

**SIX GRADE 6 STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS  
OF THE  
ONTARIO PROVINCE-WIDE READING AND  
WRITING ASSESSMENTS**

**by**

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*A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of Master of Education*

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## **Abstract**

This qualitative study investigated Grade Six Students' Perceptions of the Ontario Province-wide Reading and Writing Assessments. The participants in the study were six Grade 6 students attending a rural school in Northwestern Ontario, and their teacher. Four themes emerged from the analysis of the qualitative data: (a) preparation for the Provincial Assessments; (b) pre-assessment perceptions; (c) cognitive, metacognitive and affective perceptions relating to test performance; and (d) post-assessment reflections.

The finding of this study suggest that the pre-assessment perceptions formed by participants may be influenced by external factors including the following: test preparation practices, their level of awareness regarding the need for testing and usage of test scores, affective responses to testing and motivation to perform. Participants' reported use of cognitive and metacognitive reading and writing strategies and their affective response to testing provided insight into perceptions that may affect test performance. Finally, post-assessment reflections suggest that participants responded easily to questions that required less controlled and more personally relevant responses. The suggested changes made by participants regarding the assessment content reflected their need for more freedom of choice and opportunities to use exercise their creativity.

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## CHAPTER ONE

### Overview of the Study

Public pressure for educational accountability has been the catalyst to bring about the use of standardized achievement tests as a primary measure of quality education. In September of 1996, as part of an education reform initiative, the Ontario Ministry of Education began conducting province-wide reading, writing, and mathematical assessments at the Grade 3, 6 and 9 levels. The assessments took the form of standardized tests as “a long term and cost-effective plan for evaluating, reporting and improving the performance of students ... [giving] everyone a clear sense of how the education system is performing and how to make it better” (Cooke, 1995). Since the inception of Ontario’s Province-wide Assessment initiative, opponents of the program have questioned whether the results of standardized tests are an accurate measure of students’ abilities. Compounding the threat to acquiring valid test results is the effect that testing has on the students because test-taking strategies, performance goals, and each student’s effort during testing are influenced by the individual’s perceptions of the test and the testing situation (Paris et al., 2000; Urdan, 1999).

Previous research studies on perceptions about standardized assessments have focused primarily on the perceptions of teachers (Moore, 2000) and parents (Urdan & Paris, 1994). The studies of students’ perceptions toward standardized testing that have been conducted are based in the United States and largely quantitative in nature (Paris et al., 2000; Urdan, 1999; Wheelock et al., 1999).

This study provides insight into six Grade 6 students’ perceptions of the Ontario Province-wide Reading and Writing Assessments. The findings of this study were based on qualitative data



gathered via open-ended interviews conducted with students from one classroom who attended an elementary school in Northwestern Ontario. Respondents were a purposeful sample (Patton, 2002), nominated by the teacher.

### **Research Questions**

The following research questions were informed by existing research on students' perceptions of standardized testing (Paris, 2000; Paris, Roth & Turner, 2000; Roth Paris & Turner, 2000; Urdan, 1999; Wong & Paris, 2000):

- 1.1 What are students' perceptions regarding the value of the Ontario Province-wide Reading and Writing Assessments?
- 1.2 What is the nature of students' motivation prior to testing?
- 1.3 What test-taking strategies do students use during testing?
2. What are the emotional effects of the Ontario Province-wide Reading and Writing Assessments on students?

### **Personal Ground**

An experienced elementary school teacher, I have been interested in investigating students' perceptions of the Ontario Province-wide Assessment Program since its inception in 1996. Because I am a strong believer in a socioconstructivist approach to learning (von Glasersfeld, 1995), I question the ethics of conducting such assessments upon young children, and wonder whether scores derived from such assessments are a true reflection of students' cognitive abilities. In this respect, my skepticism is consistent with a socioconstructivist approach to learning. As Kanselaar (2002) has stated, this approach is based on

students' active participation and critical thinking regarding a learning activity that they find relevant and engaging. They are constructing their own knowledge by testing ideas and approaches based on their prior knowledge and experience, applying these to a new

situation, an integrating the new knowledge gained with pre-existing intellectual constructs. (<http://www.edu.fss.uu.nl/medewerkers/gk/files/Constructivism-gk.pdf>) Learners, therefore, are not passive but active. In addition, importance is placed on whole activities as opposed to isolated skill exercises whereby the end result of such an activity is a measure other than a grade or test score. Together and individually, “students have many choices as to what they will do and learn, which enables them to take significant responsibility for their learning ... the teacher guides, supports and structures the children’s learning as needed” (<http://www.ncte.org/wlu/FactSheetNature.htm>). Based on my experience as an elementary school teacher and my beliefs, I chose to investigate students’ perceptions about the Reading and Writing portion of the Provincial Assessments.

### **Rationale**

Public pressure for educational accountability has led to generalized use of standardized achievement tests as a primary measure of the quality education. The Ontario Province-wide Assessment Program is the responsibility of the Ministry appointed Education, Quality, and Accountability Office (E.Q.A.O.), which develops and distributes standardized reading, writing, and mathematical tests to students in Grades 3 and 6 in schools across Ontario. The results of these tests (along with those for Grades 9 and 10) are published annually for public consumption. The test results, initially intended for the use of assessing the Province’s performance as a whole, are now being used to compare the performance of students, teachers, and school boards. In addition, the stakes are becoming higher. A recent announcement of Ontario’s New Expanded Testing Program indicated that tests would involve the following design:

Students from Grades 3 through 11 ...[will be] tested in two core subjects each year.

These new tests and test questions will enable teachers across the province to more

consistently evaluate student learning and determine where improvements need to be made. The results of these new tests and test questions will count for 20 per cent of students' marks. (2001, <http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/general/elemsec/stdtest.pdf>)

The aforementioned shift is disconcerting, as there is evidence that “there are critical threats to the validity of achievement tests that have been ignored by policymakers. These include effects on teachers and students that undermine the accuracy of the scores” (Paris, Roth, & Turner, 2000, p. 4). The validity of test results is also threatened by the “variation in procedures among teachers and administrators in test preparation and test administration” (Paris et al., 2000, p. 3).

Research on students' perceptions or views about standardized testing has been conducted primarily in the United States and is largely quantitative in design. Several researchers have recommended that further research into perceptions should use a qualitative design that includes individual and group interviews (Lam & Bordignon, 2001; Paris, 2000; Paris et. al., 2000; Roth et. al., 2000; Urdan, 1991; Wong & Paris, 2000). In addition, Weinstein (1983) argues that “it is important to assess students' views of tests because children's perceptions ... have profound influences on their achievement and motivation” (p. 288).

### **Definition of Terms**

For the purpose of the study, the following definitions of terms will be used:

*Standardized testing:* A standardized test is one that is administered under standardized conditions that specify where, when, how and for how long children may respond to the question or “prompts” (<http://www.ncrel.org/sdrs/areas/issues/students/earlycld/ea5lk3.htm>).

*Perception:* A complex process by which people select, organize, and interpret sensory stimulation into a meaningful picture of the world (Berelson & Steiner, 1964).

*Cognition:* Process or result of recognising, interpreting, judging and reasoning.

(<http://www.wilearns.com/default.asp?ap=2&Mode=Single&Letter=67>).

*Metacognition:* Knowledge about one's own cognitive system; thinking about one's own thinking. "Cognitive strategies are used to help an individual achieve a particular goal (e.g., understanding a text) while metacognitive strategies are used to ensure that the goal has been reached (e.g. quizzing one's self to evaluate one's understanding of that text)" (Livingston, 1997, <http://www.gse.buffalo.edu/fas/shuell/cep564/Metacog.htm>). Metacognition is believed to have three components: (1) planning, which involves goal setting, accessing prior knowledge, identifying personal informational sources, and selecting appropriate strategies; (2) monitoring, which involves self-questioning, reviewing and testing; (3) regulation, which involves refocusing attention, adjusting effort, and selecting alternative strategies" <http://www.ncrel.org/litweb/comp48/metacog.htm>)

*Affect:* A general term for feelings, emotions or moods (<http://www.alleydog.com/glossary/definition.cfm?term=Affect>). Affect refers to the aspects of behavior that are emotionally driven and can be positive (approach) or negative (avoidance) in nature.

### **Research Design and Methodology**

The study investigated Grade 6 students' perceptions of the Province-wide Reading and Writing Assessments. The study was a qualitative case study. The primary method of data collection was the interview, based on Patton's (2002) general interview guide approach. The general interview guide allowed the researcher to pose open-ended questions and probes to elicit responses.

The participants were six Grade 6 students from one class within a rural Elementary School in Northwestern Ontario. The students were invited to participate in individual interviews by the researcher and selected for participation by their teacher based on Patton's

(2002) purposeful sampling method. Following the analysis of the interview data, the researcher also decided to interview the participants' teacher.

All of the interviews, except for the teacher interview, were held on the same day and each lasted between twenty-five and thirty minutes in length. The interviews were audiotaped with a recorder and then transcribed over a two-day period the week following the interviews. In this study, the researcher used Bogdan's and Bilken's (2003) constant comparative method to identify codes, categories and themes within the data. The interviews were analysed to find emerging, recurring patterns upon which codes were assigned to the specific categories that emerged around identified themes.

The investigation was ongoing and a research log was kept to record methodological decisions, observations, reflections and emerging patterns. Permission to conduct research in the field was sought by the Research Ethics Board, Lakehead University, as well as the school's board and principal. The ethical considerations for informed consent were based on Ethics Guidelines of the Research Ethics Board, Lakehead University.

### **Significance and Delimitations of the Study**

#### ***Significance***

Although a substantial amount of research has been conducted into the practice of standardized testing, investigations into stakeholders' perceptions about standardized testing has been minimal. The research that does exist primarily focuses on the perceptions of teachers (Moore, 2000), and parents (Urduan & Paris, 1999). The few studies that have investigated students' perceptions (Paris et al., 2000) are largely quantitative in nature and have been conducted in the United States.

This study investigated six Grade 6 students' perceptions of the Ontario Province-wide Reading and Writing Assessments. Based on the qualitative design, this study is significant as it

provides detailed insight into participants' pre-assessment predictions, affective state, perception of test utility and the nature of their motivation for taking the tests. The findings also illuminate participants' use of cognitive and metacognitive test-taking strategies and affective state during testing and provide insight into specific areas of the tests in which students experienced ease and difficulty.

### ***Delimitations***

The study was limited to six Grade 6 students in the same class of one school in Northwestern Ontario. Individual interviews were the sole means of data collection for this study. The trustworthiness of the findings depended on students' abilities to articulate their ideas, their stages of cognitive and metacognitive development, and their willingness to express perceived beliefs and feelings. In addition, due to the small sample size, generalized statements about the data cannot be made, though the data may be transferable. The study, however, was an attempt to allow students to express and describe their perceptions of the Province-wide Reading and Writing Assessments with as few restrictions as possible. Data collected were the participants' retrospective perceptions of the Reading and Writing Assessments.

An overview of the purpose, rationale, definition of terms, design, methodology, significance and delimitations has been provided in this chapter. The following chapter presents a literature review that focuses on the following: large-scale standardized testing, self-determination theory, the Ontario Province-wide Reading and Writing Assessments, intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, cognitive and metacognitive perceptions and, affective perception.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Literature Review

The first section of the review of the literature provides a description of large-scale testing and the Ontario Province-wide Reading and Writing Assessments. The remaining three sections describe the research that informs our understanding of students' perceptions of test taking: self-determination theory, intrinsic and extrinsic motivation; cognition and metacognition relative to test performance; affective perceptions.

Few researchers to date have conducted studies of students' views of standardized testing. The foundation for the following review of the literature is based primarily on research conducted in the United States by Paris and his colleagues (Paris, Roth & Turner, 2000; Roth, Paris & Turner, 2000; Wong & Paris, 2000), Urdan (1999), and Wheelock, Bebell and Haney (1999).

#### *Large-Scale Standardized Testing*

The use of standardized testing as the primary means of evaluating student performance has long been questioned in both Canada and the United States (Casas & Meaghan, 2001; Lam & Bordignon, 2001; MacDonald, 2002). The move toward high-stakes, large-scale testing in the United States and the suggestion of Canada's adopting the same high-stakes practice (Lindgren, 1999) have provoked many researchers to investigate the reliability and validity of such testing practices.

The validity and reliability of standardized tests come into question as these tests are commercially constructed, administered on a large scale, and are usually multiple-choice in design (Paris, 2000). Resnick and Resnick (1990) report, "Higher level thinking skills, such as

the ability to organize and utilize knowledge across domains, make inferences, and engage in complex planning and self-monitoring are essential components of learning that are usually not assessed by standardized, multiple-choice achievement tests” (as cited in Paris et al., 2000, p. 27). Research focusing on large-scale assessments has determined that, for an assessment tool to be considered ‘good’, the information gathered through the use of such a tool should facilitate “accurate estimates of student performance and enable teachers or other decision makers to make appropriate decisions” ([http://www.ncrel.org/sdrs/areas/stw\\_esys/4assess.htm](http://www.ncrel.org/sdrs/areas/stw_esys/4assess.htm), p.2). Characteristics of a good assessment tool satisfy the concepts of test validity (that is, whether the assessment tool measures what it purports to measure) and test reliability (that is, whether the same student writing the same test would achieve the same assessment result if the test were given at some other time, under different conditions, and scored by different raters). Critical threats to the validity of large-scale standardized tests include the following: test bias (Froese-Germain, 2001); test score pollution through divergent teaching and administration (Froese-Germain, 2001; Haladyna, Nolen, & Haas, 1991; Paris et al., 2000); test-related anxiety (Froese-Germain, 2001); inadequate representation of test results in the media (Simner, 2000); and students’ beliefs about achievement tests because test-takers’ perceptions influence their motivation, effort, and strategies (Paris et al, 2000; Urdan, 1999).

Attaching higher stakes to results of standardized tests has far greater consequences for test-takers, teachers, administrators, and schools as a whole. Reports of student achievement are publicly reported so that tax-payers in particular can compare the performance of students, schools, districts and states. Many districts and states administer such tests on a yearly basis in the areas of reading and mathematics (Paris, 2000). The positive repercussion of high-stakes testing is that high-scoring students may receive placement in advanced classes or scholarships. Conversely, students who do poorly may be retained in a grade, required to attend summer



school, or fail to graduate from high school with an endorsed diploma (Paris, 2000). As stakes become more consequential for students, the pressure to prepare and perform well increase proportionally. This cycle leads to legitimate effort by some students but questionable practices by others.

In certain American jurisdictions, schools that repeatedly perform below the state mean on mandated standardized tests can experience various detrimental effects, including staff and program cuts, reductions in teachers' salaries, career progression (removal of teachers unwilling to improve their teaching practices), and negative financial resource allocation (Froese-Germain, 2001; Paris, 2000). As with schools involved with non high-stakes testing, in schools subjected to standardized state- or provincially- mandated testing, a considerable variability in test preparation exists. Nolen, Haladyna, and Haas (1992) surveyed 2000 teachers in Arizona, and reported the following findings:

Two thirds of the teachers admit teaching or reviewing topics covered by the test before students take the tests. They also found that 40% of the teachers use commercial test preparation materials, 25% teach the vocabulary words in the test, and 10% teach the actual items on the current test. (as cited in Paris et al., 2000, p. 3)

These practices are not only unethical, but also cause pollution of the test scores by giving some students an advantage over others.

### ***Self-Determination Theory***

Current research surrounding high-stakes testing also offers what is known as the "Self-Determination Theory" [SDT] as to why high pressure, reward- and punishment- based approaches to motivating participants to perform on standardized tests will inevitably fail. According to SDT researchers, "the effects of assessments on human motivation depend on the psychological meaning, or functional significance, [that] the assessments have for the individuals

being tested” ([http://www.psych.rochester.edu/SDT/cont\\_testing.html](http://www.psych.rochester.edu/SDT/cont_testing.html), p. 2). Functional significance of an externally imposed test can be perceived by participants as one of three domains: informational, controlling, or amotivating.

Assessments that are deemed to have informational significance provide for the test-taker relevant, supportive feedback based on their results. These types of assessments have a positive effect on self-motivation in that feedback “points the way to being more effective in meeting challenges or becoming more competent, and does so without pressuring or controlling the individuals” ([http://www.psych.rochester.edu/SDT/cont\\_testing.html](http://www.psych.rochester.edu/SDT/cont_testing.html), p. 2). The opposite form of this type of assessment is one that involves controlling significance. Standardized tests fall into this category because attached to the test results is a pressure toward specific outcomes in which evaluators have controlled the activity and essentially the efforts of the test-takers. Evaluations that have controlling significance “tend to produce compliance and rote memorization, but they ultimately undermine self-motivation, investment, and commitment in the domain of activity being evaluated” ([http://www.psych.rochester.edu/SDT/cont\\_testing.html](http://www.psych.rochester.edu/SDT/cont_testing.html), p. 2). Finally, amotivating assessments are perceived by test-takers as either academically difficult or not challenging enough and “undermine motivation and lead to withdrawal of effort” ([http://www.psych.rochester.edu/SDT/cont\\_testing.html](http://www.psych.rochester.edu/SDT/cont_testing.html), p. 2).

Grolnick and Ryan (1987) conducted a study in which students were to engage in a reading comprehension task under three conditions. In the first condition, students were told that they were not being tested. The second condition was informational; students were told they were being tested, but only to assess what they had learned without any consequences for failure or success. The final condition was controlling; students were told that they were being tested and that their grades would go to their classroom teachers. Results demonstrated that controlling evaluations, “promoted short term, rote memory with a lower level of conceptual

learning and knowledge integration” (pp. 890-898) than the other two, non-controlling situations.

Research surrounding the self-determination theory suggests that assessments can have a negative effect on students’ interest, motivation, and task engagement when they are used or are perceived to be controlling or amotivating ([http://www.psych.rochester.edu/SDT/cont\\_testing.html](http://www.psych.rochester.edu/SDT/cont_testing.html)). Ryan and Deci (2000) note that, “because extrinsically motivated behaviors are not inherently interesting ... the primary reason people are likely willing to do the behaviors is that they are valued by significant others whom they feel (or would like to feel) connected, whether that be a family, peer group or society” (p. 64). In addition, Anderman and Midgley (1997) found that, “for young adolescent students with increased cognitive abilities and developing sense of identity, a sense of autonomy may be particularly important. Students at this stage say that they want to be included in decision-making and have some sense of control over their activities” (as cited in Irvin, 1997, pp. 41-48). Paris (2000) also stated, “there is also considerable variability among students in their motivation, anxiety, and strategies for high-stakes tests ... standardized tests are biased to the assessment of discrete skills rather than ‘higher level’ thinking” (pp. 4, 16). Essentially, the structure and administration of the tests contradict daily teaching and learning practices, especially in schools that foster whole language literacy programs, process writing, and cooperative learning (Paris, 2000).

### ***Ontario Province-wide Reading and Writing Assessments***

The main purpose of standardized testing in Canada is to assess individual students in order to make decisions about resource allocation and future educational/career direction. Results of the tests are said to “provide vital information on students’ progress, so schools and school boards can make adjustments and target resources to help ensure student success” (<http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/general/elemsec/stdtest.pdf>). The Ontario Reading and Writing Assessments are designed to test students’ levels of achievement in the areas of reasoning, communication, organization of ideas and application of language conventions (<http://www.eqao.com>). Students are not obliged to pass the Reading and Writing Assessments until Grade 10. Students in Grades 3 and 6 are required to take the Province-wide Assessments over a two-week period in May, as directed by the Education Quality and Accountability Office. The specific days the assessments are administered are left to the discretion of the classroom teachers, but all teachers must follow explicitly the guidelines for administration. The content (but not the format) of the reading and writing tests changes from year to year, but all participants across Ontario take the same test in any given year.

Completed test booklets are returned to the E.Q.A.O. office in Toronto, where trained evaluators (only some of whom are certified teachers) mark the assignments over a three-week period. Results are made public, and students’ scoring sheets are forwarded to the administrators of participating schools.

The test structure, format, and guidelines for test administration, however, are inconsistent with the way in which teachers customarily encourage children to explore or approach reading and writing activities on a daily basis (*The Ontario Curriculum, Grades 1-8: Language*, 1997). Paris, Roth, and Turner (2000) explain that, in language arts classes, “children are taught to use strategies such as building background knowledge through discussion

[and feedback], using dictionaries, seeking help ... but paradoxically ... these strategies are not permitted within standardized achievement testing situations” (p. 28). The aforementioned testing practices could have contributed to the negative feedback provided by Ontario teachers in response to the Ontario College of Teachers’ first opinion poll about standardized testing practices. The poll found that 90% of Ontario teachers believe that standardized tests do not improve student learning; furthermore, that equally large majorities feel the tests are not effective tracking devices for student success (88%) or for schools (92%) (Smyth, 2003). Teachers also expressed concerns that the testing does not coincide with daily curricula and that the practice of testing adds more stress to parents and students. The poll, based on telephone interviews with public and private school teachers, contradicts what is reported in the E.Q.A.O.’s 2002-2003 “Highlights of Provincial Achievement Results” regarding how teachers and administrators perceive and utilize the test results for improvement:

Principals reported that they use the Grades 3 and 6 assessment results to determine where instructional and professional resources are needed and to revise school improvement or school action plans. Teachers reported they use the Grades 3 and 6 assessment results to identify areas of weakness in order to plan instructional improvements, to show their students what good work looks like, to develop their own assessments and to prepare students for Provincial Assessments. (<http://www.eqao.com>)

### ***Students’ Intrinsic and Extrinsic Motivation***

Paris and his colleagues conducted a series of studies on students’ perceptions of standardized tests. In one study, Wong and Paris (2000) investigated variability in students’ motivational perceptions toward standardized testing. They found that students who are intrinsically motivated to perform well on standardized tests likely do so for the following reasons: (1) students value the test and their scores as a true reflection of intelligence; (2) a

desire to pass the test as the test, itself, is perceived to be important; (3) they believe the test helps them learn. Conversely, students who are extrinsically motivated to perform have test perceptions that include the following: (1) punishment if they do not do well; and (2) wanting to do well to make the teacher look good. Wong and Paris (2000) also reported that negative perceptions (e.g., believing the test is an invalid measure of students' knowledge; having a negative attitude toward the testing situation; and feeling that there are no negative consequences for doing poorly on the test) could influence motivation.

Standardized testing, which would include the Ontario Province-wide Reading and Writing Assessments for Grades 3, 6, and 9, exerts a different kind of stress on students from the stress students associate with regular classroom tests or daily seatwork (Wong & Paris, 2000). Students who experience test anxiety are less likely to believe that they will be capable of performing well during testing, thus negatively affecting motivation (Hansford & Hattie, 1982; Atkinson, 1964) and test performance (Urdu, 1999). In addition, older students who have had more experience and repeated exposure to standardized testing harbour more negative views about testing than younger counterparts; moreover, older students tend to lack the motivation to put forth their best effort (Karmos & Karmos, 1984; Paris, Lawton & Turner, 1991; Paris Roth & Turner, 2000; Wong & Paris, 2000). Urdu (1999) reported similar findings to Paris and his colleagues when he investigated students' motivational beliefs about a standardized test known as the Iowa Test of Basic Skills. He sampled 111 fifth graders, 156 seventh graders, and 262 eighth graders before and after they wrote the test. Using a survey designed to investigate their motivation in terms of value, self-concept, preparedness, and perception, he found that fifth graders took the tests more seriously, valued the test results, and exhibited greater anxiety toward testing than students in Grades 7 and 8. Grade 8 students were found to have a more

cynical attitude toward testing, less faith in the validity of results, and less confidence that increased motivation would lead to greater test success.

Test-takers' perceptions, particularly as these relate to intrinsic motivation and ability, are influential in a testing situation because "if students, teachers, or administrators believe that the results of an examination are important, it matters very little whether this is really true or false—the effect is produced by what individuals perceive to be the case" (Madaus, 1988, p. 88).

Extrinsic perceptions also have an effect on students' motivation. Students can receive a variety of mixed messages from teachers, parents, administrators, and the media regarding the importance of standardized testing (Froese-Germain, 2001), thereby influencing their motivation to succeed. External messages received can be conflicting. Some teachers, through their curriculum, may emphasize and encourage students to perform to the best of their abilities by "focusing on reading, writing and mathematics (in order to ensure students are ready for testing) at the expense of other subjects" (Froese-Germain, 2001, p. 114). Students who are encouraged and motivated within the school setting may be discouraged at home by parents who are exposed to "inadequate representation of test results by politicians and the media and inadequate explanation of test results to the public" (Froese-Germain, 2001, p. 117). In Wong and Paris' (2000) investigation of fourth graders' motivation toward the reading portion of a particular standardized test known as the Michigan Educational Assessment Program, they found that 64% wanted to do their best because of extrinsic factors while only 12% were driven by intrinsic factors. Variance in students' intrinsic and extrinsic motivation can, therefore, have an effect on students' performance on standardized assessments.

### ***Cognitive and Metacognitive Perceptions***

Cognition refers to one's knowledge or, more specifically, one's ability to recognize, interpret, judge, and reason about a certain situation or phenomenon (<http://www.wilearns.com>

/default.asp?ap=2&Mode=Single&Letter=67). Metacognition refers to higher order thinking or the process of employing strategies “which involve active control over cognitive processes engaged in learning. Activities such as planning how to approach a given learning task, monitoring comprehension and evaluating process to the completion of a task are metacognitive in nature” (Livingston, 1997, <http://www.gse.buffalo.edu/fas/shuell/cep564/Metacog.htm>).

In the first of three studies conducted by Paris and his colleagues to investigate students' perceptions about standardized achievement testing, Paris et al. (2000) asked participants from Grades 2 to 11 to rate items on a questionnaire. The students, who believed that the tests and scores were useful, demonstrated the use of metacognitive strategies during test-taking. In addition to using metacognitive strategies, younger students, had the cognitive belief that good test scores demonstrated that they were good students, and that the scores were useful for both the school and their families. Older students were more pessimistic about the value of the scores and information derived from the test. Consequently, older students generally did not believe that the tests were a good measure of intelligence; they stated they did not put forth their best effort, and that they had not employed good metacognitive strategies during test taking.

In a second study, Wong and Paris (2000) examined perceptions of high and low achieving students in Grades 4, 7 and 10 toward the reading portion of the Michigan Educational Assessment Program. They collected data using open-ended interviews coupled with Likert response questions both structured to examine and compare participants' views of regular classroom tests and standardized tests. The researchers chose participants from these three grades to also examine whether students perceived tests differently based on their grade levels. Of the 240 students that participated in the study, most reported that they tried hard when it came time to write the M.E.A.P. and didn't think the test was difficult or confusing. However, significant differences in perception were exhibited among older children. Findings revealed that



8% of tenth graders thought the test was a good measure of reading, but only 36% of tenth graders reported that they tried to do their best; only 1% reported that they had checked their answers; 46% reported that they filled in bubbles without thinking; and 17% reported that they got bored and did not bother reading the entire passage. The results suggested that older students involved in this study were not employing metacognitive or positive test-taking strategies when writing the standardized test. Data collected from both studies revealed what researchers have deemed a “developing disillusionment”: as students increased in age and grade placement, a shift in their cognitive and metacognitive strategies regarding standardized testing was evident. The final of the three studies entitled “Students Perceived Utility and Reported Use of Test Taking Strategies” by Roth, Paris and Turner (2000) is a two-part research study that provides insights into the cognitive and metacognitive strategies associated with students’ perceptions of standardized testing.

In part one of the study, Roth et al. (2000) investigated the test-taking strategies of four groups of participants: group one consisted of students in Grades 2, 3 and 4; group two, Grades 5 and 6; group three, Grades 7 and 8 students; and group four, Grades 9, 10 and 11 students. A survey describing ten positive and ten negative test-taking strategies was administered to the students. They were instructed to rate each strategy on a five-point scaled ranging from “a lot like me” to “not at all like me.” The results of the survey indicated that students, regardless of grade, infrequently used positive or negative test-taking strategies. Older students in Grades 9, 10, and 11 reported more negative metacognitive test-taking strategies, including randomly filling in answers as a consequence of fatigue, guessing or confusing questions, finishing but not checking answers, attempting to cheat, and focusing on one question for a long period of time if they got stuck.

The second part of the study conducted by Roth et al. (2000) “asked students to judge the frequency with which they use various strategies while taking standardized tests and judge the impact of these strategies on their scores” (p. 10). The rationale behind the second part of the study was to focus on the reported use and metacognitive understanding about strategies used on standardized tests of reading achievement. The researchers posed thirty questions about strategies and thirty questions about the value of strategies to 129 fourth grade students who represented a range of academic achievement. Findings indicated that, across all achievement levels, all students reported using some positive metacognitive strategies such as answering first the questions to which they knew the answers, going back and checking answers, and looking at other questions for clues if they didn’t know the answer immediately. The researchers also found a strong correlation between students’ having positive perceptions of strategy utility and their reported use of metacognitive test-taking strategies. Students identified as low achievers and average students reported using negative strategies during testing more than did high achievers. Negative strategies included the following: filling in bubbles without reading the story, forgetting about time limits, answering questions quickly to be the first in the class to finish, not checking answers, attempting to cheat, and getting stuck on one question for long periods of time.

Based on the findings of parts one and two of the study, Roth, Paris and Turner (2000) offer two explanations for the differences between types of strategies across age and ability levels. The first explanation centres around students’ metacognitive awareness and the second on students’ motivation. The researchers reported that “young students avoided negative strategies whereas older students used them, a finding inconsistent with better metacognition with age and experience” (p. 17). They suggest that lower achieving students may not recognize either the link between the use of metacognitive strategies and better test performance, or the harm of using negative strategies during test taking. Motivation, the researchers suggest, affects the use of

metacognitive or positive strategies. Using positive strategies requires additional effort on the part of test-takers and may be perceived by older and higher achieving students as “time-consuming, boring or unnecessary” (p. 18). The researchers explain the increased use of negative strategies by older students as either their way of saving time and energy or possibly a result of their belief that “the achievement test is not important enough to warrant the effort” (p. 18). Inquiring into participants’ cognitive and metacognitive perceptions of test-taking strategies may provide insight into students’ performances on the Provincial Reading and Writing Assessments.

### ***Affective Perceptions***

Affective perceptions can be defined as a combination of one’s feelings, emotions and self-esteem (<http://www.alleydog.com/glossary/definition.cfm?term=Affect>). Paris et al. (2000) contend that research on the influence of affective responses to standardized testing is important, based on their finding that, when one’s self-perception is positive and that individual feels confident in a given situation, the motivation to perform is enhanced.

Caine and Caine (1991) stress the importance of fostering a positive emotional climate within a school and classroom: “What we learn is influenced and organized by emotions and mind sets based on expectancy, personal biases and prejudices, degree of self-esteem, and the need for social interaction” (p. 82). In order to facilitate optimal student performance, the students’ environment must be a place that is supportive, open to student reflection and mutual respect, and positive. The structured and inflexible administration of the Province-wide Reading and Writing Assessments, as with other standardized testing situations, may result in negative emotional responses having a negative impact upon a student’s test performance. Bradford (1997), through investigating ways to motivate students to write creatively, found:

Students rarely respond well to writing prompts which monopolize their cognitive, linear capacities while ignoring creative strategies and affective approaches to writing and

thinking... the more writers are able to utilize their creative capacities in producing tests, the more they will simply enjoy the task in and of itself. (p. 12)

Wheelock, Bebell, and Haney (2000) investigated students' perceptions and affective responses to high-stakes testing using drawings as the method for data collection. Four hundred and eleven students in Grades 4, 8, and 10 were asked to draw a picture of themselves taking the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System test. The researchers found that 40% of their subjects cited negative responses to testing; these students reported anxiety (13.4%), anger and hostility (10 %), boredom (4.9%); the remaining students (1.7%) reported sadness, disappointment, pessimism, loss of motivation, and withdrawal (<http://www.csteep.bc.edu/drawoned/mcas/abstract.html>). Paris et al. (2000), in their study of "Students' Perceptions toward Standardized Achievement Tests," outline the effects that negative affective perceptions can have on testing:

Students who are confident and optimistic about themselves and value the test avoid counterproductive strategies to do their best. Students who are anxious about themselves and the outcomes of the test apparently undermine their own performance with less effort and mindless, or at least thought-avoiding tactics. (p. 12)

Studying students' affective responses to the Ontario's Province-wide Reading and Writing Assessments may give greater insight into the relationship between a student's affective perceptions and performance.

In summary, there exists a large body of literature investigating the fairness, validity, and reliability of large-scale standardized testing, though a majority of the studies have been based in the United States (Froese-Germain, 2001; Haladyna et al., 1991; Paris et al., 2000). In the last few years, researchers in the U. S. have turned their investigative focus to students' perceptions toward standardized testing in order to determine how their perceptions affect test performance,

test score validity, and reliability (Paris et al., 2000; Urdan, 1999). The studies that have investigated students' perceptions are primarily based on high-stakes testing in the U.S., and are mostly quantitative in design. The purpose of this study was to investigate students' perceptions of the Ontario Province-wide Reading and Writing Assessments using a qualitative design. Further research on students' perceptions about standardized testing is important as findings to date suggest that perceptions can have an effect on test performance, thus undermining the validity and reliability of test scores.

The next chapter focuses on the research design and methodology for data collection, analysis, and interpretation.

## **CHAPTER THREE**

### **Research Design and Methodology**

This was a qualitative study aimed at investigating Grade 6 students' perceptions of the Ontario Province-wide Reading and Writing Assessments. The chapter describes research design, data analysis, and ethical considerations.

#### **Theoretical Foundation of the Research Design and Methodology**

Qualitative research in education serves to reveal individual experiences of some educational phenomenon. The focus of the qualitative researcher in an open-ended interview situation is to access the unobservable perspectives of those being interviewed. Patton (2002) indicates that “qualitative interviewing begins with the assumption that the perspectives of others are meaningful, knowable, and able to be made explicit” (p. 278).

The researcher chose qualitative inquiry as the primary research method for two reasons: (1) almost of the existing research into students' perceptions has been largely quantitative in nature; and (2) the nature of the research questions centre around each participant's personal test-taking experience. In order to comprehend an individual's experience is to afford him or her the opportunity to express thoughts and feelings with as few restrictions or limitations as possible.

#### **Research Design**

The study was a qualitative case study design. The primary method of data collection consisted of conducting individual interviews with six Grade 6 students. The students were from the same classroom within an elementary school in Northwestern Ontario. The interviews were developed based on Patton's (2002) general interview guide approach, allowing the researcher

to pose open-ended questions and probes to elicit responses. During the interviews, notes were taken to record observations, reflections, and methodological decisions.

### ***Research Questions***

The following research questions were derived from existing research on students' perceptions of standardized testing (Paris, 2000; Paris, Roth & Turner, 2000; Roth Paris & Turner, 2000; Urdan, 1999; Wong & Paris, 2000) and represent the basis for the study:

- 1.1 What are students' perceptions of the value of the Ontario Province-wide Reading and Writing Assessments?
- 1.2 What is the nature of students' motivation prior to testing?
- 1.3 What test-taking strategies do students use during testing?
2. What are the emotional effects of the Ontario Province-wide Reading and Writing Assessments on students?

### ***Time Frame***

The Reading and Writing Assessments took place over a two-week period in May, 2003. The six students nominated for this study were each interviewed on the same day, three days following the last day of the Provincial Assessments. Each interview lasted approximately one half-hour and was audiotaped. The tapes were transcribed over a two-day period one week following the day of interviews. A review of the literature and contributions to the research log were ongoing.

### ***Participants***

The six participants for the study were nominated by their Grade 6 teacher to participate in individual interviews following the Province-wide Reading and Writing Assessments. The sampling method used to select the six participants for individual interviews was based on

Patton's (2002) purposeful sampling method. On the basis of the following criteria, the teacher nominated a heterogeneous group of participants:

1. Students who would be participating in the Province-wide Assessments, and had previously participated in the Grade 3 Province-wide Assessments.
2. Students who were not on Individualized Educational Plans (IEPs), as the administration of the assessments may be different for those students.

The researcher made the decision to elicit Grade 6 students' perceptions, as opposed to those of Grade 3 students, because the researcher anticipated that Grade 6 students would be better able to articulate responses to questions posed in an interview in greater depth and detail.

### ***Setting***

The interviews were conducted in the students' elementary school. The first four interviews were conducted in a vacant classroom within the school. The final two interviews had to be conducted in the school's general staff room. The informal interview with the participants' teacher took place over the phone following an analysis of the data.

### **Methodology**

The primary method for data collection was a semi-structured interview guided by a set of open-ended questions that the researcher developed prior to conducting the interview. Questions were developed to investigate perception as it pertains to motivation, cognition, metacognitive strategies, and affective response to the Province-wide Reading and Writing Assessments. The interview was developed based on Patton's (2002) general interview guide approach that involves "outlining a set of issues that are to be explored with each respondent ... the actual wording of questions to elicit responses about those issues need not be determined in advance" (p. 280). The general interview guide approach also allows the interviewer to "adapt



both the working and the sequence of questions to specific respondent in the context of the actual interview” (Patton, 1990, p. 280).

Each participant was interviewed for approximately thirty minutes, and all six interviews were conducted on the same day. Prior to beginning each interview, the researcher read aloud to each participant a verbal explanation of the study (Appendix B). The interviews were audiotaped and notes were taken by the interviewer during and immediately following each interview. One week after the participants had been interviewed, the interviews were transcribed over a two-day period. The participants’ teacher was interviewed after all of the interviews had been transcribed and analysed. Emerging categories/themes, reflections and decision-making processes were recorded in a research log as the investigation was ongoing.

### **Data Analysis**

The researcher used Bogdan and Biklen’s (2003) constant comparative method to identify codes, categories, and themes. Analysis did not begin until the interviews were transcribed. Each interview was analysed in order to identify emerging regularities and patterns (Bogdan & Bilken, 2003) in the participants’ responses. Common words and phrases served as coding categories in order to organize the data. Coding was ongoing throughout the analysis of the interviews. The example below illustrates how data were analysed and coded. The following quote was taken from the researcher’s interview with Cole:

Actually, it was kind of easy, but it was a little boring, part of it. You have like the half-hour or forty-five minutes or whatever to think about one section. You have to just sit there all day kind of by yourself. (p. 35)

This response was coded as ‘being timed-boredom’ because the respondent was expressing his feelings about being timed during the Provincial Assessments. Data with this code

were placed into the category of 'affective response to testing' which included data that indicated how participants' affective perceptions during testing related to test performance.

The coded data were then placed into categories and the categories were clustered around identified themes. For example, Cole's quote was classified in the affective response to testing category. This category was part of the theme on cognitive, metacognitive and affective perceptions relating to test performance. Table I below identifies the categories and themes developed through this study, and provides an example for each category presented.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Permission to conduct research in the field was sought by the Research Ethics Board, Lakehead University, as well as the school's board and principal. The ethical considerations for informed consent were based on Ethics Guidelines of the Research Ethics Board, Lakehead University. The participants' teacher nominated each of the Grade 6 students to participate in the study. Because of time constraints the teacher gave the six students copies of a cover letter and consent form (Appendix C) to present to their Primary Caregivers on behalf of the researcher. Informed consent to participate in the study was obtained before interviews were conducted. The letter advised Primary Caregivers of the following ethics considerations:

- Their child was a volunteer and could withdraw from the study at any time.
- There were no risks related to their child's participation and that participation would in no way affect the child's grades or assessment results.
- The data obtained would remain anonymous and confidential. Pseudonyms would be used in place of their child's name, teacher's name, and school name.
- Data will be stored at Lakehead University for a period of seven years.
- The thesis will be on file in the Education Library, and findings would be presented at educational conferences and published in journals.

- The Primary Caregiver, upon request, would receive a summary of the study

Prior to beginning the interviews, each student was read a verbal explanation (Appendix B) of the study that described the purpose of the study, as noted above.

This chapter described the research design, data analysis and ethical considerations. The following chapter presents the findings and interpretation of the findings.

Table 1.

*Categories and Themes*

Themes	Categories	Examples
Preparation for the Provincial Assessments	Reading Assessment	"The prep reading task I had done with them involved questions and the story I had photocopied from the previous year" (Mrs. Smith, p. 37)
	Writing Assessment	"I didn't (review). Just whatever writing I had done prior" (Mrs. Smith, p. 37)
Pre-assessment Perceptions	Predictions About Nature of Tests	"I sorta thought it would be more like in a language book, not a magazine" (Max, p. 4)
	Affective State Prior to Testing	"They weren't actually nervous feelings, I thought that I would be nervous but I was kind of excited" (Kate, p. 25)
	Perceptions of Test Utility	"I think they need to know if we're getting taught and if we know enough for something" (Jane, p. 21).
	Motivation	"The Luster Board of Education, teacher, Mom and Dad" (Cole, p. 34).
Cognitive, metacognitive, and affective perceptions relating to test performance	Cognitive and Metacognitive Reading Strategies	"Well I tried to read it a bit faster than how I usually would so I could get it done and, but it was alright" (Kristi, p. 10)
	Cognitive and Metacognitive Writing Strategies	"I don't think I did strategies. I just wrote" (Travis, p. 15)
	Affective Response to Testing	"Actually, it was kind of easy but it was a little boring, part of it. You have like the half-hour or forty-five minutes or whatever to think about one section. You just have to sit there all day kind of by yourself" (Cole, p. 35)
Post-assessment reflections	Reading Assessment: Areas of Ease and Difficulty	"I can't really remember, but there were some hard questions that you can't really understand. So those I just tried my hardest at it" (Kristi, p. 10)
	Writing Assessment: Areas of Ease and Difficulty	"Um, probably the editing and maybe the final draft because you just need to re-write it and just make it neater so it's nicer and that's probably it" (Kate, p.27)
	Differences between Assessments and In-Class Language Assignments	"You can ask the teacher for like lots of clarification and um you can go back in the book and kind of know it and if um you don't get it done on time you can do it at home" (Jane, p. 21)
	Suggestions for Change	"Not that much writing. Like we had to write a story and maybe if I would change it, I wouldn't have you writing a story" (Travis, p. 17)
	Advice for Upcoming Test-Takers	"There's nothing really to nervous about. It's not like these things, well, it's important but you're not going to die if you get something wrong or something" (Cole, p. 34)

## **CHAPTER FOUR**

### **Research Findings and Interpretation**

The study investigated six Grade 6 students' perceptions of the Ontario Province-wide Reading and Writing Assessments. This chapter describes the findings and interpretation of the findings. Four themes emerged from analysis of the data: preparation for the Provincial Assessments; pre-assessment perceptions; cognitive, metacognitive and affective perceptions relating to test performance; and post-assessment reflections. The chapter is organized into three sections. The first describes the Provincial Reading and Writing Assessments and the profiles of the six participants. The second details the findings, and the final section presents the interpretation of the findings.

#### **Description of the Reading and Writing Assessments**

The Provincial Reading and Writing Assessments took a total of four days spread over a two-week period. Table 2 below outlines the four-day breakdown in terms of introductory activity time and independent activity time. The format of the Reading and Writing Assessments was as follows: Each student received a nine-page magazine that was broken down into two sections. The first contained a four-page narrative entitled "Whales Beneath the Ice." The narrative was written by Janet and John Foster and details their trip to the Arctic where they whale-watched in the Inuit community known as Pond Inlet (E.Q.A.O., 2003). The second section, entitled "An Ocean Career," featured four passages pertaining to whale researchers, whale migration, tracking systems, and biographies of three whale researchers. All of the questions for the Reading and Writing Assessments were centred on these readings. Two

separate booklets, one for the Reading Assessment and one for the Writing Assessment, contained the questions and room for the participants to write their responses.

**Table 2.**

*Reading and Writing Assessment Schedule*

<b>Day</b>	<b>Reading Assessment</b>	<b>Writing Assessment</b>
One	<b>Reading #1 “Whales Beneath the Ice”</b> Introductory Activity: 10 min. Independent Activity: 50 min.	<b>Process writing (Plan)</b> Introductory Activity: 10 min. Independent Activity: 20 min.
Two	<b>Reading #1 Continued</b> Introductory Activity: 5 min. Independent Activity: 20 min.	<b>Process Writing (Draft)</b> Introductory Activity: 5 min. Independent Activity: 55 min.
Three	None	Process Writing (Self-Revision and Self-Edit) Introductory Activity: 5 min. Independent Activity: 20min.  Process Writing (Final Copy) Introductory Activity: 5 min. Independent Activity: 45 min.
Four	<b>Reading #2 An Ocean Career</b> Introductory Activity: 10 min. Independent Activity: 50 min.	<b>Writing on Demand</b> Introductory Activity: 10 min. Independent Activity: 35 min.

*Day One* – Reading Assessment: Students were instructed to read the story “Whales Beneath the Ice” and answer eight questions. Seven questions pertained specifically to the story and required answers in the form of sentences. Examples of these questions are as follows: (a) “Why is Pond Inlet a special place for Janet and John?”; (b) “What is the main idea of “Whales Beneath the Ice?”” The eighth question was broken into four parts, and involved filling in blanks with synonyms of words provided.

In the Writing Assessment portion, students were assigned the task of writing an adventure story. A three-sentence story starter outlined where the story was to take place (Pond Inlet) and what the story was to be about (an exciting discovery). The first task involved

brainstorming ideas about the exciting find and then completing a story planner (setting, characters, plot, and story title).

*Day Two* – In the Reading Assessment component, the plan for day two was a continuation of the Reading Assessment from day one. Students were assigned three questions that were to be answered in sentence or paragraph form. The first question asked students to describe the differences between a journal and a narrative. The second question involved reading a passage and identifying the purpose of the punctuation used in the passage. The final question pertained to two characters in the story and why they could be identified as “adventurous.”

Writing Assessment: A continuation of the Writing Assessment from day one. Using the story plan, students were to write the first draft of their story.

*Day Three* – Reading Assessment: None

In the Writing Assessment component, the first draft of the story was to be revised and edited, followed by the second writing activity for the day, writing the final copy.

*Day Four* – Reading Assessment: Students were instructed to read “An Ocean Career” and answer nine questions regarding the information they had just read. Examples of these questions are as follows: (a) “We share our world with whales and other creatures. How do we make sure this relationship is a positive one. Use your own ideas and information from the text to explain your answer;” (b) “Explain why the word “whales” has an apostrophe in this phrase....” Two of the questions involved identifying and explaining parts of speech used in sample sentences from the reading.

In the Writing Assessment component, students were instructed to write a letter to a whale research team in order to try to persuade the team that the student should be able to go on a special whale research expedition.

### Participant Profiles

Six participants, three girls and three boys, were nominated by their teacher to participate in this study. The following is a profile of each of the participants and their teacher, Mrs. Smith. Each student profile was provided by Mrs. Smith via a telephone interview.

*Max:* Max is an 11-year-old male who has been a student at Rockwood Elementary since he was in junior kindergarten [JK]. Max was described by his teacher as a very open, outgoing, personable, likeable yet slightly mischievous student. As a student, he is fairly conscientious but tends to rush through his work. He does not take the time to go back and check his work over upon completion. Max enjoys group work, but works well independently.

*Kristi:* Kristi is an 11-year-old female who has been a student at Rockwood Elementary since she was in JK. She was described by her teacher as a fairly quiet, reserved individual. As a student she tends not to answer questions aloud in class, and appears to lack self-confidence. She demonstrates a preference for group rather than independent work.

*Travis:* Travis is an 11-year-old male who has been a student at Rockwood Elementary since he was in JK. Travis was described as a theatrical student who likes attention, yet can be somewhat difficult at times. He experienced some social problems during the school year that affected his work. As a student he works well independently.

*Jane:* Jane is an 11-year-old girl who has been a student at Rockwood Elementary since she was in JK. Jane was described by her teacher as quiet and shy. She is studious, and frequently exceeds expectations for assignments. Her shyness may prevent her from achieving her full potential. She prefers working independently.

*Cassie:* Cassie is an 11-year-old girl who enrolled at Rockwood Elementary at the beginning of the 2002-2003 school year. She transferred from a school within the system. Initially, she was shy in the new environment, but gradually became very social. Her teacher



indicated that, although she sometimes appears to lack self-confidence, she is still eager to participate. She works well in a group, and has learned to work independently as the year has progressed.

*Cole:* Cole is an 11-year-old male who has been a student at Rockwood Elementary since he was in JK. Cole's parents emigrated here from Trinidad. Cole was born and raised in this city. His teacher described him as confident and outgoing. He is intellectually capable, but sometimes does not take time to revise his assignments. He is under great pressure from home to do well in school. He enjoys working in group situations, yet prefers to work independently when given the option.

*Mrs. Smith:* Mrs. Smith, the participants' Grade 6 teacher, has taught with the school board for four years. During her two years with the school board, she was an occasional teacher. During her third year, she taught a Grade 3/4 class and was responsible for administering the Province-wide Reading and Writing Assessments to the third grade students. This is Mrs. Smith's first year teaching a Grade 5/6.

### **Research Findings**

Four themes emerged from the analysis of the qualitative data: preparation for the Provincial Assessments; pre-assessment perceptions; cognitive, metacognitive, and affective perceptions relating to test performance; and post-assessment reflections. Each theme is discussed below.

#### ***Preparation for the Provincial Assessments***

The first theme describes the extent to which Mrs. Smith, the participants' Grade 6 teacher prepared the participants for taking the Reading and Writing Assessments.

The Luster Board of Education had forwarded to all teachers administering the Grade 6 Assessments a procedural plan for a practice review. Teachers were instructed to follow an

outline of weekly reading and writing review plans, for a total of eight weeks, to help prepare students for the tests.

*Reading Assessment.* The review Mrs. Smith conducted for the Reading Assessment was as follows:

The prep. reading task I had done with them involved questions and the story I had photocopied from the previous year. I took the story from the magazine booklet that came with the package, only I didn't have enough booklets so I had to photocopy the story. The questions were very similar to this year's test. There was some multiple choice, or fill in the blanks, or selecting the correct answer. Then there were activities related to grammar type things. Pulling stuff out of the story to answer those questions. Then there were two, I believe, comprehensive type questions. It was exactly like what they were given; only the magazine was not included. (p. 37)

She also makes the point that the practice test was different in content and format from the actual test. The practice review included a narrative "as opposed to this year where they were given reading that was more informational. Part informational ... part short story" (Mrs. Smith, p. 37).

*Writing Assessment.* Upon being asked about the review that Mrs. Smith did in order to prepare her students for the Writing Assessment, she stated: "I didn't [review]. Just whatever writing I had done because, well I certainly had a First Steps narrative done" (p. 37). First Steps is a writing program that teachers must follow throughout the year. The program outlines forms of writing that teachers must cover with their students before the end of the school year. When asked specifically whether she had done letter writing with her students that year, she responded: "Yes, we had actually. That was one of the writing assignments I had chosen to do

with them, not knowing that it would be part of the upcoming testing. That was just something I would have done with the kids anyway” (p. 37).

The first theme identified the practice review that was done with the students prior to beginning the Provincial Assessments. The second theme, pre-assessment perceptions, is discussed below.

### ***Pre-assessment Perceptions***

The second theme describes the participants’ retrospective perceptions of the Reading and Writing Assessments prior to beginning the Provincial testing. The participants’ pre-assessment perceptions were similar in the following areas: (1) predictions of upcoming testing; (2) affective state prior to testing; (3) perceptions of test utility; and (4) motivation.

*Predictions about Nature of Tests.* When participants were asked to describe their perceptions of the Reading and Writing Assessments prior to taking them and how these perceptions differed from the actual test, participants mentioned forms of writing, amount of writing, and test format. Three of the five participants commented on the unexpected format of the tests:

- Um, well for the reading I sorta thought it would be more in a language book, not a magazine ... or like a print out copy. (Max, pp. 4, 5)
- I thought we’d have to write it all in our books and didn’t know that we would have to write on separate pieces of paper. (Jane, p. 19)
- I didn’t know there was going to be a magazine we’d have to read after like to look off of. I thought it would be just on the sheet like on the [practice] test so I wasn’t so sure, but it was O.K. (Kate, p. 26)

The same three participants, as well as Kristi and Cole, also commented on the forms and amount of writing required. Max indicated that the amount of the writing required in the Writing Assessment was more than he had expected:

Um, writing I thought it would be more, not multiple choice, but uh, less writing than you think it would be other than like some paragraphs. I thought it would be more like just a couple of sentences. (p. 5)

Similarly, Jane commented: "I thought that they'd [the tasks would] be a bit shorter, 'cause I didn't know we were going to write a letter" (p. 18). Cole also stated that "there was lots of writing and stuff, but I didn't think we'd have to write a letter" (p. 31).

Kate and Kristi also mentioned the Reading Assessment: both thought that they would be required to read a text and then respond to it. Kristi noted: "I thought they would be like where you have to read a thing and then tell what you thought about it or something like that" (p. 9). Kate observed: "I thought we might read a story for reading and kind of like have to see what we thought of it maybe and then like write down your thoughts and kind of express your feelings" (p. 25).

Kristi thought that the writing test would examine handwriting: "[The test] would be like to see how you write like your printing and stuff" (p. 9). Kate commented on the use of a graphic organizer to plan the piece of writing. She stated: "I didn't know that we were going to make a little web thing. I thought we were just going to do a report form like we usually do or plan our points and stuff" (p. 26).

*Affective State Prior to Testing.* In the weeks leading up to the testing, each of the participants reported having negative feelings about the upcoming testing. Three of the participants, Max, Kate and Cole, expressed feelings of nervousness about their ability to perform well:

- I'm not the fastest reader in the world and I remember for the Grade 3 testing I didn't do so good because I didn't know how to explain every little thing. (Max, p. 4)
- Probably not remembering all of the past tense learning that we did and maybe not doing as well on it. Just kind of my memory and seeing if I could remember it all 'cause I didn't want to forget and just be there not knowing. (Kate, p. 25)
- I just felt nervous just because in Grade 2 I got a 2+ or something in there and I wanted to do better. Like a lot better. (Cole, p. 31)

Kristi explained that she was nervous about how her results might influence her grades: "Well, I was kind of nervous because I thought it would go on your report or something like that" (p. 9).

Neither Travis nor Jane appeared concerned about the testing. Travis indicated that he "wasn't nervous 'cause he was ready," and when asked what made him feel ready he responded: "It didn't really reflect my marks or anything" (p. 15). Similarly, Jane noted: "I didn't really care because I knew the test wouldn't reflect on me in the future" (p. 19).

Three of the six participants expressed excitement about the upcoming testing. Max was "kind of excited not to do any school work or homework" (p. 4). Kate, in anticipation of the challenge, shared: "I thought it was going to be pretty fun and I was excited about the multiple choice and stuff" (p. 25). Cole stated he "thought it would be more fun than it was" (p. 30). The remaining three participants did not express any positive feelings toward the upcoming testing. Upon asking Mrs. Smith about her perceptions about how the kids were feeling prior to the testing, she stated:

I don't think they were worried about it in terms of how well they would do. I think they knew it was going to be boring and they knew it was going to mean endless hours sitting at their desks ... I downplayed the fear part of it ... so I think, well I hope anyway, that they weren't worked up about it at all. (p. 38)

*Perceptions of Test Utility.* Participants were asked two questions pertaining to their perceptions of test utility. The first question asked participants to identify some of the reasons why they thought they had to take the Province-wide Reading and Writing Assessments. In response to this question, Travis, Jane, Kate and Max explained that they thought the reason for testing was to assess the teacher's performance:

- So they could see what the teacher's been teaching you, I think. (Travis, p. 16)
- I think they need to know if we're getting taught. (Jane, p. 21)
- It's to see how the teachers taught you, how good the teachers taught you and stuff. (Kate, p. 28)
- So the Government, I think, sees like how we're doing and that's all I can think of or what your teacher is teaching you. (Max, p. 7)

Max and Kristi also saw the assessments as a learning tool or review. Max noted: "Um, so you can maybe go back and go through not time, but like a review" (p. 7). Kristi explained: "So that when you go to college or high school it will be easier for you and you'll know more things and learn more things" (p. 12).

Two participants perceived that the purpose of the Assessments was to assess their performance. Cole stated: "To show what you learned that year maybe, or whatever. Um to show where everybody is at like the Grade Sixes" (p. 34). Kate, in addition to indicating that the test was used to assess teacher performance, also thought that the tests would be used "To see how the students are like the Grade Threes and show how they're doing and what the levels should be at for reading and mathematics. And the Grade Sixes, and that's why I think they do that" (p. 28).

The second question elicited participants' perceptions of how test results would be used. Three of the participants thought that the scores would become part of their permanent records or count toward their grades:

- Well, I really don't think, I really don't know much, but maybe it goes into your permanent record or whatever it is. (Max, p. 7)
- Um, well I think that they just mark them and they put half of it on your report and half of it to the teachers because it's to see how the teachers taught you, how good the teacher's taught you and stuff. That's what I think. (Kristi, p. 13)
- I think they go into the students' like, into their record, but in their grades or something, I'm not too sure. I don't remember getting my test scores back from Grade three so, I mean I heard that the other kids did, but I don't remember. (Kate, p. 29)

The three remaining respondents expressed uncertainty about what happened to their scores, but shared the following ideas. Travis thought: "Um, they file it maybe" (p. 17). Jane shared: "They have like they give it [results] to someone. I don't know who. Or like they would check the markings from the previous year, and they'd make sure that they don't have to put more on or put less" (p. 22). Cole believed the scores were used to compare students. He noted: "They like find maybe averages and stuff of where people are. Maybe." (p. 34).

*Motivation.* A participant's motivation to perform on a test can be, in part, determined by whom the student identifies as valuing test scores. In response to the question "Who do you think will be the most interested in your test scores?" only one participant, Kristi, gave a response indicating that she was interested in her test results. At first she indicated the markers as being interested in her scores in addition to her and her family. Her response is as follows: "I don't know. Um, like for the markers, the people who mark it. My Mom and Dad would and I would,

too” (p. 13). The remaining respondents cited their parents, a governing body, or the teacher as being most interested in their test scores:

- Um, I would say my parents and the Government or whoever looks at it. That’s about it. And the teachers, I guess. (Max, p. 7)
- Uh, the Board of Education, the Government and my parents. (Travis, p. 6)
- Probably the Luster Board of Education or the Government. (Jane, p. 22)
- Um, like not the Luster Board of Education but the people, um, I’m not sure if it’s the Prime Minister or the Premier but they would be like in Government. (Kate, p. 28)
- The Luster Board of Education, teacher, Mom and Dad. (Cole, p. 34)

The second theme described aspects of the participants’ retrospective pre-assessment perceptions. The second theme (participants’ cognitive, metacognitive, and affective perceptions relating to test performance) is discussed below.

### ***Cognitive, Metacognitive and Affective Perceptions Relating to Test Performance***

Participants’ cognitive, metacognitive, and affective perceptions relating to test performance fell into three categories: (1) cognitive and metacognitive reading strategies; (2) cognitive and metacognitive writing strategies; and (3) affective response to testing.

*Cognitive and Metacognitive Reading Strategies.* Respondents were asked, “What reading strategies did you use when you took the test?” and “What did you do during the reading test if there was a question or instruction you didn’t understand?” in order to determine whether they used cognitive or metacognitive test-taking strategies to complete the reading portion of the Provincial Assessments. Four of the six participants indicated that they used reading strategies. Max and Travis used cognitive strategies which involved thoroughness in completing answers: “Um, I just thought to explain my answers a bit and just read, not force myself to read as fast as I



can. I just took it nice and easy” (Max, p. 5). Travis indicated: “I tried to make my answers formal with lots of information” (p. 15).

Jane and Kate noted that as they read they attended to information that they thought was important. The strategies they describe are metacognitive: “I went back in my book and looked and remembered some stuff. And whenever I read some stuff that I thought was important, I’d try to remember it” (Jane, p. 19); “Um, I read through it and I read the questions, and if I didn’t remember what I read from the reading, I looked back and kind of just thought it over. I’d read it again to make sure my ideas were correct” (Kate, p. 26).

When asked what participants did if there was a question or instruction they didn’t understand, four of the six respondents used metacognitive strategies similar to those reported by Roth et al. (2000). Each of the four respondents indicated that they would skip the difficult question and then return to try to answer it if they had time:

- I just tried to do what I thought that it meant, but if I didn’t really get it, then I just put a question mark on it. Then I went to another question .... I usually went back to something I didn’t have done. (Kristi, p. 11)
- I skipped it and I went on to the other answers, or I mean questions and did those and then went back. (Travis, p. 15)
- I skipped it and if I had more time, I tried to go back and see if I could finish it and see if I could understand it better. (Jane, p. 20)
- Um, then I’d probably, just for a little while, just kind of read it over and, if I didn’t get it at all, then I’d just skip it and go back to it later. Future questions or past questions may help me so I’d say, “Oh, that’s what you do” and then I’d go back to it. I didn’t really have that much trouble. (Kate, p. 26)

Kristi was concerned about time and read faster than she would normally in order to complete the reading section: “Well, I tried to read a bit faster than how I usually would so I could get it done and, but it was alright” (p.10). Cole used no reading strategies to complete the reading portion of the test: “I just read it and wrote down whatever they asked me to write, I don’t know. I just read it” (p. 10). When he came upon a question he didn’t understand, he asked the teacher for help: “Well, then I’d put my hand up and Mrs. Smith would come over and read the question a little bit better than I would. Then I’d probably get it like right after that” (p. 32). Max also asked the teacher for help when he experienced difficulty: “Um, well I’d sorta of, I didn’t ask Mrs. Smith for all my help. She didn’t explain it to me that much, and she said she can’t for the Grade 6, but she sorta said ‘think thorough the question and read it carefully and you’ll get it’” (p. 5).

*Cognitive and Metacognitive Writing Strategies.* In order to determine participants’ use of writing strategies, each was again asked the same two-part question as noted above for the reading strategy category.

Four of the participants, Max, Jane, Kate, and Cole used different strategies in order to ensure that the quality within their content of writing was evident. Max explained: “Uh, I just tried to use more, uh, what kind of word am I looking for, uh, more details into it. Try to get as much detail as I can” (p. 6). Jane shared that she incorporated prior learning to complete the writing task. Her strategy would be considered metacognitive in nature: “I like thought of some things that I’ve read about in the past and put some things together for the stories and then I just edited and remembered, like words, and, if I didn’t know, I tried my best” (p. 20). Kate took a creative approach to writing her story that would be considered metacognitive thinking: “Um, I just kind of thought about it and thought if I was the actual character I’d see what I would do in my story or um, what I’d want to do. I just went on from there” (p. 27). Cole took care to use

descriptive language of his writing: “Well, I didn’t use like ‘said’ over and over again. I used like ‘said,’ ‘yelled,’ ‘screamed,’ stuff like that. Um, I made lots of paragraphs when I had to write my story. I put action in it, a lot of action [he smiles]. I liked my story” (p. 32).

Kristi and Travis were not aware that they used any strategies. Kristi said: “Well, I kind of like, I tried to like bring it all together in a way, and like finish it, almost like it was a recount or something like that” (p. 11). Travis reflected: “Uh, I don’t think I did strategies [he giggles]. I just wrote” (p. 15).

When asked what they did if there was a question or instruction they didn’t understand, five of the six participants provided similar responses. Aside from Cole, who indicated that he understood every thing that was asked of him, the remaining participants used the strategy where they re-read the question, but then skipped it completely if there was still no understanding:

- I’d just look at the question some more. (Max, p. 6)
- If I didn’t understand, I like, tried my hardest and if I really didn’t get it, then I put a question mark on it. (Kristi, p. 12)
- Same thing, I just skipped it and went on. (Travis, p. 16)
- I would, um, either if Mrs. Smith could help my, I’d ask her but if she didn’t and she’d already taught me, I’d um skip it if I could and if not I’d like try and think more but not take too much time. (Jane, p. 21)
- I think I just skipped it and went on to the next part. I thought about it for a little while, but, if I didn’t get it, I just went on to the other ones. (Kate, p. 28)

The responses suggest when it came to the writing portion of the testing, students did not use metacognitive strategies in order to answer all of the questions that were posed.

*Affective Response to Testing.* Throughout the interviews, respondents expressed their feelings about the Provincial Assessments. Their comments focussed on being timed during testing and the demands of the writing portion of the assessments.

Four of the six participants commented on being timed during the testing. Three admitted to rushing because they were worried about running out of time. Kristi noted:

I didn't really like it because I felt I was reading a bit faster and that I couldn't get much information because you just read fast and it's harder to answer the questions because then you have to keep going back and all that because like you're rushing and stuff. (p. 10)

Jane was concerned about time when completing certain areas of the test that she felt were not her strength. She stated: "Um, like in some parts, like the parts that I'm strong at, I didn't really like, uh, it was easy and I thought 'Oh, I'm going to be finished on time.' But some things where I thought I won't be finished, I was kinda like rushing a bit" (p. 20). Kate, too, was somewhat concerned about time, but did not indicate that she rushed: "It wasn't that bad, just sort of, if you're thinking about a topic or something like that, then you might be a little worried about your time. But you get a pretty good block of time so I don't think you'd be that worried" (p. 29). Cole, the final participant who commented on being timed, was not concerned: "It wasn't that bad. I finished everything on time. Like we had lots of time to do it, so it wasn't very hard doing the time limit" (p. 35).

Three of the six participants shared negative feelings about the writing portion of the Provincial Assessments. In reference to the writing test, Travis found the exercises laborious and boring. He stated: "I didn't like it. It was kind of boring because we did it all morning" (p. 18). Cole shared similar feelings: "Actually it was kind of easy, but it was a little boring. You have to like sit the half-hour or forty-five minutes or whatever to think about one section. You just have

to sit there all day kind of by yourself” (p. 35). Kate and Cole shared negative feelings about having to write a story about a topic that was chosen for them. Kate indicated: “Um, at first I thought it wasn’t the greatest thing, but then once I kind of got my ideas I didn’t have a problem with it” (p. 27). Cole was so disinterested throughout the writing portion of the test that he felt he had to “lie” in order to complete the task: “We had to write a letter and some of it we had to lie a bit. We had to act as if we actually wanted to go there [on a whale research expedition]. Yeah, right [he scoffs and rolls his eyes]” (p. 31). When asked about how he felt about having to lie, Cole revealed: “Well, it was kind of hard. I couldn’t say I don’t want to go, leave me alone or something like that. I had to say I’d really like to go and see whales and stuff” (p. 31).

The theme described above illustrates the cognitive, metacognitive, and affective perceptions of participants’ and how their perceptions influenced their test performance. The final theme, participants’ post-assessment reflections, is discussed below.

### ***Post-assessment Reflections***

The final theme describes participants’ post-assessment reflections regarding a number of areas pertaining to the Reading and Writing Assessments. Participants’ perceptions are categorized in the following areas: (1) reading assessment: areas of ease and difficulty; (2) writing assessment: areas of ease and difficulty; (3) differences between assessments and in-class language assignments; (4) participants’ suggestions for change and; (5) participants’ advice for students who would be taking the test in the future.

*Reading Assessment: Areas of Ease and Difficulty.* Participants were invited to identify the areas of the Reading Assessment that they found easy and difficult. Five of the six respondents commented that the short answer and opinion questions were easy aspects of the reading test. Their responses are as follows:

- I found, uh, I don't know what I found easy. They're all like about the same. You have to explain this and that and go back in the book. Think of your own ideas ... they're all basically the same questions. (Max, p. 5)
- Most of the parts where you just have to fill in stuff from the book. That was pretty easy ....Well, some of the stuff where there were just short answers you'd have to say. (Travis, p. 15)
- It was mostly the questions about how you relate to yourself and give your own ideas and the ones that you take from straight out of the book. (Jane, p. 20)
- Um, probably when they asked you about the first paragraph and introduction and what made it interesting. I kind of knew what to say and I kind of knew what to write so I liked that part. (Kate, p. 26)
- Easy. The one's where they asked like what is the noun or verb or something like that. I'm like this is so easy. (Cole, p. 33)

When asked what aspect of the Reading Assessment participants found difficult, four of the six respondents indicated that some of the questions posed were difficult to comprehend. Max stated: "Um, as I said before the odd time I didn't understand the question too well, like how to explain it or I didn't read it carefully and that's all I had problems with" (p. 5). Kristi explained: "I can't really remember but there were some hard questions that you can't really understand. So those I just tried my hardest at it" (p. 10). Travis described his area of difficulty: "Some of the questions that I didn't understand" (p. 15). Jane described the difficult questions with greater detail: "The ones that, um, didn't really give you the best question or something. Like it didn't tell you exactly what to do and it just kind of said and it was just kind of the same question as the other one so you kind of had to do the same thing" (p. 20).

*Writing Assessment: Areas of Ease and Difficulty.* Portions of the writing test that four of the six participants identified as being easy tasks involved either writing the story and/or editing the story they had written. Kristi, Jane, Kate, and Cole responded in the following way:

- Um, the narrative, I liked the narrative. It was pretty easy. (Kristi, p. 27)
- I found writing the story because it gave me my own ideas. Like I could take my own ideas and it was, um, like you got lots of time so you had time to read the story and edit it and re-write it. (Jane, p. 21)
- Um, probably the editing and maybe the final draft because you just need to re-write it and just make it neater so it's nicer and that's probably it. Those were the only two things I liked about the writing. (Kate, p. 27)
- Easy? Just like writing the story, I guess. Writing the good copy and editing and stuff. It was fairly easy. (Cole, p. 33)

Travis indicated that he didn't find anything easy about the writing portion of the test. Max misunderstood the question, and gave an answer that pertained to the reading test.

The participants gave varied answers when identifying the areas of the Writing Assessment they found difficult. Only two answers were similar. Travis, who found no part of the writing test easy, had an especially difficult time writing the story. He commented: "... I wrote kind of a long one and I had to, what you call it, try to figure out if there were any errors and stuff. Then we had to re-do it, a good copy and that was pretty hard" (p. 16). Jane also found the editing somewhat of a challenge: "It was probably the correcting, probably and that's about it" (p. 21). In responding, Kristi referred to, "Some of the questions and stuff ..." (p. 11), and the test being too long, "Some of it was a bit long" (p. 11). Kate commented on the difficulty she had with the story planning and thought that had to go into writing the story: "I think when they ask you like about the descriptions of the characters and like the plot and stuff

...” (p. 27). Cole had difficulty with the writing topic; specifically, he did not wish to write a letter to someone to whom he did not wish to write. He noted: “Am I allowed to say writing the letter again? Writing the letter [he re-stated with more confidence]” (p. 33).

*Differences between Assessments and In-Class Language Assignments.* In order to determine the participants’ perceptions of how the testing differed from their regular in class work in the language arts, the researcher posed the following question: “How do the Reading and Writing Assessments differ from language assignments you are given in class?” Participants gave a wide range of answers to these questions. Perhaps the most articulate response was provided by Kate:

Um, the assignments I have in class are more, actually I’d say difficult. I’d have to make a plan and it would have to be really good and then I’d have to make the points good and the summary. With the writing and the reading I just had to read the magazine and just think about it and answer the questions and just write your own story. You didn’t have to make a plan. The test was easier. They were kind of different from what we had to do because we had a practice one before the actual test and that was very different from what we had to do on the test. I thought it was kind of weird how they had the practice and then the test, but that’s basically all I can think of. (p. 28)

Max’s response was also revealing:

Well, um, the language assignments in class are more different questions like details about the book. Like, uh, what were some personalities that you could see or what can you tell about the village; it was like an Inuit or Aboriginal story about a village and all that. And, well, you don’t feel as much pressure when you’re doing them, just um, not when it’s like testing. (p. 8)



Probing what made him feel pressured, he further expanded: “Um, just sort of like the Government looking at our testing. Like, uh, I don’t know how I did or anything and I don’t want them thinking like that I’m not that smart.” (p. 7). Jane explained that she could ask the teacher for clarification during class assignments and could complete work at home if it could not be finished in class: “... You can ask the teacher for, like, lots of clarification and, um, you can go back to a book and kind of know it and, um, if you don’t get it done on time you can do it at home” (p. 21). Other participants indicated, in regards class assignments, that there isn’t as much writing or that they have fewer questions pertaining to the readings. Kristi noted: “... It has lots of questions. For the reading you have to read a story and then answer all the questions about it. We don’t normally do that ...” (p. 12). Cole stated: “We had to write a lot more. Like in class we might have to write about this much [he uses his hands to demonstrate how much] about one thing but on that [test] we had to write about this much. Lots. Like maybe seven or eight lines longer” (p. 33).

*Suggestions for Change.* Once again, a range of responses surfaced when participants responded to the question, “If you could change some things about the Reading and Writing Assessments what would they be?” Responses, however, centred primarily on making changes to the reading test. Travis made a comment that he would like the test content to be similar to language tasks they have in school and for the writing test to be shorter: “Not that much writing. Like we had to write a story and maybe if I would change it I wouldn’t have you writing a story” (p. 17). When further inquiring about what he would like to have on the test, he stated: “Um, questions I’d be interested in, like hockey and stuff I like” (p. 17). The remainder of respondents would change the topic of the story to something more personally relevant in order to make the test more interesting. Jane, Kate, and Cole stated the following:

- I'd maybe make a bit more stories like than just the two we had to give a bit more variety. (Jane, p. 22)
- Probably maybe the topic on reading. I know they have a different topic every year, but I kind of didn't really find that one so interesting. I liked the whales and the topic, but it wasn't the best; like, I'd kind of like something different maybe that we were more interested in. (Kate, p. 29)
- Nothing about whales. I hate whales; well, I don't hate whales, it's not really very much action in whales .... I don't think I would change anything about writing; that was pretty good how it was. (Cole, p. 35)

Max, though he didn't make a comment about the reading test, indicated that he would have been more 'into' the writing test if given the option to choose the topics for the writing tasks:

One thing I thought of when you had to write the narrative you had to do "The Mystery of Pond Inlet" or whatever. I thought that you should be able to think of your own idea. Or, like, when we had to write the letter, I'd rather write to somebody else that you would like to write to .... Well, you'd be more into it and thinking of more ideas 'cause for the letter I was kind of stumped because I didn't know much about the researchers. Even though I just learned about it, I didn't know that much because I wasn't into it" (p. 8)

*Advice for the Upcoming Test-Takers.* The final category involved the advice that participants would give students in Grade 5 who would be taking the tests next year. Advice shared can be broken down into three sections: difficulty of test content, test-taking strategies, and emotional.

The advice of three of the participants, Max, Travis, and Kristi addressed the difficulty of the test content. Max stated: “I’d just say be prepared for anything because there are some difficult questions and some easier questions ...” (p. 13). Travis stated: “... some of the stuff is hard, but you’ll get it eventually” (p. 17). Kristi suggested: “Some of it’s fun, some of it’s hard and some of it is easy ...” (p. 13).

Four participants shared test-taking strategies:

- ... Really think about what you’re saying. (Max, p. 13)
- ... Just like work your hardest and stuff. (Kristi, p. 13)
- Like think the questions over if you don’t understand them ... (Kate, p. 29).
- ... Take time and look it over if you have any extra time (Jane, p. 22).

Four participants gave emotional advice to the students in Grade 5. Kate and Jane would advise test-takers not to worry. Kate would tell students “not to be worried because it wasn’t that bad” (p. 29). Jane said: “... don’t really worry about it ’cause it will be over and there won’t be much else to do with it. What you do is what you do” (p. 22). Travis asserted: “I’d tell them not to be nervous ...”(p. 17). When probed about what he thought test takers might be nervous about, he explained: “Because they don’t want to get a bad mark on it or something like that” (p. 17). Finally, Cole had only emotional advice. He remarked: “There’s nothing really to be nervous about [pause]. It’s not like these things; well, it’s important, but you’re not going to die if you get something wrong or something. There’s nothing really to be nervous about” (p. 34).

In summary, the section above describes the four themes: preparation for the Reading and Writing Assessments; pre-assessment perceptions; cognitive, metacognitive and affective perceptions relating to test performance; and post-assessment reflections.

The following section presents the interpretation of the findings.

### **Interpretation of Findings**

This study investigated Grade Six students' perceptions of the Ontario Province-wide Reading and Writing Assessments. Four themes emerged from the analysis of the qualitative data: (1) preparation for the Provincial Assessments; (2) pre-assessment perceptions; (3) cognitive, metacognitive, and affective perceptions relating to test performance; and (4) post-assessment reflections.

The following interpretation of the findings is organized in relation to the four aforementioned themes.

#### ***Preparation for the Provincial Assessments***

Findings showed that there existed a variation in class preparation between the Reading Assessment and the Writing Assessment. The teacher used a Reading Assessment review from the previous year that was different in format and content from the actual test the participants wrote. The teacher did not conduct a review with the students for the Writing Assessment, but rather relied on the forms of writing she had already covered over the school year. The extent of the review conducted by Mrs. Smith had an effect on participants' pre-assessment perceptions. The effects are discussed below.

#### ***Pre-assessment Perceptions***

Analysis of the data revealed that participants had a variety of pre-test perceptions that contradicted what they thought the tests would be like in terms of format and content. Students reported that they did not expect the reading materials for the Reading and Writing Assessments to be presented in the form of a magazine. Content related comments pertained to the unexpected lengthiness and amount of writing that was required for the writing portion of the test.

The participants' perceptions about the unexpected test format and content were likely shaped by the pre-assessment review conducted by Mrs. Smith. She reported that she had not followed the review outline provided by the school board. As a result, she did not conduct a review for the writing portion of the test and only reviewed portions of the reading test from the previous year. This finding is consistent with current research suggesting that there exists considerable variability in test preparation that can cause test score pollution and give some students an advantage over others of the same age and grade (Froese-Germain, 2001; Haladyna, Nolen, & Haas, 1991; Paris et al. 2000). Each of the participants also revealed that they had some affective perceptions regarding the upcoming testing.

The six participants expressed negative feelings prior to the testing. Three respondents expressed a concern about their ability to do well, thus evoking in them 'nervous' feelings about the testing. Another indicated that she was nervous because she thought the marks of the assessment would go on her report card. The findings of this study contradict those of Wong and Paris (2000) and Urdan (2000), in which participants reported a more positive affect toward standardized tests. They indicated they felt prepared for the tests, and reported low feelings of anxiety and high expectations for success on the tests. The final two participants expressed negative feelings stemming from a lack of caring about the upcoming testing because they knew the test results would not have any effect on their marks. Mrs. Smith perceived that she didn't think the students would be worried about their performance. She believed that they would be more affected by the fact that the tests were going to be a laborious task. The teacher's perceptions of how the students were feeling prior to testing was markedly different from what the participants reported, thus enforcing the importance of evaluating students' perceptions first hand. As Urdan (1999) states: "if taking standardized achievement tests makes some students more anxious than others, and anxiety impedes performance, it is difficult to determine whether

variation in students' test scores is due to different skills or different levels of anxiety" (p. 7). As a result, the reliability of test results can come into question for those students who may harbour negative affective perceptions. Responses regarding affective pre-assessment perceptions were not entirely negative.

Three of the participants also expressed positive feelings toward the upcoming testing as they thought the test would be fun and a nice break from their regular classroom routine. These responses are unlike those reported in studies conducted by Urdan (2000) and Wong and Paris (2000), in which participants had positive feelings toward standardized testing because they believed the tests were important and reflective of their intelligence. The finding is similar to that of Karmos and Karmos (1984), who found sixth graders held moderately positive attitudes about standardized tests in general, but many students reported negative attitudes about the purpose of the tests. Participants also afforded the researcher insight into their motivation to perform on the Provincial Assessments, and they shared their perceptions about test utility.

In response to questions regarding test utility and what they thought was done with the test scores, four of the participants perceived that the tests were necessary so that a governing body could assess teachers' performances. Three mentioned that the tests were necessary in order to assess their knowledge. One participant suggested that the tests served as a review tool. Mrs. Smith indicated that she told her students prior to testing that the results would not count toward their overall marks.

In response to the question concerning what students thought was done with their test scores, three of the respondents thought that they were either filed in their permanent records, or that the test results actually counted toward their final grades for the year. The final three participants were unsure what was done with their results. Participants' varied perceptions regarding test utility suggest that students have not been thoroughly informed about the

rationale behind the Provincial Assessments or the test results. Paris et al. (2000) found that students in Grades 7 to 11 were more likely than younger students to report being poorly informed about the uses of standardized tests. The findings may be explained by through existing research, suggesting that students may receive different messages about the use and importance of standardized achievement tests. Some teachers give them little importance, whereas others emphasize the scores as critical reflections of ability and learning. Parents also vary in their understanding about the tests, as well as the importance they attach to the scores (Paris et al., 2000).

Five of the six participants identified their parents, a governing body, or their teacher as being the most interested in their test scores. This finding suggests that they were most likely extrinsically motivated to complete the tests. The remaining participant, Kristi, indicated she would be interested in her test results; therefore she would more likely be intrinsically motivated to perform well on the tests. This finding is consistent with that of Wong and Paris (2000), who found that older students in their studies were more likely than younger students to cite extrinsic versus intrinsic reasons to try to do their best on standardized tests. Students' lack of interest in their test scores relates to the self-determination theory investigating motivation and the practice of standardized testing ([http://www.psych.rochester.edu/SDT/cont\\_testing.html](http://www.psych.rochester.edu/SDT/cont_testing.html)). Provincial Assessments are controlling, externally imposed tests; students often do not see the results of performance on standardized tests, and there are rarely tangible consequences of performance on these tests for individual students therefore undermining the test-takers self-motivation to perform. In addition, Ryan and Deci (2000) indicate that students who do not find extrinsically motivated behaviours [test-taking] of personal interest perform the behaviour [complete the test] because it is valued by a significant other to whom they would like to feel connected.

The findings of this study suggest that the pre-assessment perceptions formed by participants may be influenced by external factors including the following: test- preparation practices, and their level of awareness regarding the need for testing and usage of test scores. Participants' pre-assessment perceptions may also be shaped by their affective responses to the upcoming testing and whether they are intrinsically or extrinsically motivated to perform on the tests.

### ***Cognitive, Metacognitive and Affective Perceptions Relating to Test Performance***

In response to questions pertaining to cognitive and metacognitive perceptions, the researcher found that participants used different test-taking strategies to complete the Reading Assessments and the Writing Assessments.

During the Reading Assessments, two participants identified the use of what Roth, Paris, and Turner (2000) would call positive, cognitive test-taking strategies. These included the time Max and Travis took to read the information presented, and their ensuring that their responses to questions were detailed. Two other participants identified the use of positive metacognitive test-taking strategies. Jane and Kate exhibited metacognitive strategy use to comprehend and retain important information from the readings in order to answer the questions thoroughly. The remaining two participants, Cole and Kristi, were not aware of using any test-taking strategies. Four of the six participants also reported using positive test-taking strategies during the Reading Assessment. When they came upon a question they didn't understand, they indicated that they would mark it, skip it for the time being, and return to try to answer the question later, should time permit. The remaining two participants used negative strategies when facing a question they did not understand. Cole and Travis admitted to asking Mrs. Smith for help if there was something they did not understand, even though, as previously mentioned, students were not allowed to ask the teacher for assistance during testing.



During the Writing Assessments, four of the six participants indicated the use of positive cognitive or metacognitive test-taking strategies to complete the writing tasks. None of the reported strategies were similar. Positive strategies used included the following: providing detailed responses to questions; cognitive awareness of mechanics during story-writing; incorporating past learning with information learned from the readings to answer questions; character development strategies. Incorporating past learning and character development would be considered positive metacognitive test-taking strategies. The remaining two participants did not report using any strategies to complete the writing test.

When faced with questions participants didn't understand during the Writing Assessments, however, participants reported using negative strategies. Five of the six participants revealed that they would re-read the question, and then skip it entirely if they still could not understand or answer the question posed. Two explanations can be offered in order to understand the difference in strategies used for the two tests. Participants' reported variabilities in the use of test-taking strategies in this study are similar to those in the findings of Roth et al. (2000), that students' use of appropriate strategies may be related to test preparation, administration, and their motivation. As previously discussed in this chapter, participants did a practice Reading Assessment review, but did not complete a Writing Assessment review. Therefore, there was a difference in preparation and familiarity between the two test administrations.

The second explanation may be found in the negative affective perceptions shared by the five of the six participants specifically in relation to the tasks on Provincial Assessments. Travis and Cole commented on their boredom due to the length of the Writing Assessments. Travis, Cole, Jane, and Max also commented that there was an unexpected amount of writing required. Cole, Kate, and Max expressed that they would have been more interested in the Writing

Assessment if they had been able to choose their own topics for the narrative writing task, or write a letter to someone of interest to them. The findings of this study are consistent with Bradford's (1997) suggestion that students respond well to writing prompts both affectively and cognitively if they are permitted the freedom to exercise their creativity.

Participants also shared other negative affective responses to the Provincial testing that could have, in turn, affected their cognitive and metacognitive strategy use. Three of the six participants commented on their dislike of being timed during the assessments, and admitted to using negative test-taking strategies as a result of time constraints. Specifically, Kristi and Kate both admitted to rushing through parts of the test, and indicated they had difficulty answering questions or retaining information because they were concerned about the time factor. Paris et al. (2000) also found that positive strategies are used sparingly as they require more effort and are time-consuming. Max admitted to feeling pressure during the testing due to a concern about the social consequences of performing poorly. He indicated that the word 'testing' or 'assessment' made him feel uneasy, as did his concern that he didn't want the Government looking at his testing and thinking he wasn't smart. This comment is consistent with the study conducted by Paris, Roth, and Turner (2000), who found that older students were more concerned about public knowledge and social comparisons of test scores.

In this study, participants' reported use of reading and writing strategies and their affective response to testing provided insight into perceptions that may affect test performance. Participants reported using more positive test-taking strategies during the reading tests as opposed to the writing tests, though reported use of either positive or negative strategies, a finding consistent with other studies (Roth et al., 2000), was infrequent. Participant also exhibited more negative affective perceptions toward the Writing Assessments as opposed to the Reading Assessments.

### ***Post-assessment Reflections***

In response to questions pertaining to the areas of the Reading Assessments which participants found easy and difficult, five of the participants responded that they found it easy to provide responses to short answer or opinion questions. Participants explained that responding to opinion questions was easy as they were given the opportunity to express their own ideas. In reference to the Writing Assessment, four of the six respondents indicated that writing and editing the story they had written were the easiest aspects of the test. Participants explained that this area of the writing test was easy because they could express some of their own ideas. According to the self-determination theory of motivation, the aspects of the test participants identified as easy required less controlled, personally relevant responses. Respondents may have found them intrinsically motivating. Intrinsically motivating tasks are those that instill a feeling of competence in the individual's ability, a sense of relatedness and autonomy (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Respondents also indicated that they felt they were given ample time to edit and re-write their stories; therefore, they did not feel as pressured during this portion of the testing. When asked to identify the areas of the Reading Assessment in which participants had experienced difficulty, four of the six participants indicated that some of the questions were difficult to understand. The questions on the reading test were designed to determine a test-taker's ability to reason (interpret, judge, summarize and analyze ideas), communicate (interpret readings by supporting with evidence), organize (identify, describe different forms of writing), and apply language conventions (spelling, grammar, punctuation and style) (<http://www.eqao.com>). Based on participants' responses regarding areas of ease and difficulty, the questions participants may have found difficult were ones that required them to demonstrate their ability to reason. When identifying areas in which they experienced difficulty during the Writing Assessment, participants mentioned the length of the test, writing the story, editing and having to write a

formal letter. Participants also found some of the questions posed difficult to understand, and, as mentioned previously, a majority of participants simply skipped these questions, despite having used positive strategies for answering questions of difficulty during the Reading Assessments.

Responses were varied when students were asked to describe how the Reading and Writing Assessments differ from language assignments they are given in class. The Reading and Writing Assessments are standardized tests, and differ in structure, format and administration from daily teaching and learning practices articulated in the Ministry of Education curriculum guidelines.

Participants' responses included feeling more pressure during the testing; feeling constrained by time limits; being unable to ask the teacher for clarification; having to answer more questions in reading than is normally required; and the extensive amount of writing.

The varied responses might indicate that each participant interpreted the question differently, or that the question may have been too general. The researcher might have been able to achieve greater uniformity in responses if the question had been re-worded in two parts. The first part could have been, "What kind of language activities do you do in class?" followed by, "How do they differ from what was asked of you on the Reading and Writing Assessments?" A second alternative could have been to pose a question asking participants to identify their perceived differences between the Reading and Writing Assessments as opposed to their classroom tests. Participants were much clearer when identifying a variety of changes they might make to the Reading and Writing Assessments if given the opportunity.

Although three of the participants expressed negative affective responses to the writing portion of the tests, a majority of the suggested changes centred on the Reading Assessment. Five of the six participants made comments about wanting to change aspects of the Reading

Assessments that they perceived would make the reading test and, consequently, the writing test more interesting. Students suggested including a variety of required readings rather than focussing one topic. In reference to the Writing Assessments, they would allow test-takers to choose a topic of personal interest upon which they would base the narrative and letter, rather than on the required readings. Participants perceived that these suggested changes would enable students to express their own ideas and creativity, and would make the tests more interesting. Expressing the desire for personally relevant reading topics and the need for choice are consistent with the socioconstructivist approach to learning and literature on the self-determination theory of motivation ([http://www.psych.rochester.edu/SDT/cont\\_testing.html](http://www.psych.rochester.edu/SDT/cont_testing.html)). The socioconstructivist approach encourages students to take responsibility for their learning by allowing them to choose activities that they find meaningful and interesting (Kansellaar, 2002). Self-determination theorists suggest that students often express a need to have a sense of autonomy and control over their activities, including test-taking (Anderman & Midgley, 1997).

Each participant also voiced advice to future test takers. In general, participants suggested that there was a balance of easy and difficult questions so there was no need to be nervous or worried about the Reading or Writing Assessments. In addition to providing emotional advice, four of the six participants suggested positive test-taking strategies to help students complete the test successfully: they should take the time to think when reading and responding to questions; they should try their hardest and, if there's time, go back and look over their answers. The four respondents who provided the test-taking strategy advice offered the same positive test-taking strategies that they to used during the testing. The two participants who did not provide any test-taking advice did not use strategies when taking the tests.

In summary, four themes were identified. Within the first theme, preparation for the Provincial Assessments, data revealed variability in class preparation between the administration

of the two tests. These findings are consistent with current research that suggests test preparation practices are not consistent between schools, teachers, or districts (Froese-Germain, 2001; Haladyna, Nolen & Haas, 1991; Paris et. al., 2000).

The second theme, pre-assessment perceptions, revealed that the content and format of the Reading and Writing Assessments were different from what participants had anticipated. The unexpected nature of the tests was likely due to the pre-assessment review conducted prior to the assessments. Participants' pre-assessment affective state was found to be generally negative, unlike findings reported by Wong and Paris (2000) and Urdan (2000), who found participants reporting a more positive affective response to standardized testing. In addition, the positive feelings expressed toward the testing by participants in this study were markedly different from those mentioned by the aforementioned researchers, suggesting that participants in this study may not have found the assessments to be important or reflective of their ability. Students also expressed their perceptions about test utility and their motivation to perform on the tests. Findings suggest that participants were not well informed about the purpose of Provincial Assessments or their results. This is a finding consistent with findings reported by Paris et. al. (2000). Participants, except one, did not indicate an interest in their own test scores, but cited their parents, a governing body, or their teacher as being most interested in their test scores, suggesting they were extrinsically motivated to complete the tests. Students' lack of interest in their scores relates to research into the self-determination theory of motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

The third theme (cognitive, metacognitive, and affective perceptions relating to test performance) revealed an inconsistent use of cognitive and metacognitive test-taking strategies. Responses also indicated that participants employed more positive test-taking strategies to complete the Reading as opposed to the Writing portion of the tests. Participants' reported

variability in the use of test-taking strategies is similar to those reported by Roth et. al. (2000), who found variability in test preparation, administration, and motivation affect strategy usage. Throughout the interviews, participants also exhibited more negative affective perceptions toward the Writing Assessments as opposed to the Reading Assessments. They expressed the notion that the Writing Assessment would have been more interesting if they had been able to choose the topic for the narrative and to whom they would write a letter. These findings are consistent with Bradford (1997), who suggests that students respond well to writing prompts if they are permitted the freedom to exercise their creativity.

The final theme, post-assessment reflections, served to identify test areas that participants found easy and difficult, differences they recognized between assessments and in-class language assignments, suggestions for change, and their advice for upcoming test-takers. Participants found opinion questions, story writing, and editing easy as they were afforded the opportunity to express their own ideas. Ryan and Deci (2000) report students find these tasks intrinsically motivating as they instill feelings of competence, relatedness and autonomy. Similarly, participants suggested changes to the Reading and Writing Assessments reflected this same need for autonomy and relatedness. They suggested giving students more of a variety of required reading materials and allowing students to choose their own topics for the writing tasks.

Participants also offered advice to next year's test-takers. The participants who offered emotional advice and test-taking strategy advice were found to have followed their own advice in order to complete the assessments. The two respondents who did not provide test-taking advice were not aware of any strategy use during the tests. The participants may have used strategies to complete the tests, but did not have the cognitive awareness to articulate the strategies used. Incorporating participants' suggestions for change and advice into perception they would give

other test-takers into perception research is a new area that has not yet, to this researcher's knowledge, been investigated.

This chapter presented an overview of the 2002-2003 Province-wide Reading and Writing Assessments, participant profiles, the findings of the study, and an interpretation of the findings in relation to the literature. The final chapter presents the researcher's conclusions, implications, and recommendations.



## **CHAPTER FIVE**

### **Conclusions and Recommendations**

This study investigated Grade Six students' perceptions of the Ontario Province-wide Reading and Writing Assessments. The study was qualitative in nature and design. The constant comparative method (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003) was used to identify codes, categories, and themes. The primary method for data collection was the interview, based on Patton's (2002) general interview guide approach. The participants in the study were six Grade 6 students attending a rural school in Northwestern Ontario and their teacher. Four themes emerged from the analysis of the qualitative data. The following sections focus on the conclusion and researcher's recommendations for future provincial Reading and Writing Assessments and future research.

#### **Conclusions**

Four themes emerged from the analysis of the data: (a) preparation for the Provincial Assessments; (b) pre-assessment perceptions; (c) cognitive, metacognitive, and affective perceptions relating to test performance, and; (d) post-assessment reflections.

The findings of this study suggest that the pre-assessment perceptions formed by participants may be influenced by external factors, including the following: test preparation practices, and students' level of awareness regarding the need for testing and use of test scores. Participants reflected that the Reading and Writing Assessments differed in content and format from what they had anticipated. In addition, they commented on the length and unexpected amount of writing that was required of them for the writing portion of the assessments. The students' comments reflected the in-class preparation they completed prior to writing the

Provincial Assessments. The format and content of the Reading Assessment practice that the students completed were different from those of the test they had to write. The students were not exposed to a practice Writing Assessment, and therefore had no idea about either the length or nature of the writing tasks.

Prior to testing, each of the participants also harboured negative feelings toward the testing that may be attributed to either a concern about their ability to do well or an expressed lack of caring about the tests because the results would have no impact upon their in-class marks. Positive feelings toward the testing articulated by some of the participants stemmed from their thinking that the test would be fun and a nice break from their regular classroom routine, rather than because they believed the tests to be important and a good reflection of their intelligence. All but one of the participants cited their parents, a governing body, or their teacher as being interested in their test scores, suggesting that these students were most likely extrinsically motivated to perform well on the tests. The one participant who expressed interest in her test scores was more likely to be intrinsically motivated to perform well on the tests.

Finally, participants expressed a number of responses when asked about test utility and what they thought would be done with their test scores. Some students perceived the tests to be necessary in order to assess their teacher's performance; others believed that the tests were necessary to assess their knowledge; and one participant thought the tests served as a review or learning tool. Half of the participants were unsure what would be done with their test scores, while the other half of the participants thought that the test scores were filed in their permanent records or counted toward their final grades. The findings suggest that students were not thoroughly informed about the rationale behind the Provincial Assessments or the use of test results.

In this study, participants reported use of cognitive and metacognitive strategies during the Reading and Writing Assessments. Participants used different positive cognitive and metacognitive strategies to complete the Reading and Writing Assessments, and articulated more negative affective perceptions toward the Writing Assessments as opposed to the Reading Assessments.

In response to the questions asked on the Reading Assessment, two of the respondents indicated that they used positive cognitive strategies; two indicated that they used metacognitive strategies; and the remaining two appeared unaware that they had employed any test-taking strategies. Four of the participants used positive test-taking strategies: when they came upon a question they did not understand, they would mark the question, and return to try to answer it if they had time. The remaining two asked the teacher for assistance, a negative test-taking strategy.

In response to the tasks on the Writing Assessment, two respondents indicated the use of positive cognitive strategies; two used metacognitive strategies; and two were unaware of having used any test-taking strategies. Five of the participants reported using negative test-taking strategies when they came upon a question they did not understand: they reported skipping the question entirely if, after re-reading it, they still did not understand it. A difference in preparation for the two tests may account for the variability in strategy usage and negative affective responses expressed by the participants in reference to the assessments. Negative affective responses shared by five of the participants toward the writing test included the following: length of the test, the unexpected amount of writing required, and the desire for freedom of choice of topic and of audience. Three of the participants also disliked being timed during the assessments.

Post-assessment reflections revealed the areas of the Reading and Writing Assessments that participants found easy and difficult. In reference to both tests, participants found opinion questions and the writing/editing process to be the easiest aspects of the tests because they were given the opportunity to express their own ideas and use their creativity. Respondents may have found these tasks intrinsically motivating. When asked to identify areas of difficulty, participants reported finding some of the questions on the reading test difficult to understand. Some participants who found the writing test difficult mentioned difficulty understanding questions, the length of the test, writing the story, editing, and having to write a formal letter. In contrast to their use of strategies during the reading test, on the writing assessment the participants skipped the difficult questions entirely.

Several participants recommended changes to the reading assessment, in particular, a wider variety of topics upon which the required readings would be based. For the writing assessment, they recommended allowing personal choice of topic and intended audience.

In addition, participants also offered advice to Grade 5 students who would be writing the Provincial Assessments next year. They indicated that test-takers should not be nervous or worried about the assessments as the tests had a balance between easy and difficult questions. They also suggested that test-takers take time to think when reading and responding to questions, to try hard, and to go back to look over their answers.

### **Implications and Recommendations**

#### ***Recommendations for Teaching Practice***

Two concerns emerged from the analysis of data that relate to teaching practice. The first is students' abilities to use metacognitive strategies skillfully to resolve problems they encountered during test-taking; the second is their familiarity or lack thereof with test content and format. It is recommended, therefore that

1. Teachers incorporate strategy instruction on comprehension and writing into the curriculum in order to promote the development of metacognitive awareness.
2. The language arts program incorporate opportunities for sustained writing on personally relevant topics, as well as on writing assignments which require a variety of purposes and audiences and across a variety of forms.
3. Time should be spent helping students to develop effective test-taking strategies in order to increase students' cognitive and metacognitive strategy use, which may have an effect on improving test performance.
4. Teachers provide scaffolded instruction to assist students to develop effective test-taking strategies which are directly related to the strategy instruction in comprehension and writing.
5. Grade 6 teachers select examples from the previous year's Reading and Writing Assessments for students to take rather than the complete tests and discuss the cognitive/metacognitive strategies they might use to increase the performance.

The study found that participants' responses varied regarding test utility and test results.

It is therefore recommended that

1. Teachers explain to students the rationale behind the Provincial Assessments and what is done with the test scores to try to minimize negative feelings participants may harbour prior to testing.

### ***Recommendations for Government and Exam-Preparation Panels***

When test-takers are given some autonomy and choice on an assessment, then they are more likely to be intrinsically motivated to perform to the best of their ability. It is further recommended that

1. The required readings for the Reading Assessment be varied and of interest to the participants;
2. The topics for the writing tasks on the Writing Assessment be independent from the required readings on the Reading Assessment;
3. Participants be given a variety of topics from which they can choose one about which they would write a story or letter.

Participants expressed negative affective responses concerning the length and amount of writing required on the Writing Assessment and the timed nature of the assessments. It is therefore recommended that

1. Participants be required to complete one writing task that is designed to assess the criteria upon which students are scored;
2. The Reading and Writing Assessments be designed or administered in such a way that eliminates the need to time students, as this study and other research (Roth, Paris & Turner, 2000) suggest that students are less likely to use positive metacognitive test-taking strategies as these are perceived to be time-consuming.

### ***Recommendations for Future Research***

The study focused on six Grade 6 students' perceptions of the Province-wide Reading and Writing Assessments. Further research in this area is needed to explore the following:

1. The perceptions of a larger sample of Grade 6 students across the province regarding classroom tests and standardized achievement tests in terms of perceived importance of the tests, strategy use, affective response to the test, and test utility.
2. The ways in which external influences, including parents, teachers, administrators and the media, shape students' perceptions of the Province-wide Assessments;
3. The variability in test preparation and administration across the Province.

4. Students' reported use of cognitive and metacognitive test-taking strategies.
5. Grade 3, 6, 9, and 10 students' perceptions of standardized testing in order to compare differences across age and grade levels.

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## **APPENDIX A**

### **Post-assessment Interview Questions**

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### **Post-Assessment Interview Questions**

1. What did you think the Reading and Writing tests would be like before you took them?
- 1.2 In the week leading up to the testing, what were some of your feelings?
- 1.3 How were the Reading and Writing tests different from what you thought they would be like?
2. What reading strategies did you use when you took the test?
- 2.1 What parts of the reading test did you find easy?
- 2.2 What parts of the reading test did you find difficult?
- 2.3 What did you do during the reading test if there was a question or instruction that you did not understand?
3. What writing strategies did you use when you took the test?
- 3.1 What parts of the writing test did you find easy?
- 3.2 What parts of the writing test did you find difficult?
- 3.3 What did you do during the writing test if there was a question or instruction that you did not understand?
4. How do the Reading and Writing Assessments differ from language assignments you are given in class?
5. What are some of the reasons you think you have to take the Province-wide Reading and Writing Assessments?
- 5.1 What do you think is done with the scores after the tests have been marked?
- 5.2 Who do you think will be the most interested in your test scores?
6. What advice would you give the students in Grade 5 about taking the tests?
- 6.1 If you could change some things about the Reading and Writing Assessments what would they be?
7. Do you have anything else you would like to add?

**APPENDIX B**  
**Verbal Explanation to Students**



## **Verbal Explanation to Students**

My name is Shannon and I'm a graduate student at Lakehead University. I am interested in gaining insight into Grade six students' perceptions of the Ontario Province-wide Reading and Writing Assessments. By perceptions, I mean thoughts and feelings that Grade six students have about the upcoming testing. I'm also interested in the thoughts and feelings students have after the tests have been written. By talking with you and other students about your perceptions, I may be able to better understand how thoughts and feelings may influence performance during the Reading and Writing Assessments.

In order to find out what perceptions you have about the assessments, I will be asking you some questions that you can answer orally. All of your responses to the questions will be kept completely confidential and anonymous. Your real name will not be used anywhere in my report, so feel free to express your ideas openly and honestly. Please also know that our discussion is not being timed so take as much time as you need to think about your answers. I will be audiotaping our discussions so I don't miss anything you have to say. I may write a few things down as we move along, but please don't feel that you have to stop speaking and wait for me.

Your participation is completely voluntary. Your participation will in no way affect grades or results of the Provincial Assessments. You are free at any time to withdraw. The information will be stored at Lakehead University for seven years after which time it will be destroyed. Do you have any questions at this time?

**APPENDIX C**  
**Informed Consent**

Shannon Camlin  
Master of Education (Administration)  
Faculty of Education  
Lakehead University  
Thunder Bay, Ontario

Dear \_\_\_\_\_:

I am a graduate student in the Master of Education program in the Faculty of Education, Lakehead University. I am conducting research to gain insight into Grade 6 students' perceptions of the Ontario Province-wide Reading and Writing Assessments. As there is limited research available on the subject, this study may prove useful in understanding how students' perceptions may influence their performance during the assessment.

I am inviting six elementary students from your son's/daughter's Grade 6 classroom to participate in an interview after the reading and writing assessments. The students will be nominated by their Grade 6 teacher to participate in the research. Each interview will last approximately one half hour to forty-five minutes in length. The interviews will be audiotaped.

Research procedures will conform to the ethics guidelines of the Lakehead District School Board and those of Lakehead University. Participation is voluntary and your child may withdraw at any time. Data collected will remain confidential, and participants' names will be changed in the report. Your child's teacher and school will not be named in the report.

My supervisor, Dr. Mary Clare Courtland, will keep all research tapes, transcripts, and personal notes for a period of seven years. After the seven years, the information will be destroyed. There are no risks to participants. Participation in the study will in no way affect your child's grades or results of the Provincial Assessments. The findings will be published in a thesis, which will be available in the library in the Faculty of Education, Lakehead University. I shall present the findings at educational conferences and publish the report in journals.

Should you have any questions, please feel free to contact me at, [s\\_camlin@yahoo.com](mailto:s_camlin@yahoo.com), (763)494-0776, or my supervisor, Dr. Mary Clare Courtland, [mccourt1@tbaytel.net](mailto:mccourt1@tbaytel.net), (807)343-8696.

Sincerely,

Shannon Camlin

**Consent Form**

I have received an explanation about the nature and purpose of the study by Shannon Camlin, “Investigating Grade 6 students’ perceptions of the Province-wide Reading and Writing Assessments.” I understand the following:

1. My child is a volunteer and may withdraw from the study at any time.
2. There are no risks related to my child’s participation. Participation in the study will in no way affect my child’s grades or results of the Provincial Assessments.
3. The data provided by my child will remain anonymous and confidential, and participants’ names will be changed in the final report. My child’s school and teacher will not be named in the report.
4. Data will be stored at Lakehead University for a period of seven years.
5. The thesis will be on file in the Education Library and the findings will be presented at educational conferences and published in journals.

My son/daughter, \_\_\_\_\_, may participate in the study.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Parent or Guardian

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Student

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

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If you would like to receive a summary of the study, please complete the information below.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Mailing address: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_