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# Literacy is Just Reading and Writing, Isn't It? The Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test and Its Press Coverage

LAURA PINTO, MEGAN BOLER & TREVOR NORRIS

*Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto, Canada*

**ABSTRACT** This article examines how the public discourse of print news media defines and shapes the representation of the Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test (OSSLT) based on coverage in three primary newspapers between 1998 and 2004. The data were analysed using qualitative and quantitative measures to identify types of coverage, themes, and inclusion/exclusion of voices. The analysis, which is framed by discourse about conceptions of literacy relating to Dewey's democratic vision for the press, suggests some disappointments on the measure of democratic representation and participation. The article concludes that, if the media is to represent the diversity of voices and provide a wide range of views so as to fulfil its democratic responsibility as envisioned by Dewey, a wider debate over representations of literacy must occur and more perspectives and voices must be included in newspaper coverage.

## Introduction

In North America, media and education are social institutions rhetorically committed to democracy and designed to engage citizens in processes of active cultural participation through which they develop a sense of agency with respect to governing values and discourses. In this article, we examine how the public discourse of print news media defines and shapes the representation of the Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test (OSSLT) based on coverage in three newspapers over a period of seven years. Our analysis suggests some disappointments on the measure of democratic representation and participation.

In what follows, we examine how Ontario's literacy test has been represented in three primary newspapers. We suggest that the mainstream media shapes public perception as an agenda-setting and policy-determining discourse. We analyse how the OSSLT is represented in this particular public arena, how these representations come to represent dominant cultural perceptions about literacy and finally how the public might or might not be interested at all in the implications of literacy. We will also show the consistent non-inclusion of academic expertise in this coverage, which evidences a troubling lack of conversation between scholarship and public perception. While 'think tanks' are regularly funded to ensure that certain political perspectives and research enter into the public arena, universities as think tanks are conspicuously absent within news media.

## Democratic Role of Print Media for Educational Issues

A number of researchers have explored the role of the media as an influential actor in the educational arena (e.g. Page 1996; Lugg 1998; Wong & Jain 1999; Evans 2001; Gerstl-Pepin 2002; Thomas 2002). Pettigrew & MacLure (1997, p. 392) suggest that "The press plays an active part in the construction of educational issues for its various readership. Newspapers do not just write about education, they also represent to their readers what education is "about". The media

ostensibly acts in an important educational role for the public. Yet despite acknowledgement of the unique and important role that the media plays in educational discourse in the public sphere, very little empirical research has been conducted on this topic. Aldridge (2001) suggests that in Canada, newspapers play a unique role in informing Canadians given the relatively small domestic magazine market. Her comparison of Canadian newspapers to those in other jurisdictions suggests that Canadian newspapers tend to rely on information and debate over sensationalist titillation, which Aldridge describes as more 'sedate' than other jurisdictions (2001, p. 612). She also notes that Canadian newspaper articles tend to be longer than those in the United Kingdom and United States, and therefore provide more depth of coverage and analysis.

Despite this potentially important role, the relationship of mainstream print media to education might easily be dismissed or idealised. These polar views can be characterised as 'cynical' versus 'idealist'. A cynical view might articulate such dismissals as (a) the media is merely scanned by readers and not digested, and thus should not be considered as a full-fledged policy actor; and (b) the mainstream media offers so little in-depth coverage particularly of a topic like education that one should not bother considering the media as a policy actor. In contrast, an idealist view would argue that the media ideally functions in a democracy to entice the public to learn more about a subject. This was indeed John Dewey's view, when he elaborated a Jeffersonian vision that emphasises the creation of an informed and questioning citizenry through education, and grants a clear role for the press within this ideal of democracy.

Dewey admitted that 'a newspaper which was only a daily edition of a quarterly journal of sociology or political science would undoubtedly possess a limited circulation and narrow influence.' But, he predicted, the material in the newspapers he imagines would have such an enormous and widespread human bearing that its bare existence would be an irresistible invitation to a presentation of it which would have a direct popular appeal. (John Dewey, *The Public and its Problems*, quoted in Westbrook, 1993, p. 311)

Dewey recognised the limitations of newspapers' necessary condensation and reductiveness. Yet he maintained an optimism that the average readers' interest would be so peaked by newspapers that they would be inspired to conduct further inquiry into more scholarly social science. Today, it is rather hard to imagine the average reader of the *Globe and Mail* page B12 story on literacy testing running to the library to research the question further. It is even harder to imagine very many students in teacher education being so inspired by newspapers as to carry out scholarly study. Yet Dewey also believed that social sciences should be informing news reporting. We do agree that, if nothing else, our studies of how mainstream news covers educational issues points to the need for newspapers to take more seriously the academic research being done and integrate scholarly positions into their reporting.

The introduction of the OSSLT in 2000 affected a great many citizens of Canada's largest province – students, teachers, and parents most centrally. Its introduction was one of many large-scale, high-stakes literacy testing initiatives internationally – each of which appears to have been met with controversy and resistance. As such, this article's focus on the OSSLT's introduction holds a great deal of significance since it has the potential to bring debates over literacy (e.g. What counts as literate? Who decides who is literate? Whom does the test privilege? Whom does the test disadvantage?) and high-stakes testing (e.g. test validity, test reliability) to the fore. Our focus on the OSSLT is important as high-stakes literacy testing can alternately be perceived as a middle-of-the-road, non-partisan educational issue when in fact it has far-reaching implications about achievement and about achievement differentiated by the social class and ethnicity in the multicultural context of Canadian education. As such, the introduction of the OSSLT has the potential to launch fruitful public debate over a variety of educational issues in public forums.

### **The Climate of Reform: high-stakes literacy testing**

Contemporary educational reforms are characterised by 'back to basics' philosophy and accountability measures, often in the form of standardised tests designed to measure students' literacy and numeracy achievement (Levin, 2001; Wiley & Wright, 2004). Such was the case in Ontario when the OSSLT was introduced in 2000, requiring grade 10 students in the province to pass the test in order to graduate from high school. The analysis sheds light on how the OSSLT was

presented to Canadians in the press, paying specific attention to how these mainstream media portrayals define and shape conceptions of literacy. We explore how newspaper coverage differs from much of the educational academic discourse; namely, in its reductive definition of literacy as 'functional', which lacks the necessary analyses of literacy as a complex, culturally embedded set of practices.

Widespread concern about graduates who lack 'literacy' skills has been implied as the impetus for testing in numerous jurisdictions. Nelson et al (2004) report that the rationale for testing programmes often focuses on public dissatisfaction with schools, and the perception that standards have slipped. In the United States, the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001 requires all states, school districts, and schools that are federally funded through Title 1 grants to administer state literacy tests to children in grades 3 through 8. There are plans to extend this testing through secondary school. These test scores determine whether schools achieve 'Adequate Yearly Progress' (AYP) towards the goal of proficiency for all children by 2014. Presently, the 'high stakes' tend to affect US school districts, who risk losing control or funding if students underperform, as well as students, who must pass to be promoted to the next grade. Reports suggest that in the future, American students will be required to pass a standardised test to earn their high school diploma. Similar reforms in the United Kingdom, through the Department for Education and Skills, include mandated National Curriculum tests (known as Standard Assessment Tasks [SATs]) for students at the ages of 7, 11 and 14. Unlike the United States and United Kingdom, there is no Canadian federal legislation requiring standardised literacy testing, largely because education remains within provincial jurisdiction. However, some provinces – most notably Ontario and Alberta – instituted their own high-stakes literacy testing programmes which are required to earn a high school diploma. The literacy test we discuss here, the OSSLT, was introduced in 2000, requiring grade 10 students in the province to pass the test in order to graduate from high school.

Despite what appears to be widespread public support for high-stakes literacy testing [1], there have been a number of concerns raised about it which demonstrate public efforts to contest how literacy is defined and measured and which illustrate the persistent absence of complex analyses of these public concerns within mainstream media. While the complex debate about cultural difference in relation to literacy is beyond the scope of our analysis, we wish to draw attention to one particular concern that often surfaces: the underperformance of diverse populations in high-stakes literacy tests. Cultural, racial and class-based differences in performance have been well documented (see, for example, Livingston & Livingston, 2002; Grant & Wong, 2003; Newman & Chin, 2003; Valencia & Villarreal, 2003; Nelson et al, 2004). Poor performance among marginalised groups has been attributed to the content and structure of tests, which fail to take into account the lives, cultural experiences, and points of view of these groups and tend to privilege the cultural capital of white middle-class test-takers whose first language is English.

Through the analysis and discussion that follows, we draw attention to Ontario's literacy testing initiative, and how public discourse regarding it has been framed. Underlying our discussion are a variety of tensions surrounding controversies of literacy, at the heart of which lie issues of equity and diversity in literacy and testing practices. Our central focus is on the narrow ways in which the mainstream media discusses literacy in the context of the OSSLT.

### **Tensions in Literacy Discourses: grounds for democratic discussion**

Literacy discourse is characterised by tensions over what 'literacy' means, who it serves, how it ought to be measured, and how it should be taught and learned. In this very brief summary of this vast debate, we will focus on several key tensions that surface in attempts to define literacy. Lankshear (2004) identifies four conceptions of literacy that appear in educational policy documents which are particularly useful in understanding what is at stake in how literacy is defined. First, the lingering basics, or functional literacy, conception is pragmatic in its emphasis on readying people for the necessities of daily life. This conception suggests that standards should include writing cheques, employment applications and business letters, reading sets of instructions, bus schedules, street signs and warning labels. A second conception, 'new basics', emerges under the rationale that basic or functional literacy is insufficient for effective participation in modern societies. This second conception includes some degree of reading comprehension, the ability to draw conclusions, and

solve problems using text-based forms. A third conception, elite literacies, emphasises mastery of subject disciplines, managing and synthesising information, and more complex problem-solving abilities. Fourth, Lankshear identifies foreign language literacy as a response to globalisation that entails acquisition of additional language skills beyond one's native language. In addition to Lankshear's conceptions, Michael Apple (1993, p. 44) defines a fifth conception: '*critical literacy, powerful literacy, political literacy* which enables the growth of genuine understanding and control of all of the spheres of social life in which we participate'.

Governments often suggest that 'literacy' must be a national priority under the rationale that increased literacy levels will lead to better employment and economic outcomes. However, many of these government statements rely on functional conceptions of literacy. Tensions arise when economic rationales and functional conceptions of literacy are challenged. For instance, functional conceptions of literacy claim to provide only those skills necessary to productively inhabit our world and strengthen national economic competitiveness, yet they do so in a way that entails adaptation and accommodation to a pre-existing social order which in turn remains unexamined. Functional literacy is also criticised for dismissing or minimising the importance of forms of literacy which do not necessarily contribute to measurable indicators of economic growth or readily translate into improved employment prospects.

However, students may acquire functional literacy while remaining illiterate in the ways in which they are subjugated. Those who attain functional literacy do not necessarily become the writers and rewriters of the rules and values of society, but all too often remain its interpreters and enactors. This notion is central to the work of Paulo Freire:

For Freire functional literacy is a contradiction in terms. It creates the silence of the passive reader, the silent receiver who has found their place in society, who has been given entry into the elite's library of knowledge and who therefore may be seen there, but who cannot, or must not, be heard. (Taylor, 1993, p. 148)

Thus, functional literacy claims to merely 'mirror' the world, to reflect what 'is' rather than what could be, or that what 'is' might in fact represent a constructed constellation of cultural values and social practices. In doing so, functional literacy may thereby undermine the possibility of social change.

### **The Introduction of the OSSLT**

The advent of Ontario school reform in the late 1990s brought about swift and significant changes to education and curriculum policy. The reform measures included a new approach to funding of schools, and major changes to policies governing school board organisation, curriculum, student assessment, and teacher working conditions. These changes were introduced by the Ontario Ministry of Education between 1995 and 2000. The significant changes legislated included a large-scale, high-stakes testing programme, delivered through an arm's-length agency called the Educational Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO).

Since 2000, the EQAO has administered the Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test (OSSLT) to all grade 10 students in the province. Analysis of how OSSLT presents the construct of literacy for testing is crucial, since teachers are accountable (and, according to anecdotal evidence, experience pressure from administrators) for student performance on the test. There is no doubt that preparation for the OSSLT has some impact on classroom practice. The student section of the EQAO website explains its purpose:

The purpose of the Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test (OSSLT) is to ensure that students have acquired the essential reading and writing skills that apply to all subject areas in the provincial curriculum up to the end of Grade 9. All students in public and private schools who are working toward an Ontario Secondary School Diploma are required to write the OSSLT in Grade 10. Students who have been eligible to write the OSSLT at least twice and have been unsuccessful at least once are eligible to fulfill the requirement through the Ontario Secondary School Literacy Course (OSSLC). Successful completion of the OSSLT or OSSLC is a graduation requirement. Every student who writes the OSSLT

receives an Individual Student Report. EQAO also releases provincial, school board and school results.

In 2003, the Ministry of Education stated:

It's important to note that provincial tests were put in place for two reasons. One was to set high standards for students, but most importantly, to provide educators and the [Education] Ministry with a tool to identify students who need extra support. (Lindgren, 2003, p. A14)

The test itself has been criticised for a number of flaws in content and implementation. Wolfe et al (2004, p. ii) point out that EQAO failed to define assessment constructs to be measured, nor described the 'decisions made in interpreting the curriculum documents and developing the assessment frameworks'. The test is used for a number of diverse purposes, and some have made the case that a single test cannot be used for student learning purposes, to measure teacher performance, and to rank school and board performance. The test has also been criticised for flaws in its format and grading procedures, which reward students for closely following directions, and for disadvantaging students who take on more creative approaches to responding (Wolfe et al, 2004). For additional analysis of the OSSLT, refer to the Appendix.

### **Newspaper Portrayal of Literacy in the OSSLT**

Implementation of the OSSLT led to media coverage in a variety of forms. In this section, we explore the frequency and ways in which three Canadian newspapers reported on the OSSLT, with attention to how they framed discussion about student achievement, content, and controversy. The analysis explores what notions of literacy are implicitly and explicitly discussed in the press coverage. Our investigation highlights the central question: how does the mainstream media, as an arm of democracy and key space for public debate, stimulate or constrain social and cultural conversation about such fundamental educational policy concerns as literacy?

#### *Methodology*

The research methodology used for this study incorporates both quantitative and qualitative approaches adapted from Wong & Jain (1999) to analyse newspaper articles published between 1 January 1998 and 10 October 2004. The three newspapers examined in this study were selected because they represent the major sources of national news in Canada. Given that education is a provincial issue while most Canadian magazines reflect a national orientation, that magazine audience and format may entail a different representation of the issue, and that scholars argue that 'newspapers are the principal medium for Canadians to address other Canadians' (Aldridge, 2001, p. 5), our analysis will focus only on newspaper coverage.

Canada's two 'national' newspapers – the *Globe and Mail* and the *National Post* – were selected for their large circulations and prominence in reporting news. A third paper, a 'local' but with the largest circulation in the country and national distribution of close to half a million (Townson 1999, p. 52), is the *Toronto Star*. The *Toronto Star*, published by Torstar, is considered by the public to be 'middle of the road' in terms of its political leanings and community and family orientation. Canada's largest and oldest national newspaper, the *Globe and Mail*, was established in 1843, decades before the founding of Canada itself. Owned by the Southam news chain, the *Globe* derives its enduring success from its standing as the voice of Canada's established professional elite, particularly in the economic and political centres of Toronto and Ottawa (Aldridge, 2001, pp. 2-3). The newest paper to enter the scene, the *National Post*, was established by the owner of Hollinger Inc., right-wing iconoclast Conrad Black, in 1998 as a national competitor to the *Globe and Mail* by building a newspaper on the pre-existing *Financial Post*. The *National Post* is known for a decidedly pro-corporate position (Aldridge, 2001, p. 3). Articles from these papers were located by searches within each newspaper's archival system using the following key words: 'literacy', 'literacy test', 'Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test', 'Ontario literacy test' and 'OSSLT'. Note that the scope of this article is limited to discussion of the OSSLT – excluding specific newspaper coverage related to other tests such as the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) and the grade three and six literacy tests also administered by the EQAO.

Archives of each of the three newspapers were searched electronically for mentions of literacy, the OSSLT, and standardised testing. Results were downloaded and printed, and only those articles which specifically addressed literacy testing for adolescents and referred to the OSSLT were included in this analysis. Quantitative analysis yielded descriptive summaries of the data set based on article features: type of article, year of publication, stakeholders or experts quoted.

Next, qualitative content analysis was used to establish thematic areas. Using the constant comparative method, articles were coded based on the main theme they addressed. Aggregate summaries of themes were then constructed. We then assigned key statements from the articles into the thematic categories. We compared the themes and content within each theme to the theoretic framework that guides this study. Specifically, we analysed the conceptions of literacy implicitly and explicitly discussed in the articles, and looked for instances where authors or subjects in articles challenged the dominant perceptions of literacy which are represented in the OSSLT. This last stage of analysis shed light on the degree to which newspapers contribute to or detract from democratic dialogue on literacy expressed through standardised testing in Ontario as articulated in the research question. Finally, we assembled the findings.

### Findings

Descriptive summaries of quantitative data describe the level of prominence the OSSLT receives in the newspapers studied. Tables I, II, III, and IV provide descriptive data about the articles with respect to the type of article, year of publication, main theme, and type of stakeholder(s) or expert(s) quoted.

Newspaper	Brief news articles	News articles (includes features)	Editorials or opinion pieces	Published letters	Total number of articles
<i>Toronto Star</i>	4	27	3	6	40
<i>Globe &amp; Mail</i>	11	14	2	0	18
<i>National Post</i>	3	15	1	0	19
Total	18	56	6	6	77

Table I. OSSLT coverage by type of article.

Nearly three-quarters of newspaper articles dealing with the OSSLT and literacy (56 of 77 articles or 73%) take the form of news articles. The fewest are in the form of editorials or opinion pieces and letters to the editor. While there are few published letters [2], it remains that letters suggest an interest in public discourse on literacy among readers. We included published letters to the editor in addition to news and editorial pieces because they shed some light on the level of discourse on literacy testing that the newspapers studied facilitate. Because news articles tend to report events, they provide less discussion or debate about contextual or theoretical issues. In the following sections, we will elaborate further on this point.

Newspaper	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	Total
<i>Toronto Star</i>	1		1	12	9	9	8	40
<i>Globe &amp; Mail</i>		1		4	8	3	2	18
<i>National Post</i>			1	10	2	4	2	19
Total	1	1	2	26	19	16	12	77

Table II. OSSLT coverage by year.

The highest frequency of articles concerning OSSLT occurred in 2001 (roughly one-third of articles included in this analysis). This corresponds with the first year of the test's implementation. As well, an incident concerning the theft of the closely guarded test by a university student occurred that year, and is the focus of a number of articles.

Main themes, as illustrated in Table III, were identified using a constant-comparative approach in light of the theoretical framework for analysis. Approximately one-third of articles focus on the theme of student achievement (e.g. reports of the proportion of students who passed and failed the test, descriptions of demography of test achievement). Our content analysis reveals that

throughout the course of the OSSLT’s existence, student achievement results have been publicised, with particular attention to concerns about levels of failure. However, the content of these articles avoids exploration of issues related to literacy conceptions and contains little, if any, exploration of inequities or reasons for failure. Commonly reported information includes:

- over 60,000 students in 2004 were in danger of not graduating due to failure (e.g. Lindgren, 2003; Greenberg, 2004);
- the highest failure rates are among students in ‘non-academic’ streams (e.g. Lindgren, 2002a, b, 2003; Greenberg, 2004), with more than half of all students in the ‘applied’ [3] stream failing the test (Brown, 2003a);
- some pieces (e.g. Brown, 2002a) report accusations that the Minister of Education was manipulating variables to change achievement outcomes, such as creating ‘easier’ test questions and changing the passing mark.

Theme	<i>Toronto Star</i>	<i>Globe &amp; Mail</i>	<i>National Post</i>	Total
Student achievement	13	6	7	26
Controversy	15	6	4	25
Theft and postponement of test	5	4	3	12
Test content	1	2	2	5
Test design	2	0	3	5
Remediation to improve results	3	0	0	3
Politics	1	0	0	1

Table III. OSSLT coverage by main theme.

Approximately one-third of articles focused on describing controversies that occurred associated with the OSSLT. Controversies over literacy tests as discussed in the press tend to focus on (1) fairness of the marking process (resulting from former OSSLT markers who came forward to criticise the process in 2002 and 2004); (2) discriminatory aspects of test content or structure, mainly relating to students with special needs (e.g. lack of accommodation) and differences in socio-economic status (SES) (e.g. the reasons that private schools and high-SES public schools tended to have higher achievement levels) [4]; (3) the use of test results for various purposes considered questionable by some (e.g. using test scores to rank schools, etc.); and (4) concerns about ‘teaching to the test’ in Ontario classrooms. Despite this discussion, once again, discussions about the conceptions of literacy reflected in the test – and their possible impact on achievement – are excluded from press coverage.

Group quoted	<i>Toronto Star</i>	<i>Globe &amp; Mail</i>	<i>National Post</i>	Total
School/board administrators	12	5	7	24
Politicians	12	5	2	19
EQAO or Ministry of Education	8	4	5	17
Non-profits and private ‘think tanks’	8	5	3	16
Teacher unions	6	2	5	13
Parents	6	2	2	10
Academics/researchers	6	1	3	10
Teachers	6	0	1	7
Students	4	1	0	5
Federal organizations (e.g. Council of Ministers of Education, Statistics Canada, etc.)	1	3	0	4
Police or justice system	1	0	1	2
Test markers	0	0	1	1
Celebrities	1	0	0	1
Private sector	0	0	0	0

Table IV. Frequency of ‘experts’ or stakeholders quoted regarding OSSLT. (Each article was scanned for expert[s] or stakeholder[s] quoted in the categories shown in the table. Each time a particular group appeared in a given article, it was counted as one occurrence. Many articles included quotes from several groups.)

An investigation of which experts and/or stakeholders are quoted in press coverage of the OSSLT gives an indication of whose voices are silenced, and whose are privileged (see Table IV). Analysis reveals that the three groups most directly affected by the test – parents, teachers and students – receive the fewest quotes in newspaper articles, while school and board administrators receive the most, followed by politicians. Among teacher unions, the Ontario Secondary School Teachers' Federation (OSSTF) is most frequently quoted. While a fairly wide variety of 'experts' are quoted in the articles analysed, there is little depth to their statements. Rather, content analysis reveals that, for the most part, the quotes are 'sound bites'. For example, one article quotes a teacher union representative saying, 'Hopefully it will be something that will benefit students, but from what I saw today I don't think it will' (Smyth, 2001, p. A1), but the article fails to explore what this means or why the person quoted holds this position.

While most articles in the analysis provide little opportunity for discourse and debate, few provide various aspects of resistance to testing or challenge to conceptions of literacy that relate to democratic discourse. In the subsections that follow, we will highlight instances where newspapers contributed in some way to public discourse related to conceptions of literacy related to the OSSLT.

#### *OSSLT Performance and Student Outcomes*

Though a few articles focus on the link between literacy skills (as achieved through the OSSLT) and employment prospects, particularly through the quotes included in articles, this link is not often explored. For example, the following quote is attributed to People for Education's Annie Kidder in the *National Post* (Lindgren, 2002b, p. A5):

'I can understand why a kid who wants to go through to university and college should have to be able to read and write very well at the Grade 10 level,' Ms. Kidder said. 'One hundred per cent of them should be passing that test .... But if I want to be a plumber or a bricklayer ... I may not need that level of literacy at all, but I may need my high school diploma and if I don't get it, I'm going to be a burden on all of society probably for a long time.'

Kidder's published statement underscores an 'economistic' view of literacy in that she suggests that literacy is tied to a certain post-secondary destination. The *Toronto Star* published several articles discussing strategies that parents, schools and educators are undertaking to address underachievement, more so than the other two newspapers.

There was one notable editorial, published in the *Toronto Star* (2001, p. A14), which explored the notion that literacy testing does not ensure literate graduates. This editorial, titled 'Education Means More Than Passing a Test', draws heavily on a *Harvard Education Letter's* account of a five-year literacy study in the United States. The editorial focuses on the dangers of 'teaching to the test' as reported in the *Harvard Education Letter* cited, warning that literacy testing in Ontario will not necessarily lead to more literate students. This was the only article of its kind among those surveyed.

#### *Differing Conceptions of Literacy*

There are a few instances in which newspapers allude to the existence of different conceptions of literacy – though these different conceptions are not explored. For instance, the *Toronto Star* (Gorrie, 2004, p. A06) reports the following:

Some criticism of the test is connected to changes in how literacy is viewed. It's no longer a black and white matter of being either literate or illiterate. Instead, it's a range of skills.

It's also more than reading and writing.

'It's about knowledge and being able to get along in society,' [literacy worker Nadine] Sookermany says.

This provocative passage alludes to different forms of literacy. However, the 'range of skills' is not described, nor does the author elaborate on the Sookermany quote. Similarly, one *National Post* editorial (National Post, 2004, p. A19) reports:

According to John Myers, an instructor with the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education who supports the injunction, 'there is no fallback for students who, through no fault of their own, are not successful on that one aspect of literacy.'

But this 'one aspect of literacy' Mr. Myers so casually dismisses is nothing less than the simple ability to read and write.

This particular editorial fails to describe what 'other' forms of literacy Myers might be referring to. Myers' remark opens the possibility for some meaningful discussion about literacy, but the author does not take the bait. Immediately following the passage quoted, the author dismisses Myers' view under the rationale that 'reading and writing' as shown in the test is what students need – but the author fails to acknowledge that the test shows only one form of writing and limited reading, as we have shown in our assessment of the OSSLT. While it is impossible to be certain about the context of Myers' remarks and what else he might have said, the author or editor of this piece was able to silence Myers' broader perspective of literacy through omission, whether conscious or not. Furthermore, this editorial concludes with the following statements: 'We hope the Ontario government sticks to its guns and keeps the literacy test as is ... In the end, all students will benefit from being held to a higher standard'. However, the reader is left unsure of what 'higher standard' the author is considering.

Other instances of references to alternative conceptions of literacy primarily occur in the form of stakeholder quotes. Kalinowski (2004, p. B03) attributes a quote that alludes to questioning "whether one-size-fits-all literacy makes sense" to the lawyer for parents taking legal action over the test. But once again, there is no clarification of possible alternate conceptions beyond this, and this alternate conception of literacy is, in effect, removed from the discourse.

These instances allude to the possibility of opening up public discussion about varying conceptions of literacy and challenging the focus of the OSSLT. However, superficial coverage and the dismissal of views of individuals who challenge conventional conceptions of literacy appear to shut this sort of dialogue down.

#### *Reader Interaction*

Letters to the editor suggest the degree to which readers are given the opportunity to discuss and debate the OSSLT and conceptions of literacy presented by the press.[5] A total of six letters to the editor were published within the timeframe studied, and all appeared in the *Toronto Star*. Each of the six letters published communicates some form of criticism or resistance related to the OSSLT. Two challenge predictors of success/reasons for failure reported in the *Toronto Star*, one suggests that the test served no purpose other than to harass educators, another criticises the use of alternate diplomas for those who do not pass the test, and two deal with conceptions of literacy. One of the letters in the latter group (Shaikin, 2002, p. A25) reflects the reader's response to literacy discourse in the newspaper:

How can one prepare to prove that they are literate? By Grade 10, shouldn't our students be able to read and write? Shouldn't the literacy test help to identify those students who cannot already do so, in order to ensure that they receive remedial assistance? Why are students studying for a literacy test? Why are teachers being asked to teach literacy as a subject? Does the Ontario government know the difference between literacy and understanding curriculum?

Literacy is not something that can be studied. It can, perhaps, be evaluated, but it is not a subject to learn. Literacy is a skill that needs to be reinforced and built upon over the course of one's education. Literacy has nothing to do with curriculum, for without literacy, the curriculum cannot be understood.

Our students need to learn many things in high school, but if they aren't able to read and write, Grade 10 is very late in their education to evaluate and impose those skills that are supposed to begin development in very early childhood.

This reader appears to support a functional conception of literacy. She suggests that students should be able to 'read and write' but it appears that she is not considering that there could be varying types of reading and writing. Clearly, her position suggests that acquiring literacy is a

process that takes place over a student's education. She appears to suggest that the 'curriculum' (presumably knowledge and understanding of subject matter) is outside the realm of literacy.

The following passage, which also deals with literacy conceptions, appears in a letter written by a grade 10 student published in the *Toronto Star* (Sadavoy, 2001, p. A19), discussing OSSLT results reported in the paper:

Although those are statistics, it does not prove that Grade 10 students are ignorant. I have an English class full of articulate and highly opinionated speakers.

During class debates, those who express their points of view have creative, well-thought-out ideas. The topics are very controversial and deal with problems that teenagers can relate to.

If those tests contained a 'hot topic' or insulted the new curriculum, Grade 10 students would have been capable of providing evidence for their opinions. I would bet that more than two-thirds would have something to say about those subjects.

While this passage does not overtly challenge a particular conception of literacy, the author suggests that if the OSSLT focused on different sorts of literacies – through content, or in the form of a critique – students' performance might improve. As such, this reader is challenging dominant forms of literacy presented in the OSSLT.

Here we can see that the way in which parents, students and the public engage with this educational issue is significantly influenced by the manner in which it is represented by the press. For example, had the articles these two letters responded to addressed the issue of literacy and the OSSLT with greater depth, perhaps the readers would have been able to respond with greater understanding and clarity of ideas – underscoring Dewey's emphasis on 'the importance of communication as a way of living together' in a democracy (Evans, 2001, p. 772). Finally, these letters suggest that perhaps newspaper readers may be interested in learning more about literacy and thus reinforcing Dewey's vision of newspapers stimulating inquiry among readers. But, as we have illustrated, there is little for readers like Shaikin and Sadavoy to turn to in Canadian newspapers.

#### **Discussion: opening up or shutting down discourse about 'literacy'?**

Overall, surprisingly few newspaper articles explore or question conceptions of literacy reflected in Ontario's educational policy in light of the introduction of the OSSLT. One might at this point ask why we should expect that mainstream print news do anything more than offer basic reporting on something like a provincial literacy test. Is it expecting too much to ask whether and how news can or ought to engage in more complex debate about something like high-stakes literacy testing? As a point of contrast, other topics such as Darwinism versus Creationism in schools, pro-life/pro-choice stories, environmental issues such as the Kyoto Protocol, reflect greater depth and complexity of coverage in that differing positions on the issues are at the fore of media coverage. This may stem from the relative simplicity required to present the opposing viewpoints, as well as the familiarity that readers might have with positions on these topics. Issues such as Kyoto and pro-life/pro-choice are easily defined and described, whereas discussing and debating literacy would require reframing the OSSLT as value-laden and explaining the nature of alternate conceptions of literacy.

Secondly, whether or not news does in fact offer this complexity, we suggest that one of the functions of news in a democracy is to engage debate about the social implications of something as fundamental as literacy. The OSSLT appears to be viewed through a lens of false neutrality, and acknowledging the problematic aspects we have identified would require analysis and understanding by journalists and by readers in order to construct a debate in the public sphere. The Campaign for Press and Broadcasting Freedom, an independent Canadian organisation dedicated to monitoring Canada's media, asserts that 'the basic requirements of a democratic media system should be that it is representative of the rich diversity of interests and opinions in our societies, that it is accessible to all citizens so that their voices may be heard, and that it lives up to its responsibility to provide people with a broad range of views and information'.<sup>[6]</sup> Furthermore, many educational thinkers and democratic theorists have recognised the centrality of communication to the preservation of democracy. For example, John Dewey has defined

democracy itself as a ‘conjoint *communicated* experience’ (Dewey, 1916/1943, p. 87); thus our experience of democracy is contingent on communication. Considering that the media is perhaps the most important mode of communication in our modern society, the communicative function of news must be recognised as essential for the preservation of democracy.

To reiterate, our analysis shows that the media significantly narrowed the potential of public discourse by limiting which individuals, organisations and groups had a voice in the press, shutting down discussion about alternative conceptions of literacy, and failing to provide any sort of meaningful discussion or analysis of literacy testing. In its failure to address the issues raised in this article, the Canadian print media failed to live up to its potential as a venue for democratic engagement. In stark contrast to the popular press, the academic literature contains a plethora of perspectives that discuss and debate conceptions of literacy. One thing is evident: the academic literature recognises that literacy is *never* neutral, that it goes beyond the acquisition of technical knowledge and skills applied in a predictable manner for instrumental purposes. It opens up discussion and debate that are essential to democracy and that play a role in the democratisation of education, literacy and testing.

In fact, even newspaper articles that discuss OSSLT student results fail to explain what sorts of literacy the tests reflect (though some break down results into reading and writing). There is, however, some acknowledgement of the sociocultural bias embedded in test content. As a whole, newspaper coverage also fails to give sufficient accounts of test content which would allow readers to draw their own inferences about what literacy might mean. Instead, the coverage implies that literacy is a self-explanatory phenomenon – if students read and write, they are literate. It fails to ask relevant but basic questions such as *read what? Write what?* Nor does it pose more complex questions associated with critical forms of literacy such as: *how do students make sense of the texts they read? Are students able to contextualise what they read in broader social contexts? Are they able to express their positions and their interactions with readings?* This stark absence illustrates an important relationship between media and schools as two social institutions which, together, are failing to engage the kind of public debate about something as fundamental as literacy. The fact that the media does not engage a greater diversity of voices and complexity of analysis compounds the already problematic imposition of a narrow definition of literacy found in the standardised test.

What, then, is the gist of the problems that the academic literature brings to light? Literacy, as much of the academic literature acknowledges, is always value-laden, reproducing hegemonic practices and conveying cultural norms, thus shaping social and individual consciousness. It does not merely give ‘access’ to culture, so that one might become ‘cultured’, but in fact allows cultural configurations of hegemony and power to be taken up and enacted by the subject. A variety of educational theorists, from Paulo Freire to Carmen Luke and Paul Taylor, have challenged the notion of literacy as neutral, and provide a starting point for more expansive and broad-based accounts of literacy. These conceptions of literacy reach to the very heart of debates regarding the role of education in a democratic society: Does it involve the acquisition of specific predetermined skills, or is it a transformative process of self-development and political intervention? Should it reproduce a given social order, or actively seek to illuminate, critique and alter it? Not only are such questions crucial to educational policy about literacy testing, but these are questions that must be publicly addressed in popular press discourse on literacy testing.

### **Implications**

Clearly, there are many media that could provide an arena for discourse around the problematic nature of literacy in Ontario. We suggest that newspapers, given their role as sources of public information (Aldridge, 2001) and as such policy actors, are an ideal format for this. One might jump to the conclusion that the reason for this is lack of public appetite or lack of reader interest. While this could be the case, letters to the editor examined in this research suggest that there is interest in literacy among the readership. Moreover, these letters suggest that the public has at least some interest in engaging in complex discourse about literacy. We also observed several instances of articles and editorials which addressed the inequities of literacy testing – specifically suggesting that the OSSLT tends to disadvantage students from marginalised and minority groups. Some evidence (e.g. letters to the editor) suggests that there is genuine interest in this kind of debate as envisioned

by Dewey, but that the lack of multiple perspectives on literacy in the press and elsewhere is a function of no previous exposure to this issue.[7] Regardless, addressing some of the tensions would no doubt educate readers in the latter group, and possibly stimulate reflection and additional discourse in private spheres.

As long as literacy remains understood as 'neutral' by citizens, learners and teachers, then its true character will remain concealed, and students will be handed over to its influence and political consequences. Similarly, as long as the media remains understood as 'objective', citizens, learners, and teachers will fail to demand accountability on the part of the mainstream media for the narrow confines of its sources and coverage and its absence of inclusion of diverse – and scholarly – voices on such matters as literacy. Ironically, a narrow definition of literacy divorced from ideals of democracy is perpetuated by the twin operations of standardised tests working in conjunction with a less than democratic media.

By opening up public awareness, students, teachers and parents can reflect on how literacy conceptions shape their everyday lives – especially related to classroom practice. However, the only way that such discourse will be considered in the print media is if readers demand it.

### **Conclusion**

Literacy remains a frequently used though rarely debated term in popular media forms in Ontario. By contrast, academic discourses on literacy provide a variety of hotly debated understandings of this term, largely focusing on its value-laden nature. This article explored how Canadian newspapers frame literacy as it relates to the OSSLT between 1998 and 2004. The analysis focused on whether and how the press shape discourse about conceptions of literacy when reporting on the OSSLT as it relates to Dewey's democratic vision for the press. The introduction of the OSSLT and its results, as reflected in newspaper reports, caused controversy. During the period of time studied, newspapers consistently reported information about OSSLT test status and results. However, these reports fail to discuss test content, and issues over literacy representations within the test. The press turned to a variety of stakeholder groups to provide comment, though our analysis found that those most affected by the test (students, parents and teachers) are least frequently represented in newspapers. Rather, politicians and school/board administrators are most frequently represented. The privileged voices have a greater opportunity to shape the discourse reported, though authors and editors make editorial decisions which may silence certain perspectives or ideas, and remove certain discourses from the public sphere represented by the newspaper.

While academic discourse on literacy provides full accounts of varied conceptions of literature, similar themes are simply not reflected in Canadian newspaper reports and editorials concerning high-stakes literacy testing in Ontario. Our analysis reveals that some attempts were made by authors and stakeholders quoted in articles to broaden the discussion of what constitutes literacy by suggesting alternative forms. However, allusions to alternate conceptions of literacy are simply not explained or elaborated in the newspaper. There is no evidence of explicit discourse raising issues brought about by luminaries such as Freire (1970), McLaren & Lankshear (1993), and Taylor (1993).

If the media is to represent the diversity of voices and provide a wide range of views so as to fulfil its democratic responsibility as envisioned by Dewey, then a wider debate over representations of literacy must occur and more perspectives and voices must be included in newspaper coverage. For example, our findings suggest that academic work is not performing its democratic function as Dewey imagines. Considering alternative accounts of literacy will suggest ways and directions in which what is otherwise seen as an innocuous and neutral undertaking might be understood more fully among readership. Yet to the detriment of students – and democratic life in Ontario – these essential dimensions of literacy are too often neglected in standardised and high-stakes testing programmes. We believe that the press and other media that play a role in framing issues for the public have a responsibility to acknowledge the complex and multidimensional aspects of literacy so that the 'debate' can extend beyond the academic literature to engage students, teachers, parents and citizens. By reframing coverage of these topics, and including a wider array of voices, the press could strengthen its democratic role and stimulate inquiry, discourse and debate among members of the public.

## Notes

- [1] Livingstone & Hart (2005) found that 69% of Ontarians support the Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test (OSSLT), even if it results in fewer students graduating from high school.
- [2] It is unknown how many letters were submitted to newspapers, though some were indeed published.
- [3] In grades 9 and 10, Ontario students are streamed in to 'academic' or 'applied' courses, which then lead them into corresponding destination-based streams in senior grades ('workplace', 'college', 'college/university' or 'university').
- [4] Brown (2003b) quotes a teacher union representative: "[these tests] prove once more what we already know – that the literacy test is not really a test of literacy, but of a student's socioeconomic status, and schools that cater to Ontario's wealthy families do better than those who do not".
- [5] We acknowledge that further research would be required to determine the reasons for reader responses, and whether those individuals submitting letters to the editor are representative of the broader population in their concerns.
- [6] <http://www.presscampaign.org/statement.htm> (accessed 18 April 2005).
- [7] Anecdotal evidence suggests that this might be caused by lack of exposure. One of our authors recently provided a series of literacy workshops to practising teachers, and found that few were aware that the definition of literacy was controversial. As well, a review of websites and portals aimed at Ontario teachers revealed that though a variety of discussion forums were actively used, none addressed issues of literacy as a topic of debate and dialogue.
- [8] The reading component includes 12 reading selections of three different types (information, graphic, narrative), with a total of 40 multiple-choice questions, 25 short answer questions, and 35 written explanation questions. The writing component requires four writing tasks: a summary, a series of paragraphs expressing an opinion, a news report, and an information paragraph. The components are completed over two days, within a total time allotment of 2.5 hours.
- [9] One is a news story about lost baggage in Canadian airports, and the other is an opinion piece in response to a newspaper article in which the author complains about the popularity of t-shirts as garments.
- [10] Questions include asking students to: best describe the purpose of the readings, identify the meaning of specific words in the context of readings, provide an opinion of the reading, reiterate 'facts' or reasons from reading, explaining why certain punctuation marks were used, etc.
- [11] In 2004, one of the questions on the actual OSSLT involved reading a train schedule that contained Ontario destinations. A teacher anecdotally reported to one of our authors that a student who was new to Canada experienced great difficulty with this reading task since the student lacked knowledge of the Canadian train system and the names of Canadian destinations. Given that 27% (2001 Census as reported by OCASI, 2004) of Ontario's population was not born in Canada, it is likely that this was not the only instance of such difficulty.

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## APPENDIX

### Critique of the OSSLT Format

The OSSLT contains a 'reading' component and a 'writing' component.[8] These two components present very narrow and specific conceptions of literacy characterised by what Lankshear (2004) calls 'lingering basics' or functional literacy. Specific observations about the embedded notions of literacy are:

- The sample reading questions provide readings limited to newspaper-style reports.[9] Presuming these are representative of actual questions, there is a marked lack of 'alterative' forms of literature, such as fiction or poetry. Questions posed to test-takers deal with reading comprehension, explanation of forms used in the pieces and grammar.[10] Some are extremely culturally biased.[11] The sorts of questions asked are relatively technical in nature. In no way do they call on students to demonstrate critical thinking or critical analysis, nor to respond in meaningful ways to the readings. This suggests that 'reading' literacy is strictly tied to comprehending words or sentences, not to critical evaluation or interaction with the text.
- EQAO standards state that the successful test-taker 'writes in a variety of forms, such as summary, opinion piece, news report, informational paragraph' (EQAO, n.d.) An examination of the sample questions reveals that these four forms are the only ones included. Forms such as poetry or creative writing are excluded. If students and teachers prepare for the test using the sample questions and this standard, more creative forms of writing can be under-represented or fall into the null curriculum.
- The sample writing tasks are extremely prescriptive, calling for a set number of paragraphs and limited space for the response, with a note explaining that the space reflects the amount to be written. One writing task in the sample requires a student to write a news report based on a photograph and headline provided. The sorts of questions reflect an extremely limited conception of writing as a component of literacy. Writing, by the implied definition in OSSLT, is a technical undertaking, not a creative one. Space is limited, and if the 'instructions' or conventions for topic, paragraph breakdown and space are not followed, it is not considered 'good' writing. This is problematic since it limits the creativity of students, and there is potential for conformity to be overemphasised in classrooms where test preparation takes place. Students who may be strong creative writers may not fare well on the test.

Given the extent to which adolescents in Ontario are impacted by the OSSLT, it stands to reason that students, teachers, parents and academics might be inclined to explore the sort of literacy that

is conveyed by this test. The preceding analysis suggests that the OSSLT reflects a narrow and economistic conception of literacy – one that has been widely contested in the literature.

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**LAURA PINTO** is currently a PhD Candidate in the Department of Theory and Policy Studies, Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto, Canada. Her work focuses on questions of educational policy formation in different contexts of democracy. *Correspondence:* Laura Pinto, Department of Theory and Policy Studies, Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto, 252 Bloor Street West, Toronto, Ontario M5S 1V6, Canada ([lpinto@ica.net](mailto:lpinto@ica.net))

**TREVOR NORRIS** is a PhD Candidate at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto, Canada. His work focuses on the political and pedagogical implications of consumerism. *Correspondence:* Trevor Norris, Department of Theory and Policy Studies, Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto, 252 Bloor Street West, Toronto, Ontario M5S 1V6, Canada ([trevornorris71@hotmail.com](mailto:trevornorris71@hotmail.com))

**MEGAN BOLER** is Associate Professor in Theory and Policy Studies at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto, Canada. She is currently working on a three-year research project on the uses of digital multimedia for political dissent. *Correspondence:* Megan Boler, Associate Professor, Theory and Policy Studies, Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto, 252 Bloor Street West, Toronto, Ontario M5S 1V6, Canada ([mboler@oise.utoronto.ca](mailto:mboler@oise.utoronto.ca))