Critical Education

Deconstructing Growing Success
A Critical Discourse Analysis of Ontario's Assessment Policy

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Abstract

In this study, I employ critical discourse analysis (CDA) of Growing Success: Assessment, Evaluation, and Reporting in Ontario Schools (Growing Success) to examine significant themes in a document that has been influential across a major school district in Canada. I use an adaptation of Fairclough's three-tiered taxonomy of description, interpretation, and explanation to deconstruct word-level content, investigate voices heard and silenced, and situate the text production and interpretation within a social context. My findings suggest that despite allusions to equity, the Growing Success policy reflects neoliberal values, particularly as it defines success and achievement. I conclude with a brief discussion of what may be needed in order to reconceptualise success in more inclusive terms.

This study offers an analysis of *Growing Success: Assessment, Evaluation, and Reporting in Ontario Schools* (*Growing Success*), an influential assessment-centred policy released by the Ontario Ministry of Education in 2010. I employ critical discourse analysis (CDA) to examine the policy's significant themes and ideas, and to illustrate how those particular themes move education in Ontario further along a neoliberal trajectory. After a discussion of the rationale and the methodological considerations for this analysis, I provide an outline of the principal elements policy. I then move through three phases of analysis, based on an adaptation of Fairclough's (2001) approach to discourse analysis, beginning with an explanation of the text's social context, moving to a description of word-level content analysis, and finishing with an interpretation of the production of the text with an examination of whose voices are evident in and absent from the document. To conclude, I consider what may be needed in order to reconceptualise success in more inclusive terms.

Rationale and Methodological Considerations

The rationale for this work is three-fold: first, to trace the pervasiveness of neoliberal reforms in a Canadian context; second, to contribute to a growing body of work advancing the relevance of CDA for education (Woodside-Jiron, 2004; Rogers, 2004; Taylor, 2004); and third, to continue in the tradition of employing CDA as a method to deconstruct the social process undergirding neoliberal hegemonies (Fairclough, 2013), and as means to become a "contributive agent for social change" (Candlin cited in Fairclough, 2013, p. ix). The use of this research methodology reveals an underlying Foucauldian understanding that discourse is formed at the "conjunction of power and knowledge" (Thomas, 2005, p. 27) and reveals my own positionality as a researcher who believes that "education policy discourses are sites of struggles and negotiations over the construction of competing and contradictory educational identities" (Thomas, 2005, p. 27). It is this construction of various identities in the *Growing Success* document, including that of students, teachers, families, and schools, that lies at the heart of this policy analysis. It is also important for me to note that throughout this analysis I calculatedly employ a rationalist denotation of 'policy': a document or practice that has been developed, monitored, and controlled by government (Hogwood & Gunn, 1984). While I recognise that policy can be defined and analysed through multiple conceptions, I use this traditional interpretation to situate this policy in the context of how it was conceived, written, and presented.

My study is grounded in a reading of Fairclough's (2001) three-tiered taxonomy of description, interpretation, and explanation, which is similar to the iteration of the model worked through by Raptis (2012) in her analysis of the Fraser Institute's rankings. I begin with the explanation phase by situating the text production and interpretation within a social context, proposing some lines of inquiry suggested by Fairclough's (2001) framework: what power relations are present at situational, institutional, and societal levels? Which ideologies are foregrounded (and why)? For this component of the analysis, the data comprises newspaper articles and Ministry documents. The second layer of discourse analysis narrows the focus onto the *Growing Success* document. I describe and deconstruct word-level content, examining the use of terms commonly associated with neoliberal values and the appropriation, stripping, and repurposing of words to legitimate the policy position. For the third tier of the analysis, I hone in on two particular questions within the interpretation phase of Fairclough's (2001) framework: "Who's involved?" and "In what relations?" (p. 148).

An Overview of Growing Success

The Ontario Ministry of Education (OME) published *Growing Success* in 2010 to replace previous policy documents from 2000 to 2006. The policy focuses on assessment and evaluation in elementary and secondary schools, and provides new guidelines on performance standards, methods of assessment, and means of reporting student "achievement." It is a policy that was designed to reshape how students are assessed, how teachers evaluate student achievement, and how results are communicated to parents. I have chosen to analyse this particular document because it has influenced several aspects of educational policy and practice in Ontario, shaping the trajectory of teaching and learning for the last eight years. A Google search of the title reveals some of the scope of this policy's influence: it is cited by school boards, newspaper articles (Killoran, 2013; Ballingall, 2015; Boesveld, 2014), several other provincial policy documents (for example, OME 2013a; 2013b; 2013c), teacher resource websites (such as EduGAINS, 2018) and teacher education program university courses (including Western University, 2017).

At the time of its publication, some of the most fundamental changes presented in *Growing Success*, as identified by the Assistant Deputy Minister of Curriculum and the Assistant Deputy Minister of French-language, Aboriginal Learning and Research at the OME (2009, December 11), were:

- 7 fundamental principles of assessment and evaluation were identified;
- the establishment of 6 learning skills, developed in alignment with the Ontario Skills Passport;
- the replacement of the conventional elementary fall report card with a progress report;
- 2 student report cards for elementary in January/February and June;
- letter grades for Grades 1-6;
- percentage grades for Grades 7-12. (p. 2)

The document is offered in print and was distributed to administrators throughout Ontario at the start of the 2010-2011 academic year. It is also available on the OME website and is accessible to: parents, through the link "How is my child's achievement assessed?"; teachers, through the link for Ministry publications of "ongoing interest"; and administrators, through links for policy funding. A search of "growing success" on the OME website produces 32 results.

The 159-page policy document is divided into an introduction, 10 main sections, 3 appendices, a glossary, and references. The 10 sections include: 1.) Fundamental Principles; 2.) Learning Skills and Work Habits in Grades 1 to 12; 3.) Performance Standards - The Achievement Chart; 4.) Assessment *for* Learning and *as* Learning [emphasis in original]; 5.) Evaluation; 6.) Reporting Student Achievement; 7.) Students With Special Education Needs; Modifications, Accommodations, and Alternative Programs; 9.) English Language Learners: Modifications and Accommodations; 9.) E-Learning; 10.) Credit Recovery. The first appendix provides an overview of large-scale assessments. The second gives a range of progress report and report card templates for public and Roman Catholic elementary and secondary schools. The final appendix offers a list of resources for various policy and program areas.

Critical Discourse Analysis of *Growing Success*

Critical discourse analysis is useful for this study because it provides a framework for deconstructing language and its effect on public perceptions of the purpose of education. In the following three sections I will: locate the policy within its social context by surfacing Ontario's prevailing ideologies and their effects; present and deconstruct word-level content, focussing on the use of terms commonly associated with neoliberal values and the appropriation, stripping, and repurposing of words to legitimate a policy position; investigate whose voices are heard and whose are silenced, from stakeholders and contributors, to parents and students.

Why Now? Locating Growing Success Within a Broader Context

The first phase of this CDA describes the greater societal forces at play in the background of the development and execution of *Growing Success*. To begin to understand Ontario's education policy, it is necessary to expose the dominant political discourses influential in shaping policy language and content. Since the 1980s, the emergent rhetoric that has guided public policy development has been based in neoliberal and neoconservative thinking (Parker, 2017; Pinto, 2012). Neoliberal ontology is rooted in market-driven principles of entrepreneurship, competitiveness, and choice; its epistemology, and what most strongly influences education policy, is based on careers and job skills, which results in a focus on measureable data and accountability through standardised testing (Apple, 2001; Pinto, 2012). Dale and Hyslop-Margison (2004) described neoliberalism as "an economic, moral, and social system designed to advance 20th century global capitalism ... a sort of social Darwinian economic perspective taken to its logical extreme, that devastates and blames the poor while rewarding and celebrating the rich" (p. 6). Neoconservative ontology grows from traditionalism, with strong allegiances to nuclear family, country and natural order (Apple, 2001); neoconservative epistemology is based on the knowledge of truth and clear ideas of right and wrong, which lends itself to educational doctrine founded on "uncontestable curriculum … and testing as mechanisms for accountability" (Pinto, 2012, p. 24).

The combined influences of neoliberal and neoconservative ideologies have produced an education system moulded on the belief that wealth and happiness are possible for those willing to work hard and "play by the rules" (Prime Minister Harper, as cited in Dale & Hyslop-Margison, 2004, p. xi), with an emphasis on standardisation, consistency, transparency, speed, and measurability, as aligned with a positivist tradition. These themes are found in the nature of education policy design and implementation, in the formation of standardised curricula and assessments, in the design of teacher education programs, and, most of all, in the public discourse on student success (Hopmann, 2008; Klinger, DeLuca, & Miller, 2008; Nagy, 2000). The drive for efficiency, measurability, and accountability in Ontario has led to a rigorous standardised curriculum with over 3400 learning expectations from Kindergarten to Grade 12 (Brown, 2009). It also spawned the Education Quality and Accountability Office (2016) which

> is dedicated to enhancing the quality and accountability of the education system in Ontario and to work with the education community. This will be achieved through student assessments that produce objective, reliable information, through the public release of this information and through the profiling of the value and use of EQAO data across the province. (About the EQAO section)

This mandate reflects neoliberal and neoconservative ideologies in myriad ways: first, in the use of empirical data as an indicator of "quality"; second, in the manifestation of objectivism - a belief in one, clear set of values that distinguish truth from untruth, and right from wrong; third, a focus on competition and accountability through the public discussion of results. As reflected in the EQAO mandate, high scores on standardised tests in Grades 3, 6, 9, and 10 denote achievement and success. This definition of achievement and success permeates the government's education policy initiatives that focus on improving testing outcomes. One example is the creation of the Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat in 2004 to "boost student achievement" (OME, 2009, para. 1) as measured by the results of EQAO tests. Another example if the development of the Ontario Focused Intervention Partnership (OME, 2016c), a lunchtime and after-school tutoring program launched in 2006 as a means of targeting funds to "elementary schools in Ontario where more than half of the student body was scoring at Level 1 or 2 in reading, writing and mathematics" (The Ontario Capacity Building Approach section) and where "EQAO achievement is the sole criterion used to identify low-performing schools" (What is OFIP? section). A third example is the detailed assessment policy delineated in *Growing Success* (OME, 2010a).

The neoliberal and neoconservative conceptions of education have been widely adopted and propagated by the media, which has led to these constrained definitions of achievement and success becoming the de facto definition in schools and with parents. In newspaper articles, EQAO tests are used in conjunction with international standardised tests, such as Progress in Student Achievement (PISA) and Trends in International Mathematics and Science Studies (TIMSS), to discuss student achievement in Canada. For example, the *Huffington Post* posted an article titled, "Are Ontario Grade 9 Students Missing the Mark in Math?" (Dare, 2013 March 18). The article defined "missing the mark in Math" by results on international standardised tests. Interestingly, this article also described the potential for tests to have a "curious lack of congruence" between one another, but still be useful political tools: Dare (2013, March 18) found that despite rising EQAO scores in Math over the course of former Premier Dalton McGuinty's term in office, scores on international tests had actually declined or stagnated. It is strange that the author discerned the weakness in EQAO testing (and, one could then infer, all standardised testing), but continued to use it in the definition of student success.

Other articles reflect the same denotations of success and achievement, often with a tone of panic in describing Ontario students' failures. A recent release of math scores in September 2016 resulted in a flurry of articles within days of each other: "Half of Ontario's Grade 6 Students Failed to Meet Math Standard" (Stevenson, 2016, August 31); "Ontario Addresses Math Score Decline Amid Worry From Parents, Educators" (Alphonso, 2016, August 31); and "Ontario's Math Scores Started Declining as Kids Took the New Curriculum, According to EQAO Data" (Csanady, 2016, September 5). If the relationship between these tools of measurement and accountability and politics is not yet explicit, I ought to note that it took only days before the Ontario Premier replied to the panic of low math scores by re-announcing $60 million for math lead teachers in schools (Alphonso, 2016, Aug 31). Despite the fact that the funding was planned well in advance of the latest EQAO test results (Zegarac, 2016, April 8), the short time frame between the release of the 2016 EQAO results and the restatement of funding highlights the correlation between the publicity of test scores and political strategizing. That the majority of parents view these tests as the absolute measure of school and student success is also perceptible in other areas of Canada. For example, the *Edmonton Journal* (2013, March 25) noted:

> Many teachers may not like standardized tests but the fact is, many parents do. Standardized tests are important for the light they cast on the classroom and it is only with some clear and measurable benchmarks that schools and teachers can be held accountable, and performance can be improved. They are a small, constructive element of quality control in the education system. (para. 5)

The quote is particularly noteworthy, not only because it praises standardised testing for endorsing the key neoliberal values of accountability and measurability, but also because it unabashedly foregrounds how the tests are now a political tool to keep parents (and, as such, voters) happy.

If neoliberalism, and to some extent neoconservatism, have had such a profound influence on education policy in Ontario, how does it manifest it policy documents? Does *Growing Success* reproduce the narratives of neoliberalism in its text, adding to the shape of and reinforcing the existing discourses of success and achievement? The remainder of this analysis tightens the focus onto a description and interpretation of the *Growing Success* document with the aim of answering this question.

Word-level Content

As noted above, the *Growing Success* document is divided into an introduction, 10 main sections, 3 appendices, a glossary, and a list of references. The Introduction and the first section on Fundamental Principles are important because they provide stated and presumed ideological underpinning for the policy. I begin the analysis with a deconstruction of the authors' use of the Introduction as an hortatory tool to position the document and to surreptitiously endorse the underlying ideology. I then examine other hortatory techniques, including labelling and repetition, primarily in the Introduction and Fundamental Principles sections, but also throughout the document. Finally, I identify what terms have been appropriated and repurposed to endorse the policy vision more completely. For clarity, I will cite the *Growing Success* document as *GS* with appropriate page numbers.

It is useful in CDA to understand how language can be manipulated in policy documents and in broader arenas to promulgate a certain epistemological or ontological stance. One of the techniques available to policy authors is the use of hortatory tools to exhort "stakeholders" to action or to convince them of the justifiability of a particular course of action. Schneider and Ingram (1990) noted

> Symbolic and hortatory tools assume that target populations are more apt to comply with behavior desirable from a policy perspective if the targets see that behavior as consistent with their beliefs. Symbolic and hortatory tools may be used to encourage compliance, utilization, or support of policy, to appeal for self-initiated activities in the public or private sector that will further certain goals without the need for coercive or incentive-driven government intervention, or to simply state goals and priorities thereby giving deference to some values over others even though no tangible actions are taken to promote the goals or values. (p. 519).

This type of language is evident throughout the *Growing Success* policy document, but the Introduction, in particular, illustrates how "successful ideologies such as neoliberalism typically seek to naturalize their assumptions and present them as self-evident or the only option available" (Dale & Hyslop-Margison, 2004, p. xi).

Neoliberal ideology is echoed and reinforced throughout the Introduction in the definition of success, in the stated purpose of the policy, in the reliance on government controls to enforce policy, and in the language used to describe educational processes. The following is an excerpt:

> The Ontario government is committed to enabling all students to reach their potential, and to succeed. Our challenge is that every student is unique and each must have opportunities to achieve success according to his or her own interests, abilities, and goals. We have defined high expectations and standards for graduation, while introducing a range of options that allow students to learn in ways that suit them best and enable them to earn their diplomas. We are proud that our students regularly place among the world's best on international standardized tests.
>
> The Ministry of Education's assessment, evaluation, and reporting policy has evolved significantly over the course of the last decade. Previously, aspects of the policy appeared in a number of documents and were not fully aligned across the elementary and secondary panels. In addition, stakeholders often expressed concerns about unevenness in the way the policies were being implemented among boards and schools. The present document updates, clarifies, coordinates, and consolidates the various aspects of the policy, with the aim of maintaining high standards, improving student learning, and benefiting students, parents,1 and teachers in elementary and secondary schools across the province. The document is intended to ensure that policy is clear, consistent, and well aligned across panels and across school boards and schools, and that every student in the system benefits from the same high-quality process for assessing, evaluating, and reporting achievement. (*GS*, p. 1-2)

It is notable that on the very first page of the policy document, the authors' de facto definition of success is to "place among the world's best on international standardized tests" (*GS*, p. 1). They aver that previous thinking about assessment has grown out-dated, stating "assessment, evaluation, and reporting policy has evolved significantly over the course of the last decade" (*GS*, p. 2). Politically, this is an interesting time frame since the document was authored under the Liberal government, who took over from Conservative predecessors in the early years of the decade in question. The Introduction also presents the rationale for the policy, another hortatory tool (Schneider & Ingram, 1990). The authors suggest that previous policy documents on assessment (released, once again, under the previous provincial government in 1998 and 1999) were "not fully aligned" across panels and that "stakeholders often expressed concerns about unevenness in the way the policies were being implemented among boards and schools" (*GS*, p. 2). This positioning implies two critical aspects of the policy: first, that *Growing Success* is predominantly concerned with standardisation; second, that the authors hope to employ a top-down management approach with boards and schools to ensure that the implementation of the policy is more consistent than in the past. Once again, there is the implication that the previous

Conservative government's management failed at implementing education policy. The language used throughout the Introduction continues to present the need for greater standardisation and increased government controls.

Another hortatory tool that the authors employ in the Introduction is labelling. Schneider and Ingram (1990) define labelling as "the use of images, symbols, and labels to associate the preferred activities with positively valued symbols" (p. 520). In this case, the Ministry of Education draws on language of high standards, equity, and transparency to position *Growing Success* as an advancement in education policy. The authors note that *Growing Success* "updates, clarifies, coordinates, and consolidates the various aspects of [assessment] policy, with the aim of maintaining high standards" (*GS*, p. 2). The policy is endorsed as "clear, consistent, and well-aligned." It promises to "move us closer to fairness, transparency, and equity, as well as consistent practice" (*GS*, p. 2). Finally, the authors claim that the policy was designed in response to "education stakeholders throughout the province [that] voiced the need for greater consistency in assessment, evaluation, and reporting practices" (*GS*, p. 2), which illustrates that the government felt it needed to intervene in order to manage the disparate (therefore inferior) approaches to assessment across the province.

Once the dominant neoliberal hegemony has been established using hortatory tools, repetition is employed as a rhetorical device that iterates the key values of neoliberalism, including standardisation, accountability, measurability and government control. The policy writers use a set of terms and their synonyms repeatedly in small blocks of text, as if to saturate the policy with words that evoke "such authority and *ofcourseness* that we tend to pass over them" (Rogers, 2004, p. 185). The iteration of these terms tends to naturalise and endorse certain ideas as the best, or most desirable, outcomes. In the Introduction alone, the authors use the terms "consistent" and "consistency" five times, "consolidate" twice, and "clear," "clarify," and "clarifies" five times. Descriptions of acceptable assessment practices include: "well aligned" and "transparent."

This terminology is also evident in the first section on Fundamental Principles, wherein good assessment is described as "transparent" twice and as defined by "clear standards outlined in the curriculum" (*GS*, p. 7). The authors introduce the principles by stating that they are to be used to "ensure that assessment, evaluation, and reporting are valid and reliable" (*GS*, p. 6). This focus on validity and reliability can be traced directly to the basic tenets of positivism (Nezavdal, 2003), quantitative research and measurability (Glesne, 2011), and neoliberalism (Apple, 2001; Pinto, 2012). One of the fundamental principles states that assessment ought to be "carefully planned to relate to the curriculum expectations and learning goals and, *as much as possible* [emphasis added], to the interests, learning styles and preferences, needs, and experiences of all students" (*GS*, p. 6). This principle lists the qualities of good assessment in order of priority (i.e., the assessment ought to be tied to the standardised curriculum before individual student needs are considered). The prioritization of standardised curriculum over student-based learning also demonstrates that students' ideas and needs are not as valued as Ministry expectations, since teachers are instructed to consider student interests only when possible.

Despite the pervasiveness of language that is clearly tied to neoliberal values, there is also evidence in these first two sections of the document of language appropriation. Ozga (2000) described the process of language appropriation clearly, noting that in order to "prevent the reduction of education to conservative or economistic ends," policy researchers had to be cognisant of "the stripping out of meaning from what were once central concepts in the

organisation of public life ... and their replacement with 'hollowed out' concepts" (p. 6). In the *Growing Success* document, this stripping of meaning is illustrated through the repeated pairing of the word "transparent" with the words "fair" and "equitable." For example, on page two, the document reads "The policy is based on seven fundamental principles, the first of which tells us that assessment, evaluation, and reporting practices and procedures must be fair, transparent, and equitable for all students." On page six, it notes, "To ensure that assessment, evaluation, and reporting are valid and reliable, and that they lead to the improvement of learning for all students, teachers use practices and procedures that: are fair, transparent, and equitable for all students." On page19, it states, "The goal of using a criterion-based approach is to make the assessment and evaluation of student achievement as fair, reliable, and transparent as possible." While the authors suggest assessment should be "fair" and "equitable," they simultaneously place constraints on how to achieve that fairness and equity by focusing on standardisation and control. For example, the document states that boards are only allowed to adapt "some" guidelines locally and strictly "within the parameters for consistency set by the ministry" (*GS*, p. 2). The document goes on to clarify that "locally" does not refer to individual school communities, but is defined as "with all schools in the board" (*GS*, p. 2). These examples reflect how the words "fair," "fairness," "equity," and "equitable" become hollowed-out terms that evoke a sense of *ofcourseness* in the reader, but fail to be substantiated by the rest of the policy.

Voices, Heard and Silenced

The OME (2016a) website asserts that *Growing Success* "aims to maintain high standards, improve student learning, and benefit students, parents, and teachers in elementary and secondary schools across the province" (Administrators section). This third component of the CDA focuses on who is (dis)advantaged by the policy, examining the list of references at the close of the policy document and the sources of research data cited in the formation of the policy.

The first resource to consider when asking the question "whose voice was heard?" is the list of references provided at the end of the document. It is this list that provides an overview of whose ideas mattered in the creation of the document, and also reflects who the provincial government used to substantiate their ideology. The authors cite 31 sources. Of these, 15 are the OME. A sixteenth reference, *Education for All: The Report of the Expert Panel on Literacy and Numeracy Instruction for Students with Special Education Needs, Kindergarten to Grade 6*, is not attributed to the OME, despite being funded by the Ministry. The remaining 15 citations include three from the EQAO, seven that might be deemed academic works, one from the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), one from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), and three from various educational special interest groups. These last three include: the Assessment Reform Group from the United Kingdom, the Joint Advisory Committee from the Centre for Research in Applied Measurement and Evaluation (CRAME) at the University of Alberta, and the Western and Northern Canadian Protocol for Collaboration in Education from Manitoba, Saskatchewan, Alberta, British Columbia, the Yukon and the Northwest Territories. None of the groups are based in Ontario or comprise Ontarian stakeholders. In fact, of all the references, only one of the sources outside of the OME and EQAO are drawn from an Ontarian context. The academic references range from the United Kingdom (Black and William, Harlen, Harlen and Crick, Sutton), to the United States (Costa and Kallick), and other Canadian provinces (Davies). The sole academic reference from Ontario is Louis Volante, whose research out of Brock University

focuses on assessment, international achievement studies, and education reform (Brock University, 2016, Faculty of Education section).

Of the aforementioned references, some seem more influential than others. The Joint Advisory Committee from CRAME, for example, is cited as the source for all of the fundamental principles described in the policy. This is significant because CRAME states that their aim is to "conduct high-quality research ... in the areas of measurement, evaluation, and cognition ... [including] cognition applied to assessment, advanced psychometric and statistical modeling, and program evaluation" (CRAME, 2016, Home section). The Centre's focus on quantitative research and on statistical data is not incompatible with the neoliberal focus on measurability and standardisation. The Centre also notes that, in addition to positions at publicly funded universities, graduates from the program in Measurement, Evaluation, and Cognition find employment at government testing agencies and privately funded testing companies.

A more emphatic reflection of neoliberal ideology and the drive toward the marketisation of education is evident in the section on learning skills and work habits, which are derived from the OECD, Human Resources and Skills Development Canada (HRSDC), and the Conference Board of Canada, with a particular focus on the Ontario Skills Passport (*GS*, p. 12). Each of these organisations is committed to economic policy, and their inclusion in an education document reveals just how thoroughly education has been repurposed toward jobs and economic prosperity. The OME makes this connection between the economics and education explicit in the section on Fundamental Principles, quoting themselves and stating: "Education directly influences students' life chances – and life outcomes. Today's global, knowledge-based economy makes the ongoing work in our schools critical to our students' success in life and to Ontario's economic future" (*GS*, p. 7). They go on to describe how the Ontario Skills Passport emphasizes "important work habits [including] working safely, teamwork, reliability, organization, working independently, initiative, self-advocacy, customer service, and entrepreneurship" (*GS*, p. 12). They also cite the Conference Board of Canada's "list of employability skills" (*GS*, p. 12).

This narrow, economic purpose of education ignores the value of learning for the sake of learning. Dale and Hyslop-Margison (2010) noted:

> Lifelong learning, once an educational idea connected to a passion for learning over the life course, has been transformed into an occupational skill where students are expected to accept individual responsibility for job retraining in the face of unstable labor market conditions. This is a prime example of educational concepts transformed into slogans and taught to students as labor market credentials. (p. 6)

It is a mindset totally congruent with neoliberal ideals and wholly devoid of non-economistic values. This repurposing of education toward market outcomes forefronts the voice of future employers and prioritizes education in context of the overall economic welfare of the province, but makes no mention of other potential denotations of success, including fairness, equity between all citizens, access to services, social justice, and democratic frameworks.

I have thus far laid out an analysis of voices heard. At this point, it is important to also draw attention to the voices silenced or absented from the production of *Growing Success*, as both a policy and text. There is no overt mention of parent or student consultation, which is

significant because standardized testing and neoliberal approaches to education have direct implications for both these groups. There are also questions that must be asked about how parents might find access to policy influence: What type of families might have a voice? Are they the same families most negatively affected by neoliberal policies, such as standardized testing?

If parents as voters have become such a significant determinant in the development of education policy, then their current role in a child's education is undeniably powerful. The narrow neoliberal and neoconservative denotations of achievement and success openly rely on traditional households, nuclear families, high levels of parent involvement and a presumed synchronicity of educational values. In 2010, in response to the 2009 Auditor General of Ontario's report, the EQAO published a report of a survey examining parent perspectives on the testing. The survey was conducted over the course of a month by telephone. The EQAO (2010) specified that in order to qualify for the study, parents had to be "actively involved in their child's schooling" (p. 2). At no point in the document does the EQAO define what the term "actively involved" means, or how it sought to establish that qualification in the vetting of its respondents. Ostensibly, the survey was only conducted with English language speaking households. The document, which in itself would make for an interesting analysis, reads like a text that was designed to justify the ongoing existence of the organisation that commissioned it. One question, for example, asks to what extent the parents agreed with the following statement: "Ontario's provincial testing program makes the education system accountable to parents and taxpayers" (p. 5). As I noted, this is a document that warrants some independent analysis, but it clearly solicits the responses of those parents who met the definition of "active involvement" and those who were able to communicate in English.

Parental involvement is also emphasized in the Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat (2016) webcast titled, "Coproducing Learning: The Family Path." As part of the module, the Secretariat cites the Ontario government's policy "Parents in Partnership: A Parent Engagement Policy for Ontario Schools" (2010b). This document articulates the relationship expected between parents and schools, and once again foregrounds the assumption that all parents concur with the values espoused by the Ministry of Education:

> The positive results of a genuine partnership between parents and schools include improved student achievement, reduced absenteeism, positive student behaviour and increased confidence among parents in their children's schooling. Such results, in turn, have a positive impact on our province as we seek to develop and sustain a cohesive society and a strong economy that will secure Ontario's future prosperity. (p. 8)

These expectations, and the constricted definitions and presumptions of family they imply, have clear ramifications for students whose parents do not conform to the parameters of a "normal" household. While some will argue that this may be true irrespective of the definition of achievement or success, I argue that the hypercompetitive educational environment renders the situations of the non-dominant hegemonies all the more precarious. These groups include: parents without formal education; families from a lower socioeconomic bracket and single-parent households; also, newcomers and English Language Learners (ELL).

The constrained neoliberal and neoconservative definitions of achievement and success often privilege parents who have a higher level of formal education (Suárez-Orozco et al., 2010). Parents who have had experience navigating the education system will have an understanding of how to petition for higher grades, seek out certain schools with high EQAO scores, and advocate for their children in parent-teacher interviews and on school councils. Lee and Bowen (2006) noted:

> parents with low levels of education, for example, may be less involved at school because they feel less confident about communicating with school staff owing to a lack of knowledge of the school system, a lack of familiarity with educational jargon, or their own negative educational experiences. (p. 198)

This reflects how a parent's educational attainment can affect real or perceived social capital and can inhibit their full participation in a highly politicised and competitive educational environment.

Economic capital is another important advantage, because the definition of success as attaining high scores on literacy and numeracy tests relies on the presumption that parents will be able to support homework and literacy initiatives at home or with further tutoring. This conception clearly disadvantages parents who have to work evenings or nights and who do not have the time or resources to work with their children on a nightly basis. A further economic disadvantage occurs because families without a lot of disposable income cannot afford to send their children to after-school programs to support reading, writing and mathematics learning expectations. On the other hand, parents who are savvy, who know the system, and who have financial means to offer their child extended support, will avail themselves of Oxford, Sylvain, or other learning academies. These tutoring services often offer test preparation programs that are specifically designed to improve a child's EQAO test scores. Finally, it has been theorised that children who come from two-parent homes fare better than their counterparts from single-parent households due to lower levels of disposable income (Mulkey, 1992; Suárez-Orozco et al., 2010). This may be because, in a hypercompetitive educational environment, "families with more than one adult in the home may be better equipped to deploy resources to promote better educational outcomes than those with only one adult" (Suárez-Orozco et al., 2010, p. 604).

Children whose parents do not speak English or French as first language or who are classified as ELL also struggle with the high stakes environment. Not only is it more difficult for parents to access resources about the education system in their native language, but students also face difficulty when trying to meet the definition of "success." The Office of the Auditor General of Ontario (2009) reported that some ELL students do not have to write EQAO tests, but are then counted as not having met the provincial standard. The effects of this method of data tabulation are that the students feel additionally estranged from the school community and also that schools with high ELL populations may be publicly shamed with lower scores on the OME's School Information Finder website (2018).

Students who are newcomers struggle to adjust to their new homes, learn the official language if they are not already proficient, and understand the requirements of the new educational system in "a high-stakes testing environment that is not designed with their educational needs in mind" (Suárez-Orozco, Gaytán, Bang, Pakes, O'Connor, & Rhodes, 2010, p. 602). Suárez-Orozco et al. (2010) also noted that the "parents are often ill-equipped to help them

navigate a complex, foreign, and sometimes hostile educational system" (p. 602). For some newcomers, a further drawback of standardised testing and the definitions of achievement linked to it is that some of the questions may have a cultural bias and the students may lack the cultural capital needed to ably respond (Kearns, 2008).

There is some hypocrisy in the absence of parent and student voice from the development of this policy. As part of the policy's "Context," *Growing Success* calls for high levels of parental involvement:

> It is expected that teachers will work with students and their parents to ensure that they understand [the outlined] learning skills and work habits and their importance. Students benefit when teachers discuss and model these skills, and when teachers and parents work with students to help them develop these skills. Students also benefit when teachers work with them to explain how these skills will be assessed and evaluated. (*GS*, p. 13)

The implication is that the policy is informing parents, relaying on the OECD's advocacy for global competencies, that their role is one of conformity. Parents are called upon to partner with teachers so that they can better understand the competencies, and the ways that schools will assess and evaluate those competencies so that their children can be successful in the "world of work" (*GS*, p. 12).

Students and their families are implicated in education, and certainly in processes of assessment and evaluation. Their voices should be widely accessed and deeply evidenced in policy reform. How would *Growing Success* have differed if it had solicited the voices of newcomers? Of English Language Learners (ELL)? Of parents without formal education? Of families from a lower socioeconomic brackets and single-parent households? What might these policy stakeholders have requested from and suggested for an education policy that is ostensibly meant to serve their present interests and future success?

Changing 'Success'

As de Certeau (1997) said: "If, by violence, we mean a growing distortion between what a discourse says and what a society does with it, then this very discourse functions as a manifestation of violence. It becomes itself a language of violence" (p. 30). If definitions of fairness and equity are stripped of meaning in education policy, and are handcuffed to notions of standardisation and accountability, then one must speak against the violence of appropriation and against the domination of an entire discourse by one overriding vision. Looking for a historical perspective, we can ask: Can we remember a time before standardised testing? What were our definitions of achievement and success? How did we measure them? Looking ahead, it becomes important to enquire about a future in which education might be unshackled from economics. Can we envision 'success' that connotes something outside of jobs and wages? Can our schools serve a purpose beyond that of perpetuating economic and political systems? And for those unwilling to go that far, unwilling to consider education without economic underpinnings, we could ask: How does the new economy, drifting away from the traditions of the industrial revolution and based on innovation, creativity, and entrepreneurship, define success and achievement? The International Commission on Financing Global Education Opportunity's 2016 report "The Learning Generation" contends that in the near future "the ability to acquire new

skills throughout life, to adapt and to work flexibly will be at a premium, as will technical, social, and critical thinking skills" (p. 13). How do our standardised tests account for that, if at all?

The growing influence of neoliberalism in education policy and in the management of education discourse means that counter-hegemonic ideas must be organised and spoken more coherently and consistently to redefine conceptions of "success' and "achievement." I have provided examples, using *Growing Success*, of the pervasiveness of market values and dominant hegemonic thinking in Ontario's current education system. Now, I invite stakeholders to consider Gramsci's vision of the organic intellectual in civil societies as a means of marshalling new hegemonic thinking and of winning favour in the "war of position." Gramsci (1999) contended that society was dominated by various hegemonic forces that worked within official capacities, or "the State" (p. 162), as well as through dominant discourses in unofficial spaces, "civil societies," such as schools, community centres, religious spaces, and even within families (Dimitriadis & Kamberelis, 2006). In a civil society, changing a dominant discourse becomes the responsibility of organic intellectuals, members of the working class, who "are seen as constantly interacting with society, struggling to change minds, engaged in the evolution of knowledge, raising issues in the public domain and defending decent standards of social well-being, freedoms and justice" (Tickle, 2001, p. 161). As such, those who believe that education is not simply learning to become a good worker, but the grounding of and facilitation for citizens who feel empowered to act in their local and global communities, must speak to disrupt the status quo.

As noted by the response to dropping math scores, our public education systems respond to political pressure. It is incumbent upon educators to become organic intellectuals, speaking to parents and students about the possibilities of redefining success and achievement according to values that reflect the needs of a complete and just society. In my role as an educator, I would advocate for a curriculum with far fewer than 3400 expectations and more time to delve deeply into issues and ideas relevant to the students. I would petition for local decision-making processes that empower school communities to design and enact policies as suited to their needs. I would eliminate provincial standardised assessments and permit local school boards and schools to make funding decisions in response to local needs. But this is merely one perspective. Alternate visions of education must be broadly articulated and vigorously debated in an open war of position. We, the "stakeholders," the "voters," the citizens, must assert our conceptions of success and achievement in official and unofficial spaces: in our classrooms, staff meetings and parent council meetings, certainly; but also, unfailingly, at our dinner tables and in coffee shops. For it is only through the active, consistent, and broad discussion of alternatives that non-dominant hegemonies, the subalterns, win favour in the war of position. It is only through speaking out against the normalisation of a single epistemology, and the embedded, narrow definitions of success and achievement, that a society can broaden its commitment beyond economic wealth for some.

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