

A draft response to the  
*TDSB Achievement Gap Task Force Draft Report  
For Discussion and Feedback*  
Nov. 11, 2010

## **What Are We Teaching Our Kids?**

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### **Introduction**

On November 4, 2010, the Inner City Advisory Committee of the Toronto District School Board (ICAC) responded to the Board's *Achievement Gap Task Force Draft Report* by calling for a "fuller, deeper discussion of equity" in dealing with the official understanding of "the achievement gap" among groups "impacted by complex matrices such as language, socio-economic status, race, gender, and sexual orientation." The committee determined that "defining successful outcomes for education extends beyond scores on culturally non-responsive standardized tests" and that the Task Force itself was "not representative of the communities it purports to represent." The committee is now in the process of reaching out to a "broad range of constituent communities (i.e., students, parents, community agencies, post-secondary institutions, teacher federations, trustees and representatives from advisory committees" to facilitate this discussion of equity in the context of closing the "achievement gap" within our schools.

The first level of discussion will take place with representatives from the various advisory committees of the TDSB. These notes are a contribution to that discussion. Tim McCaskell's response, from the Equity Policy Advisory Committee (EPAC) is also attached, as is the original draft report from the Achievement Gap Task Force. We both hope that this initial discussion will open a much wider discussion across the city. The more people engaged in this discussion, the better for us all.

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Given the circumstances in which Ontario school boards like the TDSB now find themselves – stripped by the province of almost all their curriculum and financial authority, having to survive with little power and enormous responsibilities – Board advisory committees like ICAC, or EPAC (Equity Policy Advisory Committee), or PIC (Parent Involvement Committee) are largely reduced to supporting small acts of decency or bits of humane policy in the face of what is now understood as the neo-liberal assault on our public schools. We experience this assault in the continuing financial restraint on our Board (now entering its 14<sup>th</sup> year of cutbacks), in the growing micro-management of our school system by Queen's Park (even to the extent of undercutting trustee capacity to

criticize Board policy), and in the intensification of the “human capital” curriculum and pedagogy in our classrooms, policed by standardized tests and Ministry operatives from the Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat. In developing small areas of resistance to this assault, our advisory committees can be congratulated for supporting what E.M. Forster once called “breathing holes for the human spirit.” This continuing work must be respected. But, at the same time, we must find ways to raise the larger problems in our public schools – and especially the power of the neo-liberal educational agenda – against which the work of such committees must contend. And sometimes a moment comes along which might allow us to do this.

The *Achievement Gap Task Force Draft Report* might offer such a moment.

This document not only lights up the core of the neo-liberal agenda in our schools, but it also opens up to public scrutiny – under a framework called “culturally responsive teaching” – three of the key means by which Education Ministry and Board officials attempt to cover up the hard-edged “human capital” purposes of this agenda.

I hope that our TDSB advisory committees will take the time to examine this draft report with care (or the full report that will follow if we are not in time to influence this draft). I also hope that these committees (and the broader public behind them) will eventually stand in opposition to that which runs counter to the principles on which they were founded – in ICAC, for example, to enrich the lives of “inner-city” children, especially those who are poor, racialized and increasingly immigrant), in EPAC to bring a powerful equity lens to all aspects of children’s experience in school), in PIC to engage our parents in such a way that their deepest values are reflected in their children’s schooling.

## I

### **The Focus on Test-Score Production**

At the core of the neo-liberal assault on our public schools – and at the core of *The Achievement Gap Task Force Draft Report* – is support for the “human capital” or “expectations” curriculum through an overwhelming focus on test-score production. The “achievement gap” in this draft report is entirely about the gap between higher and lower test scores and about raising test scores among marginalized students.

The draft report opens with the official Ministry perspective on academic “success” in school and its application to “students of Aboriginal, Black (African Heritage), Hispanic, Portuguese, Middle Eastern background.” These are students who make up a majority of the 25% of students who do not “graduate with the expected 30 credits after five successive years of secondary school.” (p.3) The report might have added that these students also make up a majority of those who “graduate” from

secondary school from bottom stream programs – programs which offers them little hope for a good job at graduation time or a solid future to come.

We are told these “racialized” students have “the lowest rates of credit accumulation through secondary school ... the highest dropout rates ... the lowest rates of school attendance ... the highest suspension rates ... and are most likely to live in the most socio-economically disadvantaged areas of the city.” (p.3)

We are also told these students have only one academic problem: “In proportion to their numbers,” the report says, “these students have the lowest test scores (EQAO).” (3) That’s it. There is no other standard applied. There is also no mention of an official curriculum or pedagogy disconnected from their lives or purposes – a curriculum and pedagogy these test scores perpetuate. There is not a word about the official profiling such test scores encourage and the pejorative labels they intensify. All that matters, it turns out, is that we find a way to raise such low scores.

This is what a “data driven” approach, referred to in the draft report, means for these students. Such students are placed within certain categories of “data” – racial background, income, language, etc. – after which a test-score focus is then “driven” in their direction. Teachers, for example, are to use “student data to assess the current achievement levels of students and to set performance targets for them.” (p.6) As you will note in the draft report, there is a good deal of puffed-up language on the virtues of a school program being “data driven,” but when you read it carefully, you will see it’s just about test score improvement for the children who need it least.

This emphasis, as anyone who has paid attention to the actual results of standardized-test-led programs knows, is a mug’s game for poor children and especially those who are immigrant and “racialized.” These programs never work, no matter how much effort educators put into them. These children will almost always lose in this particular competitive arena. Their test scores may go up a little for a while – responding to the considerable hype that is routinely brought to bear on this process – but no more learning takes place. Indeed, as Alfie Kohn argues, there is a lot less learning taking place under these circumstances. Furthermore, this small increase in scores involves no substantial shift in the social class order; the “gap” doesn’t get “closed.”

Why doesn’t a test-score focus work? Because – unlike the adults who encourage such programs – most poor, “racialized” children insist (like children everywhere) on having a human meaning as central to their work in school; they insist on their full humanity being recognized. They find it hard to understand their classroom experience as a narrow chance to climb an upward mobility ladder through test-score production. When they experience this curriculum and teaching focus, they resist it in a million different ways. Such children, it seems, are obliged to get older – to “grow up” to the reality of the world – in order to come to such cynical conclusions about learning. By then, of course, it’s too late for “success.”

Think, for a moment, what a bizarre notion it is to focus on the idea of student “success,” rather than on student learning. Success at what, is the obvious question. In this document – and documents like it that flood our school system from Board and Education Ministry officials – the only real answer we get is “success” in test score production. In documents like this one, no one in authority gets remotely near the substance of what is being taught, what is being learned. Hopefully, in this discussion that subject will be front and centre.

It is worth noting that our Toronto elementary teachers are resolutely opposed to this focus on test score production. As one teacher put it in ETT’s *Voices from the Classroom*: “It [has become] not what’s best for the kids or what’s best for school, but what’s best for the scores.”<sup>1</sup> In an extensive survey of Ontario elementary teachers a couple of years ago, the vast majority of respondents said the current emphasis on standardized tests not only skewed their curriculum priorities, but were also deeply destructive to their teaching.

### ***Item for Action***

The Toronto District School Board should open up a broad discussion on an alternative approach to the curriculum and pedagogy for inner-city schools that is currently embedded in the official “expectations” or “human capital” curriculum and the standardized tests that police it. We should ask ourselves what it means for children to genuinely explore the world with their teachers, to develop a capacity for independent judgment, and to experience their classroom work as a prelude for achieving a strong personal and family life, a meaningful job, and a role as an active citizen.

## **II**

### **“Culturally Responsive Teaching” What Does It Mean?**

“Culturally responsive teaching,” it appears, is the primary means by which “the learning process” – understood as raising test scores -- is to “make sense” for “students of racialized groups,” who are currently “disengaged academically, socially and emotionally” from such learning. (5) It is the “caring teacher,” the “culturally responsive teacher,” the “respectful, kind and compassionate” teacher who will make a “personal commitment” to engage students “culturally, socially and emotionally” in doing the kind of learning that will improve their test scores. It is this teacher, who is to bring “all the dimensions of the child (whole child) into this learning process.” (pp.7-8)

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<sup>1</sup> Elementary Teachers of Toronto, *Voices from the Classroom: Experiences and Perspectives of Elementary Public School Teachers in Toronto*, December 1, 2009 (see: [www.ett.ca](http://www.ett.ca))

To ask a “respectful, kind and compassionate” teacher to bring the whole child into the test score production process is, of course, a contradiction in terms. This is a process that denies the whole child. It runs in direct opposition to a program that encourages the whole child to explore the world, to develop independent judgment, and to understand their classroom work as a prelude to a strong personal and family life, to meaningful employment, and to active citizenship.

The contradictions of this kind of “culturally responsive teaching” are evident in the three major areas such teaching is to embody.

### **An Antiracist Perspective**

“An effective approach to culturally responsive instruction,” the report declares, “incorporates an antiracist perspective.”

It starts with opposition to “systemic racism.” This is a phrase that has been effectively co-opted by most educational bureaucracies across Canada. Most school officials have learned to wear this oppressive reality on their sleeves, like a small beating heart. This draft report is no exception.

It is deeply sympathetic to the “negative effect of systemic racism [as it] continues to erect barriers to the full realization [of the] potential for success” among “racialized groups.” “The literature is extensive,” we are told, “on the impact of societal racism on the psyche, self-esteem and social functioning of racialized groups. Suffice it to say that systemic racism affects the readiness to learn of students of colour and ultimately limits their potential to achieve the highest outcomes in many areas of their lives.” (9)

Unfortunately, it turns out – as it inevitably turns out in this kind of document – that there is really nothing to be done about “systemic racism.” It's treated like a floating abstraction that hurts people, somehow, but which we can never really lay our hands on. Our officials just wring their hands instead – “we feel your pain” – and shift the ground of the “antiracist” struggle.

What the draft report neglects, of course, is the “systemic racism” and systemic social class bias that is entrenched in legislation and in our public policies. This systemic entrenchment is especially noticeable in current neo-liberal education policy – in systemic privatization and cutbacks, in systemic destruction of local democracy, in systemic imposition of corporate curriculum “outcomes” and standardized tests and in systemic profiling and bottom streaming. And it all comes down, “systemically,” on the lives of poor, racialized children, where it hurts the most.

How do such officials shift the ground of the antiracist struggle in our schools? Usually by putting it on the backs of our teachers. Again, the draft report proves no exception. From a few lines on “systemic racism,” it abruptly shifts to “racial stereotyping” and quickly moves into the need for a more focused “antiracist education”

for school staff: “School leaders, teachers and support staff need opportunities to learn how racism acts to reinforce student disengagement from learning and limit their potential for success in school and in community life.” (p.10) How this learning is to take place is left for another time.

### ***Item for action***

The TDSB should support efforts to promote solid antiracist education for school staff – focusing particularly on a program that genuinely introduces staff to the communities that surround their schools – but it should also take on the task of laying out the impact of systemic racism and social class bias in legislation and public policy in schools serving working-class neighbourhoods, particularly poor, racialized and immigrant neighbourhoods. The main problem in these schools, it should be stressed, is not teacher racism and social class bias, though there is some of that still alive.

### **Engaging the Students**

The next priority for the “culturally responsive” teacher is to develop “a trusting relationship” with their students, “where the student experiences [a] supportive relationship with [a] caring adult in the school, on whom that student can count for guidance and encouragement.” (10) A trusting relationship is, of course, a good thing, just as it is a good thing to encourage, as the draft report does, “healthy relationships with peers and [participation] in cultural and recreational activities.” And there is nothing wrong with students developing “their leadership skills, their capacity to think critically about their lives and to express their opinions about school and their lives outside school.” (10-11) All of this is to engage students in their schools, which ought to be just fine.

What’s wrong with all of this is the “context” (to use Michael Fullan’s word) in which this emphasis on student “engagement” is placed. It is there at the service of the promotion of a standardized-test-led curriculum. This engagement is to make the student “feel that he or she has the power to make life-changing choices,” when that life-changing choice ends up defined as acquiescence to a curriculum with little or no human meaning. If, as a student, you decide to take that step, you may, if you are very lucky, get to climb the social ladder somewhat, but there is a large price to pay in loss of integrity and community connection. It’s one of the hard choices poverty and racism offer young people. Choosing acquiescence is completely understandable under such difficult circumstances – most of us have done it at one time or another – but it is not a choice we should force on poor, racialized youngsters.

A trusting relationship between teachers and students in these circumstances must involve a solid and shared understanding of the social and economic reality these students face and what can effectively be done to change that reality for the better. The teacher must be able to open up an honest path to making a difference in his or her students’ lives. Teachers must not be asked to participate in misleading public relations exercises to assure parents that their children’s future is secure.

### ***Item for Action***

The TDSB, in consultation with our teacher unions, should try to better define the role of the teacher, especially in our working-class communities. This definition should include:

- (1) An approach to curriculum and pedagogy that genuinely explores the world with their students and looks to making it a better place to live and
- (2) The meaning of a trusting relationship between teacher and students. How is a caring teacher to act responsibly with his or her students?

### **Thinking Critically**

There is only a small mention of “critical thinking,” in this draft report, but it is worth touching on.

It is, of course, important, as suggested above, to encourage students’ capacity to think critically about their lives and to express their opinions about school and their lives outside school.” What’s wrong is the context in which that statement is placed – a context of acquiescence to a fragmented and disconnected curriculum and pedagogy.

The description of critical thinking in this draft report is all in the language of acquiescence to the status quo: “Students,” says the report, “need to learn and practice making positive choices in their study routines and habits, their behaviours, the values they adopt, their relationships with peers and adults, and in their goals and aspirations.” It goes on to say that “schools which use what the students know, experience and feel as opportunities for building self-esteem, self-confidence will help students to understand how taking personal responsibilities benefits them.”

This is the worst kind of one-dimensional positive thinking – the kind that encourages children to do what they are told without really thinking about it, the kind that says take on “personal responsibilities” because it benefits you, rather than because it matters that you act like a human being. The last thing we ought to encourage is the “practice” of “positive choices” in our inner-city schools. It just ends up as empty moralizing. Children and teachers have to think negatively as well as positively: What’s good? What’s bad? What has to be changed? And how can we act that will make a difference in the lives of those we love? Students can’t be told what to think. They have to learn to use their own judgment. They have to think “two-dimensionally:” to enquire honestly about what exists in the world and, at the same time, to think hard about the potential for change that exists in the world, the possibilities of the further realization of our humanity. That’s what “critical thinking” is. It’s the opposite of “instrumental thinking” – the thinking required to fill in multiple-choice tests or prepare for multi-tasking job slots run by management orders and regulations from above.

### *Item for Action*

The TDSB should develop a “critical thinking” core of the curriculum it promotes. Perhaps this might, in part, be considered an extension of the social justice curriculum that has begun to be developed as part of the model schools program.

### **Model Schools, The Role of School Councils and Test-Score Production**

Near the end of the draft report’s discussion of MSIC (Model Schools Inner City) and UDS (Urban Diversity Strategy) is a conclusion, which says these programs “produce positive results for students.” What positive results? Improved “school attendance,” we are told. More “secondary school credits.” Improved “test scores.” This is not an emphasis, I think, that ICAC wants to have applied to the work being done in these programs. My impression is that ICAC wants the students in its model schools to have a genuine education and wants its teachers focused on providing it. Such a program can only be measured in the quality of the actual work done – in reading and writing and math, in science, literature, history, social studies, technical studies, etc. – all of which require sophisticated human judgment. A few stats about test scores, credit accumulation, and school attendance will tell us next to nothing about what’s happening in our classrooms and what we can do about it.

For all of our advisory committees with their various ties to their parent communities, it is important to recall that provincial regulations state “the purpose of the school council is, through active participation of parents, to improve pupil achievement and to enhance the accountability of the education system to parents.” At the same time, the current regulations for our Parent Involvement Committees say their purpose is to “support, encourage and enhance parent engagement at the board level in order to improve student achievement and well being.”<sup>2</sup> It is clear, as People for Education has reminded us in their 2010 Report on Ontario’s School Councils, that, in practice, such parent organizations are usually held at distance from dealing with such issues. But that needn’t be the case in the future. If we are to reestablish our parent organizations’ place in curriculum decision-making, it is essential we rethink what is meant by “improv[ing] pupil achievement.”

If we take on the items of action suggested above – to promote an engaging curriculum and pedagogy for working-class students (which should apply to all children), a strong stand against systemic racism and social class bias, a solid definition of the role of a caring and responsible teacher, and a renewed commitment to critical thinking – we are in a much better position to centre the work of the TDSB outside the “human capital” focus of the Ministry of Education and within the strongly held purposes and values of the communities we represent.

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<sup>2</sup> People for Education, *Connecting with Community & Creating Welcoming Schools, The 2010 Report on Ontario School Councils* (see: [www.peopleforeducation.com](http://www.peopleforeducation.com)), pp. 8, 12.



