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# How Schools Define Success: The Influence of Local Contexts on the Meaning of Success in Three Schools in Ontario, Canada

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# **How Schools Define Success: The Influence of Local Contexts on the Meaning of Success in Three Schools in Ontario, Canada**

## **Comment les écoles définissent-elles le succès : L'influence du contexte local dans la signification de réussite dans trois écoles en Ontario, Canada.**

Sue Winton, York University

### **Abstract**

Creating successful schools is a priority for governments, district officials, administrators, teachers and parents around the world, but just what does 'school success' mean? Grounded in theories of collective sense-making and learning, this article presents how school success is defined in three schools in Ontario, Canada, and draws on Ball, Maguire and Braun's theory of policy enactment to explain similarities and differences between the schools' definitions. A comparative case study of three elementary schools in the same neighbourhood finds that students' happiness and academic learning (rather than achievement on standardized tests) are common aspects of each school's multifaceted definition of success. Each school also has unique elements in its definition that can be attributed to differences in the schools' situated, material, and professional contexts. In addition to local influences, class-based deficit ideology and professional discourses in their external contexts impact the schools' definitions of success. Notably, the schools' definitions emphasize individual growth and outcomes that reproduce rather than transform social inequities.

### **Résumé**

Créer des écoles à succès est une priorité pour les gouvernements, les responsables de districts, les administrateurs, les enseignants et les parents à travers le monde, mais au juste que signifie 'réussite scolaire'? Fondé sur les théories de sens de décision collectif et d'apprentissage, cet article présente comment la réussite scolaire est définie dans trois écoles de l'Ontario, Canada, et s'appuie sur la théorie de Ball, Maguire et Braun sur l'adoption de politiques afin d'expliquer les similitudes et différences entre les définitions des écoles. Une étude de cas comparative de trois écoles primaires se trouvant dans le même quartier constate que le bonheur et l'apprentissage scolaire des élèves (plutôt que l'accomplissement dans les tests standardisés) représentent les aspects communs de la définition multidimensionnelle de réussite de chaque école. Chaque école dispose aussi d'éléments uniques dans sa définition qui peuvent être attribués à des différences dans les contextes situationnels, matériels et professionnels des écoles. En plus des influences locales, l'idéologie du déficit basée sur les classes et les discours professionnels dans leurs contextes externes ont un impact sur les définitions des écoles du succès. Notamment, les définitions des écoles mettent l'emphase sur le développement individuel et les résultats qui reproduisent, plutôt que de transformer, les iniquités sociales.

**Keywords:** policy, school success, Ontario

**Mots-clefs:** politiques, réussite scolaire, Ontario

### **Introduction**

What comes to mind when you picture a successful school? Smiling faces? A busy library? A winning football team? There are many ways to define school success, and yet not all can be pursued at the same time or with the same commitment. Governments funding systems of education must determine the purposes of education to pursue in education policy, support through resources, promote through professional development, and report to the public. People in schools must define educational purposes and school success to make choices about curriculum, grades, resources, and numerous other activities. Parents judge how well their

children are doing in school and how well schools meet their children's needs based on parents' own understandings of success. Meanings of school success are related to beliefs about the purposes of education (Cuban, 2003) and are influenced by local, national, and international contexts.

This article heeds Ball, Maguire and Braun's (2012) call to take local contexts seriously in efforts to understand why policies are enacted differently in seemingly similar schools. Grounded in theories of collective sensemaking (Coburn, 2001) and meaning-making (Wenger, 1999), this article examines how school success is defined in three schools in Ontario, Canada. Ball et al.'s (2012) theory of policy enactment is used to explain similarities and differences in how participants at each school conceptualize school success. Findings from the comparative case study of three elementary schools in the same neighbourhood in a city in Ontario, Canada, demonstrate that in addition to local situated, material, and professional contexts, deficit ideology and professional discourses in the schools' external context influence how success is defined.

The article begins with a brief review of various purposes of education that give rise to different conceptions of school success. Next, various meanings of school success in Ontario are discussed, and the theories that inform the study are presented. Then, the methodological approach and the schools are described, and an examination of how participants at each school define school success and dimensions of the school context that influence these definitions follows. Similarities and differences between the three cases and the Ontario government are explored. Finally, implications of the schools' definitions of success are considered.

### **What is success?**

School success can be defined in many ways. One definition might equate school success with high student achievement while another could define it as a democratic environment. Other definitions may emphasize high graduation rates, a prosperous economy, citizenship, a socially cohesive society, or some combination of these elements. Definitions of success are connected to beliefs about the purposes of education (Cuban, 2003), which in turn are connected to the ideals and nature of each society (Noddings, 2005).

Hodgkinson (1991) identifies three purposes of education that have been pursued throughout the history of formal schooling: aesthetic, economic, and ideological. Aesthetic purposes are ends related to "self-fulfillment and the enjoyment of life" (Hodgkinson, 1991, p. 23). Noddings (2003) contends that children's happiness *in* school is an important goal as well; it may even be instrumental for happiness in the future. Aspects of schooling that contribute to achieving aesthetic ends include sports, arts, and the academic curriculum (Hodgkinson, 1991). Hodgkinson's second purpose, economics, includes training for jobs so that individuals can earn money, and in the contemporary global economy, so that nations may be competitive in this sphere. The third purpose in Hodgkinson's "constellation of purposes" is ideological education (Hodgkinson, 1991, p. 24). This purpose is concerned with transmitting the dominant political, social, and cultural beliefs and values of the society in which education occurs. However, beliefs and values are contested in pluralist societies – including beliefs about whether schools should prepare children to fit into society or whether it should enable them to transform it (Young, 2004). Advocates of the latter perspective argue schools in a democracy should "seek to prepare students to improve society by critically analyzing and addressing social issues and injustices" (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004, p. 242). They contend that critical social analysis occurs infrequently within schools that instead promote conformity, compliance, and individual success (Westheimer, 2008).

Ministries of education across Canada profess commitments to aesthetic, economic, and ideological purposes (Stewart, 2004), and while multiple purposes may be pursued simultaneously (Cranston, Mulford, Keating, & Reid, 2010), it is not possible to pursue all purposes equally. Indeed, some purposes conflict with one another (Stewart, 2004).

### **Education in Ontario, Canada**

In Canada, education is the responsibility of provincial and territorial governments. Ontario is the country's most populous province, and its four publicly-funded education systems (English Catholic, French Catholic, English public [i.e., not Catholic] and French public) educate over 2 million students (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2013). The province's education system has been undergoing reform for nearly two decades (Anderson & Ben Jaafar, 2006). In 2003, the current Liberal government was elected and committed itself to achieving "improved student success in literacy and numeracy" (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2004). Success was defined then as 75% of students meeting the provincial target (equivalent to a B grade) on standardized reading, writing and math assessments administered by Ontario's Education Quality and Accountability Office (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2004). Success now also includes an 85% graduation rate (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2012b). Ontario's Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO) assessments are written by students in grades 3 and 6 in the areas of Reading, Writing, and Mathematics, in grade 9 (Mathematics), and in grade 10 (Literacy).

Many inside and outside the government equate success in Ontario schools to increasingly higher EQAO test scores. The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, for example, recognizes Ontario as one of the world's "strong performers and successful reformers in education" and refers to the increased pass rates on EQAO tests as an indicator of its success (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2010). Similarly, Levin, Glaze, and Fullan (2008) detail how the strategies of the Ontario government increased the number of students achieving at or above 75% on EQAO tests in an article entitled "Results Without Rancor or Ranking: Ontario's *Success Story*" (emphasis added, p. 272). In a response to a critique of standardized testing, the Chair of EQAO's Board of Director's explained:

Twenty-eight thousand more Grade 6 students met the provincial standard in reading and writing in 2010 than in 2000. This is a significant outcome, given that we know students who achieve the provincial standard early in their schooling are best positioned for success in the later grades. This success was made possible by the hard work of teachers, school and system administrators and education policy makers—all of whom were supported by reliable student achievement data provided by EQAO's provincial tests (Desbiens, 2011, para 6).

Achieving the provincial target on EQAO tests is often explicitly linked to economic purposes of education. A 2012 press release from the Office of the Premier (2012) entitled "Test Scores Rising For Students in Ontario: Strong EQAO Results Show McGuinty Government's Plan Working" explained:

Supporting student achievement is part of the McGuinty government's plan to help more students graduate, get jobs or move on to an apprenticeship, college or university. Building the best-educated workforce in the world helps attract the investments that create jobs and strengthen our economy.

There are policies in Ontario that support aesthetic and ideological goals as well. Policies that reflect aesthetic purposes of education include Daily Physical Activity, Safe and Caring schools, and the academic curricula. Initiatives explicitly promoting ideological purposes include the Equity and Inclusion strategy, character development, a 40-hour community volunteer requirement for graduation, and a grade 10 civics course. As Hodgkinson (1991) notes, aesthetic, economic and ideological purposes are often intertwined with one another.

Nevertheless, the Ontario government prioritizes student achievement. This commitment is reflected in its organizational design and the amount of money spent on literacy and numeracy and Student Success (designed to increase graduation rate) initiatives. For example, Student Success funding in 2009/10 and 2010/11 totalled nearly \$245 million (Office of the Auditor General of Ontario, 2011) whereas character development received \$3 million in 2006 and 2007 combined (People for Education, 2009). Further, Ontario's Ministry of Education only sometimes includes student well-being when discussing its priorities, but it always includes student achievement (e.g., see Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010).

Some, but not all, Ontario citizens share the Ontario government's prioritizing of schools' economic purposes and use of standardized test scores as indicators of success. A 2009 survey of Ontario citizens found that public satisfaction with Ontario's education was at a 30 year high and that the public supports provincial testing of students (Hart & Livingstone, 2009). On the other hand, citizens involved in public dialogues about education who were asked to define success in the ideal school emphasized students' realization of personal happiness, physical health, social well-being, communication skills, character, confidence, community service, and the achievement of individualized academic goals (Winton, 2010).

Ontario teachers also resist defining success narrowly and the use of large-scale assessments as indicators of success (Ontario English Catholic Teachers Association, 2002; Volante, 2007). In a 2010 position paper, the Elementary Teachers Federation of Ontario (ETFO) stated that "[s]caling back on the literacy and numeracy assessment initiatives is the top concern identified by ETFO members" (Elementary Teachers Federation of Ontario, 2010, p. 6). They claim the daily assessments done by teachers are the best assessments of students' progress and call for the government to help teachers do a better job assessing students rather than spending funds on tests (ETFO, 2010).

### **Defining school success locally**

The current study assumes that local meanings of school success are determined collectively through social processes embedded in local, provincial, national, and international policy webs. Through her examination of teachers' sensemaking of reading policy, Coburn (2001) demonstrates that teachers make meaning of policy messages in their environment through formal and informal conversations and interactions with their colleagues in the course of their work. These messages emerge and emanate from multiple sources, including, but not limited to, formal policies. The meanings teachers construct are affected by teachers' personal worldviews and practices as well as the informal alliances among teachers and the structure and nature of formal networks in schools (Coburn, 2001). Wenger's learning theory similarly recognizes that meaning is constructed collectively in what he calls communities of practice (COPs). COPs are made up of individuals who, in doing things together towards a joint enterprise, negotiate meanings about what they do. Over time and through their practice COPs create shared repertoires of tools, words, discourses, routines, ways of doing things, stories, and concepts (Wenger, 1999). COPs in schools must make sense of external policies, and how they understand

policy mandates affects if and how their practices change (Levinson, Sutton, & Winstead, 2009). Levinson et al. (2009) call the process of making sense of external policies by a COP *policy appropriation*. Policy appropriation is affected by COPs' institutional and existential conditions (Levinson et al., 2009).

Ball et al.'s (2012) theory of policy enactment also recognizes that how an external policy is enacted in a school depends on the school's local contexts. A school's context has multiple dimensions including its situated context (e.g., history, intake, location, and institutional narratives), professional culture (including teachers' values, attitudes, and outlooks), material context (e.g., staffing, physical buildings, budget, infrastructure), and external context (including school reputation, policies, discourses, and social, political, and economic contexts). These dimensions of local context influence how a policy is enacted in a school and explain why seemingly similar schools enact the same policy differently.

The current study draws on the ideas of collective sensemaking, COPs, policy appropriation and enactment to understand collective understandings of school success in three schools and why these understandings may vary. School success is not a discrete policy that was introduced into Ontario schools. Instead, ideas about the meaning of school success circulate as discourses in schools, policy texts, the media, literature, higher education, academic communities, and everyday conversations about education. People who attended schools confronted various definitions of success throughout their schooling experiences that affect their individual understandings of school success. Educators and school staff bring their personal worldviews and experiences to their work where they collectively make sense of the meaning of school success for their school; the school's context will affect the definition they ultimately (re)construct.

### **Methodological approach**

This article examines data collected as part of a larger project undertaken by a team of Canadian researchers as part of the International Successful School Principal Project (ISSPP). The ISSPP is a multi-national research collaboration that examines what school leaders do to enable school success (Jacobson, 2011). The ISSPP uses a comparative case study approach to identify leadership practices that improve student learning across various contexts (Jacobson, 2011). Individual schools are distinct cases. Administrators, teachers, support staff and, where possible, parents and students from each school are interviewed to provide multiple perspectives on how success is defined in the school and how the school principal supports the achievement of school success. Case studies are appropriate when asking 'how' questions about contemporary phenomena over which the researchers have no control (Yin, 1994).

Schools selected as ISSPP cases are identified according to various indicators of success including reputation, student achievement, school administrator reputation, student engagement, exceptional school programs, and approaches to decision-making (Day & Leithwood, 2007). The research team worked with officers from two school districts in Ontario to identify schools for the study. The districts were chosen based on convenience and existing relationships with research team members.

The case study schools are Lake Shore Elementary School, Maple Leaf Public School, and Holy Spirit Catholic School (pseudonyms). The three schools are located within 11 kilometers of one another in the same urban centre in Ontario, Canada. See Table 1 for a summary of the school data. At Lake Shore, the principal, secretary, a custodian, two educational assistants (EAs), the reading specialist, the learning support teacher (LST), and four classroom

teachers were interviewed (11 total). At Maple Leaf participants included the principal, an LST, two EAs, the secretary, a custodian, four classroom teachers, the teacher of English language learners, and parents on the school council (12 interviews total including 1 focus group interview). At Holy Spirit, the principal, vice-principal (VP), secretary, two EAs, and six classroom teachers were interviewed (11 total).

The interviews lasted between 40-60 minutes and were conducted using the ISSPP interview protocols. Participants were asked to define school success and to discuss if, how, and in what ways their school was achieving success as they defined it. All interviews were recorded and professionally transcribed. The transcripts were analyzed using Lichtman's (2010) 3 C's approach: Coding, Categories, and Concepts. The first step, coding, involved highlighting words and phrases in each transcript that referred to elements of school success (e.g., learning, confidence). Phrases that discussed aspects of the local context such as *parents and community*, *policies*, and *leadership* were also highlighted. Then, related codes were grouped into categories and subcategories. For example, at Holy Spirit the codes *healthy relationship with God* and *living their faith* were grouped into the category *faith*. Next, key concepts were identified from the categories (e.g., academics, deficit thinking, positive atmosphere). Each case was first analyzed independently; then, concepts identified in each case were compared with those of other cases.

**Table 1: School Data**

	<b>Lake Shore</b>	<b>Maple Leaf</b>	<b>Holy Spirit</b>
# of students	220	650	450
Students living in lower income households (%)	30	20	18
Students speaking English as a first language (%)	90	90	84
Parents with some university education (%)	17	20	50

### ***Lake Shore Elementary School***

Lake Shore is a public English school in the Green Acres District School Board (GADSB; a pseudonym). It serves about 220 children from the local community in kindergarten through grade eight. Just under 30% of students come from low income families (almost double the provincial average). Over 90% of students speak English as a first language. Only 17% parents of children in the school have some university education; this figure is less than half the provincial average (37%). Lake Shore participants describe the student population as transient.

Lake Shore's students performed poorly on EQAO tests in 2005/06. In grade three, only 44% of students met the provincial standard in reading, 56% in writing, and 31% in math. In grade six, the results were 45%, 28% and 59% in reading, writing and math respectively. In 2007/2008, however, improvements in the grade three tests ranged from 22% (writing) to almost 40% (math) more students meeting the provincial standard. The number of sixth grade students meeting the standard in reading and writing also increased by 2007/2008 but not by quite as much as the third grade students.

Lake Shore has a relatively stable teaching staff. Notably, there is a frequent turnover of administrators. The principal interviewed for this study was in his first position as principal. He moved on to another school after being principal of Lake Shore for only 2.5 years. The school offers non-academic support for students including a breakfast program. A number of community groups run programs for students in the school outside of school hours including the YMCA and a homework program. A small parent council is active at the school.

### ***Maple Leaf Public School***

Maple Leaf is a public English school within the GADSB. The school serves approximately 650 students from the surrounding community, in kindergarten to grade eight. Approximately 10% of students are learning English as a second language, about 20% percent of students live in low-income households, and 20% of parents have some university education. In 2007/08 EQAO testing, scores ranged from a low of 36% to a high of 57% of students achieving or exceeding the provincial standard.

Maple Leaf is one of the largest elementary schools in the GADSB. Each grade level has at least two full classrooms, and there are a few split grade level classrooms. Twenty years ago, the building was renovated to accommodate the growing neighbourhood surrounding the school, and more than a dozen classrooms, a new library, a double gymnasium, a staff room and a kitchen were added. Parents help support the school through a Home and School Association and parent council. There are breakfast and before-and-after-school programs and many extracurricular activities including sports teams, choir, band, student council, and peer helpers.

The principal had been at the school for 2.5 years when the study was conducted. Staff members who worked in the school prior to her arrival explained that her style and focus on work was a big adjustment for staff. However, they acknowledge that the changes she initiated, while difficult, were necessary and have been positive overall.

### ***Holy Spirit Catholic School***

Holy Spirit is a Catholic elementary school (kindergarten to grade eight) with a population of approximately 450 students and 26 teachers. It is part of the English Catholic schools district in the same city as GADSB. Eighteen percent of students live in lower-income households. Over 50% of parents have some university education; this is higher than the Ontario average. About sixteen percent of students speak a first language other than English or French. Students consistently achieved at or above the provincial standard in EQAO testing and above the district's average performance.

The school building was built in the early 1970s and has been renovated four times to increase the number of classrooms, accommodate students with special needs, and improve the library. A daycare and a family resource centre share the building. The high school most students will attend when they graduate from Holy Spirit is next door. There is an active school council and parents volunteer in classrooms and on sports teams. The current principal had been at the school for 2.5 years at the time of the study. Since the principal arrived there has been "quite a turnover of staff". This has been deliberate on the part of the principal.

## **Local meanings of success**

### ***Meaning of success at Lake Shore***

When asked to define success most participants at Lake Shore identified student engagement and academic learning as important components. As one 1<sup>st</sup> grade teacher explained, "To me, it is



students loving learning...wanting to learn and thrive. And students moving up but not necessarily at exactly where they need to be, but everyone's progressing." Similarly, the principal stated, "I want them to get the best education they can get academically and that's my focus."

While many participants discussed provincial standards at some point, meeting them was not central to their understanding of success. For example, one 4<sup>th</sup> grade teacher said, "You do what works and what makes sense, and you teach to where your students are, and we all want them to end up at that level 3, and we all want to push them on, but we got to start from where we start from." Similarly, the LST stated, "there's always a positive, because even as we don't score well, or as well, we don't improve as much as we hoped to, there's still so many great things we were able to do." Thus, academic learning, as evidenced by growth and engagement rather than students achieving the provincial standard, is considered an element of success at Lake Shore.

In addition to academic learning, Lake Shore participants explained that success involves students feeling positively about themselves and school. For example, one 1<sup>st</sup> grade teacher stated that "[i]t's students wanting to come to school and looking forward to coming to school, and wanting to learn and thrive." The secretary expressed a similar view: "you see that they're developing and you see the knowledge coming out and the confidence coming out in some of the kids."

The main elements of success identified by participants at Lake Shore reflect aesthetic goals (Hodgkinson, 1991); notably, participants emphasize the present rather than the future. Only a handful of participants suggested success involves preparing students for life after graduation. Their concerns reflect aesthetic and ideological goals including how students feel about themselves and how they treat others. For example, a 4<sup>th</sup> grade teacher explained that success includes "[k]ids who are socially responsible, who are good citizens, who are able to care for their lives or for their own children eventually, and who...would be successful in the community."

In addition, a few participants mentioned meeting other immediate student needs including providing food and clothing, assisting families in crisis, and helping children get into support programs as part of school success. The inclusion of meeting students' non-academic needs and students' happiness as elements of school success may be explained in part by participants' negative views of students' parents. Many participants characterize Lake Shore parents as difficult and students' homes as deficient. An 8<sup>th</sup> grade teacher stated:

Often, for a lot of [students], school is a really safe place, and they know that they can come here, they know the routine, they know they'll be fed, they know that their teacher cares about them, they have peers that they can talk to, you know school's a haven for them.

A few teachers expressed frustration that children do not arrive at school with academic knowledge, and many interviewees believe that many parents do not value education. For example, a kindergarten teacher remarked, "I think there's a lot of parents that don't value education as highly as I do as a teacher and I do for my child." A 4<sup>th</sup> grade teacher shared a similar view, "[parents are] not really attuned with what's going on in education, and when their children arrive, they aren't prepared for what school is about."

While most participants recognized that many families struggle financially, they did not seem sympathetic towards parents' disadvantaged circumstances. Participants explained that they have to provide many things that they believe parents should provide such as consistency, care,

and safety. Participants' beliefs that students' homes and families are inadequate may explain why they include children's day-to-day happiness at school as an element of school success.

Teachers' deficit views of parents may also affect their expectations of what the students are able to achieve academically which, in turn, may explain their focus on academic progress rather than high levels of achievement. Gorski (2008) describes how a culture of classism present in many schools leads teachers to hold low expectations for poor children's achievement. The provision of care for students as an element of success may also reflect their low expectations for students (Garcia & Guerra, 2004). Further, Lake Shore has a history of poor academic performance on EQAO tests, and it has received extra support as part of the Ontario Focused Intervention Partnership (OFIP). The OFIP provides human and financial resources to schools "that have experienced particular difficulty in achieving continuous improvement" (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2012a). The school's history of poor performance may lead to teachers feeling helpless and hopeless, thus they may believe academic growth is all that is possible. Finally, the school has frequent principal turnover; a revolving door of principals frustrates school improvement efforts (Hargreaves, Moore, Fink, Braymn, & White, 2003).

### ***Meaning of success at Maple Leaf***

When asked to define school success, the elements most strongly emphasized by Maple Leaf participants reflect aesthetic concerns: students' academic learning; a safe and predictable environment; and student and staff happiness. Like those at Lake Shore, participants at Maple Leaf viewed academic growth as an aspect of school success. A 6<sup>th</sup> grade teacher explained, "personally success to me is looking at where student began in your class and seeing where they are ending up." Some teachers explicitly dismissed EQAO test scores as indicators of success whereas others used the provincial marking scale (1, 2, 3, 4) to demonstrate academic learning. The school's ESL teacher stated, for example, "it's not the test scores... for myself the most important thing is that everybody is learning and everybody feels as though they can learn." The LST explained, "so if I take... 50% of the kids are at level 1 and hopefully they aren't but, and if we can get them to level 2, that's success to me." Teachers' appropriation of the provincial achievement levels is evident in the quotes above. Movement from one level to another, rather than the achievement of level 3 or 4, serves as an indication of success.

The LST quoted above suggested that some students were unlikely to achieve large academic gains because "there's just too many things that are going on in these kids' lives". The LST is one of many participants at Maple Leaf who explained that students and their families experienced hardships at home that made it difficult for students to learn at school. Like those at Lake Shore, participants viewed many students' home lives as deficient. These beliefs help explain why participants emphasized that a positive atmosphere is an aspect of school success. This atmosphere is one in which people feel safe and comfortable. An 8<sup>th</sup> grade teacher stated:

I see learning as a risk a lot of the time, and you have to create an atmosphere where the kids feel comfortable and you need to create an atmosphere where the community feels comfortable and I think that's really, really important.

An Educational Assistant (EA) who lives in the school community also explained:

I think one of the biggest successes in this school is that for the most part kids tend to be here, we have kids that enjoy the experience, they feel that it's a safe place to be, it's consistent, they know what to expect, it's not as flexing, as challenging as walking on egg shells as a lot of them have been doing their whole lives within their community.

Orderly student conduct and consequences for misbehaviour are additional dimensions of a successful school at Maple Leaf. A fifth grade teacher stated, “School success would be students that...aren’t constantly being interrupted with behaviour issues, so having to watch the teacher deal with someone who isn’t behaving. As described by this teacher, participants at Maple Leaf believe a positive atmosphere is a precursor to academic learning. The school has focused on improving student behaviour since the principal joined the school a few years ago. When she arrived, student behaviour was “out of control” She explained “It was a gong show. There were kids fighting, there were kids swearing, there were kids spitting, there were kids running through the halls, there were kids taking each other out.”

Through a collaborative goal-setting exercise the school staff identified improving student behaviour as the school’s priority. The teachers, secretary, and parents credit the principal for improving the school atmosphere through the introduction of a character development program. An 8<sup>th</sup> grade teacher said:

the whole character development thing has been huge in terms of the atmosphere of the school because it’s really, there’s so much of a focus with the kids on, thinking about other people and how you should feel with other people that it’s just permeated everything.

Benefits of the program were also noted by a parent:

a certain [character attribute] is picked for that month and a teacher picks one student from their class and that one is awarded and kids all sit here and watch and that really encourages the kids’ behaviour which then translates, as we’ve mentioned in other meetings, it translates into kids feeling more comfortable and then probably doing better.

A third facet of school success at Maple Leaf is student and staff happiness. Participants spoke of “happy children” and “happy staff” as components of a successful school. Children’s emotional growth, including increased self-esteem and confidence, was also discussed as an aspect of school success. An EA explained, “[students] have experienced growth and success academically and socially and emotionally and an increase in their self-esteem and confidence which is great.”

School success at Maple Leaf emphasizes the achievement of aesthetic goals (learning, confidence, and happiness) and focuses on how individual students and staff fare on a day-to-day basis. Good character and conduct, both ideologically-defined, are understood as necessary to enable learning and as such are elements of success at Maple Leaf as well.

### ***Meanings of Success at Holy Spirit***

Participants at Holy Spirit discussed three main components of school success: students’ happiness; academic learning; and family and community satisfaction. As was the case at Maple Leaf and Lake Shore, school success at Holy Spirit includes students’ happiness at school. The VP noted, “It’s going to sound odd but it’s going to be happiness and confidence and risk taking.” The principal expressed a similar view:

we could be doing very well academically on EQOA scores but have miserable kids that hate coming to school and I don’t want that, I want school to be a great place for them, a safe place, and a place where they feel loved.

Indeed, student happiness was the component of school success emphasized most strongly at Holy Spirit. However, participants also identified academic learning as an important

element. Like those in the other schools, they often did so in relation to EQAO test scores or provincial standards even while some rejected them as indicators of school success. For example, a 4<sup>th</sup> grade teacher stated, “marks and standardized testing and all of those results, it’s nice to see, that we’re moving up, but if we go down in a year, I don’t think it’s an indicator of a school that’s not succeeding.” Not all participants dismissed EQAO test scores as an indicator of school success, however, all three that identified high scores as one element suggested it was one of multiple indicators and not the most important one.

While all three schools emphasize students’ happiness and academic learning, unique to Holy Spirit’s definition of success is family and community satisfaction with the school. A 1<sup>st</sup> grade teacher said:

[W]ell I think school success is a couple things. I think it’s... I think it’s a school where children like to come [laughing] and families... and families are happy to send them. They feel comfortable and they’re happy about what’s happening at the school.

A 7<sup>th</sup> grade teacher expressed the same idea: “their parents feel fortunate that their kids are within our boundaries and that they get to go to school here.”

While Holy Spirit’s consideration of parental and community satisfaction as a component of school success may reflect participants’ understanding of local accountability, it may also reflect the school’s intake. Compared to Lake Shore and Maple Leaf, Holy Spirit is located in a more financially secure and more highly educated community. Middle-class families monitor and influence what occurs in classrooms and schools, and educators know and respond to it (McGhee Hassrick & Schneider, 2009). Indeed, some participants explicitly identified parents’ education and middle or high income as assets to the school. Further, participants at Holy Spirit may view creating strong relationships with the local community as part of the school’s Catholic mandate (Pollock, 2013).

Finally, two participants at Holy Spirit identified students’ relationship with God as an element of school success. The principal stated: “We are a Catholic faith based school, so very much it’s important for them to grow into a healthy relationship with God, and with their faith and how that fits in with our society” While it is not surprising that some participants discussed students’ relationship with God as an element of school success given that Holy Spirit is located in a Catholic school system with policy goals explicitly related to students’ relationship to their religion, it is surprising that it was not identified by more participants. However, since all school staff are Catholic, many of its students and/or their families are Catholic (although this is not required), and the school is affiliated with a local church, goals related to students’ religion may be taken-for-granted by participants and/or implicit within other elements of success.

## **Discussion**

As one teacher at Holy Spirit put it, “school success is multifaceted”. Participants in the three schools in the study share her view. Of the multiple components of school success, all three schools prioritize aesthetic purposes of education. More specifically, they all emphasize academic learning and happiness.

The participants in all schools identified student learning as an element of school success. However, with few exceptions, participants rejected the Ontario government’s definition of school success as students achieving level 3 or 4 on provincial tests or report cards. Yet EQAO test results and achievement levels figured prominently in many participants’ discussions of school success. At Maple Leaf, participants appropriated the provincial achievement levels; they

viewed the attainment of a higher level as an indication of students' academic learning – and therefore, success - rather than defining success as achieving level 3 or 4. The references by participants in all the schools to EQAO and achievement levels demonstrate the influence of the province's student achievement discourses on their meaning-making.

Study participants' rejection of the Ontario government's definition of success as 75% of students achieving or exceeding the provincial standards on EQAO tests reflects professional discourses in the schools' external contexts. Ontario teachers have resisted and resented the province's large-scale assessment initiatives since they were introduced and continue to do so (Dasko, 2010; Elementary Teachers Federation of Ontario, 2010; Ontario English Catholic Teachers Association, 2002; Ontario Secondary School Teachers Federation, 2012; Volante, 2007). The Ontario government views high student achievement on EQAO tests as an indicator of students' and the province's competitiveness in the global economy. Indeed, economic purposes of public schooling dominate Ontario's education agenda. The government's *Results-based Plan 2011/12* explains: "Student achievement from kindergarten to Grade 12 is the top priority in education. The overall skill and knowledge level of Ontario's students must continue to rise to remain competitive in a global economy" (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2012b). Participants in the current study, however, did not identify students' future success in the job market as an indicator of school success.

Participants at all three schools also identified students' happiness as an important element of school success. Like Noddings (2003), the study's participants value children's happiness while in school; however, unlike Noddings who views happiness as both means and an end of education, few participants in the study cited happiness *after* graduation as an element of school success. At Maple Leaf and Lake Shore, the schools' intake of students from low-income families and teachers' perceptions of their families' inability to provide students with security, predictability and sometimes basic necessities may help explain why participants at these schools include students' happiness and safety as elements of success. In their work with educators to create equitable learning environments, Garcia and Guerra (2004) found that teachers' caring and concern disguised their lower expectations for the low-income and culturally/linguistically diverse children in their classes.

The Ontario government also promotes aesthetic purposes of education. Texts and policies profess commitments to both student achievement and well-being, but well-being is not prioritized as highly (or as clearly defined). It is not one of the government's three priorities (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2012b), and the government does not profess its commitment to student well-being as consistently. For example, the *2010/11 Results-Based Plan* (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010) states: "Student achievement and well-being is [sic] our number one priority" (page 8), but in another place the same document explains "student achievement is now officially the top priority for school boards". Furthermore, the school participants view student happiness as an element of school success, whereas Ontario's Ministry of Education constructs well-being as an enabling condition for student achievement – which, as discussed above, is understood as an indicator of the realization of economic purposes of education.

While all three schools' definitions of school success emphasize academic learning and students' happiness, differences between their definitions of success are evident. These differences arise from differences in each school's local contexts including its professional culture and situated and material contexts (Ball, et al., 2012). For example, participants at Maple Leaf identified an orderly environment as a component of success. This aspect of success is unique to this school, and may be attributed to aspects of its situated and material contexts

including its large number of students (Cotton, 1996), history, and leadership. The previous principal's discipline policies created perceptions of student behaviour as "out of control". Participants credit the character education initiative the current principal introduced for improving student behaviour.

School leadership may also influence notions of school success at Lake Shore. Principal turnover is frequent at this school, and rapid principal turnover "creates significant barriers to educational change" (Fink & Braymn, 2006, p. 86). The professional culture in schools with frequent changes in leadership becomes "hardened" and resists initiatives introduced by a principal whom teachers expect will move on after a brief period of time (Macmillan, 2000, p. 60). Deficit beliefs about students' parents are a striking aspect of the professional culture of Lake Shore. The frequent and anticipated change of administration may help explain why these deficit beliefs persist despite direct intervention by Ontario's Focused Intervention Program.

Intake, an aspect of a school's situated context, plays an important role in the three schools' definitions of success. Lake Shore and Maple Leaf are located in communities with a higher than average number of low-income families. Educators' deficit beliefs about the parents and home lives of students at these schools influence how they understand academic learning as a component of success (i.e., as progress rather than achieving high test scores or levels 3 or 4). Intake and parents are also important to Holy Spirit's definition of success but in different way. Only Holy Spirit includes parent satisfaction as an element of school success; this difference may be attributed to parents' higher income and education levels and the school and community's shared faith.

A notable limitation of the current study was the research team's inability to talk to parents of children at Lake Shore and Holy Spirit and the possibly atypical group of parents interviewed at Maple Leaf (school council members). This limitation is an outcome of the ISSPP design, which relies on school principals to recruit parent participants. Researchers should consider collaborating with community-based organizations to access and talk to parents in future initiatives. Understanding parents' definitions of success in a particular school can help researchers understand how this dimension of a school's situated context influences how success is defined.

Despite some differences, all three schools' definitions of success serve the ideological purpose of preparing students to fit into the world as it exists. Beliefs about class that inform Lake Shore and Maple Leaf's definitions reflect the dominant deficit ideology in schools' external sociopolitical contexts which maintains a "scornful gaze" on low-income families and communities (Gorski, 2011, p. 152). This gaze is based on the myth of meritocracy that blames disadvantaged communities for their own disadvantage rather than oppressive social conditions and justifies the maintenance of inequity (Gorski, 2011). While Gorski (2011) argues that schools cannot be expected to change society's deficit ideology on their own, educators do not have to be complicit in its maintenance. Educators can challenge class-based deficit ideology by recognizing and challenging signs of deficit thinking in dialogues about education and offering counter-narratives, examining their own class socialization and behaviours that reify stereotypes and the myth of meritocracy, refusing to locate "problems" in communities rather than systemic inequities, and teaching about economic injustice and poverty (Gorski, 2011). This work must occur in initial and on-going teacher education, principal preparation, and in elementary and secondary classrooms.

Before educators can take these steps, they must first challenge their own deficit beliefs. Indeed, the findings of the study demonstrate that government efforts to 'close achievement

gaps' between groups of students should focus on challenging teachers' deficit beliefs about low-income (and culturally/linguistically diverse; Garcia & Guerra, 2004) students rather than emphasize accountability through standards and tests. The study's participants, like everyone in schools, appropriate policy in ways that make sense in their local conditions (Hardy, 2013; Koyama, 2011; Levinson, et al., 2009).

Timperley and Robinson (2001) demonstrate that educators' beliefs about low-income students' academic achievement can be challenged and changed by presenting teachers with data about what children from low-income families know and can do and about their parents' commitment to their children's education that is discrepant with their beliefs. External agents are needed to propose alternate explanations for students' achievement when teachers are trying to make sense of the discrepant data and to provide alternate practices that respond to these explanations. District and school leaders must initiate efforts to examine, and where necessary, challenge school staffs' beliefs about the limits and possibilities for students' academic achievement. If such a challenge is to occur at Lake Shore, however, its history of frequent principal turnover must end and a principal committed to serving children from low-income families must remain at the school until the professional culture becomes one in which teachers and staff interrogate aspects of the school and system that disadvantage students (Harris, 2006).

Finally, not one participant in any of the schools discussed preparing citizens to challenge inequity or transform society as an element of school success. Instead, the collective definitions of school success emphasize individual growth and outcomes that will enable students to succeed in the world as it is – a world of vast inequities. The findings support Westheimer's (2008) claim that "schools across the country [are] being seen primarily as conduits for individual success" (p. 7), and that commitments to the goals and values of democracy are eroding, and at times imperceptible, in Canadian public schools (Ricci, 2004; Westheimer, 2010). There are exceptions, however (Westheimer, 2010), and an important next step for research is to investigate the local factors that promote collective understanding, commitment, and enactment of democratic education in Canadian schools.

## **Conclusion**

The current study sought to understand how three schools in Ontario, Canada define school success and to identify the dimensions of the schools' contexts that influence collective understandings of its meaning. The three schools' definitions emphasized aesthetic purposes of education, most notably students' happiness and academic learning. Family satisfaction with the school was an additional aspect of success at Holy Cross Catholic School while orderly conduct was important at Maple Leaf Public School. Influences on the meaning of success in the schools' external contexts include professional discourses that reject standardized tests and achievement levels as indicators of success and class-based deficit discourses. Important influences of the schools' situated context on participants' understanding of success include each school's intake and history, Maple Leaf's size, and Holy Spirit's Catholic mission. Leadership emerged as an influence on the meaning of success at Maple Leaf and Lake Shore Elementary School. Teachers' beliefs about students' families and home lives were key aspects of the schools' professional culture that influenced how the three schools define success. Together, the three schools' definitions of success serve the ideological purpose of preparing students to fit into the world as it exists rather than to transform it.

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