A Disconnect Between School Improvement Intentions and Practice: Preparing Ontario

Students with IEPs for the EQAO Assessment

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ABSTRACT

The EQAO assessment is a standardized test that is administered in Ontario to students in grades 3, 6, 9 and 10. In the 2010/2011 school year, 127,000 students received special education services in Ontario. Students that receive these services have Individual Education Plans (IEPs) that outline modifications or accommodations to curriculum and teaching practices they require (Bennett, Weber, Dworet, & Weber, 2013). If a student has modifications to the curriculum as outlined by their IEP, these modifications are not permitted for the EQAO. This poses a problem for students who are working below grade level. In the study reported here, two teachers were interviewed using a semi structured interview protocol. This qualitative research study found that teachers are having a difficult time preparing students who have IEPs. To combat this, participating teachers shared differentiated EQAO preparation strategies they used aimed at supporting students with IEPs. Recommendations include developing a non-standardized method of accountability to measure student learning, re-evaluate and change policies around accommodations and modifications that are more in line with what is outlined in their IEPs and finally, change polices that issue students who are exempt from writing from a score of zero to no penalty.

Keywords: EQAO, Special Education, IEPs, Differentiated Instruction, Test Preparation

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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CHAPTER 1 – INTRODUCTION

1.0 Research Context

In the 2010/2011 school year, 191,600 students were identified as having learning exceptionalities in Ontario, and these students in turn received special education services (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2014). In addition to students identified with an exceptionality, there were also 127,600 students who have not been formally identified also receiving services (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2014). As part of the Ontario Ministry of Education policy, any student that has been identified with an exceptionality is then given an Individual Education Plan (IEP) which outlines any accommodations or modifications to the curriculum that they student would need in order to be successful in school (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2014). Students have IEPs for a variety of reasons, some of which include: processing language, memory issues, and trouble retaining new information. For example, a student may not remember something taught to them the next day. Students may also experience difficulties with sequences and ordering, have poor time management, difficulty paying attention and low self-esteem (Bennett, Weber, Dworet, & Weber, 2013).

As outlined by their IEPs, some students may be working at a lower grade level than peers their age; for example, the student could be in grade 4 but they are reading at a grade 2 level. This would require the teacher to follow the grade 2 curriculum for reading. Other students may be working at grade level but need accommodations to help them in their learning. Accommodations include a wide range of things, for example the use of technology, or having visual supports to name a few. Students with IEPs also receive modified assessments or accommodations when writing tests or when having their learning assessed. While it is mandatory for the IEP to be followed by all educators that work with these students, modifications are not permitted for the

EQAO assessment and any accommodations available are limited (Ministry of Education, 2004; EQAO 2014). This poses problems for students with IEPs who write the EQAO assessment.

With the exception of Nunavut, every province and territory in Canada administers a form of mandated large-scale assessment (Volante & Jaafar, 2008). This includes students with special needs. The EQAO (Education Equality and Accountability Office) started in 1996 to assess the quality of education in Ontario (EQAO, 2014)**.** The EQAO is used as an accountability component to the education system. There is a belief that evaluations like the EQAO effects change in policy and curriculum, which should lead to a focus on instruction that will result in greater student achievement and performance (Delandshere, 2001; Ontario Royal Commission on Learning, 1994; and Ryan, 2002).

At the elementary school level, the EQAO administer tests on reading, writing and math in grades 3 and 6. In addition to these tests in elementary school, they test math in grade 9 and literacy in grade 10 (EQAO, 2014). The intended goal of the EQAO assessment is to improve student learning. The EQAO assessment is given to all students, regardless of whether they have an IEP or not. As mentioned previously, students with IEPs receive some accommodations when writing the assessment in relation to what is outlined in their IEP. Modifications to the assessment, however, are not permitted which poses issues for students who are working at a modified curriculum. These students are then left to answer test questions well beyond their ability level. In addition to this, completed assessments are sent to the EQAO office where they are scored by trained staff who have no information on the student. These qualities are what make the EQAO standardized in nature. Students would not have their learning assessed in this manner within their regular classroom practices.

1.1 Research Problem

This research examines the problematic nature of the standardized EQAO assessments in relation to students with special needs. To ensure the validity of test scores, the EQAO is administered in a standardized manner with specific policies and procedures. This also includes a very strict scoring process where those marking the assessments are trained in specific marking procedures. Any personal information about the student, including their name is withheld from scorers. Students with IEPs and students with special needs who have not been formally identified also write the same EQAO test as their peers. This is a problem because many of these students have very specific accommodations or modifications to their lessons and curriculum. They learn differently, they are assessed differently and they have different needs than their peers, but yet they are assessed in the same way when taking the EQAO (Bennett, et. al, 2013). Bennett, et. al (2013) report that results from standardized tests are limited and do not show why a student receives the marks that they do and it also does not reveal how teachers can support students in their learning after the test has been completed. There is also the issue of the lack of research conducted on students with IEPs in relation to taking the EQAO assessment. There are gaps in research on the EQAO assessment which fails to mention anything on students with diverse needs such as students with IEPs.

1.2 Research Purpose and Research Questions

The purpose of this research study was to hear teacher-perspectives on the EQAO assessment for students on IEPs and to learn what they are doing to help prepare these students for writing the test. Questions that guided this research study include:

- What are teachers' perspectives on the benefits and limitations of standardized assessment for students, generally, and for students on IEPs specifically?

- What are teacher perspectives on the challenges faced when preparing students with IEPs for writing the EQAO assessment?

- What experiences and resources helped prepare and support teachers in assisting students with IEPs?

- What range of institutional support, if any, do teachers receive for supporting students with IEPs with preparing for the EQAO?

- What differentiated instruction strategies are teachers using to support students with IEPs learning in the classroom?

1.3 Background of the Researcher

Coming from a background of Early Childhood Studies, inclusive practices and philosophies have been ingrained throughout my undergraduate career. In addition to this, my experiences as a teacher candidate have taught me that students have very diverse needs within the classroom and while it is challenging as an educator to meet the needs of each student, it is important to do so. During my time as an Early Childhood Educator and as a Teacher Candidate, I have had opportunities to work within special needs classrooms at the elementary school level, in primary and junior grade level placements and within various childcare centres that implement differentiated instruction and assessment. I believe that every student should be able to receive their education with their peers, regardless of their learning differences and that educators should be able to teach and assess students in a way that meets the needs of all learners within their classrooms. With the diverse needs within every classroom, meeting the needs of each student in the best way can be a challenge.

While completing my practicums, I quickly realized the importance of differentiating my lesson plans to meet the various needs of students. This also included differentiating how I was

going to assess student learning. This was most apparent in my special education practicum where I was teaching students in grade 4 who were all working at different grade levels. Even though I was teaching everyone patterning, I was required to modify my lessons and activities to meet the needs of each students' individual level. When assessing students' learning, I made different math tests for the different levels the students were working at and even with this, I felt that I could have assessed some students in an alternate way other than using a pencil and paper test. Using observations and providing students with unit projects allowed students to show what they have learned in a different way. Differentiating in this way made me wonder about the EQAO and how students with IEPs who have various needs would manage when it was their time to write the assessment. They would have to write the same test as their peers, with limited accommodations. They had a hard enough time as it is with the modified assessments. This made me want to investigate what teachers were doing to support students in preparing for the EQAO and to get their perspectives on students with IEPs and the EQAO assessment.

1.4 Preview of the Whole

Chapter 1 includes an introduction to the topic and the purpose of the study, the research questions as well as my reflexive statement on how I became interested in this topic and study. Chapter 2 contains a review of the literature in the areas of the EQAO including, the purpose, background information, how it is being used and the implications on different stakeholders. Literature on Individual Education Plans (IEPs) in relation to the EQAO assessment has also been reviewed. Chapter 3 describes the methodology and procedures that have been used in this study including information about the participants and the data collection instruments. In Chapter 4 I report the research findings and discuss their significance in light of the literature reviewed in chapter 2. In Chapter 5 I speak to the implications of the findings for the education community

and my own teaching practice, and I articulate recommendations for practice and further reading

and study. References and a list of appendixes follow at the end.

CHAPTER 2 – LITERATURE REVIEW

2.0 Introduction

In this chapter I review literature on the purpose of the EQAO assessment, including background information, how EQAO results are being used, and implications of the EQAO on different stakeholders which includes the effect on students, teachers and the government's role in the EQAO process. I explore the intended purposes of the EQAO assessment, including why it started and what is being done once the results are being released. As students with Individual Education Plans also write the EQAO, I look at literature on the purpose of Individual education plans (IEPs), and finally I review literature on the connection between IEPs and the EQAO assessment. Due to the standardized manner that the EQAO test is implemented, I looked at literature on assessment alternatives to see if there is another way to assess student learning other than using EQAO. Even though there are discrepancies about whether EQAO assessments are considered standardized tests, for the purpose of this study, the terms EQAO assessment and standardized tests will be used interchangeably. Most literature reviewed referred to the EQAO as a standardized test because it is administered under a specific set of procedures and rules. It is also standardized because it is marked (scored) under specific instruction and training.

2.1 The Purpose of the EQAO Assessment

In this section I review literature on background information on the EQAO assessment which includes the origins of why it started, and the intended goals of the assessment as well as how EQAO results are being used. I do this with the intention of finding out whether the purpose and goals of the assessment are being implemented in current practice.

2.1.1 Background of the EQAO

The EQAO (Education Equality and Accountability Office) test started in 1996 to assess the quality of education in Ontario (EQAO, 2014). They administer tests on reading, writing and math in grades 3 and 6. In addition to these tests in elementary school they test math in grade 9 and literacy in grade 10 (ibid). This stemmed from a report made by the Royal Commission for Learning in 1995 under the NDP government who recommended standardized testing and the establishment of an independent agency to create, administer, score and report the results because the public wanted to know how students were performing in comparison to the provincial standards (Ohemeng, 2013). This agency is now known as the Education Equality and Accountability Office or EQAO. The EQAO assessments were introduced to address lowering standards in education (ibid). The provincial government has been in favour of standardized tests such as the EQAO because it is a tool for accountability which started out of the public's need to know what was happening in the education system (ibid). Ali and Favaro (2007) define accountability as "an individual or group taking responsibility for the performance of students on educational outcomes (p. 93)". Ontario and Alberta use large-scale assessments as a way to keep accountable (Ali & Favaro. 2007). The EQAO started as a result of parents wanting accountability for the public education system in Ontario (EQAO, 2014). The target for student achievement would be a level 3 or level 4 (Ohemeng, 2013). Standardized tests like the EQAO is used as a method of accountability but it is not always effective or efficient (Ohemeng, 2013). It is also not clear how it is used as an accountability tool.

The Royal Commission for Learning thought that test results would be valuable in resolving the gaps in student learning. It is not clear how they were planning to do this and over 20 years later, there has not been much research done to evaluate the process on improving student

learning or how an improvement in learning is measured, aside from monitoring and focusing on increasing in test scores. Continued use of standardized assessments such as the EQAO is justified by them stating they are monitoring the basic skills and accountability of student learning (Nezavdal, 2003. Nezavdal, (2003) believes that standardized tests are not an effective way in showing what can do and what they know because these types of tests do not give us information on why students do poorly. The EQAO states that their assessment's purpose is to improve student learning, but if the tests do not provide us with information as to why students are not doing well, how can this be? Ohemeng (2013) discusses that with standardized test there is a focus on measurement and accountability rather than actually improving the education system.

This leads into how EQAO results are actually being used. Literature was not found on proactive methods being used to improve student learning but rather the publication of results, use of results in the media, and the ranking of schools.

2.1.2 How EQAO Results Are Being Used

EQAO results are used for comparative and non-comparative reasons (Nezavdal, 2003). For example, they are used to compare various schools within a neighbourhood, neighbourhoods and various school boards. Using EQAO results in a comparative manner has been increasing by governments and other outside agencies (ibid).

As part of the Royal Commission for learning's recommendations they stated that the results should not be used to compare and rank schools but this is what is done by the media and third party organizations (Ohemeng, 2013). EQAO results are published publicly and used by third party organizations (ibid). The results from the test are also used to compare schools, districts and provinces in Canada (Klinger & Rogers, 2011). Test scores are compiled school wide to see how

students did as a whole which is made available to the public through the EQAO website (EQAO, 2014). Students also receive their individual results on how they did on their test (ibid).

The use of EQAO scores has various implications including unintended outcomes. One negative implication to the publication of EQAO scores is that they are used by outside organizations without considering various factors or contexts for the scores which is needed to understand the results (Ohemeng, 2013). This can lead to a misuse of results, as when, for example, parents move based on schools scores following the school rankings released by the Frasier Institute. Nezavdal, (2003) reports that the EQAO has not provided enough information on how the assessments are implemented, nor on the methods and research to support the value of the tests.

Ohemeng (2013) notes that the release of EQAO results help students and their parents get information on school's performance in relation to the provincial standard. Parents are then better able to choose which schools their children should attend which leads to the idea that schools with higher scores would mean better educational supports for their children.

While most of the literature consulted for this review discussed how results are used for comparative means, Ohemeng (2013) reported that lower scoring schools become part of an intervention program that supports schools based on their specific areas of need (Ohemeng, 2013). This intervention program is called the Ontario Focused Intervention Partnership for Elementary Schools (Ontario Ministry of Education,2016). Ohemeng (2013) also mentions literacy initiatives but it is unclear what was included in these initiatives.

EQAOs purpose is to assess students attending Ontario public schools (Nezavdal, 2003), which can be seen a way to measure how successful schools are at teaching the Ontario curriculum. In addition to measuring how well students are learning, Winton (2013) found that the schools in her research defined success with how happy their students were and the academic learning

achieved rather than how well students performed on standardized tests. Due to the fact that the EQAO is administered and marked externally, there are conflicts between the goals of the assessment and that of which the schools have for its students (Nezavdal, 2003).

2.2 Implications of the EQAO on the different stakeholders

This section will go through the implications of the EQAO on the different stakeholders involved which include, students, teachers and the government. The roles, responsibilities and implications of the EQAO on students, teachers and the government will be discussed in this section.

2.2.1 The Effect of the EQAO on Students

Students write the EQAO assessment on reading, writing and math in grade 3, 6, on math in grade 9 and on literacy in grade 10. While the EQAO has a mixture of both multiple-choice questions and opened ended, and short/long answers, its goal of having reliable results from its students is similar to those of standardized tests. Standardized tests however do not reflect everything students have learned and is biased towards certain kinds of learning such as linguistic and logical-mathematical (Ohemeng, 2013). Students bring with them a wide range of experiences, learning differences including varying background and experiences that all make them unique. With such diversity, why are we testing students in the same way? Furthermore, the EQAO claims that it is not a standardized test but it does however aim at testing all students in the same way in order to have reliable, measurable results. There are universal issues with testing students in this manner (Nezavdal, 2003). How well students perform on the EQAO assessments are subject to many factors that may not be considered when they are being marked. For example, Nezavdal (2003) discusses the link between EQAO results and socio-economic status variables and believes

that the EQAO penalizes students for their disadvantages and does not allow for teachers to even

out the social inequities as they would in the classrooms.

Mass tests such as the EQAO cannot use information on student diversity, socio-economic

status (SES), or various learning needs because this information can create biases and effect the

validity of the results. These assessments can tell us how students are doing in comparison to others

but not why students are doing poorly because these other factors are not considered (Nezavdal,

2003). Nezavdal (2003) reports that environments where students write the assessment are

questionable because resources that students would be able to use during classroom testing

procedures such as dictionaries verses what they are allowed during writing a standardized test

differ greatly. When students are used to testing within their classrooms where they can ask for

someone to read questions for them, or use anchor charts in their classrooms, and are then faced

with the specific procedures of the EQAO, this can cause changes in how well students perform.

The supports that they are used to that help them are not permitted.

2.2.2 The Effect of the EQAO on Teachers

Although the EQAO test is designed, marked and administered by the outside agency

Education Quality Accountability Office, teachers have procedures and policies that they are

required to follow when their students are writing the EQAO tests. Ohemeng (2013) reported that

teachers believed EQAO test instructions are inconsistent with their roles as teachers. The Ontario

College of Teachers (OCT) has a list of standards by which teachers are trained in and should carry

out throughout their teaching career. The first standard of practice is Commitment to Students and

Student Learning and it states:

> Members are dedicated in their care and commitment to students. They
> treat students equitably and with respect and *are sensitive to factors
> that influence individual student learning.* Members facilitate the

development of students as contributing citizens of Canadian society
(Ontario College of Teachers, 2016)

The policies and procedures that the Education Quality Accountability Office have for teachers and students writing the assessment do not reflect this core standard or practice as students with IEPs are left with limited accommodations and no modifications to their EQAO test.

To ensure the validity of the results, teachers are given specific instructions on what they are allowed and not allowed to do while students are writing the EQAO (Ohemeng, 2013). For example, teachers are not allowed to read test questions to students, they cannot translate, or define words and they cannot explain the questions (EQAO, 2016). While the EQAO has a mixture of both multiple-choice questions and opened ended, short/long answer its goal of having reliable results from its students is similar to those of standardized tests. Unlike the American assessments that can be described as "high stakes," Klinger and Rogers (2011) state that Canadian assessments are "low stakes" because test results and ramifications are not linked to teachers' salaries or sanctions (p. 140). The government of Ontario believes that instead of sanctioning schools for low scores, the focus should be a whole school approach for assisting teachers in developing skills to meet the learning needs of students (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2016). How students do on the assessment and the score they receive does not directly affect the teacher. Overall school scores however, determine what school wide workshops or professional development are provided. Standardized tests like the EQAO would also allow the government to determine how well teachers were doing by measuring how well students performed on the assessments (Ohemeng, 2013). The EQAO was designed as an accountability tool. Ohemeng (2013) claims that standardized tests like the EQAO are a form of performance management and found that this may lead to a system of teachers engaging undesirable behaviours such as teaching to the test. Ohemeng (2013) describes

this as narrowing the curriculum areas and neglecting other subject areas. He states that teaching to the test may alienate a significant portion of students whose academic strengths may be outside of the commonly tested subjects (ibid). Policy makers often see the short comings of standardized tests as the teacher's fault while failing to consider the numerous outside factors that would affect test results (Nezavdal, 2003).

When in teacher education programs, teacher candidates learn assessment practices that include a variety of methods to assess student learning (Nezavdal, 2003). Teachers are able to define their education purposes, make decisions about the curriculum, resources used and other related activities (Winton, 2013). This includes decisions on which assessment forms would be best for students to show what they have learned. Ontario teachers have resisted and resented the province's large-scale assessment initiatives since they were introduced and continue to do so (Dasko, 2010; Elementary Teachers Federation of Ontario, 2010; Ontario English Catholic Teachers Association, 2002; Ontario Secondary School Teachers Federation, 2012; Volante, 2007). Regardless of how teachers may feel about standardized tests such as the EQAO, Kohn (2002) states that "…there is no reasonable way for teachers to resist standardized tests. Teachers would be seen as not wanting to be accountable."

Winton (2013) found that when thinking of what makes their schools successful, teachers did not include standardized test scores as a measure of success Some teachers in Winton's (2013) study also rejected the idea that students needed to achieve level 3 or 4 on the EQAO to be successful Klinger and Rogers (2011) state that Ontario's test is used to monitor and improve curriculum and instruction. There are provincial standards that are trying to be achieved and the EQAO test is a way to make sure that their goal of 75% of students are meeting them in the areas of literacy and numeracy (Klinger & Rogers, 2011). While some schools viewed a higher score on

the EQAO as an indicator of students' academic learning, teachers in Winton's (2013) study did not define success as correlating solely with academic measures. Student's happiness and safety were also measures of school success for teachers, especially if students had unstable home and socio-economic factors (Winton, 2013). Winton (2013) found that principals played a role in the ideas of what made a school successful, whereas the Ontario government sees high EQAO scores as an indicator for provincial competition in the global economy.

In the original report made by the Royal Commission for Learning, one recommendation stated that "results are to only be used by teachers to inform their teaching practice and to remediate individual students learning" (Ohemeng, 2013, p.464). Currently, as the EQAO process stands, results are not released directly to teachers but instead released school wide and then to the public. They are then open for third party organization use in whichever way they please. Results are also sent home individually to students. EQAO assessments are conducted near the end of the school year with results being released in the fall of the following school year. By this time, most students have moved on to another teacher and teachers have a new class with completely different students and learning needs to work with. Results being released in the fall with the intention of improving teaching practices or assisting students who require remediation are unrealistic and not helpful for teachers to support the students that might need the support. This is because teachers would have a new class with different needs. The recommendations under the Royal Canadian commission for learning were made over 20 years ago, under the NDP government. By the time the EQAO was formed, governments changed and it is not clear what the new recommendations were or whether any of them were changed. It seems as though the EQAO assessment process and recommendations made by the Royal Commission for Learning has not gone through enough significant modification or adjustments in the 20 years that it has been around.

Klinger and Rogers (2011) note ~~is~~ that principals and teachers that are involved in the scoring and item writing process are able to bring what they learned back to their respective school. Cizek (2001) discusses that once the results are put together, schools should receive professional development in the curriculum areas that they fell short in order to improve.

There is pressure on teachers to get their students to achieve the provincial standard of 75% or the equivalent of a B grade in the areas assessed. There are many circumstances however that are beyond teachers control for example, how students are feeling on the day of the test, the socio-economic status of their family, how well their memory is as well as whether students are exempt from writing (Ohemeng, 2013). Students who are exempt from writing the test receive a score of zero which is included in the schools' over all scores. These scores of zero bring the schools results down and are beyond teacher's control. When scores are put together, these other factors need to be taken into consideration. Scorers are only given students answers to the test and nothing else. Additional information on the student or factors that might effect a student's test performance is not considered at all.

Often, teachers are not teaching in the same way that they would otherwise because they are trying to achieve provincial's desired results and end up spending more time on the curriculum areas that are going to be tested (Ohemeng, 2013). Darling-Hammond, Ancess, and Falk (1994) discuss the impact of large scale assessments stating that educators are spending more time preparing their students for the tests and as a result have less time to work on other curriculum areas such as science, art or physical education.

2.2.3 The Governments Role in the EQAO Process

The government of Ontario and the Ministry of Education monitors the Education Quality Assessment Office. The Education Quality Assessment Office is also responsible for reporting to

the Ministry of Education in Ontario who then passes down information to various school board districts. Klinger and Rogers (2011) state that policy makers believe that large scale assessments will help educators "focus their attention" and improve their instruction of the curriculum (p. 123) Nezavdal (2003) states that social power holders design EQAO tests. For example, provincial policy makers are the creators of standardized assessments. Nezavdal (2003) found that the EQAO office has not given enough information on the implementation, methods and research to support the value of their assessment. This lack of information leaves those involved with preparing students and implementing the test unsure about the intentions and how the EQAO assessment is actually helping students. It is also unclear how the EQAO assessment is better at improving student learning than what teachers are already doing within their classroom practices.

Teachers are taught various assessment practices in teacher education programs such as diagnostic assessments, formative assessments and summative assessments to measure student learning within the classroom on an on-going basis (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010). With these types of assessments, teachers make adjustments to their teaching, lessons and assessment methods accordantly. Policy maker's implement assessment practices like the EQAO that are disconnected from the classroom (Nezavdal, 2003). Having all students write the exact same assessment, with ridged rules and procedures is not only disconnected, but it is unfair to students with diverse learning needs.

EQAO provides a yearly report of the results publically to schools and the media which also results in government funding. Government funding is used for resources, professional development and reporting to the public (Winton, 2013). Both Ontario and Alberta have policies that state that school boards and schools are required to use the test results to improve their school and therefore increase student test scores (Klinger & Rogers, 2011).

Nezavdal (2003) claims that some of the people that mark the EQAO are not teachers and that the people that write the questions do not have stakes in the outcomes. Klinger and Rogers (2011) point out that EQAO test questions are created by a group of educators and principals in the field. This process is called item writing (EQAO, 2014; Klinger & Rogers, 2011). Marking of students EQAO tests are conducted by a group of educators and principals and this process is called scoring (EQAO, 2014, Klinger & Rogers, 2011). An important aspect of this process to note is that those that score the tests are not the student's teacher. Those that score the tests have no background information on the students and aspects such as whether a student has an Individual Education Plan (IEP) or if they are an English Language Learner (ELL).

2.3 The Purpose of Individual Educational Plans (IEPs)

In 1980 the Education Amendment act was passed which changes to policies around students with special needs within the classroom (Bennett, et. al, 2013). Once this act was passed it became mandatory for mainstream classrooms within public schools to accept students with special needs (Bennett, et. al, 2013). This would require teachers to plan lessons and teach differently. Planning for students with special needs is more complex than planning for other students because students with special needs learn in such diverse ways (ibid). Individual Education Plans (IEPs) are a legal document that permit teachers the flexibility to adjust curriculum to support students in a guided manner (ibid). It became mandatory for teachers to create and use IEPs for students with special needs in the 1990s with regulation 181/98 (ibid). This regulation stated that any students that have been identified with an exceptionality by an Identification, Placement, and Review Committee (IPRC) are required to have an IEP (ibid). IEPs can also be developed for students who have not been through the IPRC process if teachers feel they are having a hard time meeting the learning needs (ibid).

There has been a shift from segregating students with special needs to including them within regular classrooms. IEPs help support students and teachers in this transition with outlining student strengths and needs. Students with IEPs have modifications or accommodations written in their education plan (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2004). This document outlines goals for the student as well as what modifications or accommodations the student may need to be successful at school (ibid). Changes for test taking are also included in this plan (ibid). IEPs document student strengths and needs, what resources are needed, and what strategies would be used to support student learning. It is a plan of action when students with special needs require modifications of the regular school program in order to be successful. Information included in IEPs include: the reason for the IEP, which includes any information gathered as evidence for why students need support from medical or psychological assessments, educational expectations, special education programing, an outline of the services that students would receive and methods that would be used to track the students' progress (Bennett, et. al, 2013). All teachers and educational assistants involved with supporting the child's learning receives a copy of the IEP (ibid).

There are many causes for why students would require an IEP. Having a learning disabilities is one cause most connected to students experiencing difficulty when writing the EQAO. Learning disabilities can be defined as "a disorder that effects the acquisition, retention, understanding, organization and/or the use of verbal and nonverbal information. Students with learning disabilities may experience difficulties both academically and socially" (Bennett, et. al, 2013, p.101). Some things that students with learning disabilities have difficulty with include processing language, memory issues, trouble retaining new information. For example, a student may not remember something taught to them one day the next day (ibid). Students may also experience difficulties with sequences and ordering, have poor time management, difficulty paying

attention and low self-esteem. These are all skills that students need in order to be successful when writing tests such as the EQAO. With challenges with these skills, students have a hard time doing when writing the EQAO assessment.

Bennett, et. al (2013) report that results from standardized tests are limited and do not show why students receive the marks that they do and it also does not reveal how teachers can support students in their learning after the test has been completed. It only offers a number, not a solution and it is difficult to take the numbers and translate it into effective classroom practices (ibid). With students with special needs, reliability of their performance is diminished because of episodic issues (ibid). For example, students can write the same test on different day and will get two completely different results (ibid).

2.4 Individual Education Plans (IEPs) and the EQAO

EQAO allows accommodations when students are writing their test, but it has to be the same ones that are outlined in their IEP (EQAO, 2014). The EQAO has provided clear guidelines of which accommodations they allow in a document titled Guide for Accommodations, Special Provisions and Exemptions (EQAO, 2014). This accommodations guide defines accommodations as "changes in the way the assessment is administered or the way in which a student with special education needs responds to its components" (EQAO, 2016, n.p.). It goes on to state that "the accommodations do not alter the content of the assessment nor affect the validity or reliability" (EQAO, 2016, n.p.). These include adjustments to the setting in which the test is written, time adjustments for example extra time, or breaks at intervals, format adjustments, and accommodations to how the student answers the question for example the student may be allowed to use technology (EQAO, 2014). These accommodations are only permitted if they have been specifically documented within the students IEPs and is something that they use throughout the

school year. Assistive technology is also permitted for some students which include the use of specific software that does text to speech like Read and Write Gold and Kurzweil (EQAO, 2016). The Guide for Accommodations, Special Provisions and Exemptions Spring 2016 also state that modifications are changes to the content of the assessment and that these are not permitted because it will affect the validity and reliability of the assessment (ibid). There are also clear guidelines about what teachers and anyone involved in administering the assessment should not do. For example, teachers are not allowed to clarify, explain or translate anything from the assessment, they are also not allowed to encourage students to go back and add anything to their answers (ibid).

2.5 Assessment Alternatives

Having an accountability tool for the public education system is important but here are some other options for measuring student learning that differ from the current method of standardized testing. Nezavdal (2003) proposes the use of qualitative assessments through multiple modes of accomplishment by using varying forms of assessment to monitor student learning. Examples of assessments include interviews, anecdotal records, and portfolios. Teachers can use the information gathered through varying forms of assessment to guide curricular decisions. Teachers use these methods on a daily basis to assess their students and adapt their lessons and teaching methods accordingly. For example, diagnostic, formative and summative assessments.

Mass testing such as the EQAO cannot be responsive to student's classroom experiences because results are put together and presented once the student has already moved on to another grade and teacher. From the teacher's perspective, once results come out, they have a new class with new needs and dynamics to figure out. What may have worked or needed improvement for the class that wrote the EQAO, may not work for their new class. To inform teaching practices, teachers use formative assessment to determine what their students have learned and whether they

need to modify or adjust the delivery of their content (Brookhart et. al., 2010). This is a more authentic form of assessment and way of improving student learning. Teachers are able to tailor their methods to meet the needs of their students rather than having one mass test that's in a one size fits all manner.

Tobin and McInnes (2008) conducted a study of grade 2 and 3 classrooms in which teachers used differentiated instruction in various ways to help students who experienced difficulty with reading and writing. Walther-Thomas and Brownell (2001) state that with differentiated instruction, teachers create different levels of expectations for task completion and environments where all learners can be successful. Lawrence-Brown (2004) discusses in her article that planning with differentiated instruction in mind must be done with the mindset of the class as a community. Tomlinson and Kalbfleisch (1998) support this idea when they discuss the importance of being responsive to the various levels students may be at as well as their individual interests. Tobin and McInnes (2008) write: "In DI all learners focus on the same essential understandings, but are provided with multiple access routes to make sense of and demonstrate these understandings" (p. 3). These articles point out the importance of differentiating instruction which is beneficial to all students, especially those with diverse learning needs such as students with IEPs. Assessing student learning differently to meet their various needs is also important which is why the standardized method of testing may not be the best way to assess student learning and not the best way to measure accountability.

2.6 Conclusion

This literature review found more in-depth information on the initial development of the EQAO assessment, the intended goals for it, the effect of the assessment process on the different stakeholders involved and the role of the government in the process. Literature on the IEP and

what this document entails, including what the responsibilities for teachers when a student has an IEP were also looked at. This was a key component to research because students with IEPs have different learning needs than their peers. This also includes requiring different methods of assessments, accommodations or modifications in the methods students can show what they have learned. When trying to find literature on IEPs and the EQAO assessment, there was a very limited selection. This seems to be subject area with very limited research. Literature on the EQAO assessment commonly discusses students as a whole and fail to mention anything on students with diverse learning needs such as students with IEPs. Literature reviewed also did not find many strategies that teachers are using to prepare students for the EQAO assessment. Literature on assessment alternatives was also looked at to find out what other assessment forms could be used to measure student learning in less standardized method. This research study will inform this body of work by addressing issues students with IEPs face when writing the EQAO assessment from teachers' perspectives. It will also look at strategies that they are using to prepare students with IEPs for the EQAO assessment.

CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.0 Introduction

In this chapter, I describe the methodology used for this research study. I review the general research approach and procedures and instruments of data collection. Furthermore, I address the participants selected in this study by discussing the sampling criteria, the sampling procedures and providing a brief biography on each of the participants. This is followed by data analysis, a review of the ethical procedures and a section on methodological limitations and strengths. Finally, I provide concluding remarks and a preview of the upcoming chapter.

3.1 Research Approach and Procedures

This qualitative study involved reviewing relevant literature and conducting semi-structured interviews. Qualitative research is finding out the reason or meaning behind a human problem or social issue, by painting a holistic view of the research problem and findings (Creswell, 2013). Data is collected directly by the researcher and in this case through semi-structured interviews (Creswell, 2013). According to Hoepfl (1997), qualitative research seeks greater understanding of a problem. In contrast quantitative research uses experiments to collect data in a controlled setting and uses numbers and statistics to analyze data (Hoepfl, 1997)

Qualitative methods of research were used for this study because data was collected by the researcher directly through interviewing participants by using a semi-structured interview protocol consisting of open ended questions as well as probing questions where necessary (Creswell, 2013). Along with the literature review, the data collected from the interviews was coded into main themes for data analysis and interpretation.

3.2 Instruments of Data Collection

Data was collected using semi-structured interviews. Semi-structured interviews are a form of data collection used in qualitative research that involves predetermined open ended interview questions but also allows for probing questions where necessary (Hoepfl, 1997). It is important to use this method because for this study I looked for strategies and resources that educators use that they find beneficial in supporting students with special needs in preparing for EQAO tests. Interviews were recorded and transcribed. After this process, I searched for themes that arose in relation to the research problem. One of the strengths of using this method of research is the ability to interpret the findings, for example what participants say during the interview process and compiling themes that may emerge (Creswell, 2013). When using interviews to collect data, researchers are able to explore and gain different perspectives and a better understanding of a problem (Khan, 2014. According to Khan (2014), data collected could also be used to find antecedents related to the research problem. Semi-structured interviews can provide multiple first-hand experiences from the field related to the issue of study.

3.3 Participants

In this section I describe the criteria for selecting participants, and discuss methods in which participants were recruited for this study. A brief biography is provided for each person.

3.3.1 Sampling Criteria

Interview participants were selected for this study based on the following criteria: 1. They were educators at the primary junior level who have recently taught or are currently teaching grade 3 or 6, as these are the grades that the EQAO test is administered.

2. They had over 5 years of experience teaching either grade 3 and/or 6 with at least one teacher with special education Additional Qualifications (AQ).

I wanted to have a selection of both regular teachers and teachers with special education training to see whether the strategies, comfort level, and resources accessed differ between the two groups. I also wanted to find out whether those with special education training felt properly equipped for preparing students with Individual Education Plans (IEPs) for the EQAO tests. To determine whether teachers demonstrated effective differentiated instruction (DI) skills, I found out whether they have taken training programs related to DI or they have worked with the EQAO office. Those that may have worked with the EQAO office may have learned or received training or resources on how to support students with IEPs in preparing for the test. To be sure that teachers sampled are differentiating preparation for students with IEPs, I asked for examples of how they do so.

3.3.2 Sampling Procedures and Recruitment

To locate participants, I used convenience sampling procedures. Convenience sampling is selecting a participant based on availability with information to share related to the research question of this study (Creswell, 2013). Due to the small sample size of this study, convenience sampling was the best method for recruiting participants. I contacted small network of educators that I knew and provide them with the sampling criteria and my contact information so they could recommend any educators that fit the requirements. During my practicums I also reached out to teachers that I thought would fit the criteria of my research study.

3.3.3 Participant Biographies

Robert (pseudonym)

At the time of the interview, Robert had been teaching at the same school in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA) for over 10 years. During his time teaching, Robert had taught grade 6 for most of his teaching career. At the time of the interview, he was teaching a class of grade 3 students, this was his first time teaching this grade. He had a number of years of experience

preparing students for the EQAO assessment, including students with IEPs. He had attended numerous workshops and professional development opportunities related to the EQAO and supporting students in preparing for the assessment. Robert had also spent a number of summers scoring for the EQAO. His extensive experience in teaching grades in which the EQAO is administered made Robert a suitable candidate for this research study.

Karen

At the time of the research, Karen was a recently retired teacher who had taught at an elementary school in the GTA for over 15 years with the last 10 years of her teaching career teaching special education. Karen had her special education specialist and was the Methods and Resource Teacher (MART) for her school. She had countless experiences preparing and supporting students with IEPs for the EQAO. Karen was selected because of her unwavering commitment to students with IEPs. She was committed to understanding their learning needs and supporting their learning in preparation for the EQAO and beyond.

3.4 Data Analysis

Once the interviews were conducted, they were transcribed. Next, I found items or codes within the data collected, and identified themes that emerge from the answers that participants give during their interviews that are sorted and put together (LeCompte, 2000). These items were looked at along with the research questions, research problem and literature review to be interpreted.

According to Bazeley (2009), analyzing data collected in qualitative studies is more than just listing and identifying themes that emerge throughout interviews. It is important to use the data collected to build an argument related to the overall research problem (Bazeley, 2009). When researchers only list themes, readers unfamiliar with the topic may require extensive explanation

(ibid). To analyze data collected in this study, I used Bazeley's (2009) formula of describe, compare and relate. What this means is was transcribed I described the various participants and the interrelationship between them (ibid). I asked myself: how did the participants discuss the themes found? Did they all talk about them? What information was missing from their answers (ibid)? I also compared the differences found within the data collected from each participant by asking myself who, what, why and when to gain a further understanding of my research problem (ibid). Categories and themes found within the data collected were related back to the literature in order to make relevant connections (ibid).

3.5 Ethical Review Procedures

To prevent ethical issues, a consent form (Appendix A) was sent to all participants, which they were required to sign. The consent form informed participants that the interview would be audio-recorded. It also included an overview of the study, addressed the ethical implications of the study and specified the expectations of participation (one 45-60 minute semi-structured interview). For confidentiality, pseudonyms were given to participants (Khan, 2014). They were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time and that any identifying markers related to their schools, students or identity would be excluded. They were informed that there are no known risks to participation. Once the interview was completed and transcribed, participants had the opportunity to review the completed transcript to clarify or retract any statements before I analyzed the data. All data collected was stored on my password protected device and will be destroyed after 5 years. Only my course instructor and I had access to the raw data.

3.6 Methodological Limitations and Strengths

Methodological limitations of this study include the ethical parameters that I had approval for. For example, semi-structured interviews of teachers were the only means of data collection

permitted. Observations, as well as interviewing students and parents was not permitted. Interviewing parents or students would have been beneficial in providing a well-rounded perspective on the research problem. These two groups would have been able to provide additional information on the research problem that would provide a more holistic view. Observations would have provided an opportunity to see the teachers in action: this would have been a great addition to the interviews with teachers. I would have been able to observe whether theory was put into practice and how these teachers were implementing the things they discussed during the interview process.

Due to time constraints, only 2 teachers were interviewed. Having a small sample size prevented me from generalizing the findings to the experience of all teachers.

The strengths of this study include being able to interview teachers rather than using a survey as this provided more in depth data. The semi-structure interview protocol allowed for open ended questions and additional probing questions where needed.

3.7 Conclusion

In summary, qualitative research methods were outlined. These methods included convenience sampling procedures and sampling criteria. Interview participants were required to meet the following criteria: have over 5 years of experience teaching either grade 3 and/or 6 with at least one teacher with special education Additional Qualifications (AQ). To recruit participants, I contacted a network of educators with a description of my sampling criteria as well as reached out to teachers at the practicum schools I was placed at who I felt met the criteria. Data collection was done through semi-structured interviews with a list of questions provided in Appendix B. Interviews were audio recorded and then transcribed for data analysis. Data was analyzed by compiling themes found within the interviews which was then looked at along with the research

questions and literature review. Ethical considerations have also been presented. In chapter 4, I

will present research findings.

CHAPTER 4 – FINDINGS

4.0 Introduction

In this chapter I report and discuss the findings on teachers' perspectives on the EQAO assessment and students with IEPs. To gather research findings, I interviewed two teachers using semi-structured interviews with two elementary school teachers. One teacher was recently retired and had previously worked for a public school board in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA) for over 15 years with the last 10 years working as the Methods and Resource Teacher (MART) for her school. The second teacher had worked for a school board in the GTA for over 12 years teaching grades 3 and 6. These teachers were selected for their experience in preparing students for the EQAO and more specifically in preparing students with IEPs. Using the data collected from both interviews, I have organized the findings into five themes which include 1) Teachers expressed mostly limitations when asked about their perspectives of EQAO on their students with IEPs, 2) Lack of time, lack of assistive technology and students not being developmentally ready for the assessment are challenges that these teachers face when preparing students with IEPs for the EQAO 3) Teachers did not receive institutional support aimed at specifically supporting students with IEPs with preparing for the EQAO 4) Differentiated instruction strategies that teachers are using include: teaching students how to dissect questions and teaching students key vocabulary words to support students with IEPs in their classrooms and 5) Teachers had varying experiences but both used resources such as the EQAO website, assistive technology and consulted with other professionals to assist students with IEPs. In addition to these five themes, sub-themes will also be discussed where necessary.

4.1 Teachers expressed mostly limitations when asked about their perspectives of EQAO on their students with IEPs

When asked about students with IEPs preparing for and writing the EQAO assessment, teachers mostly expressed limitations. Teachers felt that it was important for students to have IEPs but felt that EQAO policies around accommodations do not reflect the same policies and procedures that schools and school boards have. Robert stated "As a scorer, I felt that training wasn't open to philosophies of the board or philosophies of the school." Teachers felt that having students with IEPs write the EQAO is unethical and unfair to students because they are not developmentally ready to be assessed. When students with IEPs are assessed in their classrooms, teachers are aware of their strengths and needs as outlined by their IEPs, but when scorers are marking EQAO, they were concerned that information on the student is not provided. Robert stated:

> Everything is modified or accommodated for them [students with IEPs]. I find that for the EQAO it's a standardized test. It is paper and pencil. So I don't understand. It is okay for us to encourage the student to be able to express an answer through technology or through manipulatives or drawing, but yet it's (EQAO) a standardized test where it's fill in the blank, and they are required to read words and vocabulary that they are not familiar with or they are expected to write a paragraph or elements of a story. They are being evaluated on content and conventions and meanwhile, content and conventions can be something they might not even have an IEP for.

Literature defines learning disabilities as "a disorder that effects the acquisition, retention, understanding, organization and/or the use of verbal and nonverbal information. Students with learning disabilities may experience difficulties both academically and socially" (Bennett, et. al, 2013). This academic difficulty is what Robert and Karen both discussed when talking about students with IEPs writing the EQAO assessment. Students with IEPs have different needs than their peers, which is why they have IEPs in the first place and therefore should be tested differently.

Teachers know their students' strengths and limitations well based on the information that is outlined in students' IEPs. They understand whether a student is able to write the EQAO or not. Participants felt that the accommodations that are allowed for students when writing the EQAO are limited and follow specific guidelines that are not always the same as what teachers are required to do in the classroom. Karen explained: "there are accommodations [but] they are pretty lame. They are very minimal and thin. A lot of the accommodations are open to other children anyway." Within their classrooms, students with IEPs would be allowed accommodations such as having the questions read to them, having words defined, or having the questions presented in a more simplified manner that they can understand. The EQAO has provided clear guidelines of which accommodations they allow in a document titled Guide for Accommodations, Special Provisions and Exemptions (EQAO, 2014). These include adjustments to the setting in which the test is written, time adjustments for example extra time, or breaks at intervals, format adjustments, and accommodations to how the student answers the question for example the student may be allowed to use technology (ibid). These accommodations are only permitted if they have been specifically documented within the students IEPs and is something that they use throughout the school year. When asked about the accommodations that are available to other children, Karen shared that the use of manipulatives for math, for example, is something that is available to all students regardless of whether it is outlined in their IEPs.

These teachers expressed that the rules for accommodating students are allowed change each year. This negatively impacts students and teachers in that they are not able to properly prepare for the EQAO with changes to the accommodations each year. The inconsistency also poses a problem because students with IEPs are used to the accommodations and/or modifications that they receive within their classrooms, are then left to adjust or do without the accommodations

they are used to. With having more than 10 years of experience each with having students with IEPs in their classrooms, teachers interviewed experienced various changes in accommodation rules for students with IEPs over the years.

Students working at a different grade level work with a modified curriculum as outlined in their IEP. This modified curriculum is based on where they are developmentally. Both Robert and Karen believed that students working below grade level should write the EQAO when they start working at the grade level that the EQAO is administered in. Often students that are working one or two grade levels below their peers have not covered curriculum areas that are on the EQAO. Karen believed that the time spent on preparing these students for the EQAO could be used in developing other skills. The EQAO does not allow modifications to their assessment, even though this is something that students would have throughout school as outlined by their IEP. The guidelines state modifications are changes to the content of the assessment and that these are not permitted because it will affect the validity and reliability of the assessment (EQAO, 2016).

Karen expressed feeling powerless because there was not anything she could do to change policies around students with special needs and the EQAO. She felt that it was unfair and unethical to use the EQAO to assess students who are working below grade level. Karen believed that the EQAO is used to see how well teachers are teaching and that improving student experience is not a priority for EQAO. She saw it as a political accountability tool used to assess teachers and how well public funds are being spent; this is done at the students' expense. Literature reviewed stated that the EQAO is indeed an accountability tool for the education system. The provincial government has been in favour of standardized tests such as the EQAO because it is a tool for accountability which started out of the public's need to know what was happening in the education system (Ohemeng, 2013).

As a special education teacher, Karen expressed negative feelings towards the amount of money being spent on the EQAO and felt that the money could be spent on other educational resources to support student learning. For example, she stated that her students could have benefited from having better technology for their classroom which included working computers, updated software like Read and Write Gold and headphones. Literature also stated that standardized tests like the EQAO are used as a method of accountability but are not always effective or efficient (ibid). Standardized tests like the EQAO also allow the government to determine how well teachers are doing by measuring how well students performed on the assessments (ibid).

Scorers are trained by the EQAO office on how to mark the assessments following specific criteria. Both Robert and Karen stated that scorers do not have any student information when they are scoring. This differed greatly from general teaching practices in that teachers take into account many things when marking. This included whether a student is on an IEP, is an ELL, or is new to the country. These are factors that have a great impact on student performance and need to be taken into account when marking. This information is not given to scorers and they are expected to mark each student in the same way. There were many circumstances however that are beyond teachers control for example, how students are feeling on the day of the test, the socio-economic status of their family, how well their memory is as well as whether students are exempt from writing (ibid). Robert, who had experience as a scorer, believed that scoring procedures did not align with the philosophies of the board and the school he works in. Literature stated that policy maker's commonly implement assessment practices like the EQAO that are disconnected from the classroom (Nezavdal, 2003). Due to the fact that the EQAO is administered and marked externally,

there are conflicts between the goals of the assessment and that of which the schools have for their

students (ibid).

While there were many limitations reported by teachers interviewed for this study, there

were a few benefits reported. Teachers reported that students with IEPs benefitted by learning

study skills and mastering strategies that help support their test writing process and learning. For

example, students learn how to dissect test questions for greater understanding and how to

effectively answer questions. Karen also reported that students gain the experience of test taking

that they will experience when they are older. Robert also stated that he felt that the EQAO allowed

teachers, principals, students and parents to see how well students were performing provincially.

Ohemeng (2013), noted that the release of EQAO results helps students and their parents get

information on a schools' performance in relation to the provincial standard.

4.2 Lack of time, lack of assistive technology, and students not being developmentally ready for the assessment are challenges that these teachers face when preparing students with IEPs for the EQAO.

Teachers interviewed reported a lack of time, lack of assistive technology and students not

being developmentally ready for the EQAO as challenges faced when preparing students with IEPs

for the EQAO. Literature reviewed for this research study failed to include students with IEPs

specifically when discussing the EQAO assessment. There was also a lack of literature on EQAO

preparation for students, including students with IEPs.

4.2.1 Lack of time

When discussing the lack of time, teachers interviewed discussed challenges with

preparing students who were working below grade level as these students had not yet covered

curriculum that would be on the EQAO. Issues arose when these teachers felt pressure to teach

students how to answer EQAO type questions rather than teaching them for deeper understanding because there was not enough time to do so.

Both teachers felt that the most pressure was put on teachers who taught grades 3 and 6. Literature reported that policy makers often see the short comings of standardized tests as the teacher's fault while failing to consider the numerous outside factors that would affect test results (Nezavdal, 2003). This related to the teachers interviewed for this study who expressed the feeling of being responsible for getting students as ready as they can be for the assessments even though they felt that the students with IEPs were not ready. Karen expressed that the EQAO should be on every teacher's mind no matter what grade they are teaching. The grade 3 primary assessment builds on all the skills and content learned in the primary grades leading up to grade 3 and the same for the grade 6 junior assessment. Robert felt that preparation of his grades 3 and 6 classes would have been different if all teachers were teaching with EQAO in mind. Robert felt that students were newly being introduced to EQAO style teaching and methods for answering questions, for example using pictures, numbers, and words for solving math problems.

4.2.2 Lack of assistive technology

Karen believed that one challenge she had faced when preparing students with IEPs was the lack of updated technology at her school. The Guide for Accommodations, Special Provisions and Exemptions (2016) outlined assistive technology is also permitted for some students which include the use of specific software that does text to speech like Read and Write Gold and Kurzweil (EQAO, 2016). Karen shared that technology has been one of the more helpful accommodations for students and not having enough updated technology for her special education students was very challenging. Her students had to share the limited technology available in her classroom which meant they had less time to practice and master using the accommodations that would be available

to them. She felt that grade 3 and 6 classes received the new equipment as they had priority for

being grades that write the EQAO: Karen stated:

> Well computer technology was always a problem. I had a bank of 5
> computers in my classroom 3 of which I actually cobbled together from
> random computers that have been discarded in a storage room at the
> end of the hall these are kids that shouldn't just visit a computer lab
> once a week. They need every day all day hands on use of computers
> to get good at it and it was not happening so the computer technology
> was incredibly limited however the grades and grades sixes got laptops.

4.2.3 Students with IEPs are not developmentally ready

Ohemeng (2013) reported that teachers are forced to narrow the curriculum areas and

neglecting other subject areas which led to behaviours such as teaching to the test. He stated that

teaching to the test may alienate a significant portion of students whose academic strengths may

be outside of the commonly tested subjects (ibid). While this literature discussed students in

general as a whole, this finding is also true for students with IEPs who are working below grade

level. Both Karen and Robert felt that they needed to leap ahead in the curriculum to prepare

students working below grade level for the EQAO. Robert, for example, shared: "They [students]

can only do tasks at their grade level, but with EQAO they are expected to do things at a higher

level. I find that I have to jump teach to get them to learn the concepts that will be tested." Karen

felt that her students had a difficult time catching up to learn content that was at their chronological

grade. Literature stated that teachers are not teaching in the same way that they would because

they are trying to achieve provincial's desired results and end up spending more time on the

curriculum areas that are going to be tested (ibid).

Darling-Hammond, Ancess, and Falk (1994) also discussed the impact of large scale

assessments stating that educators are spending more time preparing their students for the tests and

as a result have less time to work on other curriculum areas. Both teachers found that even with a

lot of preparation, students had a difficult time understanding what the questions on the EQAO were asking them to do. Karen tried to counteract this challenge by teaching her students how to dissect questions. She stated that students also faced time constraints when writing the EQAO. Robert believes that students on IEPs for language or math experience difficulties completing the EQAO in the allotted time. Even with students who receive an accommodation that allows them to have extra time, they still have a difficult time finishing. While this is an accommodation that is permitted by the EQAO accommodation guidelines, if a student is not ready developmentally or have not developed the skills needed to write the EQAO assessment, this extra time is not helpful.

4.3 Teachers did not feel that they received institutional support aimed at specifically supporting students with IEPs with preparing for the EQAO

The teachers interviewed did not receive any institutional supports aimed at specifically supporting students with IEPs with preparing for the EQAO. Institutional supports that they did receive focused on EQAO preparation generally, and included workshops, professional developmental days or training offered by the school, school board or the EQAO office. Institutional supports given were designed for students as a whole without any specifically for students with IEPs. Workshops were provided within the family of schools which is a small group of schools within the same neighbourhood. Teachers also received workshops within their own schools. The topics of the workshops were determined by the perceived needs that come from analyzing test scores. For example, if scores were low in math, workshops would be provided in that area. Ohemeng (2013) reported that lower scoring schools become part of an intervention program that supports schools based on their specific areas of need. This intervention program is called the Ontario Focused Intervention Partnership for Elementary Schools (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2016). While teachers interviewed for this study both discussed various workshops and professional development, neither of them mentioned this intervention program specifically. It is

also not clear how successful these intervention programs are. Robert shared his experience of how the types of professional development was determined: "oh these were your results for the last couple of years so therefore you are in this category and this is the type of PD you are going to be receiving from somebody maybe from the board."

Teachers interviewed reported that EQAO specific workshops outlined the procedures and policies surrounding the process of testing. Assessments from the previous years were also looked at during workshops and professional development sessions. Karen described this process as assessments being picked apart and analyzed to see how what went well and where the school and teachers could make improvements. All teachers in Karen's school were involved in this process. Sample answers with examples of each marking level for example levels 1, 2, 3, and 4 were given so teachers had an idea of what scorers were looking for when they were marking. Both Robert and Karen provided examples of workshops during their interviews. Literacy workshops mainly consisted of sample questions, and math workshops focused on vocabulary used in word problems. Robert also had the opportunity to attend a professional development session where he was brought into a classroom to watch a teacher in action using the specific vocabulary. Robert was taught how to teach what keywords on the EQAO meant and what information students needed to include when answering test questions. Both Ontario and Alberta have policies that state that school boards and schools are required to use the test results to improve their school and therefore increase student test scores (Klinger & Rogers, 2011). Karen and Robert reported that workshops focused on increasing scores, teaching students how to better understand what the questions are asking and how to properly answer EQAO questions. There seems to be a disconnect here between school improvement and increased test scores.

The only IEP related information during workshops or professional development was on how to understand IEPs better and how manipulatives and assistive technologies could be used to support students. As a Methods and Resource Teacher (MART), Karen attended meetings where test anxiety for students with IEPs was discussed. Karen also credited her experience as a MART for her school as increasing her understanding of students with special needs to better support her students and staff at her school. This experience has helped her understand her students better in order to differentiate and customize learning for them.

4.4 Differentiated instruction strategies that teachers are using include teaching students how to dissect questions, teaching students key vocabulary words to support students with IEPs in their classrooms, and the use of visuals.

Walther-Thomas and Brownell (2001) state that with differentiated instruction, teachers create different levels of expectations for task completion and environments where all learners can be successful. In their words: "In DI all learners focus on the same essential understandings, but are provided with multiple access routes to make sense of and demonstrate these understandings" (p.3). For this reason, I was interested in learning what strategies participating teachers used to prepare their students with IEPs for the EQAO assessment. Participating teachers identified four key practices: teaching them how to dissect questions, teaching them key vocabulary words, and using visual representation. In addition to the themes discussed, how to use the accommodations available to students, providing anchor charts seating arrangements and using the buddy system will be discussed.

Teachers interviewed expressed that students with IEPs often had difficulty understanding what EQAO questions were asking. This poses a major problem for students because they can misinterpret the questions and end up providing an incorrect answer. One strategy that Karen found extremely important in trying to solve this problem was teaching students how to dissect questions

into smaller parts and then rewording the question. Karen felt that this was the most important thing she did for her students. In her words: "I think the biggest thing that I ever did and that span all subject matter, is [teaching students about] dissecting the question in the first place." Karen felt that when students dissected questions, they were able to better understand what the questions were asking them to do. She taught her students to use different colour highlighters to highlight key words in the questions.

Both Karen and Robert used anchor charts in their classrooms to help students with key vocabulary words. Anchor charts included information like key vocabulary words that would be on the EQAO or steps for solving word problems. Teaching students what EQAO vocabulary words mean and what they need to include in their answers was something both teachers felt was important for all of their students to learn. Klinger and Rogers (2011) stated that policy makers believe that large scale assessments will help educators "focus their attention" and improve their instruction of the curriculum. But instead, teachers interviewed are spending time teaching to the test and this practice is reinforced by the types of professional development that they are given once results are released.

Teachers interviewed also used strategies such as adjusting the vocabulary used in questions or instruction, changing the wording of questions and/or modifying steps needed to answer a question and using the buddy system when having their students with IEPs work in EQAO preparation activities. Both Karen and Robert talked about pairing stronger students with weaker ones to work together when appropriate. When writing the EQAO students are not allowed to receive any assistance from teachers or their peers, this includes clarification of word definitions or having someone explain what a question means. The accommodations guide defined accommodations as "changes in the way the assessment is administered or the way in which a

student with special education needs responds to its components (EQAO, 2016). It goes on to state that "the accommodations do not alter the content of the assessment nor affect the validity or reliability" (EQAO, 2016, n.p.). With students on IEPs who have previously become accustomed to the buddy system or received this type of support, not having this support can be problematic when they are left to figure out what is being asked of them on their own. There are also clear guidelines about what teachers and anyone involved in administering the assessment should not do for example teachers are not allowed to clarify, explain or translate anything from the assessment, they are also not allowed to encourage students to go back and add anything to their answers (ibid).

Both Karen and Robert discussed teaching their students with IEPs the importance of showing their work and being as detailed as possible when answering questions. Karen spent a lot of time explaining to her students that even if their answer was incorrect, visually representing their thinking could get them some marks, whereas leaving the question blank would get them nothing. Karen found that before learning the importance of showing their work, many of her students would give up if they felt that they did not know the answer.

Some students on IEPs have a scribe as an accommodation. Robert stated the importance of teaching his students with this particular accommodation how to utilize this person. He taught these students how to be as detailed as possible in explaining their thinking and the steps that they took in answering questions for the scribe to record. Without this, Robert felt that even though the student had a scribe, the information recorded by them would not fully show the students' thinking. He would prompt students and give them verbal cues during EQAO preparation activities and remind his students to tell the scribe everything. He explained: "Say everything you possibly could,

did you add here why did you add here did you subtract here why did you subtract here. Don't just

say you added explain why."

4.5 Teachers had varying experiences but both used resources such as the EQAO website, assistive technology, and other professionals to assist students with IEPs.

Resources that teachers used to assist students with IEPs in preparation for the EQAO

assessment included the EQAO website, assistive technology, and other professionals. Karen

believed that the resources available are only beneficial to students if they have learned how to use

them well. She believed in spending as much time as possible teaching her students how to

effectively use the resources. She felt that it was important to give students lots of practice using

the accommodations that they would be allowed to use during the EQAO.

4.5.1 EQAO website

The EQAO website was a common resource that teachers interviewed used to access

sample questions and resources to support their teaching practices and lessons. Sample questions

and sample assessments with examples of answers ranging from level 1 to 4 were easily

downloadable and used within the classroom. Teachers were able to use these as guides for creating

questions for their students to work on and provide them with exemplars for what answers for the

assessment would look like.

4.5.2 Assistive Technology

Assistive technology is also permitted for some students which include the use of specific

software that does text to speech like Read and Write Gold and Kurzweil (EQAO, 2016). These

technologies are helpful for students who need accommodations within the classroom but they are

also permitted for use on the EQAO assessment. Assistive technology that teachers used were a

software program called Read & Write Gold, and speech to text. Robert described using the speech

to text feature of Read & Write Gold and on Google Docs to assist an English Language Learner

(ELL) student who had difficulty printing. While it took some time to train the student on how to use the features of speech to text, this accommodation helped to remove the barrier the student had with writing using pencil and paper. With this barrier removed, Robert stated that the student's response was still lacking in content and conventions, something that he remembers marking for when he was a scorer. Although the student was able to verbally provide his answers through the speech to text program, there were still key aspects of the answer missing. He explained: "Well his text ended up not making sense. Run on sentences for example it seems like its misspelled or what have you but to him that is his response. If that were submitted, then he's going to be scored on the content what the content may be is distilled and broken up and the conventions there probably most likely be no punctuation."

Karen also used Read & Write Gold and credited this software as playing an integral role in preparing her students with IEPs. She would give her students practice questions to use with this program where her students used Read & Write Gold to have the questions and passages read to them. They were able to listen to this through headphones and replay it as many times as necessary. Karen believed that this software was imperative to how well her students with IEPs did on the EQAO. Interactive white boards were also beneficial for presenting information visually for Karen's students who needed it.

4.5.3 Consulting with other Professionals and Additional Resources

Karen believed in spending a lot of time teaching students how to effectively use the resources that would be available to them during the EQAO. Other resources that teachers interviewed used include curriculum documents, textbooks and online math programs such as IXL math. IXL is a website that features practice math questions for kindergarten to grade 12 that aligns with the Ontario Curriculum. Robert used IXL math with his students because he could easily

modify the grade level of the questions students had access to. Students would then have questions appropriate for the level they were working at. These were resources that could be used outside of specifically preparing students for the EQAO assessment.

Klinger and Rogers (2011) note that principals and teachers that are involved in the scoring and item writing process are able to bring what they learned back to their respective school. Robert, who worked as a scorer for many years, credited his experience and training for this role as experience that he has used to help prepare his students. He was able to use the experiences as a scorer to guide his students in preparing "level 4" answers with components that he knew scorers would be looking for.

Being the Methods and Resource Teacher for her school, Karen felt that this helped enhance her understanding and experience in preparing students with IEPs. Within this role she meets with many professionals in the education field that are able to provide new strategies and/or resources that might be helpful to her students with IEPs. She believed that it is important to stay open to trying new things and to consult with the school principal or other staff members within the school for new ideas, strategies and resources when needed.

4.6 Conclusion

In summary, key findings from this research study are that teachers expressed mostly limitations when asked about their perspectives of the EQAO on their students with IEPs. Teachers also expressed various challenges in preparing students with IEPs for the EQAO assessment which include a lack of time, lack of assistive technology and most importantly, students not being developmentally ready for the assessment. When it came to professional development or institutional support related to preparing students with IEPs for the EQAO assessment, teachers reported that they did not receive any specifically for this targeted group of students. As a way to

support students with IEPs for preparing for the EQAO assessments teachers used various differentiated instruction strategies related to the EQAO assessment. These include teaching their students how to dissect practice questions, and teaching students key vocabulary words that would be on the assessment. While there was limited literature available on how teachers are supporting this targeted group of students to write standardized tests like the EQAO, bring to light some of the issues students with IEPs and their teachers face when they are preparing for and wring the EQAO assessment. Literature states that standardized tests such as the EQAO assessment do not provide enough information for educators and policy makers to make significant changes to improve the education system. Nezavdal (2003) argues that standardized tests are not an effective way to show what students can do and what they know because these types of tests do not give information on why students do poorly. The existing literature in this area does support the importance of accommodations and modifications for students with IEPs and supports the view that these students have very diverse needs that need to be accommodated for. In chapter 5, I will speak to the implications of these findings and make recommendations for moving forward.

CHAPTER 5 – IMPLICATIONS

5.0 Introduction

In this chapter I discuss the implications of my research study. An overview of my key findings and their significance will be included followed by a description of the implications of my findings in relation to the educational community and for myself as a new teacher. Next, I outline recommendations for key stakeholders in the educational community. Further areas of research will then be identified followed by a conclusion that describes the significance of the research findings.

5.1 Overview of Key Findings and Their Significance

Key findings of this research are that teachers expressed mostly limitations when asked about their perspectives of the EQAO on their students with IEPs. Teachers also expressed various challenges in preparing students with IEPs for the EQAO assessments which include a lack of time, lack of assistive technology and most importantly, students not being developmentally ready for the assessment. When it came to professional development or institutional support related to preparing students with IEPs for the EQAO assessment, teachers reported that they did not receive any specifically for this group of students. As a way to support students with IEPs for preparing for the EQAO assessments teachers used various differentiated instruction strategies related to the EQAO assessment. These include teaching their students how to dissect practice questions, and teaching students key vocabulary words that would be on the assessment. These findings are significant because they outline the difficulties teachers and their students with IEPs have in preparing for the EQAO assessment. These findings illustrate how standardized assessments such as the EQAO fail to take into account the diverse needs and accommodations needed for students

with IEPs. This is especially true for students on a modified curriculum who are working below grade level.

5.2 Implications

In this section I discuss what the implications of my findings are for the educational community as well as for myself as a new teacher.

5.2.1 The Educational Community

The findings of this study reported that the students of participating teachers who were working below grade level commonly had not yet covered curriculum material that they would be tested on. Students who are exempt from writing the EQAO assessment receive a score of zero. If an assessment of zero does not impact student learning or have any implications for teachers, then this raises questions about the overall purpose of this form of standardized assessment. Scores of zero are counted in overall school scores. This leads to administrators and teachers feeling pressured to have all students write the EQAO assessment because a low score is better than a score of zero. This study revealed that rather than having teachers work towards improving education and student learning, the EQAO assessment practices, especially in terms of preparing students for the tests, commonly result in forcing teachers to teach to the test. From participating teachers' perspectives, this is especially true when teachers are trying to prepare students with IEPs for the EQAO. Teachers expressed having to "skip teach" curriculum to get their students to have some basic understanding of a curriculum area that would be on the EQAO assessment.

The current state of EQAO policies, procedures and preparation methods had led to a culture of teaching to the test. This research study found that professional development opportunities that teachers are provided are directed at improving test scores but not directed at improving teaching practices and students over all learning. This research also found that there

was a lack of training and research on students with IEPs and writing the EQAO assessment. A lack of training and research on students with IEPs writing the EQAO leaves teachers unprepared and uninformed for properly addressing issues these students face.

There are many policies in place that attempt to ensure the validity of standardized assessments but pressures to continue to increase test scores have led to schools and professional development being focused on teaching to the test. Professional development topics typically include teaching students what the various vocabulary used on the assessment mean and what to include to have a successful answer. The advertised intended goal of the EQAO assessment is to measure the accountability of the education system in order to improve student learning, but the literature in this area and the findings from this study suggest that this student learning is the priority.

5.2.2 My Own Professional Identity and Practice

As a beginning teacher the implications of the findings for my professional identity includes continuing to build my knowledge of the strengths and needs of students with IEPs in order to better support them within the classroom as well as in situations such as the EQAO assessment where they are at a clear disadvantage. To do this, I might work towards completing the special education Additional Qualifications (AQ) as this is a means to becoming more knowledgeable on tools and strategies that would help students with IEPs. I believe that strengthening my knowledge base is a way to be proactive in supporting this group of students as well as all of my students.

5.3 Recommendations

I will articulate recommendations for a variety of stakeholders including, teachers, administrators, school boards, ministries of education, and teacher education programs.

Teachers

- In order for teachers to properly support students with IEPs it is important that they read and understand students' IEPs and consult with their parents, special education teacher, and the student if needed because this will help with supporting the student in the best way possible for the EQAO assessment and within the classroom

- Teachers can provide differentiated instruction and test preparation activities based on the student's strengths and abilities to assist students in preparing for the EQAO assessments. Providing students with activities that are based on their strengths can make a difference in how well they are able to complete and perform in a task.

- To prepare students for using their accommodations, give them enough time to practice using the specific accommodations that are outlined in their IEPs such as assistive technology, manipulatives, or scribes. As Karen stated in her interview for this study, accommodations are only beneficial to students if they know how to use them well.

- It is important that teachers continue teaching as they would to develop strong curriculum knowledge and also help students develop proficient learning skills and work habits. This will provide a strong basis for students who are writing the EQAO assessment, including those with IEPs without having to teach to the test.

- Teachers can advocate to have changes in the process of EQAO in relation to students with IEPs writing the EQAO assessment before they are developmentally ready which include students working below grade level by consulting with their administration, superintendent and school boards about the issues that they are facing related to this matter. It is not feasible to spend time preparing students for the assessment when they have not covered material that is being tested as yet. Time could be better spent developing skills and

working at the grade level they are at. Teachers can also share the effects scores of zero have on students with IEPs and their families to express the importance of changes to students receiving a zero and not allowing those scores to be included in overall test scores is imperative because the results do not have direct implications on student learning.

Administrators

- It is important for administrators to work with teachers to strengthen their understanding of students IEPs and how to best support these students within their classroom that are aligned with the EQAO assessment. Not all teachers have a special education background or have taken special education additional qualification courses.

- Administrators can advocate for students with IEPs who are not ready to write the EQAO assessment to be exempt without being penalized by receiving a score of zero by sharing the concerns that teachers and parents have for students with IEPs with their school boards and superintendent in hopes of making changes in government policy.

- Provide diverse topics of professional development which include creative ways to differentiate instruction and assessment for students with IEPs for teachers to strengthen their skills as educators in various curriculum areas by taking a proactive approach at improving student learning rather than professional development targeted specifically at increasing test scores. These types of professional developments and workshops are reactive and force teachers to spend insurmountable time on teaching to the test when they could be using it to develop more in-depth knowledge of curriculum for their students.

- Professional development topics can include a sharing of resources and ideas on ways teachers are effectively supporting students with IEPs in their classroom, which may include the use of assistive technology, software programs, or web based resources. Both

Karen and Robert described the importance of these tools when discussing supporting students with IEPs.

School Boards

- Change and challenge the way that the EQAO scores are viewed and perceived by the public, teachers, students and their parents by putting a stop to publicly publishing test scores. As found in the literature review, results are being misused and misinterpreted by the public and outside agencies. It is also important for school boards to present a shift in focus with less on the EQAO results and more on the successes schools and teachers are having in their daily teaching practices.

- Work with administration, teachers and the Ministry of Education to redevelop an accountability framework that puts more emphasis on finding out why students are struggling in reading, writing and math including what might be appropriate response to these barriers. Reporting scores is not enough and working to increase scores does not do anything to improve the currently state of the education system.

Ministries of Education

- Re-evaluate the current policies surrounding the content and purpose of the EQAO assessment (not only the procedures).

- Explore various options to better support students with IEPs in the EQAO assessment process. For example, looking into having modified versions of the EQAO assessment that would be beneficial to students with various learning needs.

- Consider getting rid of the EQAO as an accountability tool because it seems to be measuring accountability at the student's expense. Instead, develop a method for measuring the effectiveness of teaching practices because teachers deliver the curriculum and are

responsible for teaching students. At the same time, it is important to identify and respond to the barriers that students with IEPs face when writing the EQAO because these are often systemic and structural.

Teacher Education

- When developing and teaching teacher candidates curriculum courses, include resources, strategies and teaching methods pertaining to students with IEPs for all curriculum areas. This will benefit new teachers coming in with supporting students with IEPs in their classrooms.

5.4 Areas for Further Research

From my research findings I propose two key courses for action 1) completely eliminate standardized assessments like the EQAO to measure accountability or 2) change policies and procedures surrounding how the EQAO is implemented, and how the results are being used. This led to thinking of areas for further research which include looking into non-standardized methods of measuring student learning on a larger provincial wide scale that allow for the kinds of accommodations and modifications that students with IEPs are permitted throughout their school year. Researchers could look into whether this would be a good alternative method to the current forms of standardized testing. Non-standardized methods of measuring student learning will allow more flexibility in allowing for accommodations and/or modifications that students with IEPs require. Students with IEPs would then not be at a disadvantage when having their learning assessed.

If the EQAO assessment were to continue, changes in policies and procedures around how the EQAO is implemented and how the results are being used is imperative. Questions that were raised for me throughout this research include what are teachers and schools being held

accountable for – student learning or improving school rankings? how do student test scores from the EQAO assessment measure accountability? How is working towards increasing scores improving teaching practice and the state of student learning? I also think it is important to research whether having students who are working below grade level being exempt from writing the EQAO has a great impact on overall school scores or not. How do student scores provide a strong representation of the education system? How might the education system in Ontario implement a form of standardized assessment for students in IEPs? How are teachers enacting their own versions of this, and what can we learn from their practices in terms of thinking about how differentiation can be accounted for in standardized testing?

In addition to these areas of research, there needs to be more research on students with IEPs and the EQAO assessment. This includes the impact and/or consequences of students with IEPs writing the assessment either without the appropriate accommodations such has having questions read and explained to them or without having an modified version of the assessment. Research should also be done on assessment practices that work best for the various needs of students with IEPs and how effective these methods are at measuring student learning.

5.5 Concluding Comments

The goal of this study was to find out how teachers are supporting students with IEPs in preparation for the EQAO assessment. What I found through interviewing two elementary school teachers was that teachers did not see many benefits for students with IEPs writing the EQAO assessment, which leads to challenges in preparing students with IEPs for the EQAO such as, a lack of time, a lack of assistive technology and students not being developmentally ready. Teachers did receive professional development on preparing students for the EQAO assessment but without any focus on addressing support for students with IEPs. Teachers used various methods to support

and prepare students with IEPs for the EQAO assessment which included teaching their students how to dissect practice questions, and teaching students key vocabulary words that would be on the assessment.

These findings are significant because there is a lack of research on students with IEPs and the EQAO assessment. This research study also brings awareness to the challenges, unethical and inequitable state that result by having students with IEPs write the EQAO when they are not ready or sufficiently prepared. This research is also significant because it reveals a culture of teaching to the test that goes against best practices like differentiated instruction, being responsive to students' SES and the impact these have on student learning. The culture of teaching to the tests an issue is because of the emphasis that is put on test scores, and as a response schools are spending a lot of time on professional development that are around increasing test scores. With the EQAOs intended goal of accountability and improving student learning, increasing test scores and making students who are on IEPs write a standardized assessment is not the answer.

The findings of this research are especially significant to teachers, students with IEPs, and students who are not on IEPs because there seems to be a disconnect between improving student learning and the need for accountability of the education system. Changes need to happen when it comes to how we measure the accountability of the education system and something needs to be done to improve how students with IEPs are tested.

Recommendations include eliminating the EQAO assessment altogether and creating a non-standardized large-scale provincial method of measuring student learning and accountability. An alternative recommendation would be to modify policies and procedures around how EQAO results are being used by school boards and outside agency by shifting the focus on school ranking and increasing test scores and more towards improving student learning. Additionally, eliminating

scores of zero for students with IEPs who are exempt from writing the EQAO assessment. Changes in policies that impact students with IEPs are also recommended which include having accommodations that are consistent and more in line with what students are permitted within their classrooms. While there is value in holding teachers accountable for student learning in the public school system in Ontario, the current state of the process and its intended purpose of improving student learning has seemed to been lost. Quality student learning should always be at the forefront of what teachers, administrators, school boards and ministries of education base their actions on rather than the emphasis of student scores and school rankings. Without this shift, student learning will not improve.

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Appendix A

UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO
OISE | ONTARIO INSTITUTE
FOR STUDIES IN EDUCATION

Consent Form

Date:

Dear _____,

      My Name is Elizabeth Wilfred and I am a student in the Master of Teaching program at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto (OISE/UT). A component of this degree program involves conducting a small-scale qualitative research study. My research will focus on strategies used in preparing students with IEPs for the EQAO test. I am interested in interviewing teachers who have taught or is teaching grades 3 or 6, completed additional qualification training in special education, and/or is a beginning teacher with no special education training. I think that your knowledge and experience will provide insights into this topic.

      Your participation in this research will involve one 45-60 minute interview, which will be transcribed and audio-recorded. I would be grateful if you would allow me to interview you at a place and time convenient for you, outside of school time. The contents of this interview will be used for my research project, which will include a final paper, as well as informal presentations to my classmates and/or potentially at a research conference or publication. You will be assigned a pseudonym to maintain your anonymity and I will not use your name or any other content that might identify you in my written work, oral presentations, or publications. This information will remain confidential. This data will be stored on my password-protected computer and the only people who will have access to the research data will be my course instructor Dr. Angela MacDonald-Vemic. You are free to change your mind about your participation at any time, and to withdraw even after you have consented to participate. You may also choose to decline to answer any specific question. I will destroy the audio recording after the paper has been presented and/or published, which may take up to a maximum of five years after the data has been collected. There are no known risks or benefits to participation, and I will share with you a copy of the transcript to ensure accuracy.

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

Sincerely,

Elizabeth Wilfred

4168861422

e.wilfred@mail.utoronto.ca

Course Instructor's Name: Dr. Angela MacDonald-Vemic

Contact Info: angela.macdonald@utoronto.ca

Consent Form

I acknowledge that the topic of this interview has been explained to me and that any questions that I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction. I understand that I can withdraw from this research study at any time without penalty.

I have read the letter provided to me by Elizabeth Wilfred and agree to participate in an interview for the purposes described. I agree to have the interview audio-recorded.

Signature: _____

Name: (printed) _____

Date: _____

Appendix B

UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO
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Interview Questions

Thank you for participating in this interview. The aim of this research is to learn more about the strategies that teachers like you are using to help prepare students with IEPs for the EQAO tests. The interview should take approximately 45 - 60 minutes. I will ask you a series of 10 questions focused on your experience in supporting students with the EQAO. I want to remind you of your right to choose not to answer any question. Do you have any questions before we begin?

Background Information

1. What is your name?
2. What grade are you teaching this year?
3. When did you teach grade 3 or 6?
4. How much experience do you have preparing students for EQAO testing?
5. Have you ever worked for EQAO (scoring)?
6. Can you tell me a bit about the school you are currently teaching in? (Size, demographics, program priorities).
7. Does your school have a high number of students with special needs? To your knowledge, what are some of these needs?
8. Please tell me about any special education training you have received.
9. Did this training include attention to preparing students for large scale testing/standardized tests? If yes, what do you remember that including?
10. How, if at all, has your special education training helped you support/prepare students for the EQAO tests?
11. What experiences have contributed to developing your knowledge and commitment to supporting students with special needs and differentiating your instruction to prepare them for EQAO? *probe re: personal, professional, and educational experiences

Beliefs/Values

12. Can you please share with me your perspective on the benefits and limitations of EQAO testing?

13. Do you believe that EQAO testing is helpful for students? If so, how? If not why not?

14. In your experience, what are some of the most common challenges that students face when preparing for the EQAO tests?

15. In your experience, what are some of the most common challenges that students on IEPs / with special needs face preparing for the tests?

16. In your view, is it important that students with special needs have access to differentiated testing? Why/why not?

17. What does differentiated instruction mean to you? And differentiated assessment? Are these practices that you implement in your classroom? Why?

Teacher Practices

18. How do you differentiate your instruction and assessment in your teaching (generally speaking)? What kinds of instructional practices, strategies and approaches do you enact to support students on IEPs in your classroom and why?

19. How do you prepare students for EQAO (generally speaking)? What does this preparation typically look like and involve? At what point in the school year do you begin? Approximately how many hours per week do you devote to this during the period leading up to the tests?

20. Which strategies do you use specifically to help prepare students on IEPs for the EQAO test?

    a) Do you begin prepping them at the same stage of the school year as other students? Why/why not?

    b) What resources do you use to support you?

    c) How do your students respond to your approach and strategies?

    d) How are you able to differentially support students on IEPs while preparing the other students?

21. Can you please give me an example of a student on an IEP that you have worked with to prepare them for EQAO tests?

    a) Who was the student? *grade, learning needs etc.

    b) What were your learning goals for them during this lesson?

     c) What instructional practices did you use and why? What opportunities for learning did you create?

     d) What outcomes did you observe from this student?

     e) What resources supported you in this lesson?

     f) To your knowledge, how do your students on IEPs do on the tests?

Support Resources, Challenges, and Next Steps

22. What range of factors and resources do you find helpful and supportive for supporting students in preparing for the EQAO test?

23. What challenges have you faced when trying to prepare students with IEPs for the EQAO test? How do you respond to these challenges? How might the education system further support you in meeting these challenges?

24. What advice, if any, do you have for beginning teachers about how they can differentiate their instruction to prepare students for EQAO tests?

Thank you so much for taking the time to participate in my study.