



# Settling the score

## Redefining accountability and closing the opportunity gap

Ardavan Eizadirad

When Ontario's education unions began their job action in November 2019, one of the work to rule actions was members' refusal to prepare or administer government mandated Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO) standardized tests at various levels. The Grade 9 EQAO math test, which typically is administered in January, was postponed until June. *[Editor's note: since writing, as a result of COVID-19, EQAO testing was cancelled entirely for the remainder of the 2020 school year.]*

This is significant because the current provincial government has placed tremendous emphasis on standardized testing as an effective tool to close the achievement gap and reverse achievement trends in math scores which have decreased over the last five years amongst Ontario students (as demonstrated by EQAO scores).<sup>1</sup> As of 2020, EQAO testing is not only applicable to students in Grades 3, 6, 9 and 10 but also applies to all teacher candidates graduating from any Faculty of Education in Ontario. Education Minister Stephen Lecce has claimed that actions jeopardizing EQAO

testing adversely impacts student learning and data collection for accountability purposes.

As an educator who has worked with various students from elementary to post-secondary levels over the years, I became concerned about the impact of EQAO standardized testing on racialized and minoritized students symbolized by how vividly they remembered writing EQAO tests in their early years and how it profoundly impacted and made them feel. Many had developed test-taking anxiety rooted in their experiences in the early years with EQAO testing. These conversations inspired me to further pursue the impact of EQAO standardized testing; to compare and contrast the extent to which narratives from racialized and minoritized children and parents interviewed support or oppose the dominant narrative told by EQAO about the exclusive positive benefits of EQAO standardized tests.

### **History of standardized testing in Ontario**

Since at least the early 1990s, Ontario's education system was increasingly scrutinized by taxpayers, media outlets, policy-makers, and parents due to the compounding provincial government debt and the rising unemployment rate. Schools were blamed for inadequately preparing students for the emergence of a

knowledge-based economy. This placed pressure on the government 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 to provide “an independent gauge of children’s learning and achievement” (EQAO, 2012, p. 1). The launch of annual EQAO standardized testing began in 1996-1997 school year where all Grade 3 children wrote the EQAO test in reading, writing, and mathematics. EQAO standardized tests continue to be implemented today in Grades 3, 6, 9, and 10 in Ontario and cost about \$32 million per year to administer. The current provincial government has invested a further \$200 million over four years to improve EQAO math scores in elementary schools, and is forcing all future teacher candidates, regardless of teaching subject or grade, to write a Math Proficiency Test designed and administered by EQAO.

Currently, EQAO test scores (used in annual school rankings produced by the Fraser Institute based on EQAO results over a five year period) have gained so much currency that they drive increases or decreases in property values in local communities. Real estate agents emphasize school rankings to attract homebuyers which feeds into the cycle of parents making inferences about the quality of education offered at a school exclusively based on EQAO scores. As part of this cycle, schools

often located in higher socio-economic communities maintain a valued status being labelled as offering “high quality” education, whereas schools located in marginalized, racialized, and lower socio-economic communities get labelled as “bad” schools offering a “poor quality” education.

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 for accountability purposes which aligns with the market-driven economical view of education as measurable and quantifiable. But test scores do not capture what an entire school is about, the power dynamics within a

school-community interface including level of support for students, accessibility to opportunities, type of systemic issues impacting the community, or type or quality of relationships between students and teachers and amongst staff and administrators. And, significantly, since EQAO testing was introduced in Ontario schools, the achievement gap has not been drastically reduced and instead has intensified for certain identities particularly impacting Indigenous, racialized, English Language Learners, recent immigrants, and students from lower socio-economic backgrounds (Colour of Poverty, Colour of Change, 2019).<sup>2</sup>

### **Findings and implications**

To test the accountability hypothesis and the dominant normalized narrative about the benefits of EQAO testing, as part of my research I interviewed<sup>3</sup> eight racialized families and their children about each child’s experience preparing and writing the Grade 3 EQAO test. The focus was on their lived experiences before, during, and after writing the test.

Two major reoccurring themes were: a) experiencing intense socio-emotional stress and anxiety; b) fear of failure. Examples of negative physical and psychological impact expressed by the children interviewed included; 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 labelled as “dumb” or made fun of by peers for doing poorly on the test. And regardless of what the children were told about the non-impact of the test on their marks and advancement to the next grade, majority of them did not believe it, exemplified by their fear of failure and their own subjective perceived consequences associated with doing poorly on the test such as having to redo Grade 3 all over again.

One of the implications of placing such high importance on EQAO tests and doing well on them is the rise of test-taking anxiety amongst young children which can have a spill-over effect into the rest of their lives as they mature and attend high school and post-secondary institutions. If students do not feel great about themselves, in terms of their self-confidence as a result of doing poorly on a standardized test, it can lead to “a self-fulfilling prophecy on continuing lower achievement” (Ontario Teachers’

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Federation, 2011, p. 10). This can occur at two stages; immediately after completion of the test based on their subjective self-perception of how they did on the test relative to how difficult they found the questions, and at the start of Grade 4 when they receive their EQAO results back and it does not align with how well they thought they did retrospectively and in comparison to their peers.

Upon receiving their EQAO test results, which indicate an achievement level ranging from level 1 to 4 without any descriptive feedback or where mistakes were made, children often ask their peers how they did to compare one another's achievements. This sharing of one's achievement level amongst peers can be stressful and traumatizing, particularly if one has "done poorly." This can have long term effects; for example, a child who does poorly in reading according to the EQAO might avoid reading for enjoyment for not wanting to feel embarrassed by being judged or made fun of by others. Significantly, data collected as part of student questionnaires administered to children who write the EQAO test at the primary and junior level indicates that "the number of students who read for enjoyment has dropped significantly over the last 10 years" (Ontario Teachers' Federation, 2011, p. 10) which aligns with increased investments in standardized testing by the government.

In the long term, the negative psychological and emotional stress and anxiety associated with writing highly publicized standardized tests such as EQAO can lead to lack of motivation, reduced effort in completing tasks, and simply not caring about school-related activities. This can become part of a vicious cycle that perpetuates the self-fulfilling prophecy where the young child is labelled as "at risk" by the education system. Russo (2012) makes an important developmental argument stating, "By placing unrealistic demands upon children who are not developmentally ready, we are asking teachers to spend most of their time attempting to

push children in ways that may set them up to fail." (pp. 143–144) The problem may not be that the child is not knowledgeable, but rather that EQAO standardized tests — in medium or format — are not an effective avenue for all children relative to their developmental stage to optimally express what they know. One of the implications is that "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 is unacceptable and needs to change.

### **From equality to equity: from closing the Achievement Gap to minimizing the Opportunity Gap**

The current market-driven model of education, with its reliance on standardized testing as an accountability tool, homogenizes the needs of all students and communities by disregarding them as holistic beings and dynamic communities and instead judges them predominantly by results on standardized tests. This approach disregards how learning conditions are impacted by systemic barriers within a local community. We need a shift from sameness to fairness; from equality to equity, and a place-based approach to judging the quality of education offered within a school. Just as being healthy is simply more than whether you are physically sick or not, the quality of an education offered in a school is much more complex than scores on EQAO standardized tests.

We need to change gears and try new approaches and strategies as standardized testing has proven ineffective in closing the achievement gap. We need to shift towards aligning 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 socio-economic status. 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 local student and community needs.

If we want to close the achievement gap between different social groups in the education system and to address systemic barriers that are present and persistent in schools impacting racialized and minoritized identities and communities, we need to invest in programs and policies that view education as symbiotic with the larger community and other institutions outside of schools. We cannot address the achievement gap without first addressing the inequality of opportunity that plagues our educational system and further marginalizes our most vulnerable student populations. 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. We need to stop calling students “leaders of tomorrow” and instead treat them as capable students who are “leaders of today”! ●

**Dr. Ardavan Eizadirad** is currently an Assistant Professor in the Faculty of Education at Wilfrid Laurier University and an instructor in the School of Early Childhood Studies at Ryerson University and in the Master of Teaching program at OISE/UofT. He is also an educator with the Toronto District School Board, and author of *Decolonizing Educational Assessment: Ontario Elementary Students and the EQAO* (available at <https://www.palgrave.com/us/book/9783030274610#aboutBook>).

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## Notes

- 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. EQAO justifies the use of standardized in schools by emphasizing accountability to the public by means of providing useful data to schools to close the achievement gap between different social groups.
- The term “minority” is descriptive in nature and 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 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). “Racialized” shifts the conversation from looking at student achievement from a deficit lens focusing on individual factors such as effort and motivation, towards examining systemic processes such as accessibility to support services and opportunities that function as barriers towards achieving optimal student success.
- A combination of male and females attending eight different schools in the Greater Toronto Area were selected. Participants were recruited via purposeful sampling and community networks. 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.

In my book I recommended a series of action-oriented strategies and initiatives to mitigate the negative impact of EQAO standardized testing. The following suggestions are intended to promote discussions and dialogue towards a decolonized educational assessment model that is more equitable and justice-oriented:

- School boards and schools should immediately invest in mitigating the short- and long-term invisible scars and traumatizing effects of standardized testing by investing in offering more mental health and mindfulness initiatives for racialized and minoritized children and parents.
- To address concerns about how individual EQAO student results contain only raw achievement scores with limited descriptive feedback, EQAO should digitalize all marked EQAO booklets by scanning them and making them, along with comments, available to students and parents online through a secure website that allows them to log in with a personalized username and password. This would allow children and parents to visually see what questions they did well on, where they made errors, and how they can improve in various areas.
- As soon as EQAO results are returned in the fall, schools should host “parent-student-teacher” meetings, in person or via alternative methods such as by phone or email, to explain how to effectively interpret EQAO results in a constructive manner to improve student learning and mitigate the invisible scars and traumatizing effects of standardized testing associated with children’s self-critique and parent’s critique of their children based on EQAO scores. As part of this conference meeting, the child, the parent(s), and the teacher should collaboratively co-construct an individualized personal action plan for the school year outlining short- and long-term goals for areas of improvement along with plans on how to achieve those goals. Near the end of each three-month period in the school year — November, February, and May — teachers should have a “parents-student-teacher” conference meeting to assess and discuss progress of students in different subjects.
- The Ministry of Education, school boards, and schools should invest in creating and maintaining sustainable long-term synergic collaborations with external organizations at the local community level involving practitioners from multiple sectors that work with children, youth, and young adults to provide socio-culturally relevant holistic services relative to the needs of students and the local community.

—Ardavan Eizadirad