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Re/Viewing Student Success in an Era of Accountability

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Abstract

This paper examines how student success is defined in Ontario schools. In the current era of accountability, student success is often narrowly defined in terms of student achievement on standardized tests. Alternate definitions of student success are explored by viewing student success from the vantage point of various stakeholders. Finally, the author suggests that we need to re/view student success by envisioning it from the perspective of the students themselves.

Introduction

In the current era of accountability in Ontario schools there seems to be a commonly held belief that the term "student success" means the same thing to all stakeholders. Policy makers have listened to a few dominant voices and "student success" has become synonymous with "student achievement" on provincial tests. This has resulted in a focus on top-down, large-scale reform. Many stakeholders have not been consulted. In fact, teacher, parent, and student visions of success have largely been ignored. This review of the literature will investigate how educational partners at all

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levels of the school system view "student success" and what implications those definitions may have in terms of curricular decisions and outcomes for Ontario students.

Theoretical Framework

The analysis of "student success" at all levels of Ontario's school system will be viewed in terms of two distinct vantage points, largely based on Maxine Greene's work, *Releasing the Imagination*. Definitions of student success will be viewed from the position of "seeing things small" or "seeing things big":

> To see things or people small, one chooses to see from a detached point of view, to watch behaviors from the perspective of a system, to be concerned with trends and tendencies, rather than the intentionality and concreteness of everyday life. To see things or people big, one must resist viewing other human beings as mere objects or chess pieces and view them in their integrity and particularity instead. One must see from the point of view of the participant in the midst of what is happening if one is to be privy to the plans people make, the initiatives they take, the uncertainties they face. When applied to schooling, the vision that sees things big brings us in close contact with the details and with the particularities that cannot be reduced to statistics or even to the measurable. (Greene, 1995, p. 10)

Eight images have been interspersed throughout the text to provide a visual metaphor for how various stakeholder groups may view student success. These images have been borrowed from a wordless picture book entitled Zoom by Istvan Banyai. Zoom is a wordless picture book that re-creates the effect of a camera lens zooming out through the use of 30 sequential "pictures within pictures." The Zoom narrative moves from an image of a rooster to a ship to a city street to a desert island and ends with an image of outer space. For the purposes of this article the image sequence has been reversed in order to give the impression of zooming in on the rooster.

Accountability, Testing, and Large Scale Reform

Seeing Things Small

Figure 1. Seeing student success small.

From *Zoom* (p. 8) by I. Banyai, Viking Press. Reprinted with permission of the author.

In Ontario, the current discourse on "student success" in publicly funded schools is inextricably linked to student achievement on standardized tests. Province-wide assessments, originally introduced as alternative ways to assess student progress; a passenger along for the ride so to speak, have become the driving force behind education in Ontario. The entire school system has been mobilized at all levels to improve the very test results that had been previously described as innocuous. Ontario's experience with large-scale reform and the direction it has taken follows the pattern described by Hargreaves (2009), "educational change and reform strategies and their accompanying directions have become bigger, tighter, harder, and flatter" (p. 90) throughout the last

decade. "Educational reformers began to look at more coordinated system-wide designs for reform – and research money increasingly followed them. School-based and classroom-based change was out; large-scale reform was in" (Hargreaves, 2009, p. 90).

In fact, in *Results without Rancor or Ranking: Ontario's Success Story*, Levin, Glaze, and Fullan (2008) outline the two main components of Ontario's success strategy that began in 2003: "a commitment to improve elementary school literacy and numeracy outcomes, and a commitment to increase high school graduation rates" (p. 275). The authors justify this admittedly narrow view of success by stating that this is what is needed to restore public confidence in education. "These priorities were chosen because public confidence in and support for education depend on demonstrated achievement of good outcomes for students. These core goals are supported by a large-scale strategy based substantially on Michael Fullan's work" (Levin et al., 2008, p. 275).
The strategy for improved outcomes was further framed by delineating clear and ambitious goals in both of these areas. "The goal of Ontario's Literacy and Numeracy Strategy was to have at least 75% of 6th-grade students able to read, write, and do mathematics at the expected level by spring 2008" (Levin et al., p. 275). In addition, "the province has set a target of having at least 85% of entering 9th-grade students graduate from high school in a timely way by 2010" (Levin et al., p. 275).

What is clear is that students in Ontario are viewed from a system-wide perspective and ambitious targets have resulted in the creation of a high stakes testing

environment. Indeed, Hargreaves (2009) warns, "The quest for more and more detailed data to guide every action and decision can become obsessive and excessive" (p. 95).

Ministry of Education

Seeing Things Small

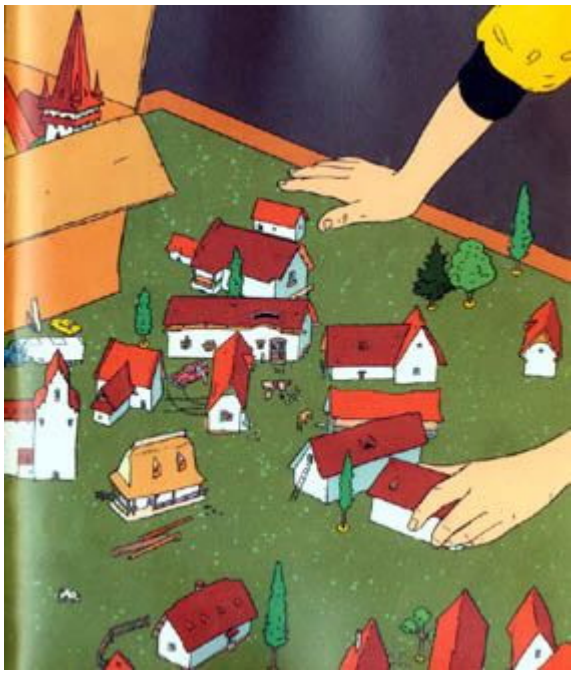

Figure 2. A ministry of education view of student success.

From *Zoom* (p. 7) by I. Banyai, Viking Press. Reprinted with permission of the author.

An explicit operational definition of "student success" could not be found in the legislation or policy memoranda governing the school system in Ontario. However, student success is viewed from the perspective of "seeing things small" and it is measured in terms of student achievement on province-wide assessments.

Ontario's large-scale reform is largely based on the work of Michael Fullan and his colleagues. In fact, Fullan (2009) states that, "whole-system reform is the work that my colleagues and I are engaged in now, in Ontario and around the world" (p. 48). Policy makers have allowed the views of a few strategically placed researchers to permeate the discussion of reform. The "research-based evidence" that is used to support and justify the implementation of various programs and policies invariably comes from those with a vested interest in "large-scale reform" and a "small" view of student success.

Stakeholders are erroneously led to believe that initiatives are grounded in a plethora of unbiased research. This situation is further confounded by the fact that the original intent of research is often lost in translation; distorted both intentionally and unintentionally, to suit the prescriptive purposes of the Ministry and/or Boards of Education. Time and budget constraints have further hampered the link between research and practice.

In the spirit of "large-scale reform" the influence of these researchers has gradually and purposefully extended its reach to exert control over the daily lives of both teachers and students alike. Value-laden terms like "alignment," "capacity building," "teacher moderation," and "embedded" are commonly found in their work. The underlying assumption is that teachers are incapable of independently providing sound programming and assessment for their students without specific direction and guidance from external sources. I will now describe the reform efforts that have changed the face of education in Ontario.

The Ontario Curriculum

Initial reform efforts began in the late 1990s when the government of Ontario established a prescribed curriculum that outlined what would be taught in elementary schools. "Curriculum documents define what students are taught in Ontario public schools. They detail the knowledge and skills that students are expected to develop in each subject at each grade level. By developing and publishing curriculum documents for use by all Ontario teachers, the Ministry of Education sets standards for the entire province" (Ontario Ministry of Education). This was the first step toward changing the face of learning and "student success" in Ontario. "Learning as an exciting, fulfilling, meaningful adventure actually gets in the way of accomplishing the objectives of classrooms driven by teacher-proof curricula" (Hatch, 2007, p. 311).

Provincial Testing

The Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO) was established based on a recommendation of the Ontario Royal Commission on Learning in 1995. The Commission concluded that province-wide assessments would help to respond to public demands for greater quality and accountability in the publicly funded school system. "In 1996, the government established the Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO) to: accomplish its mandate of designing new tests for grades 3, 6, 9, and 10 in reading, writing and mathematics; manage the administration of these tests; report the results to the public; and collect data to help determine the effectiveness of Ontario's education system" (Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario, ¶ 2).

"While it can be argued that standardized testing is an effective evaluative instrument when its limitations are understood, the use of a single, summative instrument becomes problematic when it is viewed as a comprehensive evaluation that overrides the validity of findings generated by other forms of assessment" (Gasoi, 2009, p. 174). The singular focus on test scores as measures of student achievement in Ontario disenfranchises teachers because it implies that province-wide tests that are given over three days have more validity than the assessments teachers use to assess student progress over a ten month period. In order to address this fallacy, in 2008 ETFO released a position paper entitled, *If you want to know how your child is doing in school ask your child's teacher*, which provides stakeholders with information about how teachers formulate assessments. "Research in the field of assessment for learning clearly indicates that effective teachers intentionally design assessments into their practice to enable students to think deeply about their own learning" (Willms, Friesen, & Milton, 2009, p. 35). Teachers use the assessment process to help students articulate what they have found and to help them determine where they might be going which stimulates critical thinking and self-directed learning.

To further complicate matters, Ontario's provincial tests are not truly "standardized" in that every year the test items are reformulated and given to entirely new populations of grade 3 and 6 students. As such, they are not psychometrically sound and possess little reliability or validity. Eisner (2002) states that, "the tests that are being employed in schools have very little predictive validity outside of other test scores" and he believes that "you can raise test scores and diminish the quality of education students

receive." The human cost of testing is immeasurable. In the process of preparing students for the test we are emphasizing a narrowly defined set of knowledge and neglecting to prepare them for life. Westheimer (2008) contends that, "curricular approaches that spoonfeed students to succeed on narrow academic tests teach students that broader critical thinking is optional" (p. 7).

Many researchers contend that the current large-scale reform agenda is diminishing democracy (Kerr, 2006; Ricci, 2004; Romanowski, 2008; Westheimer, 2008). "In Canada, too many schools have become oriented toward pedagogical models of efficiency that discourage deeper consideration of important ideas. The relentless focus on testing and 'achievement' means that time for indepth critical analysis of ideas is diminished" (Westheimer, 2008, p. 8). Despite the fact that many Board mission statements extol democratic principles by claiming to foster the development of students who are"self-directed learners" and "critical thinkers," "current school reform policies and many classroom practices too often reduce teaching and learning to exactly the kind of mindless rule-following that makes students unable to take principled stands that have long been associated with democracies" (Westheimer, 2008, p. 8). Instead as Westheimer (2008) claims, "students are learning more about how to please authority and pass the tests than how to develop convictions and stand up for them" (p. 8).

The Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat (LNS)

"The Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat was established in 2004 to help boost student achievement. Highly skilled and experienced educators (known as student achievement officers) work directly with schools and school boards across the province

to build capacity and implement strategies to improve our students' reading, writing and math skills" (Ontario Ministry of Education).

The Secretariat creates and implements a vast number of policies and programs designed to improve student outcomes on province-wide assessments. Two specific initiatives, namely, the Teaching-Learning Critical Pathways component of the Capacity Building Series and the School Effectiveness Framework will be examined in some depth in order to illustrate the increasing extensiveness of governmental control over pedagogical decisions in Ontario. No longer satisfied with delineating the "what" of curriculum, the Secretariat is stepping into classrooms and determining "how" the curriculum should be taught.

Teaching-Learning Critical Pathways.

In their book, *Breakthrough*, Fullan, Hill, and Crévola (2006) claim that the problem with school reform is that it has failed to impact daily instruction in a meaningful way. "The breakthrough we are seeking involves the education community as a whole establishing a system of expert data driven instruction that will result in daily continuous improvement for all students in all classrooms" (p. 2). "The problem that we tackle in *Breakthrough* is not only to make the data more manageable but also precisely how to link the data to instruction on a daily basis — something that so far has evaded even the most results-oriented districts" (Fullan et al., 2006, p. 20).

These researchers believe that standards and accountability do not go far enough if they do not change how and what teachers do on a daily basis. "The new direction that we advocate is the complex and challenging task of transforming classroom instruction into a precision-based process that provides the teacher with the necessary information to make well-informed instructional decisions for all students…" (Fullan et al., p. 28). They further contend that this form of instruction serves a "moral purpose" if it promotes the achievement of all students, "moral purpose accompanied by a powerful pedagogy is unstoppable" (Fullan et al., p. 40).

The *Breakthrough* plan calls for teachers to gather data on every child in every lesson on every single day of the academic year. This process would be "streamlined" through the use of rubrics called, "Critical Learning Instructional Paths" or CLIPs. It is evident that this work forms the basis of the Teaching-Learning Critical Pathways initiative that is currently being implemented in Ontario schools as part of the Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat's Capacity Building Series.

"The Capacity Building Series is produced by The Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat to support leadership and instructional effectiveness in Ontario schools" (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2008). It includes comprehensive strategies and initiatives that determine the direction of elementary teaching practice across the province. One such initiative that is currently being implemented in Ontario classrooms involves Teaching-Learning Critical Pathways.

According to the Ministry website, "the Teaching-Learning Critical Pathway (TLCP) is a promising model used to organize actions for teaching and student learning.

The TLCP, inspired by a strategy presented by Michael Fullan, Peter Hill and Carmel Crévola in their book *Breakthrough*, is designed as the work of the professional learning community (PLC)" (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2008, p. 1). "The basic idea of a pathway is that classroom practice can be organized in a practical, precise and highly personalized manner for each student, with the intended outcome being increased achievement for *all* students" (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2008, p.1).

The general process involves a six-week period devoted to one "big idea". Throughout the process, teachers meet in professional learning communities to: determine an area of need based on available data; "select high-yield teaching strategies that will promote the greatest student growth and align best with the identified area of need" (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2008, p.3); share evidence and design a culminating task; and bring work samples to the final PLC in order to participate in teacher moderation.

The Teaching-Learning Critical Pathways initiative is grounded in the assumption that teachers need to be told what to teach and how to teach it. The Teaching-Learning Critical Pathways (TLCP) initiative will be unpacked to reveal the harsh reality of its implementation in school boards across the province. TLCPs effectively illustrate how initiatives can be co-opted to suit the purposes of those concerned with student outcomes on provincial tests.

Let us begin with the "Triple P Core Components" of a pathway: personalization, precision and professional learning. The intent of the research was to design instruction

tailored to the needs of every student so that it would be personalized and precise. This would be accomplished by gathering data on every child in every lesson on every single day of the school year which translates into hundreds of formative assessments a week. "Good teachers do not resist learning more about their children's learning needs. Nor do they resist assessments. But like too many other school reforms, the *Breakthrough* system fails to account for other than the most technical aspects of teaching" (Cooper, 2007, p. 277). Teachers would become nothing more than data collectors who have little time to attend to the other demands they face in the course of a school day. The Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat determined that "big ideas" could easily be drawn from the deficits identified in the data collected by "individual" school boards. It is difficult to comprehend how "data-driven instruction" can be described as "precise and personalized" when it is based on system-wide information.

Over the six-week period of a TLCP, teachers in schools are expected to employ the "high-yield strategies" that best "align" with the identified need. The research that the Ministry cites to support the use of "high-yield strategies" propagates the assumption that superior teaching and learning can be reduced to the employment of specific actions on the part of the teacher. In his article, *Setting the Record Straight on "High-Yield" Strategies*, Marzano (2009) himself states that his work has been widely misinterpreted, "defining teaching using a narrow set of instructional strategies, management strategies, or assessment strategies doesn't do justice to the teaching-learning process," (p. 32) and "unfortunately, in some schools and districts, this message was lost" (Marzano, 2009, p. 31).

The final core component of the Teaching-Learning Critical Pathway is "professional learning." The Teaching-Learning Critical Pathway "is designed as the work of the professional learning community (PLC)" (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2008, p.1). Professional learning communities were originally conceived as "a group of professionals who focus on learning within a supportive, self-created community" (Alberta Education, 2006, p. 4). Professional learning communities have been transformed into required meetings with prescribed agendas designed to satisfy school and board officials that teachers are doing what they can to improve student outcomes on achievement tests. The Teaching-Learning Critical Pathway process strips teachers of their professionalism and robs students of an education that acknowledges a full range of human possibilities rather than a limited set of content and skills. The final stage in the Teaching-Learning Critical Pathway is "teacher moderation" of the culminating task. "When teachers gather to review and assess student work, they bring different experiences and often find that their understandings of curriculum expectations, levels of achievement, and instructional effectiveness differ. Assessment practices can have wide variance from classroom to classroom. Opportunities for professional dialogue about assessment practices bring coherence to those practices" (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2007b, p.1). Again, we see that a teacher's role is being reduced to that of a technician on a "marking assembly line" who must be "moderated" to meet quality assurance demands.

The School Effectiveness Framework.

The description of the Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat's school effectiveness framework as it appears on the Ontario Ministry of Education's website is as follows:

> *The School Effectiveness Framework: A Collegial Process for Continued Growth in the Effectiveness of Ontario Elementary Schools* is designed to assist schools and boards in analyzing the key components that make schools effective so they can plan for improvement. The Secretariat respects the professionalism of educators and believes in their desire to bring about improvement from within the profession. As such, this framework will provide ways for teachers, as well as school and system administrators, to voluntarily accept responsibility and hold themselves accountable for ensuring that research-based, effective strategies are consistently implemented across the province. (Ontario Ministry of Education)

In her opening comments, Glaze, the CEO of the Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat, states, "this initiative is a reflection of the Secretariat's belief that Ontario's schools are ready to move to a new level of professional accountability. This is based on a philosophy of shared commitment and collegiality" (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2007a, p. 2). "The framework will provide ways in which teachers and school and system administrators accept responsibility to hold themselves accountable for ensuring that research-based, effective strategies are consistently implemented across the province" (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2007a, p. 8).

"The framework is intended to provide indicators for critical analysis of key components of school effectiveness. The framework will be used for both the School Self-Assessment Process and the District Review Process. Based on the literature on what makes schools effective, nine components have been identified as factors that have an impact on student achievement" (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2007a, p. 13). "The framework is not designed to be a performance appraisal tool nor is it designed to

evaluate the principal or any other staff member. It is a process that is essentially about schools that are willing and ready to learn from observation, analysis, reflection and feedback for improvement and action planning. It acknowledges where schools are and incorporates their vision of a preferred future" (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2007a, p. 27).

This description is contrary to the way many teachers experience the implementation of the School Effectiveness Framework. A sixth grade teacher's experience with the District Review Process last year would not be characterized as either collegial or transparent. Several board administrators and the Supervisory Officer of Literacy and Numeracy conducted a walkthrough in the school with clipboards and pencils in hand. They appeared to be using a checklist or rubric to assess what was happening in each classroom. At the next staff meeting teachers were told what they needed to do in order to be more "effective" and compliance was mandatory, teachers were not given the opportunity to "voluntarily accept responsibility." The "naming and blaming process" involved comments around such seemingly trivial matters as the lack of specific rubrics or anchor charts on the walls. Furthermore, teachers were not given the criteria upon which their classrooms would be judged in advance, the information contained in the School Effectiveness Framework was not shared with the staff at any stage of the District Review Process. The summary report and recommendations provided feedback that was neither meaningful nor constructive. The principal told teachers at the next staff meeting that "the Ministry has a plan," but he failed to divulge any further information. The whole process seemed to be cloaked in secrecy and deemed

to be beyond the comprehension of regular classroom teachers, the frontline workers of the education system. City, Elmore, Fiarman and Teitel (2009) aptly describe how teachers usually experience the walkthrough process:

> Unfortunately, the practice of walkthroughs has been corrupted in many ways by confounding it with supervision and evaluation of teachers. The purpose of some walkthroughs has been to identify deficiencies in classroom practice and to "fix" teachers who manifest these deficiencies. In many instances, judgments about what needs fixing are made on the basis of simplistic checklists that have little or nothing to do with direct experience of teachers in their classrooms. Groups of administrators descend on classrooms with clipboards and checklists, caucus briefly in the hallway, and then deliver a set of simplistic messages about what needs fixing. This kind of practice is antithetical to the purposes of instructional rounds and profoundly unprofessional. (p. 4)

Boards of Education

Seeing Things Small

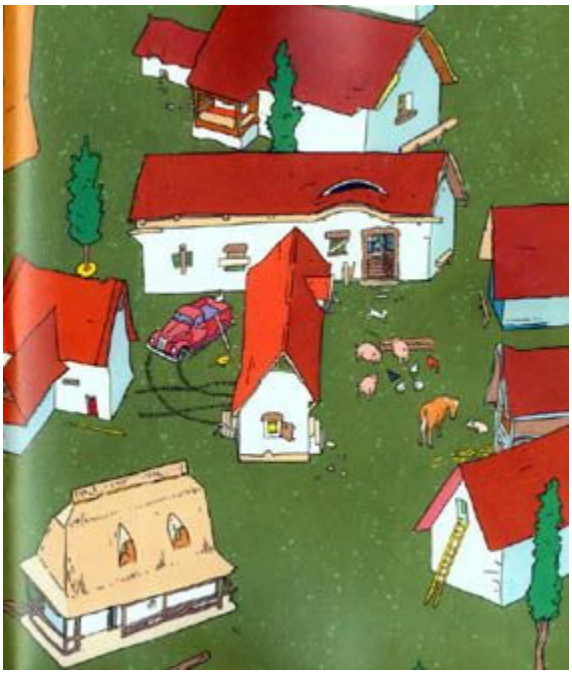

Figure 3. A board of education view of student success.

From *Zoom* (p. 6) by I. Banyai, Viking Press. Reprinted with permission of the author.

"Seeing things small" has had a devastating effect on Ontario boards of education. They have become purveyors and conveyors of data. Under the *Education Quality and Accountability Office Act*. 1996, c.11, s. 3 (6), one of the objects of the Office is "to report to the public and to the Minister of Education and Training on the results of tests and generally on the quality and effectiveness of elementary and secondary school education and on the public accountability of boards." Boards of Education are required to administer and report on the results of the tests to the Office and to the general public within the jurisdiction of the board according to Section 4 of the *Education Quality and Accountability Office Act*. 1996.

Levin et al. (2008) outline the common elements of the elementary literacy/numeracy strategy and the high school graduation strategy, which include, but are not limited to "creating dedicated infrastructures in the ministry and school boards and developing leadership teams in every district and every school" (p. 276). Essentially, this means that every school board has been given funding to create upper and middle-management positions devoted to "student success." These individuals assume a variety of titles in Boards, such as: "supervisory officer of literacy and numeracy;" "principal of student success;" "student success leader;" but their intended purpose remains the same. They must oversee the implementation of Ministry initiatives designed to improve results. They are essentially bureaucrats, who have been trained to disseminate propaganda, push paper, and crunch numbers, all in an effort to justify their positions.

They formulate "plans" that must ultimately be executed by classroom teachers who are already facing overwhelming curricular demands.

Schools

Seeing Things Small

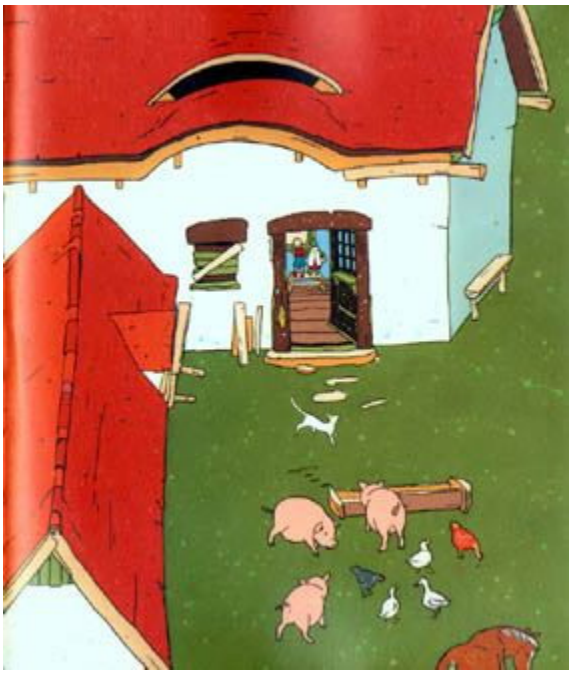

Figure 4. A school view of student success.

From *Zoom* (p. 5) by I. Banyai, Viking Press. Reprinted with permission of the author.

"Seeing schools small" involves seeing them as data generators. The entire focus of schools has become linked to their students' performance on provincial assessments.

Although Levin et al. (2008) claim otherwise in *Results without Rancor or Ranking: Ontario's Success Story*, schools are ranked. To prove this point, one only needs to go to the Ministry Website and click on the "School Information Finder" which provides detailed information about the EQAO results for every school in Ontario.

Schools are required to have a plan in place that describes the actions that will be taken to improve test results. Every year, a significant amount of time is devoted to the development of a School Improvement Plan (SIP).

In accordance with the School Effectiveness Framework (SEF), schools are required to engage in the School Self-Assessment Process prior to District Review Process. The School Self-Assessment Process is a school-based process, with the principal and School Improvement Team (SIT) playing a major role. The components identified in the School Effectiveness Framework form the basis for the School Self-Assessment Process. It involves groups of teachers with their leadership team coming together as a professional learning community (PLC) and reflecting on their work. The Ministry emphasizes that "school self-assessment is not an externally imposed evaluation, but an opportunity for principals and teachers to reflect on key aspects of their classroom practice" and that "it is, ideally, a collaborative activity which encourages open, honest discussion about strengths, areas requiring improvement and next steps" (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2007a, p. 11).

The process of self-assessment is designed to help schools focus their improvement planning efforts. This work culminates in the formulation of a School

Improvement Plan (SIP), a summary of strengths and areas requiring further development. The development and revision of the School Improvement Plan (SIP) has become the sole purpose of most, if not every, professional development day throughout the school year. Teachers are no longer afforded the opportunity to spend time learning and sharing from one another. Meaningful professional development activities that would directly benefit students have been replaced by obligatory mundane tasks that are determined by board or school officials.

Principals

Seeing Things Small

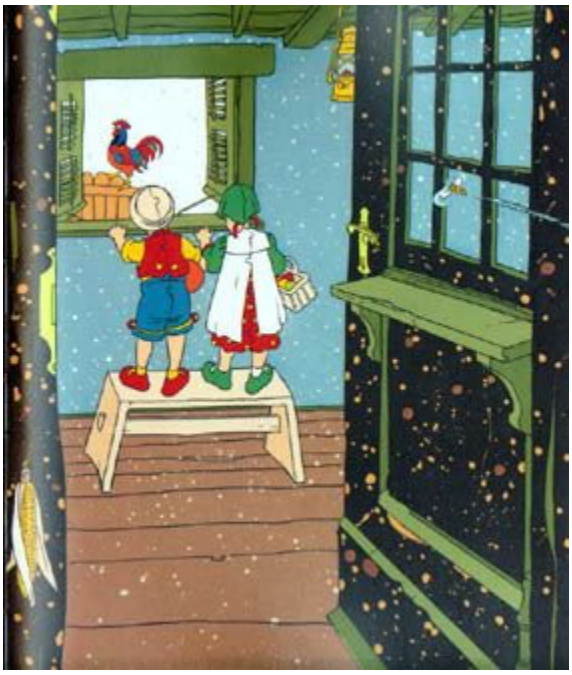

Figure5. A principal view of student success.

From *Zoom* (p. 4) by I. Banyai, Viking Press. Reprinted with permission of the author.

The pressure to "see things small" has exerted itself on school leaders as well. According to Fullan (2009), "leadership development needs to be job-embedded, organization-embedded, and system-embedded" (p.45) if meaningful gains in student achievement are to be achieved. Fullan (2009) believes that "successful job-embedded development programs place their candidates in schools such as those identified by Ontario's *Schools on the Move* initiative, which have registered strong achievement gains in literacy and numeracy over three successive years" (p. 46).

"The Ontario Principals' Council (OPC) is a voluntary professional association that represents the interests of principals and vice-principals in Ontario's publicly funded school system" (Ontario Principals' Council, 2010, ¶ 1). "We believe that exemplary leadership results in outstanding schools and improved student achievement" (Ontario Principals' Council, 2010, ¶ 2). This statement effectively demonstrates that student success, school success, and leadership success are all inextricably linked to and measured by student achievement on provincial tests.

"*Leading Student Achievement* (LSA) is a five-year project developed by the provincial principals' associations, l'Association des directions et directions adjointes des écoles franco-ontariennes (ADFO), Catholic Principals' Council of Ontario (CPCO), and the Ontario Principals' Council (OPC), in partnership with and funded by The Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat (LNS) and supported by Curriculum Services Canada (CSC)" (Curriculum Services Canada, 2005, ¶ 1).

"The LNS (Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat) has a mandate from the Government of Ontario to ensure that '75% of students reach the provincial standard on province-wide testing. The LSA project is designed to help principals as they support their teachers to 'raise the bar and narrow the gap' between high and low achieving students. A second purpose is to develop research on effective schools from an Ontario-based context" (Curriculum Services Canada, 2005, ¶ 2).

The title of the project, "Leading Student Achievement: Our Principal Purpose" reveals the singular emphasis on school improvement through improved outcomes on provincial assessments. This mission is made more palatable by cloaking it in democratic language: Fullan (2009) contends that leadership development is a necessary component of school improvement and reform, but only if it is seen as "a means to an end…for the moral purpose of raising the bar and closing the achievement gap for all students" (p. 48), but ultimately, principals are "enforcers" whose success is measured by the degree to which they can influence their teachers to buy into the LSA project and thereby improve school results. This is the end that justifies any means.

When speaking at a LSA symposium for principals in May 2008, Kenneth Leithwood, a professor of Educational Leadership and Policy at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE) acknowledged the limits of a project of this kind. Leithwood (2008) states that reform efforts have given Ontario an interesting problem space in terms of student achievement: instead of having to move students from "poor to good" levels of achievement we now have what he described as a "good to great"

problem. Leithwood (2008) acknowledges that Ontario students are "the best there is or very close to it at the present time" based on most international and national test standards.

Leithwood (2008) describes some of the challenges associated with the "good to great problem." One of the main difficulties is the "closing the gap problem that's created that has nothing to do with equity and social justice, in other words, in order to get even more aggregated increases in achievement we really will have to bring up the kids who are underachieving right now because the kids at the top don't have much more to give us in terms of improving scores" (Leithwood, 2008). In my opinion, Leithwood (2008) admits that reform efforts have not truly "raised the bar and closed the gap" for disadvantaged students, but they have only succeeded in raising the scores of the students who were already "at the top." This suggests that the only thing that the testing, standards, and accountability agenda has really accomplished thus far is to further "widen the gap" between the "haves" and the "have-nots," which can hardly be described as a "moral purpose." Leithwood (2008) also explains the statistical problems that are associated with marked gains in test scores such as "ceiling effects" and "regression to the mean." Ceiling effects make it harder to make gains past a certain point and regression to the mean is a statistical phenomenon that causes extreme scores to slide back. This too seems to discredit the worth of such a project. Furthermore, if Canada is, as Leithwood (2008) suggests, already one of the top performing countries in the world according to the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA), why are we

allowing testing mania to continue reducing a rich set of experiences into a narrow sequence of lessons?

Teachers

Seeing Things Big

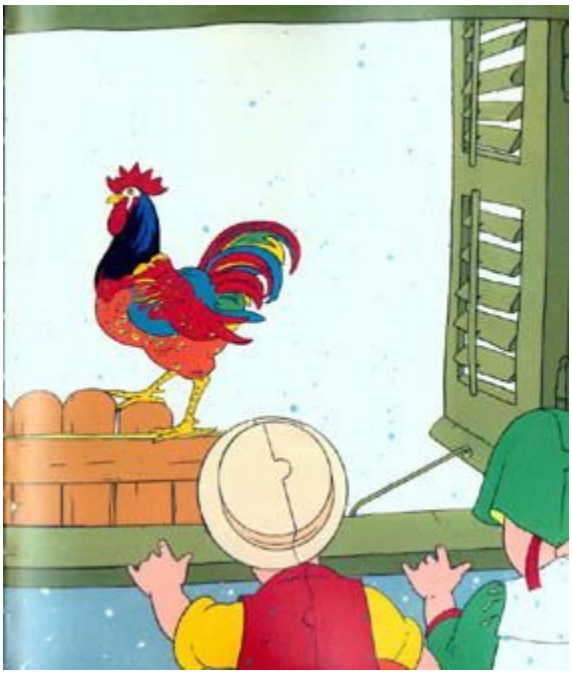

Figure 6. A teacher view of student success.

From *Zoom* (p. 3) by I. Banyai, Viking Press. Reprinted with permission of the author.

> Teachers…are concerned with understanding and teaching the whole child. Teachers are motivated to know children's individual capacities and needs and to do whatever is necessary to develop those capacities and meet those needs, whether they are emotional, social, physical, or cognitive. It causes genuine

> anxiety when other domains of children's development are ignored or put at risk because of an overemphasis on something as narrowly defined as academic standards. (Hatch, 2002, p. 458)

It is no surprise that a teacher's view of "capacity building" is quite different from the views of those in favor of large-scale reform that tend to "see kids small." Teachers "see kids big;" they are concerned with understanding and teaching the whole child. Teachers foster individual growth. They design meaningful learning opportunities and provide assessments that expand the capacities of the students they teach instead of the capacities of an entire system. Teachers are often faced with the dilemma: Do what is right for the students or do what is needed to increase test scores? A case study conducted by Upadhyay (2009) effectively highlights this dilemma: in this study an elementary science teacher working in a high-stakes testing environment continually felt that she needed to negotiate her identities between providing the authentic activity-based science teaching she believed in and providing the content mastery that was required in order to help her students pass the high-stakes test.

This dilemma is a difficult one because the pressures to conform and perform are pervasive and invasive. Teachers are continually barraged by a system that is increasingly placing constraints on their time and professionalism. Several times a year, elementary teachers at every grade level are expected to administer, score, and submit results for board mandated tests that provide "additional" assessment data for tracking walls; they are being asked to teach critical pathways; they are being asked to use "student success" strategies; and to follow prescribed curriculums designed for the sole purpose of preparing students to take the EQAO. Many teachers lament that more time is

spent preparing for tests or testing than is actually spent teaching and that seems counter intuitive. "Across the educational landscape, the movement toward standards is a movement away from teacher responsibility and agency. As curricula, teaching strategies, outcomes, and evaluation techniques are standardized, teachers' opportunities to make decisions based on their professional judgment are systematically reduced" (Hatch, 2002, p. 459). The implementation of standards-based programs signals students, parents, and society at large that teachers are not to be trusted or respected and that technical/managerial control is what is needed to fix the problems that teachers helped create. The sense that something is being lost is prevalent amongst teachers. There is a general feeling of discontent with a system that is "sucking the life out of them." One colleague stated, "I'm glad I'm retiring in a couple of years because the way things are going I don't think I can take it much longer. They're taking the joy out of teaching." Another said, "I used to look forward to each day and wake up excited to see the kids. Every day was an adventure. Now I dread coming to school and doing what someone else wants me to." Greene (1995) encapsulates this sentiment, "We who are teachers would have to accommodate ourselves to lives as clerks or functionaries if we did not have in mind a quest for a better state of things for those we teach and for the world we all share. It is simply not enough to reproduce the way things are" (p. 1).

Despite the obvious rancor amongst teachers regarding the effects of testing and large-scale reform efforts over the past several years, until now, teachers' unions or other professional bodies have done relatively little to refute or counter this agenda. Hargreaves (2009) admits, "authoritative independent evaluations of the Ontario

experience are not yet available" (p. 92). However, an article in the March 2010 issue of ETFO *Voice*, entitled, *Assessment: Teachers Speak Out*, both acknowledged and investigated the systematic disenfranchisement of both teachers and students in Ontario schools. In February 2009 the Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario and the Ontario Teachers' Federation commissioned the Environics Research Group to survey teachers and parents regarding their views on EQAO testing in Ontario. "In November, 2009 Environics Research Group surveyed 1,010 ETFO teacher members. In a separate poll, Environics surveyed 1,000 adult Ontarians including 243 parents of school-age children" (Brand, 2010, p. 9). Parents were undecided as to whether EQAO testing had improved the quality of education and teachers said, "that EQAO testing has either made no difference to the quality of elementary education in Ontario, or has made it worse since the testing began 13 years ago" (Brand, 2010, p. 9). Overwhelmingly both teachers and parents agreed the tests were of little value in terms of measuring a child's success at school. Furthermore, both groups of respondents indicated that they would not be upset if EQAO testing were phased out.

Parents

Seeing Things Big

Figure 7. A parent view of student success.

From *Zoom* (p. 2) by I. Banyai, Viking Press. Reprinted with permission of the author.

Looking at parents from a system-wide perspective involves only seeing them as a segment of the public sector. Parents are viewed as stakeholders who are given the amount of information deemed necessary to garner and maintain their trust. Parents need to be placated and like other taxpayers; they need to "buy in" to the accountability myth. Parents need to believe that testing is an essential component of providing a quality education to their children.

The need to satisfy taxpayers that they are getting good value for their money is the main justification given for the current focus on standards, testing, and large-scale reform in Ontario. This managerial or business model makes prima fascia sense when it is applied to the products manufactured by industry. It is perfectly understandable to parents and other stakeholders that bicycle helmets and light bulbs need to meet safety standards in order to be fit for human consumption, but what happens when this business model is applied to students? What does this mean in terms of the lived experiences of children?

In Ontario, parents are beginning to see that testing alone does not equal a quality education. In fact, a parent-led organization called "People for Education" is working to improve education in Ontario's English, Catholic and French schools. They began in 1996 as a parent association in Toronto and they have grown to represent parents across

the province. In their most recent annual report, *Wanted: A Renewed Vision for Public Education*, it is clear that these parents want more for their children:

> Our current provincial goals for education consist of targets for provincial test scores in reading, writing and math, a targeted graduation rate, a reduction in the achievement gap between low performing and high-performing students and increased public confidence in education. Shouldn't there be more to it than that? This report identifies some possibilities for higher aspirations for our education system: Schools as centres of strong, inclusive communities; policy and services that recognize the integrated nature of learning and success; creativity fostered as the driving factor for innovation; libraries in schools as hubs of learning and curricular cooperation; and education as an incubator for environmental, social and economic breakthroughs. (People for Education, 2009, p. 3)

Gasoi (2009) believes that "it is important…not to allow the appeal of tough love truisms and silver bullet solutions to drown out the voices of educators (and parents) whose criteria for school success encompass more than student test scores" (p. 174). In the article, *How we define success: Holding Values in an Era of High Stakes Accountability*, Gasoi (2009) describes an innovative school that resisted accommodation to the state accountability system in Massachusetts. On the grounds that the state system fostered competition and failed to cultivate real learning the school utilized a variety of alternative assessment methods. Furthermore, school administrators believed that "decisions regarding a student's grades, promotion, and graduation should be made by …family and school, [who are] most knowledgeable about the child—and not by a State test score" (p. 181).

Gasoi (2009) admits, "most families would not have opted to forgo testing if MHS (Mission Hill School) did not offer reliable alternative assessments of student

achievement and progress" (p. 181). The school offers two progress reports, two formal report cards, two mandatory teacher-student-family conferences, and two audio taped literacy assessments. In addition, each student completed work sample portfolios in each subject area throughout the year. The assessment of student progress is comprehensive and integrated with the learning process. These assessment practices treat learners with dignity and respect and allow parents to share in and celebrate their child's learning.

Students

Seeing Things Big

Figure 8. A student view of student success.

From *Zoom* (p.1) by I. Banyai, Viking Press. Reprinted with permission of the author.

When "seeing things small," students are viewed from a detached perspective. Each student is measured and quantified as part of an insignificant whole. A student is a pixel on a bar, on a bar graph, for a grade, in a school, in a board of education somewhere in Ontario.

Currently, "standardized testing is a reality with which all educators must contend. Although the laws enforcing such assessments do so under the premise that students will be assured an equal opportunity for academic success, they overlook a critical point – students are human beings with needs that reach beyond what is measured on a test" (Barrier-Ferreira, 2008, p. 138).

There is very little in the literature about student views of "student success." Holt (1982) contends "that 'success,' as much as 'failure,' are adult ideas which we impose on children" (p. 69). He believes that there is joy in doing the act itself and "children who undertake to do things…do not think in terms of success and failure but of effort and adventure" (p. 70).

As a former classroom teacher I spent considerable time in "focus schools." These experiences made me question the direction of school reform in Ontario. They allowed me to see what a high stakes testing environment meant in terms of the lived experiences of children. It meant that grade 3 students spent the entire day doing either literacy or numeracy. It meant that physical education classes were often cancelled to accommodate more language or mathematics instruction. It meant that students were "trained" to use the "Better Answer Method" in order to ensure that they achieved a

Level 3 or 4 when they responded to questions on the grade 3 EQAO Reading test. It meant that they received little or no instruction in other areas of the curriculum. Student engagement was extremely low. These practices seem to ignore the fact that learners learn best when they have a vested interest in what they are learning. "If students are not engaged in the learning process, all of the testing, data analysis, teacher meetings and instructional minutes in the world will not motivate students to learn" (Kidwell, 2010, p. 30). I wondered what skills and strengths were being left untapped. How do students who possess a myriad of talents and abilities feel about themselves when "success" is being measured in such limited ways? In real terms, what are we doing to kids?

Looking Back, Looking Forward

"Standards, assessment, outcomes, and achievement: these concepts are the currency of educational discussion today. What ought sixteen-year-olds be expected to know, whoever they are, wherever they are? How can school achievement …be raised to world-class levels?" (Greene, 1995, p. 9). The rationale for the current focus on large-scale reform is limited to pleasing the tax paying public, but if students don't actually learn more or if they must pay dearly for improved performance on a narrowly defined set of arbitrary standards, who benefits from the drive to implement standards?

Kohn (1999) characterizes the dominant philosophy for fixing schools as a return to the methods of the past, only using them "harder, longer, stronger, louder, and meaner" (p. 16). It is clearly apparent that the drive to improve test scores has mobilized the entire education system in Ontario. This "small view" of "student success" has been the only

view that we have been privy to, but in the face of mounting professional and public dissatisfaction with the large-scale reform agenda it is time to consider alternate views. We need to move away from the discourse of deficit and move toward a language of possibility. We have to find new ways of looking at and defining "student success."

In 2007, the Canadian Council on Learning (CCL), in partnership with several Aboriginal organizations across Canada made efforts to redefine how success is measured in First Nations, Inuit, and Métis learning. "Although current learning indicators now widely used by governments and researchers are important measures, they fall short. They must be broadened to measure more than simply years of schooling and performance on standardized tests. A more holistic approach to measurement that recognizes all aspects of lifelong learning is needed to measure the individual and collective well-being of First Nations, Métis and Inuit communities" (Canadian Council on Learning, 2007). This initiative resulted in the development of Holistic Life Learning Models that recognize the value of experiential and lifelong learning. I believe that these models are valuable examples of how "student success" can be re/viewed in a manner that acknowledges all ways of knowing; not just in aboriginal populations, but in all populations. "Educational reform in Canada should not just be about narrowing numerical gaps in easily measurable outcomes, but should be about striving to benefit and enrich the learning of all students and all aspects of every student in an inspired and inclusive social and educational vision of what the country still stands for today and must aspire to become tomorrow" (Hargreaves, 2007, p. 22).

Hargreaves (2009) contends that after a decade of large-scale reform "it is a time…to embark on a new course that can lead us towards a better place" (p. 89) "It should look abroad for intelligent alternatives and be especially alert to those educational and economic successes that also express and advance democratic and humanitarian values. It should to attend to…the advancement of the human spirit" (Hargreaves, 2009, p. 90). Another quote paragraph, this is not your paper, but paraphrasing?

Alternate Views

Seeing "student success small;" that is defining it in terms of testing, standards, and accountability, has become so firmly entrenched in the educational system that it is hard to imagine any other way; and the question becomes, "If not standards, then what?" Although it is hard to imagine other discourses for "student success", imagine we must in order to provide students with the education they deserve. Greene (1995) warns that "when we look out at it from the vantage point of our old framework, the new always appears improbable" (p. 22), but she goes on to say that when we choose to look at things from the perspective of those in the midst of doing them, "imagining things being otherwise may be the first step toward acting on the belief that they can be changed" (Greene, 1995, p. 22). We need to view "student success" from the vantage point of the students themselves; we need to give them a voice if we are going to provide them with an education that acknowledges learning as "a source of satisfaction, growth, and self-fulfillment" (Hatch, 2007, p. 311).

This is exactly what the Canadian Education Association (CEA) decided to do in 2006. They asked 27 high school students of diverse backgrounds to share their stories of life and learning. Under the leadership of Kathleen Gould Lundy of Destination Arts, York University, the students created and performed a play entitled, "Imagine a School." "Their stories moved, energized and inspired us to wonder how we could get it right for adolescent learners. We decided that we needed a better understanding of the learning experiences of students from across the country. We also decided that, to make a difference, this new information should arise from collaborations among researchers, school and district leaders, teachers, and students themselves" (Olsen, 2009, p. 1). The Canadian Education Association (CEA) responded by initiating, "What did you do in school today?" a multi-year research and development project that was funded through collaboration with the Canadian Council on Learning (CCL) and a number of Canadian school districts. The findings of this study were based on data collected from 32, 322 students in 93 schools from 10 school districts. The sample included 16,542 males and 15,780 females. Initial results indicate that overwhelmingly student engagement is the pivotal factor that students identify as the key to their success in school. Students want their work to be "meaningful, relevant and authentic" to enable them to generate knowledge through experiences and the understanding of relationships, not through "the rote study of disconnected parts" (Willms et al., 2009, p. 34). Needless to say, the results from this study were not cited as "research based evidence" for any current Ministry initiatives or documents. The views of students remain ignored.

In Ontario, it is time to consider new directions and alternate views of "student success." External measurements of "student success" are superficial platitudes that avert our gaze from a deeper question that needs to be addressed: what do children want and need to be successful?

Innovation needs to replace standardization, responsibility needs to replace accountability, and learning needs to replace testing. It is my hope that the messiness and complexity of everyday life will be celebrated and respected. It is my hope that policy makers consider the views of all stakeholders in Ontario's publicly funded education system, even those that have been traditionally marginalized: teachers, parents, and most importantly, the students. The resulting definitions of "student success" would not be finite or measurable. The singular definition of "student success" as "student achievement" would be replaced by multiple definitions; definitions that would embrace and encourage a myriad of possibilities, descriptions, and voices.

As educators it is imperative that we join parents and others who imagine something more for our children. We need to envision and give voice to alternate views. We cannot stand by and watch as the most vulnerable members of our society are subjugated to the harshest measures of success. Indeed, the very qualities we value in our leaders such as emotional intelligence and perseverance cannot be measured by paper and pencil tests. The most remarkable teachers are not plotted on a graph; their stories are shared in a professional trade magazine. We need to re/view "student success" as we share in the learning journeys of our students.

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