. In working towards the "well-being of learners," Sayed and Soudien (2003) have urged us to notice that equitable education is not simply a matter of treating everyone the same in order to achieve a fair result.

Youth who are marginalized by the literacy test are not simply illiterate or deficient subjects who need to become literate for the benefit of society as much as their own. Arguably, they are marginalized due to sex, race, ethnicity, class, ability, language, and other characteristics. The OSSLT creates further conditions that mark and continue to mark marginalized youth as different from their mainstream peers. In the large urban setting in which the interviews took place, many youth who failed the literacy test did not possess the historically dominant currency of those in positions of power, namely, the White, middle class, English as a first language, and/or male norms. Arguably, the test constrains differently located youth in different ways. Those who are successful may be seen to possess "cultural capital"—the knowledge that is valued by the education system and the knowledge that status holders in the educational system are rewarded by possessing (Thomson, 2002). There are cultural, social, political, and economic norms that exist within a standardized test that privilege some youth's cultural capital and devalues that of others.

Equity in the EQAO framework views youth as being able to achieve the same standard of excellence on standardized tests. Yet, youth are different and differently located, and those differences impact test-taking success and failure. Lesko (2001) reminds readers that when "adolescent development, like child development purports to be color-blind and gender-blind, the gender and race of secondary school success and failures is largely downplayed, invisible to those in power at least" (p. 173). This is now also true of the development of literate adolescents. Research suggests that race and ethnicity play a major role in standardized testing success and failure (Lipman, 2004). English language learners not only experience difficulties (Cheng et al., 2007) but are disadvantaged (McNeil, 2000) by standardized testing. Socio-economic status also makes a significant difference to literacy success (Meaghan & Cacas, 2004). Further, given the poverty by postal code data that correlates very strongly with literacy test scores across Ontario (United Way, 2004), perhaps, as some educational theorists would argue, there are inequities that exist in school districts that cannot simply be closed by the educational system. There are complex social, political, and economic circumstances that marginalize youth (Anyon, 2005; TeRiele, 2006; Thomson, 2002).

All in all, the youth in my study have brought forward a number of reasons to be concerned about the impact of high-stakes, large scale standardized testing. They were constrained by the power of the test, but also showed signs of resistance. Many not only showed dislike for the test and its results, but also questioned its function. As Bob reflected, "It's weird that one test holds so much power against you…It has too much authority on us graduating or not." Certainly questioning the OSSLT's existence and power are ways to resist its negative impact on one's identity. Although many have questioned the test and accompanying literacy technology (e.g., practice tests, remediation, second test, the literacy course), youth wanted to know why the test is present in schools when it humiliates and degrades people. Laura insisted that people in positions of authority ought to know that "you shouldn't make kids keep writing it [the literacy test]…because…it's not really good for teens to feel that low."

In the spirit of looking at how our practices may be 'disposing of some of the very kids we are trying to help,' and in recognizing that most youth who fail are marginalized youth, we need to look at how high-stakes, large scale, standardized literacy testing may not be working in the "best interest" or "well-being" of those it deems are not "thriving."

Conclusion

Lesko (2001) maintained that one of the greatest contributions a study can make is to change "what counts as a public problem" (p. 199). The youth voices in my study help elucidate how standardized literacy testing policy is lived and experienced by youth who fail the high-stakes, large scale Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test. In contrast to the EQAO's mandate that stipulates that the OSSLT works towards the "well-being" of all learners and helps all youth "thrive" and contribute to an "equitable" educational system, the youth voices in my study point to some different outcomes.

The effects of OSSLT failure shapes youths' consciousness in ways that may not have been anticipated; some youth said their test failure was surprising, while all youth in my study experienced various levels of shame, humiliation, embarrassment, and/or degradation. The youth in my study questioned their abilities and experienced stress at the overall high-stakes, standardized testing process (i.e., first time test-taking, second time test-taking, the third option of a literacy course, fear of not passing/graduating). Youth wondered and worried greatly about the power of one test having such an impact on their school choices and potentially future possibilities, as well as the ability to cause them stress for a lengthy period of time. They confided that adults or people in positions of authority did not care about their feelings and/or did not really care about their relationship to literacy, which they see as a process taking place over time. Youth maintain that they did not find the literacy test or course as helpful as their "regular English" classes.

Although my study has focused on the narratives of only 16 youth, we see that marginalized youth fail more. Issues of class, race, ethnicity, language ability, school placement (i.e., academic, applied, ESL), poverty by postal code, and literacy test success and failure feature prominently in examining who is failing the EQAO's OSSLT, taking the test a second time, and taking the literacy course. Given this reality and their very real negative experiences as a result of the OSSLT, it may be necessary to rethink approaches to marginalized youth and how to support their efforts to acquire meaningful literacies. If the goals of literacy are to promote the well-being of youth, to help youth thrive, and to promote equity within the educational system, then the approach to working with and for diverse and marginalized youth must be rethought.

Whether by removing the “high-stakes” aspect of the standardized testing by creating different tests for different levels of literacy; by moving from standardized literacy test snapshots to more comprehensive multiple literacy portfolios (which would allow youth to demonstrate their knowledge in a number of different ways using oral, written and visual communication); by developing more local literacy curricula that help meet the diverse needs of differently located learners; by varying school practices and approaches with regard to standardized testing; or by imagining completely different alternatives and practices to high-stakes, standardized literacy testing, this conversation must begin. Overall, these findings entreat us to listen to the voices of youth and to consider the impact of high-stakes standardized literacy testing policy on those who fail, so that we can continue to work towards creating a more equitable educational system.

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