Administrator and Teachers' Perceptions of School Success in a Publicly Funded Catholic School in Ontario, Canada

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School success is a complex and abstract notion. Asking questions about what is meant by school success is important, since the ways in which educators and administrators define school success tends to guide their practice, and may have implications for current and future policy initiatives. This qualitative case study explores how one publicly funded Catholic school in Ontario, Canada, conceives of school success. First, a brief historical description of publicly funded Catholic schooling in Ontario is given, followed by a short introduction of the contemporary school success discourse. Next, the methodological approach is described, leading into a detailed account of the study's findings. Last, a comprehensive discussion follows around a particular publicly funded Catholic school's notions of success in their local context. This study pays particular attention to the question of whether or not narrow achievement priorities from the provincial government dominate local school discourse and practices.

Over the past decade, public school systems in Canada and other parts of the developed world have increasingly interpreted school success in terms of student achievement on provincial and state standardized tests. In the United States, for example, legislation such as No Child Left Behind supports narrowly defined standards-based education reform, where school success is understood as the ability to move students to grade-level proficiency in math and English language arts (ELA) as measured by standardized tests. State accountability systems are considered high stakes because not only do they determine a student's progress toward graduation, but they also dictate the programs in which students can participate and the federal funding that comes to the school. As an example, consider the state of Florida.

In the 14 years since Florida instituted the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT) in 1998, the number of tests conducted yearly has increased from approximately seven to approximately 28 assessments (Central Florida School Board Coalition, 2012). Students' ability to achieve proficiency

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on these tests is now required to receive a high school diploma. In 2002, the adequate yearly progress (AYP) measure from the federal No Child Left Behind regulation was incorporated into the school success equation. Not meeting AYP for certain subgroups of students triggers a variety of prescriptive state- and federally mandated interventions. Schools considered Title 1—where 40% or more of students come from low-income families—that show no academic improvement within a two-year period are placed on choice school improvement status. In these situations, schools are required to develop an improvement plan and provide students with the option to transfer to a different school. Part of the Title I funds must be allocated for professional development for teachers and staff (Manwaring, 2010). Schools that do not improve on the AYP for five years are given five rather extreme choices, which include chartering, reconstitution, contracting, state takeover, or any other major governance restructuring (Center for Comprehensive School Reform and Improvement, 2008). FCAT tests are not just high stakes for students and schools; they also have monetary consequences for teachers. Student success on these tests reflects almost half of a teacher's evaluation, which in turn can affect their salary and professional standing (Central Florida School Board Coalition, 2012; Education Pre-K–12 Committee, 2011).

Many educators and researchers do not share the belief that school success can be measured by quantifiable test results alone. Some scholars (Drysdale, Goode & Gurr, 2009; Johnson, 2007; Møller, Vedøy, Presthus, & Skedsmo, 2009; Riahani, 2008) see school success as much more than achievement on standardized tests. Some alternative definitions of school success include students acquiring particular skill sets and knowledge required for successful entry into the workforce (Huddleston & Oh, 2004; Ontario Education Act, 1990); contributing to global competitiveness (Boman, 2006; Lingard & Ozga, 2007; O'Sullivan, 1999); supporting individual growth through child-centred pedagogical approaches and curriculum (Vadeboncoeur, 1997); changing current social inequities and challenging the status quo (Roth, 2006); producing democratic citizens (Dewey, 1916; Gutmann, 1999; Rolheiser & Glickman, 1995) and supporting students' spiritual growth in creating a healthy relationship with their God or deity (Arthur, 1995; Morris 1997). These definitions of success speak to the many purposes of education. Acknowledging that some purposes of education may be contradictory while others are complementary, schools and school systems often find themselves pursuing more than one purpose, but one will typically be predominant (Cranston, Mulford, Keating, & Reid, 2010). Asking questions about what is meant by school success is important, since

the ways in which educators and administrators define school success tends to guide their practice, and may have implications for current and future policy initiatives.

One area connected to school success about which little research has been done is concerned with how particular values-based schools and school systems conceive of success. Catholic schools, for example, promote a distinct value-based education, but little is known about how they define school success in terms of values-based outcomes. Do they see success in terms of student achievement? Do they prioritize their own values? Or do they work to blend student achievement with their own values? And how might publicly funded Catholic schools balance the pressure to perform on public standardized tests with their own value-based practices? In an effort to answer these questions, this article explores how one publicly funded Ontario Catholic school conceives of school success. First, a brief historical description of publicly funded Catholic schooling in Ontario is given, followed by a short introduction of the prevalent school success discourse. Next, the methodological approach is described leading to a detailed account of the study's findings. Last, a comprehensive discussion follows on this publicly funded Catholic school's negotiated notions of school success in their local context.

Catholic Education in Ontario, Canada

Unlike in the United States, where most faith-based schools are private and funded by religious communities and tuition-paying parents, the province of Ontario has a publicly funded provincial Catholic school system. This publicly funded system has its origins in legislation that eventually shaped Canada into the country it is today. Those responsible for this initial legislation made sure to enshrine minority rights, which included both language and religion, as a governing principle. These rights became part of the confederation agreement known as the British North America (BNA) Act that formed Canada. Public education became a provincial rather than a federal responsibility, and the rights granted within the BNA Act—and later the Canadian Constitution and the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms that was part of the Constitution Act of 1982—were upheld. This meant that Catholics in Ontario had a right to be educated in Catholic public schools. This does not mean, however, that both the public and Catholic education systems have been treated equally; rather, there is a long history of struggle for equal funding and resources (for more on this, see Gidney, 1999).

The Catholic education system in Ontario (known as either "the separate system" or "the Catholic system") serves approximately 600,000 students in 37 separate school districts, and is publicly funded from kindergarten through high school. Because the Catholic system is publicly funded, it is subject to the same provincial legislation, mandates, and program and policy regulations as the secular public school system. For example, all publicly funded school systems in Ontario, including the Catholic system, are governed by the 1990 Ontario Education Act (Education Act, s 28). Part of Ontario's provincial accountability system includes the Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO), which is responsible for testing students in all publicly funded schools, including students in the Catholic system. All students in publicly funded schools are subject to the same EQAO testing in reading, writing, and mathematics during third, sixth, and ninth grades. Achievement levels are reported on a scale from 1–4, with level 3 being the provincial achievement standard. Schools that do not meet these achievement expectations are subject to a number of interventions, such as the Ontario Focused Intervention Partnership (OFIP) and Schools on the Move program. Low-performing schools are placed into one of three categorizations under the Ontario Focused Intervention Partnership (OFIP), and receive targeted intervention based on their categorization. For example, the lowest-performing schools would be categorized as OFIP1—schools where 34% or fewer students are achieving at level three or four in reading in two of the last three years (OFIP, 2008). School boards (secular or Catholic) with schools that have an OFIP designation receive additional funds that are targeted for such things as "job-embedded professional learning for teachers, resources, literacy and numeracy coaches and release time to facilitate additional training opportunities" (OFIP, 2008, n.p.). Catholic schools in the publicly funded system must also offer the Ontario mandated curriculum (Education Act, s 2(8.3a)), and teachers working within the publicly funded school systems receive the same accreditation from the Ontario College of Teachers (OCT) (Education Act, s 10(261)). Conversely, privately funded Catholic schools in Ontario are not required to follow policies and procedures under the Ontario Education Act, participate in provincial testing, follow the provincial curriculum, or employ teachers with OCT certification.

Even though the Catholic separate system is mandated to implement the Ontario Ministry curriculum, the Catholic separate system nevertheless pursues its own unique set of (Catholic) values, and does so by infusing the teachings of Jesus Christ throughout the entire schooling experience, and

through religious curriculum taught in religion classes. The Education Act supports this pursuit of Catholic values when it states that a Roman Catholic board "may establish and maintain programs and courses of study in religious education for pupils in all schools under its jurisdiction" (Education Act, s 52). The Catholic Catechism and the provincial Catholic Curriculum Corporation advise and facilitate the publishing of Catholic documents in accordance with the Ontario Ministry's objectives with the Ontario curriculum. The Catholic Catechism and the Catholic Curriculum Corporation also recommend what should be included in these programs and courses of study in religious education. In practice, Catholic identity and Catholic teaching permeate the Catholic school system within the provincial curriculum.

Despite its prominence, little is known about Catholic education in Ontario. Little research has been undertaken to explore its Catholic nature, with a few rare exceptions (Homes, 2008; Meaney, Rye, Wood, & Solovieva, 2009; Raphael, Wahlstrom, & McLean, 1988). What does exist tends to be historical and predominantly focuses on the struggle Catholic school systems have endured in gaining and maintaining public funding and recognition (Lawton & Leithwood, 1991; Peters, 1998; Shapiro, 1986; Zinga, 2008). Research that moves beyond historical review can be divided into two groups: (1) research on Catholic schools that does not find its way into mainstream research and academic publishing (Black, 2010; Kostoff, 2010; Mulligan, 2005, 1999); and (2) secular research that includes Catholic schools and teachers in studies but totally ignores the catholicity of their work (Brackenreed, 2008; De Wit, Karioja, & Rye, 2010; Eagles & Richardson, 1992; Killoran, 2002; Leroux, 1997;). This paper explores the perceptions of school success among school administration and educators in a publicly funded Catholic school in a time of narrowly defined notions of school success and accountability. In particular, it considers how, if at all, the Catholic values espoused by the school become part of the quest for school success.

Competing Notions of School Success

Just as there are different purposes of education, so too are there different notions of school success. Some researchers have focused on alternative notions of school success, aside from the aforementioned standardized test scores (Drysdale, Goode, & Gurr, 2009; Johnson, 2007; Møller, Vedøy, Presthus, & Skedsmo 2009; Riahani, 2008). In considering the principal's role in sustaining school success, Drysdale, Goode, and Gurr (2009) reported that schools in

their study identified success on a range of criteria that included "development of a clearly defined philosophy; collaborative, happy, committed staff; positive and rich learning environment for the children; community support; and a sound reputation in the community" (p. 701). Møller, Vedøy, Presthus, and Skedsmo (2009) pointed out that principals' understanding of school success in their three cases took into consideration the nature and history of the community, the nature of the school, and the socioeconomic status of students. In his exploration of principals' leadership in successful Indonesian secondary schools, Riahani (2008) reported that respondents defined school success in terms of "better student output, good school conditions and supportive school cultures" (p. 46). These examples support the argument that Day (2007a) makes that school success is more than narrow operationalized definitions where students' outcomes are measured by standardized tests. As Day (2007b) points out:

> Success includes, but is more than, effectiveness. Whereas the latter (associated with observable behaviors and outcomes which are quantifiable), is always part of the former, the former is not necessarily a part of the latter. In general, we may say that "effectiveness" is associated with instrumental outcomes of students (tests, examination results), whereas success is associated with these in addition to positive personal and social outcomes, well-being, and equity. In others words, success is more all encompassing, more complex to discern than the sets of bullet points, good advice, and other indicators so readily available from the plethora of school effectiveness research, policy documents, and training and development program documentation. (p. 15)

The Ontario provincial government's definition of success includes both effectiveness associated with standardized assessments, and those outcomes that are less easy to document, such as student well-being (Legislative Assembly of Ontario, 2009). In the ministry's document entitled *Growing Success: Assessment, Evaluation, and Reporting in Ontario Schools* (2010), the ministry states that it is "[c]ommitted 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" (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010a, p. 1). Immediately following this statement additional information is provided:

> 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. (p. 1)

It is not surprising that there are various notions of school success at play simultaneously in this document. However, the two approaches mentioned in the quotation above are contradictory to each other. On the one hand, the system encourages students to be "unique" and to pursue their own interests. Yet these very same students are expected to achieve specific curriculum outcomes that need to be fulfilled in order to meet graduation requirements, and these competencies are measured by standardized tests. What happens when some students' uniqueness and interests are not aligned with the provincial curriculum or measured by current assessments?

Even though there are competing and/or complementary notions of school success at play in the *Growing Success* document, some are privileged over others. The current dominant discourse on school success focuses on global economic competitiveness (Lingard & Ozga, 2007). This global competitiveness reaches into schools and classrooms alike; schools compete against one another, while students simultaneously compete against one another within schools. This means that even though other notions of school success do exist, it is those policies and practices that increase performance on standardized tests and accountability systems that dominate. This being the case in Ontario, decisions are made based on these performance measures, and not necessarily on other notions of school success such as serving individual student interests or promoting well-being. For example, one of the three high-priority goals of the Ontario Ministry of Education's *High Levels of Student Achievement* specifically aims "to have 75% of 12-year-olds achieving at the provincial standard (level 3) in reading, writing, and math" (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010b). Schools not achieving level 3 in any of these areas are directed to analyze their EQAO test results to inform their school improvement plan (EQAO, 2005). These improvement plans act as "a roadmap that sets out the changes a school needs to make to improve the level of student achievement, and shows how and when these changes will be made" (Education Improvement Commission, 2000, p. 6). The improvement plans, mainly driven by student performance scores on EQAO tests, determine what is prioritized for boards and individual schools in three areas: curriculum delivery, school environment, and parental

involvement. Within each area, boards and districts will establish the following: a goal statement, performance targets, areas of focus, implementation strategies, indicators of success, time lines, responsibility for implementing strategies, checkpoints for status updates, and opportunities for revisions (Education Improvement Commission, 2000, p. 6). By following this process, decisions will be made in terms of what programs will be implemented, what resources will be utilized, and how funding will be allocated. In a time of increased emphasis on accountability programs and practices based on narrow definitions of success, it is expected that the achievement-based notion of school success will dominate in local school discourse and practice. The question is whether this narrow notion of school success is at the forefront of how the teachers and principal understand school success in the publicly funded Catholic school examined in this study.

Methodology

Any success experienced within a school can be at least partly attributed to the work of its principal. Next to teachers, school leaders have the second-most influence on school-based factors of student learning. The findings reported in this article come from a larger international consortium of researchers studying successful school principals. In an attempt to investigate principals in successful schools, the consortium's inquiry included investigating what school success meant for the principals who participated in the research, and for the educators who worked with these administrators. As mentioned previously, this article focuses on the findings reported around meanings of school success in one particular Catholic school.

International Successful School Principals Project (ISSPP)

The present qualitative case study is a part of a larger research consortium. In 2001, a number of leading researchers in education administration and leadership from around the world came together to form an international project known as the International Successful School Principal Project (ISSPP). Participants included, Ken Leithwood (Canada), Christopher Day (United Kingdom), Olof Johansson (Sweden), and Steve Jacobson (United States). Currently, the ISSPP is the largest and most sustained network of research on successful school leadership. At the time of the ISSPP's inception, little academic research focused specifically on successful principals. The consortium is driven by five

guiding questions, one of them being: Do different countries have different ways of defining school success (University of Oslo, 2010)? This "multi-perspective" research project was designed through a collaborative research approach based on common protocols. A case study analysis was employed to identify the qualities, characteristics, competencies, and other mediating influences of educational leaders who have been successful in primary and secondary schools in different socioeconomic circumstances in 17 participating countries: Australia, Canada, China, Cyprus, Denmark, England, Kenya, Mexico, Norway, Puerto Rico, Portugal, Sweden, South Africa, Turkey, Israel, New Zealand and the United States. To date, over 100 cases have been analyzed, and research continues. Participants collect data and analyze case studies from their smaller international research projects or respective countries, share their findings with the larger project, and then do further comparative analysis. Each member of the consortium is expected to approach their individual studies using the same theoretical framework (Leithwood & Riehl, 2005).

Framework

Four seminal studies in the early 2000s acted as the foundation for the ISSPP research in the areas of leading schools in times of change (Day, Harris, Hadfield, Tolley, & Beresford, 2000), successful school leadership (Gurr, Drysdale, Natale, Ford, Hardy, & Swan, 2003), leadership for school–community partnerships (Kilpatrick, Johns, Mulford, Falk, & Prescott, 2002), and leadership for organizational learning and improved student outcomes (Mulford, Silins, & Leithwood, 2004). The framework was further informed by Leithwood and Riehl's 2005 literature review, in which it was argued that principals in successful schools engage in some common core leadership practices. These practices include setting directions, developing people, developing the organization, and practicing instructional leadership. Each practice includes various subcomponents. Encompassed within setting directions are identifying and articulating a vision, creating shared meanings, creating high-performance expectations, fostering the acceptance of group goals, monitoring organizational performance, and communicating (Leithwood & Riehl, 2005). The second core practice, developing people, includes offering intellectual stimulation, providing individualized support, and providing an appropriate model. The third practice, redesigning the organization, includes strengthening school culture, building collaborative processes, modifying organizational structures, and managing the environment. The final core practice, managing the instructional program,

includes planning and supervising instruction, providing instructional support, monitoring the school's progress, and buffering staff from external demands unrelated to the school's priorities. The findings reported in this article are from one of the Canadian cases.

School Selection

The school selection criteria consisted of the school having received a positive review from its state/province or jurisdiction (particularly with regard to school leadership), having demonstrated improving performance as indicated through some type of standardized testing over a period of five years, and the principal having been acknowledged widely by his/her professional peers as being an effective leader (Day, 2007b). To help with school selection, EQAO test scores for grades 3 and 6 from 2004–2005 to 2007–2008 were considered for elementary schools from one Catholic school district. The school site discussed in this article was chosen from a local Catholic board with which the researcher has an existing research relationship. Potential school sites were considered that demonstrated an overall improvement in student achievement according to EQAO test scores. It should be noted that not every school showed improvement in every score every year. To help narrow the study site, the research officer for the local Catholic Board was contacted to determine which of the principals were widely regarded by their professional peers as being an effective leader, whether the district recognized the principal as successful, whether the principal was still at the school, and how many years he/she had been at their present school site. The potential list of school sites was narrowed as some school principals had moved to different schools, some principals were perceived to be unlikely to participate in the study, and lastly, some principals and school sites were not endorsed by the research officer.

School Site

Holy Spirit Elementary School (pseudonym) is part of the Wedgewood Catholic School Board (pseudonym). The board is situated in southwestern Ontario, and provides public Catholic education across three counties. The school system has 48 elementary and eight secondary schools, providing education for 21,000 students from kindergarten to grade 12 (K–12). Features of the school system include programs for French immersion, concentrated music and arts, as well as adult education. Special education, workplace programs, and Eng-

lish-as-a-Second Language programs are also highlighted. Holy Spirit Elementary school is an urban, Catholic school that serves approximately 400 students in the surrounding community, in grades junior kindergarten to 8. The school features 20 classrooms, a gymnasium, a newly renovated library and computer lab, as well as two outdoor play and sports fields. Most grades have two full classrooms. There are 20 classroom teachers, three French second language (FSL) teachers, two English language learning (ELL) teachers, two music teachers, one student program support teacher (SPST), four educational assistants (EA), as well as a settlement worker, a social worker, and a librarian. There is a full-time principal and a vice-principal; the current principal has been at the school since 2007. Two community-based organizations (an early-years center and an after-hours childcare program) have space in the school and provide support for families within the community.

A Canadian research and educational organization ranks Holy Spirit Elementary school at about 1,300th out of 2,695 Ontario schools in terms of student achievement. Eighty percent of the students are Canadian-born, and an additional 11% of students were born outside of Canada but have been in the country three years or more. Approximately 8% of students are learning English as a second language, and about 6% receive special education services. About 18% of students live in lower-income households, which is slightly higher than the provincial average of 16.5%. In addition, 51% of students have parents who have some university education, which is higher than the Ontario provincial average of 36.9%. The majority of grade 6 students meet or exceed the provincial standard in reading (87%), writing (75%), and math (58%). The provincial average for each subject is 72%, 75%, and 58%, respectively.

Interviews

The researcher specifically asked for interviews with the superintendent, the vice-principal, and the secretary. Because of a low initial response rate, the researcher had to rely on the principal to approach teachers and educational assistants to participate through passing on information letters about the study, and then following-up with staff to see who was interested in participating. Eleven (N=11) 30-40 minute semi-structured interviews were conducted with the superintendent for curriculum, the principal, the vice-principal, the secretary, an educational assistant, classroom teachers within the various grades (K-8), and teachers with special assignments such as English as a second language, for a total of six teachers (meeting the 20% teaching staff requirement for the

study protocol). Because this was an elementary school, students were not interviewed. We tried to gain access to parents, but were unsuccessful.

Interview Protocol

The interview protocols varied somewhat among the principals, teachers, and support staff. The principal interview protocol consisted of 10 guiding questions that focused on his/her beliefs about what school success meant and what practices he/she engaged in to work toward these notions of success. Interview protocols for the teaching staff and support staff (secretary, educational assistants, and custodian) were similar as they were also asked what school success meant for them and whether or not they thought their school was successful. Additional questions focused on specific principal practices. For example, support staff members were asked, "How does your principal contribute to your school's success?" This article focuses specifically on participants' responses to the following questions: "What does school success mean for you?" and "Do you think your school is successful?" As expected, all participants indicated that they believed their school was successful. Interviewees were then asked to define school success using examples from their school site. Participants were also asked, "How do you account for the school's success? What are the factors contributing to its success?"

Data Analysis

Qualitative research methodology was utilized for this study. All interviews were conducted and digitally recorded at the school site and then later transcribed. In this study, responses were analyzed after all interviews were conducted using Lichtman's (2006) "three Cs" process of analysis: codes, categories, and concepts. The general codes were determined by the larger ISSPP research protocol that was driven by research questions such as, Do different countries have different ways of defining success? In order to compare different countries or jurisdictions, it was necessary to determine how success was understood in each location. Therefore, using the qualitative data analysis software Nvivo9, any reference to school success was coded in a large theme, "School Success." The data within this theme was sub-grouped into general categories. Some of these categories came from the literature, and included: collaborative, supportive staff; community support; sound reputation; and student output, while others emerged from the data, including connections to

faith-based education. The categories are described in the findings section of this article. The categories were then connected to the literature on Catholic schooling and explained as concepts in the Discussion section.

Findings

For some, school success can be a straightforward matter: The school either meets provincial mandates, school board missions, and individual school vision statements or it does not. As mentioned earlier, however, success is more complex, and the definition of success is often contested (Moos & Kofod, 2009). This study reveals that, as in other jurisdictions and different local contexts, the notion of school success can be complex in a faith-based school. In attempting to describe what school success meant to them, participants described not only their understanding of school success, but also the levers used to support success, some indicators of success, and in some cases a combination of meaning, levers, and indicators. What was clear from the responses, however, was that all participants believed that school success was more than mere academic achievement on standardized provincial tests. The following represents key themes regarding school success from the interviews.

Success as More than Academics

Students' academic learning as set out by the Ontario provincial curriculum was only mentioned by a few participants, and while it was identified as important (as stated by one classroom teacher: "I think it's also those performance things…does your school do well on the EQAO test and are they following provincial initiatives"), it was not viewed as *the* most important component of participants' definitions of school success. For example, when asked about the meaning of school success, the principal stated:

> I think certainly having children leave elementary school with a good foundation of academic knowledge, but more than that, I think feeling confident about themselves, and proud of their accomplishments, and having some goals in mind for future success and ambitions.

In the above quote, the principal acknowledges that academic achievement is an important component, but also mentions that he believes school success is not limited to student academic achievement. One teacher pointed out that

she did not see school success "so much as marks on provincial standardized testing…high marks on that isn't, to me, a big indicator of school success, although it's one." It was clear from participants' responses that school success included more than student achievement on provincial standardized test scores.

Given the provincial emphasis on a common provincial curriculum and standardized tests, the researcher anticipated that educators would highlight academic results. The current provincial government goal "is to have 75% of 12-year-olds achieving at the provincial standard (level 3) in reading, writing and math" (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010a), and so the researcher thought that teachers would include specific mention of improving reading, writing, math skills, and understanding. But this was not the case; participants understood school success more in terms of student well-being.

Student Well-Being

In this case study, student well-being was conceived of as a goal to be achieved, but it was also understood as a means to improve student learning. Most participants described school success in terms of making a difference in students in some positive way. They referred to creating particular emotions, behaviors, and a safe school environment. The principal captured this sentiment in the following statement:

> We could be doing very well academically on EQAO scores but have miserable kids that hate coming to school, and I want school to be a great place for them, a safe place and a place where they feel loved. And that's the model I try to give and do each day and that's the expectation I have for staff.

In terms of making a difference in students emotionally, a few participants indicated that they felt part of being a successful school included influencing how students felt. When asked what defined school as a successful place, participants used phrases such as "where children like to come," "are happy," "have confidence," or "a fun place to be." One teacher commented that she usually asks: "how they [students] are, are they comfortable? Are they happy? How happy are they with what's happening at the school?"

In addition to describing school success in terms of students' social and emotional well-being, many participants believed that one of the levers to school success included influencing student behavior so that students felt safe

to come to school to learn. From the interviews, there was a sense that teachers worked hard to make the school inviting; goals mentioned included wanting to make the students "feel safe," "want to come," and be "willing to take risks." The vice-principal commented,

> It's going to sound odd. But it's going to be happiness and confidence and risk taking. When the kids are willing to come and share what they've learned, or sometimes what they still don't get...some of them will come up and tell me that [what the student still needs to learn or does not understand]...that's success, that they're willing to share this.

The vice-principal describes in the passage above how creating a safe learning environment in the school allows students to come and share not only what they know, but also what they do not yet understand. Creation of this safe environment occurs with a committed teaching staff.

Committed Teaching Staff

Another lever highlighted in achieving school success was a committed teaching staff. When asked about school success, some teachers went to great lengths to describe how their teaching colleagues were committed, dedicated, and worked collaboratively to make the school successful. For example, one teacher explained that the school was successful because it had good teachers:

> Most of our teachers are very dedicated, and they treat this as more than just a job. They spend a lot more hours then just your nine to three thirty day. They are here really early in the morning. They stay late at night. They dedicate a lot of their weekends...a lot of their time after school coaching. We provide everything; every sport. We don't miss any of the events that take place in our school board. We participate in every intramural. I think we have really, really hard-working teachers in this school.

For this particular teacher, the school achieved success because of the level of commitment and dedication that teachers demonstrated and to the degree that the student body was involved in extracurricular activities. Another teacher described how the positive relationship between the teaching staff and the principal contributed to school success when "staff are on board with the

principal's plan…a staff that really works together as a unit…it feels like we're one solid team." Another teacher explained:

> I see this as a very successful school. I think it's a school that's always open to trying different things and following different initiatives and it's supported as well...there's a culture within the school where people are always looking to improve what they do and kind of share resources and share what they've learned in workshops and try different things.

In addition to the teaching staff working as a solid team, it was clear that the practices of sharing resources and information, and risk-taking were strategies attributed to making the school successful. In addition to referring to the levers that promote school success, interviewees included indicators when describing how they understood school success. One of these indicators was school relations to the broader community.

Community Attitudes toward the School

One indicator participants included in their attempts to define school success was the way in which the community perceived the school. A number of participants indicated that a successful school was a school where families were happy to send their children. One teacher stated: "Families…really feel like their children's lives are enriched because they have been here [at this school]." Another teacher pointed out: "I've been here enough years that I've seen families say, 'I'm really glad my children went to this school.'" Others suggested that another indicator of school success is when parents point out that a school has "got it together" and is a model for other schools. As indicated by the respondents, a perceived positive school image by the public was seen as being an indicator of a successful school.

A Healthy Relationship with God

Participants understood faith-based education as both a lever to help students do the best they can academically *and* as an outcome of faith formation. In terms of promoting Catholicism and living the Catholic faith, one person pointed out that a successful school in the Catholic education system meant students "living their faith." While the vice-principal explained that this was "not something tangible," he suggested it could be witnessed through how faith-based schooling promoted high expectations of living the faith, and

emphasized creating a sense of community based on the Catholic faith. For example, in terms of creating high expectations in living the faith, the secretary commented:

> I think because we practice our faith every day, we practice it in our everyday living: it's out there, our expectation as a Catholic student or a Catholic staff member. We have a certain, high standard, in how we dress, how we act, how we treat each other, just how we live our everyday life and I think that expectation and that belief is out there in how we do everything, and it's the accountability of living our faith that's really who we are, I guess.

In addition to high expectations for a healthy relationship with God through living the Catholic faith, the creation of a strong faith-based community was considered part of supporting individual spiritual growth. One teacher reported:

> I think [Catholic schooling] promotes community because...depending where you live as a teacher you sometimes see those children at church and so it does sort of promote that sense of community...like a larger community outside of the school and it does give you that sort of common...[Catholic] belief system…where you can do instruction on just basic morals and you know exactly what your parameters are because of the Church teaching you can teach that to the students and you can be very consistent in your approach, and I think it allows you to be very consistent as a teacher across the school because you can use that as your guide in how you teach [the Catholic faith]. I do think it really does build community.

In this case, it is clear that the teacher believes that by making connections to the Catholic community, there is some type of consistency for students as they practice their Catholic beliefs both within the school and outside. It was suggested that this connection to community is a part of school success because having a strong community can in turn strengthen a positive learning environment.

Some of the participants thought that faith-based education contributed to academic school success. The secretary expressed that part of living one's Catholic faith includes having high expectations wherein one is expected to

do one's best, both academically and in all other facets of living, each and every decision being guided by Catholic values and beliefs. The vice-principal supported this assertion when she described how faith-based education contributed to school success:

> I think we pass on those expectations to our children, our students, every day and I guess the accountability with them is 'are you doing your best, are you?' And I know that can be, no matter where you are, you can ask that. But, I think, given they will say 'well, what would God do?' or, you know, 'when we read that Bible story, or whatever it was, or that reading, and it showed they were doing their best, are you doing your best?'

For the vice-principal, reading the Bible is not just for faith formation, but is also a time to support and encourage literacy skills and demonstrate a high expectation that students will practice (and learn) literacy skills.

School Success: A Sum of Its Parts

What becomes apparent from this case study and is supported by other researchers is that school success means different things to different people. As one teacher commented:

> I think there are a couple of different ways of thinking about it. It's multi-faceted. You can think of it as just marks...you can look at it in the way of the students...how are they? Are they comfortable? Are they happy? Are they participating in extracurricular activities and the community...how happy are they with what's happening at the school?

Another teacher said: "I think school success is a process. I don't think it is a place to be." At this particular school site, study participants described school success through various definitions, levers, and indicators, and these included not just student learning outcomes as set out by the Ontario provincial government. Other measures of school success mentioned in the interviews included student well-being (which comprises physical, emotional, social, and spiritual well-being), a committed teaching staff, a dedication to Catholic values, and the community's positive attitude towards the school.

Discussion

The study conducted for this paper focused on whether or not narrow achievement priorities from the provincial government dominate local school discourse and practices. Particularly, this study examined how the principal and teachers understand school success in their publicly funded *Catholic* school. The overall notion of success for this school appears to be consistent with the goals of Catholic education that aim for "total student wellness" (Buetow, 1988, p. 93). According to Fusco (2005), the goal of Catholic education is "to encourage students to achieve their potential spiritually, mentally, physically, and emotionally" (p. 91). While there is conflict over how schools demonstrate their Catholicity (Bryk & Driscoll, 1988; Fusco, 2005), these educational goals appear to be rooted in generally shared Catholic values such as:

> Achievement of the maximum point of intelligence, a moral formation to do the will of God, freedom to develop to one's full potential, sensitivity to others, reflection upon meanings, values, and problems, and firm roots with family and bonds with the community. (Buetow [1988] as cited in Fusco 2005, p. 91)

It is clear that participants from this particular school site included Catholic values in their notions of school success. This is not surprising, as the main focus of faith-based schooling *is* faith formation (or else students would attend secular schooling systems).

It is worth restating that the Catholic school in question is publicly funded, and that publicly funded Catholic schools in Ontario have less decision-making power than do privately funded schools, and they are required by legislation to uphold government education policies. Because the school is publicly funded, teachers and administrators experienced pressure to ensure that they were accountable to the public, which meant that they acknowledged a need to ensure that students did well on standardized tests. The data collected indicate that the school demonstrated it was able to balance the public pressure to see success in terms of achievement with the private Catholic pressure to promote faith formation. These pressures were not mutually exclusive. It appears that accountability measures such as demonstrating academic improvement according to the EQAO test scores were subsumed as part of the faith-based

focus of the school.

Based on the data collected, Holy Spirit Elementary also demonstrated a commitment to creating and sustaining a strong connection with the community. This appears to be consistent with Catholic schools. Greeley, McCready, and McCourt (1976) argue: "research demonstrates that it is precisely the 'community-forming' component of Catholic education which makes them effective" (p. 178). The term "community" in this case encompasses both the community within the school walls and outside of the school. It should be noted, however, that the two are not mutually exclusive. Part of the aim in faith-based schooling is teaching and demonstrating/practicing the faith within the school environment. By default, faith-based schools such as Holy Spirit display a greater consistency of values than most public schools. In addition to sharing a coherent set of values, teachers and students of faith-based schools also tend to have relationships that extend beyond the school site and into the greater community (McDermott, 1997; Ontario Institute for Catholic Education, 2011; Walbank, 2012). They tend to be members of church parishes and other organizations affiliated with the Catholic Church. In these cases, "most of the people with whom the students interact in and outside of the school have multiple relationships with multiple stakeholders" (Fusco, 2005, p. 88), reinforcing common values, expectations, behaviors, and practices. Some argue, as one of the participants mentioned above did, that this connection to community can be helpful in creating a successful school. It could also be argued that the inclusion of a positive, supportive teaching staff as part of the notion of school success comes from the Catholic notion of schools being a community, in the sense that Catholic schools are grounded in the "shared understandings about what students should learn and how students and adults should behave" (Fusco, 2005, p. 90).

Participants in this case study did not indicate a connection between community and parent involvement and student achievement. Initially, the researcher anticipated that teachers would refer to the recent push by the provincial government to increase parent engagement as a means to enhance student achievement (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2011). However, this proved not to be the case. Holy Spirit was involved in parent and community engagement for slightly different reasons; educators saw the value in making connections to the larger community simply as part of their Catholic mandate.

Conclusion

Is the complex notion of school success expressed by the teachers and administrators at Holy Spirit unique? As stated earlier, school success has been defined elsewhere more broadly than improvement on standardized tests, indicating that the data collected in this case study are not necessarily exceptional. What is important to examine in every case, however, is how these notions and understandings of school success play out for teachers and principals at the individual school sites. It appears as though most principals and teachers define school success broadly, but do so with an understanding that occurs within an accountability framework where test scores matter, as they do in the current educational climate. In the case of Holy Spirit, striving to possess and foster a distinctly Catholic, faith-based school environment seemingly influences the values espoused, as well as what is expected of teachers, the role of the principal, what curriculum is delivered, and how it is delivered. In reality, it is naïve to think that school success can be whittled down to some simplistic operational definition. Schools are multifaceted organizations where very complex social processes take place. How one defines school success is dependent on a number of influences such as the aims of the local school site, school board mandates, and purposes of schooling, for example. There is a need to interrogate what is meant by school success because the ways in which educators and principals perceive school success influences how they engage in their work, and this has implications for current and future policy initiatives.

While similar findings have been reported in other ISSPP case studies in countries such as Norway, Australia, and the United States, it appears that the findings were interpreted differently. For example, in this case, participants could be perceived as understanding school success in three ways: as a definition, through levers, and from indicators. School success was defined as academic success (but not *just* academic success), student well-being, and faith formation. Strategies or levers used to work toward these goals included teacher collaboration, practicing Catholic values, and making connections to the Catholic community. Ways in which participants recognized that these goals were being achieved included: seeing children participate in faith formation activities such as prayer, communion, confirmation, etc.; being happy and taking risks; and parents making positive comments about the school. As mentioned earlier, Drysdale, Goode, and Gurr (2009) reported similar findings in their case studies and interpreted them as a set of criteria: “development of a clearly defined philosophy; collaborative, happy, committed staff; positive

and rich learning environment for the children; community support; and a sound reputation in the community" (p. 701). One wonders if these criteria of school success could be more appropriately described as definitions, levers, and indicators?

In closing, current state-mandated notions of success—to teach students skills that can be used to contribute to the economy by enabling them to enter the workforce when they graduate—so pervasive in this day and age reflect a narrow view of the purpose of public schooling. But it is only one way of understanding what the business of schools should be. The problem with prioritizing this view is that other important understandings of school success will receive less attention and support. Critical thinking, citizenship, spirituality, emotional development, artistic skills, personal well-being, for example, all take a backseat to efforts to prepare students to enter the world of work. Ironically, it may well be some of these latter skills and abilities that enable students to handle the increasing complexity in what awaits them in the current knowledge economy (Hargreaves, 2003).

Most private schools tend to have more freedom to determine their educational focus than public schools. These institutions are generally not bound to public policies that favor narrowly defined school purposes. But it is not always easy for private schools to raise money in this day and age. And so in an increasingly competitive environment private schools may welcome financial assistance from such sources as vouchers and tax credits. The problem with accepting public money, however, is that private schools may well have to compromise their control over what happens in their schools. They may have little choice but to accommodate public accountability protocols. It remains to be seen whether private schools that accept this assistance will be able to sustain their unique missions, and in the case of Catholic schools, whether this public assistance will affect their ability to maintain their Catholic missions.

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