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A SECOND LOOK AT AN ONTARIO PROVINCIAL STUDENT SUCCESS INITIATIVE: AN EMERGENT ETHIC OF CARE

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Introduction

In 2003, the Ontario Government undertook a comprehensive multi-year Student Success Strategy to keep more young people learning to age 18 or graduation (Ministry of Education, 2007). This followed the release of a Ministry commissioned research report showing that Ontario's graduation rates lagged behind other provinces in Canada, and that up to 30% of students did not complete diploma requirements. Thus, from 2004 to 2007, the Government of Ontario, Canada provided funding to district school boards across the province for local development of 225 "Lighthouse Projects" designed for at-risk students who had difficulty coping with mainstream programming in secondary schools, or were at risk of dropping out of school, or who had already left school without graduating.

This Lighthouse Projects Initiative (LPI) exemplified an approach to educational change that was radically different than the traditional top-down model in which changes are designed centrally and then mandated for adoption and implementation at the local level. Instead, this LPI illustrates a process of mutual engagement (Campbell, Elliott-Johns, & Wideman, 2010) in which the central authority supports local projects to develop and evaluate creative solutions to shared problems. The experience of the LPI supports Furman's (2004) argument for valuing the development of shared leadership, local autonomy, and problem solving as a means of school improvement in the twenty-first century.

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Towards the end of the Ministry funded lifespan of this LPI a research study was undertaken by Curriculum Services Canada (CSC) who commissioned Wideman & Shields (2007) to review the nature and impact of these initiatives. Here it was found that despite School boards not been given directives on philosophy or educational methodology for their emerging projects other than that they were to focus on facilitating student success and increasing graduation rates, they invariably treated the locally developed projects as opportunities for knowledge creation (Hannay, Wideman, & Seller, 2006) whereby the project teams developed, implemented, and reviewed their individual and unique projects according to ministry policies and local needs.

The importance of this research of the locally developed LPI utilizing a qualitative research agenda cannot be overstated. First, because field researchers visited school boards across the province to hear about successes and challenges directly from students, staff, and administrators, an opportunity to share the contextualized knowledge was created. Secondly, information gathered and shared in this manner provided insights that were then available to help other schools and school boards not just replicate what others had done, but learn from the experiences of others how to create alternatives that could meet the needs of high-risk students in their own communities. Finally, this research provided insights that were helpful for provincial and school board authorities to consider policies and directions to support program flexibility in schools to serve the needs of students for whom the traditional school program has proved inadequate.

While we were pleased with the outcome of this study at that time, looking back now, the two elements that stand out are the ethic of care that materialized in the creation and delivery of courses that were unique to different jurisdictions, and the knowledge creation as educators and a variety of community partners engaged together to develop programs of real interest and benefit to students. In other words, more professional insight can be gained from a second review of the LPI. To this end, the key focus of this article pertains specifically to the ethic of care that emerged from the analysis of the LPI data and its implications for shared educational leadership.

Contextualizing the Lighthouse Initiative in the Literature

The Ontario Government's determination to improve the graduation rate may be situated historically. King, Warren, Michalski, and Peart (1988) noted that the overriding explanation for school leaving was lack of academic success, and that the vast majority of students left school simply because they were so far behind in their studies that the likelihood of graduation was remote. What was different about the LPI was that it went beyond providing streamed courses within the traditional secondary program. Instead the LPI created alternative school contexts – staffed, programmed, and housed uniquely to support students socially, emotionally, and academically, and to connect their learning to their real-world contexts.

Gardner, Csikszentmihalyi and Damon (2001) note that learning environments should include the opportunity for learners to do meaningful work in ways that they find satisfying and rewarding and, consequently, that the notion of schooling must extend beyond the walls of the school building and to encompass the community and its opportunities for employment. In the LPI, alternative learning contexts and activities were developed locally to address students' needs, unique situations, and opportunities in particular settings. Projects tended to fit into one or more of six main categories that are described later in this article. Thus, these projects represented a shift in emphasis from centralization in education to a more decentralized approach that enabled school staff to develop and assess programs to best serve the learning needs of their own students. This approach reflects a developing understanding that "there is inevitable variation in how complex change initiatives are taken up in different communities" (Corter et. al., 2008, p.792) and that school improvement results from the collaboration among multiple individuals and organizations (Datnow, Hubbard, & Mehan, 2002; Snyder, Bolin, & Zumwalt, 1992). A one-size-fits-all approach to educational change is increasingly understood to be inadequate and there is a need for highly effective authentic, and responsive leaders who can bring partners together to create solutions within local contexts (Campbell, Elliott-Johns, & Wideman, 2010; Fullan, 2000, 2001, 2005).

Methodology used in the Initial Research of the LPI

For the purpose of the research study, a diverse sample of 35 Lighthouse projects was chosen from the 225 available in order to maximize the possibility that school boards beyond the 35 could learn from the results. The sample included projects from a variety of geographic locations across the province, including rural and urban settings in Public and Catholic, English- and French-language school boards.

From among several possible qualitative, methodological approaches, we chose case study as a viable method of gathering data from these sites to provide insight into individual projects. In particular, we used a collective case study (Stake, 2000) because we believed that in understanding the 35 particular projects, we could gain a better understanding of the larger collection of projects as a whole. Case study research is well established in education, law, medicine and other disciplines (Coles, 1989; Sacks, 1995) as a means of gathering and explaining both particularities about an individual case and what may be common across and among cases.

Methods included utilizing documentation on the background and rationale for each case studied. In addition, pairs of interviewers visited each of the 35 sites to interview the various stakeholders who voiced their perspectives about multiple aspects of their projects.

Students and school board project teams that included superintendents, principals, and teachers were interviewed individually and in groups. Wherever possible, student selection was comprised of one student who had met with success and one who had been less successful, so that varying opinions about the projects could be heard. This method provided us with the thick description (Glesne, 2006) necessary for allowing us to build a holistic picture of individual sites.

Revisiting the Study Now With a Different Lens

When the initial research was conducted, analysis of the data provided four emergent themes: 1) a Climate of Success; 2) a Culture of Relevance; 3) Beacons of Hope; 4) Tensions and Challenges. Together they spoke to the fact that all those involved with students at the 35 sites - teachers, administrators, support staff, parents, and community members - had dedicated themselves to building courses and programs that created possibilities for at-risk students that could take them towards high school completion. These individuals and groups included school personnel and in some cases community partners. Many of the educators interviewed spoke passionately about individual students and the need to continue working with them and it was clear to the researchers that school boards had bent and stretched their traditional organizational structures so that these students could experience success according to their personal needs.

As we reflected back on the LPI evaluation, however, we began to understand the results of our study in new and important ways. The four themes that we identified all established the care and concern that school board personnel expressed in their work with at-risk students who were in danger of dropping out of school or, indeed, had already dropped out. These were the people who created educational environments and programs that were expressed in our first two themes as a Climate of Success and a Culture of Relevance. Such programs focused on ensuring that a real interest in topics and courses could be developed in students who then wanted and were able to continue in school. Our third theme, Beacons of Hope, came from student comments in interviews where they expressed hope for their own futures for the first time. They had come to understand that teachers and others were working for them and they could connect a skill development for future use in the job market. The challenges expressed by teachers and administrators in our fourth theme, Tensions and Challenges, were all about ways to keep the projects going once provincial funding ended. No one wanted these students to go back to the levels of failure they had been previously experiencing in regular school programming.

As we thought about the dedication and commitment to students expressed by everyone in our initial interview data, our third theme, Beacons of Hope, came forward as the essential ingredient provided to students through the projects. For this reason, we turned to the work of authors such as Noddings (1984, 1991), Friere (1998, 2000), hooks (2003) and Palmer (1993, 2000, 2004) who all consider hope and care to be critical elements for reaching students in a personal way so that relationships become part of the teaching/learning cycle. hooks, for example, writes that the development of a community of teacher and learners is an essential element of a pedagogy of hope offering "practical wisdom about what we do… to make the classroom a place that is life-sustaining and mind-expanding, a place of liberating mutuality where teacher and student together work in partnership" (p. xv).

Friere (2000) notes, "In an effort to [keep] hope alive, since it is indispensable for happiness in school life, educators should always analyze the comings and goings of social reality. These are the movements that make a higher reason for hope possible" (p. 107).

And Palmer (1993) says;

> *Practicing responsive listening between teacher, student, and subject, is not finally a matter of technique. It depends ultimately on the teacher who has a living relationship with the subject at hand, who invites students into that relationship as full partners. Here is the largest hospitality on which this sort of teaching relies: the hospitality of a teacher who has a fruitful friendship with the subject and who wants students to benefit from that friendship as well* (p. 104).

From Beacons of Hope to Weaving a Tapestry: Insights from a Perspective of Care

As we did in the initial study, we considered a metaphor that we could apply to our new vision of our previous LPI research. We borrowed Palmer's (1993) conceptual framework for learning spaces - the notion of hospitality, which he co-joins with the ideas of openness and boundaries - to explore a new perspective. What emerged for us in the present is a student-centred tapestry in which learning environments based on openness, boundaries, and hospitality represent the warp of our fabric, and caring teachers and school community represent the weft. With this metaphor in place, we re-visit the data gathered in our original study and place our results under Palmer's three headings of openness, boundaries, and hospitality.

Openness

Palmer describes openness as "the creation of space to remove the impediments to learning that we find around us and within us, to set aside the barriers behind which we hide so that truth cannot seek us out" (p. 71). Looking first at the institutional level, the LPI demonstrated openness by the provincial Ministry of Education, local district school boards, and members of local project committees to create fundamentally new ways to achieve Ontario learning expectations for at-risk students. The LPI went well beyond the traditional, centrally-mandated, mainstream secondary program by creating alternative school contexts – staffed, programmed, and housed uniquely to support students socially, emotionally, and academically, and to connect their learning to their real-world environments.

These alternative school contexts were developed locally to best serve students and to use educational opportunities within the communities themselves. This approach reflects the understanding that "there is inevitable variation in how complex change initiatives are taken up in different communities" (Corter et. Al., 2008, p. 792) and that school improvement results from the collaboration among multiple individuals and organizations rather than the mere replication of reforms developed elsewhere (Datnow, Hubbard, & Mehan, 2002; Snyder, Bolin, & Zumwalt, 1992).

At the project level, we saw that there was openness to the recognition that students had a diversity of needs and, therefore, required multi-faceted and flexible options to be successful. Projects seemed to be organized to take the whole student into account, understanding that socio-emotional needs and psychological wellbeing are critically important factors in a student's likelihood of experiencing success. The programs that comprised these projects were diverse and offered flexibility for students. There seemed to be recognition that students had a wide variety of needs, and in order to work toward their strengths, programs had to be multifaceted, offering choices. For example, in one project it was possible to receive study skills development, tutoring, credit recovery opportunities, and new credit for courses delivered on-line.

In terms of instructional strategies, one teacher said, "The projects allow students to work at their own pace…We needed to provide a variety of tasks for students to do and to break the curriculum down into manageable parts." Another noted, "We held weekly conferences to talk to students individually about what was working, the challenges they were experiencing and to receive personal feedback." A principal reported, "The course activities are selected on an individual basis and the credit recovery teachers focus on key learning, broken down further into required skills and knowledge to enable individual pacing."

We found that openness extended to bending and stretching traditional structures so that students could experience success according to their unique population needs. Highly inventive projects were reported. For example, one school set up a "late school" program where class time was scheduled from 12:30 pm to 5 pm. Another utilized a continuous intake co-op program hoping to "capture students who were not attending school at all and give them a different experience." In addition, there were skills and certification programs, which included an apprenticeship component and programs on resource management and environmental science.

Openness included extending learning environments beyond the walls of the school out into the local community. The breadth and scope of the projects required principals and teachers to connect with local partners to set up project opportunities and alert students who were not in school to the possibilities created. For example, one principal noted, "A survey of the community was done to ascertain willingness to participate in the program." Another reported, "site visits were made to every business in the community." Still another principal said, "We are putting brochures in public libraries [and other places] to try to reach those who are not in school."

Schools were able to partner with businesses to organize job shadowing, job twinning and co-operative education work experience in a variety of workplaces for students. Connections to future employment for students were also a factor in the community outreach aspect of some projects. For example, a principal noted, "The school team approached students, their families, and their employers to determine if there would be interest in turning their current jobs into cooperative credit courses along with registration in a night school academic credit course."

In addition to organizing with partners outside of the school, student success teams demonstrated openness to partner within the school system. For example, drawing on expertise from Guidance departments to help identify students who might benefit from these projects. Overall, it was clear that the inter-departmental organizing that took place to make LPI viable was a sizeable task within schools and school boards. A project consultant seemed to sum up what the research teams found in various ways in the organization of all the projects, "We have based our philosophy and goals on 'whatever it takes' to re-engage students and help them achieve success."

Boundaries

Palmer notes that openness of space is created by the firmness of its boundaries - edges, foci, or limits. While the LPI demonstrated openness to different ways of doing things, they also demonstrated tightly defined boundaries in terms of whom they served and what they were to accomplish. First, the projects were exclusively for students at risk of leaving school without graduating or who had already left school. Secondly, at the time it applied for funding, each school board identified a primary and secondary area of focus for its project(s) from a list provided by the Ministry of Education. This list included: program pathways to apprenticeship and the workplace; alternative education; credit recovery; student success in Grades 9 and 10; success for targeted groups of students; and college connections.

Program pathways projects were specific to a desired student destination, such as a particular apprenticeship or college program. For example, one project created a commercial kitchen at a local high school for a hospitality and tourism pathway. The four-year program included three staff members certified as trainers and provided students with workplace connections to cooperative education, work experiences, industry certifications, college programs, and employment.

Alternative education programs provided a different kind of learning environment from the mainstream in terms of such factors as location, context, and programming. For example, one school board established programs in various

schools to provide experiential opportunities for students in Grades 7 and 8 to acquire high school credits and ease the transition to secondary school. These programs incorporated field studies that integrated curriculum expectations, experiential learning, and community resources, and focused on skills in literacy and numeracy.

Credit recovery programs helped students gain credit for courses they previously failed. One such project was located at a high school and a satellite location for adult learners, and was led by a teacher and an enrolment coordinator at each location. Students attended one of the two sites and earned compulsory credits in workplace courses for English and Mathematics, as well as Cooperative Education, by participating in experiential learning opportunities in community industry placements.

Student success in Grades 9 and 10 programs was established to help students in Grade 9 who had fallen behind in elementary school, and assisted students having difficulty in Grade 10. One school board developed a program for students who had been unsuccessful in acquiring two or more credits. Remedial support was provided, and students developed learning skills necessary for continuing their education and being successful in senior grades.

Success for targeted groups of students focused on improving success rates for students of particular groups. For example, one school board's project was to connect aboriginal students to the school by recognizing and celebrating their culture and history. The program involved, among other things, hiring a traditional mentor who counseled Native students, their teachers, and school administrators.

Finally, college connections involved establishing partnerships between secondary schools, school boards, and colleges to facilitate student success, leading to admission to a college program. For example, one school board partnered with a local community college to enable students returning to secondary school to earn and bank a college credit as they completed other secondary school courses at the board's adult learning centre. Students participated in the course at the college one afternoon each week, and also in work placements related to the course.

Hospitality

Of hospitality Palmer writes,

> *Precisely because a learning space can be a painful place, it must have...hospitality. Hospitality means receiving each other, our struggles, our newborn ideas, with openness and care...The classroom where truth is central will be a place where every stranger and every strange utterance is met with welcome. This may suggest a classroom lacking essential rigor… But that would be a false understanding of hospitality. Hospitality is not an end in itself. It is offered for the sake of what it can allow, permit, encourage, and yield. A learning space needs to be hospitable not to make learning painless but to make the painful things possible things without which no learning can occur...* (p. 75).

A key factor in providing a hospitable environment in all the 35 projects was the teacher. The very nature of the projects required teachers who were willing to try new ways to meet students' needs in the hope of making a difference for them. Many interviewees said that the personal qualities of the teacher drew in the students and kept them connected to their learning. One said, "it was essential that the right teacher be selected…someone who would commit to work in consultation with a variety of school and school-board departments, community social service agencies, and private-sector partners, far above and beyond the normal scope of a regular classroom teacher."

Across all the projects, it was reiterated that finding teachers willing to champion new approaches and programs and engage with students who had a diverse range of challenging needs was a critically important factor for student success. A vice-principal noted the challenge of "finding the right teacher who could keep students engaged; the teacher had to be comfortable in a counseling role and work with students with emotional and learning difficulties." One French-language project administrator noted, "The teacher must be versatile, qualified, and skilled to create a positive emotional bond with the student – it's a must!"

Support staff also figured very prominently in these projects in terms of providing hospitality for students. It was directly stated, or indirectly implied across many cases, that a team approach created the Climate of Success for students and that the team included not just teachers but also system leaders, Student Success leaders, school administrators, social workers, secretaries and receptionists, consultants, mentors, and co-op staff. Depending on the nature of the project, staff and teachers joined together to work with the students and help them in multiple ways. For example, in one project, the social worker was seen as a critical player on the team who stressed the need to dismantle the "culture of failure" embedded in some of the students' thinking and experience. In another, students encountered a network of caring professionals who had empathy for their personal situations. Senior administrators were given credit by one team who said that they were knowledgeable advocates and visible cheerleaders in their commitment to student success.

The warm and caring learning environment created by these teams was also considered critical to the success of the projects. For many of the students, school had not been a positive environment in the past, and many teachers took on the challenge of trying to create welcoming and emotionally safe places for students that reflected their culture, invited their interest and engagement, and mirrored workplace or adult settings. In addition, many projects aimed at building a sense of place for students

where they could feel valued and connected. One teacher reported, "Creating a small group setting for students and allowing them movement around the school as well as outside the school was important." An aboriginal student noted that success is possible when acceptance, agreement, and relational trust exist and "students do not have to leave who they are at the door." Other students said that the opportunity to complete their secondary schooling in a "College" or "adult education" environment was meaningful and positive; not having to step back into facilities that held negative associations, such as age discrepancy, past failure, or social conflict, was a factor they found attractive. Use of technology seemed to be another aspect of project environments that teachers reported being very positive in creating a hospitable environment because a more adult world was replicated for students.

Naming the Strength in the New, Knowledge Creation Tapestry

As we consider the outcome of combining educational relationships with the traits of openness, boundaries, and hospitality provided to students through the LPI, we feel we can claim a strength in the tapestry of school experience that was not there before for these at-risk students. When knowledge creation (Hannay, Wideman, & Seller, 2006) takes the form of locally-developed projects and is of worth to individual student development, outcomes can be positive, long term, hopeful, and sustaining. For students who have not experienced such rich texture before, the affect can be powerful - even life changing. An example of this possibility was a student who described her stresses and failures in school prior to becoming involved in the project. She told the interviewers that she would not be in school this year, graduating with a diploma, and doing work that was meaningful for her, if it were not for her caring teachers and the very different learning environment they had created for her. As this example notes, becoming a person of value in the eyes of professionals where that was not formerly the case, holds a potency that should not be taken lightly.

Time for students to be with caring teachers, formal and otherwise, like those who were associated with these projects is noted by Noddings (1991) as a key ingredient for success. She writes, "Teachers and students need more time together. If trust is to develop, people need to know something about each other, to talk to each other." She goes on to state that extended contact could:

> *1) provide time for a caring relation to develop: Students in the care of good teachers learn that they are the recipients of care, and they have an opportunity to learn more about appropriate forms of response. 2) The cognitive capacity for discernment and thus more fruitful dialogue may be better developed [over time] with teachers who regard this capacity as a legitimate target of development. 3) Students can begin the sensitive work of learning to be 'carers' as they see caregiving modeled* (p. 167).

Embedded in caring for students are attributes such as Friere (1998) describes including commitment, careful listening, openness to dialogue and open-mindedness. He notes, "The open-minded teacher cannot afford to ignore anything that concerns the human person" (p. 127). All these traits not only strengthen the fabric of relationship between teacher and student, but also add the sheen that makes subject matter valuable; it is the embellishments within the tapestry that represent the rich layers that are remembered by students over the long term.

Beyond teacher-student relationships, additions to the tapestry were provided through school-community connections. In the larger community where students engaged in work experience, new threads of meaning-making were noted by students. One told interviewers, "From the employer, I learned that if you work hard, things come to you…you'd be surprised, you meet one person, and you get numerous opportunities." hooks (2003) writes, "Progressive education, education as the practice of freedom, enables us to confront feelings of loss and restore our sense of connection. It teaches us how to create community" (p. xv). For students who have been sidelined in the past, such revelations are new and invite further connection.

The ethic of care on the part of so many people for these students, and which binds the completed tapestry, adds the vibrancy and colour of which real learning is comprised. The knowledge created in the LPI touched all participants - students, teachers, administrators, parents, and community members. hooks (2003), quoting Palmer, describes the larger vision of school community to which these projects testify:

> *This community goes far beyond our face-to-face relationships with each other as human beings. In education especially this community connects us with the 'great things' of the world, and with 'the grace of great things'...we are in community with all these great things, and great teaching is about knowing that community, feeling that community, sensing that community, and then drawing your students into it* (p. xvi).

Pagano (1991) writes that "to act is to theorize" (p. 194). Ultimately, the completion of our tapestry rests on the ethical theorizing of caring adults exercising shared leadership provincially and locally in the best interests of students in their care and suggests a need for alternative educational programming to be more easily established and sustained. Metaphorically, through a knowledge creation process, each one involved in the development of the LPI has had a hand in creating a final product - a rich and varied tapestry woven on the loom of school community.

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REMINDER
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