

CURRICULUM CASUALTIES IN THE 'AT RISK' QUEST TO SUCCESS

Imagine your classroom. It is the start of a new day. A few minutes remain before the bell rings. Today, you've planned something new. You recently attended a workshop where a new plan, a new solution, promised to engage your grade 10 applied class. But you're doubtful. You've tried so many tactics in the past, to no avail.

The bell rings, signaling the start of class. Few conversations occur. Most students ignore one another, except for the few who loudly converse across the room. You give an enthusiastic hello, which goes largely unanswered. You look around. Your classroom remains one-third empty. Your enthusiasm wanes a bit, only to turn into annoyance as several students stroll in, realizing, but not caring, they're late. Still you persevere, determined to make your lesson a success, determined to engage these students. You begin again, giving your best attempt at energetic instruction.

Halfway through the period, you realize you're alone. All that meets you are blank, bored faces. Only a few spontaneous, unrelated, outbursts bring momentary life to these faces. Your doubts become reality, the new tactic didn't work. More importantly, you realize yet again that they just don't want to be there.

Most teachers have had this experience. Despite the greatest efforts of teachers, many students within the applied stream do not want to be in school. They are disinterested in the curriculum. They're not successful. They feel stupid most of the time. Unsurprisingly they become disengaged with school; they stop trying, act out, disrupt routine and break rules. Or they stop coming altogether.

It's not a new phenomenon, and it's not limited to any single province or country. Here in Ontario, student disengagement has been recognized as a problem since the turn of the 20th century,¹ but not until 2003 did the Ontario government make a serious effort to remedy it.

The current Ontario government claims that it is committed to addressing the problem of disengagement by meeting the diverse needs of students. But it hasn't looked seriously into the source of the problem: the singular university preparation curriculum in secondary schools. As a result, even after significant reforms, the school curriculum is insufficiently comprehensive for today's learners.

On the surface, Ontario appears to be heading in the right direction. "Student success" has become a significant priority for the government as they "deliver help to students who are struggling with the curriculum".² This help has come in the form of a 1.3 billion dollar strategy to increase educational flexibility by expanding co-operative and technological education, increasing social supports, and providing community outreach programs. The government seems to recognize that success can include apprenticeships and skilled job placements as well as college and university. It is injecting millions of dollars into programming to demonstrate this recognition. In 2003, it implemented phase one of the Student Success Initiative (SSI) with the aim to graduate 85 rather than 68 per cent of its students. This initiative seems to be an important step for student success, economic health, and social wellness. Closer analysis, however, suggests that it may be ill conceived.

While officially recognizing that formal postsecondary education "does not reflect the reality of many students' interests, abilities and choices, and it is unreasonable to measure student success solely in terms of this outcome,"³ Ontario's core curriculum remains a singular university preparation curriculum. And Ontario students are paying the price, particularly Grade 9 and 10 students in the applied stream who, according to a 2004 news release from former Minister of Education Gerard Kennedy, "continue to struggle with the core subjects and are at risk of not obtaining the credits required to graduate." These core subjects are virtually all based on intellectual and university preparation curricula: English, math, science, history, geography, and French. Perhaps adjusting the curriculum so academic and practical interests are equally weighted would engage students in school and illustrate that there are multiple, equally valid, forms of knowledge.

The Ontario curriculum has historically been a curriculum for a small, academically-minded minority,⁴ consisting of art, literature, music, morality, history and philosophy – not unlike our curriculum today. While our diverse society needs all types of knowledge and skills, our schools have continually favoured academic knowledge, and only those students who have this mindset succeed.

As long as academic knowledge is perceived as more prestigious, schools will inadequately meet the needs of the constituents they serve. Moreover, society will lose for failing to capitalize on the strengths of over one-half of its youth. Technical vocations require knowledge and practiced competence, and yet schools – under the guise of multiple pathways of success – continue to perpetuate social inequalities by validating intellectual knowledge through the core university preparation curriculum.

Even without changing the curriculum, the government may achieve its goal of graduating 85 per cent of students by 2010 since it defines success as credit accumulation, and in one way or another, credits will be accumulated. Yet surely this perception of success is short sighted.

Student success should not simply mean credit accumulation by whatever means work. It should mean validating intellectual diversity. It should be about helping students find their place in the world with their natural talents and knowledge, be they intellectual or practical. It should be about giving equal merit to multiple forms of intelligence. Only when merit is given to both academic and practical knowledge, will student success truly occur. |

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Notes

- 1 Royal Commission on Learning. *For the Love of Learning*. (Ottawa: Queens Printer for Ontario, 1995).
- 2 Ministry of Education, *McGuinty Government Acting to Improve Student Achievement*, (November 25, 2004). Retrieved September 1, 2006, from <<http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/document/nr/04.11/1125.html>>
- 3 Ministry of Education, *Building Pathways to Success: The Final Report of the Program Pathways for Students at Risk Work Group* (2003). Available at <<http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/document/reports/pathways.pdf>>
- 4 Denis Lawton, *Class, Culture and the Curriculum* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1975).

