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POSTDOCTORAL STUDIES

Jill-Anne Chouinard

AUTEUR DE LA THÈSE / AUTHOR OF THESIS

M.A. (Education)

GRADE / DEGREE

Faculty of Education

FACULTÉ, ÉCOLE, DÉPARTEMENT / FACULTY, SCHOOL, DEPARTMENT

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Standards and Testing

TITRE DE LA THÈSE / TITLE OF THESIS

Martin Barlosky

DIRECTEUR (DIRECTRICE) DE LA THÈSE / THESIS SUPERVISOR

CO-DIRECTEUR (CO-DIRECTRICE) DE LA THÈSE / THESIS CO-SUPERVISOR

EXAMINATEURS (EXAMINATRICES) DE LA THÈSE / THESIS EXAMINERS

Marielle Simon

Joel Westheimer

Gary W. Slater

LE DOYEN DE LA FACULTÉ DES ÉTUDES SUPÉRIEURES ET POSTDOCTORALES /
DEAN OF THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE AND POSTDOCTORAL STUDIES

**Regulating Learning and Teaching: A Case Study of
Ontario Elementary Teachers in an Era of Standards and Testing**

By

Jill-Anne Chouinard

A thesis submitted in conformity with the requirements
for the degree of Master of Arts
Faculty of Education
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Regulating Learning and Teaching: A Case Study of Ontario Elementary Teachers in an Era of Standards and Testing

Abstract

The current trend in Ontario toward greater educational accountability through standardized curriculum and testing appears to be based largely on the hope that compliance with external standards will lead to a more transparent, uniform, and predictable educational system. Through a focus group and individual interviews, this case study explores the experiences and perceptions of three elementary school teachers from one school who are required to implement the Ontario curriculum, as well as to provide annually administered standardized tests to their students in reading, writing and mathematics. The research conducted suggests how specific aspects of the tension between teachers' localized perceptions of classroom life and provincial curricular requirements and Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO) testing are redefining the educational realities experienced by students and teachers in one contemporary Ontario school and its classrooms.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Postmodernism, poststructuralism, hermeneutics, phenomenology, critical theory: The labels ought not matter. What matters is an affirmation of a social world accepting of tension and conflict. What matters is an affirmation of energy and the passion of reflection in a renewed hope of common action, of face-to-face encounters among friends and strangers, striving for meaning, striving for understanding.

Maxine Greene, "Epistemology and Educational Research: The Influence of Recent Approaches to Knowledge", *Review of Research in Education*, 1994, p. 459.

Statement of the Problem

In an effort to hold teachers accountable, as well as to ensure more predictable student outcomes (Earl, 1999; Casas and Meaghan, 2001; Wien, 1998), the Ontario government has created a standardized curriculum for all elementary grade levels and has mandated standardized testing for all Grade 3 and Grade 6 students. This current trend is based largely on the hope that compliance with external standards will lead to an education system that is more transparent, uniform and predictable (Barlosky, 2003). Many have argued, however, that this conception of education reduces the complexity of teaching to issues of efficiency and effectiveness, to an arguably misplaced confidence in quantifiable, objective criteria of educational worth and value. At the same time, it risks reducing learning to the passive acquisition of a predefined, fact-based, and ultimately fragmented form of knowledge. In the end, what is taught, as well as the ways in which it is taught, has profound and continuing implications for teaching and learning, and most significantly, for creating engaged citizens who are capable of thinking creatively, constructively and critically about themselves and their world.

Purpose of Study

The original purpose of this case study was to understand how teachers mediate between competing notions of teaching and learning, for example, between mandated requirements and more personalistic notions of effective teaching. Ironically, in the focus group and individual interviews with participants it became apparent that teachers' personal notions are subsumed by institutional requirements and daily, non-stop classroom activities, with what Maxine Greene (1988) refers to as the "immediacy of the felt encounter" (p. 283). Thus, in the spirit of qualitative research, and with an emphasis on emergent design (Lincoln and Guba, 1985), the focus of this study has shifted to include the understanding of the more fundamental and critical tensions that exist between stated educational goals and the exigencies of classroom life, between curricular content and pedagogy, and between explicit and more personalistic and often tacit forms of knowledge.

Central to this study is the recognition that Ontario's outcome-based model of education, with its increasing emphasis on standardized curriculum and testing, has important epistemological implications related to definitions of knowledge, pedagogical implications related to classroom teaching practices, and normative implications related to educational purposes and goals, all of which would benefit from critical attention. To further explore these issues, this study examines the experiences and perceptions of a purposeful and an intentionally small sample of Grade 3 and Grade 6 teachers who are required to implement *The Ontario Curriculum*, as well as to provide standardized tests to their students in reading, writing and mathematics. Specifically, the purpose of this study is to explore how the trend in Ontario toward greater accountability for teachers,

through tightened curriculum control and standardized testing, may impact teaching and learning in an Ontario elementary public school. The following questions are explored:

1. How do provincial curricular and Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO) testing mandates impact the professional experience of a select sample of Ontario elementary school teachers concerning issues of teaching, learning, and assessment in their individual classrooms?
2. How do government policy mandates shape specific aspects of the local school and individual classroom contexts, that in turn, influence teachers' reported classroom practices?

Theoretical Framework

The framework for this thesis is based on the conception of schools as sites of social interaction and cultural contest (Waller, 1932), where the interplay between formal bureaucratic demands and the needs and dispositions of individual personalities gives rise to specific behaviour in organizations (Getzels, Lipham, Campbell, 1968). The Getzels-Guba (1968) model of social behaviour (Figure 1), which makes a critical distinction between the nomothetic and idiographic dimensions of organizations (Lipham, 1988), will provide the starting point from which to explore the dynamic and complex relationship between teachers' individual and localized perceptions of teaching and learning, and provincial curricular requirements and standardized testing.

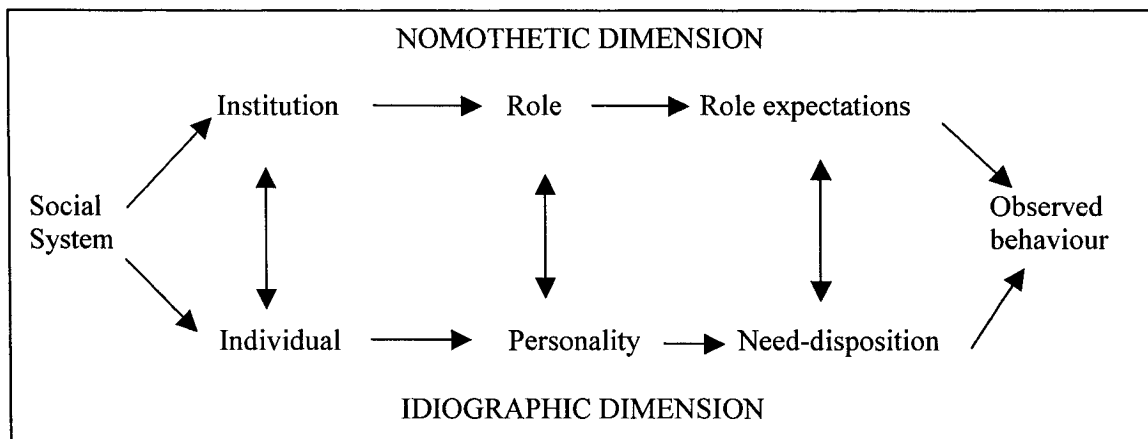


Figure 1. The Getzels-Guba model of the dimensions of social behaviour.

What follows is a brief description of the nomothetic and idiographic dimensions of organizational behaviour, their interrelationship, and the epistemological, pedagogical, and normative implications manifested in these two dimensions of social and organizational life.

The nomothetic dimension of organizational behaviour is formalized through a school's goals, expectations, standards, and rules (Getzels, Lipham, Campbell, 1968). I will argue that the nomothetic dimension of schools and classrooms can be characterized by standardized curriculum and assessment, by external, technical knowledge that is "comprised of units that can be organized into systems of ordered parts" (Wake, 1983, p. 85). The nomothetic dimension thus advances a depersonalized description of reality, truth and meaning, of what Ellul (1964) calls "technique". For Ellul, technique is the *totality of methods rationally arrived at and having absolute efficiency* (p. xxv, italics in original). Technique thus provides a convenient

means of apprehending reality, of acting on the world, which allows us to neglect all individual differences, all subjectivity. Technique alone is rigorously

objective. It blots out all personal opinions. It effaces all individual, and even all collective modes of expression. (Ellul, 1964, p. 131)

Ellul's conception of technique, though effecting a seemingly rigorous objectivity, provides policy makers with a standardized, prescriptive means of achieving putatively predictable outcomes.

The idiographic dimension, on the other hand, represents the individual personalities and dispositions of those who fulfill institutional roles and positions (Getzels, Lipham, Campbell, 1968). It thus represents what is arguably a more "visceral knowledge" (Donmoyer, 1995), what Britzman refers to as "internally persuasive discourse" (Britzman, 2003). Unlike the more objective, quantifiable voice of the nomothetic, this more subjective knowledge in the case of schools may be related to the practical, personal, and idiosyncratic experiences of individuals, and as such can be considered "practitioner knowledge" (Polkinghorne, 1992). Clandinin and Connelly (1995) refer to personal, practical knowledge as "that body of convictions and meanings, conscious or unconscious, that have arisen from experience (intimate, social or traditional) and that are expressed in a person's practices" (p. 7). While this form of knowledge is subjective, it is also, as Britzman (2003) points out, "always in dialogue with authoritative discourse", which I have described as being included in the nomothetic aspect of organizations, and with the "voice of others" (p. 43), represented by the students, the teacher, the curriculum, and the shared institutional context (Britzman, 1989).

Of particular interest is the interplay between these "voices", a term used metaphorically to describe the tension between "the inflections and intonations of who

we are”, and our “relationship to the world and to others” (Britzman, 2003, p. 34). For teachers, the notion of voice represents the struggle between the idiographic and nomothetic dimensions of organizational behaviour, between individual notions of the professional work of teaching and redefinitions of their work that emerge from external sources. As J. C. Greene (1994) points out, “reality resides neither with an objective, external world nor with the subjective mind of the knower, but within dynamic transactions between the two” (p. 536). As I will argue, it is precisely the interplay between objectively defined external requirements and subjectively defined perceptions of teaching and learning that creates a profound tension within which the localized reality of teaching and learning in Ontario public schools is defined.

Exploring the dynamic and complex interplay between provincial curricular requirements and standardized testing and the personalistic and localized experiences of elementary school teachers draws attention to the perennial tensions between conflicting notions of teaching and learning and contested assumptions about purpose embedded in the educational enterprise. An examination of the choice of curriculum, including the selection of content, and how it is structured, communicated and measured, allows us to raise fundamental questions about the nature and purpose of education, knowledge and pedagogy. Thus, while the aim of this thesis was to explore teachers’ perceptions of teaching and learning in what I will argue is an era of increasing standards and testing, of fundamental significance are the broader epistemological, pedagogical, and normative assumptions that characterize standardized notions of education. As Portelli and Vibert (1997) remind us, “the issues facing education presently are far more complex than the standards movement would allow” (p. 72).

Organization of the Thesis

The chapters in this case study are intended to reflect the research process involved in recording, reporting, and analyzing the experiences and perceptions of the Grade 3 and Grade 6 teachers included in my sample. ***Chapter 2, Review of Literature***, provides a historical and theoretical overview of educational standards, seeking a deeper understanding of the epistemological and normative questions that provide context for the research questions. The chapter concludes with a review of selected literature concerning standards and testing that is relevant to this study. ***Chapter 3, Methodology***, provides a rationale for the case study approach used herein, as well as a description of the research design, including sample selection, data collection and data analysis. ***Chapter 4, Context of the Study***, provides a description of the international educational environment, the educational context in Ontario, the school that was the site of my research, and introduces the teachers who participated in this study. The organization of this chapter, from a broad to a more focused perspective, is meant to provide a more thorough rendering of the context of the case and to show how external educational decisions may shape actual classroom practices. ***Chapter 5, Research Findings***, introduces two primary categories of findings and five interrelated themes, all of which are based on the reported experiences of those in the study sample. These categories and themes are linked to the research questions that guide this study. ***Chapter 6, Research Implications***, begins with a meta-analysis of the identified categories and themes, and moves to a discussion of the principle findings and implications of this study. This chapter concludes with a summary of reflections and recommendations for further study.

Chapter 2: Review of Literature

It is important to note that the cool rationality and search for the one best method was a caricature of science. The practice of science is itself an art pervaded by passion, dependent upon imagination, filled with uncertainty, and often motivated by the challenge and joy of the journey.

Elliot Eisner, From Episteme to Phronesis to Artistry in the Study and Improvement of Teaching, *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 2002, p. 379.

Conceptual Beginnings

The field of education is fundamentally a normative domain (Young and Levin, 2002) reflecting a multiplicity of competing and conflicting interests about how education should be defined and what it should be for. Moreover, there is an enduring tension between questions of educational purpose and goals and ensuing results (Young and Levin, 2002). For instance, many argue that standardized curriculum and testing adversely impact a student population that is culturally and economically diverse, whereas others argue that without the guidance of explicit procedures and measures, culturally and economically disenfranchised students will be unable to apprehend, learn, and make use of the rules, discourse and practices of the dominant culture (Hirsch, 1988; Delpit, 1995). While such divergent positions underscore the difficulty of broadly defining an educational system that will meet the needs of all students, embedded in the educational enterprise are epistemological assumptions concerning the nature of knowledge and of how it is defined, produced, and communicated in the process of schooling. As Schrag (1992) states:

Education is centrally (though not exclusively) concerned with the transmission of knowledge, not just facts...but modes of inquiry, attitudes toward inquiry, and the like. It is therefore only natural to suppose that the stance one adopts toward

educational issues will depend, in part, on the view one adopts toward the nature and sources of knowledge. (p. 268)

Central to this study was the recognition that Ontario's outcome-based model of education has epistemological, pedagogical and normative implications, all of which are inextricably linked and made manifest in the reported classroom practices of the teachers in the research sample. Thus, before turning to the relevant empirical literature that deals with the relationship between standardized educational models and teachers' classroom practices, it is essential to understand the history of and the philosophical assumptions that underlie the standardized model in education.

Educational Standards: Origins and Assumptions

The use of objective measures and standards to predict and control student outcomes has a long history in educational administration, a history that can be traced to Frederick Taylor's "time and motion studies" performed early in the 20th century in order to increase factory worker productivity (Campbell, Fleming, Newell and Bennion, 1987). The idea behind Taylor's studies was to find the "one best method" with which to maximize production and efficiency (Taylor, 1911). According to Taylor (1911, pp. 64, 85), "every single act of every single workman can be reduced to a science", requiring "rigid rules for each motion of every man, and the perfection and standardization of all implements and working conditions [leading to] the substitution of science for the judgement of the worker". Under these standardized conditions and close supervision, Taylor believed that outcomes could thereby be predictably assured and achieved with "absolute uniformity" (p. 36). In spite of the fact that Taylor's workmen were pig iron

handlers, bricklayers, shovelers, and bicycle ball inspectors, his scientific management practices were nonetheless appropriated by educational administrators (Gronn, 1982; Watkins, 1986; Barlosky, 2003) as a way to “legitimize” (Meyer and Rowan, 1983) their activities to the public. In other words, by appropriating the technical, rational, and “formal” language of industry, educational administrators could increase the organizational and public validity of the school.

The influence of Taylor’s scientific management principles extended beyond the administration of schools, to include the organization and administration of the curriculum itself (Carlson, 1988; Garrison, 1988; Kliebard, 1992). According to Kliebard (1992), modern curriculum theory rests on the “production metaphor”, where the student becomes “the raw material from which the school factory must fashion a product drawn to the specifications of social convention” (p. 120). To achieve this goal, to find the “one best method” to assure predictable and measurable results, curriculum design thus becomes tied to the principles of scientific management (Carlson, 1988; Garrison, 1988; McCutcheon, 1988; Kliebard, 1992). As in industry, the success of the production metaphor “depends on the fact that it reduces the process of production to units so simple that the predicted outcome is assured” (Kliebard, 1992, p. 120). As Carlson (1988) states:

Knowledge to be learned and activities to be performed by students are first fragmented into a series of small bits of knowledge...which are then reassembled in a hierarchical sequence. The student approaches the curriculum as a series of small, sequential tasks to be completed and skills to be mastered. (p. 106)

Thus, despite the fact that students are not simply raw materials, teachers are not production-line workers, and schools are not factories, the last century of educational theory has been spent in search of scientific certainty, a search for the “one best method” that will ultimately produce predictable educational outcomes. The effective schools movement is one obvious example of this understandable, but often misdirected search.

An underlying feature of Taylor’s scientific management, and concomitantly of the standards-based model of education, is the requirement for compliance with authority, with nomothetically derived standards and with prescriptive methods found in provincial curriculum and testing and in report cards. For Taylor (1911), in order to replace the workers “personal experience” with scientific certainty, the “one best method” would have to be “enforced” by management. According to Taylor (1911):

It is only through *enforced* standardization of methods, *enforced* adoption of the best implements and working conditions, and *enforced* co-operation that this faster work can be assured. And the duty of *enforcing* adoption of standards and of *enforcing* this co-operation rests with management alone. (p. 83)

Thus, scientific management is based on control (Gronn, 1982; Eisner, 1985; Watkins, 1986), control of the definition and structure of knowledge, control of the “one best method”, and control of the measurement and evaluation of specified outcomes. When applied to schooling, scientific management thus translates into an institutional accountability (Carlson, 1988), wherein teachers and schools are increasingly held accountable for student progress and student outcomes.

While these standards purport to express through the sanctioned voice of legislated authority legitimate, objective, and universalistic educational assumptions, the

assumptions themselves are contestable and arguably flawed. As Portelli and Vibert (1997) state, “educational standards are not absolute, fixed, naturally-given facts. They are socially-constructed” (p. 75). Thus, despite claims to the contrary, standards are neither neutral nor value-free (Goodlad, 1990; Popkewitz, 1991; Greene, 1994; Eisner, 2002; Britzman, 2003). In fact, “axiomatic truths” embodied in standards legitimize certain types of knowledge as more important than others (Wake, 1983), while curtailing and denying the legitimacy of more tentative, contextually-bound, and particularistic experiences – paradoxically, those complex interpretations that more closely match the reality of schools and classrooms.

Relevant Empirical Literature

While a number of studies have looked at the relationship between externally mandated requirements and the pedagogical practices of teachers in the classroom (Barksdale-Ladd and Thomas, 2000; Mathison and Freeman, 2003; Pedula, Abrams, Madaus, Russell, Ramos, Miao, 2003), many of these studies are limited to a discussion of the more technical and procedural relationships between the two. Despite these limitations, however, the results of these studies indicate a consistent relationship between teachers’ perceptions of externally defined notions of teaching and learning and actual classroom pedagogy. Barksdale-Ladd and Thomas (2000) conducted a qualitative study of 59 language arts Grade 1-8 teachers in two American states, where both standards and testing dominate the educational landscape. They held three focus groups with one-third of the teachers and conducted individual interviews with the remaining teachers. Among the things they looked at were teachers’ perceptions of mandated

standards and related tests and teachers' instructional decisions based on these mandates. Their findings indicate that teachers felt pressured to teach to the test and to refocus their classroom instruction to help ensure strong test results. Although teachers were in general agreement about the need for standards, they did not believe that the state-sponsored standards were developmentally appropriate. Of particular interest is the finding that despite conflicting views about standards, teachers nonetheless uniformly reported that testing drove their pedagogical classroom practices.

Similarly, in a yearlong ethnographic field study of teachers in two elementary schools in New York state, Mathison and Freeman (2003) found that despite teachers' negative personal views of standards and testing, their classroom practices were nonetheless largely defined by state testing requirements. Through focus groups, individual interviews and classroom observations, the researchers found that the teachers were of the belief that to ensure student success as measured by state tests, their classroom practices, resources and pedagogical decisions would have to be defined by state testing imperatives. Thus, despite their personal views toward testing, teachers nonetheless taught to the test in order to give their students the opportunity to succeed. As Mathison and Freeman (2003) state, teachers felt that they must "most often do the wrong thing in order to do the right thing" (p. 19).

Pedula and colleagues (2003) conducted a national survey of 4,195 elementary, middle, and high school teachers in high, moderate and low stakes testing environments across the United States, where they looked at the relationship between accountability practices and classroom teaching. From their data analysis, they concluded that the combination of high stakes testing and grade level taught had the most influence on

teachers' classroom practices. "High stakes" refers to the severity of the consequences, either in the form of rewards or sanctions, attached to test results. Their data showed that elementary teachers in high stakes states were also the most affected, spending more time on test preparation and more time on tested subjects than non-tested subjects. Similar to the studies cited above, the researchers also found that while elementary teachers held the more positive view of state standards, they also felt more pressure than their high school counterparts to teach in ways that conflicted with their individual notions of effective classroom practices. While the results of these studies indicate a consistent relationship between externally mandated requirements and teachers' classroom practices, the nature of this relationship is far from straightforward. Particularly relevant to this point is the finding that despite conflicting views of standards and testing, teachers in the above cited studies felt pressured to adopt classroom practices that contradicted their more personal and professional notions of effective teaching.

The studies cited above convey a sense of the overriding tensions teachers experience in attempting to mediate between what many researchers depict as two quite disparate and distinct notions of teaching and learning, and they portray a consistent relationship between externally mandated requirements and teachers' classroom practices, that is, teachers "teach to the test." Other researchers (Corbett and Wilson, 1991; Firestone, Mayrowetz and Fairman, 1998; Moroz and Waugh, 2000; Grant, 2001), however, argue that the relationship between external mandates and teachers' classroom practices is far from straightforward. In a qualitative case study conducted using semi-structured interviews and site visits, Firestone and colleagues go so far as to state that the effect of testing on teaching is "overrated", and that while teachers may well focus their

teaching content on the test, they do not alter their instructional strategies. Moreover, in a review of the empirical literature on testing and teachers' beliefs and practices, Cimbricz (2002) concluded that the relationship between standards, testing and classroom practices is more limited than previously believed, particularly when one considers the influence of other potentially mediating factors on teachers classroom practices.

For example, in a case study of two high school teachers, using classroom observations, focus groups and individual interviews, Grant (2001) found that while the influence of standards and testing does influence teachers' pedagogical practices, this "influence interacts with a range of other factors (such as school norms, expectations, time and resources)" (p. 414) to affect what teachers do and say in the classroom. According to Grant (2001), tests are "uncertain levers," the effects of which are strongly influenced by local school contexts. While Grant did not examine the interaction of other potentially mediating factors, his study highlights the need to look beyond teachers' personal notions and beyond the walls of the classroom to understand how a number of variables shape what teachers do in classrooms. These variables include external policy mandates, cultural norms, professional expectations, and existing policies. This point is further corroborated by Corbett and Wilson (1993), who found that "stakes associated with a test might not be a formal policy characteristic that is uniformly present in all districts, but rather that it may have different meanings from district to district" (p. 88).

Hargreaves and Moore (2000) state that all educational policies have "distinctive social histories and social geographies...which lead them to play out differently ... according to the moral, political, economic, social and historical contexts of their development" (p. 40). Thus, to understand the relationship between policy and practice,

it is essential that we recognize the “variable geometries” (Hargreaves and Moore, 2000) of policy directives across different contexts and that we therefore avoid the temptation of prematurely imputing causal relationships between policy and practice, or perceptions of such dynamics.

While the above studies are indeed important, notably absent is any discussion of the deeper epistemological and normative complexities involved in the mediation between external mandates and teachers’ classroom practices. In an ethnographic study of a pre-service teacher, Britzman (1989) explores these tensions by examining one teacher’s experience in attempting to mediate between externally defined notions of education and her intrinsic conceptions of teaching and learning. For Britzman, the curriculum encountered during teaching and learning includes the explicit curriculum, defined simply as “the officially selected course of study” (p. 149), the implicit curriculum, which represents the learning process, and the null curriculum defined as “all that is not selected as well as all that occurs but remains unnamed and unacknowledged” (p. 149). It is precisely the disjuncture between these three active “voices” that led the pre-service teacher in Britzman’s study to suppress her own convictions about effective teaching. According to Britzman:

These tensions, experienced differently by teachers and students, include the dissonance between curriculum discourse and student discourse, the struggle for voice in a context that suppresses experience, and the reification of knowledge from its human origins. Sustaining these tensions are the institutional values of compliance to authority, social conformity, efficiency, standardization, competition and the objectification of knowledge. (p. 150)

Britzman's ethnographic study thus highlights the epistemological and normative complexities embedded in the teaching and learning encounter, complexities which extend beyond the confines of the current outcome-based educational paradigm.

Similarly, in a collection of biographical studies, Clandinin and Connelly (1995) looked at how teachers' personal knowledge interacts with the professional knowledge context within which teaching and learning take place. Their studies highlight the "epistemological dilemmas" (p.6) teachers encounter between the demands of the professional knowledge landscape and their more personal and idiosyncratic notions of knowledge and effective teaching practices. Using the metaphor of a funnel, they describe how school policies are fed into schools, and how these policies in turn interact with teachers' personal knowledge. Using a collection of autobiographical vignettes, Clandinin and Connelly (1995) conclude that teachers "live cover stories" (p. 162), sacrificing their own personal convictions "to act in ways that are sanctioned by others" (p. 158). This is a conclusion that sociologist Erving Goffman (1959) argues is true not merely in some social situations, but for all human interactions, whether in the school yard or not. As Goffman (1959) remarks, "the very obligation and profitability of appearing always in a steady moral light, of being a socialized character, forces one to be the sort of person who is practiced in the ways of the stage" (p. 23).

Ontario's outcome-based educational system, with standardized curriculum and annual testing, provides an ideal opportunity to study not only how external policies play out in classrooms and schools, but also what kinds of educational experiences we are creating for our children by enacting them. As Eisner (2002) asks, "aside from literacy and numeracy, what do we want to achieve? What are our aims? What is important?"

What kind of educational culture do we want our children to experience? In short, what kind of schools do we need?" (p. 577). To further explore these epistemological, pedagogical, and normative issues, this study examines the perceptions and experiences of three Grade 3 and Grade 6 teachers as they attempt to implement the standardized curriculum and administer standardized tests to their students in reading, writing and mathematics respectively. What impact do these external policies have on teachers' reported pedagogical practices? What is the relationship between policy and practice as it is experienced in the professional lives of the teachers in the study sample? What forms of knowledge, teaching and learning are being advanced by the current educational environment and what forms are being stymied?

Chapter 3: Methodology

There is no one truth...there is no single monological description of physical or human phenomena. To recognize this is to become awake to the processes of our own sense making in a radically different way...

Maxine Greene, "Epistemology and Educational Research: The Influence of Recent Approaches to Knowledge", *Review of Research in Education*, 1994, p. 440.

Research Approach

The purpose of this study is to explore the complex interplay between current governmental educational initiatives, specifically EQAO testing and standardized curriculum in Ontario, and the reported experiences of three Grade 3 and Grade 6 teachers concerning their teaching practices and their perceptions of classroom life, learning and assessment. As my study is focused on the perceptions and experiences of teachers from a single school, a qualitative case study approach was used to more fully capture the "phenomenological meaningfulness of lived experience" (Greene, 1994), as well as to apprehend the contextual richness of teachers' experiences in schools and classrooms. As Lincoln and Guba (1985) state, the case study represents "an unparalleled means for communicating contextual information that is grounded in the particular setting that was studied" (p. 360).

For the purposes of my research, the instrumental case study (Stake, 1995) approach was used to explore the experiences of a small and purposeful sample of teachers with provincial curricular and EQAO testing mandates within one rural elementary school in Ontario. It is important to note that the reported experiences of the teachers from a single school represent one instance (among slightly over 95,000 in Ontario) of teachers' experiences with standardized curriculum and evaluation. Although the experiences of teachers at the school site may be transferable in part or in full to the

experiences of other teachers in elementary schools in Ontario, the purpose of my research is not “to map and conquer the world but to sophisticate the beholding of it” (Stake, 1995, p. 43).

Pilot Study

Prior to beginning work on this thesis, I conducted an initial pilot study with two Grade 7 and Grade 8 teachers in an urban non-denominational public middle school. In the pilot study I explored their experiences with the standardized curriculum and outcome measures mandated by the provincial government. While the pilot study enabled me to examine my research questions empirically and helped give shape to the current study, it also provided the opportunity to refine my focus group and interview questions, and my criteria for participants.

Sample Selection

All public elementary schools in Ontario have been mandated to implement *The Ontario Curriculum: Grades 1-8* and to provide standardized testing for all their Grade 3 and Grade 6 students. As the purpose of this study is to explore teachers’ perceptions and reported experiences with this standardized curriculum and testing, a purposive sample “reflecting the average instance of the phenomenon of interest” (Merriam, 1998, p. 62) has been selected for this study. The small sample size represented by the three teacher participants from a single school, while helping to reduce interschool variables, also allows for a more in-depth exploration of teachers’ experiences with the curriculum and

with testing. As Merriam (1998) remarks, the advantage of selecting a small sample is to “understand the particular in depth, not to find out what is true of the many” (p. 208).

To help identify a school and teachers for this study, I initially emailed the Directors of two school boards, one of which was a Catholic school board. The Director of the Catholic school board was the first to express interest in this study, agreeing to meet to discuss the schools within her jurisdiction that might potentially be selected for my research. After establishing that I wanted to focus on a “typical” school that “highlights what is normal or average” (Miles and Huberman, 1994, p. 28), we selected Ste-Anne School*, a small rural Catholic school with approximately 330 students from Kindergarten to Grade 8. While the fact that a Catholic school was chosen may limit the ability to extrapolate to other, non-faith based public schools in Ontario, it must be noted that Catholic schools in Ontario are considered public schools in that “they are financed by grants and local taxes like other public schools, and in all but their religious policies are administered just like the rest of the public system” (Gidney, 1999, p. 6). Thus, while Catholic teachers must teach religious instruction each day, they must also teach *The Ontario Curriculum* and prepare their students for provincial testing. Although I did attempt to determine whether Catholic education could be a factor in my study, in responding to two questions I asked during the individual interviews, the teachers responses seemed inconsequential and thus were excluded from my final discussion.

The participants in this study are Grade 3 and Grade 6 classroom teachers from one school who were chosen specifically because they are responsible for administering and preparing their students for provincial testing in Math and Language Arts in the May

* Ste-Anne School is a pseudonym.

of each school year. While four Grade 3 and Grade 6 teachers were initially selected for this study, after the initial focus group one of the participant teachers decided that she was too busy to continue with the study. It was only during a later one-on-one interview with one of her colleagues, that I learned that she was away marking provincial tests for the summer. The remaining three teachers, the three included in the sample, were selected because of the special perspective they promised to bring to the study: two teach grades in which students are required to take the test annually and one brings a focus on students who are defined as having special needs.

Data Collection

To explore teachers' experiences and perceptions of standardized curriculum and EQAO testing, my study consisted of a focus group with the four selected teachers (see Appendix A), followed by in-depth, structured and open-ended interviews with individual teachers (see Appendix B). To provide a more detailed description of the case, data was also supplemented with a review of public documents, including school policies and provincial legislation. What follows is a description of each data collection instrument.

Focus Group and Individual Interviews

The primary data for this study was collected over a period of three months, with the initial focus group conducted in May 2004 and the individual one-on-one interviews conducted throughout the month of July 2004. The focus group and one-on-one interviews each lasted approximately 2 hours. The focus group questions were initially refined through a pilot study conducted with two Grade 7 and Grade 8 teachers and

further developed through informal conversations with professors, through the analysis of Ontario Ministry of Education documentation, and through the review of empirical literature cited in Chapter 2. The one-on-one interviews with teachers were more focused and were contingent on issues identified in the initial focus group, through ethnographic observations during site visits and through the review of literature conducted for this study. The structure of the questions based on specific issue areas was inspired by Stake's (1995) separation of research questions into topical and issue questions.

While the focus group took place in the school library, in an effort to accommodate all of the teachers, the location selected for one-on-one interviews was left to each teachers' discretion. The interview with the Grade 6 teacher was conducted over the telephone, with the Grade 3 teacher in the backyard of her home, and with the special needs teacher in the food court of a shopping mall. The focus group session and interviews were audio taped with the permission of participants, transcribed verbatim, and emailed to participants for content validation. None of the teachers in either the focus group or in the one-on-one interviews elected to add or delete any of the transcript material.

Review of Documentation

A thorough analysis of the Ontario Ministry of Education policy statements concerning curriculum and provincial testing, as well as the review of EQAO documentation, helped elaborate a more detailed context for this case study and helped provide further guidance for the content of the focus group and interview questions.

Data Analysis

The focus group and individual interview data together resulted in approximately 78 pages of notes. The process of analysis consisted of interactive reading through transcript notes, making marginal notes, and identifying emergent categories in the data. While data collection and analysis did occur simultaneously, more intensive data analysis involving the subsequent coding and identification of categories and themes occurred only after all of the data was collected. Utilizing the constant comparative method, data analysis began in earnest by comparing and sorting the data according to similarities and recurring regularities (Merriam, 1998), a process which ultimately led to the creation of two broad categories and five related themes and factors. While all of the data was initially sorted into these two categories, the subsequent identification of themes and factors enabled the selection of more focused and telling data. The two categories identified, “adaptive pedagogical strategies” and “localized contexts impacting teaching and learning”, directly relate to the two primary research questions. The first category, “adaptive pedagogical strategies”, reflects the relationship between provincial curricular and EQAO testing mandates and the professional experience of the participant teachers. The second category, “contextual factors impacting teaching and learning”, reflects how governmental policy mandates shape teachers’ classroom contexts. The themes and factors identified for each category are thus intended to reflect the research questions and provide preliminary responses to the questions posed (Merriam, 1998). Provincial policy documents were used throughout to help bring a greater focus to and to provide context for the data analysis.

Researcher's Personal Position

I am not a classroom teacher and that I do not have a Bachelors of Education degree. Any significant adult time I have spent inside of a public school has had to do with my role as the parent of a thirteen year old boy, rather than as a result of occupying a more formal educational role. My interest in pursuing advanced research in education, specifically in the area of standards and assessment, is the result of my experience as a manager responsible for implementing and assessing competency-based learning within a governmental organization. This experience led me to actively pursue an academic study of organizations and organizational change and development within the education faculty at the University of Ottawa.

The fact that I approached this study from a position outside of the school system and that I have spent, at least prior to conducting my research, very little time in a school and very little time in the company of teachers, was both a limitation and a virtue. On the one hand, my position as an “outsider” limited the store of knowledge that I brought to my study concerning the everyday practices associated with school and classroom life. On the other hand, my status positioned me to remain open to surprise and to limit my assumptions as I addressed questions to those in my research sample. Said in another way, I was dependent upon the study participants for all of the information that would become my data. As Stake (1995) remarks, in underscoring the knowledge and attitudes that a researcher brings to a given situation, “phenomena need accurate description, but even observational interpretation of those phenomena will be shaped by the mood, the experience, the intention of the researcher” (p. 95). Thus, my position as a relative

newcomer to the field of education significantly advanced my research agenda rather than hindered it.

Chapter 4: Context of the Study

The world isn't just the way it is. It is how we understand it, no? And in understanding something, we bring something to it, no? Doesn't that make life a story?

Yann Martel, *Life of Pi*, 2001, p. 335.

The Broader Educational Context

The recent educational reform initiatives in Ontario, particularly in the areas of school governance, curriculum, and assessment, are part of a larger international shift in educational policy occurring in many Western, industrialized countries. As open systems (Campbell, Fleming, Newell and Bennion, 1987), schools are part of a larger economic, political, social and technological environment, an environment that penetrates the artificial boundaries of the schoolyard and permeates through the walls of the school into the classroom. As society changes, so then do schools. Thus, seemingly irrespective of national boundaries and traditional party politics, what some refer to as the “new orthodoxy” (Hargreaves, Earl, Moore and Manning, 2001) in education shares many common characteristics across Western, industrialized nations. Levin (1998) has identified the following six themes, all of which appear to accurately describe the flavour of Ontario’s educational reforms between 1995 and 2004: 1. the stated need to prepare the workforce to compete in the global economy; 2. criticism of schools; 3. the refinancing of schools; 4. changes in the governance structure of schools; 5. the commercialization of schools; and 6. an emphasis on accountability, standards and testing. While these characteristics are not uniformly shared across international boundaries (Levin, 1998), their manifestation in diverse jurisdictions surely cannot be mere happenstance. By using the term the “new orthodoxy” in education, researchers point to the fact that schools are part of a larger ecological system that is intimately

connected to the political, social and economic forces that shape Western, industrialized societies.

The Ontario Educational Context

Shortly after winning a majority in 1995, the new Progressive Conservative government announced that “the (education) system is broken” (Macleans, 1997, p.16), and only profound reform would “provide students with an education system that [would] enable them to compete in today’s global economy” (Excellence in Education, 1995). Echoing the call for educational reform in other provincial jurisdictions, the new government thus moved quickly, passing more legislation in education between the late 1990s and early 2000s, than in all of Ontario’s prior history (Gidney, 2000). The changes introduced during this period included legislation to centralize the governance and financing of schools, the reduction in the number of school boards from 129 to 72, the reduction in professional development days for teachers, a province-wide curriculum linked to standardized report cards and annual standardized testing of all grade 3 and grade 6 students. Moreover, while these changes were taking place, the government cut over \$600,000 from the operating grants for school boards (Anderson and Jaafar, 2003, p. 14). As Leithwood, Fullan and Watson (2003) conclude in *The Schools We Need*, “policy changes over the past seven or eight years have increased pressure and accountability for teachers, but with no corresponding increase in support or resources to meet these higher standards” (p. 12), a situation paralleling reform initiatives occurring across the Western world (Smyth and Dow, 1998).

These massive changes to the education system did not come without their critics, many of whom were outraged at what they viewed as the government's heavy-handed approach to school reform (Earl, Freeman, Lasky, Sutherland, and Torrence, 2002). Although parents, teachers and school boards asked for consultation meetings with the government, John Snobelen, then Minister of Education refused, stating that the government "would not be frozen by the consultative process" (Cited in Robertson, p. 44). Thus, despite a province-wide walkout by all public school teachers that lasted two weeks in October 1997, and despite public concern, changes in governance, curriculum and testing went ahead as planned.

For the purposes of this study, two specific reform initiatives are particularly relevant, the introduction of *The Ontario Curriculum: Grades 1-8* and the implementation of annual standardized testing for all Grade 3 and Grade 6 students in mathematics, reading and writing. Pledging to "improve student achievement and increase accountability to parents" (Ontario Ministry of Education, 1997), the Conservative government replaced *The Common Curriculum* with *The Ontario Curriculum: Grades 1-8*, a substantially more prescriptive and rigorous document focused on specified subject-based learning outcomes tied to standards articulated for each grade level. Between 1997 and 2002, teachers were provided with twelve new curriculum guidelines and twenty-four different exemplars (standardized examples of students' work) (Grieve, 2003). A new standardized report card intended to measure individual student achievement against the expectations and standards articulated in the curriculum was also introduced at this time.

The new curriculum signalled an important departure from a more child-centred and integrated approach to teaching and learning, an approach previously articulated in *The Common Curriculum* (Wien and Dudley-Marling, 1998), where the needs of the individual student determine curricula, to a more content-focused and outcome-driven curriculum specifying precisely what all students are to accomplish in each subject area at the end of each grade. Thus, while the curriculum prescribes and specifies precise standards and outcomes for each grade level, there is little mention of how teachers should teach, that is, which pedagogical strategies teachers should use to ensure the achievement of stated curricular outcomes. While it could be argued that leaving pedagogical decisions to the discretion of teachers advances the image of teachers as professionals, this argument is offset by the use of increased measures to hold teachers accountable for student outcomes (Anderson and Ben Jaafar, 2003), particularly in the area of assessment and evaluation. This seeming contradiction can also be noted in the Conservative government's creation of the Ontario College of Teachers, a professional self-regulatory body intended to "professionalize" teaching, and which, somewhat ironically, was created during a period in which teachers' control and autonomy were being dismantled through increased centralization of curriculum and assessment, and fiscal restraint (Goodson and Hargreaves, 1996).

The findings of the present study illustrate how accountability measures can directly influence teachers' selection of instructional strategies. Thus, while it seems apparent that the Ontario Conservative government believed that "content is more important than teaching" (Cuban, 1993, p. 184), the omission of any substantive pedagogical principles in curriculum documents is not a mere oversight. The content of

the curriculum, the knowledge that it contains, is considered “instructive in and of itself” (Britzman, 2003, p. 54). The teacher’s job is merely to transmit that knowledge, a role that is likely considered technical rather than intellectual (Britzman, 2003), and ironically increasingly becomes so through the agenda of standardization.

The new, prescriptive curriculum is also more rigorous and demanding, requiring that students accomplish more complex tasks in earlier grades. As stated in a government press release:

Students will be expected to write in simple and complete sentences using proper punctuation by the end of Grade 1. By the time they finish Grade 3, they will have learned how to organize their information in short paragraphs with correct use of nouns, verbs, adjectives and adverbs. Similarly, in mathematics, students will be expected to do two-step problems with decimals in Grade 5 and understand exponents in Grade 7. (Ontario Ministry of Education, 1997)

A more challenging curriculum should not be confused with a better curriculum (Kohn, 2004). McAdie (2003), for example, questions whether pushing the material and concepts down to earlier grades is developmentally appropriate. Moreover, the assumption that “a rigorous and demanding curriculum...will raise the standard of education for all students in Ontario” (Ontario Ministry of Education, 1997), though perhaps laudable, is somewhat wishful. As Eisner (2002) states, “if our students were simply inert entities...it would be possible in principle to formulate methods of acting on them that would yield uniform responses” (p. 590). Schools, teachers and students, however, are not uniform entities, machines that can be pre-programmed to produce specific and pre-defined outputs. As Cronbach (1975) states, “when we give proper

weight to local conditions, any generalization is a working hypothesis, not a conclusion” (p. 125).

In addition to changes in curriculum and pedagogy, the government also introduced standardized testing for all Grade 3 and Grade 6 students in reading, writing and mathematics. In accordance with recommendations from *For the Love of Learning: Report of the Royal Commission on Learning*, in 1996, the government created the Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO), a semi-autonomous agency mandated to “ensure greater accountability and contribute to the enhancement of the quality of education in Ontario” (Education Quality Accountability Office, 2004). According to Ministry documents, the original purpose of the EQAO testing was to “improve student learning” (Ontario Ministry of Education, 1998) and to “provide valuable and consistent information on students’ achievement” (Ontario Ministry of Education, 1995). Despite the lack of corroborating empirical data on the link between assessment and instruction, testing results were intended to be used not only to monitor compliance with curriculum implementation, but to improve classroom practices. As Earl and Torrance (2000) state, “EQAO hoped that schools would make changes to their practices and perhaps even begin to develop instructional units based on the same principles as the assessment units” (p. 125).

It is interesting to note that an external evaluation of EQAO’s assessment processes found that the purpose of Grade 3 and Grade 6 testing has expanded over the years to accommodate multiple, and often conflicting demands (Wolfe, Childs, and Elgie, 2004). For example, according to the authors of the external evaluation report:

The purpose of measuring change between the years was not considered a priority in the original design. That purpose became more important especially because of the added-on use of the assessment in the target setting as mandated by the Ministry of Education, but also because of public attention to school-by-school rankings and changes. (p. 9)

However, the authors of the report argue that results generated to measure change over time, cannot accurately provide individual student assessment or improve classroom practices, as the tests cannot possibly support the level of detail required to generate accurate assessments. The integrity of the test results, in other words, is compromised by the attempt to accommodate initially unintended purposes. Thus, despite the government's claim that "standardized tests are one of the most accurate and dependable ways of measuring student achievement" (Ontario Ministry of Education, 1999), the authors of the EQAO external evaluation concluded that "individual diagnosis [of students through the receipt of individual test results] is not a viable option for this kind of large-scale assessment" (Wolfe, Childs, and Elgie, 2004). EQAO's "mandate spread" (Wolfe, Childs, and Elgie, 2004), where "the purposes the assessments are being asked to serve have changed and expanded" (p. i), thus highlights the tension between information intended to improve student learning and information for the broader purposes of accountability, a tension which is remarked upon by the teachers participating in this study.

The School and Community

Dear Lord, give me the patience to listen, the courage to speak, the honour to follow, the wisdom to lead.

Poster on the Principal's door

Ste-Anne School is a rural, Catholic elementary school nestled within in a small, middle class bedroom community (for a major Canadian urban centre) of approximately 4,600 people, the vast majority of whom are English speaking, white and Canadian-born. As a Catholic school, Ste-Anne School works in close partnership with the local parish and has been part of the community for over 125 years. Seniors from the community volunteer in the school on a daily basis, helping out in the classroom and with special projects. There are 12.5 classroom teachers who provide integrated and French immersion classes for 330 students from Kindergarten to Grade 8. There are a number of split grade classes and all students with special needs are fully integrated into the classroom. French Immersion students divide their time evenly between two classrooms, which means that teachers see many of their students for only half of the day.

While Ste-Anne School is very much a community and faith-based school, the introduction of new administration and teaching staff over the past few years is slowly changing the culture of the school. Although the majority of the teachers still live in the community, as teachers retire new teachers are being hired from “away.” Moreover, the principal of the school was new to the job and new to the school, having been hired for a one-year period as an interim principal to replace the regular school principal who was away on a one-year sabbatical. During the interviews, it was revealed that the regular principal would not be returning, the interim principal would be returning to her job at the Board office, and another new principal had been hired for the following school year.

The school building is relatively new, bright and open, with children's art and religious symbols adorning the hallways. The school has a library, a gymnasium and ten classrooms that are physically and academically arranged into primary, junior and intermediate divisions. Teachers meet in their divisions on a monthly basis, where discussion covers Board initiatives, curriculum, implementation, or special projects. The size of the school and the small number of staff permit teachers to meet informally on a regular, if not daily basis.

Ste-Anne School results on the provincial assessments of reading, writing and mathematics have been fairly consistent over the past few years, with 59% of students in Grade 3 at or above the provincial standard and 56% of Grade 6 students at or above the provincial standard. Very few students have been exempted from writing the tests, and very few parents have chosen to exempt their children. The results for 2004, however, may be noticeably affected by the fact that six Grade 3 students did not participate in the provincial assessment. According to the Grade 3 teacher, the parents of these students felt that the testing would be too stressful for their children. The results for these six students will nonetheless be entered as 0, thus lowering the overall scoring for the Grade 3 results.

The Teachers*

Mr. Community

Mr. Community lives in the community and has been teaching for 23 years, the last eight of which have been at Ste-Anne's. He currently teaches a Grade 5-6 split class

* To help the reader identify study participants, pseudonyms reflecting who the teachers are, have been provided for each.

in the morning and a straight Grade 6 class in the afternoon. He reports that he has always had a love of learning, and after a number of years working in the construction industry, he entered the teaching profession at the age of 30. He believes that teaching is a great profession, and despite all of the changes in the education system over the years, “there is nothing that has come along and that has changed that [feeling]”. While he admits that “they are telling us to do way more”, he does not feel that teaching is more challenging now than it was before. As he says, “kids are always kids...and I don’t think that’s changed in a hundred years”.

When Mr. Community was young, he stated that he preferred reading atlases and encyclopaedias, to reading the *Hardy Boys*. As a result, he admits that as a teacher he tends to be too content-oriented, a tendency that he feels was intensified by the new curriculum. As he explains:

I probably got more content oriented, so I tried to teach a lot more. I gave kids more homework. I really did a lot of stuff on achievement levels...I think for a year or two, and even with the testing, I thought I’m going to get these kids, I’m going to get the highest marks in the province, or as high as I can, and I’m going to do everything I can.

In his enthusiasm, he states that he “lost sight of what’s more important”, which for him, is to provide the children with what they need, “whether it’s math or a pat on the back”. Thus, while Mr. Community does like the new curriculum, he believes that teaching is “a much more organic thing than something black and white and straightforward”. He does not believe that having a curriculum in place necessarily guarantees “success”.

Mr. Community has come to believe in a child-centred approach to teaching, where “the needs of your students...[have] to come first...you take them from where they are and you try to get them to grow a little bit in whatever way you can”. Despite the apparent contrast between his belief in a child-centred approach and the current outcomes-based approach promulgated by the provincial government, he articulates a pragmatic and cautious view of his role as a teacher. According to Mr. Community:

The way I see that, I try to keep it simple. I’m the guy in the trenches, I’m the guy that does the work and they tell me what to do and I do it to the best of my ability. Asking why or making a fuss about that is counterproductive. I’m told what to do and I trust what they’re doing, the reasons they have and I just do it to the best of my ability. They have to trust me that I can handle it and I have to trust them that they’re giving me the right stuff to do.

Mr. Community’s compliant and somewhat harmonious verbal depiction of his relationship with government policies, however, seems to contradict not only his stated approach to teaching, but also his views about the purpose of education. In response to a question about provincial testing, Mr. Community passionately explained:

To me, especially at a Catholic school at the end of the day, I want kids who are good citizens first and foremost. And this test is zero on that scale. The kids in this school have raised probably between \$10 and \$20,000 for charity this year and where does that show up when they report in *The Citizen*? We did well, so it’s not sour grapes or anything, but all the other things that we do, like who’s the bully in the classroom, is more important than who got a 90 in math [in grade 6]. There are so many things, like who’s the kid who has a really rough home life and

is still pulling in B's and working their guts off. None of that is recognized, so it's such a small thing that so much energy and everything is being put into and so much weight and so much attention is being drawn to [provincial testing] and away from so many things that are much more important.

The expressed tension between Mr. Community's views and government policies became increasingly apparent in his responses to questions about accountability. He feels that he is primarily accountable to his students and to their parents, and for helping his students become productive members of society. Thus, despite government measures to hold teachers accountable, he states that:

If I can justify what I'm doing to the kids and to their parents, then it should be okay with the province...I can't be thinking all the time that there's someone looking over my shoulder, there's somebody holding a gun to my head.

When he was asked how the teaching profession has changed in the past decade as a result of the government's accountability policies, he responded:

When you get people who think accountability means holding a gun to somebody's head, raising their stress level so that hopefully they become more productive and that kind of thing. Maybe in a factory or a construction site and you want to make people more productive and you set goals and you set standards and you do put a gun to their head. Maybe that works there, but our product is different. We're dealing with kids, little kids, and I think you have to have a sense of inner peace and calmness and you have to be clear sighted with what you're doing with kids. It's not, you're not ripping two by fours.

When he was asked further how he deals with his feelings about the government's accountability policies, he responded simply, "you just block it out".

Symbolic though they are, metaphors provide insight into how people perceive reality. Thus, despite Mr. Community's claims that he "trusts" what the government is doing, and his further claim that he has "never disagreed with Ministry policies", his more passionate discourse contrasts with his more compliant statements. While Mr. Community does see himself as a "guy in the trenches", a compelling and telling metaphor as well, he equates the government's accountability measures to someone putting a gun to teachers' heads. The contrast between his child-centred view of education and the outcome-based approach is further exemplified in his depiction of government policies as more suited to a construction site or to a factory. The contrast he draws between ripping two by fours and dealing with children is stark, and provides insight into a profound tension between two conflicting and contrasting views of education and teaching.

Despite his feelings about the government's accountability measures, Mr. Community considers himself a professional, who is sincerely devoted to the well-being and education of his students. Every year he tries to improve his teaching, either by attending professional development courses or by simply reading on his own. According to Mr. Community, with the reduction in teachers' professional development days, there are now fewer opportunities to get together with teachers from different schools across the Board. While he now has the opportunity to meet and collaborate with teachers in his division at Ste-Anne's, he misses the "cross-pollination" that he got from meeting teachers from other schools. Although he does have the opportunity to meet with

teachers from other schools once during the school year and at school Board functions, he admits that, “it’s mostly up to yourself to create those opportunities and to keep up that network”.

As a veteran teacher, Mr. Community has experienced numerous changes in the educational system over the years. Despite these myriad change initiatives, Mr. Community claims to be a dedicated professional committed to putting the needs of his students first. While his philosophy of education may not agree with specific government mandates, he notes that he persists in the belief that teaching is a rewarding and a valuable profession.

Ms. Newcomer

Ms. Newcomer has been teaching for eight years, but has only been at Ste-Anne’s for one year, where she teaches Grade 3 in the morning and Grade 5 in the afternoon. In the mid to late 90s, she took time off from teaching to spend time with her young children, returning to the classroom just as the changes in curriculum and assessment were first being implemented. As a result, she feels that the changes in curriculum and testing were “not a huge issue” for her. As she states, “I loved having the document here, this is what I was going to cover, I could sit at home and make up my long-term plans because I knew what I was going to be teaching”. However, while she does like the curriculum, she also feels that the amount of material to be covered in the curriculum has made teaching more challenging, particularly given the number of students in her class and the diversity of their needs.

In the past year, Ms. Newcomer was designated the Junior Literacy Representative for Ste-Anne School. As part of her role, she attended literacy workshops where she was provided with new curricular units and material, which she was responsible for bringing back to the other teachers in the school. However, despite her first hand exposure to the new material, she nonetheless expressed concern with the paucity of resources connected to the curriculum, resources that she feels teachers need in order to adequately “cover all of the concepts in the curriculum” and to prepare students for provincial testing. Ms. Newcomer also worries that the textbooks currently in use do not adequately address the diversity of student needs. According to Ms. Newcomer, “I see the *Interactions* program (math) as a real void unless you have very academic students who already have the basics and they are working at that higher level already”. She therefore feels compelled to purchase her own resources to ensure that she covers “all of the specific expectations in the curriculum”.

While Ms. Newcomer believes that the curriculum is “an improvement” over what teachers had before, and that the standards do help provide more complete information for parents, she does worry that it is too challenging, both in terms of the amount of material to cover and the stringency of the standards themselves. As she says, “it caters to the stronger students...and it moves too quickly for a student that isn’t academically strong”. For Ms. Newcomer, this situation is compounded by the large number of students she has in each class and by the diversity of her students’ needs. As she says, “when you do have 28 children, getting to all those children and meeting their needs is difficult”. To “meet the median” and to “cover the curriculum”, she therefore

finds that she has to move along even though she knows that not all of her students are ready to move forward.

Moreover, as a Grade 3 teacher, Ms. Newcomer feels responsible for preparing her students for provincial testing. As she stated, “I think if you have a Grade 3 or a Grade 6 class, you do tend to have that testing in the back of your mind all the time”. Thus, at the beginning of the school year, she covers a unit from the curriculum and then uses examples from previous tests to expose her students “to that way of thinking or that same type of questioning”. Moreover, two weeks before the testing she provides her students with examples from previous tests and she gives them “mini-lessons” on concepts in the curriculum that she has not yet had the opportunity to cover in class. Thus, while Ms. Newcomer initially said that the testing did not force her to change her teaching style to better reflect the style of the provincial testing, upon further reflection she realized that her style of teaching has changed. As she said, “I do think my teaching style has changed now that I think of it because I know that that is the end result of what they have to get to and so I really force that all of the time”.

While Ms. Newcomer stated that testing is “a good thing”, she did express concern with the amount of money spent on testing and with the accuracy of the results. She believes that the results are only “a snapshot in time”, and therefore do not provide an accurate measure of her students’ abilities. As she states, “you have to look at how a child is able to work from day-to-day, their work habits. There are so many factors that come into play...it [the standardized test] measures something, but it doesn’t measure everything”. She is also suspicious of EQAO testing, believing that it is, at bottom, politically motivated. As she states, the tests have “gotten progressively easier so the

government can say, this is the new curriculum. Look at how much better the kids are doing.” This suspicion is confirmed by the fact that school results are published in the newspapers and in annual Fraser Institute “Report Cards”.

While Ms. Newcomer acknowledges that she is accountable for covering the curriculum and preparing her students for EQAO testing, she does not believe that the accountability aspect of the testing is fair. As she sees it:

I don't think the testing is a measure of how successful a teacher is and I think there is a perception that if the children don't do well, then it's a reflection on the teachers and on the school. Yes, you have to cover the curriculum and you have to do your job well, and I fully agree with that, but you also have to look at the group of children that you have.

She was quite emphatic in her belief that provincial test results unfairly rank schools by failing to take into account differences in student characteristics from year to year.

According to Ms. Newcomer:

I think what also isn't fair is that you're looking at a different group of children every year. The school is weak in writing, but you know what, one year they might do well because you're working with different children. I think you have to look at the same group of children and follow them through...but one year you might have to focus on writing because that group of students is weak in writing and others are stronger in math. But you know what, those are different children you're looking at so how accurate a measure is that...is anybody looking at this or making this point?

Despite her evident frustration with the accuracy of test results and with the way the results are used, Ms. Newcomer nonetheless maintains that provincial testing is “not a bad thing”. As she states, “it really does make me think about how I can improve their writing skills and that type of thing”.

Although teachers at Ste-Anne’s have divisional meetings once a month where they discuss Board initiatives related to literacy and numeracy, and the school is small enough to meet informally with teachers on a regular basis, Ms. Newcomer nonetheless stated that she does not have an overall sense of what other teachers are doing in the school. As she says:

I think what I would like to see, and I’m sure it’s written down somewhere, where all teachers in one grade get together and discuss homework standards, how much time is being spent on all of the subjects, a real coordinated effort throughout the whole school, so that you have an overview of what people are doing...It is written down somewhere, but it’s not something we really discuss.

While teachers do have the opportunity to discuss new Board and school initiatives, as a new teacher at Ste-Anne’s, Ms. Newcomer would appreciate more opportunities to meet with colleagues to discuss issues that fall outside of the more specific literacy and numeracy initiatives.

Ms. Newcomer is a committed professional who feels responsible for developing her students’ self-esteem and motivation to learn. While she expressed frustration about the application of the standardized curriculum, particularly in relation to the diversity of her students’ needs, she continues to believe that it ultimately benefits both students and teachers. Moreover, while she does take issue with specific aspects of provincial testing,

particularly in terms of the accuracy of results and the ranking of schools and teachers, she maintains that it provides a “valuable measure” of the school system. Despite her conflicting views, Ms. Newcomer reports that she continues to work within the education system to provide her students with the opportunity to become productive and contributing members of society.

Ms. Special Needs

Ms. Special Needs has been teaching for seven years, the last five of which have been at Ste-Anne’s. She is the primary special education teacher and has 27 special needs children on her roster. As the school is fully integrated, her main task is to go into the eight different classrooms during Language Arts and help the teacher by modelling appropriate classroom behaviour for her special needs students, modelling both what they should be doing and how they should be doing it. There are also times when she will teach the whole class, and the regular classroom teacher will sit with the special needs children. She is also responsible for writing Individual Educational Plans (IEP) for each special needs child and for coordinating the work of the seven Educational Assistants. As Ste-Anne’s School does not have a vice-principal, Ms. Special Needs and the other special education teacher act as the vice-principals when the principal is away. The value of including Ms. Special Needs in the sample of teachers is thus precisely that she provides a more holistic perspective of the school than the other two classroom teachers included in this study.

Ms. Special Needs believes that “quality education is different from person to person”, and that “it should be a child-centered education system rather than, okay, here’s

your curriculum, check it off as you teach each expectation”. In her opinion, the main problem with the public education system is that “it has become so standardized and the individual has been lost”. She states that:

It’s great to have the guidelines of the curriculum, especially in the science and the social studies and the math, but you do have to remember that these are children and they aren’t little robots and you can’t just fill their heads with stuff.

She worries that teachers are so busy covering the curriculum and teaching to the standard level 3 child, that the high achievers and the low achievers often get left out, which she emphasized bespeaks “a horrible, horrible system”.

As the primary special education teacher, Ms. Special Needs visits up to eight primary classes each day, where she has the opportunity to observe teachers at work in their classrooms. Of particular concern to her is that teachers are not using the “balanced literacy approach” advocated by the government and their Board, an approach to teaching that emphasizes integrating all of the subjects into language arts so that teachers can “cover the curriculum”. As she says, “I find that teachers who have been teaching for a long, long time like to teach science, then math, then language, then the old grammar”. In her view, teachers tend to use the curriculum as a checklist and do not integrate subjects across the curriculum. As she pointed out, “some of them have social studies from 10 to 10:25, well it’s not. Social studies is throughout the day, and that’s how it should be programmed better because that’s the only way that you’re going to get it covered”.

While Ms. Special Needs states that “the point of the EQAO test is that we need to see where these kids are at developmentally along the way”, she does not believe that provincial testing is necessary for her special education students. As she states:

My special education kids have been tested enough. I know where they are reading, I know where they are writing, I know their math, I know everything that they’re doing. They shouldn’t have to take time out of their ten months they’re with us to sit down and write this test.

She believes that you have to look at the needs of each individual child, and that “if you’re going to test in Grade 3, then you should only test those children that read at a Grade 3 level”. Provincial testing, in her opinion, “is just an interruption of two weeks”.

Ms. Special Needs believes that she is accountable primarily for her students, and for ensuring that teachers are providing the accommodations throughout the day that her children need to access the curriculum. She also believes that teachers should be accountable “for the safety and well-being of children, not only filling their minds with stuff, but making sure the children are happy and they are going to be productive members of society”. Thus, while she acknowledges that the curriculum is intended to hold teachers accountable, she states that a key problem is that “there’s no system of checking whether that’s [curricular expectations] been taught or not”. In her opinion, accountability measures for classroom teachers need to be “tightened”. As she says:

I don’t think accountability measures are in place yet from the Ministry because that’s really who should be watching. We’re very well protected with unions, a College of Teachers, so we’re very protected in what we do, but sometimes we have to take ownership for our jobs.

She thus feels that too many teachers “like to get by the easiest way they can”.

Ms. Special Needs takes her job “very seriously” and is constantly networking and making connections within the community to ensure that she has the resources that she needs to do her job well. She believes that there are “tons” of resources available, but you have to know who to contact within the Board to find the material and the resources that you need. As she says, “you have to know (the resources) are out there, that’s the big problem. If you’re not informed or you don’t keep up-to-date with what’s going on yourself, you don’t always get the information”. After three years of networking within the community and within the Board, she now feels “really connected and supported within the Board”. Moreover, as the lead teacher for literacy at Ste-Anne’s, she also had the opportunity to participate in a number of professional development activities related to literacy development. She thus feels that there is “extensive” training available to teachers, particularly on EQAO testing and on the literacy program.

Ms. Special Needs believes in a child-centred approach to teaching, where each student is provided with the opportunity to learn and develop into a productive member of society. While she is concerned that standardized education overlooks the individual, her job is such that she individualizes the curriculum for each of the children on her roster. As a special education teacher who works with a number of different teachers in the school each day, and as one of the two acting vice-principals, she has a broader perspective of Ste-Anne’s School and more knowledge of board practices than the other two teacher participants, a fact which serves to distinguish her remarks from the other two classroom teachers throughout this study and which, therefore, adds significance to her reported experiences.

Chapter 5: Research Findings

I used to think that paired opposites were a given, that love was the opposite of hate, right the opposite of wrong. But now I think we sometimes buy into these concepts because it is so much easier to embrace absolutes than to suffer reality. I don't think anything is the opposite of love. Reality is unforgivingly complex.

Anne Lamott, *Bird By Bird: Some Instructions on Writing and Life*, 1994

Identified Themes

The purpose of this study is to explore the experiences and perceptions of three teachers in a single school who are required both to implement *The Ontario Curriculum*, as well as to provide standardized tests to their students in reading, writing and mathematics. The specific questions guiding this research are:

1. How do provincial curricular and Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO) testing mandates impact the professional experience of a select sample of Ontario elementary school teachers concerning issues of teaching, learning, and assessment in their individual classrooms?
2. How do government policy mandates shape specific aspects of the local school and individual classroom contexts, that in turn, influence teachers' reported classroom practices?

The research findings, including the identification and organization of two primary categories and five related themes and factors (see Table 1), are based on the reported experiences of teachers participating in this study as they pertain to the research questions that guide it.

Table 1. Summary of research findings

Research Questions	Categories	Themes/Factors
Question One	A. Adaptive pedagogical strategies	Balancing act
		The enacted curriculum
		Teaching to the test
Question Two	B. Contextual factors impacting teaching and learning	Time
		Resources

Category A: Adaptive Pedagogical Strategies

The focus group and individual interviews suggest that the interplay between teachers' individual and localized perceptions of teaching and learning and provincial curricular requirements and EQAO testing creates a profound and enduring tension that serves to define the contextual reality of teaching and learning in Ontario public schools. This tension includes the dissonance between institutional demands and the diversity of interactions that constitute classroom life, the dissonance between curricular content and pedagogy, and the dissonance between explicit forms of knowledge and more localized,

particularistic and individualized forms of knowledge. It is precisely the confluence of such contrasting educational notions, and the unresolved tensions that result from this “polyphony of voices” (Britzman, 1989), that defines the experiences of the three teachers who participated in this study.

Despite the government’s rhetoric about creating “province-wide consistency” and raising “the standard for all students in Ontario” (Ontario Ministry of Education, 1997) through standardized curricula and testing, teachers must nonetheless attempt to reconcile and adapt these somewhat lofty goals and institutional imperatives within the more localized realities of classroom life. It is precisely within the walls of the classroom and the corridors of the school, that teachers must learn to make sense of external mandates as they apply them in real classrooms. As McCutcheon (1988) states:

Teachers filter the objectives; it is up to them to understand what is to be taught and then conceive of ways to enact it and make it accessible to students. Teachers must also make sense of the context -- the neighbourhood, their students, parents’ hopes and dreams, the social setting within the school...and fit the objectives into these understandings. (p. 198)

The category identified as “adaptive classroom practices” thus reflects the ways in which teachers make sense of government mandates, how they “filter the objectives”, and adapt external mandates to the “local terrain” (Tyack and Cuban, 1995) of their classrooms and schools. The themes “teaching perceived as a balancing act”, “the enacted curriculum”, and “teaching to the test” are thus intended to reflect and describe how teachers understand and adapt policies as they put them into place behind the doors of their individual classrooms. In the end, no matter how well articulated and elaborated a policy

may be, the act of realizing that policy is fraught with the small but significant details and complexities of classroom life which exist apart from the hermetic world of policy making. As Wexler (1982) concludes, “the social organizing process through which knowledge is produced makes its own reality” (p. 280).

Teaching Perceived as a “Balancing Act”

Teachers participating in this study all espouse a child-centred approach to teaching, an approach that is seemingly in sharp contrast to the current prescriptive and subject-specific standardized outcomes articulated in *The Ontario Curriculum: Grades 1-8*. While the current curricular documents precisely detail the expected learning outcomes for all students, little mention is made of how teachers should teach (Anderson and Jaafar, 2003). As Ms. Special Needs explains, the government has said “here’s your checklist, fulfill these requirements, but they haven’t given us samples of this is how your lesson should be delivered.” The curriculum is also more challenging, both in terms of the amount of material to cover and in terms of the standards themselves. As a result, the teachers repeatedly expressed concern with the quantity of material to cover and with the monolithic nature of the standards themselves, particularly when it comes to meeting the diverse needs and abilities of their students. The “balancing act”, an expression coined by two of the participants, thus describes how teachers must negotiate between the institutional imperative of covering the content of the curriculum and meeting the needs of their particular students.

Mr. Community, initially excited by the new curriculum, soon realized that there is a fundamental difference between teaching the curriculum and teaching children. As he explains:

When the new curriculum came out, I thought this is great, we got some real stuff here. We get to do all of these science units and geography. Even in the language arts they're telling us to do way more...and I think I lost sight of what's more important. As one teacher once told me, and you have to remind yourself, you're not there to teach lessons, you're there to teach kids...and I think that when the province and the politicians' talk about the wonderful curriculum and the wonderful things they're doing, they're talking about lessons. And as any good teacher knows...sometimes you just forget to look at the kid. It's like forgetting to smell the roses.

When participants were asked how they balance the needs of the curriculum and the needs of their students, they were quite pragmatic in stating that the needs of the children must come first. According to Mr. Community:

The needs of your students is what has to drive what you do everyday, and that has to come first. If you're not meeting the needs of your students, then you're wasting your time...If it says this and this are the skills that have to be taught in Grade 6, but if five or six of them are missing a skill that is a Grade 4 or 5 skill, you've got to bring them up to speed before you can teach them the Grade 6 skill because that would be a waste of time because they're not going to get it anyway.

Ms. Newcomer added that:

When you have a strong group of children, it's quite easy to get through what you need to get through. But obviously when you run across students that are having difficulty, you have to pull back. You have to make a decision, okay, I can't cover everything or this will confuse the children. It's just too much information for them to be able to absorb and understand.

Only Ms. Special Needs disputed the use of the expression "balancing act", stating that it is not a balancing act if you teach "cross-curricular", integrating themes and content across the different subject areas. While Ms. Special Needs did acknowledge that there is a lot of difficult material to cover within a specific time, in her opinion it only becomes a challenge if "you're only teaching subject per subject."

Synopsis: Teaching Perceived as a "Balancing Act"

The teachers interviewed in this study all express a belief in a child-centred approach to teaching, an approach that is in conflict with the uniformity of curricular requirements. This finding is consistent with a study conducted by Wood and Bennett (2001), which found that "teachers espouse an overarching developmental orientation which is at odds with the hierarchical and increasingly prescriptive curriculum framework" (p. 241). What is more, Wood and Bennett (1999) similarly found that "teachers engage in a continuous juggling act to accommodate their predominantly learner-centred models of progression and continuity with curriculum-centred models" (p. 242). While Ms. Special Needs also believes in a child-centred approach to teaching, her role in the school and her relationship to the curriculum and to the students on her roster, enables her to better harmonize her philosophical beliefs with her pedagogical

approach. Mr. Community and Ms. Newcomer, as classroom teachers, report that they must find a balance between meeting two conflicting needs, the needs of the curriculum and the needs of their students. Further, they report that the tension between these two conflicting needs is further exacerbated by the amount of material to cover, the rigour of the standards themselves, and the diversity of the student population. Mr. Community and Ms. Newcomer experience themselves as living what Clandinin and Connelly (1995) refer to as a “split existence”, an existence that is at least partly defined by the attempt to satisfy two seemingly dissonant needs. For Clandinin and Connelly (1995), there is a “dilemma-laden quality” for teachers as they must find a precarious “balance” between theory and practice, between institutional demands and the diversity of classroom life.

According to Greene (1988):

There is, after all, a dialectical relation marking every human situation: the relationship between subject and object, individual and environment, self and society, outsider and community, living consciousness and phenomenal world.

This relation exists between two different, apparently opposite poles, but it presupposes a mediation between them (p. 8).

The concept of the “balancing act” thus provides the means for Mr. Community and Ms. Newcomer to mediate between such contrasting “poles”.

In spite of the apparent contrast between teachers’ beliefs in a child-centred approach and the current standardized educational agenda, as well as the difficulty inherent in balancing the needs of the curriculum and the disparate needs of their students, both Mr. Community and Ms. Newcomer have learned to bridge what they report as the “expanse” between these two contrasting approaches. Despite the difficulty

in applying uniform standards to a diverse group of learners, a task that for participant teachers is seemingly in contradiction to their child-centred approach to education, both Mr. Community and Ms. Newcomer “decode the language of the policy documents” (Hargreaves, Earl, Moore, Manning, 2001, p. 125), reinterpreting the expectations to better align with the needs of their students and their personal and professional perspectives. As such, the “balancing act” becomes a pragmatic act of accommodation and adaptation, an act that for Mr. Community and Ms. Newcomer, is intended to reconcile two seemingly conflicting approaches to education.

The theme “teaching perceived as a balancing act” thus underscores the fundamental and formative tension between two opposing conceptions of teaching and learning, between the nomothetically derived conception of education represented by the expectations articulated in curricular documents, and the more idiographic, subjective and experience-based reality teachers confront in the classroom. Despite the fact that Ste-Anne’s School has a largely homogenous student population and is not culturally, ethnically or linguistically diverse as more urban centres in Ontario, teachers nonetheless reported difficulty in uniformly applying the standardized curriculum to their students. For the teachers participating in this study, applying standards in a non-standard world ultimately becomes a precarious “balancing act”.

The Enacted Curriculum

The dissonance between the expectations articulated in the curricular documents and the more diverse reality of the classroom leads to the “balancing act” described above, and reflects a discrepancy between expectations and actuality, between the

expectations elaborated in the curriculum and the delivered or enacted curriculum. The theme “the enacted curriculum” describes how teachers adapt and transform the curriculum, based on the contextualized needs and abilities of their students.

The classroom teachers in the focus group I conducted acknowledge that they should cover the content of the curriculum without making any modifications or adjustments to the subject matter. In other words, they feel that there should be little discrepancy between the explicit curriculum and the enacted curriculum. However, later in the focus group session, teachers stated that, “whether the government allows it or not, if you have to deliver the program...if they’re [the students] not ready and they’re struggling, you have to adjust your program and the content and everything”. Mr. Community explained, “you have to know your kids, and that really dictates what you teach, and maybe more importantly, how you teach it”. Similarly, Ms. Newcomer stated that “I think we have to realize that those changes, alterations have to be made and you can’t expect that you’re going to cover it [the curriculum] the same way every year. You have to look at the children you have”. Thus, in spite of the provincial mandate that they “cover the curriculum”, the needs of their students influence not only *what* teachers teach, but *how* they teach it.

While Mr. Community did admit that there is a lot of material to cover each term, the challenge as he sees it is to determine where his students are academically and to revise the curriculum accordingly. As he explains:

What level you teach everything at in those five strands [in the math curriculum] is what you have to work at. You have to find out where the kids are at. Let’s say

that they don't know their times tables, that's certainly not a Grade 6 thing, but if they don't know it, you certainly have to put in some time with it.

For Ms. Newcomer, getting through the curriculum poses more of a challenge. As she candidly explains:

I think one of the science strands, there's just so much there that personally, I don't know if other teachers do it, in order to cover the four other strands well, you might not be able to get to one of them. You could touch upon it, and just sort of skim the surface of everything and get through it, but you aren't going to get the depth and the understanding that you should be getting if you're covering those topics. There's just too much there.

When probed further, Ms. Newcomer added that, "realistically, you can't do it all. You really can't. You can just touch upon it and you can say you did it...I think it needs to be watered down a little bit and I think we teachers do that anyway".

Despite the standardization of the curriculum and the teachers' stated feeling that the curriculum not be modified, both Mr. Community and Ms. Newcomer candidly admit that they modify and adapt the curriculum to better meet the academic needs of their students. According to these two teachers, the curriculum enacted in the classroom, while certainly based on the curricular expectations outlined for their respective grades, is nonetheless more specifically tailored to the requirements of their students rather than to the requirements of provincial authorities. In putting the needs of their students first, the challenge then becomes not only how much of the material to cover in the curriculum, but what level of depth they should go into for each curricular unit. In the end, Ms. Newcomer admits that she "skims the surface" and "waters [the curriculum] down" in

order to better meet the needs of her students. The goal then becomes breadth rather than depth.

Ms. Special Needs, on the other hand, believes that teachers in Ontario today are being asked to teach students how to “be thinkers and how to be problem solvers”, and to teach students to probe for deeper understanding rather than simply for the right answer. As she explains:

When I was a child two plus two was four, and that was just fine with me. Tell me the answer and I’ll get it right. Whereas now children have become a lot more inquisitive and a lot more “world aware”, through internet access, and the news, and that kind of thing. So we have to change our teaching style to reciprocate and to be able to reflect who the children are as well.

As a special education teacher, Ms. Special Needs must continuously modify and adapt the curriculum to the individual needs and requirements of the students on her roster. Unlike regular classroom teachers, the educational program she delivers, the enacted curriculum, is individualized for each of her students. The predilection of her students, their needs, wants and abilities, determine both *what* she teaches and *how* she teaches. She is not required to “cover the curriculum”, and thus can spend more individual time and effort ensuring that her students understand more fully what is being taught.

Synopsis: The Enacted Curriculum

The Ontario Curriculum: Grades 1-8 provides an educational bill of fare that specifies and defines in precise detail what is to be learned, when it is to be learned, and how and when it is to be evaluated. Moreover, these curricular expectations are premised

on the prescriptive notion that *all students will* meet the provincial expectations detailed in the curriculum. The assumption seems to be that the explicit curriculum and the enacted curriculum should be the same (McCutcheon, 1988). While this assumption has the effect of deproblematizing the teaching and learning encounter and thereby establishing a solidly objectified vision of education, many educators argue that it is inaccurate.

As key players in deciphering curriculum objectives, teachers play a vital part in shaping the curriculum enacted in the classroom. Thus, while the outcome-based approach to education assumes a unidirectional view of teaching and learning and a rather direct correlation between the explicit curriculum and the enacted curriculum, the reported experiences of teachers in this study continue to challenge such a reductive view of classroom life. As Coburn (2001) states, teachers do not blindly apply policy but, rather, give shape to policy, that is, “teachers interpret, adapt, and even transform reforms as they put them into place” (p.145). The theme “the enacted curriculum” thus draws attention to the fact that despite the uniformity of standards and the desire for more predictable student outcomes, “what one learns, and what one teaches, is transformed within the classroom” (Freedman, 1988, p. 206). At the same time, “teachers *adaptation* is not considered part of the curriculum” (Freedman, 1988, p. 206). In spite of what many claim are “teacher-proof curricula”, the teachers in this study nonetheless maintain sufficient professional discretion to transform what they have been given into something appropriate for their students.

Although the curriculum is certainly prescriptive in terms of the content that is to be covered, teachers have been provided with scant pedagogical direction in terms of *how*

they should teach. Despite the lack of explicit pedagogical direction provided by the province, however, the fact that teachers are required to cover the content of the curriculum “unavoidably informs the methods that will be used” (Kohn, 2004, p. 48). The sheer number of specific expectations teachers are required to cover, 3,993 expectations by the end of the eighth grade (Leithwood, McAdie, Bascia, Rodrigue, Moore, 2004), make it increasingly difficult for teachers to do other than “skim the surface” of the curriculum. In the end, there are far too many expectations for teachers to realistically cover in any significant detail, and “the efficient achievement of the end product becomes the criterion by which the means are selected” (Kliebard, 1992, p. 129). Thus, to ensure curriculum coverage, breadth becomes pragmatically and realistically more important than depth.

Teaching To the Test

The Grade 3 and Grade 6 teachers interviewed in this study are responsible for administering and preparing their students for provincial testing in Math and Language Arts in May of each school year. Despite misgivings about the validity, accuracy and utility of provincial test results, the teaching styles and pedagogical practices of Mr. Community and Ms. Newcomer are nonetheless influenced and shaped by the Grade 3 and Grade 6 testing. As Mr. Community stated, “right from the beginning you made it your business to find out what’s going on and how the score is and what’s going to be on it”. Ms. Newcomer added that “I think if you have a Grade 3 or Grade 6 class, you do tend to have that testing in the back of your mind all of the time”. Thus, to adequately prepare their students for the provincial testing in May of the school year, the teachers

who participated in this study admitted that they aligned their teaching strategies to the tests and tried to cover the content of the curriculum to ensure that their students would “have a chance” to do well.

In terms of the content of the testing, three of the focus group participants admitted that although it is difficult, they do try to anticipate what will be on the tests. According to one of the teachers in the focus group:

One of the little tricks they use, and especially in math and I thought this year was a little fairer, but in math in previous years there was one year they had a whole bunch of volume questions in grade 6, really difficult volume questions, where they had to make 3-D drawings and then figure out how many little boxes would fit into bigger boxes and a few other ones like that. That was that one skill and there were a lot of those in the test so that if you hadn't spent a lot of time on that and mastered that one it skewed the whole thing. And the next year it was scatter graphs. Of all the different kinds of graphs, there were all kinds of scatter graphs. So if you hadn't spent much time on scatter graphs, it skewed your tests. So then, okay, I have to do a lot of volume, and then there's not one question on volume the next year.

Another focus group participant concluded that, “it's hard to teach to the test. They'll trick you that way...They put a lot of thought into it”. Ms. Newcomer admitted that in order to cover all of the concepts in the curriculum before the testing in May, she feels she has to provide her students with “little mini lessons” to ensure that they are exposed to content that might be on the tests. Ms. Newcomer worries that “I haven't taught this concept and it's going to be on the testing. So you almost get a quick little lesson in to

try to get them to understand it. You wouldn't normally do that when you know that you have another month".

Mr. Community also admitted that he has had to change his teaching style to mirror the style of the testing. As he explains:

When they brought in EQAO, you see the tests and it's a whole different style of teaching. You can have the things you're supposed to teach and you can use different styles to teach it, but if you're using the wrong style, the kids aren't going to do well on the tests because they've never seen that before...You have to operate in the same style.

Mr. Community also explained that when testing was first introduced, his students did not do well on the math test because the book they used was not written in the same style as the test.

I had a pretty good class and a lot of really good mathematicians in that class, but we bombed the test because questions were worded differently...and so right away you have to go out and find the right program that's going to teach the way so these kids are doing what everyone wants them to do.

Teachers thus feel that to ensure that their students do well, they must use workbooks and worksheets that are worded in the same way as the tests.

Only Ms. Special Needs stated that she has not had to change her teaching style as a result of provincial testing. As she explains, "teaching to the test, as in I've had to change my teaching style, I don't agree with because I've always taught that way anyway." If her teaching style has changed at all over the years, she believes that it is because children have changed, and so teachers have had to change their teaching style to

better “reflect who the children are”. Unlike Mr. Community and Ms. Newcomer, Ms. Special Needs is not responsible for a specific classroom or grade, but for all 27 special needs children in the primary grades. Her students are either exempted from the testing or else are given special accommodations for writing the test. As such, Ms. Special Needs does not feel the same pressure to “do well on the tests” that the other two classroom teachers report.

When teachers were asked how much time they devote to provincial testing, both Mr. Community and Ms. Newcomer admitted that they spent the whole school year, either directly or indirectly, getting their students ready for the testing in May. As Ms. Newcomer explained:

Probably what I do at the beginning of the year is I cover a unit and then take an example (from the test), to try to get them into that mode of thinking. I use numbers words and pictures, just some of the terminology that I know the testing uses and the icons to get them familiar with it.

Teachers also use mid-year assessments that are modelled after the EQAO tests and they do a number of writing on demand exercises throughout the year to get their students ready for the testing.

Synopsis: Teaching to the Test

Despite misgivings about the appropriateness and the validity of EQAO testing, both Mr. Community and Ms. Newcomer admit that they continue to feel pressure to change their teaching styles to better reflect the style of the testing. According to Lam and Bordignon (2001), there are two principle ways teachers can teach to the test, “either

by teaching exclusively to the test domain or by drilling the students with test-taking skills and practice tests” (p. 193). Mr. Community and Ms. Newcomer both report that throughout the whole school year, they spend considerable time delivering material that they believe will be on the test and providing practice drills and exercises to their students.

While Mr. Community and Ms. Newcomer seemed quite emphatic in expressing their negative impression of EQAO testing, particularly in regard to the utility of test results, they nonetheless devote a significant proportion of time throughout the school year teaching to the test domain and providing their students with test-taking skills. While testing seems to drive teaching, as participant responses indicate, both teachers are actively seeking ways to make the linkages between testing and teaching tighter. They do this in two ways, in seeking a more predictable pattern of test questions and in seeking resources that conform to the test content. Thus while the motivation to teach to the test may seem somewhat paradoxical in the case of Mr. Community and Ms. Newcomer, it has been found in similar studies that “the use of provincial test results to compare and rank schools is the most powerful means to force teachers to teach to the test” (Lam and Bordinon, 2001, p. 195). Thus, in spite of the personal views of Mr. Community and Ms. Newcomer, particularly in terms of the validity and the accuracy of EQAO testing, and consistent with research cited in Chapter 2, they continue to go against their own feelings as they respectively teach to the test. In other words, in spite of their disapproval concerning provincial testing, and the fact that they do not believe the results to be particularly useful or meaningful, they nonetheless continue to teach directly to the test in both senses described above.

While proponents of provincial or state testing may argue the merits of teaching to the test, particularly in jurisdictions where testing and curriculum are well aligned (Earl and Torrance, 2000; Posner, 2004), others would argue that teaching to the test invalidates the results by falsely inflating test scores without any corresponding increase in “real” learning (Sheppard, 1989; Lam and Bordignon, 2001; Schorr and Firestone, 2004; Volante, 2004). The test scores for Grade 3 and Grade 6 students at Ste-Anne’s, for example, have increased significantly over the past three years of testing, averaging a 30% increase for Grade 3 students and a 24% increase for Grade 6 students. The most striking increase is in the 2003 results, that show increases of 45% in Grade 3 reading scores in a single year and 41% increases in Grade 6 math scores in the same period. The significant increase in overall EQAO scores at Ste-Anne’s, coupled with the finding that Mr. Community and Ms. Newcomer do teach to the test both in terms of what they teach and how they teach, raises questions about the integrity of results and what, in fact, testing actually measures and what teaching actually accomplishes. Thus while their teaching may in fact be considered more “effective”, specifically given that test scores are rising, ironically it may also suggest that their teaching is ultimately becoming less meaningful.

Category B: Contextual Factors Impacting Teaching and Learning

While provincial educational policy is created outside of the local school context and in relative isolation from day-to-day classroom practices, there is nonetheless a dynamic interaction not only between policies, teachers and students, but between policies and the more localized context of the school and classroom. Not only must

teachers adapt and transform policies as they put them into practice, they must do so within an institutional context that serves to influence the processes and outcomes of their teaching decisions (Darling-Hammond and Snyder, 2000). The category identified as “contextual factors impacting teaching and learning” thus serves to underscore the fact that teaching and learning does not occur in a vacuum, but that in many fundamental ways, the local terrain of the school and the classroom helps shape teachers’ daily classroom practices. The factors “time” and “resources” are thus intended to reflect two significant aspects of the institutional reality confronted by the teachers who participated in this study and which imposes upon their classroom work.

Time

For the teachers participating in the focus group and interviews, time, or lack of time, was the most critical issue impacting their classroom teaching. In fact, early on in the data collection process, all of the teachers stated that they were too busy to meet for individual interviews in the last month of school, requesting that interviews be postponed until their summer holidays. While four teachers participated in the initial focus group, one of the participants was “too busy” to participate in a follow-up interview.

While none of the initial questions focused specifically on the issue of time and use of time, all teachers stated that time was a constraining factor in terms of covering the material in the curriculum. Ms. Newcomer stated that:

...it is a more challenging curriculum and there is an awful lot to get through...do I stay with this because I have finished it and they don’t know it as well as they

should...I've got two months to cover each of these units and I've got to move on to the other ones regardless.

Covering the material in the curriculum becomes even more of a challenge for teachers in a school with large class sizes, and where the children with special needs are fully integrated in the classroom. Focus group participants explained that "if you have a strong group, and yes you can probably cover a lot of that curriculum, but if you don't have a strong group, then you're going to have to decide what the priority is..." As Ms.

Newcomer explained:

You're expected to keep a really fast pace just to get through it. But unfortunately in a classroom situation you're going to have to slow it down and you are going to have to cater to those children to get them to understand it.

The feeling that teachers are "forced to be rushed" just to get through the curriculum, and that there is "not enough time in a day" is further exacerbated by their need to report on a specific number of strands each term. According to Ms. Newcomer:

You're forced to stop what you're doing and go to another strand and go to another strand...I would like maybe a little more flexibility...I find that aspect frustrating because you're forced to jump from one to another as opposed to just following something through the way you'd like to...it would be better than just jumping from one thing to another because we're forced to report on three different strands a term.

The same teacher, when asked whether the focus then becomes breadth rather than depth, responded that, "...realistically, you can't do it all. You really can't. You can just touch upon it and you can say you did it all, but how well are those kids going to understand

those concepts.” Mr. Community admitted, “you’re so busy marking, prepping, trying to get stuff together, trying to teach that you almost forget who you’re working with.”

The two Grade 3 and 6 teachers selected for this study are also responsible for administering and preparing their students for provincial testing in math and language arts, resulting in even less time to cover the curriculum, particularly in non-tested subjects such as social studies and science. The timing of the provincial testing in terms of the school year also exacerbates time pressures. The provincial testing is administered over a two-week period in May, which means that teachers would normally still have another month to cover the curriculum if students were tested at the end of the school year. According to Mr. Community:

So you think, I haven’t gotten through this so you’d almost have to give them a mini-lesson, these are three things I haven’t covered yet and I have to cover them before the testing because they probably will have a question on it. That’s something you wouldn’t normally do if you didn’t have the testing, you’d have another month to cover it. That’s a lot of time to be able to cover a lot of concepts.

Both Ms. Newcomer and Ms. Special Needs mentioned that existing pressures and demands on teachers’ time are further intensified in Catholic schools, as they are required to teach thirty minutes of religious studies a day, in addition to time spent on the regular curriculum. Thus, while they still teach the same number of minutes a day as teachers in public schools, they “lose” 30 minutes from teaching the regular curriculum. Although two of the teachers mentioned that you, “try to integrate as much as possible”,

using language arts to teach bible studies, time, according to Ms. Special Needs, remains *the* “impediment”.

Time demands are also felt outside of the classroom, both in terms of coordinating professional development activities and in creating opportunities for teachers to collaborate. Rather than send all teachers to workshops, the principal designates literacy and numeracy leaders who are responsible for attending workshops and training the teachers upon their return. As Ms. Special Needs explains:

We do creative ways to get teacher release times throughout the day, like if there's a play that's coming, the whole school will go to the play and it will be called a primary meeting day, so the primary teachers don't have to go to the play...we also have reading buddies, where we pair up say the Grade 1s and the Grade 7s, and so that would be called an intermediate meeting day and all of the Grade 1 teachers would watch both classes...

Synopsis: Time

The teachers participating in this study all express feelings of frustration with the lack of time to adequately cover the curriculum, meet children's diverse needs, deliver thirty minutes of religious instruction a day, and prepare students for provincial testing in the May of each school year. For Mr. Community and Ms. Newcomer, the rigor of the standards and the amount of material to cover in the curriculum, coupled with the diversity of their students' needs and abilities, intensifies their sense of urgency.

While all three of the teachers raised the issue of time during the focus group and one-on-one interviews, it was the new teacher at the school, Ms. Newcomer, who

expressed the most frustration with what she perceived were serious limitations on her time. Throughout the interview, Ms. Newcomer alternately characterized time both as a subjective experience and as a more objectively defined force outside of her control. In his critique of the invention of “clock time” during the industrial revolution, E.P. Thompson (1967) raises an important distinction between these two conceptions of time, between “employer’s time and their [worker’s] ‘own’ time” (p. 58), that is, between externally determined and internally perceived senses of time. Similarly, Hargreaves (1994) points out that “time for teachers is not just an objective oppressive constraint but also a subjectively defined horizon of possibility and limitation” (p. 95). For Ms. Newcomer, her experience with time creates a sense of urgency that limits her ability to cover both the regular curriculum and the religious curriculum *and* to adequately prepare her students for provincial testing. Time is perceived to be an imposition, a constraining force that impedes her ability to do her job well.

The anthropologist E.T. Hall (1983), in his discussion of experienced time, makes an important distinction between “monochronic” conceptions of time, where schedules, linearity, and order (e.g. semesters, report cards and testing) predominate, and “polychronic” conceptions of time, where everything occurs all at once and in no particular order. For Hargreaves (1994), while the world of the elementary school teacher is “profoundly polychronic in character” (p. 104), the administrative, more bureaucratic world of the school and, at a still greater remove, the world of the policy maker is monochronic in tone. The uneven and at times unhelpful convergence of the polychronic and the monochronic dimensions of time, as experienced by the teachers in this study, serves to increase the sense that they are “forced to be rushed” just to get

through the day. For Hargreaves (1994), the clash between the polychronic and the monochronic dimensions leads to the intensification of teachers' work, where teachers feel a "chronic sense of work overload... [and where] more and more has to be done [and] less and less time is available to do it" (Apple and Jungck, 1990, p. 234). The intensification of teachers work is particularly applicable to the teaching experiences of Ms. Newcomer, who expressed frustration with the increasing workload and the lack of time available in which to complete all of her work.

Resources

When the *Ontario Curriculum, Grades 1-8* was initially introduced, the teachers participating in the initial focus group reported that the resources and textbooks were inadequate, forcing teachers to generate their own material to support the curriculum. While the situation has improved over the last six years, teachers still do not feel that the resources are well enough aligned with the curriculum. All of the teachers interviewed mentioned that they do not yet have a math program that, "delivers the Ontario curriculum the way it's supposed to be done." The math textbook currently used, *Interactions*, was felt to be less than "perfect" and "a real void unless you have very academic students who already have the basics". All of the teachers mentioned that they would "hopefully" be purchasing the Nelson math program in the new academic year. However, Ms. Newcomer worried that:

We're supposed to be getting this Nelson program next year, but I don't know if we're going to get it because there's not enough money there for all of us to get it. So maybe just some grades will get it.

Ms. Special Needs concluded that “there should be more money, it’s just that simple. More money for funding and textbooks and those kinds of things.”

Despite the quantity of resources available, teachers are still forced to buy their own resources in order to cover the curriculum effectively. According to Ms. Newcomer:

The math program, none of us are really thrilled with the *Interactions*, so I’m buying all of my personal resources and getting bits and pieces of a bunch of things in order to meet all the specific expectations of the curriculum. Otherwise the program doesn’t cover everything...and even some of the language arts, we’re still pulling...it’s still left up to you to pull resources in to cover the concepts.

There isn’t a book that covers all of the concepts in the curriculum. I think those are being developed and it is getting better...even in science, you have to go out and buy your own.

Despite the lack of resources that are directly aligned with the curriculum, Ms. Special Needs did add that there are a lot of resources available, you just have to know where to find them. “If you’re not informed or you don’t keep up-to-date with what’s going on, you don’t always get the information.”

Teachers also felt that resources and textbooks do not fully reflect the teaching style and the language of the provincial testing. According to the teachers, textbooks that are both connected to the curriculum and to the testing would certainly “improve the results” of the testing. Focus group participants also felt frustrated that, “so much money was being wasted” on provincial testing, money that could be better spent on providing teachers with the resources that they need in the classroom. As focus group participants

said, “take the money out of testing and hire more teachers to make class sizes smaller...(we need) more educational assistants, more textbooks and resources.”

Synopsis: Resources

All of the teachers interviewed decried the scarcity of resources, particularly resources that are aligned with the curriculum and with provincial testing, thus highlighting how the testing and curricular regime of standardization “bleeds” resources and time from an already pressed system. While many new resources have been developed in the last few years, the teachers claim that many of the resources that they currently use are still inadequate. All of the teachers, for example, mentioned the math textbook and the fact that it is not well aligned with the curriculum and not useful in helping to prepare their students for EQAO testing. While they will be getting a new math textbook in the next school term, lack of money will preclude them all from getting new and more appropriate textbooks in all subjects.

Ms. Special Needs believes that there are “tons” of resources available for teachers and that it is simply a matter of knowing where to look. Ms. Newcomer, on the other hand, does not feel that there are adequate resources available and she therefore feels compelled to buy her own material to help cover the expectations in the curriculum. Faced with time pressures and a challenging curriculum to cover in preparation for EQAO testing in May, and despite their ambivalence towards the government’s agenda, Mr. Community and Ms. Newcomer would both like to see more money spent on resources that are linked to the curriculum and to EQAO testing. Ms. Newcomer, moreover, suggested that she would like to see resources that would cover *all* of the

expectations in the curriculum. Faced with a more “intense” work situation, Mr. Community and Ms. Newcomer are forced to rely more and more on external and independently purchased resources that will help them teach more efficiently and effectively (Apple and Jungck, 1990; Hargreaves, 1994). More specifically, teachers’ heavy workloads and lack of time to prepare force them to “increasingly rely on “experts” to tell them what to do” (Apple and Jungck, 1990, p. 234), to help provide material that will bring the curriculum to life and to move beyond baseline requirements.

Chapter 6: Discussion and Research Implications

The image that emerges of the individual is that of a juggler and synthesizer, an accommodator and appeaser, who fulfills one function while he is apparently engaged in another; he stands guard at the door of the tent but lets all of his friends and relatives crawl under the flap.

Erving Goffman, *The Goffman Reader*, 1997, p. 40.

The purpose of this small scale case study has been to explore the interplay between current governmental educational initiatives in the province of Ontario – specifically the EQAO tests and a standardized curriculum – and the reported experiences of three elementary school teachers from a single school concerning their teaching practices and their perceptions of classroom life, learning, and assessment. While the themes and factors discussed in Chapter 5 facilitated an initial interpretation of the research findings, a more complete rendering of this case study requires a more integrated discussion of the themes and factors noted above. This chapter will thus provide a summative discussion of the research findings and related implications, and conclude with final reflections and implications for future research.

Before proceeding with the discussion section of this thesis, it is important to reiterate that the qualitative case study approach was not used in order to facilitate the generalization of findings, a procedurally hazardous task given the methodological approach of a single case, but to explore the issues and the research questions experientially and to utilize the findings to suggest areas for future research. Although generalizability is problematic, case studies often generate an experiential resonance that can allow others in similar settings to deepen reflection, to gain insight into circumstance, and to see means through which current practice may be improved. Thus, while these research findings are partial and tentative (Cronbach, 1975; Donmoyer, 1990), they point

to very real issues related to teaching and learning in elementary schools in Ontario, issues that merit further, more in-depth research.

Research Findings and Related Implications

A total of five themes and factors were identified in this case study: 1) teaching perceived as a “balancing act”; 2) the enacted curriculum; 3) teaching to the test; 4) time; and 5) resources. These identified themes and factors were subsequently grouped into two broad categories: A) adaptive pedagogical strategies; and B) contextual factors impacting teaching and learning. Both categories are specifically related to the research questions. The first category, adaptive pedagogical strategies, is meant to capture the ways in which teachers personally and professionally interact with and adapt external mandates to the “idiosyncrasies” (Donmoyer, 1988) of their students and of their classrooms. The second category, contextual factors impacting teaching and learning, is intended to reflect the more objective effects of standardized curriculum and testing and the impact of this interplay on teaching and learning.

While the findings of this study are consistent with the studies cited in Chapter 2, particularly in terms of the evident tension between external mandates and teachers’ more personalistic and localized notions of effective teaching, the relationship between teachers’ perceptions of external mandates and practices is not quite so straightforward, particularly when one considers the instances of dissonance between teachers’ stated perceptions and reported practices. Similar to the research cited in Chapter 2, the teachers in this study adopted classroom practices, such as over-reliance on curricula and teaching to the test, that seem to contradict their stated personal and professional notions

of effective teaching. At the same time, the impact of contextual factors, particularly the lack of time and resources, seemed to exacerbate the pressures and tensions the teachers participating in this study reported. While lack of resources certainly created additional tension for Ms. Newcomer, it was the lack of time to cover the content of the curriculum and to adequately prepare students for provincial testing that seemed particularly significant for the teachers interviewed. In fact, it was the lack of time coupled with the quantity of material to cover, the rigour of the standards, and the diverse needs and abilities of students, that led Mr. Community and Ms. Newcomer to “skim the surface” and to teach a more watered down version of the curriculum. In the end, the sense of urgency prevailed, leading the two classroom teachers to focus on breadth and curriculum coverage, rather than on depth of content and understanding. This finding is consistent with other studies, where researchers found that lack of time and a crowded curriculum leads teachers to make an “uneasy compromise [between] the competing demands of breadth and depth” (e.g., Bereiter, 2004, p. 10). With over 500 curricular expectations outlined for each grade level (Leithwood, McAdie, Bascia, Rodrigue, Moore, 2004), ensuring that each expectation is even “touched upon” (Ms. Newcomer) becomes one of the consuming challenges of teaching.

The initial findings of my thesis suggest that the interplay between teachers’ individual and localized perceptions of teaching and learning and provincial curricular requirements and EQAO testing may create an enduring tension that serves to define the contextual reality of teaching and learning in Ontario classrooms. While each of the three teachers who participated in this study brought a unique perspective to the questions posed during the focus group and one-on-one interviews, the research findings suggest

what is a truly formative tension between institutional demands and the diversity of classroom life, between curricular content and pedagogy, between explicit forms of knowledge and more localized, particularistic, individualized and often tacit forms of knowledge, between institutional requirements and teachers' more personalistic notions of effective teaching, and between provincial policies and the more localized context of the school and classroom. In many ways, this case study is the story of three individual teachers who work in a world characterized by complexity and uncertainty, ambiguities which the current system of accountability and efficiency is arguably meant to remove. As Waller reminds us, "children and teachers are not disembodied intelligences, not instructing machines, but whole human beings tied together in a complex maze of social interconnections" (Waller, 1932, p. 1). Ironically, the seemingly algorithmic simplicity of standards and testing denies such complexity, and in so doing, creates a heightened sense of ambiguity and tension for the teachers participating in this study, who see in the movement towards standards the utter absence of the realities most central to their work and to their experience.

In many ways, the themes and factors identified in this thesis relate to the difficulty the teachers interviewed experience in attempting to apply standardized notions of teaching and learning to a disparate and non-uniform group of children. The world of the classroom is multi-textured and locally diverse, a point repeatedly stressed by the teachers interviewed, while the standardized curriculum and testing practices advocated by the provincial government are premised on the more rational, objective and reductive principles of scientific management, where uniformity and predictability are predominate concerns. Hall's (1983) distinction between monochronic vs. polychronic time can also

be used to underscore the differences between the polychronic “world” of the classroom and the monochronic “world” of policy. Applying uniform standards to a diverse group of students thus seems to heighten the pressure study participants reportedly feel in attempting to cover the material in the curriculum, a fact that seems further exacerbated by the lack of time and resources at the local level. Thus, in denying the legitimacy of more tentative, contextually-bound and particularistic experiences that occur in schools and classrooms, and in over valuing those things that can be “fashioned to the technology of objective measurement” (Smyth and Dow, 1998, p. 295), we are in danger of neglecting the very things that make education such a humanly compelling enterprise.

While the interviews with the teachers in this study revealed a tension between external mandates and more localized school and classroom realities, the interviews also revealed contradictions between teachers’ stated beliefs and perceptions and their reported behaviour. For example, although the teachers interviewed all espoused a child-centred view of education, they nonetheless also stated that they liked the newly revised standardized curriculum. While a child-centered view of education might be consistent with standardized curriculum, the teachers who participated in this study repeatedly expressed their frustration with the quantity of material to cover in the curriculum and the rigour of the standards, particularly in that both became obstacles to meeting the diversity of their students’ needs and abilities. As a result, the teachers interviewed stated that the standardized curriculum caters to the academically stronger student and hence “does not meet all of the students’ needs” (Focus Group Participant). Thus, while the expectations detailed in the curriculum are intended for *all* students, and each expectation is prefaced with the dictate that “students will”, the diversity of students’ abilities and needs stands in

sharp contrast to teachers' preferred child-centred and hence individuated approach to teaching.

In order to mediate between a child-centred approach and a standardized approach to education, and in the rush to cover the specified content within the allotted timeframe and with the resources available, the two classroom teachers interviewed acknowledged that they have had to sacrifice depth for breadth in their teaching and presentation of material, a practice that seems to favour the curriculum over the child. In other words, they report feeling pressed to cover the material in the curriculum rather than to ensure that students have the opportunity to take the time to really understand and utilize the material.

The teachers interviewed also stated that they did not agree with many of the principles of standardized testing and that they did not believe in the accuracy of the results. At the same time, however, Mr. Community and Ms. Newcomer both acknowledged that they teach to the test throughout the school year, by changing their teaching style to mirror the style of the testing, by anticipating and covering material they believe will be on the test, and by providing practice drills and exercises for their students throughout the school year. Thus, while the two classroom teachers often shape their teaching in order to help students do well on the EQAO tests, they do not believe that the test results are of particular significance or an accurate reflection of their teaching practices or of authentic student learning. Although the two teachers acknowledge teaching to the test, they cannot use the test results to help them better assess the learning needs of the actual students who populate their classrooms. In an important sense, the work of teaching, "loses any organic relationship with the end product" (Kliebard, 1992,

p. 130). Despite teaching to the test all year, neither of the classroom teachers will use the test results to improve their classroom practices nor to help with individual student assessment. The “end product”, in other words, is practically meaningless.

As this study underscores, such an instrumental and the overly rationalized view of learning and teaching that undergirds it, threatens to depersonalize and deproblematize (Wake, 1983) much of the complex and sometimes intractable life of schools and classrooms, while diverting attention away from issues that may arguably be more important than what the current trend toward standardization in education would allow. While standardized curriculum, test scores and report cards may superficially satisfy accountability measures, what is lost in the quest to accomplish this goal may be far more significant. For example, while test results may help provide a measure of the implementation of the prescribed curriculum, ultimately they “tap [only] a very slender part of what matters in schooling...to understand the significance of an educational outcome you need to understand how it was achieved” (Eisner, 1998, p. 2). Teaching to the test and thereby boosting test scores provides one particularly significant application of Eisner’s point that much may be lost in standardized measures of achievement. Much of what is “gained” may be a mere artefact of the test and the acquisition of test taking skills.

In our quest to make teachers and schools more accountable, we have seemingly reduced the complexity of teaching to issues of measurable efficiency and effectiveness, to what is an arguably misplaced confidence in quantifiable, objective criteria of educational worth and value. By dwelling exclusively upon compliance with standards, a more inclusive debate about what constitutes educational quality and accountability may

be subverted. Paradoxically, a preoccupation with ensuring standardization may actually preempt movement towards a comprehensive sense of accountability. As Barlosky (2003) states:

The underlying assumption is that if people and organizations can be policed to ensure that they are doing what they are directed to do by a publicly crafted consensus, education will be more transparent, rational, assessable, and hence accounted for (p. 50).

For the teachers who participated in this study, the existence of standardized curriculum and provincial testing has not led to a more transparent educational system, but to an educational system characterized by increased ambiguity and a heightened sense of dissonance between provincial curricular expectations and classroom reality. Despite the rhetoric about accountability and transparency, the challenges the teachers in this study describe make it increasingly difficult for them to be accountable for the educational outcomes of their students. The context of teaching, for example, is intricately connected to a broad range of factors that can constrain or inhibit effective teaching, such as lack of time and resources, thereby making it difficult for teachers to be truly responsive to the needs of their students. As the teachers interviewed in this study attest, the formal and very public image of teaching and learning as accountable and transparent belies the reality of school and classroom life. Thus, while the “discourse of standards seems to make it possible to address the issues of accountability unambiguously” (Barlosky, 2003, p. 53), the dissonance and dilemmas inherent in the educational enterprise have not been removed through adherence to a uniform curriculum or through a regime of standardized testing, although they may be better concealed. This

dissonance can be more narrowly defined as a conflict between institutional requirements and classroom and school reality, and more broadly as discord between uniformity and diversity. As Greene (1973) states, “in a multifarious culture, no single schema or category can be sufficient for organizing the flux of reality” (p. 9). This is particularly true of the educational enterprise, where the “flux of reality” consists of the clamorous dissonance and discordant push and pull of competing and often conflicting interests, values, and norms.

This is not to argue blindly against standards in education. Given the highly idiosyncratic and unpredictable world of teaching (Donmoyer, 1988), teachers can gain from categories, constructs, and guidelines provided in the form of a standardized curriculum, and an explicit framework for evaluation*. Standards also allow the more culturally and economically disenfranchised to participate and share in what has been called the “culture of power” (Delpit, 1999), or the normative knowledge base that can translate into social acceptance and economic mobility. In some sense, standards may help to advance the “cultural literacy” (Hirsch, 1987) that ultimately enables our increasingly diverse and multicultural society to share a common body of knowledge and a common language of discourse. At the same time, however, it is important to recognize that “educational standards are not absolute, fixed, naturally-given facts [but are] socially constructed” (Portelli and Vibert, 1997, p. 75). Standards, in other words, represent one particular view of the world, one construct of what counts as knowledge, providing an arguably limited conception of education, and ultimately a monolithic vision of teaching

*It must also be noted that the profession of teaching is already mediated by numerous guidelines provided in legal codes, Ministry guidelines (including the Ontario College of Teachers, Teachers’ Performance Appraisals and Standards of Practice), Board policies and processes, teachers’ federation guidelines, school mission and vision statements, norms of the teaching discipline, the history of teaching and schools, and the tacit culture of the school and community.

and learning. As Rogers (1997) points out, “learning is not the mere passive working with and memorizing of the products (the facts, dictums, theories, results) of others’ thinking and experiencing. Learning is also the dynamic experience of building and using knowledge oneself” (p. 687). The issue then, is not the standardized curriculum, but rather its use as the reductive and sole definition of teaching and learning and the sole means of holding teachers and schools accountable. As Battistich (1999) cautions, “with the current emphasis on academic content and performance standards, society once again seems to be in danger of viewing student’s academic achievement as the only important outcome of schooling” (p. 415). In defining education with such seeming scientific rigour, much of what really matters in schools and classrooms is denied.

More than this, the very idea that standards can reduce assessment and evaluation to a simple instrument of accountability that ultimately provides unambiguous and certain results is problematic. While standards may offer a more rational, transparent, and predictable means of holding teachers and schools accountable, the narratives provided by the three teachers participating in this study would suggest that their experiences are far less transparent and more complex than the current standards discourse would allow. In contradistinction to the explicit curriculum, Britzman (1989) uses the idea of the null curriculum to show what is “represented by silences, deliberate omissions, and what the institution of school designates as cultural taboos, controversy, or matters deemed extraneous to the values of efficiency and standardization (p. 149). The null curriculum represents what we don’t see in any official public texts and discourse, the unofficial story behind appearances, the story that the teachers in this study in a partial sense convey. The narratives provided by the three teachers participating in this study suggest

that while they know what they are doing, and they can provide rationales for their practices, the effect of what they are doing in terms of how they are teaching and what their students are learning remains unclear. It is also unclear how the putative clarity of standards and test measures may be changing how we think about education and how we enact teaching and learning in schools and classrooms. As Foucault (1982) aptly remarks, “people know what they do; they frequently know why they do what they do; but what they don’t know is what what they do does” (Dreyfus and Rabinow, p. 187).

Research Limitations

As in all research, there are a number of factors that have influenced the approach, focus, and results of this study. The fact that I am not a classroom teacher and that I have spent very little adult time in a classroom or school has meant that I had very few preconceptions about teachers and schools prior to commencing this study. During the focus group and individual interviews, I asked many follow-up questions and took little for granted. My lack of school and classroom experience, as well as my position as an outsider in the school system, provided a unique lens with which to analyse the data. Classroom teachers, on the other hand, may well have interpreted the results differently. Second, time constraints in collecting my research meant that I did not make classroom visits, an additional data input that might have provided a valuable cross reference for interview data. Third, my necessarily small sample size of one school, while appropriate to the purpose of this research and the resources available to the researcher, meant that while I did not have to contend with interschool variation, the results of my research may not translate well to other elementary schools in Ontario, in particular to those not in the

separate school sector. The limited sample size, however, advantaged a more in depth discussion of the data gained from interviews and thereby sharpened the research concentration upon teacher experience, which was the principal focus of my study. It is precisely this focus upon teacher experience that will, at least in theory, allow other practitioners to find points of resonance and relevance in the data reported herein.

Final Reflections

Through this case study, I sought to better understand the experiences and perceptions of a select and admittedly small sample of Grade 3 and Grade 6 teachers who are required to implement *The Ontario Curriculum*, as well as to provide standardized tests to their students in reading, writing and mathematics. More specifically, the purpose of this study was to explore how the teachers who participated understood the impact of Ontario's standardized curriculum and testing upon their classroom practices and views of teaching and learning. My research findings suggest that the interplay between teachers' classroom experiences and provincial curricular and EQAO testing requirements is evidence of formative tensions within which the contextual reality of teaching and learning is defined. Many of these tensions and the resultant experiences of dissonance reported by the teachers who participated in this study are particularly consequential as they essentially "entail tension between the individual and the crowd" (Popkewitz, 1983, p. 45), between the idiographic and the nomothetic, between the personalized and localized reality of teachers and the more instrumental and rationalized view of education, as they are realized within contemporary Ontario classrooms and schools.

These tensions, particularly those identified in this thesis between institutional requirements and individual needs, mirror quite closely tensions that have historical roots in the introduction of schools as a mass system of formal education (Tomkins, 1986), where the tension between the “desire to help individuals learn to think for themselves and [the] desire to have those individuals develop the same basic attitudes and values as everyone else in our society” (Young and Levin, 2002, p. 9) was first played out. It has been noted that in the pre-confederation Canada of the 1840s, education was being used for the purposes of state building (Curtis, 1983) and as a means to achieve a more stable, nationalistic, and cohesive society (Tomkins, 1986). From that point onward formal public education continuously grappled with the tension between individual and community needs, a tension that was to resurface notably in the Hall-Dennis Report of 1968 (Manzer, 1994), a report which pushed the educational pendulum towards a radical focus on a child-centered or idiographic approach to education.

In many ways, this perennial tension in education, between the individual and society, underscores more fundamental questions about what schools are for, and what we want education to accomplish, questions which are given specificity by the historical periods in which they are asked. As Reid (1988) maintains, “it is of the essence of a liberal education that its forms are never settled since there lies at the core of the idea a debate about the part education should play in connecting the individual to society” (p. 116). Greene (1973) illustrates well the various roles education can play:

Education, in one perspective, is a process of initiating young people into the ways of thinking and behaving characteristic of the culture into which they were born. In another perspective, it is the development of a person from innocence to

experience, from the confines of childish immediacies to the open plains of conceptual thought. In still another, it is the effort of a community to recreate itself with the rise of each new generation and to perpetuate itself in historic time. (p. 3)

Unfortunately, as the case studies described herein indicate, the current trend in education diverts attention away from what are arguably more important questions about what matters in schools, and distracts us from engaging in conversations that extend beyond the measurable and predictable to include contestable educational issues involving epistemological and normative questions about educational purposes and goals. We need to develop a better and more inclusive vocabulary to talk about education and at least to talk about the things that we care about. The language and the words that we use shape what we see (Berger and Luckman, 1966), and can ultimately prevent us from even being aware of the values, norms, and predispositions that are embedded in our vocabulary. The null curriculum is silenced by our preoccupation with the more technical language of standards and accountability (Britzman, 1998).

What do standards actually measure? How can they be used to help us learn what our doing does? While testing makes it possible to fix norms (Foucault, 1995), what do test results really tell us about students, classrooms, schools, and perhaps most importantly about ourselves and our collective aspirations? More important, what “realities” are obscured or lost by an obsessive valorization of accountability defined exclusively through adherence to standards? While the answers to these questions remain unclear, newspapers continue to boldly announce that students are finally approaching the Ontario provincial standard and that achievement levels are rising, claims which

undoubtedly are worth celebrating, or are they? As an inner-city school in Toronto has a potluck party to celebrate its seven-point increase in test scores in math (*Toronto Star*, 2004), we might ask what exactly they will be celebrating? If the findings of this study are even tentatively indicative, they may be celebrating the fact that their teachers have finally learned to “teach to the test” and that students have become practiced in test taking skills.

This study suggests that in focusing attention primarily upon those things that can be counted and quantified, the language of accountability becomes compromised and we are increasingly limited in what we can see and what we can say about and in schools and classrooms. The “legitimizing” language (Meyers and Rowan, 1983) of standards, whether made manifest in a uniform curriculum or in our means for ensuring that it has been routinely learned, effectively narrows and arguably misdirects the scope of public debate about education. While the newspapers announce the low percentage of students who achieved the provincial standard on Grade 3 and Grade 6 standardized tests, they seldom question the provincial standard, what it means and might signify, and how it was established. As Kohn (2001) concludes, “what troubles me is the rarity of such discussion, the absence of questioning, the tendency to offer instruction about how to teach to the standards before we have even asked whether doing so is a sound idea” (p. 52). Despite the fact that test scores were never intended to compare and rank schools, results are nonetheless considered an objective and accurate measure of school quality and an effective means of holding schools and teachers accountable.

As Earl (1999) cautions, “we live in a culture that has come to value and depend on statistical information to inform our decisions” (p.7). Given this valorization of

statistical accounts of student achievement, it is incumbent upon us to specify the educational significance of our measures and the value of what they capture. In the end, the echo of the hallways and classrooms, the day-to-day reality of Mr. Community, Ms. Newcomer, and Ms. Special Needs, is replaced perhaps prematurely, by mythical numerical certainties that may lead us to ignore what is most significant in teaching and learning. As certainty is gained, education may be lost.

Implications for Future Research

Through a focus group and one-on-one interviews, this small scale case study sought to explore the effect of standardized curriculum and testing by focusing on the reports of three teachers working in one Ontario public school. Through exploring these reports, this study begins to map how teachers experience the professional impact of curricular uniformity and educational standards upon their daily work in schools and classrooms. As research does show that there is a difference between what teachers say and how they act in the classroom (Cohen, 1990), further more in-depth studies would benefit by corroborating teacher reports through in-depth observation of school and classroom contexts. Specifically, a future study of accountability, standards and testing practices in Ontario would benefit from a more complete study of the learning and teaching environment, through classroom and school observation, and through an ethnographic exploration of teachers' modes of sense making as they negotiate and personalize the institutional demands imposed upon them by provincial educational authorities.

As calls for greater accountability mount, we need to begin to sort out what makes accountability and assessment meaningful within the context of the public school system. We also need to more fully account for the organizational and existential complexities inherent in the educational enterprise. Perhaps most of all we need to appreciate that there are no worthwhile quick or simple responses to perennial questions of quality and accountability in education and schooling. We thus need to comprehend and to work within the multiple structural, professional, and personal ambiguities characteristic of the educational enterprise. By coming to value what is diverse as well as what is uniform, what is accidental as well as what is intended, and what is contingent as well as what is standardized, we may come to understand those aspects of education that make teaching and learning truly memorable and truly meaningful.

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Appendix A. Focus Group Questions

Demographic Information:

Grade taught:

Years of teaching at current school:

Total years of teaching experience:

Number of students in class:

Issue (Contextual Background)

1. How would you describe the student population at this school?
2. What are the most important issues that you face with students in the classroom?
3. Does the principal provide you with the support you require to do your job effectively? If so, please explain how? If not, please explain what is lacking?
4. What formal accountability measures are in place in your school?
5. Do you feel that these accountability measures are an accurate measure of your teaching? Why/why not?
6. Can you think of any impediments that prevent you from being accountable, either to students, parents or school administration?
7. As a teacher, what do you think you should be accountable for?
8. How do you know when you are doing your job well?

Issue (Teaching/Pedagogical Practices)

9. Do you feel that the standardized curriculum has impacted your teaching practices? How/why? Please describe.
10. How much flexibility do you have to modify the curriculum and your instructional practices?
11. Have you received instructional materials required to support the new curriculum? Please elaborate.
12. Do you feel that the annual standardized testing has impacted your pedagogical and classroom practices? Please elaborate.

13. Do you feel that the results of this testing are an accurate reflection of your students' abilities? Why/why not?
14. What use do you make of these tests in the classroom? With individual students?

Issue (Student Population)

15. How have mandated changes impacted your day-to-day relationships with students?
16. Do you feel that mandated requirements meet the needs of your student population? Why/why not?
17. Who, in your opinion, benefits the most from these changes to curriculum and assessment?
18. Who loses out the most from these changes to curriculum and assessment?
19. Can you think of any curriculum and assessment reforms that would better meet the needs of students?

Appendix B. Interview Questions

Students

1. How would you describe the student population at this school?
2. What are the most important issues that you face with students in the classroom?
3. In your opinion, do you believe that the current education system provides quality educational opportunities for all students? Please elaborate. Do you think that this was done better before?
4. The goal of Catholic education is to educate the whole child, mind, body, heart and soul. Could you describe the relationship between Ontario's standardized practices (curriculum and testing) and the goals of Catholic education. Can you think of any impediments that you face as a teacher to attaining this goal?
5. How do you believe that your classroom is different than the average public education classroom?
6. How should schools be organized to best support student learning?

Teachers

7. How do you feel about teaching today, as compared to five years ago?
8. In the last five years, what would you say has had the biggest impact on your classroom teaching (pedagogy not content)? Please elaborate.
9. In the focus group you mentioned that getting through the curriculum becomes a "balancing act". Could you please elaborate upon this further—how do you juggle the demands of the curriculum with the needs of your students? Is anything lost along the way?
10. In the focus group you also mentioned that in the tested subjects (math and language arts), you have had to change your teaching style to better align with the teaching style articulated in the testing—Could you provide a few examples of the types of changes you have had to make.
11. Have you ever disagreed with board or ministry policy? If so, what did you do? Why?
12. What factors do you believe have influenced how you feel about provincial standards (curriculum and testing)? Have your beliefs or attitudes changed at all? If so, to what do you attribute the change?

13. As a teacher, what are you accountable for?
14. To whom are you accountable?
15. Do you feel that these accountability measures are an accurate measure of your teaching? Why/why not?
16. As a teacher, what do you think you should be accountable for?
17. Can you think of any impediments that prevent you from being accountable, either to students, parents or school administration?
18. How do you know when you are doing your job well?

School and Community

19. How would you describe the climate/culture of this school?
20. Can you think of any ways that the climate/culture has changed in the last few years? Please describe.
21. What types of support and/or resources do you receive that help you do your job effectively? What type of support do you believe is missing? Please provide examples.
22. What types of differences has your principal made in assisting you with your classroom teaching (given that it is a new principal)?
23. Could you describe the nature of the professional development opportunities available to you. Does this PD help you with classroom teaching? Please elaborate.
24. Do you have informal or formal opportunities to communicate with your colleagues? How would you characterize this communication?
25. Do you have sufficient opportunities to collaborate with your colleagues? Please describe the nature of these collaborations?

Board and Ministry

26. Could you please describe what you know about the Ontario government's accountability policy. What do you think about it?