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Listening to the Student Voice: Understanding the school-related factors that limit student success
Écouter la voix de l'élève : comprendre les facteurs scolaires limitant le succès de l'élève

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Article abstract

Literature on social inequalities in schooling reveals that the school curriculum, streaming, and teacher expectations are school-related factors that limit student success. This study asks: How do the school curriculum, streaming and teacher expectations limit students who have been designated "at risk" from finding success in school? Quantitative and qualitative data showed that the curriculum does not meet all students' needs, streaming diminishes learning, and low teacher expectations limit student success. Student self-blame and meritocracy are other factors found to limit student success.

LISTENING TO THE STUDENT VOICE: UNDERSTANDING THE SCHOOL-RELATED FACTORS THAT LIMIT STUDENT SUCCESS

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ABSTRACT. Literature on social inequalities in schooling reveals that the school curriculum, streaming, and teacher expectations are school-related factors that limit student success. This study asks: How do the school curriculum, streaming and teacher expectations limit students who have been designated "at risk" from finding success in school? Quantitative and qualitative data showed that the curriculum does not meet all students' needs, streaming diminishes learning, and low teacher expectations limit student success. Student self-blame and meritocracy are other factors found to limit student success.

ÉCOUTER LA VOIX DE L'ÉLÈVE : COMPRENDRE LES FACTEURS SCOLAIRES LIMITANT LE SUCCÈS DE L'ÉLÈVE

RÉSUMÉ. La littérature traitant des inégalités sociales à l'école révèle que les programmes scolaires, la répartition des élèves par niveaux et les attentes des enseignants constituent des facteurs scolaires limitant le succès des élèves. Cette étude pose donc comme question : de quelle manière les programmes, la répartition des élèves par niveaux et les attentes des enseignants empêchent-ils les élèves ayant été désignés comme « à risque » dans leur succès en milieu scolaire? Les données quantitatives et qualitatives montrent que les programmes ne rencontrent les besoins de tous les élèves, que la répartition des élèves par niveaux diminue les apprentissages et que des attentes basses de l'enseignant limitent le succès à l'école. Le sentiment de culpabilité de l'élève et la méritocratie sont d'autres facteurs relevés comme limitant le succès des élèves.

In Canada and many other countries, student disengagement has been recognized as a problem since the turn of the twentieth century. Here in Ontario, Canada, reviews of public education including the Hope Commission in 1950, the Hall-Dennis Report of 1968, the Secondary Education Review Project in 1982 (Green, 1982), the Radwanski Report of 1987, the Royal Commission of Learning in 1995, and the Double Cohort Study by Dr. Alan King (2004) have acknowledged the problem of student disengagement. Radwanski's report

(1987), for example, concluded that the education system had become irrelevant, students lacked appropriate skills and knowledge for today's economy, and that many students were uninterested in what they were being taught at school. King (2004) found that only fifty percent of high school students go to university or college while the remaining fifty percent of students enter the work force with or without an Ontario Secondary School Diploma. Schooling has been reported again and again to not be meeting the needs of all students. This is because:

1. The school curriculum is insufficiently comprehensive for many of today's learners. It is predominantly an academic curriculum for the minority of students who are university bound. Students who feel that the curriculum is not relevant to their lives are more inclined to disengage in school (Allensworth & Easton, 2007; Bridgeland, Dilulio, Morison, 2006; Hammond, Linton, Smink & Drew, 2007; King, 2004);

2. Streaming (or ability grouping) of students has been associated with many negative effects in schooling and is often to the detriment of students who are placed in the lower streams (Curtis, Livingston & Smaller, 1992; Gamoran, Nystrand, Berends, & LePore, 1993; Mac Iver & Mac Iver, 2009; Oakes, 2004);

3. Teacher expectations limit student success in school. Lowered expectations of students in the "lower" (applied) stream by teachers and administration often lead to lack of encouragement and diminish the likelihood of these students from finding success in school (Croninger & Lee, 2001; Dei, Mazzuca, McIsaac, & Zine, 1997; Good & Brophy, 2000; Lyche, 2010).

Stemming from the research on social inequalities in school, this study asks: how do the school curriculum, streaming, and teacher expectations limit students in the applied streams who have been designated "at-risk" from finding success in school? This study's objective is to gain an initial understanding of students' perceptions and attitudes about the factors that influence their success (credit achievement) at school.

OVERVIEW OF THE STUDY

This study grew out of my work as an educator who teaches students who are disengaged in school and who have not experienced success. I was specifically interested in hearing the voices of the students who have been labeled as "at-risk" by the school they attend. At-risk students are students who are struggling in school and are at risk of not graduating from high school. They match one or more of the following criteria: failed two or more classes in a semester, have behaviour problems, or have been classified by a teacher as students who have and/or are currently struggling to find success within school. These students were generally found in the applied stream in secondary school.

Both quantitative and qualitative research was carried out for this study. First, a survey was made available to all one hundred and seven of the at-risk candidates at one high school, in Ontario, Canada during the 2007-2008 school year. Sixty-one students completed the survey. Both open- and close-ended questions were asked in the survey to gain an understanding of how the curriculum, streaming, and teacher expectations affected their success in school. Second, semi-structured interviews were conducted with four at-risk students. The participants that were chosen reflected different backgrounds (e.g. race, gender, age, and socio-economic status) and different success rates in school. These four students were also asked questions about how the curriculum, streaming, and teacher expectations affected their success, or lack thereof, in school.

The theoretical framework that this study was situated in is critical theory, or what is also known as critical pedagogy. Critical theory seeks human emancipation, "to liberate human beings from the circumstances that enslave them" (Horkheimer, 1982, p. 244). Critical theorists ask *whose* knowledge it is that students learn and *why* it is organized and taught in a particular way. Critical pedagogy takes this a step further to consider how education can provide individuals with the "tools to better themselves and strengthen democracy, to create a more egalitarian and just society, and thus to employ education in a process of progressive social change" (Kellner, 2000, p. 3). Critical pedagogy is also an educational approach that attempts to help students question authority and to challenge the beliefs and practices that prevail, such as meritocracy. Meritocracy is founded on the belief (or rather myth) that success and progress in society is based on ability and talent rather than on class privilege or wealth. By calling attention to the inequalities that exist in the educational system, critical pedagogy theorists and educators hope to eliminate them.

This study is relevant within the current educational focus on school reform. Both provincially and internationally there is an aim to increase the success of all students in secondary school. While the voices of policy makers and educators are often heard in this process, the voices of students are often disregarded. Perhaps listening to the voices of those students who have not found success in school may shed new light on this topic.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In Canada and the US, the curriculum to a large extent has been and continues to be an academic, university preparation curriculum (Montgomery, Allensworth & Correa, 2010; Royal Commission on Learning, 1995). Schools have traditionally operated in what Durkheim (1977) called the conservation of the past. While there are many different realms of knowledge in this world, only a certain portion is selected for the school curriculum. Through learning the formal school corpus, students realize that their familial knowledge corresponds

or does not correspond to school knowledge. For many students, what the school considers legitimate knowledge bears little resemblance to the actual life of their parents, friends and their part-time jobs (Apple & Beyer, 1983). Furthermore, within these university preparation curricula, there traditionally has been little room for the student to construct, create, and actively inquire (Cohen, 1990; Dewey, 1959; Smith & O'Day, 1990). Schools have rarely acknowledged the educational research that supports the fact that people learn best when they can build on their experiences (Darling-Hammond, 2005). Schools also have not often acknowledged that student choice has been found to be a critical ingredient in student engagement. Findings from the Chicago Public Schools found that the relevance of classroom instruction to their perceived future was key to students staying in school (Allensworth & Easton, 2007). Relevant education leads to student engagement and motivation, which keeps students in school (Bridgeland et al., 2006). Making school more relevant and interesting keeps students engaged, it increases their attendance, and the likelihood of them staying engaged in school (Hammond et al., 2007).

Streaming is a second factor that leads to student disengagement in school. Streaming is a process that is based on the assumption that students learn better when they are grouped with other students with similar academic ability. Streaming is also based on the assumption that grouping students based on intellectual ability enables students to have positive attitudes about themselves and school. While streaming and the assumptions that it is based on may seem logical, research evidence does not support this practice. Instead, research has found that streaming largely perpetuates social inequalities, which affects how students perform in school (Curtis, Livingstone, & Smaller, 1992; Mac Iver & Mac Iver, 2009; Oakes, 2004).

Research literature addresses many negative outcomes of streaming. The first negative effect of streaming is the undesirable peer structures created in low-track classes. This leads to discouragement and alienation, and it creates disengaged learning environments for students in the lower streams (Curtis, Livingtone, & Smaller, 1992; Gamoran et al., 1995; Mac Iver & Mac Iver, 2009). The second negative effect is that streams tend to be permanent. Research shows that there is little movement from one track to another once initial assignments have been made and the movement that does occur tends to be downward (Oakes, 2004). The third negative effect of streaming is that students in the different streams receive different curricula. Researchers (Good and Brophy, 2000; Oakes, 2004) found that teachers in the lower streams focus on simple memory tasks, comprehension, and basic literacy skills. The fourth negative effect of streaming is that classroom environments tend to vary between streams. Applied classes are more likely to provide little choice and emphasize student conformity: students getting along with one another, working quietly, improving study habits, and conforming to classroom rules and expectations, all of which often lead to a negative school experience (Oakes,

2004; Ramsey, 1989). The final negative effect of streaming is teacher attitude and expectation. This will be discussed in greater detail below.

Teacher expectations, while recognized as an important aspect of education, are often overlooked as an integral component of why students do or do not find success in school (Good & Brophy, 2000). Teachers' expectations are "inferences that teachers make about the future behaviour or academic achievement of their students, based on what they know about these students now" (Good & Brophy, 2000, p. 116). In teachers' everyday interactions with students, they are guided by their beliefs about what students need and how students will respond to certain types of treatment.

Teacher expectations and behaviours can be positive and affect student achievement. Allensworth and Easton (2007) found that students' course performance was related to student relationships with teachers. Students are less likely to be disengaged with school where they experience high levels of trust for their teachers; feel teachers are helpful and motivating, and provide personal support to them. When students feel they are cared about, are treated fairly and with respect, they experience more success in, and are more satisfied with school (Croninger & Lee, 2001; Hammond et al., 2007; Radwanski, 1987). However, students who leave high school prior to graduation often cite a lack of social and academic support as one reason for doing so. They do not feel a sense of belonging in school; feel disconnected from teachers; and sometimes complain that their teachers do not care about them, are not interested in how well they do in school, and are unwilling to help with the problem (Croninger & Lee, 2001; Sinclar, Christenson, Lehr, & Anderson, 2003). Students who experience low teacher expectations may internalize negative perceptions of themselves and self-blame for their performance in school. Self-blame attributions include poor motivational orientations, lower levels of self-worth, and lower ratings of importance of academic success, scholastic competence and hopefulness (Johnson, 1993; Simon, 1991).

In summary, this study asks: how do the school curriculum, streaming and teacher expectations limit students in the applied streams who have been designated "at-risk" from finding success in school? The review of the literature indicates that school curricula limit student engagement as they are not relevant to many students' lives. Streaming is a detriment to many students as it has been found to create undesirable peer structures in low-track classes, permanence within streams, requires less intelligence, and fosters lower teacher attitude and expectation. Lastly, teacher expectations are found to limit student success in school. While positive expectations are noted to be effective in enhancing student success, caring relationships and high teacher expectations are less likely to occur in low-ability classes. In return, students often internalize negative perceptions of themselves and self-blame for their lack of success in school.

METHODOLOGY

This study took place during the 2007-2008 school year in a mid-size secondary school in Ontario, Canada. Westview High School (a pseudonym) has an enrollment of approximately eight hundred and fifty students and is located in an urban environment in southwestern Ontario. The school is located in an upper class neighbourhood, although Westview High School's geographic boundary includes all socio-economic backgrounds.

Both quantitative and qualitative research was conducted. Quantitative studies survey a sample of the population to grasp a broader perspective while qualitative research allows the researcher to have close contact with participants in order to give a voice to their feelings and perceptions. This was seen as important as both research methods help to provide a holistic picture of why students do not find success in school. The combination of methods also strengthens data dependability and transferability.

All participants in the study were classified as at-risk by Westview High School administration. Some of the at-risk students are in the credit recovery program. This program helps students earn the credits they have previously failed to achieve, while developing the learning skills needed for academic success.

Participants were informed of the study by Westview High School's administration, who were fully supportive of the study. Details of the study were outlined in the letter of information and participants were asked to read the informed consent letter. At this time, the students had the opportunity to have any questions answered. They were also asked to take the consent letter home to be signed by their parents/guardians and to return the signed consent letter. The survey took place two days later. Only those sixty-one students who had their consent letter signed participated in the survey. The students who participated in the semi-structured qualitative interviews were recruited with the same courtesies as those who participated in the survey; they attended the information session and were requested to return the consent letter. However, their recruitment was slightly different. They were asked individually by me if they would be willing to participate in the study after the consent forms were returned. Upon agreement, I arranged an interview time that was mutually convenient. These students were chosen from a variety of backgrounds, gender, grades, socio-economic status, and present success in school to ensure purposeful sampling.

The survey contained thirty-two open and close-ended questions in order to gain an understanding of how the curriculum, streaming, and teacher expectations affect their success in school. The program-wide questionnaire was administered to reflect general trends, support the qualitative research findings, and provide a wider understanding of student success issues. Survey data were analyzed using an Excel spreadsheet. The semi-structured interviews were conducted with four at-risk students. The interviews consisted of twenty-eight questions

with the intent of gaining an understanding of how the curriculum, streaming and teacher expectations affect their success in school. The participants that were chosen reflected different backgrounds (race, gender, age, and socio-economic status) and different success rates in school. One student was finding success in school, (i.e. passing all courses), two were continuing to struggle to obtain all their credits each semester, and one left school as the study commenced. The interviews took place at an appointed time that met with approval of the students. All the interviews were transcribed verbatim, coded according to a priori and emergent codes, and analyzed using MAXqda2 computer software.

DATA ANLYSIS / FINDINGS

Survey participants were asked to state their demographic information. Approximately one-third of the sixty-one survey participants were fourteen years of age, one-third were fifteen years of age, and the remaining third were sixteen years or older. Almost three-quarters (69%) were in grade nine. Almost two-thirds (61%) of the respondents were female. Seventy percent of the student participants in this study took all their courses in the applied stream; thirty percent took some academic courses in addition to the applied courses. All students in this study were struggling academically in school.

There were four participants in the semi-structured interviews, all of whom were taking applied level courses. The first interview participant was Lisa (pseudonyms are used for all participants). Lisa was a 16 year old female in grade 10. She was a strong, outspoken student who had a great sense of humour and laughed a lot. She was barely obtaining her credits in school.

The second interview participant was Steven. Steven was a 17 year old male in grade 11. He was a kind, friendly student who clearly knew what he must do to be successful, yet he was failing many of his classes in school.

The third interview participant was Joe. Joe was a 16 year old male in grade 11. Joe was very open and honest in describing his family life, which was filled with violence and illegal activity. Joe was a kind-hearted individual who wanted to do well in school, but found his personal life distracting. He was failing all his courses.

Interview participant four was Sarah. Sarah was a 16 year old female in grade 11. Sarah was a kind, positive student who sincerely wanted to do well in school. While she struggled to find success in school after the death of her mother, she was presently passing all her classes with her marks ranging from 60% to 80%.

School curriculum

Questions regarding the school curriculum were asked first. Participants were asked if they found the curriculum interesting, reflected their interests, and relevant to their present life and future career. 33% of the survey participants stated that they were interested in what they were learning in class. The activities that reflect their interests included media arts, basketball, reading and hands on activities. Due to the class not being particularly interesting, the majority of the survey participants (59%) stated that the effort they put into school consists of listening to the teacher. Less than half (40%) stated that they complete their assignments, and 31% stated that they participate in course discussions.

All four interviewees felt that their courses were interesting sometimes, but their interest was directly related to the information that they could use in their lives and future career. For example, Lisa stated that her classes were only a "little bit" interesting because, she felt that "some of the things are stupid, you're just never going to use them again." I don't plan on measuring angles in my life," she added. While she did understand how math was valuable for her cashier job and basic everyday duties, she found other tasks uninteresting and unrelated to her interests.

Participants were also asked if their classes were worthwhile to their future or present lives. Only half (48%) of the participants thought what they learned in school will be worthwhile to their future. However, 41% of the survey participants felt that school is one of the most important things in their life, while the same percentage of participants stated that most of the time they would like to be anywhere else than school. The reasons listed by the survey participants that make a class worthwhile included: the class or the teacher being fun and/or interesting, and class being relevant to their everyday lives/future. Two interview participants also stated that they felt teachers had a large impact on the interest level of the class. Sarah claimed that "if a teacher is sitting there droning out the same things and you try to ask for help and they still explain it in the same way they just did," class is not interesting.

The last question regarding the school curriculum was whether the information students learned in school was relevant to their everyday life. The majority (67%) of survey participants stated that they used it only sometimes or never at all. All four interview participants also stated that they rarely, if at all, used the information learned at school in their everyday lives. Lisa stated that she only used math in her cashier job, and Joe stated that he used woodworking and science for his hobbies. However, Joe, while occasionally using school information for his hobbies, lacked the understanding of how school knowledge would help him when confronting non-school related issues in his personal life, such as having to deal with "the crackheads in the neighbourhood [because] once they figure out you are not home they will

go break in your house". He did not feel school prepared him for what he confronted in his every-day life.

Streaming

Streaming is the practice in education of placing students into groups or classes based on their perceived abilities, talents, or previous achievement. In the survey, students were asked who choose their stream, their beliefs about changing streams, and their future options based on streaming. 80% of the survey participants stated that they chose their stream, although 28% of these participants stated that they decided with a parent, teacher or guidance counselor. All interview participants stated that guidance counselors and parents chose their stream, although half of them felt that they were part of the decision.

Participants were asked if they felt they had the ability to change streams. 87% of the survey participants and three interview participants stated they believed they could change streams in at least some of their courses, even though they knew that more work would be required. Yet, according to these interviewees, putting more effort into school is not desired. For example, Steven stated that if he was put into academic classes he would "fail automatically right there, cause, [he] just [does not] do work. So [he] just takes applied [courses].... It is easier, not a lot of work." Lisa reiterated this when she stated that she felt that students choose applied classes "because kids just do not care... they just get by, just under the bar, and that's it." Lisa felt that while students could do better, they did not have an interest in doing so.

While most of the students in the applied stream believed they could change streams, approximately two-thirds (65%) of survey participants and all interview participants stated that being in the applied stream gave them fewer future options some or all of the time. As Steven stated:

> Applied level students can't decide between university or college, they have to go to college. You can't decide what you want to be; you're basically told you have to do this stuff or that, that's all that's offered here.

Sarah agreed that applied classes have fewer options, but stated she was taking applied classes because:

> I was doing a lot of bad things at the time...I was drinking and doing drugs and I just didn't care about anything...I was really depressed because my mom had passed away and I just didn't know what to do with myself.

Sarah felt that her choice, even though it would give her fewer options, was self-imposed. She blamed herself for failing courses and not working hard enough to be placed in the academic stream.

Students were also asked if applied classes have more behavioural problems than academic classes. The majority of the survey participants (61%) stated that

there are more behaviour problems, at least some of the time. Three out of four interview participants agreed. Lisa addressed this issue when she stated:

> Some applied students like to misbehave and stuff so they take applied because it is easier. You learn what you need to know but it's learned easier and quicker... If you're put in an academic class, it's constantly learning and learning and learning. So [applied students] are just there trying to take the easy way out because they'd rather like to skip school or not be in class or try to do nothing. And when they think this is too easy, they start misbehaving.

Lisa felt that due to the lack of difficulty in school-work, behavioural problems erupt in the applied classes. Joe believed that there are more behaviour problems in applied versus academic classes because teachers expect applied students to misbehave:

> ...a lot of the kids in applied classes are more hyper. They are used to being told that they're bad. Like I know if I am told I am bad and shit I am purposely going to turn around and be bad. I do it just like if someone tells me I'm being bad I am going to purposely do it just to piss them off.

Joe believed that when teachers assume there will be more behavioural problems in applied classes, applied students will meet that expectation. Further findings about teacher expectations are addressed next.

Teacher expectations

Students were first asked if they felt that their teachers had high expectations of them. Almost all survey participants (92%) and three of the four interviewees felt that teachers either had high expectations all or some of the time, and that this made a difference. As Sarah stated:

> ...if there is somebody going "I know you can do this" you are going to be like "ya I can do this" but if there are teachers staring at you and you are like "I can't do this" and they never put the encouragement into you that you can, you are not going to.

She believed, like many others, that there were teachers who had high expectations of her. Furthermore, when students were asked in an open-ended question why they did not pass their classes, almost 85% of the participants referred to self-imposed reasons: not handing in all their work, having failed an exam or having been absent from the exam, not paying attention, and being absent from school. Interview participants stated they failed because they are either lazy, do not listen, or are misbehaving, so they do not feel that a teacher would believe in them given their own behaviour. Only 20% believed that failing a course had anything to do with a teacher or a teacher's expectation.

Nevertheless, while the majority of participants believe teachers have high expectations and their lack of success is self-inflicted, 83% of the survey participants believe that teachers have higher expectations of academic students

than applied students at least some of the time. Seventy percent and all interview participants also felt there was unequal treatment between applied and academic students. The reasons given were: academic students have more freedom, they receive more respect and higher expectations from teachers, teachers talk to applied students like they are "stupid" compared to the academic students, teachers ask applied students less challenging questions in class, or teachers ignore applied students completely when they are speaking. Interview participants also felt that teachers are more respectful to academic students, they are nicer to them and they treat academic students as though they are superior.

DISCUSSION

In analyzing the data pertaining to the school curriculum, streaming and teacher expectations, a number of themes arose. First, the curriculum was uninteresting to the majority (66%) of the students in this study. The few school related activities that they claimed reflected their interests included media arts, basketball, reading, and hands-on activities. Over half (52%) found the school curriculum irrelevant to their future lives, and 67% stated that they used school knowledge only some of the time or not at all in their present life. While 41% of the survey participants felt that school is one of the most important things in their life, the same percentage of participants stated that most of the time they would like to be anywhere else than school. Simply put, school is not interesting or relevant to their lives. These findings are not new. Numerous reviews of public education, including the Radwanski Report of 1987 and the Dr. Alan King Study of 2004, have acknowledged this problem that the school system is not meeting the needs or interests or is relevant in the lives of at least half of the student population in Ontario. This appears to be true in this study as well.

Second, as indicated in the literature and as illustrated in this study, low stream classes had more behavioural problems, a negative classroom atmosphere, and low motivation. For example, 61% of the surveyed students and three of the interviewees stated that there are more behaviour problems in applied courses as compared to academic classes. 87% of the survey participants and three interview participants stated they could change streams in at least some of their courses, but putting more effort into school is not desired "because kids just do not care... they just get by, just under the bar, and that's it" (Lisa). The literature on this topic reports similar findings. Due to the classroom climate, low academic stream students often have lowered self expectations where students are often frustrated and play a disruptive role and where teachers have preconceived ideas and expectations of students (Antonelli, 2004; Oakes, 2004; Rosenthal, 1991). The data from this research study supported this finding with Joe's statement that applied students are regularly told that they're bad, and with this expectation they often purposely try to be bad. He believed, as

the research suggests, that there are more behaviour problems in low stream classes because teachers expect these students to misbehave.

Third, teacher expectations played a role in the success of students in this study. While 92% and three interviewees believed that teachers had high expectations of them all or some of the time, 83% believed teachers had higher expectations of academic students by giving them more respect, more attention, and more challenging work. Teachers typically teach both applied and academic students, which is why this finding is particularly significant - the students see the teachers' expectations change depending on the students they teach. While there is research on the differential treatment of students and the impact this has on student academic success (Mac Iver & Mac Iver, 2009; Oakes, 2004), Babad (1993) found that teachers are generally unaware of the negative messages communicated to students. Teachers tend to believe that they are emotionally supportive of low-achieving students. Yet, teachers, although concerned about their students, are not optimistic about their futures. Many teachers are more concerned with monitoring student work and behaviour rather than creating a community with a broad range of activity (Good & Brophy, 2000). This often leads to a lack of a sense of belonging and often a lack of success in school (Croninger & Lee, 2001; Sinclar et al., 2003).

Fourth, it is important to note that while the majority of the study participants found the curriculum uninteresting and not relevant to their lives most of the time, many blamed themselves for their failure in school. They believed (85%) that they were to blame for not handing in all their work, not paying attention, and being absent from school, and generally not finding success in school. The majority also blamed themselves for picking their stream (80%), despite the belief they could change streams in at least some of their courses (87%), and despite believing the applied stream would give them fewer options for their future (65%). They even stated that they chose the applied stream, despite feeling that teachers believe in academic students more (83%) and treat academic students more fairly (70%). Yet, few (20%) blamed teachers, the curriculum, or any other school-related factors at all. Eighty percent of students surveyed and all interviewees blamed no one but themselves for their lack of success in school. With this belief, it would seem that these students reflect consistent trait-like attributions of self-blame. As indicated above, self-blame attributions include poor motivational orientations and lower ratings of academic success (Johnson, 1993; Simon 1991). In this study, students also displayed poor motivation and low academic success, despite believing that they could do better and that the choices they were currently making would offer fewer future options.

However, while self-blame seems to play a role in the students' lack of success, it may not be the only or true culprit here. The idea of meritocracy or the belief that success is based on talent and ability and not on social class or

wealth may be a more significant factor. Students, often unaware, internalize the school and school system. These students do not question whose knowledge they learn or why schooling is organized and taught in a particular way. The inequalities that exist in the school system are not addressed or even recognized. Instead, students believe that success is based on talent and ability and that they are to blame for their choices and their success or lack of success in school. Yet, the way the school system is organized, many choices may have already been made for them. For example, the school curriculum does not reflect many interests or future career of at-risk students, who typically have low socio-economic status. The school system is organized into streams, and with teachers' lowered expectations of low stream students, students behave and are streamed into courses that often seems like a natural choice - especially if they blame themselves when they do not illustrate the necessary work ethic, talent or ability. Within the low stream school environment, typically characterized by lowered expectations, negative classroom atmosphere, student behavioural problems, and low student motivation, many at-risk students do not find success in school. Yet, rather than seeing or understanding the barriers that are hindering their success in school, students blame themselves. Students are not given the tools, awareness or voice to question authority and challenge the beliefs and practices that prevail, as critical pedagogy aims to do. Instead, fueled by low self-concept, many students in this study seem to have bought into the idea of meritocracy and blame themselves for their lack of academic success.

CONCLUSION

In summary, the school curriculum is not relevant or interesting to at-risk students' lives. Streaming creates negative classroom environments with many behavioural problems and lower student motivation. Teacher expectations, while key to student success, were perceived to be much higher for high stream students than low stream students. Student self-blame and meritocracy are other factors found to limit student success in school. As indicated above, these findings are not new. Five decades of educational research has proven again and again the barriers to student success (Rumberger 1987; Sinclair et al., 2003). Yet little change has occurred in schools. The curriculum, streaming, and teachers expectations largely remain unchanged.

However, perhaps through the critical pedagogy approach, which was the conceptual lens for this study, schools can work to eliminate inequalities in the school system. In order to do this, schools and educators need to discard old assumptions about how students experience secondary school. There is a need to view the students' educational experience as evolving both within and outside of the school. Such a perspective suggests that schools start with what students know and use, and to celebrate this knowledge by building upon it with diverse educational experiences. A deep restructuring that draws up a

vision where all human potential flourishes within a positive social environment can occur. The kinds of changes that are needed will take place only when we begin to view the school as a complex system in which every decision has long-term implications. This, I realize, will take many years to unfold. Nevertheless, I believe that with time and dedicated purpose it is possible.

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