Growing Success or Nurturing Failure:
A study of Social Promotion Policy in Ontario’s Education System

By:
Christine McAllan

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Department of Curriculum, Teaching and Learning
Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto

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Abstract

According to Freeman, teachers must help students create a platform for choosing the best choice, both academically and socially (1998). However, if students have not learned the basic building blocks needed to be successful in future school years, how can they be expected to make the “best choice” to be successful? Prior to high school, students may have little understanding of the importance of actively participating in their education, as they do not realize how it will affect them in the future and thus, some get lost in the system. When a teacher has no option but to promote a student to the next grade without the fundamental skills for future success, what expectations are set for the student to succeed both academically and socially? In Ontario in 2010, academic assessment and evaluation reforms were outlined by the Ministry of Education document, Growing Success. This research is a qualitative study on the enactment of Growing Success and social promotion programs by school boards in Ontario and was approached using a disabilities interpretive lens. The study finds that the current education system does not treat students equitably. In fact, current assessing and reporting processes presents a significant challenge for those students who are unable to keep up with the curriculum as teachers are unable to allocate enough classroom time and materials to cover all of the previous learning outcomes.

Keywords: Retention; Social Promotion; Identification and Intervention; Authentic Assessment; Disability and Special Needs in Education
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“Don't cry because it's over. Smile because it happened!”
I've heard there are troubles of more than one kind;
some come from ahead, and some come from behind.

But I've brought a big bat. I'm all ready, you see;
now my troubles are going to have troubles with me!

- Dr. Seuss

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Chapter 1: INTRODUCTION

Introduction to the Research Study

While completing my undergraduate degree I did a lot of self-reflection while I worked in a variety of diverse settings academically, as well as, commercially. I worked as a teaching assistant running tutorials and meeting with students, I ran academic workshops helping develop student success and academic skills, and I worked over the many summers as a tennis instructor. I knew I wanted to work with students as I have a passion for helping others but the question was in what form would this passion take? My sister at the time was working as a middle school teacher in a grade eight class, in the Peel Distract School Board. Through numerous discussions and debates with my sister on the current education system and curriculum we began to develop differing opinion on student support in schools for those behind the standard expectations. After volunteering in the classroom with my sister for a few months it became clear how large of a gap existed between all of the varying levels of student’s abilities in the classroom, for example, a grade eight who was only able to read at a grade two level.

It was not until I entered my sister’s classroom and began to work with the students did I realize that it was not just a select few, but many students were not at the prescribed level of education for a grade eight student; some were behind in math, many in English, but most shocking was the lack of social skills and considerations in the classroom. These students had not learned how to properly conduct themselves in an academic setting, how on earth could they succeed in high school if they had not built up the fundamentals such as reading and writing? Unfortunately, due to recent education reforms and school board policies these students are pushed forward to the high school
platform where they will receive vastly different experiences and instructions with which had not been customary. The high school years, especially grade nine, are the years where students are most likely to be retained, which can have an impact on both academic and non-academic outcomes (Martin, 2011). This is in part due to the shocking situation students find themselves in when moving between middle school and high school, as they are trusted to be more independent and responsible for their academic journey. However, students have reported to feel that they are no longer engaged in the material or feel encouraged by teachers (Frederick & Hauser, 2008).

Across Canada, it is established that teachers have a duty of care towards students who are under their care, this duty derives from the special relationships teachers develop with their students as teacher, this relationship can be attributed to the ideology of in loco parentis, or rather the teacher temporarily being in place of the parent. “Parents entrust their children to the care of teachers and other board employees,” with this trust comes the expectation that their children are given “the opportunity to acquire knowledge and skills, fair and equitable discipline, and a safe learning environment” (Scarfo and Zuker, 2011). Above was the example of a grade eight student who is unable to read at a grade four level, have they been given a fair opportunity to acquire knowledge? In my study I will be researching the social programs that school boards have put in place regarding new reforms that the Ministry of Education produced in order to make the education environment more accessible and safe to all students.

What I will be focusing on is the teacher’s experiences with the students and the teacher’s inability to help the students reach their full capacity for knowledge as the students are passed on from grade to grade with little ability or second opportunity to
build the required fundamental skills. While this study will look into the impact these programs have on students, I will be interviewing teachers in order to gain a full understanding of teacher’s opinions of what would be potential solutions to the education divide. I will focus on the solutions that teachers believe to be feasible and comment on how these suggestions could be enacted based on education policies and past reforms.

**Statement of the Research Question**

What are three Ontario educator’s perspectives on the effects of social programs in a high school setting?

- This includes examples such as social promotion and streaming beginning at grade nine
- Focus on the issues both morally and professionally for the teachers in specific regards to a grade eight teacher have no option but to move them forward to high school even though their academic level might not be there, and then a grade nine teacher being the first to issue a failure to the student
- A history and explanation of past policies to demonstrate the expectations of implementing social promotion in schools versus the outcomes and what should be done in the future, what would the system look like and include

**Purpose of the Study**

In 2010, the Ministry of Education produced a guideline for school boards, which covered assessment, evaluation and reporting titled “Growing Success: assessment, evaluation, and reporting in Ontario schools.” It is then the duty of the school boards to implement policies such as social promotion, which comply with the criteria laid out in the reforms. In looking to enact on the goals of the new criteria, many schools set in place social programs such as social promotion progress at the elementary level. In the provincial document, the ministry outlines “the goal of using a criterion-based approach is to make the assessment and evaluation of student achievement as fair, reliable, and
transparent as possible” (Ministry of Education, 2010). In the past, assessment and evaluation performance standards varied from teacher to teacher and from school to school, and this led to results that were not always fair for all students. This created an inconsistency in the schooling system, which resulted in an inability to analyze results on a school-to-school basis. According to the ministry, these new standards enable 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. 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” (Ministry of Education, 2010).

Based on the school board policies that have developed out of the ministries reforms, are the students achieving the prescribed expectations in order to graduate?

If the Education Act specifies that all teachers shall “be responsible for effective instruction, training and evaluation of progress of pupils in the subjects assigned to the teacher,” then how can a teacher achieve these prescribed goals under the changes produced by the encouragement of social promotion? (Regulation 298, 1990, s 20)

According to Freeman, teachers must help student’s create the best platform for choosing the “best” choice, this is both academically and socially (Freeman, 1998). However, if students are not aware of the consequences, or for that matter if there are no consequences, there is the potential for students to not take of their education, as they do not understand how it will affect them in the future. Yet, the Ministry of Education specifies,

Treating all children exactly the same means that children who need accommodations or modifications to the program in order to succeed
will be disadvantaged. Some students require more or different support than others in order to work at a level appropriate to their abilities and needs. For some students, therefore, assessment, evaluation, and reporting will be based on modified expectations (Ministry of Education, 2010).

If this is the case, how is forcing a student to continue forward in the system fair or equitable? Some students need more time to learn the material, or be given different opportunities and resources to learn, and yet this new reform and the school boards enactment policies do not reflect this ideal of equitable thinking. High schools are meant to prepare all students to be college and, or career ready (Barton & Coley, 2011).

Therefore, the purpose of this study is to examine how school boards have enacted social promotion, research what supports they have available to students and conclude whether it is supporting students to the best of the abilities or if there is room for improvement.

**Background of the Researcher**

As I have alluded to in the opening of this chapter, I have volunteered in the school setting working with students who are directly affected by these social programs for the past four years. But, even more than that, I have been alongside my sister and her fellow teachers as they have struggled with internal dilemmas about what to do with underdeveloped students as they are pushed forward through the education system. I have a personal familiarity with the topic and already have some gained insight and to a certain extent developed an opinion of the topic. I am coming into this study with preconceived opinions between social promotion and retention, especially regarding the encouragement of continuous education at the elementary level. I have experienced a wide of variety of students succeeding and students failing because of these initiatives. Much of my experience in schools has been working with students in high school between the ages of fourteen and nineteen, and it is hard to see students who are unable to read a question and
understand what is being asked of them. The frustration that both the teachers and students experience will affect them in a variety of subjects as it can devastate their engagement in academics and participation in society. While graduation rates from high school are increasing and are now currently hovering in the eightieth percentile, the standard achievement levels of students and their inquiry based thinking are not necessarily meeting standards (Greene, 2008).

In Ottawa, at Carleton University I had the opportunity to work as a Residence Fellow and as a Teaching Assistant. Both of these jobs offered me the chance to work with students in their first year of university, most of whom were coming right out of high school. I observed first year students who were unable to appropriately construct essays, did not have a proper grasp of the English language, lacked rudimentary math skills and many had not developed appropriate social etiquette in a classroom setting. From firsthand experience, I understand the joy and excitement that comes with freedom and independence for the first time at a young age of eighteen or nineteen. However, it was not outside, but inside the classroom in lectures and tutorials that I noticed the student’s inability to grasp concepts or seek assistance when needed. This is another manifestation of social promotion.

For my first practicum experience in teaching I was placed at Craig Kielburger High School in the Halton District School Board, a 1,700-student population with a wide catchment area including both rural and urban locations and a broad social economic income base. I had the opportunity to work both in a “normal” classroom setting of grade nine academic geography, the resource centre with students who have acknowledged learning disabilities and an essentials level class with students in either grade eleven or
twelve, some of whom had established individual education plans. The ages of these students in the essentials class were between sixteen and nineteen, when taking in consideration the levels of maturity this class had a huge gap between students in different walks of life and personal development. It was in this classroom that I was faced with some behavioral challenges, but with these challenges came the daunting realization that neither social promotion nor retention are reasonable solutions to the problematic education system and poor student learning environments.

Talking with a variety of teachers about their experience before social promotion or inclusive classrooms were introduced and after, I have noticed that many feel students have lost a sense of purpose or necessity in school. The lesson that is being taught to the students through the assessment and feedback they receive, is that while they do no work, or put in very little effort, they still succeed, they still pass and they do move on. However, it is then a rude awakening when students enter high school and fail. They have not developed the skills that is necessary to succeed and have either been set up for failure, or must work hard with a lot of support from home and school, which may not be available or an option. I remember when I was in elementary school, we had what was called an extra support classroom, where students who needed extra help in order to succeed would be placed, though, they would be integrated into our classroom for art, drama, music and gym. In addition, students could either be held back or moved forward depending on their achievement levels. This class and the potential for retention were used as incentives to push students to work harder. When trying to decide upon what topic to research I found that I was most engaged and passionate about the social
programs and achievement levels as these initiatives directly affect a student’s success and ability to progress in the future.

**Limitations of the Research**

I foresee location being a major influence on my research; for example, if I am able to interview a teacher in their classroom I feel that their responses to the research questions might not be as open or honest compared to if I interviewed them privately in a coffee shop. I fear that teachers maybe worried with a sense of having to protect themselves and their opinions from other teachers or administration with fear of repercussions.

In addition, I believe that geography will have an impact on my research, because of the scale of the province and my inability to travel to each school district; I will have to endeavour to have a cross section of representative data. These reforms might help students in a rural context who could already be working in the field of their future employment, however, for urban learners; these programs could reduce the availability of support programs. One thing that I have noticed is when I begin to discuss my topic with educators I find that teachers who live in an urban area are adamantly against the programs and more willing to talk out. Rather than when discussing my topic of research with teachers who are in a rural landscape they tend to hesitate, as they believe it does help the students remain engaged for the limited time they are in school until they enter society to take over some sort of predefined job opportunity. I believe the gap in my research will come from the availability or rather lack of availability of teachers able to participate who work in the rural areas.
While these limitations suggest there will be a gap in my research, I believe I will be able to overcome this issue by discussing it in my findings. If I am able to conduct an interview outside of a school setting, that would be the best outcome, however, if the teacher is uncomfortable, or for a time restraint issue the interview must be conducted in a school setting, then I will discuss this in regards to the findings from the interview. The hardest part of my research will be not invalidating my research because of the geographical issue. I will do this by suggesting that my paper will focus strictly on urban schools and urban teachers. Nevertheless, these limitations are crucial to keep in mind while reading the findings and result from the research and interviews.

Key Concepts and Terms

- **Retention**: the practice of having a student repeat a grade, with the expectation that the student can work on the academic skills necessary to advance to the next level with a greater potential for academic success. This action includes holding a student behind and encouraging the child to redo the grade so that they can have a full and complete understanding of the material covered

- **Social Promotion or Continuous Education**: where a teacher is unable to fail the student or issue an “F” or “R” to signal the student must repeat the course or subject. Instead they are issued an “I” for incomplete meaning they do not have sufficient knowledge of the subject material to be graded on it however, they are still passed on in to the next grade level

- **Identification and Intervention**: the act of identifying a student who is in need of additional support. These are at-risk students who are in the zone of potentially failing or not meeting curriculum standards. A teacher or administration will recognize a student at risk and then working alongside Education Assistants, Social Workers and Parents, outline a plan of action including additional support and resources available to the student

- **Academic**: courses available in grades nine and ten to students who are seeking to attend either university or college. These courses will demand students to be more
critical and encourage inquiry with class material. These students will meet curriculum expectations

- **Applied**: courses available in grades nine and ten to students who are potentially going to go to college or out into the workplace upon graduation. These students may have low motivation, academic engagement or a lack of support from home

- **University**: courses available to students in grade eleven and twelve to students who are going to apply to University or college. These students are academically oriented and have classroom engagement. These courses will ask students to think critically and be able to explain coherent thoughts. They will demand students to be independent with the ability to complete course material on their own with little instruction as they are meant to prepare students for a university setting

- **College**: courses available to students who are looking to attend a college or diploma program after graduation. Typically these students are academically oriented but have a kinesthetic preference when learning. These students will complete work with a little more support from the teacher

- **Essentials**: courses available to students who will be going into apprenticeship programs, cooperative education or straight out into the workplace. These courses are designed to prepare students to be active citizens. Course material will demand very little from students and will be limited to skills required to function in society: basic math, reading, writing, verbal reasoning

- **Fundamental Skills**: In regards to math with addition/subtraction/multiplication/division, in terms of writing being able to coherently explain answers on a paper, verbal reasoning is being able to explain why the statement you make is valid. These skills are one that should be learned in the elementary years and will be developed and built on as a student’s knowledge and is built on and generates the ability to pull information from different experiences
Chapter 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview

Education in this century should be characterized a foundational relationship between the students, teachers, administration and parents. However, on the contrary, the nature of education systems (strongly based on my experiences within the Ontario public school system, as both a classroom volunteer, teacher candidate and an educational researcher) not only seem to move further away from character education and dismiss the voices of students, but also hinder teacher agency with which many new ideas of education can be built. These hindrances are mainly due to the fact that ever-changing and growing curriculum mandates and board-wide policies have become the main focus of policy makers who are no longer present and working in a classroom. Furthermore, the greater the push becomes on such mandates as standardized testing such as Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test, the less room there is left for classroom educators to implement personal initiatives to focus on student success.

The policies of social promotion result in the most unfortunate circumstances, of course, will be the feeling of disengagement and alienation – something which teachers and administration alike are trying to avoid, yet something which is experienced quite often within public school classrooms by both educators and students alike. These feelings resonate from student failure and the student’s inability to keep up with curriculum standards.

This chapter will examine the existing research and literature surrounding the policies of retention versus social promotion and the events which lead to the enactment of continuous education as a document for student success. This research will look at a
composition of situations and investigations surrounding the impact of retention or social promotion on students, both from the United States and Canada. Chapter two will also introduce some of the important categories for my research and discuss theoretical frameworks within which they are based.

2.1 An overview of reforming policies (1990 – 2010) in Ontario’s Education System

Schools serve societies in all kinds of direct and indirect ways, for example, they serve to educate the ever-growing population and they are a window and a reflection of social order that surrounds it (Ayers, 2010). Though the provincial government has undergone significant changes to political ideologies, moving from Liberal (1986 – 1990) to a New Democratic Party (1990 – 1995) and then on to the Conservative party (1990 – 2002), the nature of the reforms of education continued from one party to another. Even though there was a vast spectrum of promises and interests, the evolution of education in Ontario remained on a close path through out the years (Anderson and Jaafar, 2003). For the past twenty years the Ministry of Education in Ontario has worked to create a more standardized curriculum across the province, this is demonstrated through the specific learning outcomes by subject, grade level and program stream across Ontario. In addition, what this standardization did was ensure that all students in Ontario have the same access to education with the same assessment process and report card. These common standards across differing school boards in Ontario were set in place to help students achieve success and ensure equal access to a proper education in all parts of the province. They created a commonality, which allowed students, teachers and parents to identify whether the student or students of the school are preforming at, exceeding or below the provincially set expectations (Anderson and Jaafar, 2003).
In Ontario, the teacher representation system is split between two major federations, the Elementary Teachers’ Federation of Ontario (ETFO) and the Ontario Secondary School Teachers’ Federation (OSSTF). In the school setting students between kindergarten and grade eight are in the elementary school system, and those between grade nine and twelve are in the secondary school system. The transition years between the two systems, grade eight and grade nine are known to be the hardest years for students as there are many major differences between the what is called a grades school and a high school. These include schedules, class duration, academic expectations, streaming meaning students would be placed in either academic or applied and curriculum standards. According to Andrew Martin, the high school years, especially grade nine, are the years where students are most subject to retention, which can have an impact on both academic and non-academic outcomes (2011). If one looks at the transition years upon entering grade nine, some students will experience a quasi-culture shock moment as the student will not be prepared for the independence or idea that they are now in charge of their own academic success or failure.

2.2 Bill 160, Education Quality Improvement Act

In December 1997, a major restructuring of the curriculum for students across all grades was announced, for example students in grade one to eight had a revamped math and language curricula outlining mandatory expectations. In addition, high school students, upon entering grade nine were to be streamed for the rest of their school careers, they would be able to choose academic or applied which was said to prepare students for the changing world waiting for them, and students were now expected to pass a Grade Ten Literacy test (O’Sullivan, 1999). What these reforms did was create a common
curriculum across Ontario with higher expectations for students, where the importance of rapid changing global ideologies and the impact of technology was recognized. While expectations for student achievement were changed by the ministry, in 1998, the government announced it would outsource the re-creation of provincial curriculum to the private sector with the end result of only passing reference to key ideals like Canada’s significant role internationally or to the major part of not only French but also, multiculturalism (O’Sullivan, 1999). The new curriculum was accompanied by a new standardized report card. Teachers in all boards and schools were required to use the same report card format, which was aligned with the grade level learning outcomes and standards for each grade level and subject. This started the trend of outsourcing curriculum documents so that now when the ministry calls for a new document they will hire in specialist to complete the task. It is these reforms that fuelled the 1990’s education reform movement, which still has lasting effects today. These policies have played a major role in a student’s ability to be judged as being successful in school whether that is on their own accord, through retention or social promotion.

The most key component of students who are subjected to social promotion or retention is that they are not just underachievers academically, but they may also be unmotivated, have uncontrollable behavioural issues or just be immature (Martin, 2011). References to equity goals related to gender, racial and cultural differences were replaced by the idea that equity will be achieved by holding teachers accountable for the achievement of all students who are all subject to the same high academic standards (Anderson & Jaafar, 2003). By creating a standardized curriculum with mandatory expectations for each student, there is not much ability for teachers to adapt instruction in
order to suit the needs of their students. To then force students on to the next grade through social promotion, they are pushed forward even though they have not demonstrated the necessary foundational skills in order to achieve a passing grade in the subject material in the first place. The education policies outlined in numerous bills and reforms for the past thirty years have centred on the students with an outcome-based approach meaning, that teachers are encouraged to focus on assessment and the end product of the student’s knowledge rather than the learning. The major problem with this standard is that students are not active participants in their education instead they are the objects.

2.3 Restructuring Education in the Classroom

In order for students to fully take command of their education an active student-based approach needs to be included in the classroom. This means encouraging the child to set the pace for the education, teachers will provide learning opportunities however, if the student is not learning then the teacher will seek out external support to encourage student growth and development (Raphael, 1993). By this it means that if students need an extra year to fully understand concepts they will be given the extra opportunity to develop an understanding of the concepts and offered the chance to succeed. This does not necessarily mean retaining students, however, it does involve moving students into an environment where they receive academic support and can move at a pace that is beneficial to their learning. The Ministry outlines broad goals for students and teachers, it is then upon school boards and administration to adapt these goals to the local circumstances to benefit the students (Raphael, 1993). While policy has played a huge influence on a student’s ability to succeed, with higher expectations and increased
standards, the adaptations of curriculum do not include a learning style, which suits the
needs of a variety of students. In fact the outlined curriculum only suits one type of
student: English as a first language, with support at home from parents, and the student is
academically inclined with an ability to fuel there own education with little or no impact
from exterior forces. A closer look needs to take place at how the new curriculum affects
social promotion and a student’s ability to function in society at graduation.

2.4 How the Change in Standards in the Curriculum Affected Student Success

In order to full grasp the impact of curriculum on students, we are going to look at
a few contemporary examples, one persona and one released by the Ministry of
Education. The current secondary school curriculum does not adequately address the
needs of the non-university or college-bound students, who are now a majority of the
secondary student body (Leithwood, Fullan & Watson, 2003). Due to social promotion
and the lack of differentiated subject material available for students, too many students
are graduating high school who are unable to fully participate in Canadian society or for
that matter prosper in the future. From working in an essential streamed classroom, these
are students who are not looking to go to college or university nor do they have the
academic standing to do so, I can comment first hand, that these students do not receive
the necessary support they require to contribute and be successful. Very few schools give
these students access to apprenticeships programs or workplace programs where they
could be participating a coop program in order to get ahead once they have graduated. In
addition, if a school board does offer some or all of these programs in one form or
another, the students could potentially be commuting to another school in order to enrol
in the course. This means that students, who may already have low motivation or little to
no support at home, are being forced to take a bus or find alternatives way of transportation in order to get to school. These unrealistic expectations of the capabilities of students that when combined with the social promotion initiative where the students are not given the basic building blocks to succeed are what force students to drop out or slip between the cracks, meaning that these are students who have been identified as not satisfying curriculum standards but are still being placed into the next year and are ultimately unable to actively participate in society.

In 2013, the Ministry of Education released an updated version of some secondary school subject curriculums, among these was new curriculums was history and this will be my example to demonstrate that the material being taught to the students does not create the environment for students to be successful following social promotion. Social promotion is under the belief that it is more important for students to learn alongside their peers who are of similar age than it is to repeat in order to relearn or build a more solid foundation. While much research has been done on the effects of retention or social promotion academically, very little research has been done to study the non-academic success of either route. In fact, when students reach high school, if they have not developed the necessary skills to succeed they will experience their first failure, it is almost a reality check for students. While social promotion deludes students into beliefs that are unrealistic, retention can defuse the student’s interest or willingness to participate in their education. Both sides of the coin have faults while also having attributions to help. As Greene suggests behind each tough or suffering students is a challenging behaviour, which is either an unsolved problem or lacking skill (2008). What social promotion lacks is the ability to distinguish this behaviour and therefore help the healing
process by confronting the major issue, as the students are carried forward from one
grade to the next with very little or no assistance. When students who have demonstrated
insufficient evidence of knowledge and skills enter high school, they are almost set up for
failure in the sense that it is a sink or swim moment; the student will work to grasp the
material and seek extra aid from teachers or the student will fail and then look for their
first opportunities to getaway. How does the curriculum enable these students to learn?

The hope was that by streaming students into a section of academic or applied, the
students who would need more support would receive it in either of those classes.
However well intentioned this initiative, reality does not always carry out as one may
hope. In an academic class students are asked to inquire, question and reason the
outcome, in an applied class, students are asked to demonstrate and show that they have
learned the information, there is a lack of questioning or reasoning skills requested from
the students (Gini-Newman, 2014). If one were to look at the curriculum developed and
provided by the Ministry of Education in 2013, under the prescribed expectations it is
clear that there is a large thinking divide between the expectations of academic and
applied students, for example the applied students are asked to describe some key social
trends; identify sources of major development; and explain some key issues (Ontario
Curriculum, 2013). The skills and memorization it takes for individuals to demonstrate a
proper understanding of material is not reasonable to expect of students, especially those
who might have a low motivation or barriers to learn. Instead asking these students to
work with the material and question what is asked of them is more reasonable, providing
them with the information to critically think for themselves will help produce active
citizens who are integral parts of society. Is it acceptable to think that students, who have
not been given fair access to the education system as they have been pushed through the
system, and who then are required to do work that is not facilitating an inclusive learning
environment, are then able to succeed in the education system? No, it is not, students are
subjects to a system that does not inculcate an inclusive, equitable learning environment.

2.5 Assessment and Student Success

As the Ministry of Education explains: “assessment is the process of gathering
information that accurately reflects how well a student is achieving the curriculum
expectation in a subject or course” (Growing Success, 2010). According to this
definition, assessment is used for the purpose of defining how well a student is doing
according to pre-set expectations. When it comes to assessing students teachers have two
forms of assessment, there is assessment for learning and assessment as learning. It is
through these two processes that a teacher can aid the academic success of a student. Yet,
at the same time, it is through this process that a teacher can deter a student from wanting
to continue on with their academic journey. For assessment to be both effective and
efficient for teachers and students, it must be planned, promote learning, avoid bias and
be flexible in order to meet student’s needs (Cooper, 2006). If these strategies are at the
forefront of assessment, then the outcome will be in the best interest of the student and
used to further improve the students learning. These assessments will come in a variety of
ways being both formal and informal forms on an ongoing basis; these can include
observations, discussions, questioning, group assignments, presentations, reflections,
theses, and tests. Assessment should confirm the tendency of achievement that the
students have already demonstrated; outcomes should not come as a surprise to students,
parents or the teachers.
2.6 Summative and Formative Assessment

Assessment is based on gathering information about a student’s knowledge and academic skills; this should not be biased or for that matter based on one sole activity, when producing feedback for an assessment one should take into consideration other situations surrounding the material and previously demonstrated knowledge. Assessment for learning is designed to promote learning, and increase skills, this is done by checking in on student’s abilities as one provides feedback for learning, such as early drafts, practice assignments, reviews and reflections are all examples of assessment for learning. The student is provided feedback in order to improve their abilities on an on-going process. Assessment as learning demonstrates the knowledge that the student has acquired up until that point, the student is assigned a percentage that is to reflect where they are positioned in relation to the curriculum standards. This assessment will take the form of report cards or summative reports. Teachers are required to evaluate student learning and comment on the student’s ability to continue with academic success. These comments will come from both a summative and formative assessment.

Formative assessment is an informal process that occurs during learning, and will provide feedback with the student on an ongoing basis (Cooper, 2006). An example of this is in class, a teacher could assign an in-class assignment and then during the work period circle the class to provide assistance to students and carry out discussions surrounding the student’s work. This feedback will assist the student as they will know what next steps to take to improve their work and further their learning, it also assists the teacher as it provides crucial information on how to better create lesson plans and instruct
the students to reach a vaster audience. Formative assessment gives the teacher a chance to work with the students and improve the overall atmosphere of the classroom.

While formative is a great opportunity for students to assess through observation and the learning process, summative assessment occurs at the end of a period of learning period and reflects the student achievement for that period of time (Growing Success, 2010). This process is designed to provide information to parents, teachers and students, as well as administration, the overall achievement of the students and to what extent students are able to grasp the information provided. The key to student engagement when it comes to assessment is to ensure that the student has an interest in the material covered, the criteria is clearly provided and that the student believes they can learn and succeed. Motivation can be one of the largest factors to student success, without engagement or motivation; it is almost impossible for student or teacher to provide adequate feedback. From the information provided above it will become clear that assessment and evaluation is crucial to student success and academic involvement.

For students there is very little difference between assessment and evaluation, however, it on up to the teacher to specify the difference that evaluation focuses on the student achievement based on the overall expectations and assessment is meant to be a form of reflection, feedback and next steps. When a teacher is determining a report card grade under the standardized report for across Ontario, the student will take into consideration various actions and observations in order to make a decision on the final grade to be entered no the report card (Growing Success, 2010). The impact that grades play in students likely hood to fail or dropout has a large correlation, according to The Ontario Study of the Relevance f Education and the Issue of Dropouts, most students who
dropped out or reported failures and deterrence from education recall being “C” students or below (Sullivan, 1988). In Ontario, the primary mode of student assistance is social promotion, what this means is a student will graduate and go on to the next year in school without any regards to their academic level achievement. On the report cards for the ETFO, students who receive under a 50% or D- in their course work are issued an “I,” this stands for insufficient evidence of course work to issue a grade, which in reality means that the student does not have a solid grasp on the fundamentals of the course. This reporting process based on the assessment and evaluation can be a make it or break it situation for the student. Upon entering high school, students are able to receive their first failure, “F” or “R”. What are the effects of this on student’s mentality?

A student will go through eight years of the education system with being given access to the necessary support systems because they have been pushed along in the system. This reporting process is not fair to students who may have an individual education plan (IEP), are English Language Learners or have some sort of inhibitor which effects the student’s ability to learn. Although they may require modified or alternative expectations, these students may also require additional time or access to other materials and by pushing students forward into the next year without having the full knowledge of expectations is not necessarily the solution. Individual boards will create policies to lower the range of percentage marks below 50 % that teachers can record on the report cards of students in grade nine to twelve. What this policy creates a system for teachers to “pity pass” or offer students significant second chances in order to make sure they only have a certain number of students below the half line. Is it fair those students
who are all at different points in their lives and abilities are still subjected to similar 
evaluations and forced to learn the same material at the same pace?

2.7 Inclusive Classrooms and the Impact of Social Promotion

The movement toward the inclusion of students with disabilities into general 
education classes has become the overwhelming trend in education (Chow & Kasari, 
1999; Mamlin, 1999). This has become the reality for Ontario since the introduction of 
the document and ensuring policies of Growing Success in 2010. Student performance in 
Ontario has been essentially flat since 1997; results of the government’s own tests 
(aligned with the provincial curriculum) indicate that improvements in achievement have 
stalled over the past years. For instance, concerning reading abilities, about fifty percent 
of grade three students achieve a level 3 standing, the expected level or higher, while 
about sixty percent achieve at this level in mathematics and yet these students who do not 
achieve the expected level are promoted (Leithwood et. al., 2000). For students who 
would benefit from additional support or more one-on-one attention, they are placed at a 
disadvantage because of inclusive classrooms as they are grouped in with thirty. 
Classroom teachers are unable to provide the necessary support for these students with 
exceptionalities as they may not have the proper training, or be unable to spend the 
required time with the student and ignore other students. This question arises: are 
inclusive creates serving the purpose of equity or equality for students?

There are two large problems with social promotion in regards to students with 
disabilities; the policy does not take individual exceptionalities into considerations for 
needed support systems, and the policy starts out assuming that schools already have 
adequate resources to get all students to a proficient level with in one or two years of
being promoted, if teachers would only use those resources better. The implication is that administrators and teachers are not working hard enough, not working well, or both. Thus, with willpower, effort and collaboration, schools and school boards can force their way to receive unprecedented results from the students. This reasoning ignores every part of the student’s life and real factors that impede improvements in teaching and learning, such as large class sizes, inadequate books, and outmoded technology, as well as non-school factors like disabilities, poverty and high student mobility (Guisbond and Neill, 2004). According to Pavri and Luftig, social promotion creates an atmosphere of exclusivity and exclusion: “merely placing students with disabilities in inclusive classrooms is not sufficient to allow for their social inclusion and that other supports need to be in place to facilitate their acceptance and belonging in the peer group” (2001). While social promotion does not take the individual into consideration, effectively informing students who have disabilities that they must learn to cope in a setting where they are disadvantaged.

There is no empirical support for retention or social promotion as effective interventions for children with school failure. The problem with both of these two options to serve and assist students is that they are reactive actions. Social promotion and retention is done as a reaction to a student being unable to achieve curriculum standards. It was suggested that future research focus on the identification of more efficient and appropriate instruction for children with different learning rates and styles, rather than on these pseudo solutions (Carstens, 1985). The problem with inclusive classrooms and social promotion, is that there are now too many expectations placed on the teacher as well as the student. As a teacher, they are expected to engage every student in their
classroom, with limited resources and training, while ensuring that every other student is receiving the same attention. Yet, first and foremost in an inclusive classroom, a safe place must be made and all students must be comfortable and given the opportunity to participate. Pavri and Luftig demonstrate that students with learning disabilities were lonelier than students without disabilities and that their loneliness appeared to be versed in reality inasmuch as they were less popular and more controversial than their peers (2001). For a teacher inside instructing an inclusive classroom the emphasis is dealing with student’s feelings of loneliness and depression while also teaching them required social skills. Thus, academics take are no longer the primary focus of the classroom and students fall further behind the expected curriculum standards.

Finally, it should be pointed out that the current findings as to the decreased popularity and increased controversial status of the students with learning disabilities in an education setting occurred within the inclusive classroom. A variety of studies have found that students often do not accept their peers who have disabilities (Bryan, 1997) and that they are more likely to hesitate, reject or to be critical of the behaviors of students with disabilities (Stitt et al., 1988). Thus, it is important to note that merely placing students with disabilities in inclusive classrooms is not sufficient to allow for their social inclusion and that other supports need to be in place to facilitate their acceptance and belonging in the peer group. While social promotion is reactive, one suggestion to help integrate a student with disabilities in to the classroom successfully is to offer flexible schedules for these student’s, where the school day and school year is adapted to meet the student’s needs. For example, instead of strictly enforcing students to fall in step with the rigid structured timetables, students could either elect to enrol in a
block schedule format where they take all of their courses, every other day throughout the school year but for longer periods of time allowing the student more opportunities to ask questions and inquire, receive feedback and develop on their path to success. Though this is similar to the setup of some high schools, reorganizing the school schedule and year is gaining more popularity in return for student success (Johnson and Rudolph, 2001).

Neither social promotion nor student retention is supported by research. When looking at the effects of the policy of social promotion on students with disabilities, especially since the introduction and rapid growth of inclusive classroom, students are insecure, lonely and disengaged as they fall further and further behind curriculum expectations.

2.8 Learning Disability Theoretical Framework

It is often voiced with regards to retention, that a disproportionate number of students who have an individual education plan or who have a learning disability and are held back to repeat. I will approach the topic of retention versus social promotion versus identification and intervention as a case study. This study will be completed by interviewing a variety of teachers and school administrators to understand their experience with these three concepts and what they believe would be the best approach and how that could then be implemented smoothly into the education system. This topic will be approached using a disabilities interpretive lens as it has already been demonstrated that the current education system does not treat students as equitable. In fact, the current reporting process and curriculum presents a struggle for those who are unable to keep up with the system. For example, a student who may have a delayed
learning condition and is unable to keep up with the class material does not have a fair chance when it comes time for the evaluation process. Due to this, there is a need to change the system, it is not fair that students are subjected to social promotion and not given a reasonable chance to succeed in further years.

With this framework I will focus on a student’s ability to succeed, I will not focus on the differences of students learning abilities as a defect, but rather a bump that some students need to overcome on their academic journey. It is with this mindset that I will present interviewees with questions that address differences in the classroom, while avoiding labels and how this is then reflected in the evaluation process. The key point that will be addressed in this paper is what the meaning of safe space is in the schools and how the school’s environment through policy and curriculum do not provide students with the opportunity to learn (Creswell, 2013). The meaning of what a safe school is will encompass administration, teachers, parents and students. Using this framework I will focus on concepts and how these ideas have influenced a variety of students in the classroom.

2.9 Three concepts that will be the focus for the study

Retention

Retention, which can also be called red-shirting, holding back, is the practice of having a student repeat a grade, with the expectation that the student can work on the academic skills necessary to advance to the next level with a greater potential for academic success. This action includes holding a student behind and encouraging the child to redo the grade so that they can have a full and complete understanding of the material covered. Retention is operated under the belief, that if the child does not develop
the basic skills necessary for completing the grade there is little chance for success in further grades as the basic skills are continuously built upon. The main ideas behind the process is giving the child another chance or year to catch-up and develop the skills for a positive outcome (Stump). Retention is a system that represented as an option for students to have a second chance at success. The student is given the opportunity to continue developing their skills in the academic settings. Very little research has been done on the non-academic outcomes such as peer relationships and self-esteem.

Consider a student being pushed forward without adequate knowledge of the course material; they are then subjected to a series of classes, which continue teaching and instructing off of presumed skills they should have learned the year before. This means that before class has even begun some students in the class are already behind. A common critique of retention is that students have greater inattentive, anxious and disruptive classroom behaviour, yet how does this change when they are placed in a class where they are unable to understand classroom material. Notwithstanding this, Alexander et al. (2004) later noted that the positive effects of retention diminish over time and that even these positive effects will not bring retained students’ achievement to the level of the ‘average’ student in their new cohort. Seemingly, those who tend to argue in favour of retention come are teachers in the elementary school level, where the teachers are not aware of the ultimate damage that can be caused in later years (Martin, 2011). However, in this study, three faculty members of the OSSTF will be interviewed in order to understand the opinion of high school workers. Much of the research and material available is focused on the elementary level, how much will holding a student back effect a child of the younger age, however, not very much has been done in relation to high
school students. In opposition to this argument, how much does social promotion affect the success of students in high school if they have not developed basic skills necessary for success?

**Social Promotion**

As it has been outlined at the beginning of this chapter Ontario’s education and curriculum have undergone numerous changes, some more extensive than others. Perhaps one of the most contested subjects is the idea of social promotion as an alternative to retention. Social promotion is the passing of students to the next grade with their peers even though they are not academically prepared or able to do the required work (Thomas, 2000). There are some key points in this statement, the students who are subject to social promotion are unable to successfully complete work which is expected of them, they do not reach provincial standards, but they are moving through the academic system and growing up with their peers. Perhaps the most impactful outcome of the social promotion program is that it maximizes the number of students graduating with a high school diploma, but the question remains have they mastered and are able to demonstrate the expected academic skills? As Thompson explains, it is virtually impossible to tell how common social promotion as currently there are no statistics kept on social promotion in part because few boards or districts for that matter will admit to embracing the practice, this is the case in Ontario (2000). Yet, the impact of social promotion on students is irrevocable, it can delude students into thinking that they have the critical skills and abilities to be successful meaning that if and when they do not succeed in high school it is a harder blow to recover from. Worse, it can encourage students into believe that learning does not matter, they will succeed no matter what they do (Thomas, 2000).
In the recently produced policy by the Ministry of Education it is stated, “Teachers may use the code “I” when evaluating and reporting student achievement,” this is used for students between the grades of one and ten (Growing Success, 2010). “I” stands for insufficient evidence is available or provided to the teacher in order to determine a letter grade that accurately represents the students learning ability or knowledge. It is at the discretion of school boards to implement the policies how they would like teachers to follow guidelines. While there is a standardized curriculum and report card, it is up to the teachers, administration and school board to decide how student success will be achieved. In Ontario, social promotion is the common theme, students between kindergarten and grade eight are unable to fail or be retained instead they are assigned into the next year even though they have not demonstrated proper knowledge of the standard curriculum or class material. The problem with this situation is that social promotion has come under fire for being too lenient on students. The school system has got in to the habit of passing students from one grade level to the next with no accountability on the part of the student or teacher. In addition, it is believed that under this program students do not develop adequate academic skills to be successful in the future, instead they appear to slip through the cracks and continue to succeed without fully developing the necessities (Jimerson et. al, 2006).

Identification and Intervention

It is hard to fully identify which students are in need of additional support versus which students need a little extra motivation. Sometimes students feel overwhelmed, they struggle to find enough time to complete homework or they might not have adequate support at home, so they are unable to grasp concepts as easily as others. In a classroom,
a teacher will come across a wide variety of students, some might have learning
disabilities, developmental issues, English language learners or they might lack
motivation. However, each and every one of these issues presented as just as important as
the last and it is crucial for teachers to assist the students in any reasonable way possible.
In society teachers are seen to be in a position of trust and power, parents entrust their
children to the care of the teachers and administration. *In loco parentis* refers to the idea
that teachers act in place of the parent for the purpose of educating the child, thus, parents
expect three things for their child, 1) the student has an opportunity to acquire a variety of
academic and non-academic skills, 2) there is equity and equality in the classroom, and 3) the students are placed in a safe, inclusion environment which nurtures learning (Scarfo & Zuker, 2011). Identification is a responsibility placed on the teacher to be aware and acknowledge that a student is in need of extra support. Then moving into a process of aid and assistance, it is important to respect developmental, cultural, linguistic, and gender differences among students when selecting and implementing interventions (Jimerson *et. al*, 2006).

Ontario’s education credo since the introduction of all the policy changed
discussed earlier has a child-based approach with a focus on assessment and results to
education, which is all very well intended however the foundation of the approach
appears to be lacking as evident by the poor achievement results and slipping provincial
wide test scores (Raphael, 1993). This approach, however well intentioned, limits public
accountability and student enthusiasm for success. In order for identification and intervention to best work, this idea of outcomes-based learning needs to be removed from the classroom. The prescribed list of expectations that has been produced fails to
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acknowledge the different experiences of students and teachers. By having a central focus on the results of students the approach contradicts itself by not allowing the students to achieve their best, as they may not be given access to the necessary resources in order to be successful (Wien & Marling, 1998). Central to this, is that students are taught to regurgitate information, enquire and questioning is not a central focus of the curriculum. For identification and intervention to become achievable, teachers and administration must work alongside the school board in order to create an education system which will have a set of goals that encourage an environment where are students have access to education for them. A teacher is responsible for effective instruction to their students and in order for this to be achieved, a teacher must work to identify the needs of students and provide assignments and assessments that best fit their capacity while still challenging the student to grow academically (Scarfo & Zuker, 2011). If one is to achieve this, it will be done through intervention and making the proper resources and supports available to all students in need.

Chapter Summary

As it has been shown, there has been very little research done on social promotion, much of the research presented has been alongside or in opposition to retention in school. At the time of research, the only other option to retaining a student was social promotion, encouraging students through continuing them in their education and pushing them forward. Little research has since then been done on social promotion and the impact this process has on students whether that is academic or non-academic. The message that should be sent to the students is clear: “in this classroom and at this very moment, you are a valuable and valued person: without you this entire enterprise
would flounder and fail” (Ayer, 2010). The current education system set in place does not encourage or represent this statement by any means. In order for students to feel like valued members of society they must be encouraged to participate and given a chance to succeed. This study will look in to how student success so far in education has been measured, what are the protocols set in place for at-risk students and what is realistic to help students get back on the right track to success.
Chapter 3: METHODOLOGIES

3.1 Introduction

This research is a qualitative study. This paper explores the results of social promotion in Ontario public schools, focusing on the effects that this policy can have on both teachers and students through interviews that were conducted with three experienced educators, varying in disciplines from the classroom, guidance and administration. The emphasis of these interviews were placed on the impact social promotion has had on teachers and their experiences either promoting a students knowing they will not be successful or failing students for the first time. The main point of this study is to call direct attention to three important terms including social promotion, continuous education and retention, by dissecting each term and by focusing on the impact these practices have on teachers and the classroom experience. This was done by interviewing three educators in the Ontario College of Teachers. Much of the research will be based on my own personal data collection which was restricted by both time and access to participants. In addition, to further emphasis my results I used already existing literature surrounding social promotion and new intervention programs in Ontario as well as pre-existing data from American studies to help support my data collection, analysis and conclusions.

3.2 Procedures

The primary means of data collection was done through interviews with teachers and school administration. The focus of these interviews was to gain knowledge, beliefs and examples of social promotion in the classroom and school system, highlighting what lasting effects this program has had on teachers and students alike. These interviews were conducted in an environment of the participants choosing as I had hoped the participants
would feel comfortable and have the opportunity to be completely honest. The format of the interview followed a series of questions that were pre-designed, with every participant answering the same questions. However, the participants were encouraged to expand on ideas and if willing, were asked to propose potential solutions or alternatives. I did not have a time limit set on the interviews, giving the participants time to discuss as much as they would like as I asked personal and open-ended questions. As said before I did ask my participants to expand on most ideas in order to gather as much data as possible. However, when finished the interview participants were not able to add any remarks to the original draft. All participants were able to do, if they wanted, was review the interview after I had made a final copy of the transcription. If the participants decided they wanted to change their answers, this was documented and in some circumstances this was discussed in the analysis and conclusions.

The interview questions that will be used for data collection can be found in appendix A.

3.3 Participants

In an attempt to gather as much representative data as possible, I interviewed three very different participants in the education system with a wide variety of teaching experience and differing daily interactions with students. For example, a classroom teacher has experience with the students in the classroom and their pre-existing knowledge on the subjects, as well as in high school, being the first teacher to fail the student if needed. Whereas guidance staff will be working individually with the student to develop an individual education plan that can support the student to the best of the school’s ability in an attempt to keep the student in school and ultimately result with
student success. Finally, my third participant was a principal who has very different interactions with the students, generally this interaction will warrant some sort of intervention on the students’ education plan outside of the classroom. By using three different roles in the school system, I was able to gain a deeper understanding in how social promotion effects the education system as whole, instead of perhaps one side. As continuous education is a sensitive topic that not many educators are willing to discuss, especially in regards to the effects in the classroom, I found that even though the interviews were confidential, the private interview in some cases was not enough to encourage these educators to be open. Some participants did not feel comfortable answering all the questions, and in addition, I had a participant should to withdraw from participation as they felt the issue was too political and would reflect poorly on their professionalism. The ultimate goal was to explore these sensitive topics and create an open dialogue on teachers experiences with students and their ability to help students reach their full capacity for knowledge. The educators I sought out all worked within a school board in Ontario, and had been impacted by Growing Success.

Participant 1: Ariel has been teaching with the Peel District School Board for forty years now, and only this year decided it was time to retire. She has taught a variety of age groups, but for the majority of her tenure as a teacher, she elected to teach either grade seven or eight, her last few years were spent teaching grade eights preparing students for high school. Much of Ariel’s experiences lead her to state that she is very concerned with the education system and believes we are in the middle of a crisis as students are not prepared entering high school. Ariel states that a generation of students are being raised who will be incapable of succeeding in the modern era, as they are being taught to be
egocentric and give up if they are unable to complete the task at hand, as they will be promoted anyways.

Participant 2: Belle has been teaching in Ontario for thirty-seven years, and in the past ten years recently transferred from the Hastings and Prince Edward District School Board to the Halton District School Board. Belle has only taught in the high school setting, but has taught a variety of grades, from nine – twelve, with student ages ranging from thirteen to twenty-one. Furthermore, Belle has two children currently going through the public school system, both of which just recently entered high school. Belle explained that every year she has to deal with being the first teacher to ever fail a student and that can definitely take its toll on an educator. But, for students entering a new environment, failure can be the ultimate blow, which has crippling effects on the student’s morality. Belle is the only participant who works in an Ontario public high school to participant in this research and offers tremendous insight into students handling the adjustment between elementary and high school expectations.

Participant 3: Merida is currently working for the Toronto District School Board as a Vice-Principal. She has about fourteen years of prior teaching experience primarily working with elementary school students between the ages of eight and twelve, as a classroom teacher and then a Student Success teacher, In-School Support Programmer (ISSP) and finally a guidance councillor. Merida has worked with many students who are directly impacted by social promotion, either by creating an individual education plan, or trying to ensure the student is receiving the proper treatment and access to support. Merida had tremendous insight into the reasoning behind social promotion and what
students it is meant to help, versus the reality of the implementation of the policy and who it really affects.

3.4 Recruitment Strategies

In terms of recruiting the participants, I emailed three different schools located in as diverse of a location as possible, the HDSB, PDSB, and TDSB. The major form of communication used for selection and then follow-up information as well as any general contact information was emailing. I was not opposed to interviewing individuals with whom who I have either a personal or professional relationship, however, I tried to avoid this as much as possible so as to not impact the data collected. Belle is the only interviewee I have a professional relationship as she was an associate teacher at a school I was doing one of my practicums at. As I have outlined previously, three educators were interviewed.

3.5 Procedures and Analysis

Data Collection:

The data was collected through three semi-structured interviews that ranged from an hour and a half to two hours long. The interview questions looked at teacher’s opinions and experiences within the classroom when trying to work within the realms created by the policy. These interviews were transcribed by myself and were then read over individually and as a collective to see where similar themes or major points of discussion were carried over between all the participants. Participants were informed about the study being conducted prior to the interview, as well as assured that the interview will remain anonymous and confidential. The interview questions provided to participants just prior to the interview will be provided in the appendices of this paper. I
did not use any additional software to aid in transcribing the interviews. Everything was
done by hand, and re-checked in an attempt to avoid technological or third-party errors.

*Data Coding and Analysis:*

When analyzing the data once it had been collected, I began by reviewing each
interview individually ensuring that there is a break in time in between the reviews so as
to avoid an unintentional influence of one interview on the other, I took about a two-week
period between transcribing. Following the transcribing, the interview data was coded
meaning that the transcriptions went through thorough revision and analyzing. This was
done through several methods including initial coding, simultaneous coding, in vivo
coding, provisional coding, holistic coding, and values coding (Saldana, 2009).

Once each interview had been transcribed and then analyzed for themes and main
points, I reviewed all the interviews simultaneously in an attempt to see if there are any
common themes or responses, this was done by using colour coding and looking for
similar terms used. This was all done to see if there were any common trends. These
themes, and repeated points of concern then became the body of the analysis section,
where I explored and suggested possibilities as to why the data suggest what it does. In
addition, when analyzing the interviews, I tried to build a conceptualisation map using
the three major terms: social promotion, continuous education and retention, which
enabled me to condense each interview and filter the information provided so as to create
a coherent explanation of educator’s opinion of social promotion in Ontario public
schools. This was done by deconstructing the interviews through a learning disabilities
theoretical framework lens as it has already been demonstrated that the current education
system does not treat students as equitable. In fact, the current reporting process and
curriculum presents a struggle for those who are unable to keep up with the system. Therefore, the focus of my analysis of the data collected was the impact of the policy on the students from the perspective of teachers.

3.6 Limitations of the Interviews

One limitation of this study is the access to research participants. Due to research board of ethics clearance at the Ontario Institute in Education at the University of Toronto, I was unable to gain clearance to interview students and see how comfortable they are in class and whether or not they believe they are being given an opportunity to gain a proper education. In addition, some individuals who I had requested to interview were unable to participate because I did not have ethical clearance for the individual school boards. Thus, my access to research participants was severely reduced, forcing the sample size for my study to be reduced. Though all experiences described by the participants are valuable, a more diverse sample would have provided a more holistic understanding of the impact of social promotion.

Location has been a major influence on my research; for example, if I tried to interview a teacher in their classroom I felt that their responses to my questions were not necessarily as open or honest compared to those interviews that I conducted privately in a coffee shop. I am concerned that teachers were worried and concerned with a sense of having to protect themselves and their opinions from other teachers or administration for fear of repercussions.

Furthermore, I believe that geography has had an immeasurable impact on my research, because of the scale of the province and my inability to travel and interview a representative in each school district, I have tried to endeavour to have a cross section of
representative data through the use of three different school boards. These reforms might help students in a rural context who may already be working in the field of their future employment, however, for urban learners; these programs could reduce the availability of support programs. One thing that I have noticed is when I begin to discuss my topic with educators I find that teachers who live in an urban area are adamantly against the policies and more willing to discuss openly the effects of the policy in schools. I believe that making statements on the impact of social promotion in rural areas falls outside of the scope for this students due to availability or rather lack of availability in the rural areas.

While these limitations suggest there is a gap in my research, I believe I will be able to overcome this issue by bringing forward these limitations and creating a dialogue in my findings. In addition, I have tried to use data from other case studies that have been conducted to support my conclusions and claims for next steps. Each participant had a specific role in the field of education that was different from the other. Since this is not a comparison study, I examined each participant’s experiences individually. To overlook the limitations that have been brought forward, this paper strictly focuses on urban schools and urban teachers. Nevertheless, these limitations are crucial to keep in mind while reading the findings and results from the research and interviews.

3.7 Ethical Review Procedures

Interview participants were given letters of informed consent prior to participating in the interview process, which they were required to and sign before the interview was conducted (see Appendix A). A copy of this form was given to the participant and another copy was retained for the records of the study. Participants were provided with the necessary information about content, consent and confidentiality to ensure that the
participant is fully informed and comfortable participating. Before the start of each interview I reminded participants that they have the ability to refrain from answering any question and the opportunity to withdrawal from the study up to the date it was submitted (March 31st, 2016). In addition, participants were informed that they can review or revise their answers at any point, even after the interview, once a copy of the transcription has been sent to them, however, all of the revisions were recorded and an opportunity for discussion in the findings. Every effort was made to ensure the participant is comfortable and willing to participate in the interview and ensure the interviewees understood they can change their mind about the use of the data at any point during the research process until submission.

To ensure that confidentiality is upheld throughout the research process any information that could compromise the anonymity of a participate was changed through the use of pseudonyms. All information specific to the participant was omitted or changes to protect the participant’s identity.

3.8 Research Question

What are three Ontario educator’s perspectives on the effects of social programs in a public school setting?

- Is social promotion representative of the equitable education the Ministry of Education specifies?

- Does social promotion have any impact on teachers?

- What are other potential programs for teachers that seem reasonable to aid a student’s journey through the education system?
Chapter 4: KEY FINDINGS

4. Introduction

Many educators are quick to dismiss the merit of keeping a struggling student in a grade for an additional year so that they can be academically successful (Zwaagstra, 2009). Social promotion is set under the false pretense that the policy is acting in the best interests of the student in mind. Yet, they forget to include the students in the assessment of this process causing a miscommunication a lack of expectation to encourage student achievement when promoted. On the flip side, when a teacher receives a student who has been socially promoted, they are forced to cope with a ride range of modified expectations and performance levels. Though differentiated instruction is a great start, it will only take a class so far as the teacher will now be instructing from a variety of curriculums. Looking forward, for a student to enter high school, they will not only be lacking basic knowledge to be successful, students are entering high school without the basic academic skills needed for success. If the education is meant to set students up for success, and high schools goals are to have students become active participants in society, how can this be accomplished when students are not given access to this education?

This chapter will outline the study findings and discuss the prominent themes that emerged: (1) teacher’s perspectives; (2) role of teachers; (3) realities of the policies enactment; (4) effects on students; and (5) a blanket statement policy. The research question that informed the study is: what are three Ontario educator’s perspectives on the effects of social promotion in a school setting, with particular emphasis placed on the enactment of the policy as being equitable. This chapter also address how the research
questions were revealed through the shared experiences of the experienced educator participants. In this chapter, pseudonyms are only used for the three teacher participants who contributed extended narratives.

The policy *Growing Success*, which was enacted by the Ministry of Education in 2010, created a standard set of policies and practices surrounding assessment, evaluations and reporting in all Ontario schools. The goal was to help improve graduation rates in Ontario by improving student learning, maintaining high standards which will now be consistent across the province, and take into consideration the importance of student, teacher and parent in the education system. However, when discussing *Growing Success* with three different educators in Ontario, each had similar comments, “I know I have that document somewhere with the tree on it. I think it is buried in the back of a closest or something in my classroom.” While the policy is meant to be a guide that is there to help teachers complete the report card process, in reality, it is a blanket statement document which provides teachers with little to no agency when it comes time to the reporting process and assigning grades “the code ‘I’ may be used in a mark book and/or on a student’s report card, including the final report card, to indicate that insufficient evidence is available to determine a letter grade or percentage mark…R and percentage marks below 50 percent indicate the need for the development of strategies to address the student’s specific learning needs in order to support his or her success in learning” (Ministry of Education, 2010). Rather than address students who are falling behind, every student is declared to be a ‘success’ and is promoted to the next grade without any evidence or achievement. As has been discussed by Martin, the next-grade teacher has a classroom of varied preparedness, with which it is nearly impossible to teach the whole
standard curriculum and ultimately worsening the situation but dispersing accountability (2011). The uninformative report card process as outlined in Growing Success leaves no paper trail and very few recommendations and strategies for the student’s success in the future.

4.1. Understanding Social Promotion from a Teacher’s Perspective

   It is crucial to conceptualize the teachers’ understanding of what social promotion is and how this will affect the ways in which they develop lessons inside the classroom. Most of the questions asked are targeting the opinions of the experienced educators surrounding social promotion inside the classroom and what visual, substantive impacts they can see it having on the classroom as a whole with an emphasis on the students. Interestingly, all three educators discuss social promotion as having the biggest impact on the environment of the classroom and the way in which the teachers are forced to conduct their lessons and teach students are their pace. Ensuring that the teachers have prepared multiple activities and multiple lesson plans for each and every student in the classroom to help them learn and develop at their own pace.

When asked the question, what is social promotion, only one interviewee was able to give me an answer. Merida defined social promotion as:

   I would describe social promotion as a child who is prepared with the necessary skill set socially and have met the required Learning Skills as outlined by the Ministry of Education to move on to the next grade level.

   Looking at the background of Merida’s experience, and taking in to consideration she is now a Vice-Principal, her definition for social promotion is fitting. It is, however, a little bit shocking that the other two interviewees were unaware of the policy and unable to provide a definition or any opportunities for professional development. I find this fact
rather troublesome as the teachers are supposed to be the individuals assigning grades based on evidence and assessment of the students. If they do not believe a student is ready to move on to the next grade, they must devise a learning plan and potential strategies to help the student be successful in the future. However, as far as either are concerned, both Ariel and Belle are aware that students can not fail until they enter high school, but they do not know the reasons or policies behind it. As Ariel explains “I recently tried to hold a student back [retain] to provide them with another opportunity for success and the principal overturned my assessment, providing the student with new grades.” In fact, upon having the policy explained to them, both adamantly disagreed with the policy explaining their motivations from first hand experience inside the classroom. This will be discussed further throughout the chapter. However, Merida has more understanding of the policy and added evidence both from a teaching and administration experience as to why social promotion existed: “depending on the needs of the child, communication with our special ed. department and the families with determine if they are promoted, transferred or retained.” Yet, what is left out, is that rarely are students ever retained, even before the introduction of Growing Success. Upon talking to Ariel she explained that in her forty years of teacher only six students have ever been retained, and none of those have been in the last ten years.

As the data from the interview shows, and as Martin continues to discuss among educators there is a large divide of understanding the reason behind and enacting policy (2011). Ariel goes on to explain that this can cause distance between teachers, administration and parents as there is little communication had between all three. After asking the participants to provide their own understanding of social promotion, I offered
a brief explanation of what social promotion is to create a proper understanding and agreement for the rest of the interview. The definition is as follows: “continuous education or social promotion is where a child cannot fail. So when the students are in kindergarten all the way up to grade eight they are given an “I” for incomplete or insufficient evidence to assess. Ultimately it is where you, as a teacher cannot fail the student and they continue to be pushed forward, or promoted into the next grade. But the child does not necessarily understand they have failed, they only see an “I,” no F, no R or anything like that.” This definition was referred to continuously throughout the interview by myself and the interviewees, with specific attention paid to the idea that the students do not necessarily understand they have failed, or that they are not up to curriculum expectations, yet they continued to be promoted.

4.1.1 Basic Development of Academic Skills

When interviewing three different experienced educators, first and foremost, each participate explained that they believed students were not receiving the proper instruction for certain academic skills. The importance of the development of academic skills when the students is being promoted from elementary school into secondary school, meaning they are moving from grade eight to grade nine. As Belle explained:

[Upon entering high school] Students do not know how to study, teachers have taught to the mainstream, the middle, so academics [students in the academic stream] get things right away and have never had to deal with homework, they retain a lot of the information that is what makes them academic, they do not have to study … and organizational skills are brutal. So those are the two areas where I feel all students are lost because they have not streamed early enough to really tailor the information and skills to the students set of needs.
A clear sense of a lack of preparation for students emerges as the students have not been offered an opportunity to develop these necessary skills. If students are continuously promoted and are unable to acquire skills such as organization and preparation, how can teachers and parents expect students to be successful when class content becomes material focused at a faster pace in high school. Students who are moving through the education school have never felt the need to work to acquire these skills, either the material is easy enough for them to grasp and retain the concepts without the affirmation of studying. Or, on the other side, students are aware of the fact that if they do not fully grasp concepts and are unable to demonstrate sufficient understanding of the material, they will still be promoted to the next grade where the material will become more difficult. It is a harsh reality in high school that students can and potentially will fail. But, what if students had been introduced to this reality before entering high school, where they are not only streamed for the first time, but are also, entering a new environment, with new friends, a new teacher for each subject, whereby balancing a renewed social and more intense academic life? A clear sense of student development in skills throughout their academic career and not just in the high school setting is crucial for a comprehensive initiative of student engagement and success.

4.1.2 Learning from Adversity and Motivation

The first part of the interview with the educators focuses on student development or lack thereof where social promotion is involved. When discussing with Ariel, she has some great insights towards the idea of learning from adversity and students not receiving this opportunity to grow, develop and mature as young adults:

We fail in life, everyone fails in life and the child’s needs to learn that can happen… The kids now know the policy
so they figure they can just screw around unless they are self-motivated or parent-motivated, and in school now-a-days there are very few of either. They simply could care less, they do not do the work, they do not do anything because they know they are just going to be pushed on. So the first time somebody at McDonalds says you did not make the hamburger right they will be devastated.

When looking specifically at the social promotion section of the policy in *Growing Success*, the original intent is to help students with an Individual Education Plan (IEP), where students require modified or alternative expectations to be success in the classroom but continue on from grade to the next grade with their peers for social development. However, as school boards implement the policy, it affects all students, not only those with IEP’s. This, as Ariel explains, is where other students have learnt from those before them, like an older sibling of how to play the system and be promoted with the least amount of effort. Therefore, as Belle explains, when a student enters high school and but has been a subject of social promotion, they will generally have a note reading similar to this in their IEP: “It’s like, how do you help them [the student] move forward? It appears to be an instruction on how we have helped them move forward, so in a sense, it is saying we have pushed them through, and here are what the next steps to continue with this path of promotion.” Nevertheless, if a student has been promoted, and does not have an IEP, there is no indication as to whether or not the students has the necessary skills to be successful, and thus it will take more time for the teacher to fully grasp how to differentiate for each student’s needs.

The question then becomes, how does a teacher motivate students inside the classroom to achieve while fighting the constraints of policy? As Ariel explains in a
grade seven or eight classroom it will get reach a point where students will feel like they are drowning and are then not only disengage but become disheartened with a feeling of failure. When everyone else knows the answer and one student does not, it becomes a constant battle to bring them back into the classroom and engage with the material. Subsequently, in a class size of thirty, Ariel explains there are at least six to eight students who she needs to be consciously reaching out to the student on a daily basis, using contracts and extrinsic motivation such as bribes to have the student participate and behave in a certain way that is conducive so that the rest of the class will learn as well. Accordingly, as Merida explained the emphasis needs to be placed on helping student become

Socially successful and understand the importance of co-operating with others, respecting one-self and others, and self-regulate, collaborate with peers and have the confidence to take initiative.

By encouraging and fostering these skills in students they will be set up for success in the future. It becomes a daily field of conversations and negotiations with the student and the ultimate goal is a self-sufficient young adult who can engage of their own accord. Social promotion offers opportunities of redemption for the students, however, teachers must work alongside the academic community and the student to decide what is best for the student to work on and create alternative success criteria for achievement, continuous education is not the answer. Ariel argues that is does not help the student in the future, it merely provides a temporary false sense of security and achievement which will be taken away in high school.

4.2. Expectation for Teachers
The goal of this research was to outline teacher’s roles when helping students who experience social promotion. By looking at teacher agency inside the classroom, the aim is to dissect government policy and the ways in which teachers work to interpret, enact and manipulate the rules to fully help and engage students on a path to success. However, through conversations with many educators when on practicum or volunteering in schools and in interviews for this study, it is apparent the variety of teachers I discuss with do not agree with the current policy as it creates a redefined role in which teachers are expected to wear multiple hats moving from an instructor, to a role model, to a peer and ultimately a creator of a safe space where all students will be successful. To a great extent, these teachers define the success of their roles by being able to empower all of their students. They see themselves as individuals who are expected to help thirty to ninety students become self-reliant, self-motivated, and curious about learning and entering the world. And yet, with all of these expectations, the teacher’s ultimate purpose is to prepare students to enter society as active citizens who are set up for success. Except, with social promotion, how is this conceivable? Through differentiated instruction.

4.2.1. Differentiated Instruction

Differentiated instruction, the most common word used through all of the interviews, it is becoming evident that teachers are expected to teach each individual in their class, not as a whole using mainstream, but through the creation of individual student-centered curriculums. When discussing Ariel’s assessment and reporting experience as an educator, it is interesting how she brought up the introduction of Growing Success, and how that not only changed the reporting process, but in doing so,
changed the composition of her classroom, making it much more difficult to tailor curriculum to students:

When I started out in a normal classroom before all of this [Growing Success policy] I would have three groups, you know, usually you could get 3 groups of high-middle-low, now you have 7 groups and 4 individuals. I certainly find I go home more tired and am doing more at home. My husband laughs but he is not a teacher, he married one, and says during report cards I do not see her, she comes in and goes right to her office. It is not by any means an easy job, but certainly more frustrating and work, heart breaks more and I had to fight, where the kid will say what the hell I am going to pass anyways, I had to fight saying what the hell he is going to pass anyways. When we were told they should not get less than a B, I had to really fight to actually figure out their mark, and I got laughed at a lot for this by colleagues, and if the student was not going to get a B, it was figuring out what work he was going to do until he did. As opposed to just going B-B-B-B-B and making your life easier. I would agonize over all of them and look over everything, then by the time you go to special education students, and they got a B but they are working at a grade 2 level, I would spend hours going through and figuring out each mark, making comments specific to each mark and then when the reports came in and I looked at them, guess what, it would all say B-B-B-B-B.

Discussing teacher agency in the classroom is crucial when analysing how to integrate all students in an inclusive classroom, and engage with each student on their own playing field. However, one must remember that teachers are human too, full of raw emotion both for themselves and the students, and these policies and new expectations of teachers have a huge impact on one’s humanity, as well as teaching. Beneath the surface, it is a game of negotiating space, where teachers must master grading students based on evidence, communicating those grades and expectations to administration for approval,
and then finally, working alongside parents to explain whether expectations are being meant by the student and where there is room for approval. If a teacher does decide to acknowledge a student’s insufficient evidence for grading on a report card with an “I,” or in the case of high school an “F,” the teacher must develop and set in place strategies to address the student’s specific learning needs in order to support their success in learning (Ministry of Education, 2010). As all three educators voice the reality of why would an educator go to such trouble when invariably the mark will be changed and the credit granted? While the document focuses on embellishing student success, the unforeseen impact of teachers is present and growing. Teacher burnout has become an evermore present issue inside schools leading to student disengagement and ultimately lowered expectations, as Ariel explains teachers will assign a grade without consideration or real evaluation of student achievement. According to research from Ken Mrozek, author of “Teacher Stress,” just under 1/3 of new teachers quit before their 5th year of teaching due to overwhelming stress, and about the same amount of teachers, new or experienced, claim that teaching is a very stressful job (Curry, 2012).

4.2.2 Teacher Education and Preparation

“Determining a report card grade will involve teachers’ professional judgement and interpretation of evidence and should reflect the student’s most consistent level of achievement, with special consideration given to more recent evidence,” that is a heavy proposition for teachers to fully grasp upon entering the profession (Ministry of Education, 2010). The overall expectations for teachers are outlined in the Growing Success document and yet, as informed by the interviews, this is a document that is not easily accessible for teachers. Though all three educators explain they do have a copy of
the document, somewhere, and it has been reviewed many times at professional
development sessions, the document itself does not read as a friendly outline to assist
teachers in reporting, more so as Belle puts it, “it’s an instruction manual from Ikea.” As
it has been defined above so far, there are gaps in policy surrounding student engagement
and learning inside the classroom, however, are there issues surrounding teacher
preparation and burnout surrounding the policy?

Many teachers want to be remembered as an inspiring role model who captivate the
minds of their students and help them grow as individuals inside and outside the
classroom. Belle explains it is done through developing basic academic and social skills
that can be transferred over into real life situations. Except, what kind of expectations and
supports are there for new teachers entering the discipline and experiencing a classroom
and evaluation process that looks very different from one they experienced when they
were students? As Ariel explains, she has had the opportunity to mentor many new up
and coming teachers in her forty years of experience and clarified:

If new teachers are diligent and working to help all the students in their class, they will have 6 different reading
groups and 7 different math groups, but I do not know a lot of teachers who do that. Especially new teachers, they
seem to struggle with that the most. But I do not see how any of them can be totally prepared because there are
kids who have been pushed through all the way up. In grade 8 if their teachers are doing what they should are
working at a grade 4 level and the kids who are working at a grade 8 level have been largely ignored all the way
up because if the teacher isn’t willing to differentiate or are unable to. The teachers just resort to teaching to the
middle or lowest in the class and the other students end up getting everything dumbed down.

This resonates with and follows along parallel to what Belle was explaining surrounding
new teachers in a high school setting, especially when teaching grade nine.

But in the classroom from being pushed through they are lacking simple academic skills such as taking notes, organization and studying. Right now we are working on note taking which is a very tough skill to learn and I know I probably didn’t learn until about grade eleven or twelve, and then really forced to learn it at university, but I try to tell them, also, when they are writing down every word, read five words, write the five words and don’t look up until you are finished the five words. But I don’t know how to spell, then that’s another issue. New teachers appear to be content focused, need to get the curriculum done and they are already struggling with their own lesson preparation and putting out fires in the classroom as they come up, is it realistic to have them teach three separate lesson plans in one class for the variety of students being promoted?

The impacts of *Growing Success* are something that cannot be taught, it is something that will be learnt through experience inside the classroom. With the rare mention of the policy in teacher education programs, and the new teachers already have a flux of information and experiences going on around them, does this policy set new teachers, or students for that matter, up for success in the present or future? There is no way to measure the impact of *Growing Success* on teachers, the primarily purpose of the document is to improve student success and learning, but at what cost for teachers?

### 4.2.3 Educational Assistant Support

When I was in middle school, I remember having an Educational Assistant (EA) assigned to my class because we have three students who had it outlined in their IEP that they would benefit from additional support due to delayed development physically and socially. This meant that my teacher had support with not only the three students but also, the rest of the class. Invariably the EA was able to support the whole class by
participating in reading circles and large group discussions. Now, as all three educators explain, there has been a dwindling number of EA support in the classroom, as it is only students who absolutely require an individual support will be assigned one, say a deaf individual. Inclusive classrooms are becoming more prominent and with that, an expectation that teachers will be able to reach and engage every student through differentiated instruction and scaffolding. However, not all teachers are trained in special education or for that matter, understand how to deal with a wide range of skills and competencies from students inside the classroom. As Ariel explains “now kids designated do not get any support. I have had special education and ELL kids in my classroom for years and it has probably been about six years since someone has recently come to take the students outside the classroom for additional support.” In her grade eight classroom, Ariel goes on to explain that this includes students who are behind and even those who are illiterate.

Now, there are still supports inside the school for all students, but they must be willing to go and work for it. As Merida explained:

We offer social work, psycho-educational assessments if the student meets the criteria, guidance at the middle/high school level and of course programs within the school – Boys and Girls clubs, Big Brothers Big Sisters, Social groups with our Social Worker and a variety of other clubs and sports teams. Nevertheless, these supports mentioned all deal with social aspects of student development. It appears that in regards to the academic development of knowledge, the student must learn to acquire that information inside the classroom, seek additional help from teachers outside of classroom hours or at home. Belle explains that once they hit high school, they must actively seek out extra-help at clinics, request for a tutor or learn
to study on their own. In high school Belle continues, it is a lot more hands-off, the
teacher will suggest extra-help or email a parent, but the student must want to or at least
be willing to go. Again taking it back to student motivation and the drive to succeed. At
least, with the lack of EAs inside the classroom, teachers are less able to move and
negotiate educational strategies with the students as the learning must become student
driven.

The diminution of EA support inside the classroom and schools may not come
directly from Growing Success, but it does however have a huge impact on the action of
the policy and the influence on teachers. Inclusive classrooms attempt to bring students
and teachers together fighting stigmas and labelling of students, but to what detriment?
With the higher expectations of teachers in creating student success, the larger classroom
sizes with a variety of students all at varying achievement levels, what hope is there for a
student to make the jump between elementary school to high school where they are not
set up academically for success?

4.3. Realities of the Policy enactment in Schools

Promoting a student from one grade to the next without the basic understanding of
skills or demonstration of understanding all necessary concepts through assessment with
clear standards, the students do not have a hope of succeeding in the next grade. If the
gap continues to widen between ability and expectation for the students, it reaches the
point that eventually the student will enter high school being so disengaged that a teacher
cannot have a hope of re-engaging the student when they have ninety some-odd other
students to be concerned with as well. The realities of high school as Belle explains “a
teacher focuses more on content in order to cover the curriculum, rather than the student.
They must seek the support when needed.” The policy has the best intentions surrounding students concerning their social development and morale, but the realities of the policies inside the schools cannot be ignored. Not only does it take away from teacher responsibility and authority, it does not give a student an equitable opportunity to be successful in the continuous school system. Growing Success is a blanket document that encompasses all students believing they are all the same case, without acknowledging that each student is an individual with differing needs and requires to be looked at from a different perspective. As Ariel explains, the document removes teacher’s decision in the assessment process, leaving it up to administration to decide when a student is ready to be promoted, when teachers are the individuals who spend eight to ten hours a day with the student, and in some cases this could be more time than the parent. Is it not reasonable to deduce that teachers will have a better insight as to what could be beneficial for the student more so than administration, or for that matter policy makers?

Based on the reading of existing literature there appears to be two main points, one is either in favour of social promotion as it helps the student continue to develop socially which is the most important aspects for the students to grow up and become active members of society (Thomas, 2000). Retaining the student would be detriment to their moral and social growth. As Merida explained:

The learning skills are the most important part of the Ontario Provincial report card. If a child is able to be socially successful and understands the importance of cooperating with others, respecting one-self and others, is able to self-regulate, collaborate with peers and have the confidence to take the initiative then they will be able to handle themselves in any given situation in today’s society. Being able to develop personable skills at a young age so they can advocate for themselves and continue to
maintain working relationships with people of all different personalities is in my mind of utmost importance.

Nevertheless, in disagreement, social promotion is a policy created by the Ministry of Education to improve graduation rates and have a higher amount of young adults graduating with a high school diploma entering society with the “necessary skills” (King and Warren, 2008). Students now are being promoted despite their lack of achievement and demonstration of basic skills, the integrity of evaluation and assessment is slowly dwindling. To promote these students does little for their moral and self-identity and in some cases, the argument has been made that it does more harm than good (Alexander et al, 2004). The problem is that many of those who advocate for social promotion, Merida being one, focus on students who have academic difficulties or extenuating circumstances, those who the system is intended to help. However, there are also students who are academically capable but, for whatever reason, chose not to be academically successful, they fall between the cracks until high school where the gap is so wide, and the basic skills have not been developed, that they are unable to make up the difference in the four years and are forced to choose from reduced career options.

4.3.1 Widening Gap for Students between Ability and Expectation

There are factors that govern how much content and what content teachers can incorporate into what they teach in each unit of study and even how much time they can devote to their lessons. As a result, teachers find it challenging to follow an ebb and flow that is most effective for their given class. Perhaps the most outstanding issue that has yet to be addressed by the policy, existing literature and the interviewees is, how are the students who are promoted going to eventually learn the material? Suppose the students continue to receive instruction that is differentiated to the extent that they are in a grade
eight classroom learning at a grade four or five level, when they are promoted to the next
eyear, upon entering high school they are expected to have completed the elementary
curriculum. Each school year builds off of the previous years, therefore, if the students
miss building the basic blocks of their education, when will they acquire the knowledge
in order to be successful? For these students it is as if they have a moving targeting they
are always looking up to hit, but it is slowly getting further and further away. Eventually
these students give up and look for a way to escape from school.

A teacher assigned to a grade seven class will not only be teaching grade seven,
they will need to know a variety of curriculums to fully help their students develop within
that year. This means that the preparation time they are given for one class, now is being
split between five different subjects at say three different grade levels. Looking at it from
a student’s perspective, Ariel brought forward a very valid point:

It is virtually impossible to improve a child over one
level or grade in a year Suppose I have a student who is
at a grade four level in my grade six class. I diligently
work with them and do it, the best I am going to get
them to is grade 5. And then they go into grade 7. Even
if you have teachers who really do work hard to
individualize their lessons, you are still only going to
bring that kid up as far as that kid comes. The gap is
going to get bigger and bigger.

The fear becomes that no matter how hard one teacher works with a student, that student
is still only going to progress at a certain pace. But by promoting them each year they
continue to fall further and further behind, until it gets to a breaking point for the student
where it sounds as though the teachers are speaking a different language, and they totally
turn off and disengage. Then they move into high school, where they are forced to decide
on whether they should enter academic, applied or essentials, at the age of thirteen or
fourteen, students make life-altering decisions for future career aspirations. Well, if a student has not developed the basic educational skills then academic will not work because again the students will feel like they are drowning. Thus, the students are strongly encouraged to go into the applied or essential stream and because of this choice they are making at the age of thirteen or fourteen they are no longer able to go to university and certain career paths are closed.

The unintended reactions of the policy are present and yet continue to be ignored. Students who are promoted fall further and further behind, to the point where they are so overwhelmed, in order to protect themselves, they no longer care, and because of their lack of academic development career paths are predetermined for them, all for the sake of protecting our student’s morale and ensuring they develop socially during younger years, foregoing potential detriment later in life.

4.3.2 Creation of Inclusive Classrooms

By having both a grade eight and grade nine teacher as an interviewee, I am able to gain a deeper insight into how social promotion effects students not only in the middle school years where a higher importance on pedagogy and acquisition of knowledge is made, but how the student carries the consequences with them to high school. Also, I am able to really see the impact of promotion on students making the leap and adjusting between elementary and secondary school expectations. In specific, Belle discussed how a lot of the students have not developed basic organizational and study skills, or for that matter, fully understand how to conduct themselves in the classroom. Where as, Ariel discusses her worry for students who are falling through the cracks and have an unrealistic idea of where their academic achievement is because the grades they receive
on their report cards are not representative of the evidence they have provided and accordingly register for courses in high school they are not necessarily prepared for.

Alongside the promotion of students grows and develops the emphasis of inclusive classrooms, of all students, where those with IEPs and those with out should all be in the same classroom, with the same teacher. While this is a great initiative to fight stigma and labelling of students, the major problem is that with the reducing of EA support, teachers are not equipped to fully incorporate every student in the classroom with success. Ariel believes that administrators and policy makers are so removed from the classroom, that they do not understand the diversity of students and with that, the diversity of levels and achievements that exist in class. She describes having one student who was unable to fully develop ideas both orally or written, and with intense anger issues that quite often the class was forced to relocate for safety. Sure, Ariel was not necessarily comfortable with the situations, but because she has so much experience as an educator she understood how to contain students and ensure safety was of utmost importance, but when she discusses the achievements of the students, expressions of genuine concern and worry for the students are at the forefront of her comments. She is vocal about her concerns as she has experienced classrooms where students who are promoted do not receive equitable access to education and opportunities for learning are disrupted because students are not receiving the support or attention they need:

[Other teachers will think] Oh well then shove them off, let them become someone else’s problem who may or may not deal specifically with his needs and whether they or do not shove him on again and so the kid who was a year behind is now two years behind. And is eventually, the gap is going to widen and widen, is going to drop out or start wearing a hair net.
These blanket policies force teachers to deal with situations that should have been dealt with much earlier. The longer one waits for students to “just figure it out” and continue them on with their course of promotion, the more damage is being done. Teachers are present and working with the best interest of their students, but this must be carried over in to the assigning of grades and in the reporting process of student achievement.

4.3.3 Proactive versus Reactive

Instead of implementing a strict no-fail policy where all students must be promoted until they reach high school at which point the walls come crashing down and reality settles in for the students, the Ministry of Education needs to be looking to help empower teachers and administration to work together and do what is best for the student. This will re-invigorate the system and help maintain the integrity of the educational process, which appears to have lost some of it’s validity. Students must be prepared to enter society set up for success by possessing the necessary skills and knowledge to function in jobs and become an active participant in society. As Belle explained this is done by being proactive rather than reactive:

It is the teachers job and the parents to bring them in and say okay you have not been granted promotion, you are being transferred from 5 to 6, you must A B and C by Christmas or else you will be put back into grade 5 at the point. I have never had a kid have to come back. But they go oh man, if I do not get this, you’re not only being retained with kids you don’t know, it is taking place during the middle of the semester. And it was with a very special student we did that with, case by case.

This is a wonderful example of being proactive in the elementary years rather than reactive in high school and enabling teachers to work alongside parents and administration to figure out what would be in the best interest of the students and create
an education plan. As Belle specifies it is in special cases you would work with students and they must be included in the process. This is somewhat similar to the credit recovery program for high school students, therefore why not integrate a program similar for the students on the elementary level. Further familiarize the students with the education system creating similarities across the curriculums and schools.

Invariably, each interviewee answered the question ““if you were able to change any or all parts of the continuous education policy, what would you change and why,” with similar conclusions, more control and agency needs to be given back to the teachers. It should be an effort on all parts of the teacher, administration, parents and students to reinvigorate their academic success and close the gap of their achievement and curriculum expectations. Perhaps Merida worded it the best:

We always stress the importance of teacher/student/family teamwork. If we keep the lines of communication open with families, then the chances of their children succeeding with be greater. Sometimes we offer support to the families who may also be struggling with social issues.

Schools need to be brought back to the centre of community and an area where those who work at the schools with the students are the drivers of policy. The issue right now is individuals who are not current and have been out of school and the classroom for years upon years are making the policy and sweeping statements that take the individual out of the student. A box is being created which every student fits in, and the expectation is that teachers will be able to make every student successful as long as they differentiate instruct and offer students the opportunity to develop. But, reality is that promoting students with their or the parent’s approval, they are taking away from the student’s opportunity to be successful in the future. Instead, they are offering students the
opportunity to take advantage of the system and coast until it is too late to develop a healthy work ethic to fully grasp concepts.

4.4. Contributing Factors Left Out of the Policy

A common theme that ran through every interview was removing the individual student and looking at each student as if they were the same. The problem with this mentality and predisposition of the document, is that the policy does not take into consideration the outstanding circumstances of the individual. Teachers are required by Ministry to differentiate their lessons on a daily basis and yet a policy produced by the Ministry cannot even follow their own pedagogy. Each student brings their own set of baggage to the classroom, varying from individual to family questions, and by removing the teacher from the decision of whether or not a student is ready to continue on in their education, these incomplete circumstances are not taken into consideration. Meaning that promoting a student in to a new environment, with a new teacher, and a new set of expectations may be more detrimental then giving the student one more chance to be successful and grow in a comfortable environment.

4.4.1 Individual versus Group Mentality

Social promotion will force the student to stay in the same setting with the same courses, programs and instruction that has not been working for them in the past. Warning signs are present and may generally start to show at a young age when the students who are promoted first start to develop the gap between expectation and achievement. This is the point where individual conditions and circumstances need to be taken into consideration as to what will be best for the students. This is where the student learning path needs to begin to be devised, however, because the students are young and
have not necessarily had time to develop, it is difficult for teachers to being to taken into consideration the best ways for the student to learn and what kind of specific supports the students will need in the future. Accordingly, under social promotion, they are pushed forward without any plan or immediate call to action on the student’s behalf.

One example Ariel uses is her grade eight class she taught two years ago. She has previously taught many of these students in grade six. As students enter grade eight expectations for achievement increase as curriculum begins to focus more on content and material in an attempt to have students prepared for high school. But Ariel notices a substantial change in her students from the two-year separation. Ariel argued that,

Now you’ve got 2 kids in your high group, 10 kids in the middle group and the rest are in the low group because there is enough of them that are being pushed through, they aren’t by themselves. I’ve had some kids that have no problem being special education, and other kids that do not want anyone to know.

The composition of the classroom since the introduction of Growing Success is dramatically changing. What once was the standard of as Ariel explains it having three main groups in the classroom, high – middle – low standing. Furthermore, when creating groups and instructing it is easier to tailor lessons to these students as the teacher knows exactly where the students are in terms of curriculum and what the next step is for material acquisition. Now a teacher will have a variety of students all being promoted to the next level, with no further expectations or action plan. Social promotion takes the individual student and unique circumstances out of the equation, and decides that all students need to be promoted for their social development. This blanket policy decides that all students will benefit from being promoted, it takes away the ability for the teacher and administration to look at the student as an individual and the extenuating
circumstance to make a balanced decision for future success.

4.4.2 Support from Home

Looking more at the mitigating factors that the policy does not acknowledge, home life for students can perhaps have one of the largest effects as it meant to be a location of safety and support. Merida having been a guidance councillor and now Vice-Principal deals heavily with parent communication and comments quite a bit on the importance of communication and support between home and school and the crucial role that parents play for a student’s education and development: “I believe that each child comes to school with a very different profile and most are unique in many cases and we as staff and students learn from each individual child. We do have some students of concern but we put supports into place as soon as we can.” Merida comments on these supports previously in the chapter, but they vary from support groups, clubs and counselling for the students and family. However, none of these supports offer the student an opportunity to re-learn material that has been taught in class. To this Merida explains that is why the reporting process is so crucial and must be done accurately along with individual comments for the students, “parents are responsible for their children and therefore are held accountable. Parents can continue to support their children and be an advocate for them (attend meetings, open lines of communication, request extra academic support etc.).” In Merida’s comments she explains a situation where the teacher, administration and parents all communicate and work alongside the student to ensure they are progressing and feel comfortable and supported. However, when discussing these ideas with Belle, she was of another opinion, after having two children of her own graduate the elementary school system recently.
From the experiences of having her own children Belle explains that a majority of students when they come home from spending eight or nine hours at school, do not want to continue to think or even work on school. They may instead be looking for an opportunity to relax and socialize. But, as Belle describes, that is not the main issue. What really affects these students and their ability to continue to be productive with the academic expectations may be factors such as single parents, living situation, other siblings etc. For Belle, one ever-present issue brought forward is a single-parent home. Having the advantage of being a teacher with a steady income and regular hours made child-rearing somewhat easier for Belle, especially come time for homework. Imagine coming to school and having a teacher being one of the only adult who is looking out for the student’s academic achievement, this is the reality for some of Belle’s students who are trying to make the adjustment to high school on their own. Growing Success does not take into consideration the issues that students are experiencing outside of school at home, which they will then bring into the classroom ultimately affecting their success.

4.4.3 Socio-Economic Impact inside the Classroom

Though it is great for parents to be involved in their child’s education to help make decisions and encourage development at home when it is not happening in school, Ariel argues this is hard to come by and something she, as well as colleagues, no longer expect. Home life is a major variable for many of her students, they come from homes with one parent or two, both of whom work a job, some of whom work two jobs and will invariably not be home when the students get home, or will not be home until later, at which point the students are already in bed. Much of Ariel’s experiences centre around the little communication taking place at home because the parents are looking to find
ways to first and foremost provide food and shelter for the student’s, not education:

Unless that student reacts to the fact that they are feeling stupid and hopeless in the classroom and all of a sudden become self-motivated by asking mom and dad I can go to tutor at say $65 an hour, hopefully the parents can afford that tutor per hour too. In variably the parent cannot afford to pay for the tutor for two or three subjects and teachers are only able to support one student so much outside of the classroom before it is unfair to all the other thirty to ninety students.

The policy creates the expectation that students are receiving extra support at home in order to catch them up inside the classroom, which in many situations is not a realistic expectation to have as parents expect their children to be receiving the education at school, not home.

4.4.4. How to Support the Students with Special Education Needs

Introducing inclusive classroom is stunting student access to additional services that are crucial to their academic achievement. As this research has shown so far teacher experiences demonstrate the negative impact that social promotion has on students who are not given basic education opportunities. But, what about students who are identified as being part of the special education program due to either being socially and - or developmentally delayed and are in need of an extra year or exclusive environment to support the student in maturing. Merida explains that she had a student who was identified as needing extra support because she was designated learning disability under special education, and who’s mother wanted the student held back for a year so the child could mature and develop just a little bit more in order to help the student feel more comfortable and participate more in class. Merida continued her experience that they devised a half schedule program where she would try to participate in some grade three
courses as well as some grade four courses to see if she could handle the transition, “Each child is unique in their own way. They all come from different homes and different circumstances. Some are more introverted and some extroverted. As a teacher, I accept all types of personalities and we learn from each other and we continue to work on the social/emotional needs of each child.” Subsequently, why not keep the individual child and best interests at the heart of all academic choices. How is it that some educators look to support students in the most successful way possible while others adhere to the promotion policy and continue the student on with the hopes of the best outcome.

Looking at it from another point of view, Belle explains that the marks that are assigned on an evaluation will reflect on the student’s need for access to extra educational support. Though the student may need more help with guided reading or fundamental math to get the basics, if the student is not assigned a grade that is reflective of their stance in the classroom, or echo the student’s ability to grasp material, they will not be granted access to this support. When the administration, parents or teachers decides to promote the student and assign a grade to ensure that promotion, they are hindering the student’s ability to seek out additional support or receive access to resources that can help bring them back and re-engage the students inside the classroom. In reality, when looking at social promotion, there are very few positive effects it can have on a student addressed with special education needs. Unless their individual education plan is already set up and the parents are active participants in the student’s education ensuring those needs are met, the student will simply continue on, being passed on from one teacher to the next, restricting access to additional educational services inside and outside of the classroom.
4.4.5 English Language Learners

Imagine, sitting in a classroom full of thirty students, many of whom speak more than one language, and the teacher is only able to instruct in one language, English. It is no surprise that Ontario has a high immigrant population, and with this comes numerous students who speak more than one language. For those students, English is likely an additional language, and may not be spoken at home. When students enter an Ontario classroom, there are two languages that the instruction will be taught in; English or French (Ministry of Education, 2010). Many of the classes are taught in English, and for Ariel, she explains that in the past five years, there are about forty to fifty percent of her students are English Language Learners (ELL). This means that for students who are trying to keep up with the class material being presented, are also attempting to learn the English language at the same time. Consequently, the teacher is literally speaking a different language. Words and terminology will appear in class, and students who are unable to learn the concept and remember it during class will need to review it in the evening. Ariel argues that there are issues with this as the students will go home, and much of the time parents are unable to assist the students as they are not familiar with the Ontario curriculum not having learnt it themselves, or for that matter, the English language.

ELL students are promoted to the next year, when they cannot remember the language they have been introduced to the year before and may be encouraged to learn new concepts and build on material that the students are expected to already have. Ariel expresses the reality for these students and what needs to take place for the policy to have a positive effect, “many students of mine do not speak any English or very little and yet
they are still pushed on. So they have to learn English first by osmosis and then learn multiples and the reciprocal by osmosis after. Its not going to happen. Isn’t English one of those courses that are mandatory throughout high school?” Not only are students expected to one day acquire a proficient knowledge of the English language without the scaffolding other students have received, but then it is expected of the students to catch up on all the other class material they have missed due to the language barrier. Students who are unable to proficiently speak the language are being instructed and then pushed on in their academic career simply because they are putting in the time by sitting in a classroom. Extra resources must be implemented to help aid the growing population of ELL’s inside the classroom, and help prevent the students from falling further behind, but rather help the students catch up and be present and aware in the classroom.

4.5. Effects on Students

The most prominent argument against retention or at least being in favour of social promotion, is the idea of the lasting social and moral effects being held back will have on the students (Martin, 2011). The idea is that grade retention does not benefit students, resulting in academic or social adjustment difficulties. In fact, the most noted negative outcome of retention is the idea that retained students experience lower self-esteem and lower rates of school attendance upon entering high school (Stump). However, what has yet to be discussed, especially in academic literature, it the effects that social promotion has on students in the long run, direct impacts have been discussed thoroughly, however, there is a gap in the literature that looks at students later on in their school career. If the original intention behind social promotion is to keep students with peers who are of similar age to encourage social growth and learning skills, what they did
not take into consideration is the stigma and self-esteem issues that can come with being so far academically behind in class. Social skills are critical building blocks because learning is done through motivation within respect to teachers, peers and parents. But if a student does not feel capable, or competent surrounding the class material, the reality is that the gap will continue to widen for academic development and the student will not feel any sense of responsibility or duty as they continue to be promoted through the system (Zmuda and Bradhsaw, ). When students make the transition from elementary school to high school, they do not understand that they are not prepared as the evaluation and assessment they are receiving so far has not been authentic or representative of the student’s academic success. As Belle explains, “the students often think it has worked for me so far, why should I change now?” The students have not faced difficulties or adversary, and believe, because they have been told to believe, that even though you do not succeed, you are not failing. Does this set up the students for success in their continuing education?

4.5.1 Trying and Failing to Graduate

A study done by Colleges Ontario explain that students who failed courses early in secondary school were much less likely to complete an OSSD. For example, 83% of students who did not fail Grade 9 courses graduated with an OSSD within five years compared to only 61% with one single failed Grade 9 course (2009). These students who are failing in their first year of high school are the individuals who do not have the basic building blocks of knowledge, and academic skills. Due to these circumstances, students who will not be successful in one or more courses in grade nine are not likely to be successful throughout high school and resort to dropping out. Therefore, the goal of
Growing Success is to help students continue on their education path and be successful come time they enter society as active participants upon graduation. Although in some cases, students who are subject to social promotion do not even graduate.

4.5.2 Stigma and Labelling inside the Classrooms and Schools

One effect I did not foresee developing out of social promotion, was what the educators described to be stigma and labelling of students inside the classroom and in the school. Growing Success policies are meant to help students develop socially alongside their peers in a hope to combat the labelling that would potentially come alongside with the student being retained. However, what is being described by the educators, is that the stigma associated with social promotion in the classroom is on par with the so-called stigma students would be feeling if they were to be retained. As Ariel explained:

Eventually the kid gets to the point where they never put their hand up because they are never sure. Each time they move on and get everybody knowing something in the room that they do not it chips a little at their self-esteem and self-confidence and eventually they get to the point where they are not going to try at all. They are going to tune out because they do not get it. You might as well be speaking a different language. And in many cases you are speaking a different language.

There is no point in promoting the student to the next grade if the individual is so far below the level of expectations, because it is almost impossible then for next year's teacher to help the student get caught up, not if they are going to teach the rest of the class at the expected grade level. Consequently, promoted student’s fall further and further behind until they become so disengaged and experience a feeling of loss and hopelessness leading to teachers giving up as the student gives up. Belle explains that in the high school setting, teachers are guilty of complaining and voicing negative opinions,
to other teachers, of students who do not have the basic foundations and are seen to be hopeless in the course leading to further labelling in other courses. This labelling happens both by students to themselves or their peers and by teachers. Though stigma is something that educators battle against inside of schools, it is hard to change a student’s vision of themselves and persona when they have developed this image of themselves over the years.

4.5.3 Authority and Consequence

Assessment and evaluation should start from the premise that a pass or promotion to the next grade should be earned, and if the student is going to be promoted to the next grade, they have at least acquired a level of knowledge where they can be successful in the next year. The students do not necessarily have to master all the content, but at least be able to demonstrate a basic skill level at which they will be able to be successful and continue learning in future years. Reality is that students are aware they do not necessarily have to do the work to be promoted, students understand that with basic or little effort they will still move forward, they do not see the consequences these actions have in the future. Belle exposes both in the middle school and high school setting students understand that summer school receives the label of being easier with less expectations. Students do little during the school year, enjoying their social life including clubs and athletics and when the summer roles around, they sit in a classroom for a month, do little again and are promoted to the next grade, even in high school:

I don’t think they learn a thing. The only thing they learned is that I do not have to do my work, I just spend summer in the classroom and they are being passed just for them to graduate and get out into the real world, unprepared.
The unforeseen effect of this is the teacher’s loss of authority in the classroom as students are not concerned with failing or repercussion, they do not see failure in elementary school, they see busy work in order to move from one year to the next. In high school students use other opportunities such as summer school and credit recovery programs, so why be concerned with not handing in assignments, attending class or achieving. As a result of social promotion there are no consequences and a loss of teacher authority in school, that unless students have the motivation and drive to learn, they will not until they are receiving push back at which point they move in the system to an easier opportunity for success.

4.5.4 Preparation for the Transition in Schooling and Real World

Finally, the biggest divergence I have found in the literature and the interviews conducted is upon graduation students are not prepared to actively participate in society. Two of the three educators believed that students were entering high school unprepared and set up for failure. But, Merida explained how she believed students were entering high school with the basic skills developed to be successful: “students are entering high school with the necessary skills that they need to succeed. I think that our students will be doing jobs that are not invented yet but that is centered around technology,” therefore the emphasis is being placed on learning skills and social skills that will help these students be successful. Upon further inquiry, Merida explained that the students who are effected by social promotion are generally the students who will be entering in to the applied and essential streams, ultimately going into more trades work and will need social and logic skills as opposed to wrote learning.
After a long discussion surrounding the stereotypical students of who are subjected to social promotion, and really those students may not necessarily receiving an opportunity to grow, Merida stood by her claim that it is generally students who go into more trades opportunity who are socially promoted, and the policy works to encourage those students to graduate, find an apprenticeship and move into their future endeavors sooner, gaining more work and life experience. But, the question remains, that for the first two years of high school where the students must attend class and receive credits for mandatory courses, are students prepared? Before students can apply for an apprenticeship or co-operative learning placement, students must complete sixteen credits, or grade nine and ten. To this, the answer remains no. Belle explains that students enter her class stuck in a middle school, juvenile mentality, both socially and academically. Students who want to do well will attend class and work to mature and develop their academic skills. However, students who have not received adversary from the system will fail to understand what is required of them in order to demonstrate knowledge for evaluation, and they fail for the first time. Belle being the only high school teacher interviewed, I asked how she felt being the first teacher to fail a student in an academic setting, her response was worrisome for teacher morale:

It is a hard thing to fail students for the first time, it can be a make it or break it for some of them, I have never thought of it that way. Wow talk about being the bad guy or mean parent. But it certainly explains why students seem discombobulated when they receive their five-week or fifteen-week report and are failing. It is the kick in the butt they have been needing.
Majority of students are not prepared for high school, no matter their previous grades, the students lack basic learning skills such as organization, independent work and note-taking, which they are forced to learn on a steep curve in the first year of high school.

4.6 Conclusion

Being a teacher has expectations of responsibility both for yourself and for the students. If the Education Act specifies that all teachers shall “be responsible for effective instruction, training and evaluation of progress of pupils in the subjects assigned to the teacher,” then how can a teacher achieve these prescribed goals under the changes produced by the encouragement of socially promoting students in the policy Growing Success? (Regulation 298, 1990, s 20). This chapter discusses the repercussions after the enactment of social promotion policy inside the school and classrooms, with particular attention being paid to the impressions educators are left with and their dwindling morale. According to the Ministry of Education, “we believe that success is the best way to breed more success, that punitive measures such as deducting marks only serve to discourage students and promote failure, and that it is more appropriate and more productive to focus on preventative measures” (2010). Students are dropping out of high school because they are struggling not understanding the concepts presented as they have little prior knowledge to build on, not because they would be held back. By enacting social promotion policy, not only is the ability for students to acquire described curriculum effected, but also, effects on teacher health and engagement inside the classroom are noteworthy and in need of further research and support. In every interview conducted with the varying disciplines of the educators all with a large amount of experience inside the
education system, it appears that early intervention, honest evaluation and assessment and access to extra resources are the key to better developing and ensuring student success.
Chapter 5: DISCUSSIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

Introduction

This chapter will set out to interpret the data findings outlined in Chapter Four, based on the major themes that emerged from the study surrounding the impact of social promotion on both teachers and students including: the expectations, implications, implementation strategies and effects. In order to decipher the significance for the findings, each thematic idea will be situated in the already existing literature. Additionally, I will outline the implications of the study and further questions that have arisen as a result of the findings and interpretations. Therefore, the chapter will be divided into the following main sections: 1) key findings, 2) implications 3) recommendations, and 4) concluding remarks.

The goal of this study was to research the implementation of Growing Success inside public schools in Ontario, and gain insight from three educator’s perspectives of the presence of social promotion in classrooms and how it effects curriculum. From interviewing three different, experienced educators, in three different roles inside a school, a more holistic impact was developed resulting in solid findings. This study demonstrated that while social promotion can help a student develop socially, the policy does not account for individual characteristics or uncontrollable situations. In addition, since the implementation of the policy, teachers feel they have less ability to help a student grow and develop through honest feedback and evaluation, due to the unaccounted effects of social promotion. In order to engage students inside the classroom, teachers must have more freedom to evaluate, assess and provide honest feedback to students without the reality of being ignored because of a policy where it is impossible to fail a student. In order to properly equip students with the skills and
knowledge to be successful in society, a system must be set in place where intervention, extra resources and conscientious assessment can be offered to both students and teachers.

5.1. Significance of the Key Findings

Since the enactment of Growing Success in 2010, many teachers feel as though they have less authority inside the classroom as, gradually, many students have become more aware of the lack of repercussions for incomplete course work. As Ariel explained, there is no longer a scapegoat or repercussions anymore to extrinsically motivate the students to success. Thus, teachers experience a lack of agency and voice as they are no longer able to provide credible feedback alongside impartial assigning of grades. Though there is little research on Growing Success, there is quite a lot of academic discussion regarding social promotion versus retention, and the ultimate effects of either, both positive and negative, on a student. However, since conducting the research and discussing experiences with educators, my question has become: why does it have to be this dichotomy of either or? Perhaps there is some way to assess the situation and find a balanced solution for the student where both the student and teacher feel they have a voice and agency in the situation. According to research from Ken Mrozek, author of “Teacher Stress,” just under one third of new teachers quit before their fifth year of teaching due to overwhelming stress; about the same amount of teachers, new or experienced, claim that teaching is a very stressful job (Curry, 2012). Perhaps these issues stem from a lack of understanding policy, and a feeling of little to no validation or agency inside the classroom. This part of the chapter will discuss educators’ opinion of the policy, and the effects of the policy inside the classroom.
5.1.2 Effects on Students

Though the *Growing Success* document states, “the primary purpose of assessment and evaluation is to improve student learning,” much of the research discussed in chapter two, explains that students who do not have the basic building blocks of a topic are placed in the next grade with more advanced material, they are unable to associate the new material with what has already been learnt (38, 2010). What the students have already learned is incomplete, or does not represent anything remotely close to the new material being taught. With this in mind, all three interview participants commented that social promotion merely helps with social development. Academic knowledge and skills development become a responsibility of the teacher or extra support, outside of school, at a cost such as tutoring or summer school. When a student is unable to understand material, he/she may become disengaged in the classroom, potentially leading to a feeling of loss and hopelessness, where school is no longer a safe space for learning, but rather a dreaded place of boredom and potential humiliation from failure.

5.1.3 Impact on Teachers

Expectations for teachers are now centred around student achievement, while the role of a student changes, so does the role of the teacher and ultimately the requirements for student success. The 21st century educator, a term that is now being used to define the teacher both inside and outside the classroom as their role continues to be challenged by society and expectations are constantly in flux (Tomlinson, 2008). Much of the research found concerning social promotion surrounds societies expectations for teachers and their inability to engage students in the classroom. Before the implementation of social
promotion, teachers were expected to teach the curriculum material, and scaffold the material at three different paces for the class. As Ariel explained, there were three main areas, high - average - low. Generally, much of the class was in the middle, with a few in the high and a few in the low areas. However, recently she has noticed many more students being grouped in the low, and they are no longer around the same level any more. She explained that in a grade eight class, the student levels could vary from grade two all the way up to grade eight with a select few performing at a high school level. Though differentiated instruction will get a teacher so far, they are now having to teach numerous curricula in one period. When it then comes time to evaluate student achievement and assign a grade for curriculum expectations as “a report card grade represents a students’ achievement of overall curriculum expectations, as demonstrated to that point in time”, the grade becomes unreasonable, no longer honest and a false representation of student achievement but because of social promotion even they do not curriculum standards they are promoted (Ministry of education, 2010). The stress and pressure associated with student achievement and assessment can be demanding if a teacher is looking to provide valuable feedback for future use, this pressure can come from either the students, parents, administration or next year’s teacher. But when there are few supports available to the teacher, support staff and administration, as the repercussions of the enactment of the policy have not yet been validated by administration or the ministry, teachers are becoming less engaged. The teacher knows students will be promoted, or rather pushed, on to the next grade even though they are not prepared. It becomes a mental game, and as research has demonstrated, one that is often lost by the teachers.
5.1.4. Blanket Statement Policy

From a young age, many children are told they are individual, unique and are all different. As teachers, we are told all students are unique and have features that make them special. Yet, Growing Success does not take into consideration these unique qualities and external factors that make every student’s situation different. Instead, the document creates a box, and places every student inside of that box, not taking into account socio-economic status, disabilities, exceptionalities, and previous experiences at school. There are so many factors that contribute to a student’s academic success, and Growing Success removes the individual student by looking at each student as if he or she is the same, all in the same circumstances across Ontario. So while one student may benefit from continuing on in their education as they will receive support from home to be successful, other students do not develop adequate academic skills to be successful in the future, instead they appear to slip through the cracks and continue to “succeed” without fully developing the necessities for future success (Jimerson et. al, 2006).

For eight years, a student will make their way through the Ontario public school system, being subject to the same curriculum standards, same instructional techniques and same reporting processes, all of which could very well have a negative effect on the student. As Greene suggests, behind each tough or suffering students is a challenging behaviour, which is either an unsolved problem or a lacking skill due to insufficient educational opportunities (2008). What social promotion lacks is the ability to identify these gaps and therefore start the healing process by confronting the major issue, as the students are carried forward from one grade to the next with little or no assistance. In order for students to feel like valued members of the class room, they must be encouraged
to participate and given a chance to succeed. It is time to stand up for equity inside the public school system and ensure that each student is given fair access to education by taking into consideration their circumstances and the environment surrounding them. If our education systems continue to fall short, the quality of education will begin to fall short, and the success of future generations will become greatly inhibited.

5.2. Implications

Though much research has been done surrounding social promotion and the implications of this policy on students, very little research has been done surrounding social promotion and the effects the policy can have on teachers, administration and the school atmosphere. Teachers are meant to be educators rather than facilitators, however, when one teacher has a class of thirty students with a large spectrum of student achievement, it becomes too large a task to educate each and every student in the classroom. At this point, facilitation becomes the best option to ensure that students are growing at their own pace, but a student can only achieve so much in one school year. Sometimes students need that extra year, or even just half a year to achieve success and be prepared to be promoted. I went in to this study expecting to find that social promotion is a terrible policy that is failing the system as it does not take into account the individual, and rather than help students, it hinders their ability to succeed. What I was shocked to find out, was that, Growing Success is a policy that is on the right track, but needs some refining to allow administration and teachers to take the students circumstances and previous academic success into consideration to create the best plan of action for a student’s success. It is the start of a necessary conversation, though, currently incomplete.
5.2.1. Implication for the Education Community

While it is crucial to account for student wellness, inside and outside the classroom, teachers are just as important, however, they seem to be absent in much of the research. This study has brought to the forefront the importance of teacher education programs in preparing teachers with adequate knowledge of ministry policy documents and their unknown impact inside the classroom. As defined by my research participants, there is already enough stress associated with teaching one grade and one curriculum to thirty students; to add more (which would need to be tailored to each student’s previous academic achievement) would be very difficult and near impossible.

This study has also brought to the forefront the need for more classroom support staff, and the completion of detailed Individual Education Plans (IEP) for students who are being socially promoted. The IEPs are the best way currently available to help alleviate stress and continue the students path for success, as the new teacher does not have to reassess the student every time new material is introduced. In addition, an IEP offers the opportunity for strategies, tips and pre-established routines that have already be tested and found to be useful, to be carried on into the next year.

Finally, teachers must take it upon themselves to fill out the report cards to the prescribed standards set in place by the policies of Growing Success. Though it does take more time, effort and negotiation with administration, students must be given real, genuine assessment, to help parents, students and the student’s future teachers know the academic standing of the student. When teachers assign students an arbitrary grade to avoid having to complete an IEP or action plan for student success, they hinder the student as well as his or her future teachers’ ability to support the student. By not
providing students, parents and teachers with an honest evaluation of the student’s achievement according to curriculum standards, the students are presented with an unrealistic idea of where they stand in terms of academic achievement, and therefore are setup with unrealistic expectations for success in future grades.

Overall, the biggest effect that social promotion has on students is that when they enter high school, failing becomes reality, and something that will happen if students have not developed the proper academic skills and knowledge base. As students are making the transition from elementary to high school, they are coping with larger class sizes in many cases, more advanced material at a faster pace, and teachers who may instruct to the curriculum standard - class material will likely not be tailored specifically to every student’s needs in the classroom. Though this is not necessarily the best practice, this is reality for many students, which as Belle explains, creates a sense of hopelessness, and leads some students to be disengaged before they reach the end of first semester in grade nine. Thus, this study illustrates the necessity for teachers to work alongside students to create a comprehensive understanding of where the student is academically and socially and then collaborate on plans for next steps inside and outside of the classroom for success.

5.2.2 Implications for the Researcher

This research has become more personal than originally intended. When I set out to research the implementation of social promotion and the effects on both students and teachers, I did not expect to become so heavily invested in the research and the outcomes. Though much of this research surrounds policy and a call for a more in-depth reporting process to be carried out surrounding the effects of the policy and the realities of the use
of Growing Success inside schools, I have taken away many valuable pieces of information that I will use in my future endeavours either as an educator or researcher. This research brings to the forefront the importance of creating success plans for all students, not just those who have been identified as having exceptionalities. It is the students who are promoted under the policy, and not given plans for success who generally fall between the cracks and do not receive adequate support.

Due to the interactions with teachers, and the close work with policy, I have discovered that I am interested in a role working as either a success teacher, contact teacher or guidance councilor inside a high school. I will look to support students in as large of a capacity as possible, looking specifically at programs that can help re-engage students inside the classroom and in society. In addition, much like the larger implications, I would look to champion IEPs in schools and support staff to complete them to the best of an educator’s ability.

As a researcher I would like to pursue more conversations with teachers, parents and students to gain a holistic insight of how social promotion affects society as a whole, and a student’s life both inside and outside school in particular. One of the participants children are currently going through the public school system and making the transfer from grade eight to nine. She talked about the impact of social promotion from personal experience and the effects it has on her home life. Belle explains that she is picking elective courses with her daughter to take in high school and he daughter was not understanding that she does not have the necessary to succeed in a course because she has never been given the opportunity to learn the material. While this would be a difficult topic, it would be extremely interesting and transformational to understanding the impact
that ministry policy can have on society as a whole, as opposed to the belief it only has an effect inside the school and the classroom.

5.3. Recommendations

The message that teachers should be sending to the students is clear: “in this classroom and at this very moment, you are a valuable and valued person: without you this entire enterprise would flounder and fail” (Ayers, 2010). Inside the classroom, teachers need to be attending to students and ensuring that they are understanding content, and if they are not, early identification and intervention are necessary. The longer that failure goes untouched and ignored the worse the effects it will have on a student’s academic success and participation inside the classroom. Thus, teachers must collaborate alongside support staff and administration to bring attention to at-risk students and create plans for success for all. Though we want to protect, encourage and foster a safe learning environment for students, they need to know when they are not achieving curriculum standards and the risks for their future success. Implementing workshops with in the first few weeks of school and then revisiting the workshops during mid-terms and report cards would be crucial to assisting teachers in how to provide honest and needed assessment. These workshops would need to be board based and available to all schools and all the staff inside the schools.

A majority of students may not be prepared for high school, no matter their previous grades, many lack basic learning skills such as organization, independent work and note-taking, which they are forced to learn on a steep curve in their first year of high school. It is a collaboration process where teachers, administration and parents must work alongside the student for success. Thus, the largest recommendation to come out of the
research is communication. Teachers have a variety of outlets to communicate with administration and parents, whether it is through report cards, mid-term reports, or a direct communication such as a face to face conversation or an email. Teachers must work to keep administration and parents in the loop of a student’s success. It is a group effort of support at home, at school and inside the classroom that will help at-risk students who are participants of social promotion, become successful inside the classroom and education system.

5.4 Conclusion

This study assessed the enactment of the Ministry of Education’s document *Growing Success*, the policies that drive evaluation and assessment inside public schools, and the impact this policy has had on the education system. The research drew upon three experienced educations perspective on Growing Success and the impacts the policies have had on measuring student success, what the protocols are that are set in place for at-risk students and the support systems set in place to help at-risk students get back on the right track to success. In the findings from the conducted interviews with the varying disciplines of educators, it appears that early intervention and extra resources are the keys to better developing and ensuring student success. This study has brought to the forefront the importance of reassessing policy documents every few years after they have been implemented to ensure that the original goals of the document are still in place and the policy is helping rather than hindering students. This study is the first stepping stone to a more in-depth analysis of the 2010 policy *Growing Success*, and the implications this policy has had inside the classroom both for students and teachers.
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Appendix A: Letter of Consent for Interviews

Date: ___________________

Dear Participant,

I am a graduate student at OISE, University of Toronto, and am currently enrolled as a Master of Teaching candidate. I am analyzing the policy of continuous education in Ontario for the purposes of investigating an educational topic as a major assignment for our program. I think that your knowledge and experience will provide insights into this topic.

I am writing a report on this study as a requirement of the Master of Teaching Program. The purpose of this requirement is to allow us to become familiar with a variety of ways to do research. My data collection consists of an interview that will be tape-recorded. I would be grateful if you would allow me to interview you at a place and time convenient for you. I can conduct the interview at your office or workplace, in a public place, or anywhere else that you might prefer.

The contents of this interview will be used for my assignment, which will include a final paper, as well as informal presentations to my classmates and/or potentially at a conference or publication. I will not use your name or anything else that might identify you in my written work, oral presentations, or publications. This information remains confidential. The only people who will have access to my assignment work will be my research supervisor and my course instructor. You are free to change your mind at any time, and to withdraw even after you have consented to participate. You may decline to answer any specific questions. I will destroy the tape recording after the paper has been presented and/or published which may take up to five years after the data has been collected. There are no known risks or benefits to you for assisting in the project, and I will share with you a copy of my notes to ensure accuracy.

Please sign the attached form, if you agree to be interviewed. The second copy is for your records. Thank you very much for your help.

Yours sincerely,

Christine McAllan  
Researcher name: Christine McAllan  
Research Supervisor’s Name: Arlo Kempf
**Consent Form**

I acknowledge that the topic of this interview has been explained to me and that any questions that I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction. I understand that I can withdraw at any time without penalty.

I have read the letter provided to me by Christine McAllan and agree to participate in an interview for the purposes described.

Signature: ______________________________________

Name (printed): _________________________________

Date: __________________________
Appendix B: Interview Questions

Statement of Intent

Good (morning / afternoon / evening), my name is Christine McAllan and I am a Masters candidate at the University of Toronto. Today, I will be asking you few questions related to the policy of social promotion in Ontario. The word continuous education and social promotion will be used synonymously through out this interview. Everything in this interview will be tape recorded and may be used for further data collection. Just a reminder, at any point if you do not feel comfortable you can opt to not answer a question, or withdraw from participation in the study. Thank you for taking the time to be here today. Before we start, do you have any questions?

Background Information

1. Tell me about your experience as an educator?
   a. How long have you been teaching?
   b. What grades have you taught?
   c. Are currently working in the education system now? If so, doing what?

Beliefs about Continuous Education

2. Are you aware of the policy of social promotion / continuous education?

3. In your own words, how would you describe social promotion?
   a. Do you agree with this system? Why or why not?

Experience with Social Promotion

4. What is your current understanding and/or experience with social promotion an approach to education and a strategy for student development?
a. Have you ever taught a student who was subject to the continuous education policy? Where by I mean, you believe they could have benefitted from being held back, but was pushed forward anyways.

b. What was your experience with this student?

**Social Promotion within the Schools**

5. Are students entering high school with the necessary skills and training to fully succeed?

6. Does the policy of continuous education encourage students to build basic education skills before they start high school?
   a. Are there any supplemental educational services available to students or teachers who have been pushed through due to continuous education?

**Effects in the Classroom**

7. Are there any major effects of social promotion in the classroom?
   a. Why or why not? If so, can you provide examples?

8. Is there anything you specifically do with students who have participated in social promotion?
   a. Why do you believe this works and can you give an example?
   b. How does this effect have on other students in the class?

**Resources for Social Promotion**

9. Who do you have available in terms of professional individuals, either from within or outside of the school, to help with both your experience and the students experience?
a. What supports do you feel are necessary to have in order to help these students be successful in their high school career?

**Social Promotion at Home**

10. What effects does social promotion have at home?
   a. Do you believe parents are an important part of an effective social promotion, meaning parents are a critical aspect in regards to a child’s success in education?

11. What can parents do at home to help their child succeed in school when they have been pushed forward due to social promotion?
   a. Is there any accountability for parents?
   b. Should there be any accountability for parents? If so, what would this accountability look like?

**Effectiveness of Social Promotion**

12. Do you believe that continuous education is helping the students in any kind of way?
   a. How do you know if continuous education is effective and successful with any given student?

13. Does the current policy of continuous education make it feasible for students to enter high school and be successful?
   a. If you were able to change any or all parts of the continuous education policy, what would you change and why?

14. Any further comments?

   Thank you for your participation!