

Examining How the Student “Determines” the Success and/or Failure of Education Reform

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Abstract: *The goal of this article is to offer insight into how education stakeholders (i.e., policymakers, administrators, teachers, parents, students) can reframe the discourse of education reform so that the child is no longer viewed simply as an object of success or failure within the field. The arbitrariness of the ‘failure’ construct, as well as related conceptualizations within American education that eventually lead all children to be identified as lacking, is examined (Varenne & McDermott, 1998). An analysis of how education policymakers in Wisconsin fostered a system of education that used the dualism between the success/failure constructs as foundational is conducted. The author concludes by arguing that education stakeholders must take up their ethical responsibility and examine how they structure children as failures so that the field of education research can pursue solutions that alter that structuring.*

Within the context of public education in the United States (U.S.), the construct of academic performance has arisen as a key measure through which the education system socially structures the child as a learner (James, Jenks, & Prout, 1998; Jenks, 2004; Kauerz & McMaken, 2004). This issue of improving academic performance is at the center of most education reform measures in the U. S. (e.g., the federal government’s continual reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, currently referred to as the *No Child Left Behind Act* (NCLB)). Embedded within these policies and the discourses¹ that surround them are the constructs of success and failure, or what might be more accurately referred to as the success/failure dichotomy.

Failure is used bi-directionally within these reforms. Failure not only defines the policy problem at hand (e.g., failing to outperform other nations’ students on international comparisons of academic performance), but policymakers also see it as a catalyst that can improve students’ academic performance on a range of standardized measures (e.g., retaining students who fail to perform at a specific

¹ I use Bakhtin’s work to define discourses. Bakhtin defined discourses as social phenomena that cover the entire range “from the sound image the furthest reaches of abstract meaning (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 259).

level on a standardized measure). Whereby, the life of the student within U.S. public education system dialogically interacts with the construct of failure in numerous ways (Bakhtin, 1986).

This article examines the ways that education policymakers at the state and school district levels within a given U.S. context foster a system of education that necessitates the use of a success/failure dichotomy as a primary means to educate children. Specifically, I employ the work of Varenne and McDermott (1998) to analyze how education stakeholders in the state of Wisconsin use this threat of failure as a policy lever from within a discourse that would increase students' academic success. Employing their work in my analysis offers insight into how education stakeholders (i.e., policymakers, administrators, teachers, parents, students, and so on) can begin to reframe the discourse of education reform so that the child is no longer viewed simply as an object of success or failure within the field of education.

Constructing a System of Failure through Policy

An underlying assumption that permeates the political rhetoric and policies that frame the United States and its education systems is that equal opportunity exists for all children (Varenne & McDermott, 1998). This conceptualization of the American society and its locally based education systems is dependent upon the constructs of success and failure. These constructs link performance (on test scores) to the individual student, the community in which that student resides (including the student's family), and the local system of education in which that student operates. Educational stakeholders typically assume the cause for failure is not located with the structuring of American society,² but rather, in one of these three human groups.

Varenne and McDermott (1998) contend that the American education system, which is "the site where members of each new generation are measured and then assigned a place in the social structure based on this measurement," does not have to be constructed in this way (p. xi). Instead, through a reanalysis of their own educational research, they reveal the arbitrariness of definitions of failure by demonstrating how those who are constructed by the culture of America's schools as failures actually succeed.

Rather than continue with the goals of their project and explore additional cases of 'successful failure,' I employ their conceptual understanding of success and failure and their connection to the American education system to investigate

² I recognize that there many Americas throughout the world. For this text, I am employing Varenne and McDermott's usage of America, which refers to the United States.

how policymakers combine and use these constructs as a lever from within a policy discourse that focuses on increasing students' academic success. Through examining state and district policymakers' conceptualization of failure within Wisconsin's *No Social Promotion* statutes, I consider how education stakeholders can move beyond the simple binary of success and failure so that education policies and practices might emerge that can improve the educational opportunities for all children.

Varenne's and McDermott's Successful Failure: Examining Our Hidden Conceptualizations

In analyzing the American education system's dependency on the constructs of success and failure, Varenne and McDermott (1998) argue that educational research must turn away from the individual and her cultural affiliation and refocus on dominant American cultural perspectives. For these researchers, the categories of success and failure are "arbitrary and [fail] to capture what it is children do" (p. 4). The American education system is set up in such a way that nearly everyone is eventually marked as lacking in some area and is assigned their place in the structure, and yet, "there is no evidence that it *must* be this way" (p. xii) [emphasis in the original].

To focus on the structure of schooling, Varenne and McDermott (1998) assert that researchers must move beyond conducting investigative studies that attempt to answer "why questions" such as "Why can't Johnny read?" Locating the answer to these "why questions" in the individual or his/her socio-cultural affiliation "prevents us from confronting American Education as a cultural system" (p. 209). Rather than asking "why questions," the researchers propose examining our need to ask such questions as well as what those questions mask.

Through re-examining their own research projects, Varenne and McDermott (1998) demonstrate how their participants, whom this education system has marked as failures, are "facing facts" and are "affirm[ing] their freedom from a world that may break them but never quite makes them" (p. xiv). Through analyzing how these "successful failures" manage their world, they demonstrate how their participants who interact with various components of the U. S. education system are constructed as successes and failures at different moments throughout their lives. These researchers willingly admit that poverty, racism, oppression, and cultural difference play into issues such as why students are "acquired by special education," and that these "other problems are not distributed randomly across all groups of the body politic. [Though] these answers make sense . . . they are misleading if they prevent us from confronting American Education as a cultural system" (p. 209). For them, everyone in the United States does success and failure, and each individual "resist[s] it with varying consequences" (p. 126).

The purpose of this article is to examine a particular set of policies that create the institution of “school,” which Varenne and McDermott (1998) identify as the mechanism through which children are assigned these “arbitrary” marker. My analysis investigates how policymakers institutionalize the construct of failure through policy, and I look at how these policymakers at the state and district levels in Wisconsin view student failure as a policy lever to increase students’ academic success. While my analysis does fall prey to Varenne and McDermott’s critique of asking a “why” question, my focus is not on “why Johnny can’t read” but rather “why do policymakers use failure as a means to increase ‘so-called’ student academic success?” My use of Varenne and McDermott’s (1998) analysis of success and failure turns away from the child and examines how education policies frame the world of schooling for the child. I use this case of education reform in Wisconsin to consider ways in which education stakeholders can reduce their dependency on education policies and interventions that structure the child solely as a success or failure, which in turn, can create new avenues for the child to define herself as educated.

Policy Makers and the “Failure” Context in Wisconsin

A case study of education reform in the U.S. that examines how state and local education stakeholders in Wisconsin construct success and failure for the child through a set of social promotion statutes is presented in this paper. Social promotion is the act of promoting a student to the next grade level because she/he turns a year older. Critics of this practice want education stakeholders to shift their understanding of academic progression from a temporal lens to a performance lens (e.g., Alexander, Entwisle, & Dauber, 2003).

The push by education stakeholders to eliminate the practice of social promotion from the Wisconsin’s schools emerged in the mid-1990s as particular indicators and social actors began to question the academic ability of the state’s students. Some of these indicators included the average performance of Wisconsin’s 8th and 10th graders on the state’s first mandated statewide test, titled the Wisconsin Knowledge and Concepts Exam (WKCE) in 1994 (Bougie, 1994). Business organizations, such as the Wisconsin Manufacturers and Commerce Association, publicly doubting the academic ability of the state’s high school graduates by publishing a survey of executives within their membership that found 61% of them did not believe that the state’s primary and secondary schools were adequately preparing children for work after high school (Bergquist, 1994). Finally, as Wisconsin’s policymakers were formulating and implementing the state’s standards-based reforms, *Education Week*, a national weekly education newspaper, released its annual report on the quality of education systems within the U.S. titled *Quality Counts* in January 1997. The report’s authors gave Wisconsin’s public schools low marks across the board, and in terms of

standards and assessments, the state received a grade of B- (Associated Press, 1997).

These indicators as well as political discourses circulating in the state questioned the effectiveness and direction of the state's schools, which led to discussions over what type of educated child the schools were to produce. The two central political figures in this debate were former Wisconsin Governor Tommy Thompson, a Republican, who held office from 1988 up until his departure in 2001 to become the Secretary of Health and Human Services under President George W. Bush, and former Superintendent of Public Instruction John Benson, a non-partisan official, who served from 1993 to 2001.³ Thompson framed himself as an "outsider" who wanted to "shake up the status quo" within the education establishment, which Benson represented (Mayers, 1995; Thompson, 1996).

This debate over the direction of the state's school took many twists and turns (i.e., the Governor attempted to eliminate the position of the Superintendent), but eventually, these two policymakers settled their differences and put forward a series of standards-based education reforms to increase students' academic success in the state of Wisconsin (Jones, 1997; Russell, 1997). A key provision within this reform process was the establishment of the state's *No Social Promotion* (NSP) statutes, which required students in grades 4 and 8 to score at or above the basic level on the state's Wisconsin Knowledge and Concepts Exam (WKCE) in order to advance to the next grade level.

This high-stakes reform received mixed support from politicians, bureaucrats, and the public at-large (Davis, 1998a). Eventually, community-based advocacy groups, such as Advocates for Education of Whitefish Bay, school-based organizations such as the Janesville School Board, and other education organizations, such as the Wisconsin Education Association Council, rallied their constituents and lobbied various state legislators to amend the statutes from a single indicator promotion policy to a multiple-indicator promotion policy (Brinkman, 1998; Davis, 1998b).

³ Education reform in Wisconsin is not simply a narrative of Thompson versus Benson and the education establishment. Education reform emerged out of the actions of numerous stakeholders. However Wisconsin is the only state in the U.S. that does not have a state school board, and tied with this, the State Superintendent has no legislative power. Furthermore, Thompson taking a leadership role in education mirrors a trend of state leaders employing strategies "to acquire legislative influence, gain positional advantage, attract campaign funding, and advanc[ing] political careers" (Mazzoni, 1993, p. 372).

The legislature and governor heeded their call and amended the NSP statutes by changing them from a single indicator system to a multiple indicator system that required local school districts to develop a set of grade promotion criteria that students must meet to advance to the 5th and 8th grade (Blair, 1999; Keller, 1999). These criteria had to include the student's score on the 4th and 8th grade WKCE, the recommendations of the student's teachers, the pupil's academic performance in the classroom, and any other academic criteria specified by the school board. (Department of Public Instruction (DPI), 2000, p. 62-63). The NSP statutes went into effect during the 2002-2003 academic school year, and since that time, the retention rates for students in grades 4 and 8 have remained fairly constant (See Table 1).

In this article, I examine how state policymakers and administrators who were part of the formulation and implementation of the state's NSP statutes understood student success and failure, and how they use failure, which in this case involves retention, as a policy lever to increase students' "so-called" academic success. Additionally, I examine how stakeholders within a large urban school district in Wisconsin interpret the state policymakers' conceptualization of student failure as defined by the state's NSP statutes and implement their own retention policies to answer state policymakers' call to improve students' academic success.

Table 1
Retention Rates for Wisconsin's 4th and 8th Grade Students Prior to and after Implementation of NSP Statutes (DPI, 2007)

Academic School Year	4th grade (percentage of students retained)	8th grade (percentage of students retained)
2001-2002⁴	.32% (200 out of 63,482 students)	1.17% (782 out of 66,501 students)
2003-2004	.54% (334 out of 61, 717 students)	.79% (543 out of 68,586 students)
2005-2006	.70% (422 out of 60,139 students)	1.21% (810 out of 66,760 students)

⁴ For the 2003-04 school, the state implemented a new Wisconsin Knowledge and Content Exam, and as such, DPI warns that one cannot compare student performance on tests that were given during or prior to the 2002-2003 school year with tests scores that occurred after this date (DPI, 2007).

Methods

The Case

The research presented in this article is from an instrumental case study that examined the formulation and implementation of a high-stakes accountability policy at the state and school district level (Stake, 1995; 2000). In this piece, I focus on how policymakers at the state and district level conceptualized the notion of student failure through the formulation and implementation of Wisconsin's NSP statutes. These statutes mirror the current trend within the United States to require particular levels of performance by students on standardized state-mandated tests to advance to the next academic grade level or graduate from high school.⁵

Data Generation and Analysis

Informants for this instrumental case study included state and District⁶ stakeholders, such as elected representatives, state administrators, school board members, and District administrators. All were interviewed between the years of 2002 to 2004 (n=39). Additionally, I gathered public documents for analysis. These documents included the state and District policies, such as the NSP legislation from both the 1997-98 and 1999 legislative sessions, reports generated by the Department of Public Instruction (e.g., DPI, 2000), position papers put forward by state agencies, and District documents pertaining to the 4th and 8th grade promotion statutes (Heck, 2004).

Methods of traditional qualitative inquiry were used (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003; Erikson, 1986; Wolcott, 1994). Field notes, interview transcripts, and public documents were analyzed to identify relevant themes in the data, which were then coded using both external and internal codes (Graue & Walsh, 1998). External codes, such as assessment, represent my theoretical and conceptual perspectives about this research project (Graue & Walsh, 1998). Internal codes, such as personal experience in school, emerged from my reading of the data (Graue & Walsh, 1998). Using this coded data, themes were developed and read against the text in search of contradictory evidence (Wolcott, 1994; Strauss, 1996).

⁵ Currently, 19 states within the U.S. have standardized exams that students must pass in order to graduate from high school. By 2012, 25 states will have such requirements in place (Center for Education Policy, 2006).

⁶ This district, which I refer to as the District throughout the article, is located in a large urban community, and over 40% of the student population represents non-Anglo/European cultures.

Student failure emerged as a primary theme. Because I view the child as a socially structured agent (James, Jenks, & Prout, 1998), I reread the coded data that fell under this theme of student failure using Varenne and McDermott's (1998) conceptual understanding of successful failure. Through this reanalysis of the data, I generated a narrative that examined how Wisconsin's policies and policymakers use the constructs of success and failure to increase students' academic success within the state's current education system (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003). This article emerged from my reading of this narrative against the entire set of data to ensure contradictory evidence did not exist (Wolcott, 1994; Strauss, 1996).

Findings: Wisconsin's Notions of Successful Failure

While Varenne and McDermott would suggest that education move beyond the marks of success and failure, the emergence of standards-based reforms on policymakers' agendas during the 1990s in the state of Wisconsin consistently positioned the child and his/her ability to succeed on the state's standardized exams at the center of reform. Not only did poor student performance on assessment measures lead to increased accountability measures, the child was the one who bore the responsibility for ensuring that the system succeeded. One can read the establishment of these NSP statutes as a series of political acts between the former Governor, State Superintendent, the Legislature, and their constituents to create what they viewed as a high-performing education system that created successful students (Varenne & McDermott, 1998). Within these political discussions, the educated child is framed as an end product who has achieved a specific level of performance on a particular set of tasks that the state's education system is to produce.

Increasing More Types of Failure

Many within the field of education would view the expansion of the NSP statutes to a multiple indicator promotion system as a more reliable and valid decision about student performance (e.g., American Educational Research Association, 2000; Heubert & Hauser, 1999). However, Varenne and McDermott's (1998) work demonstrates that establishing more indicators in fact creates additional occasions for stakeholders to mark the child as a failure. This system does reduce the likelihood for members of the school system to retain the child by increasing the number of indicators she/he must fail. However, with each new indicator comes a new type of failure (p. 11).

Such a political dynamic creates a system of education in which the child's interaction with these retention policies that rely on subjective and standardized measures of success and failure makes her/him "visible" as a particular type of student (Varenne & McDermott, 1998, p. 17). These differentiated categories

within this multiple indicator promotion policy create learning environments in which the activities of one child might go unnoticed and yet with another child they might mark her for failure—e.g., teacher recommendations, report card grades, etc. Such a complex system of marking students as successes and failures further supports the roles of the education system and its actors as moderator and interventionists by providing more opportunities to correct such failure in the child. The acceptance of the notion of failure validates not only the need for an intensified policy community but also for a more complex education system (Varenne & McDermott, 1998).

What results from this is that Wisconsin's multiple-indicator promotion system creates more opportunities for the education community to ask "why" questions about student performance, which further normalizes the actions of children as either having conducive or detrimental effects on their education. In arguing that the education community must move beyond these "why" questions, Varenne and McDermott (1998) "wish to protect those who are subjected to the School from any further action by the School—particularly from anything that starts with an identification of the child as a person with qualities to be discovered by agents of School" (p. 215). They warn that simply reframing these "why" questions that place their solutions in services or interventions for the child or her socio-cultural group necessitates this cycle of failure. However, as I state in the above, I want to return to these "why questions" to examine what makes student failure an attractive policy lever for policymakers. I now turn to the comments of state policymakers and administrators to answer my "why" question.

The Structuring of the Child through a Success/Failure Model

When considering the basic structure of Wisconsin's NSP statutes, Varenne and McDermott's (1998) understanding of the constructs of success and failure cause one to become immediately aware of how dependent these promotion policies are on the state policymakers' conceptualization of academic achievement. By identifying a successful student through a policy that narrowly defines student success, these policymakers created a dialogic relationship in which the performance of the student justifies their actions. As an administrator from the Department of Administration (DOA) noted, "The state standards wanted it to be absolutely clear about who gets held responsible, and it is clearly the student." This administrator's comments highlight that it is the student who carries the burden of the system. Additionally, the 'failed' student demonstrates that the state's policymakers' standards-based system of education holds the student accountable for individual academic performance; for the student who passes each indicator, the statutes are interpreted as demonstrating that the student was able to achieve the particular performance markers that

policymakers' identified to be measures of success. The success/failure perspective results in a cycle that perpetuates itself.

State stakeholders viewed this system of accountability not only as a means to instill responsibility in the child but also to motivate her to succeed in it (O'Day, 2002). This is not to state that policymakers wanted students to fail. For instance, the comments of a Republican Assemblyperson, who sits on the Assembly's Committee on Education, highlights the impetus behind using the construct of failure to increase students' academic success:

The goal is not to hold kids back. The goal is to make sure that we teach them what they need to know. It's not a vindictive thing. It's a thing that's saying we can't continue to fail. Kids get one chance at this game, and if they mess up, they could be lost for their lifetime. As a state, we can't afford that, and it's not fair to the kids. (Interview 8/23/2003)

This legislator views the consequence of failure as a symbol of the state's commitment to the child while at the same time viewing the outcomes of promotion and retention as means to ensure the state gets a return on its investment into that child's education. This Assemblyperson continued, "Wisconsin has always done well, and we should probably do better than we are because of the amount of money we spend. [Through these policies] we're saying Wisconsin takes education seriously." By framing the NSP statutes as a "thing," this policymaker normalizes the construction of success and failure by positioning this policy and the education system as being natural entities that have no author (Foucault, 1995; Rose, 1990).

Essentially, stakeholders at the state level are not examining their role or the role of the state's institutions in constructing a system of education that views success and failure as a particular type of performance by the student. Rather, the state's policymakers viewed the system as already being there and that these policies center on assisting the child to choose success within this established system. Such a vision of reform continues to foster the image of a level playing field in which the opportunity to perform well is there and academic success is only a matter of choice by the student.

In viewing these statutes as a policy lever that would motivate student performance, policymakers also viewed these policies as a means to create the successful citizen (Rose, 1990; 1999). A Republican Assemblyperson who sits on the state Assembly's Committee on Education and the Committee on Education Reform commented, "I think the long-range goal is not to let children continue through the system and then graduate with poor grades just to get them out of there." What is interesting in this comment is that by institutionalizing failure in grades 4 and 8, state policymakers viewed the NSP statutes as a

vehicle that can assist the state's educators in preventing a failed life for those students who were socially promoted. The Assemblyperson continued:

Once they're out they can't even survive in the workplace because of their particular skills. They can't go to college because their grades are terrible. They struggle at the tech school level because their English or Math skills are less than desirable. So it really helps to capture them at the early level so there won't be any worry later on of them not making the grade. (Interview 9/16/2003)

This statement exemplifies the complexity of failure within the policy arena. Because the state had previously not institutionalized a failure policy in grades 4 and 8, socially promoted students were allowed to pass through the system and fail in later parts of their life. By 'captur[ing]' failure early, state policymakers have structured the state's education system so that corrective actions can be taken by those in the state's schools to prevent students from 'continu[ing] through the system' and not 'surviv[ing] in the workplace.'

However, in discussing this issue of the retained student with state policymakers, the administrator at the DOA cited above noted that members of the Thompson administration did not think through the results that might occur if a large number of students did fail the state's tests. The administrator pointed out that:

Nobody really thought through the repercussions to the issue of what if a lot of people fail. The governor's comment was "I hope everybody passes the tests." He knew what he wanted, and this is a very typical way that politicians look at things. Thompson comment was, "I want a test that's tough. That's rigorous. That everybody says it has a lot of credibility, and I want to be sure that we have a 3 or 4 percent failure rate, a failure rate that we can deal with and address through some remediation programs." Thompson recognized that if the state has a 30% failure rate, there's going to be pressure for massive infusions of dollars, and he didn't want that. (Interview 11/10/2003)

This statement illustrates the arbitrariness of these statutes, and how stakeholders assume that failure, a necessary part of the institution of schooling, must be controlled. In constructing these conditions that identify the student as a failure, this administrator's comments exemplify how state policymakers hoped that this policy would be implemented in such a way that there would be just enough student failure to portray themselves as education reformers who were tough, but not too tough, which would leave the system itself unchanged. When looking at the current levels of retention cited in Table 1, the state's NSP statutes have achieved this goal by not altering the state's overall retention rates for 4th and 8th grade students.

While Varenne and McDermott themselves pledge to avoid asking “why” questions, their work highlights how important these “why” questions are in understanding why education policy is formulated and implemented. For my case study, I asked state policymakers and administrators why was there student failure in Wisconsin? Interestingly, stakeholders at the state level of governance typically discussed this question of why students fail by narrowing their focus to the low performance of students in the state’s urban communities, particularly the city of Milwaukee.

Milwaukee is Wisconsin’s largest city, and over ten percent of the state’s student population attends school in this district (DPI, 2007). While it is quite diverse culturally, it is also very segregated (Robinson & Grant-Thomas, 2004). The city has suffered from a significant loss of jobs due to post-industrialization of the American economy, and trails the majority of cities in the state and in the nation in employment and high school graduation rates.⁷ See Table 2 for information about student performance in Milwaukee.

Table 2
Achievement Gap Between Students in Milwaukee and Students in the State as a Whole (with state average including Milwaukee)

Students Who Scored as either Proficient or Advanced on the WKCE Reading Examination

4th		Milwaukee		State	
	Nov 2003	6,751	67.1%	61,581	82.6%
Nov 2005	5,808	62.3%	60,136	82.3%	
8th		Milwaukee		State	
	Nov 2003	6,465	52.9%	68,409	80%
	Nov 2005	6,084	59.4%	67,003	84.6%

⁷ The current unemployment rate is 9%. Between 1990 and 2003, Milwaukee lost 21% of its manufacturing jobs (The University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Center for Economic Development, 2003). Moreover, the current graduation rate for students who enter Milwaukee’s high school is 45% (Carr, 2006).

10th		Milwaukee		State	
	Nov 2003	5,657	36.4%	70,543	69.9%
	Nov 2005	5,718	41.9%	72,876	75%

Students Who Scored as either Proficient or Advanced on the WKCE Math Examination

4th		Milwaukee		State	
	Nov 2003	6,751	53.1%	61,581	74.1%
	Nov 2005	5,808	44.8%	60,136	72.6%
8th		Milwaukee		State	
	Nov 2003	6,465	29.2%	68,409	65.9%
	Nov 2005	6,084	39.9%	67,003	74.2%
10th		Milwaukee		State	
	Nov 2003	5,657	29.8%	70,543	69.7%
	Nov 2005	5,718	32.1%	72,876	71.6%

With this history in mind, policymakers, administrators for various state agencies, the education establishment, and the business community all identified Milwaukee as “the squeaky wheel” in the state’s education system (this term comes from the director⁸ of one of the state’s largest business organizations.)

⁸ The director went on to state, “We could give you a cute anecdote that we had [about a major manufacturer in Milwaukee] and of course they are a renowned as a high performance work organization. They’re highly motivating of their people, there’s good labor/management cooperation, quality is driven, the whole bit. [The president of the manufacturer’s name] told a group of educators that we were having in for some training that the 10 graduates of the Milwaukee

For instance, an assessment expert from DPI stated, “The oldest issue in the State that I can think since I went to DPI was the performance of the Milwaukee public schools.” While many acknowledged the failure of the system within Milwaukee, they typically positioned this systemic failure as emerging from the child. For instance, the comments from a former assistant superintendent from DPI demonstrate this point.

I have seen attempts for years to do something about the situation in Milwaukee and the question always is, “What new programs can we put in Milwaukee to make this work?” You can have the best set of standards in the world, you can have the most wonderful programs in the world, you can have the most wonderful teachers in the world, and if the students don’t come to school, they are not going to learn and that is the problem in Milwaukee. On any given day, 75% of the students are in school, and it’s not the same 75% from one day to the next. Until you do something about that situation, you are not going to be able to correct the problem. (Interview 8/25/2003)

This administrator’s comment frames a student’s success or failure through the choices she makes—the child chooses to attend school and to participate in the education system. Unfortunately, this Assistant Superintendent does not recognize that Milwaukee’s public schools, and many other schools throughout Wisconsin as well as the U.S. have not always constructed environments that implement “wonderful programs”⁹ or employ “the most wonderful teachers in the world.” Locating the problem within the individual child rather than the system symbolizes the restructuring of the discursive language of education reform so that the “because” to the “why do children fail” question is located in the child’s actions. This administrator’s interpretation of failure does not cause the system to examine itself or even acknowledge his/her role in continuing to support the establishment of these institutions. Rather, this administrator’s words, which exemplify statements made by many stakeholders throughout the state, inscribe the belief that the education field is level, and it is the child and her family who make choices about their participation.

This sample of statements from stakeholders at the state level of policy demonstrates how the formulation and implementation of these retention policies at the state level position the constructs of success and failure within the state’s school systems. State policymakers and their promotion policies structure the individual as the one who chooses success and failure rather than how the system itself structures these constructs. It is actually the “why question” that Varenne and McDermott (1998) choose not to answer that allow state stakeholders to place the onus for failure on the performance of the student.

Public Schools presented diplomas and wanted an entry level job. His company tested them at the 6th grade level. And only 4 of the 10 passed the test.”

⁹ This includes curricula.

Students fail because they do not perform well on academic measures. Furthermore, state policymakers, through the NSP statutes, institutionalized failure and ensured that all students “do success and failure” (p. 121).

Structuring Success and Failure as Local Issues

At the district (local) level, the structure of the state’s system of education is somewhat different. Local school district personnel are positioned as the intermediary agents between the state policymakers’ reforms and the families that are served by their schools. Student failure is institutionalized by the state, and as such, school district personnel must create a level playing field so that failure results in the students’ actions and not the system of education district personnel create.

District personnel consistently stated that they would have focused on the issue of increasing students’ academic success with or without the state’s NSP statutes. For instance, a District administrator from department research and evaluation illustrated this belief by stating:

We didn’t need the state’s policy to address student performance. We do that. We have been doing that for several years now. We didn’t need the policy to help us do that. Quite frankly, we didn’t. I think this policy [the NSP statutes] was implemented for political reasons, and there’s an agenda out there and that agenda is being forwarded and advanced right now. And that’s what happened, and we’re just going along with it. (Interview 9/4/2003)

According to this administrator, the District was already trying to increase the academic success of students, and the state’s retention policies were an unnecessary political act by the state’s policymakers.

District stakeholders also saw the state’s NSP statutes as restricting the District’s ability to address the issue of increasing students’ academic success. A school board member who was a parent of a child who went through the District’s K-12 system stated, “These statutes very much restrict our flexibility. It dictates what it is we have to deal with and those may not in fact be the big issues for us (Interview 7/15/2003).” Structurally, the NSP statutes limit the policy priorities for the District.

Nevertheless, the District’s response to the state’s NSP statutes became the tool that not only determines if the District’s students were educated, but the statutes also informed District stakeholders as to whether the students were fulfilling

their roles within this process.¹⁰ The state's statutes caused District personnel to re-evaluate how they were educating all of their students and to develop

¹⁰ The District's 4th grade promotion policy requires that a student must have a grade of "2" or higher on the 4th grade report card in each of the core content areas (Language Arts, Mathematics, Science, Social Studies). If a student has a grade of "1" on his/her 4th grade report card in any of the core content areas, the school shall review the student's performance on the Wisconsin Knowledge and Concepts Examination (WKCE). If the student has a score of "basic" or above in each content area where the report card grade was "1," the student shall be promoted. If a student meets neither the report card grade nor the WKCE criteria, the student may be promoted if the student's academic performance is such that he/she passes a District-approved District summer school program that the student takes between his/her 4th and 5th grade school years. If a student does not meet the criteria relative to report card grades, the WKCE or the summer school program, the student may, with District approval, (1) repeat the 4th grade school program, or (2) remain in 4th grade until the student attends and satisfies the District's requirement(s) in a District program that has been approved by the District as a learning opportunity for the purpose of the student meeting such requirement(s). If a student repeats the above-referenced 4th grade school program, and/or attends and satisfies the District's requirement(s) in the above-referenced District program, the student shall be promoted to 5th grade. A 4th grade student who meets the District's requirement(s) shall be promoted as soon as practicable. The District's 8th grade promotion policy requires that a student must have a 1.67 cumulative GPA during seventh and eighth grade in courses aligned to the 8th Grade Wisconsin Model Academic Standards in each of the core content areas (English/ Language Arts, Mathematics, Science, Social Studies). If a student has less than a 1.67 cumulative GPA from 7th and 8th grade in any of the core content areas, the school shall review the student's performance on the Wisconsin Knowledge and Concepts Examination (WKCE). If the student has a score of "basic" or above in each content area where the GPA was below 1.67, the student shall be promoted. If a student does not meet the criteria relative to his/her report card grade point average or the WKCE, the student may be promoted if the student's academic performance is such that he/she passes a District approved District summer school program that the student takes between his/her 8th and 9th grade school years. If a student does not meet the criteria relative to the report card grade point average, the WKCE or the District's summer school program, the student may, with District approval, (1) repeat the 8th grade school program, or (2) remain in 8th grade until the student attends and satisfies the District's requirement(s) in a District program that has been approved by the District as a learning opportunity for the purpose of the student meeting such requirement(s). If a student repeats the above-referenced 8th grade school program, and/or attends and satisfies the District's requirement(s) in the above-referenced District program, a student

intervention programs that improved the failing student's performance. For instance, the comments by the parent who sat on the District's committee to develop its promotion policies point to a possible reason why the state's policies changed the practices of District personnel.

I hate to say this; it sounds so awful, but when you attach consequences to kids, people start to pay attention in ways that don't happen when you just attach it to more amorphous levels like schools, districts, etc. Having consequences for kids matters. When you make things important for kids, you make them important for teachers, for parents, for the community in ways that just making them important for administrators does not. (Interview 7/30/2003)

The state level policymakers were able to create change in the District by reinforcing the fact that there was a consequence for students performing poorly on the academic indicators used to determine grade promotion. Using this parent's logic, the individual student represents a direct link between the District's employees and the community it serves, which forced District administrators to address the issue of student performance immediately. The comments of an elementary math coordinator support this point. The coordinator stated, "It wasn't until you had the promotion piece that made people think they've got to throw money into this kind of thing. It's a Catch-22." (Interview 8/11/2003) Even the administrator from department research and evaluation cited above, who questioned the need for the state's NSP statutes, noted that these policies "probably did have some impetus for speeding up and growing" the District's summer programs, which the District created to assist students who did not meet promotion requirements. No matter where District policymakers were heading prior to the requirements of the NSP statutes, their implementation made funding intervention services for students to meet the District's promotion requirements a priority.

At the district level of reform, the NSP statutes are a clear marker as to whether a level playing field for students existed. As a former teacher who is now a school board member stated, "There is the recognition that we can no longer just assume that there are going to be some kids who fail and there's nothing we can do about it." If the District's personnel ignored this issue of providing support for students affected by the state-mandated District promotion policies, they might have lost the support of the community that funds their existence. In essence, the "why" students fail question has been edited by district stakeholder to "what are we doing to prevent failure."

shall be promoted to 9th grade. An 8th grade student who meets the District's requirement(s) shall be promoted as soon as practicable.

Constructing Children as Failures

This framing of the reform process seems logical and can create a sense of comfort for families and community members. These policies cause District personnel to implement changes in the system, such as summer school, to increase student success. However, these changes within the District to level the playing field so that all students succeed still necessitate the success and failure of the individual child.

Some District stakeholders worried that the retention policies created a perspective in which the complicity of the education system itself in the construction of failure is ignored. For instance, the District did change its procedures and intervention services to level the playing field, so if failure persists, it is the result of the student's actions. The comments of an African-American school board member illuminate this point.

The education community really needs to do some deep thinking. We've almost accepted that there's a minority achievement gap. Everybody's got every kind of excuse in the world: the kids are poor; they're mobile, and yes, that that's all a fact. But we've almost accepted it as a society that it exists. We're working at it, but nobody's in an uproar of closing it. Everybody's focusing and say they're putting dollars there. But the truth is, do they really believe it can be closed?

This implicit acceptance of the achievement gap, which means conceding that there will always be students who will fail to meet the mandated performance requirements, frustrated this school board member. This board member questioned whether these reforms as well as the policymakers who formulated them could truly address the issue of student failure. The board member continued:

We need to take a different approach. Although my approach may be a little bit more difficult for a society that's more politically correct than it is straightforward. When I go to these neighborhoods, and I know that these young people, their peers, and/or adults are involved in activities that we would consider illegal - if they can cut marijuana to the ounce, they can do basic math. But they come into math thinking, "It's math. I can't learn that, and everybody says I can't really learn math." But when they're on the street, they're doing math. Now, it's not exactly what you want them to be doing, but they're doing it pretty well. My point is that we've got to stop accepting that these children cannot learn and start saying "How are we going to get them to apply the skills and interest them in education?" (Interview 9/11/2003)

According to this board member's statements, addressing school failure is more than creating a structure in which the student bears the brunt of the promotion policies. Instead, the system must change. The ability of the child to cut marijuana to the ounce means that she can be successful. Success is a matter of teachers and administrators recognizing a student's abilities and transforming that child's knowledge through instructional practices that teach the student "school" math. Failure is not in the child. It is in the system. Yet, even in this school board member's blaming the system for failing to recognize success in the student who can cut marijuana to the ounce creates a structure of success and failure that justifies differential treatment for each student by the identification of particular abilities in that child (Varenne & McDermott, 1998).

This board member implicates the system, but in such a way as to level it so that in the end the child still must "do success and failure" (Varenne & McDermott, 1998, p. 121). The complexity of failure found at the level of the school district still can be reduced to the individual student. No matter what solutions District stakeholders proposed or implemented, the child is the one who is identified as the success or failure, and as such, failure through the individual's performance causes one to lose focus on how these constructs are mutually constructed in this process. The focus among District personnel is still on the "why" questions that define success and failure through the individual student, which in the end, alters but does not change the "problem" that Varenne and McDermott (1998) want to move beyond. This dilemma causes one to question whether the current structure of education policies that evaluate success through rates of student failure creates a system that allows all children to be successful, or have these policies structured the system so that failing students are necessary for the system's success?

In turning away from the child and focusing on the system, Varenne and McDermott (1998) are not out to frame the policies and programs such as those found in Wisconsin as "ill conceived [policies developed] by evil people with sinister motives." Rather, they believe in most cases that reforms such as these "were well conceived by good people with the most enlightened motives" (p. 216). In this case, stakeholders at the state and district level wanted all students to succeed. The question becomes the determination of how state and local policymakers can successfully put in place education reforms that do not depend upon the construct of student failure.

Discussion

These brief excerpts into how stakeholders in Wisconsin locate success and failure in children, their communities, and their education system exemplify how the system actually inscribes the notion of failure. Varenne and McDermott (1998) want to stop asking questions that focus on the student and examine the

system itself. They end their work by asking key “why” questions about the process of education in the United States to demonstrate how this problem of success and failure has been constructed not through the failure of the individual but through the American system of education and the dominant culture that it represents. For example, they ask “Why should education, as a lifelong process of shaping one’s very being and character, be linked to getting particular jobs at a particular time? Why, even more minimally, should one reach one’s place in society through failure . . . Why should anyone ever be tested for intelligence given that almost everyone will be identified eventually as “not as intelligent as” everyone else?” (p. 216). Using these questions as an endpoint, Varenne and McDermott contend that “we” must “examine what all others, including ourselves, are doing” to create this system (p. 217).

In this article, I responded to their challenge by exploring why policymakers use failure as a means to increase students’ academic success, and how their use of this construct continues to position the student as the one who decides to succeed or fail. In this case, implementing retention policies offers policymakers a tangible solution to the issue of student failure that does not force them to question or to alter Wisconsin’s education system dramatically. The comments made by the administrator from the Department of Administration about former governor Thompson’s concern over the rate of failure that might emerge from such policies exemplifies this point. The administrator’s statement demonstrates how locating success and failure in the child and controlling it in such a way that not too many children fail allows the state to look “tough” on student failure while at the same time leaving the system unchanged.

Additionally, Wisconsin’s retention policies symbolize a current trend within the U.S. to employ particular political measures to identify the child as a success or failure. Within this context, the tendency is for education stakeholders to work towards eliminating failure from the education system by pursuing interventions such as an instructional program to assist the child in gaining the skills needed to pass the promotion requirements. However, such actions continue to locate success and failure in the students and avoid questioning the system of education itself.

This case also demonstrates how Wisconsin’s education system is designed so that the state’s policymakers have difficulty in recognizing their role within this process of creating the constructs of success and failure for the state’s students. For instance, a Democratic Senator that I spoke with did not like the state’s original retention policy’s dependency on using a single test because “when I had to get the number 2 pencil out, I didn’t do well.” Yet, the Senator’s solution to the problem was to support the multiple indicator system that state settled upon. This Senator’s resistance to reform is detailed and specific, and it is in

that specificity that one avoids questioning the entire system. As Varenne and McDermott (1998) point out, the “School” remains unscathed.

Other scholars who have examined this issue of student failure, argue that systems of education must be ‘reconceptualized’ (Stone, 1998). Stone (1998) makes the case that “the bottom line is ethical: To do nothing means to accept the status quo—a language/practice/system of failure” (p. 24). She contends that Richard Rorty’s (1989) notion of agency in which individuals can redescribe or reconceptualize terms creates the opportunity for new terms. Hanson (2000) offers a similar suggestion, which mirrors the work of Foucault (1995). She argues that while the growth of knowledge about the individual through testing has created new opportunities for coercion, it also encourages “human liberation” (p. 80) by constructing new opportunities for critique and resistance. Individuals can use this knowledge to promote the growth of personal autonomy, recognize coercion, and alter the trajectory of influence of such forms of human measurement.

However, one must be cautious in considering the possibility that such knowledge can be used to reconceptualize the structure of the American culture. Altering terms or redefining success and failure does not necessarily lead those in power and their institutions to relinquish their role in defining success and failure willingly (Strallybrass & White, 1986; Apple, 2003). Furthermore, centering solutions on “reconceptualizing” terms that describe the individual continues to foster a culture of American education in which the actions and or traits of the child can be used to identify her as a success or failure. Such a framing of success and failure removes the American system of education from the problem, which in turn positions this system not only as being the entity that determines success or failure but also the only device through which any decisions for reform can occur. Merely altering the trajectory of success and failure within the current structure of America does not address the issue at hand. The challenge is to take up Varenne and McDermott’s call to turn away from the child and examine what it is “we” are doing to structure this system of success and failure.

Education stakeholders must question how they are fostering this construct of success and failure when they advocate for particular education reforms. For instance, policymakers’ reforms that do not involve the issue of retention still frame the effectiveness of their idea or program around the ‘so-called’ academic success of the individual child. Early childhood education is a good example of this. Within the U.S., many argue for increased funding for education programs that serve young children to prevent failure in the future (e.g., Karoly, Greenwood, Everingham, Houbé, Kilburn, Rydell, Sanders, & Chiesa, 1998; Lynch, 2004). This argument is dependent upon children who carry particular individual markers, such as coming from a family living in poverty, and thus,

the expansion of the field of early childhood justifies its existence on the failure of particular children.

In terms of standards-based reforms, altering the current structure is more than just policy. It is also politics (e.g., Elmore 2004; Hess, 1999; Pincus, 1974). In Wisconsin, these reform measures allowed policymakers to be very involved with the state's system of education without having to alter it dramatically. Such reforms are therefore very attractive to policymakers.

Whether one views the implementation of the NSP statutes as policymakers getting "tough" or not, Varenne and McDermott (1998) point out that students' performance on a test such as Wisconsin's WKCE to determine such things as grade promotion, at best:

tell us little about the possible fates of any particular child. At worst, the identification of the child by a score on a test locks the child in position. In either case, it does nothing to change the system of stratification or to alleviate the problems it can make for those in the lower rungs (p. 216).

Even with Wisconsin's multiple indicator system, children will fail to meet their district's promotion requirements, and their performance on the WKCE and other performance measures will be used to justify their positioning either inside or outside the education system. Moreover, the annual increased demands on the level of performance a child is to achieve by education stakeholders at the federal, state, and local might creates a policy environment in which the emphasis of reform is on high performance expectations for all children. Yet, when looking at the history of the impact of such reforms, this political posturing only ensures that the number of children who are failing these tests will increase (e.g., Linn, 2003).

On a personal level, I find that my work is dependent upon these constructs of success and failure. Without them, my job as an education researcher is more difficult to justify and the work I generate loses much of its meaning if I am unable to demonstrate how my suggestions improve the life of the student in the American education system.

As a result of this, my work as well as the work of others who call for solutions to increase students' academic success (read: test scores) through such things as curricula, better educated teachers, and so on all work toward the success of the individual child, which fails to address the culture of American education. Levin's comments reiterate this point (1998). He states that "Until we shift a major part of the focus on failure to the need to transform entire schools, school districts, and state and national educational systems to democratic entities that are designed for the success of all participants, we ourselves fail to achieve much of the cause of present student and teacher failure" (p. 172).

To analyze the culture of the American education system, stakeholders, including myself, should recognize how each of us contributes to the illusion of a level playing field and reinforces the constructs of success and failure within our work. Reconceptualization (Stone, 1998) and awareness (Hanson, 2000) do play a part in this process, but they are not enough. Action is required. For instance, in my research, I failed to ask these policymakers how they see themselves contributing to an education system that continues to allow students in Wisconsin or their school district to fail. Moreover, I should have asked them to identify what state or local system/structures outside of education that they believe could be altered to increase students' academic success. While these two questions in no way achieve Varenne and McDermott's goals, they are small step that I can take to restructure my work so that the trajectory of my research takes a different path. I must begin to examine how I contribute to fostering a system of education that is structured in such a way that the stakeholders who are necessary to support it fail to question their responsibility in creating a system of success and failure. Thus, as education stakeholders, each of us must take up our ethical responsibility and examine how we structure children as successes and failures so that we can begin to pursue solutions that alter this structuring (Stone, 1998; Varenne & McDermott, 1998).¹¹

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