RESEARCH
BRIEF

Student Success

STUDENT SUCCESS

There is no one accepted definition of student success, since what is means to be successful looks different according to every context. Therefore, how we, as teachers, parents, researchers, society at large define success for our students drastically impacts how they go about schooling. In other words, is student success receiving good grades? Going to university? Feeling fulfilled? Answering these questions for each school context should determine how success is defined and then measured. The problem is that what is deemed to be successful and how we measure that success are often at odds with what we indicate to be the purpose of school and learning.
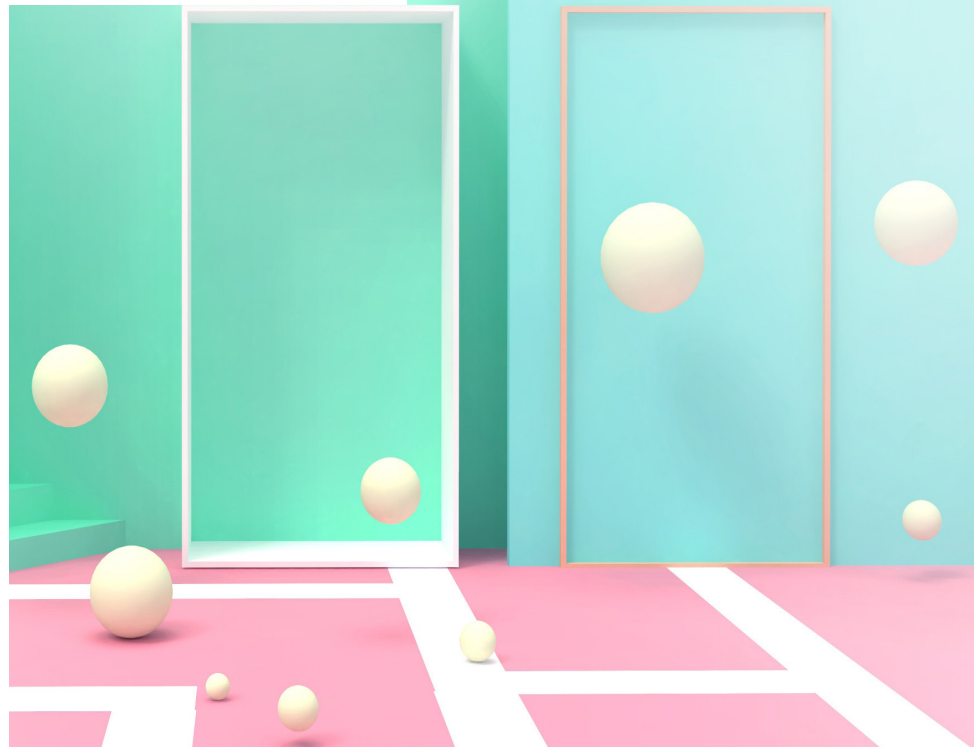
FOR EXAMPLE

IF the purpose of schooling is to foster the development of students as active citizens **THEN** success is students who become active citizens. **HOW** do we measure that? It is not an easy answer, but it is not necessarily with a standardized exam.

IF the purpose of schooling is to foster academic achievement **THEN** success is students who demonstrate academic achievement. **HOW** do we measure that? By grading student work, student engagement in academic tasks etc.

As such, we must clearly define what the purpose(s) of schooling is for our contexts and choose measurements of success in alignment with those goals.

It is important to note that academic success is perhaps the easiest area of success to measure since it is easily quantifiable (i.e. grades, graduation rates etc.). However that does not mean that it should necessarily be the only way a student is deemed to be successful. Indeed, simply focusing on academic success can undermine many of the other important ways a student can be successful. Especially when we as educators often have the achievement of personal success as one of our goals for our students.

Since student success has many different meanings, below are just some of the areas in which a student can achieve/demonstrate success:

ACADEMIC SUCCESS
- Grades
- Scores on standardized exams
- Honour rolls
- Enrolment in post-secondary institutions
- Degree attainment
- Student engagement

PERSONAL SUCCESS
- An appreciation for human differences
- Commitment to democratic values
- A capacity to work effectively with people from different backgrounds to solve problems
- Information literacy
- A well-developed sense of identity
- Becoming proficient in writing and speaking Critical thinking
- Scientific literacy
- Self-awareness
- Confidence
- Self-worth
- Social competence
- Sense of purpose
- Becoming a self-directed lifelong learner
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PROFESSIONAL SUCCESS
- Employment income
- Job stability
- Job satisfaction
- Opportunities for advancement

1   AACU 2005; Baxter Magolda, 2004a; Hossler, Schmit, & Vesper, 1999; Kuh 2001, 2003; Pascarella & Terenzini 2005; Strauss & Volkwein 2002; Venezi et al. 2005

HOW DO STUDENTS ACHIEVE SUCCESS?

Another important element of student success is related to how we expect students to achieve success. Two commonly held beliefs about attaining success are that we achieve it through talent/intelligence and/or effort/hard work:

1 Success-through-intelligence illustrates the widely held belief that different people have different levels of intelligence and that the more intelligence a student has, the greater success they can have in school.

2 Success-through-effort implies the harder people try, the more success they can achieve. The onus of responsibility rests on the individual student: they must be motivated enough to put forth the necessary level of effort, which is a feature of the individual's character. Success-through-effort suggests that hard work can compensate for limits to intelligence, barring any serious mental disability. According to this logic, people with higher intelligence need to put forth less effort than do people with lower intelligence.[2]

What these two paths to success fail to address however are a) intelligence is not static, it changes over time;[3] b) effort is often not enough to overcome systemic barriers and inequities[4] and; c) success and motivation for success are intertwined and subject to many outward influences such as family life and friends.[5]

2   Nunn, 2014
3   Marchesi & Cook, 2012; Rinaldi & Karmiloff-Smith, 2017
4   McPherson, 2020; Milner IV, 2013
5   Bandura, 1995; Shernoff, 2013

WHY IS STUDENT SUCCESS IMPORTANT?

As educational stakeholders it is important to clearly define what we mean by student success since it will have lasting impacts on students self-determination of success and self-worth.[6] If we tell students their success is linked to their grades and then ignore the systemic barriers inhibiting their attainment of those grades then we are setting them up for failure and low self-worth.[7] Furthermore, if our goals for our students are more in alignment with personal successes we should be creating the tools to measure those types of successes.

HOW CAN WE DEFINE STUDENT SUCCESS?

A broad definition of student success is academic achievement, engagement in educationally purposeful activities, satisfaction, acquisition of desired knowledge, skills and competencies, persistence, attainment of educational and personal objectives, and post-school performance.[8]

What exactly this means for you or your school should be determined by you and your school. It is important that there are clear school-wide expectations for what success looks like and paths towards that success (which will most likely be different for every student). Making sure everyone in your school is on the same page about student success will not only make it more likely that students can achieve success but also create more equitable practices for achieving said success.

6   Baxter Magola, 2004b; La Guardia, 2009; Taylor et al., 2014
7   Townend & Pendergast, 2015; Whiting, 2009
8   Kuh et al., 2006

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