

Book Review/Recension d'ouvrage

Decolonizing Educational Assessment: Ontario Elementary Students and the EQAO

by Ardavan Eizadirad

Published by Palgrave Macmillan, 2019, 255 pages

ISBN: 978-3-030-27461-0 (eBook/hardcover)

Reviewed by/ Revu par

Zuhra Abawi

University of Toronto/OISE

With the expansion of neoliberalization in K-12 education in Ontario, increasing pressure has been placed onto students, parents, teachers and administrators to achieve high scores on the Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO) assessments. However, the stress of performing well on these standardized tests is most taxing on racialized students, families and communities. High-stakes standardized tests have become scrutinized by the government through aggressive accountability mechanisms, school rankings that privilege Eurocentric epistemic norms and knowledges, while silencing Indigenous and non-European ways of knowing (Dei, 2008). Racialized children have been detrimentally impacted by the EQAO evaluations as they are culturally biased and do not accurately represent their knowledge and learning.

Decolonizing Educational Assessment: Ontario Elementary Students and the EQAO detail the experiences and encounters of racialized students, families and communities with the Grade 3 EQAO assessment. The context is specific to the Grade 3 Mathematics, Reading and Writing assessments, as there is a lack of extant research pertaining to the impacts of elementary standardized testing on racialized youth. At eight years old, Grade 3 students are still considered to be developmentally within the spectrum of the early years (Fiore, 2012). The author begins by situating himself and his journey as an educator, followed by contextual background on the research study, methods, findings, recommendations and conclusion.

The first chapter is an intimate positioning of the author and his childhood in Iran, drawing on non-Eurocentric, land-based pedagogies based on his encounters with the environment and his journey to Toronto, Canada as a new immigrant. The author's rationale

for undertaking this study is based in his social location and experience as an ‘othered’, racialized individual in the Ontario education system (Said, 1978). Chapter 2 outlines the pros and cons of standardized testing in Ontario, informed by parent perspectives and overall public opinion of significant financial resources being invested in the evaluations. While the author notes that graduation rates have increased since the inception of the EQAO, the emphasis on graduation rates mask the inequitable opportunities, barriers and stigma faced by minority students.

Chapter 3 details the historical overview that led to the implementation of the EQAO in Ontario, namely, Harris’s Progressive Conservative Party educational reforms. The reforms ushered in steep educational cuts, a culture of surveillance, and accountability measures stemming from panic that Ontario students were not performing as well as their international counterparts. Chapter 4 draws on social reproduction of power relations through discourses of racialization, such as: the achievement gap, discriminatory practices, low teacher expectations, and the push-out of marginalized identities, most notably Black males from schools through oppressive “Zero Tolerance” policy expulsions and suspensions. The author centres schools as microcosms of their communities, mired in structural, institutional and systemic racism, rather than neutral, race-less, bias-free institutions. A central component of this social reproduction is the isolation and erasure of non-Eurocentric pedagogical approaches, where students do not feel reflected or represented in the curriculum or their schools. The author draws on the disconnect, between the diversity of the Greater Toronto Area (GTA) and the overrepresentation of racialized people in non-academic fields, streaming practices, child welfare systems and incarceration rates.

Chapters 5 and 6 explore the neoliberal, market-based incentives informing curriculum as a ‘racial text’ (Pinar, Reynolds, et al. 1995) representing hegemonic norms and standards, effectively dictating what knowledge ought to be ‘mastered’ by specific ages according to Western developmentalist trajectories (Pacini-Ketchabaw & Pence, 2005). The neoliberal shift in education to align with principles of global capitalist market-economy ideology is framed by the justification of quantifiable, tangible data for the public as consumers, to engage in school choice based on rankings, another tenant of neoliberalism. The impact of this outcome-based education thus homogenizes student learning, knowledge, and narratives of competency and incompetency with limited room for children to be constructed beyond binary and oppressive labels. Competitive and high stakes environments serve to further divide, marginalize and stigmatize already oppressed communities in educational institutions.

Chapters 7 and 8 outline the author’s methodological approach. The qualitative study focuses on an exploratory Critical Race Theory (CRT) and Critical Theory (CT) framework to deconstruct the myriad ways that power operates and interplays in schools as colonial institutions. As the focal point of CRT, counter-stories are utilized to dismantle dominant normalized white narratives by re-centring displaced voices, those of racialized grade three students and families and their perspectives of the EQAO. The

author provides a biographical sketch of each of the eight case study participants and their respective social locations, implications and recommendations from each case. The findings of the study underline the disproportionately harmful experiences, barriers and obstacles to the EQAO namely, the labeling and pathologizing of racialized communities “low” and incompetent.

In Chapter 9, the author introduces his own theory of “external assessment as stereotyping” (Eizadirad, 2019, p. 175), where he poses a significant question as to whether the purpose of the EQAO is as a tool to determine and close educational gaps within a system, or rather, to accentuate them. The onslaught of equity and inclusive education policies sweeping the Province have allowed “happy diversity” (Ahmed, 2012) to flourish, while simultaneously continuing to ignore the inequitable educational opportunities of racialized students. Chapter 10 provides impactful strategies and recommendations to engage in the process of decolonizing assessment. While the author acknowledges that not all assessment is harmful, what makes the EQAO detrimental to certain identities is the way the data from the evaluations further pathologize minority students, and validate Eurocentric knowledge as the only way of knowing. The author calls for consultations and focus groups to be carried out with parents, students, teachers and community members to reimagine more holistic alternatives to colonial, high stakes standardized testing.

The author focuses most of the study and statistics specifically on the GTA, rather than the wider Ontario context. He also mentions the violence and oppression Indigenous communities have suffered as a result of settler colonialism, most notably residential schools and the ongoing removal of Indigenous children from their homes into white foster care (Blackstock, 2007; Tuck and Yang, 2012). However, he does not centre Indigenous epistemologies and elders in his discussion of decolonizing assessment. The book provides critical dialogue from a uniquely Ontario perspective to the wider conversation of re-thinking assessment from grassroots, decolonizing pedagogies that are grounded in and informed by communities.

References

- Blackstock, C. (2007). Residential Schools: Did they really close or just morph into child welfare? *Indigenous Law Journal*, 1(6), 71-78.
- Dei, G. J. S. (2008). Schooling as community: Race, schooling and the education of African youth. *Journal of Black Studies*, 38(3), 346-366.
- Fiore, L. (2012). *Assessment of young children: A collaborative approach*. New York: Routledge.
- Pacini-Ketchabaw, V., & Pence, A. (2005). The reconceptualizing movement in Canadian early childhood education, care and development. In V. Pacini-Ketchabaw; A. Pence (Eds.), *Canadian early childhood education: Broadening and deepening discussions of quality* (pp.5–20). Ottawa, ON: Canadian Child Care Federation.

- Pinar, W., Reynolds, W., Slattery, P., & Taubman, P. (1995). *Understanding curriculum: An introduction to the study of historical and contemporary curriculum discourses*. New York: Peter Lang Publishing, Incorporated.
- Said, E. W. (1978). *Orientalism*. New York, NY: Pantheon Books.
- Tuck, E., & Yang, K. W. (2012). Decolonization is not a Metaphor. *Decolonization, Indigeneity, Education, and Society*, 1(1), 1-40.