Deconstructing the "At-Risk" of *Student Success*- A Literature Review Summary

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## ABSTRACT

This paper is a summary of the literature review written for a major research paper conducted through the Ontario Institute of Studies in Education (OISE/UT) and the Toronto District School Board (TDSB). This research looked at how the *Student Success* program was being offered at a specific junior high school in Toronto. *Student Success* is a government initiative that provides support for students learning in secondary school. At one particular junior high school, an intervention program to support academic gains was designed for students who were considered academically "at-risk." Specifically, this research study tracked grade 8 students during the 2007-2008 school year, and looked at how this program was working for them. An important part of this research explored how students were highlighted as "at-risk" and the measures taken by teachers to help these students. This research also deconstructed the term "at-risk" and how this label affected students and teachers.

## CONTEXT OF STUDY

*Student Success* is an Ontario government initiative that emerged in 2003 in response to this province's growing high school drop out rate. Under the McGuinty government, the Ministry of Education introduced this strategy to lower the drop out rates and help all students reach their potential. At one particular junior high school in Toronto, students who were not at grade level expectations were considered to be students "at-risk" of failing. Additional support, in the form of the *Student Success* initiative, was offered to these students to help them with their academic, social and emotional achievements. Support in the form of a homework club with specialized teacher assistance, student workshops on issues important to the students and access to a school guidance counsellor and *Student Success* teacher were just some of the interventions that this school implemented. However, are programs like *Student Success* making a difference in student academic gains? Does labelling a student

as "at-risk" help or hinder student achievement?  Many of these questions, and others alike, were explored in this study.

Throughout this research, *Student Success* is written in italics to denote the official name of the program offered at the data collection site.  Quotation marks are used around the word "at-risk' to signify that this term is ambiguous, and that it can take on many definitions and it can be interpreted in many ways.  When using this term to label students within the education system, it is important to recognize how others will interpret the word "at-risk," and the effect of these interpretations on those given this label. At Great Expectations Junior High School (a pseudonym), any student not achieving at grade level, were highlighted as "at-risk."

For this research, an exploration of *Student Success* and "at-risk" students took place at a junior high school, where the *Student Success* program was offered to students in grades 7, 8 and 9. Typically, *Student Success* is a program only available in high school settings; however, this school made it available to all three of its grades.  As a result, early identification of students considered to be "at-risk," occured as young as in grade 7 at this school.  In the school's opinion, early identification meant that students were being tracked and receiving additional support to help them make academic gains.  The purpose of this research was to see if the *Student Success* program effectively helped the students at Great Expectations Junior High School in English and in Mathematics.  If this program was successful, there would be implications for other elementary and junior high schools to adopt this program.  If this program was not successful, that would indicate to improve or terminate this program for the students in this school.  Another purpose of this study was to explore the term "at-risk," as it applies to *Student Success*.

## LITERATURE REVIEW SUMMARY

### *Student Success*

The McGuinty government's *Student Success Strategy* was a response to the growing dropout rate of students in Ontario.  In 1998, the high school graduation rate was 78% and in 2004 – 5, this rate

dropped to 68% (Ministry, 2005a).  This problem of early school leavers, or dropouts, meant that many

students are without a high school diploma.  At the macro level, a population without a high school

education will affect Ontario's economy and competitive advantage because they will be under

educated (Ministry, 2005a).

The Learning to 18 Legislation passed in 2006 amended the Ontario Education Act to deter

students from becoming early school leavers.  Bill 52 changed so that students cannot leave high school

until they are 18 years old or until they graduate.  If students leave school prior to 18, then they will not

be entitled to their driver's license.  Only New Brunswick and Ontario amended legislation to require

students to stay in school to 18 (Robertson, 2006, p. 715).

The main goal of *Student Success* was to increase the graduation rate to 85% by 2010.  To

achieve this goal, five other goals were considered and they are:  (1) Students will receive better

learning through intervention and assistance.  (2) There will be healthier attitudes and expectations for

*Student Success*, meaning that stakeholders will be aware that each individual has the potential to

succeed.  (3) High schools will provide a caring and engaging place for all students to learn.

Additional support will be available to students.  (4) The courses students take will be relevant and

meaningful to their future careers through clear Workplace Learning, Apprenticeship, College, and

University outcomes.  (5) Targets for success will be set and tracked by the government (Ministry,

2005a, p. 1).

## Definitions of "At-Risk"

Much of the literature that supports this *Student Success* research is rooted within the term "at-

risk" because this is how Great Expectations labeled the students within their *Student Success* program.

The term "at-risk" is attached to many situations and carries with it a wide range of connotations.

When using the term "at-risk," it is valuable to define it for the purpose of the situation.  In most

contexts for this paper, "at-risk" is used to describe students who are in regular education but in danger

of dropping out of school, or academically failing (Kruger, 1990, p. 3).  Similar definitions also include

students who use drugs, alcohol, and weapons or get pregnant.  These youth are considered to come from disadvantaged backgrounds and are expected to be the people who will drop out of school and fail to be integrated into "a normally accepted pattern of social responsibility" (OECD, 1995, p. 47).  Poverty, ethnic minority status, family arrangements such as single parent households, type of school, geography of school, and community factors are all aspects that might cause a student to be defined as "at-risk" of something (OECD, 1995, p. 48).

However, these assumptions only fit certain students, and thus there is a belief that "any young person may become 'at risk'" (Barr & Parrett, 1995, p. 2).  This means that such factors related to economics, gender, ethnicity, or family do not predetermine that a certain youth, in belonging to a certain culture for example, will become "at-risk" (Barr & Parrett, 1995, p. 17).  This does mean that any student has the potential to become "at-risk," if their life situations cause for it.  Therefore, the education system, in an attempt to reach all learners, should consider how to reach each learner.  Jordan (2006) writes, "Students at risk are likely to succeed in the mainstream on standards set for all students when they, their families and cultures are valued and included in the educational process" (p. 5).

## Language Theory

Poststructural theory claims that language has the power to construct social reality, which means that when educators label students as "at-risk," this language causes the students to see themselves as "at-risk" (Higgs & Tarsi, 1997, p. 119).  This label places students in an inferior position to their peer counterparts and shifts the focus to what is wrong with the student rather than what is right (Higgs & Tarsi, 1997, p. 119).

 In psychological terms, self-fulfilling prophecy effect is "When your expectations about a person's actions cause that person to behave in the expected way" (Nairne et al, 2001, p. 526 – 7).  In an educational setting, if a teacher has preconceived notions about a student because they have been given this "at-risk" label, then perhaps that teacher's actions and behaviour towards that student will lead to the student's behaviour corresponding with the teacher's behaviour.  If language has the power

to serve as a self-fulfilling prophecy, whereby to name and treat a student as "at-risk," eventually causes them to become "at-risk," then it is important for educators to consider their language when using this term to label students (Barr & Parrett, 1995, p. 15).

This view is just one perspective, and does not mean that youth should not be identified if they require support. Rather a change in the terminology might benefit students. Higgs and Tarsi (1997) propose the term "at-promise" because it focuses on the positive aspects of students. "At-promise" means "individuals whose unique gifts are often untapped in informal school settings" (p. 119). These students have aptitudes and strengths, but traditional classroom environments are determined to not be conducive to the expression of their skills. With a term like "at-promise," the positive emphasis on the students' abilities could change how "at-risk" students view themselves and how educators instruct these students. Further, there is research that states, "Teachers make a difference not only to how students learn, but also to how students feel about their ability to learn" (Jordan, 2006, p. 6).

## Teachers and Instruction for "At-Risk" Students

According to Vygotsky's theory of zone of proximal development, students can master a task with the right amount of adult guidance and support (Woolfolk et al, 2006, p. 50). This theory supports the existence of intervention programs, like *Student Success*, offered to "at-risk" students because a key component to both the theory and the intervention programs available is that students have the ability to reach a goal with the assistance of a caring adult or peer. Similarly, Jerome Bruner believed that as long as the instructional programs are developed effectively, any child, at any age, has the potential to learn any concept (Barr & Parrett, 1995, p. 25). These beliefs about learning point to the idea that all students have the ability to learn and excel if given the opportunity to do so. In addition, a movement away from the preoccupation with "at-riskness" to a focus on assessment and building on student abilities is required to reach the diverse students within the education system (Jordan, 2006, p. 6).

One strategy to help "at-risk" youth is prevention programs. These programs believe that a student should feel like a member within their school community (Knesting & Waldron, 2006, p. 600).

Often students who drop out of school feel as if no one is invested in their success, and thus they give up on school. Teachers and schools play a pivotal role in a student's decision to drop out because they could make a difference in keeping students in school (Knesting & Waldron, 2006, p. 610). Similarly, a report conducted by Health Canada recommends that schools should improve the sense of belonging students feel at school (Jordan, 2006, p. 8). If students feel connected to their school, this will have positive outcomes, such as an increase in self-esteem and academics.

## FINAL THOUGHTS

A review of the literature on *Student Success* and the term "at-risk" set the framework for an intensive data collection process at Great Expectations where observations, note-taking, interviews and focus groups were used as a part of the methodology to gather detailed information about how this program was working for the students involved with it. The findings demonstrated some interesting trends and themes that overall displayed that *Student Success* was a positive program for students at this school.

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