

# **Opening All the Doors to Success**

MEQ Strategy in Support of  
Discussion and Reflection

**GRADE REPETITION: MYTHS, BELIEFS AND  
ALTERNATIVES**

**Reflection Workshop on Grade Repetition**

WORKING DOCUMENT

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## INTRODUCTION

Reflection on grade repetition by all school staff is certainly not a useless undertaking. Quite the contrary, it is an essential exercise. In fact, the use of grade repetition is so well established in the culture of the school system that simply raising questions about the practice can provoke a great deal of protest. A high percentage of teachers see grade repetition as an effective means of permitting students who are experiencing difficulties to solidify the foundations of their learning.

How can we explain this situation when all the European, American and Québec research on the subject indicates that grade repetition does not permit students who are behind to catch up and can, in fact, have negative effects on their self-esteem, their motivation and even whether they stay in school? In its brief<sup>1</sup> on the organization of elementary education in learning cycles, the Conseil supérieur de l'éducation suggests several very pertinent explanations, including lack of knowledge of the research on the subject. It refers to an article published in the magazine *Vie pédagogique*: "According to a survey of teachers in 15 school boards, 64 per cent of them are not aware of the results of research on grade repetition."<sup>2</sup>

However, as the two authors observe in the conclusion of the article: "Informing teachers of the research on grade repetition is not enough to change their beliefs. The doubts raised can nevertheless be a jumping-off point for discussion on this practice."<sup>3</sup>

Moreover, reducing grade repetition should not imply automatic promotion to the next cycle. Indeed, in all cases, it is essential to take into account the distinct characteristics and needs of all students, and to establish support and follow-up measures for each one.

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1. Québec, Conseil supérieur de l'éducation, *L'organisation du primaire en cycles d'apprentissage : une mise en œuvre à soutenir* (Québec, 2002), 67 p. Abridged version in English: *Cycle-Based Instruction in Elementary Schools: Supporting the Implementation Process* (Québec: Gouvernement du Québec, 2002).
  2. Louisette Pouliot and Pierre Potvin, "La puce à l'oreille au sujet du redoublement," *Vie pédagogique*, no. 116, septembre-octobre 2000, p. 49-53. Translation.
  3. Ibid., p. 49-53. Translation.

This workshop should be approached with this context in mind. It is not intended to provide an exhaustive study of the phenomenon of grade repetition or other possible approaches. The references consist of suggestions for books, articles and Web sites that provide material for a more detailed analysis.

This workshop presents a few activities to stimulate discussion with the members of a school team. This reflection process could also be carried out with the governing board, or even with the parents, because, for many of them, grade repetition is still a favoured solution to meet the needs of their children.

The following are the main objectives of the workshop:

- to become aware of perceptions and habits in the school with respect to grade repetition
- to learn about the results of some of the research
- to determine what is already being done to support students' progress in learning, as well as the changes that have been brought about by the reform and that could constitute effective means of supporting students experiencing difficulties in their school careers
- to enrich these actions with the results of the research, and with the various programs and documents provided by the Ministère de l'Éducation
- to identify avenues for action that may be tried in schools

This workshop is intended for staff in both elementary and secondary schools. Even though several of the texts are based on research carried out in elementary schools, they are relevant to discussion in secondary schools, since the same effects of grade repetition may be manifested with varying intensity at either level. The texts that are concerned more with the underlying basis for intervention are relevant to both levels of education. However, those on hypotheses for alternative solutions or interventions intended to prevent grade repetition may be different according to the level of education.

This workshop, moreover, does not exclude discussion of the fact that, exceptionally, an extra year can be an appropriate solution for certain needs of students. This possibility requires that we stop and think about the conditions that

need to be put into place when it is used, so that students benefit. Because, as Philippe Perrenoud reminds us: "Delaying promotion to a cycle, while it should not be excluded, is like a joker—it should only be used when we are sure."<sup>4</sup>

The process used for this reflection may vary according to the characteristics, needs and projects of each school team. What is provided here is a brief presentation of each activity and some indications of how its organization could be supported in a school.

The workshop repeats a few elements presented at the provincial meeting on the education reform on April 24 and 25, 2001. It can be carried out in several stages spaced out over several sessions or in a single meeting of a few hours, such as a day of reflection. However, doing it over three different sessions would be more beneficial for stimulating personal or collective reflection between the discussions of the school team. The important thing is to respect the team's pace.

The purpose of the first activity, *Grade Repetition: Perceptions, Beliefs and Reality*, is to make participants aware of perceptions in the school and provide a brief review of some of the results of research on grade repetition. During this activity, participants are asked to begin discussing the topic and to make connections between what they have always thought and what the research shows. This is in short a situation in which current knowledge is drawn out, before participants begin reflecting on the topic itself. At the end of the activity, the reading of the "Parable of the Cherry Pickers" will provide a humorous perspective for reflection before the next meeting.

The second activity, *Progress in Learning: A Priority for Everyone*, is a reflection on progress in learning and educational success for all students. Which teaching approaches, which types of interventions, what kind of organization would be the most effective to support progress in learning and favour success for all students, in particular those experiencing difficulties in their school careers? Research and experiments conducted in several schools suggest interesting avenues for reflection that could inspire a school that wants not only to think about the subject, but also, little by little, to adopt measures capable of supporting the

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4. Philippe Perrenoud, *Les cycles d'apprentissage - Une autre organisation du travail pour combattre l'échec scolaire* (Québec: Presses de l'Université du Québec, 2002), p. 41-43. Translation.

progress of all students and meeting the specific needs of those experiencing difficulties in their school careers.

The final activity, *Reflections and Actions for Our School*, is aimed at turning reflection into concrete action in the school. It could lead to a very simple project or to action research, depending on the situation of the school team and the needs of the school. For this activity, there is no predetermined duration, since it consists of a discussion with a view to carrying out concrete action and adopting an approach and measures in order to help all students progress in their learning and develop their capacities and their strengths to the maximum.

To begin this reflection, it may be useful to do a brief review of the legal and regulatory context of grade repetition.

## GRADE REPETITION: MYTHS, BELIEFS AND ALTERNATIVES

### Objectives of the workshop

- To reach a shared vision of the problem of grade repetition.
- To examine ways to facilitate reflection on this subject and establish teaching, evaluation and classroom management practices, complementary support services for teachers and students, and a system of organizing work in cycle teams in order to meet the specific needs of students experiencing difficulties in their school careers.

### Overview of the workshop

#### ➤ Activity 1

##### **Grade Repetition: Perceptions, Beliefs and Reality**

- **Activity 1 A**

Perceptions in our school with respect to grade repetition

##### **Purpose of the activity**

To gain an awareness of the various perceptions and of the current situation in the school with respect to grade repetition.

- **Activity 1 B**

Effects of grade repetition: what the research says

##### **Purpose of the activity**

- To gain an awareness of some of the results of research on grade repetition.
- To discuss the new factors brought out by these research results.

➤ **Activity 2**  
**Progress in Learning: A Priority for Everyone**

**Purpose of the activity**

- To identify elements of the reform that favour success for all students.
- To identify current practices that offer interesting possibilities for supporting students with difficulties.

➤ **Activity 3**  
**Reflections and Actions for Our School**

**Purpose of the activity**

- To determine the strengths of our school with respect to progress and success for all students.
- To explore measures that could be implemented to support progress in learning for all students and meet the specific needs of those experiencing difficulties in their school careers.

## **ACTIVITY 1**

### **Grade Repetition: Perceptions, Beliefs and Reality**

## ACTIVITY 1

### Overview of the activity

The first activity, *Grade Repetition: Perceptions, Beliefs and Reality*, is intended to raise awareness of perceptions in the school and briefly review some of the results of research on grade repetition. During this activity, participants are asked to begin discussing the topic and to make connections between what they have always thought and what the research shows. This is in short a situation in which current knowledge is drawn out, before participants begin reflecting on the topic itself. At the end of the activity, the reading of the "Parable of the Cherry Pickers" will provide a humorous perspective for reflection before the next meeting.

### ➤ Activity 1

#### Grade Repetition: Perceptions, Beliefs and Reality

- **Activity 1 A**

Perceptions in our school with respect to grade repetition

#### **Purpose of the activity**

To gain an awareness of the various perceptions and of the current situation in the school with respect to grade repetition.

- **Activity 1 B**

Effects of grade repetition: what the research says

#### **Purpose of the activity**

- To gain an awareness of some of the results of research on grade repetition.
- To discuss the new factors brought out by these research results.

**Activity 1 should not last more than two hours.**

## ACTIVITY 1 A

### Perceptions in Our School With Respect to Grade Repetition

#### **Purpose of the activity**

To gain an awareness of the various perceptions and of the current situation in the school with respect to grade repetition.

#### **Description of the activity**

Depending on the particular situation of the school team, this first activity may be carried out in two different ways: in one group or in subgroups. Its objective is to permit the members of the team to share their perceptions. However, the emphasis should not be on criticizing or opposing the current perceptions; they should be used essentially as a starting point to initiate reflection. This activity is quite brief, about twenty minutes at the most, since it is intended to bring out perceptions and knowledge in order to continue exchanging ideas on grade repetition. It is the starting point for activity 1 B.

#### **Procedure for carrying out the activity in a large group**

If this is suitable to the dynamics of the school, the participants can discuss the following question in a large group:

*What are the perceptions in our school with respect to grade repetition?*

In order to encourage a variety of views and help the participants go beyond first impressions, the facilitator, if he or she considers it useful, may ask more specific questions:

*Are perceptions and attitudes different according to the role of the individual (teacher, parent, remedial teacher, principal, etc.)?*

*Have perceptions changed with the arrival of the reform?*

*Has the situation evolved in our school?*

The facilitator writes down a few ideas or key words on big sheets of paper in order to record them for use in the second part of the activity.

### **Procedure for carrying out the activity in subgroups**

*This procedure makes it possible for more people to express themselves, since it is sometimes easier to speak in a smaller group. However, it is important to set a specific time limit for this team session, since such a topic can lead to many digressions. If this procedure is adopted, the time set aside for the activity could be increased to 25 minutes.*

**1st stage:** In small teams, the participants answer the following question:

*What are the perceptions in our school with respect to grade repetition?*

After a few minutes (about 10), the spokesperson of the team present the results of the exchange of ideas to the whole group.

**2nd stage:** The discussion continues in the large group after a report from each team (about 15 minutes).

In order to encourage a variety of views and help the participants go beyond first impressions, the facilitator, if he or she considers it useful, may ask more specific questions:

*Are perceptions and attitudes different according to the role of the individual (teacher, parent, remedial teacher, principal, etc.)?*

*Have perceptions changed with the arrival of the reform?*

*Has the situation evolved in our school?*

The facilitator writes down a few ideas or key words on big sheets of paper in order to record them for use in the second part of the activity.

Activity 1 B follows immediately after activity 1 A.

## ACTIVITY 1 B

### Effects of Grade Repetition: What the Research Says

#### Purpose of the activity

- To gain an awareness of some of the results of research on grade repetition.
- To discuss the new factors brought out by these research results.

#### Description of the activity

The activity is carried out in two stages. First of all, in subgroups, the participants read a few texts on the results of research on grade repetition and its effects. Since all the teams are working from the same texts, it is not necessary to report on this aspect; that could be redundant with respect to the second part of the activity. The participants are then asked to reflect on the topic, taking into consideration the perceptions and beliefs they enumerated in the first activity and the research results they have just explored.

#### Part one (40 to 45 minutes)

The facilitator gives the teams the suggested texts and work sheets for the reading and discussion.

The members of the team divide up the texts for reading. Since some of the texts are longer, they could be divided into sections so that the reading period will not be overly long. Working in teams of five to eight persons will minimize reading time and encourage richer discussion.

During or after the reading, they write down elements of an answer to the overall question on the work sheet or to any aspect of the question, according to the procedure the team has decided to adopt.

This is followed by a period of discussion within the team during which the participants gain further information (since not all participants have read the same text) and test their perceptions.

In addition, in order to take the reflection further, each school could, in the medium term, investigate the effects of grade repetition on its repeating students. What were the effects on their marks three or four years after the grade repetition? Did grade repetition really help the development of maturity in students who repeated for reasons of immaturity? Other questions could also guide this process. This could be useful, since it opens up the reflection on aspects of grade repetition that are rarely talked about by school teams.

**Part two** (25 to 30 minutes)

After part one has raised awareness and brought out questions, the participants are asked to discuss, in the big group, the cognitive conflicts that have arisen, the doubts raised and the information needs made evident by the readings.

The facilitator guides the exchange of ideas among the participants in order to bring out the following elements:

- the main cognitive conflicts that have arisen, that is, the research results that have done the most to shake their convictions, perceptions or beliefs
- doubts that have been raised by any of the results and for which further information is required
- what now makes them most uncomfortable with respect to grade repetition
- any other elements the facilitator considers relevant to the needs of the team

The primary objective of this activity is to raise awareness of some of the results of research on grade repetition. However, as already mentioned, the whole emotional aspect of this topic should not be ignored. In fact, the first two activities, without being used as a "complaints department," should provide an opportunity for school staff members to express their impressions or feelings on the subject. No one needs to feel responsible for what has been experienced and is perhaps still being experienced with respect to grade repetition. It is important to bring out the fact that actions are already being taken and experiments being carried out in the school to support learning by students experiencing difficulties. Often the people who implement these actions or projects that are part of day-to-day life do not see them as effective means of supporting learning and, therefore, as helping to reduce the risk of grade repetition for some students.

Guiding the discussion in this way reduces the risk that it will degenerate into futile complaints and allows it to be directed towards the exploration of avenues for action. It also provides an opportunity to introduce the second activity, the objective of which is to identify favourable conditions created by the reform and to highlight current practices that represent interesting avenues for supporting learning by students with difficulties.

Among the references presented, several books, articles and Web sites are suggested for those who wish to go further in their reflections or to add to the documentation provided for this activity.

The first activity ends by raising awareness of the fact that various paths could be explored or that actions already in place in the school could be improved in order to support progress in learning for students experiencing difficulties in their school careers. It would be useful to suggest that participants read the "Parable of the Cherry Pickers" on their own in order to continue their reflection and prepare for the next meeting, which will consist of an exploration of avenues for intervention that favour progress and success for all students, particularly those experiencing difficulties in their school careers.

## ACTIVITY 1 B

### Effects of Grade Repetition: What the Research Says

#### Work Sheets

The suggested texts present various effects of grade repetition. Some focus on how marks are affected, others on the consequences for the students themselves, their self-esteem, motivation and staying in school.

The objective of this activity is to highlight the main effects of grade repetition that have been identified by the research on each of these aspects.

What does the research say about:

effects of grade repetition on marks?

psychosocial effects of grade repetition?

effects of grade repetition on whether students stay in school?

## **ACTIVITY 1 B**

### Suggested Texts for the Activity

## BELIEFS AND PRACTICES OF EDUCATORS WITH RESPECT TO GRADE REPETITION IN ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

**Table 2**  
Researchers who have reported negative effects of grade repetition

Author	Year	Observations
Klene and Branson	1929	Students who repeat because of lack of maturity make less of their potential than those promoted
Farley, Frey and Garland	1933	Do their work less easily
Otto and Melby	1935	Grade repetition provides no motivation
Arthur	1936	Learn less in two years than those promoted
Afinson	1941	Achieve less maturity and show diminished capacity for adaptation
Goodlad	1954	Negative perception by peers
Goodlad, Coofield and Cook	1954	Persistent gap between repeaters and those promoted
Morrison and Perry	1956	The lack of social maturity should not be a criterion
Dobbs and Neville	1967	Achievement in math and reading lower than those promoted
Godfrey	1972	Do not catch up, diminished self-esteem
Elligett and Tocco;	1983	Marks lower than their peers
Schuler and Matter;	1983	
Rose	1983	
Doss	1983	Difficulties in social adjustment
Holmes and Matthews	1984	The negative effects are greater than the positive ones
Martin et al.	1988	More negative effects than positive
Shepard and Smith	1989	Survey of 54 studies that found grade repetition to be useless and even detrimental
Holmes;	1989	Grade repetition should not be used as a strategy to help those experiencing academic or social difficulties
<i>Education Letter</i> ;	1986	
Jackson	1975	
Shepard and Smith	1989	Grade repetition is ineffective
Kowitz and Armstrong;	1961	All these authors cast doubt on the effectiveness of grade repetition
Dobbs and Neville;	1967	
McAfee;	1981	
Elligett and Tocco;	1983	
Rose, Medway, Cantrell, Marus;	1983	
Schuyler and Matter;	1983	
Leblanc	1991	

Among all these studies (28 in total), particular note should be taken of Shepard and Smith (1990), who analyzed 54 studies that all reached the same conclusion: grade repetition is useless and can even be detrimental. These authors confirmed that having students repeat in homogeneous groups organized according to their abilities (strong/weak) is of more help to the strong groups, creates barriers for the weak groups, and leads to isolation and social stratification in the school. The practice of grade repetition, which is applied increasingly at the preschool level in various forms (preparatory class, junior grade one, pre-kindergarten for five-year-olds, maturation kindergarten, pre-grade one), is ineffective. Using reading and mathematics tests, the researchers have shown that after the first year the marks of repeaters are barely better than those of promoted students. The lack of enduring positive effects related to grade repetition seems to be a key element in the analysis done by Shepard and Smith. The short-term positive effect of grade repetition, that is, higher marks, does not last into the next year: the marks fall to the same levels as those of students with difficulties who were promoted. Holmes (1990) did a survey of 63 studies that demonstrated negative effects of grade repetition. These studies showed that students who repeat require an additional year to obtain the same marks as comparable students, and in addition, the students who repeat fall further and further behind over the years, in comparison with those who are promoted. In short, a repeated year is a lost year.

In Switzerland, Bain (1988) observed the marks of elementary school students who repeated a grade. He noted that 17 per cent of the repeating students obtained satisfactory marks, 3 per cent obtained acceptable marks and 46 per cent obtained marks considered mediocre. The remaining 34 per cent were not specified.

In France, as reported in a series of articles on grade repetition in *Cahiers pédagogiques* (Martin et al., 1988, reported by Leblanc, 1991) the following observations were made:

- *Grade repetition is of no use if the student simply repeats the same experience.*
- *Linear advancement through separate grades is completely inappropriate for some students.*
- *In many cases grade repetition signifies a refusal to individualize teaching and an absence of objectives.*
- *The threat of grade repetition is still considered an essential motivation for working at school.*
- *The probability of negative effects of grade repetition far outweighs the positive results.*
- *Grade repetition is very expensive for the government and represents a pure loss; it should be changed (Andrieu, 1988, p. 48).*

Grade repetition is also associated with dropping out of school. According to an MEQ publication (1991), there is a link between academic delay and dropping out of school: 97 per cent of students who drop out during their first, second or third year of secondary school are behind in their studies; 84.4 per cent of those who drop out in their fourth year of secondary school are behind, as are 55.6 per cent of those who drop out in their fifth or sixth year. In 1988-1989, it was found that 80 per cent of repeaters were at least one year behind. Of this number, 30 per cent fell

behind in secondary school and 50 per cent fell behind in elementary school. It is estimated that about half of students who start secondary school at the age of 13 (the maximum age) will drop out. This rate is four times higher than the rate for students who enter secondary school at the age of 12 or less. For students who enter secondary school at 13 years or older, the consequences of the delay on their future learning path depend on the number of years behind they are, the grade that was repeated, and whether they had the opportunity to cover the whole elementary school program before going on to secondary school. The risks of dropping out are highest among students who, even when they are only one year behind, enter secondary school without having completed their elementary schooling. Next comes the group of students who have fallen at least two years behind in elementary school. Finally, the earlier students repeated, the greater the risk they will drop out (repeaters in the second cycle of elementary school are therefore better off than the repeaters in the first cycle).

Academic difficulties are the main reason given for dropping out (MEQ 1991). These difficulties are manifested in learning difficulties, poor marks, failures and academic delay, resulting in discouragement that leads to dropping out. Therefore, there is a close link between grade repetition and dropping out, which in turn is closely related to academic failure.

According to French national statistics (Martin et al., 1988), 10.7 per cent of students who repeat a year complete elementary school, as compared to 55.1 per cent of those who do not repeat.

A national study in the United States shows that 40 per cent of dropouts have repeated a year, compared to 10 per cent of dropouts who have never repeated (Bachman, Green and Wirtanen, 1971). The remaining 50 per cent are explained by the fact that students dropped out of school in order to enter the job market, chronic absenteeism, etc. Alexander, Entwisle and Dauber (1994) point out in their survey that grade repetition increases adjustment problems for students and that one of the consequences of grade repetition is dropping out.

In short, grade repetition has not yet proven its worth and few studies have been able to demonstrate its merits. Among the latter (about 11 in total in the United States) is that of Alexander, Entwisle and Dauber (1994), which observed that among students from disadvantaged urban neighbourhoods, grade repetition sometimes goes hand-in-hand with an improved attitude towards school and higher marks.

Excerpt from Louise Langevin and France Dubé, *Croyances et pratiques d'intervenants en regard du redoublement au primaire* (UQAM, 1997).

## RETHINKING GRADE REPETITION<sup>5</sup>

*Louissette Pouliot and Pierre Potvin*

While respecting the beliefs of many teachers on the subject of grade repetition, this article calls into question the effectiveness of this pedagogical practice.

Every year, some 30 000 Québec students in kindergarten and elementary school are obliged to repeat their year. Grade repetition is the result of a decision of the school administration on a recommendation a teacher may make when evaluating student learning. Grade repetition is frequent, but does it really help students experiencing difficulties? "No," answer researchers. But why continue to use a tool that has been scientifically recognized as ineffective? The research has perhaps not reached teachers working day-to-day in their schools. The scientific literature on grade repetition brings out the dichotomy between research and practice on grade repetition, and it highlights the role played by the beliefs of teachers. This article looks at the results of a survey in the form of a written questionnaire filled out by 230 kindergarten and elementary school teachers in the Mauricie and Centre-du-Québec regions of Québec. But before presenting these results, it is important to place grade repetition in its historical context. This will be followed by a survey of research on grade repetition in order to reach a better understanding of the effectiveness or lack of effectiveness of this practice.

### HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Grade repetition has been used ever since schools have existed as social institutions, that is, since students have been grouped in grade levels, which constitute barriers holding back students who do not achieve the predetermined objectives. It began in Great Britain during the 16th century and in the United States at the beginning of the 19th century. In Québec, it can be traced back to the beginning of the 20th century, that is, when the public school system was sufficiently organized to establish a uniform program, which included the concept of passing or repeating grades. According to Filteau (1954), this new program soon came under criticism: "Most students took two years to get through the first year's subject matter, and often three years."

In the years that followed, there was one curriculum after another and, although it was used less frequently than at the beginning of the century, grade repetition was still widespread. This continued until 1964 when the Parent Report (Royal Commission of Inquiry on Education in the Province of Québec, 1964) suggested reducing the number of mandatory examinations in schools. The report warned that it needed to be clearly established that the fate of a student must not depend on exams alone. This was at the beginning of the Quiet Revolution, when a substantial education reform took place that influenced teaching practices until the end of the 1970s. Grade repetition almost disappeared during the 1970s with the advent of the humanistic trend in education. The concept of continuous progress led to the practice of automatic promotion to the next grade or level of education.

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5. Translation of Louissette Pouliot and Pierre Potvin, "La puce à l'oreille au sujet du redoublement," *Vie pédagogique* 116 (September-October 2000): 49-53.

At the beginning of the 1980s, substantial reforms called for in *The Schools of Québec: Policy Statement and Plan of Action* for the Ministère de l'Éducation (1979), which emphasized the American ideology of "excellence," convinced educational communities to question the humanistic approach and automatic promotion. Higher educational standards were established, emphasizing the use of summative evaluation. The Conseil supérieur de l'éducation (1992) was critical of the overemphasis on this type of evaluation. In addition, more and more students with difficulties were being integrated into regular classes and they did not always receive help from remedial education services. Teachers faced a dilemma: school authorities wanted performance and excellence while at the same time integrating more and more students with difficulties. Teachers had to focus evaluation on the learning process, but they also had to take into account programs that included objectives distributed over time, which required summative evaluation. It was difficult to individualize evaluation since the teachers usually were given only report cards and uniform examinations, which provide little opportunity for adaptation for students with difficulties. The decision to have a student repeat a grade remained difficult, according to a study by Robitaille-Gagnon and Julien (1994), and the use of quantitative criteria, such as the results of standardized examinations, seemed reassuring when the decision was made." Grade repetition was an accessible solution that teachers contemplated when faced with poor quantitative results from students. Anchored in tradition, grade repetition has endured over time, but beyond tradition, there are serious doubts about its effectiveness.

## THE INEFFECTIVENESS OF GRADE REPETITION

In the last few decades, there has been a great deal of research on grade repetition, particularly in the United States and English Canada. Recently, European studies have been added to the list, including *Le redoublement : pour ou contre?* (Paul, 1996) and *Peut-on lutter contre l'échec scolaire?* (Crahay, 1996). Crahay's far-reaching discussion is based on empirical research. Whether they are articles in scientific journals, theses or dissertations, collections, or meta-analyses, these sources rarely show any advantages for grade repetition; they are almost unanimous on the negative effects. Three Québec studies include numerous bibliographic references on the subject (Dubé, 1997; Leblanc, 1991; Pouliot, 1998).

Three works in particular are frequently cited in the scientific literature on grade repetition: a critical survey by Jackson and two meta-analyses described in an article by Paradis and Potvin (*Vie pédagogique*, no. 85, 1993). For Jackson (1975), there is no evidence that grade repetition is any more beneficial for students with difficulties than promotion to the next grade. Holmes and Matthews (1984) conclude that teachers who continue to use grade repetition do so without any scientific guarantee of its effectiveness. A few years later, Shepard and Smith (1989) made clear pronouncements on the ineffectiveness of grade repetition. In the summary of the collection *Flunking Grades: Research and Policies on Retention*, Shepard and Smith (1989) make some very categorical statements. First of all, they conclude that grade repetition is not advantageous, in terms of either academic results or personal adjustment. Secondly, they assert that grade repetition is closely linked to dropping out. Thirdly, they note that two years spent in a kindergarten class, even with a transition program, do not result in improved academic performance in the long term, nor do they solve the problem of lack of preparation for grade one. Fourthly, they

add that, from the point of view of the students, grade repetition leads to conflicts and can be hurtful.

The fact that they are older than their classmates can be an advantage to repeating students who lack maturity at the beginning of their school careers, but the advantage is only temporary (Shepard and Smith, 1989); repeating can later hinder their feelings of belonging to a group of students, making their social integration at school more difficult. The results of the meta-analyses mentioned above should lead teachers to proceed with caution.

The position taken in this article on the value of grade repetition is based on a coherent review of the literature. In the meta-analyses, as well as the other scientific documents consulted, the studies are almost unanimous in concluding that grade repetition is an educational practice that can produce more harmful effects than beneficial ones.

### **BELIEFS AS A POSSIBLE EXPLANATION**

The effectiveness of grade repetition has been seriously called into question in the scientific literature consulted. Several motivations for the use of grade repetition are described in it: pressure from public opinion to establish stricter evaluation policies, the desire to maintain high standards, and the desire for homogeneity within groups of students. In addition, grade repetition is considered to be an easy solution that does not require any changes in the established organization of the school. To these motivations, we also need to add another element that seems to help maintain the reliance on the practice of grade repetition: educators' beliefs about this practice.

Among those persons who maintain the practice of grade repetition, teachers are the group that is most involved in the decision to promote students to the next grade or have them repeat. Through the assessments they as evaluators make of students, teachers can be considered the initiators of grade repetition. The beliefs of teachers influence their judgment and their attitudes, which have repercussions on their behaviour in the classroom and influence them when they propose grade repetition or promotion to the next grade (Crahay, 1996).

According to the studies examined, most teachers think that grade repetition has positive effects. Teachers think that an additional year spent repeating the same activities can help students understand, acquire maturity and develop basic skills, thus preventing failure in the years to come. Teachers' beliefs are related to their experience. The teacher believes he or she made the right decision for a student who repeats a year, especially when the student gets better marks the following year. The teacher has no way of knowing if the repeating student would have done better by being promoted with the rest of the class to the next grade. It is impossible for the teacher to have the weak student repeat, and then to turn back the clock and promote this same student to the next grade in order to observe which option is better. A valid way to compare grade repetition and promotion to the next grade is through longitudinal studies of two groups of weak students, one made up of students who repeated, and the other made up of students who were promoted to the next grade. Most of the studies done of groups of repeaters and groups that were promoted to the next grade conclude that grade repetition is ineffective. They show that at the beginning of the

repeated year, marks are usually high. These marks fall gradually in the course of the repeated year. The following year, marks drop sharply. Two years after repeating, the students who repeated have marks comparable to those of students of equal strength who were promoted to the next grade. Teachers believe in the positive effects of grade repetition, but what exactly is this belief based on? To answer this question, it is important first of all to describe the beliefs of teachers with respect to the effects of grade repetition, and then to verify if these beliefs are related to the professional characteristics of the teachers.

## QUÉBEC TEACHERS' BELIEFS ON GRADE REPETITION

In February 1996, a questionnaire was filled out by 230 teachers from two schools in each of the 15 school boards in the Mauricie and Centre-du-Québec administrative regions (Pouliot, 1998). These schools were selected according to two strata used in similar studies: the rate of repetition, high or low, in each school, and the kindergarten, first cycle and second cycle classes in which grade repetition was practised. Here are some of the answers from these teachers and the percentages these responses represent (see tables 1 and 2).

A high percentage of the teachers believe that grade repetition has positive effects on students' marks. To the statement *students should never repeat*, 91.7 per cent answered that they disagreed. The teachers are very strongly in agreement with the practice of grade repetition. Even kindergarten teachers attribute many advantages to grade repetition. They also agree that it should preferably take place before fourth grade. However, it seems that the consequences of grade repetition at these grade levels are particularly significant, since, according to Brais (1992), the earlier a student repeats, the greater the risk he or she will drop out.

It is useful to take a closer look at the statements that show subtle differences in teachers' beliefs according to the grade level of the students. The wording of some of the statements provides an opportunity to verify the teachers' beliefs according to whether the students are in kindergarten, the first cycle (grades 1, 2 and 3) or the second cycle (grades 4, 5 and 6) of elementary school.

Many respondents believe that grade repetition helps immature students, that it does not harm self-esteem, that it does not lead to behaviour difficulties and that it does not stigmatize students permanently. It is important to note, however, that teachers have divided views when it comes to evaluating the effect of grade repetition on older students.

In addition to statements with which the teachers were asked to agree or disagree, the questionnaire included a request for professional information. Specifically the respondents were asked to say whether they were familiar with the results of research on grade repetition. To this question, it is surprising to see that 64 per cent of the teachers answered "no." Significantly more of the teachers who were familiar with the research results believe that grade repetition is harmful to students' self-esteem. Similarly, significantly more of them doubt that grade repetition in Cycle One of elementary school helps the immature student.

Another professional characteristic that is significant is the highest degree obtained by the teacher. Teachers with a teaching diploma believe more strongly than those with a B.A. or M.A. that having children in kindergarten or Cycle One of elementary school repeat a year does not harm their self-esteem.

## CONCLUSION

The teachers seem to be behaving rationally when they recommend grade repetition, but the reasons behind this professional action are based on false premises. Teachers propose grade repetition because they believe that its effects are beneficial for the students. However, many studies have shown that grade repetition is ineffective in terms of marks and that it can even be harmful to the emotional and social development of students. It is surprising to see that a strong proportion of teachers questioned (64 per cent) said they were unfamiliar with the research on grade repetition. There are therefore substantial gaps in information to be filled.

While many teachers attribute beneficial effects to grade repetition, Crahay (1996) points out that scientific method is based on doubt and requires that we be suspicious of widely held beliefs. Québec studies on grade repetition are still not very numerous. It is likely that such beliefs are still common not only among teachers, but also among school administrators and principals, as well as parents and students themselves. It will also be important to verify the beliefs of another group: future teachers. Do university training programs include the dissemination of scientific research on grade repetition?

Familiarizing teachers with the research on grade repetition is not sufficient to make them change their beliefs. The doubts raised, however, can be a starting point for reflection on this practice. Certainly, with the implementation of the new curriculum, the possibilities for using grade repetition are reduced. However, if the beliefs of teachers remain unchanged, there is a risk of fostering attitudes and behaviours that run counter to the education reform that is now under way.

Abandoning the use of a practice as ineffective as grade repetition would constitute progress, but it would be irresponsible to leave students who are experiencing difficulties to their own devices. Grade repetition, as Perrenoud points out (1994), has enormous human and financial costs. Rather than spending substantial amounts of money on a practice that has been scientifically shown to be ineffective, it would be better to allocate those same financial resources to research into effective alternative practices.

It is appropriate to use scientific data to raise questions regarding the experiential knowledge of teachers. This valuable knowledge, combined with the questioning of beliefs, should be used to discover alternatives to grade repetition, and thus to instill new momentum into the education system.

**Table 1**  
Beliefs of teachers on grade repetition

Statements	Teachers' answers	
	Agree	Disagree
Grade repetition is an effective means of preventing failure in higher grades.	81.2%	18.8%
Grade repetition is necessary to maintain standards in each grade.	71.9%	28.1%
Grade repetition makes it possible to prevent large gaps in the learning levels of students in the same class.	78.4%	21.6%
Students who do not achieve the objectives in two of the three basic subjects (reading, writing and mathematics) should repeat.	89.9%	10.1%
If a student repeats, it should be before fourth grade.	78.5%	21.5%
Students should never repeat.	8.3%	91.7%

**Table 2**  
Beliefs of teachers responding to statements on the anticipated emotional and social effects of grade repetition

Statements	Teachers' answers	
	Agree	Disagree
Grade repetition in <b>kindergarten</b> is an effective means of helping immature children catch up with the others.	74.2%	25.8%
Grade repetition in <b>Cycle One of elementary school</b> is an effective means of helping immature students catch up with the others.	75.9%	24.1%
Grade repetition in <b>Cycle Two of elementary school</b> is an effective means of helping immature students catch up with the others.	49.8%	50.2%
Having children repeat in <b>kindergarten</b> is harmful to their self-esteem.	21.7%	78.3%
Having students repeat in <b>Cycle One of elementary school</b> is harmful to their self-esteem.	21.0%	79.0%
Having students repeat in <b>Cycle Two of elementary school</b> is harmful to their self-esteem.	48.3%	51.7%
<b>In kindergarten</b> , children who are older (because of grade repetition) show more behavioural difficulties than others.	16.9%	83.1%
<b>In Cycle One of elementary school</b> , students who are older (because of grade repetition) show more behavioural difficulties.	16.9%	83.1%
<b>In Cycle Two of elementary school</b> , students who are older (because of grade repetition) show more behavioural difficulties.	43.4%	56.6%
Grade repetition in <b>kindergarten</b> stigmatizes students permanently.	12.7%	87.3%

Grade repetition in <b>Cycle One</b> of elementary school stigmatizes students permanently.	10.9%	89.1%
Grade repetition in <b>Cycle Two</b> of elementary school stigmatizes students permanently.	24.3%	75.7%

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## **ACTIVITY 1**

### **Parable of the Cherry Pickers**

Suggested reading following activity 1 B

## INTRODUCTION

The "Parable of the Cherry Pickers" was used in a talk given by Louise Pouliot during a day of reflection on grade repetition held in Jonquière in November 1994. It is adapted from an article by Professor John V. "Dick" Hamby (Clemson University in South Carolina), published in *The Journal of At-Risk Issues* in 1994. This text presents, in the form of a parable, a very important reality in our schools: each student who comes to school is different and has specific needs.

Suggesting this reading to the members of the school team at the end of the first activity encourages them to continue reflection on their own. When the text is handed out to the participants, they should be given reading goals such as the following:

- Find similarities between the situation of the cherry pickers and that experienced in a school.
- Imagine the reaction of the cherry pickers when they see the ladder.
- With respect to students experiencing difficulties in their school careers, are there avenues that have not yet been explored? Are there "ladders" to be invented?

## PARABLE OF THE CHERRY PICKERS

Long ago in a faraway land a simple people made a humble living tilling the soil and catching fish in the river that ran through their village. This was before the age of mechanization. Most work was done by hand. Life was hard but good for these poor people.

One day the leader of the people made a trip to the port where the river ran into the sea. There he learned that merchants were paying high prices for cherries. So he took some trees back to his village and told the people they could make lots of money growing cherries.

A few farmers planted cherry trees in the fields surrounding the village. The next year they had a good crop, but they also faced a dilemma: the cherry trees were taller than most people in the village. Only the tallest could reach high enough to pick all the cherries. So the farmers had to pay a premium wage to the taller people to harvest the crop. Also, it took a stout back to haul the cherries, so the stronger people made money by hauling the cherries to the river where the fishermen made money transporting the cherries to the seaport.

In a couple of years, more and more farmers were planting cherry trees. For a while the villagers were able to pick all the cherries, haul them to the river, and transport them to the seaport. Everyone was making money, and everyone was happy.

Eventually, however, someone surmised that if more and more trees were planted each year, in a few seasons there would be more trees than tall people to pick the cherries and strong people to haul them to the river. The challenge was clear. For the cherry business to grow, and with it the villagers' standard of living, they would need more tall and strong people in the village.

Then someone came up with a marvelous idea. There were lots of children in the village, and as in all normal villages, some children were taller than others and weighed more than others. "What if," reasoned the villagers, "we could make them all tall and heavy? Then we could grow, harvest, and ship all the cherries we wanted."

So they established the Cherry Picking Preparatory Academy where children in the village would be developed as cherry pickers and haulers. Children would have the midday meal at the academy, engage in all kinds of exercises, and even take naps. They would learn which foods to eat at home, how many hours of sleep to get each night, and which kinds of exercise to take. They would even be given homework about how to chew their food.

On the first day of the academy, all the children were weighed and measured, and the plan went into action. However, the academy staff soon discovered that with so many children it was not possible to prepare a special meal for each child or to give individual lessons about what to do at home. They solved the problem, by having all the children do the same thing.

For a year, the children went to the academy. On examination day at the end of the year, the villagers anxiously awaited the results of their efforts. When the results were announced, the

villagers were shocked. Some children had grown taller and heavier, but some had not made much progress at all. A few had even lost weight during the year.

The villagers called a town meeting to discuss the situation. Although they agreed there was a problem, several groups had different explanations about what had happened and different suggestions about what they should do.

One group, the Framers, believed that adults could accomplish almost anything with children if they just set things up the right way. "The children failed to grow because we didn't feed them the right food," argued one. So they established a committee to study recipes.

"Maybe we didn't feed them at the right time of day," suggested another. So they appointed another committee to study eating schedules.

"What about exercise?" opined others. "Was it the right kind; was it at the right time of day?" Then one Framer, much brighter than all the rest, suggested that it was probably a food-exercise-sex interaction, so they decided to study what would happen if boys and girls got different foods and exercises at different times of the day.

Another group, the Shamers, said the children should be ashamed of themselves for not taking advantage of all the things the village was doing to make them grow taller and heavier. "I'll bet they're not eating all their midday meal," said one Shamer. "We should appoint a monitor to make sure they eat all their food." However, the Shamers got into an argument with a third group, the Namers, and spent a lot of time debating the name of this lunchroom monitor. Would they call this person the Eating Completing Supervisor or the Completing Eating Supervisor?

One Framer exclaimed, "These children probably don't know how to chew their food properly. Chewing, as everyone knows, is very important to nutrition." So the children were given a test to see if they knew how to chew. Those having trouble were placed in a special class for chewing disorders. Of course, the Namers came up with a lovely title for this class. They called it Mastication Remediation. They also believed that the children were not exercising enough, so they set up some afternoon and Saturday morning classes. The Namers called this program Wise Exercise.

"What about the parents?" cried some of the Shamers. "They ought to be ashamed for not teaching their children how to eat all their food, how to chew properly, and how to exercise. Most of the parents just don't care. We never could get them to come to Open House." They decided to set up a program of home visits and parenting classes and provided pamphlets explaining how parents should teach their children to grow to the minimum height and weight.

A fourth group, the Blamers, said that the adults in the village were coddling these kids. "This is serious business," they said. "We are in competition with the village across the river. We can't have our academy turning out young people who are too short to pick cherries or too weak to haul them to the docks. If they are not the right height and weight at the end of the year, let them spend another year doing the same things over again until they have reached the minimum height and

weight. If some come to the Academy not ready to grow, let them stay at home until they are ready."

The villagers were democratic and heard all sides, and they included this approach in their solutions. Again, the Namers came through. They called this program Extension Through Retention. The villagers put all these ideas into practice. Over the next several years, it seemed that the children were getting taller and heavier. However, with so many things happening, no one was quite sure what was making the difference. A few observers suggested that most children get taller and heavier as they get older anyway, and this whole Academy thing was a waste of time.

Some new problems arose. The programs were expensive, and some villagers felt it wasn't worth it. Many children who had been made to repeat the eating and exercise classes—some as many as two and three times—decided that they did not want to be in the Academy any more. They dropped out and went to work in the local McCherries fast food store.

Faced with all these new problems along with the old ones, the villagers decided they should call a meeting of the Estates General. As they bemoaned their fate, the leader got up and said, "Now folks, I know things are bad, but they can't get much worse..." Just then, someone ran into the meeting shouting. "The cherry pickers across the river have just invented the ladder.

The "Parable of the Cherry Pickers" was used in a talk given by Louise Pouliot during a day of reflection on grade repetition held in Jonquière in November 1994. It is adapted from an article by Professor John V. "Dick" Hamby (Clemson University in South Carolina), published in *The Journal of At-Risk Issues* in 1994.

## **ACTIVITY 2**

Progress in Learning: A Priority for Everyone

## ACTIVITY 2

### Overview of the activity

The second activity, *Progress in Learning: A Priority for Everyone*, is a reflection on progress in learning and educational success for all students. What pedagogical approaches, what types of interventions, what kind of organization would be the most effective to support progress in learning and favour success for all students, in particular those experiencing difficulties in their school careers? Research and experiments conducted in several schools suggest interesting avenues for discussion that may be used by a school that wants not only to think about the subject, but also, little by little, to adopt measures to support the progress of all students and meet the specific needs of those experiencing difficulties in their school careers.

#### ➤ Activity 2

#### **Progress in Learning: A Priority for Everyone**

#### **Purpose of the activity**

- To identify elements of the reform that favour success for all students.
- To identify current practices that offer interesting possibilities for supporting students with difficulties.

**A period of about two hours should be scheduled for this activity.**

## ACTIVITY 2

### Purpose of the activity

- To identify elements of the reform that favour success for all students.
- To identify current practices that offer interesting possibilities for supporting students experiencing difficulties.

### Introduction to the activity

The concept of grade repetition is hard to reconcile with all the changes brought about by the reform:

- the organization of instruction in learning cycles
- an education program that includes the development of competencies and end-of-cycle outcomes
- evaluation used as an aid to learning and for monitoring progress in learning
- tools, such as Competency Scales, that make it possible to recognize students' progress and support it continuously

The development of competencies is part of the continuity of the learning the student has already achieved. For those experiencing difficulties, repeating an entire year under the same conditions, using the same textbooks and, very often, with the same pedagogical approaches achieves little. The preceding activities have demonstrated this.

However, exceptionally, an additional year can be an appropriate solution to meet certain needs of a student. But, for this measure to permit the student to continue developing his or her competencies and make progress in continuity with what he or she has already achieved, it is essential to plan the implementation of various support and monitoring measures.

The objective is to support students in their learning, to find the most effective interventions and means to help them progress and develop their competencies, while taking into account their individual differences and needs.

### Description of the activity

In subgroups, the participants provide elements of answers to the following questions:

*What elements of the reform favour the implementation of practices that facilitate support and monitoring of learning for students who are experiencing difficulties?*

*What actions that have already been undertaken to provide support to students with difficulties may be measures to prevent grade repetition?*

The participants fill in the work sheets on the basis of their knowledge and experience.

After about 20 minutes, a series of texts is handed out to each subgroup, in addition to the following documents published by the MEQ. Each document should be read in its entirety in order to get the full benefit. However, for the purposes of this activity, a few chapters should be focused on: in *Learning Difficulties in School: Reference Framework for Intervention*, chapter 4; in *Complementary Educational Services: Essential to Success*, chapter 3. Another relevant document, *Individualized Education Plans: Helping Students Achieve Success*, has recently been published.

The members of the subgroups divide the texts among themselves and attempt to find new information to complement the work that has already been started. The participants divide up the new texts to be read. Next they draw up a list of measures, actions and interventions that could be implemented in the school in order to meet the needs of students with difficulties. They do not make a selection, but rather identify everything that seems to represent interesting possibilities. Making this list in no way means that everything on it must be done in the school. The choice of actions to be carried out in the school will be made later, during other meetings. This part of the activity is very important, and the teams should be given enough time (40 to 45 minutes) to consult the documentation and identify promising interventions.

During a plenary session (about 30 minutes), a representative of each subgroup presents the best solutions identified by his or her team. To avoid repetition and not unduly prolong this sharing period, the first team presents everything they have noted, and then the other teams add any new elements they have identified.

**IMPORTANT:** The elements noted during the plenary session should be recorded. They may be used throughout the reflection on actions the team could implement to pursue their research on measures, interventions or experiments cycle teams could undertake in order to meet the specific needs of students experiencing difficulties.

This activity lasts about two hours, which leaves the members of the school team enough time to consult and use the documentation. **The documents published by the MEQ, in particular *Learning Difficulties in School: Reference Framework for Intervention*, should be handed out ahead of time so that the participants can read or reread the designated chapters.** It would perhaps also be a good idea to remind them that these documents are a first-rate source of information.

This activity can be carried out either in elementary school or in secondary school. Obviously, in secondary school, staff members are not as familiar with the elements of the reform as those in elementary school. However, in most secondary schools, reflection on the reform has already begun and it should be possible to focus on some elements that would facilitate support and monitoring of students experiencing difficulties. As for the suggested texts and the documents published by the MEQ, they are intended for both levels of instruction.

## Activity 2

### Guidelines and conditions to promote student success

Elements of the reform that favour the implementation of practices to support and monitor students with difficulties

## Activity 2

### Guidelines and conditions to promote student success

Actions already undertaken to support students with difficulties, which could be:

- alternatives to grade repetition
- support measures for students whose time within a cycle is extended

## Activity 2

### Guidelines and conditions to promote student success

After consultation of several texts, actions that seem promising for supporting students with difficulties, which could be:

- alternatives to grade repetition
- support measures for students for whom an extension of the time spent in a cycle must be considered

## ACTIVITY 2

### Suggested Texts for the Activity

## CONDITIONS FOR EFFECTIVE ACTION

Raising questions concerning grade repetition should lead to reflection on current practices and on the conditions for appropriate action. It should be noted that repeating a year is an assistance measure that should be considered only in cases where it can really be effective (when in doubt, it is better to refrain). It is essential that grade repetition be a last resort and that other solutions be studied first and given preference (for example, promotion to the next level with an intensive assistance program).

Part three sets out the various conditions that favour success for students in academic failure situations. These conditions have been observed in studies on dropouts. They are:

- **Deal with several variables at once.** Action must be taken not only in relation to subjects that have not been passed, but also in relation to the reasons for failure, such as lack of support, poor motivation, emotional problems.
- **Take a long-term approach** and provide follow-up in subsequent years, because the immediate positive effects have a tendency to dissipate over time.
- **Organize a favourable school environment** that facilitates learning, that is, a school that has clear, precise objectives, a calm atmosphere, a responsible administration, appropriate facilities, frequent monitoring of students, etc. Decompartmentalization of programs (multiprogram classes) and individualized programs are suggested.
- **Help students** directly by establishing meaningful student-teacher relationships ("we're really interested in the students, and they know it"), encouraging them to create networks of friends, favouring enhanced self-esteem, working on their motivation (increase their desire and hope for success) and helping them assume responsibility for dealing with their difficulties.
- **Help parents** so that students receive the supervision they need at home. The parents have to demonstrate their interest, provide encouragement when necessary and show understanding, respect and tolerance for mistakes. It is important to clarify their role and to support their supervision of homework. Parents are not always able to provide help with homework (work schedule, illiteracy, etc.) and the school should provide alternative measures.
- **Help teachers** of students with difficulties by providing them with all relevant information concerning the help the students are already receiving, the alternatives to grade repetition being envisaged and the educational approaches considered most favourable to success (individualized teaching, cognitive behaviours related to tasks to be carried out, varied teaching methods, etc.). The teachers should also have the support of a team of educators: remedial teachers, education consultants, psychologists, etc.

In a case of grade repetition, it is important to **record in writing** the reasons behind the decision so that the teacher and parents are properly informed and support the decision. This support is one of the success factors for the repetition of a year.

Translation of an abridged version of *Le redoublement au primaire : État des connaissances et recommandations pour en faire un meilleur usage*, Commission scolaire Chaudière-Étchemin, Direction régionale Québec-Chaudière-Étchemin, MEQ, September 1996, 78 p.

The complete text in French can be found on the following Web site: <[www.rtsq.qc.ca/saqca/repeaters/redoub.htm](http://www.rtsq.qc.ca/saqca/repeaters/redoub.htm)>.

WORKING DOCUMENT

DASSC  
September 2003

Éducation  
Québec 

## FOSTERING EDUCATIONAL SUCCESS FOR ALL STUDENTS

### A preventive approach

#### Attention and Concentration

- Some students are very sensitive to interference and to visual stimuli, so it is essential to pay special attention to their seating in the classroom and to the classroom layout. Teachers can also enlist the students' classmates to help refocus students who have become distracted, or who risk becoming distracted.
- In tasks involving visual acuity, some students are easily distracted by peripheral factors. It may be helpful for them to limit their field of vision, either by using their finger as a pointer or by hiding part of a text.
- Some students need to change their position or activity to maintain their level of interest, attention or concentration. It is preferable to come to an agreement with them to have shorter, more frequent work periods or to alternate between manual and intellectual tasks.
- The proximity of the teacher may be enough to refocus some students on their tasks. With some students, it may also be useful to agree on secret verbal, visual or sound cues that will remind them to behave without letting their peers know.
- Some students need to relax in order to recover their ability to concentrate. For some, this may mean taking a break or listening to soothing music, while others may need to play or move around.

#### Organization in Space and Time

- Some students need time to reflect on which materials they will need for a task or project and to identify materials that are not useful for the task and must be put away. Some students may need help from an adult or their classmates in making the appropriate choices.
- Some students have difficulty estimating time; they require signs or external cues (verbal, visual or sound) to help them realize how much of the allotted time for an activity has elapsed and how much remains.
- Some students need signposts to help them relate to time. The daily use of a calendar and a time line representing the day helps them learn the cycles of time (days, weeks, seasons, etc.) and contributes to their emotional security.

- To plan and make optimal use of their time, many students benefit from having the work plan for a given period posted where they can see it, along with suggestions for activities to occupy their spare time.
- Students who are not familiar with the environment (recent immigrants, students with a limited command of the language of instruction, etc.) need time to explore the various resources of the classroom and school.

### **Self-Esteem**

- Some students constantly seek social approval. They need to be commended for their progress and praised for their efforts. Approval is especially effective if it comes from peers. An effort should be made, however, to reduce their reliance on the approval of others by teaching them to encourage and congratulate themselves.
- Some students have social and family backgrounds that provide little connection with school culture. In relating to both the students and their parents, it is important to show respect and take into consideration their cultural background. These students may also need help in coming to terms with the school culture, which may be unfamiliar to them.
- Students do not necessarily have much responsibility for their lifestyle habits as regards hygiene and nutrition since they must, to a large extent, abide by the choices made by their parents. They must be assured that the school is working together with their families in this area. They must also be helped to develop the skills to make informed personal choices.
- In order to cooperate, many students have to understand that their contribution is important, and even essential, to their team; thus it is important to plan roles that are interdependent and are in keeping with individual students' abilities. This does not mean that students should be confined to the same roles all the time—quite the contrary.
- Children from homogeneous backgrounds may have difficulty imagining the coexistence of different cultural and religious traditions. It will be necessary to adapt examples to their own reality (by referring to the coexistence of different generations or of people with and without handicaps, etc.). It is important to focus on similarities rather than differences.
- Some students need to take on a responsibility within their class in order to develop a sense of belonging and social competency.

### **Socialization**

- Some children find it difficult to decode facial expressions. They need to be attuned to the various possible interpretations of nonverbal communication. Some may also need to choose from among visual examples of facial expressions (illustrations, photographs or words describing various emotions).

- Some students, whatever their age, may not always be able to come up with an appropriate alternative for an unacceptable behaviour or action. It may be helpful to make suggestions or provide models, especially if these are proposed by classmates.
- Some students have difficulty recognizing their own behaviour as inappropriate and tend to confront people who point this out. Working with the students' positive intention—what they aimed to do—makes it easier to discuss the matter and helps them accept more appropriate behaviour.
- Some very impulsive students may sometimes use aggressive behaviour or language. They need explicit instruction in internal dialogue or other methods of controlling their emotions, such as deep breathing, leaving the scene of the confrontation, or automatic writing.
- Because they lack confidence in themselves, many students are easily influenced. It is necessary to discuss with them the possible sources of influences and ways to resist being influenced when they do not want to be. Role-plays and simulation exercises can help them become more assertive by enabling them to represent a situation, react, and imagine the consequences of their actions.
- To develop their social conscience, some students need to have a chance to associate actions with their consequences. Staff meetings and cooperative committees can help teachers in this regard.

### **Communication and Verbalization**

- Many students require guidance in associating words with actions (listening, watching, writing, etc.) or ideas (focusing their attention, having an image of something, committing to memory, etc.). The teacher can help them by posing questions that elicit descriptions, such as "How do you know...?" "How can you recognize a...?" and "What do you do when...?" instead of offering explanations.
- Communication in a group is improved by having the students sit in a circle or a horseshoe formation. In this arrangement, it is easy for them to make eye contact and hear each other.
- Some students require help in structuring their messages; they can be prompted with keywords or questions, diagrams, frequently used expressions, a checklist, etc.
- Some students are slow at learning the names of things; they must be given adequate time, and sometimes clues, in order to identify familiar objects by name. To help them increase their vocabulary, one should increase the requirements gradually. Thus one might begin by identifying the object ("It's a..."), then asking them to recognize the object ("Show me the..."), and finally asking them to identify the object themselves ("What is this?").
- For activities involving discussion, some students may need to use concrete props—such as a speaker's staff or a microphone—in order to learn the rules of communication, speak in turn, etc.

### **Motivation: Participation and Persistence**

- Motivation is strongly affected by students' emotional response to what they perceive as the causes of their success or failure. In order to be willing to take risks and make an effort, they must feel that they can influence those causes and their own perception.
- Some students, especially boys, feel very little motivation to learn to read. It is crucial to take into account their interests and to build on their strengths in other areas.
- In order to undertake a task, many children need to feel that they are capable of completing the task, and that if they make a mistake, they will not lose face.
- Some students require frequent feedback on their performance and their behaviour in order to complete a task.

### **Comprehension and Memorization**

- Some students will find it easier to accept instructions if they agree on a procedure for dealing with them, accompanied by visual models, such as diagrams, or pictograms, or keywords. Having the students reformulate the instructions in their own words is an essential step in making sure they understand what to do.
- For some students, it is easier to organize their thoughts or sentences if they manipulate them—for example, by noting the various elements on strips of paper and rearranging the order of the strips.
- To correlate items of information, which helps in memorizing them, some students need to use their body (playing the role of an information item themselves) in order to form a mental image of the item.
- Some students need to rely on concrete materials (to manipulate, explore and experiment with) longer than others in order to form or process concepts.

### **Self-Control and Transfer of Learning**

- Some students need to be reminded how to approach a task involving interpretation. In mathematics, for example, the student may not automatically think to apply strategies used in English Language Arts.
- To make wise choices, students need to recognize that it is in their interest to use effective strategies, and that inappropriate strategies or strategies used inappropriately can cause problems.

- Some students may not see the parallel between the procedure for solving mathematical problems and one for solving moral and social problems. The relationship between the two should be explained to them.
- Many students have a limited view of events. Focused on the present, they find it difficult to reflect on actions in the past or to look ahead to future actions to consider their possible impact. To do so, they need to begin by looking at events in a very limited time frame, and then to gradually extend this time frame.

DASSC, 2000

## TAKING ACTION TO AVOID GRADE REPETITION

- Differentiating pedagogy means **providing each student**, as often as possible, with **optimal learning situations and tasks** in order to meet his or her needs. (Perrenoud, 1996)
- **Through formative observation**, teachers can differentiate their pedagogy to support different students.
- **Remedial teachers** possess very specialized educational competencies that permit them to **play a key role** in pedagogical differentiation for **at-risk students**, because they are able to understand why students are experiencing difficulties and can **suggest likely remedies**.
- The needs of students will be met by a **cycle team** that shows **flexibility** in establishing the roles of the members.
- Differentiation means *juggling* the following differences:
  - different needs
  - different development
  - different sexes
  - different projects
  - different ages
  - different cultures
  - different cognitive styles
  - different learning rates
- **The presence of students who are experiencing difficulties should never be denied** in the context of the reform. From the start, it is important to **recognize differences and to take action early, with a view to prevention**. If this is not done, students may continue to experience difficulties and not achieve the exit profile, and there would be a temptation to reintroduce repetition in a disguised form at the end of the cycle (Allal, 1995).
- **The negative effect of the absence of pedagogical differentiation** on students with learning difficulties can be a **huge increase in their academic delay by the end of the cycle**.
- **It is not enough to let time take its course**.
- Learning rates have to be taken into consideration. **Differentiation does not mean following different students' learning rates, but rather taking them into account** in an appropriate way in order to help students progress as quickly as possible (Perrenoud).
- It is likely that some students will not be able to achieve the exit profile for a cycle in the standard time period. **It would then be necessary to move them on to the next cycle while intensifying work with them**.

- The cycle permits students to be **guided over more than one year**.
- Pedagogical differentiation makes teaching more effective for at-risk students because it enables educators to **rethink, optimize, diversify and regulate** learning processes.
- Pedagogical differentiation enables **teachers to choose the best teaching techniques to meet the diversity of students' needs**. In order to accomplish this, teachers should acquire techniques for use in problem situations, project learning, cooperative teaching, strategic teaching, lecturing and systematic, intensive training sessions, etc.
- We need to **break the mould of standardized practices** and make available to teachers **a wide range of ideas and tools** that will permit them to diversify their teaching and class management strategies.
- In the context of differentiation, teachers should:
  - **share responsibility**
  - **extend differentiation over the whole cycle**
- Differentiation should not affect pedagogy only, but also structures, management and processes. Managers in the school system should demonstrate creativity and leadership in order to:
  - **mobilize human resources**
  - **establish structures that will permit educators in the school to avoid grade repetition**

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April 18, 2001

## Preventing Dropping Out: Avoiding Traps, Making Accommodations<sup>6</sup>

*Pierre Bouchard*

### Accommodating students' difficulties

*The Gage Canadian Dictionary* defines the verb *accommodate* as "make or become fit or suitable; adapt," or "reconcile; adjust." The word and the ideas it expresses correspond to the measures we would like to apply when students are at risk of dropping out or are experiencing adjustment difficulties. In the next section, I will discuss a specific experience that illustrates how a school can create a structure to accommodate students who are experiencing adjustment difficulties or are at risk of dropping out. First of all, because this kind of process is based on a way of thinking, I will state certain basic concepts in order to define what I mean by "accommodation measures." These concepts will make it easier to understand the choices made and the structures established.

1. *Recognizing a statistical reality.* Secondary schools have to recognize that, in regular classes, a certain number of students will not succeed in adjusting to the common course structure. This is not a criticism of the quality of the school, but simply recognition of a statistical reality. If, for example, 97 per cent of students integrate well, the organizational model must be highly effective. For the others, accommodations, means of "retrieval," have to be provided.

2. *Planning alternative solutions.* At the beginning of the school year, it is difficult to foresee events that will occur in the personal lives of students, the make-up of groups, and student-teacher interaction, in short, the whole set of circumstances that come into play and that will result in some students experiencing adjustment difficulties. Although it is impossible to know precisely which students will need help and what will be the nature of their difficulties and the situations in which they will be manifested, provision should be made for accommodation measures that are flexible enough to quickly and effectively meet their needs.

3. *Maintaining contact during difficult periods.* Adolescence is a period of life characterized by all sorts of disruptions. Given this reality, and the possibility of students experiencing adjustment difficulties, schools should plan accommodation measures in order to keep students there, so that the students get through any crisis and avoid more substantial damage.

4. *A voluntary measure.* Students commit themselves on a voluntary basis to a process in which accommodation measures are applied. This condition enables the student to fully commit to the proposed process, while respecting its non-coercive nature.

5. *Another form of organization of instruction.* This accommodation measure consists of adapting the school to the student, in other words, modifying the organizational structure so that it suits the student experiencing difficulties. It involves replacing or supplementing the instruction provided in the regular class.

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6. Translation of Pierre Bouchard, "Prévenir le décrochage : les pièges à éviter, les accommodements à trouver," *Vie pédagogique*, no. 107 (April-May 1998): 49-52.

6. *An assistance measure in the regular school.* The solution is not somewhere else. Too often, educators who find themselves in a dead end direct the student to another institution, whose only merit is being different from the first. Since the student's difficulties have not been resolved, there is a danger they will reoccur, except that, each time, the student has to adjust to a new environment. In many cases, the effect of the move will be to aggravate the student's adjustment difficulties, and it will therefore be harmful.

7. *An immediate assistance measure.* The educators concerned decide with the student and his or her parents what procedure to follow and what changes to make. It is thus possible to act without delay and avoid the serious damage that could result.

8. *A measure aimed at making the school take responsibility.* The school commits itself to keeping students who are experiencing difficulties, and in order to translate this commitment into action, it provides the required resources (personnel, space, materials). The school team shows its solidarity by accepting the application of accommodation measures in the school and by respecting the limitations of the resource persons. It should be recalled that any accommodation measure reflects a particular way of thinking.

9. *A behavioural intervention model.* The behavioural intervention parameters of this accommodation measure can be briefly described. This type of intervention is based on control of the context and situations in which behaviour is manifested: 1) control and restructuring of situational variables, such as moving the student to another class, changing the schedule or the time allotted to homework, adaptation of the program; 2) control of changes in the situation resulting from the behaviour, which implies placing the student in a context in which he or she can take charge again, to a certain extent, of his or her schooling. The support measure is based on a behavioural intervention model, and is distinct from, but not opposed to categorization and classification measures, which are based on a management model. It is distinct from it, but it is not in opposition to it. Measures to identify and classify students with a view to directing them to specialized resources may be useful, but in this regard, the behavioural intervention model makes it possible to attain two desirable objectives: 1) prevention, by reducing the need for more substantial services, 2) reintegration, by offering the student receiving such services the possibility of a gradual return to a regular classroom.

10. *No specific classification.* It is not necessary, for purposes of the allocation of resources, to differentiate students benefiting from accommodation measures from the other students. When this must be done, the administrative procedure that is followed has no relation to the accommodation measure.

11. *Access to the school's services.* Any accommodation measure should be applied in such a way that the student always has access to student life, the school's services and the social environment. Accommodation measures can be a great help to students if they prevent any exclusion that might cut students off from the school community or the support that, despite their difficulties, they receive from it.

*12. A process of inclusion and integration.* The goal is to keep the student in the school, that is, in the most normal environment possible. This is the vision that inspires those who favour this approach.

*13. A resource class whose composition is not predetermined.* Since no list of students is predetermined at the beginning of the year, students are accepted into the resource class over the course of the year.

*14. Focusing on the student and not on the difficulties.* This accommodation measure is part of a global approach that strives to keep the student in his or her own environment. There is therefore no clear demarcation between adjustment difficulties and learning difficulties or delays. The assistance is applied to one or the other, or both.

### **An example of an accommodation measure: the Foyer Program**

Five years ago, the team at École secondaire Chomedey designed this project within the framework of the MEQ action plan on educational success, in order to provide assistance to students who had dropped out or were at risk of doing so. The project was initially implemented in February and it made it possible for students who were failing to take charge of themselves in mid-year by concentrating on the basic subjects. Some students had behaviour disorders, others were frequently absent, and some no longer attended school at all. These students were withdrawn from regular classes and placed together in a single class with one teacher. Educational and related activities (practicums, visits, field trips) were also part of their schedule.

Five years later, the project became a full-time program, accessible throughout the year. The general principle of the program is in keeping with the rules for accommodation measures listed above. It is still possible for students to make a fresh start in mid-year by concentrating on the basic subjects, but the program now permits resource persons right at the beginning of the year to tackle the various types of difficulties that certain students may be experiencing, including:

- Students who have adjustment difficulties such as phobias, depressive states or feelings of rejection, difficulties that can seriously affect their school attendance: In these cases, the students can lighten their schedule and receive assistance from the Foyer Program, in a more private context than normally.
- Students at risk of dropping out because they are experiencing learning difficulties: At the beginning of the year, they are taken out of one or two courses in order to receive homework assistance, examination preparation or training in work methods; in other words, they receive special support throughout the year. Assistance that is given to students at serious risk of dropping out contributes greatly to preventing deterioration of the situation and reducing the need to withdraw such students from their programs of study in mid-year.
- Students who disrupt the class and are therefore frequently removed from the classroom: They will be withdrawn only from classes where there is a problem.

- Students who no longer attend school: In this case, the problem may have existed for several months or even years, and it may result from a personal situation that makes it very difficult for the student to follow the normal schedule. The flexibility of the Foyer Program makes it possible for the student to reintegrate gradually. The student starts on a partial schedule, and then moves on to attending school full time.

The success of the Foyer Program comes from teamwork. Primarily to ensure good communication, and consistency and intensity in the actions, the staff taking part is small, that is, two teachers responsible for the full schedule, the psychologist who coordinates the program, and the principal. Team meetings are systematically included in the schedule. Structured in this way, the program establishes the conditions for team accountability with respect to students taking responsibility for themselves. The success of the Foyer Program also depends on a broader responsibility of the school team, which has to understand and respect objectives, capacities, and limitations, and show solidarity. Thanks to this support and this understanding, the program achieves maximum effectiveness.

### **The concept of the responsible school**

In this article, we have proposed avenues for reflection on the problem of dropping out and adjustment difficulties in secondary school. One central concept emerges from this analysis, that of the responsible school. We will end by outlining its broad characteristics.

The responsible school replaces "elsewhere" solutions with "here" solutions. It sets itself an educational project that not only brings people together, but also includes them. An educational project that does not have a place for students who are experiencing difficulties and for students who are unable to achieve the required level of performance should not be given a passing mark. The responsible school provides within its walls a full range of assistance services that meet the various needs and respond to the different types of difficulties students experience. Sending students elsewhere should only occur when the school finds it impossible to organize the required services: severe impairments, handicaps.

The responsible school has a vision of students developing as whole persons. It rejects models of performance and excellence. It focuses on the student and not on the subject matter.

The responsible school makes the people working in it responsible. It entrusts a limited number of students to a limited number of teachers. It places its confidence in the creation of small work teams that are capable of taking responsibility for the education they dispense.

The responsible school develops by taking advantage of the day-to-day experience acquired working with young people rather than by attempting to apply management standards. The administrator, therefore, places the teaching team in a situation where they control the quality of the education they provide.

The responsible school has in its team people who are open to new ideas, who are constantly refining their means of action and who are never content with second-best. Uniformity, cohesiveness, and

collective consistency have their proper place, but they must be put in a broader context of tolerance and respect for differences.

The responsible school welcomes students who have dropped out or who are experiencing adjustment difficulties. Far from pushing them aside if they question its actions, it listens to their message. The difficulties and obstacles encountered by the students guide the school towards improving the quality of its services. The students will perhaps prove to be as responsible as the school has been towards them.

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Translation of an excerpt from Pierre Bouchard, "Prévenir le décrochage : les pièges à éviter, les accommodements à trouver." The complete text in French can be found on the Web site of *Vie pédagogique* at the following address: <[www.viepedagogique.gouv.qc.ca](http://www.viepedagogique.gouv.qc.ca)>.

## **ACTIVITY 3**

### Reflections and Actions for Our School

## ACTIVITY 3

### Overview of the activity

This final activity, *Reflections and Actions for Our School*, is intended to direct the discussion towards concrete action in the school. It could lead to a very simple project or some kind of action research, depending on the situation of the school team and the needs of the school. For this activity, there is no predetermined duration, since it consists of initiating reflection with a view to carrying out concrete action and adopting a procedure and interventions in order to help all the students progress in their learning and develop their capacities and strengths to the maximum.

### ➤ Activity 3 Reflections and Actions for Our School

#### Purpose of the activity

- To determine the strengths of our school with respect to progress and success for all students.
- To explore measures that could be implemented to support progress in learning for all students and meet the specific needs of those experiencing difficulties in their school careers.

## ACTIVITY 3

### Reflections and Actions for Our School

#### Purpose of the activity

- To determine the strengths of our school with respect to progress and success for all students.
- To explore measures that could be implemented to support progress in learning for all students and meet the specific needs of those experiencing difficulties in their school careers.

#### Introduction to the activity

This activity is different from the others. No specific approach or duration is suggested. It is intended, rather, to initiate reflection by the whole school team on how to support students experiencing difficulties in their school careers. It only provides elements for reflection on avenues for action.

It does, however, suggest additional materials to be consulted in order to continue this reflection: the brief<sup>7</sup> by the Conseil supérieur de l'éducation on cycle-based organization in elementary school, which also offers interesting avenues for reflection for secondary schools; the brief *Pour une meilleure réussite scolaire des garçons et des filles*,<sup>8</sup> which proposes relevant elements for reflection on a subject of concern to the school system; two other briefs from the Conseil supérieur de l'éducation that are particularly concerned with secondary schools, one on scheduling in secondary schools<sup>9</sup> and the other on taking ownership of the reform in secondary schools.<sup>10</sup> We could also add the document *Fostering the Success of*

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7. Québec, Conseil supérieur de l'éducation, *L'organisation du primaire en cycles d'apprentissage : une mise en œuvre à soutenir* (Québec, 2002), 67 p. Abridged version in English: *Cycle-Based Instruction in Elementary Schools: Supporting the Implementation Process* (Québec: Gouvernement du Québec, 2002).

8. Québec, Conseil supérieur de l'éducation, *Pour une meilleure réussite scolaire des garçons et des filles* (Québec, 1999), 116 p. English summary: *Improving Boys' and Girls' Academic Achievement* (Québec: Gouvernement du Québec, 1999).

9. Québec, Conseil supérieur de l'éducation, *Aménager le temps autrement - Une responsabilité de l'école secondaire* (Québec, 2001). Abridged version in English: *Organizing Academic Time Differently: A Responsibility of Secondary Schools* (Québec, 2001).

10. Québec, Conseil supérieur de l'éducation, *L'appropriation locale de la réforme : un défi à la mesure de l'école secondaire*, (Québec, 2003). 80 p. Abridged version in English: *Taking Ownership of the Reform: The Challenge for Secondary Schools* (Québec, 2003).

*Québec Students: Secondary School Transformed*,<sup>11</sup> which presents several types of organization and approaches that can currently be found in many Québec secondary schools.

We should not forget the documents used during the previous activities: *Learning Difficulties in School: Reference Framework for Intervention*, *Complementary Educational Services: Essential to Success* and *Individualized Education Plans: Helping Students Achieve Success: Reference Framework for the Establishment of Individualized Education Plans*. All are valuable references that should not be ignored.

Why all this documentation? Because, in order to move to action, to build a project for the school, to rethink the organization of complementary services in the school, to organize learning cycles that are more than a form of administrative organization, there have to be foundations, theories and orientations. Change is a long process that needs to be nurtured. The process may take longer, but such changes cannot be made haphazardly. Above all, we should keep in mind that they cannot be achieved in a single school year.

**With respect to progress and success for all students, what are the strengths of our school?**

Before taking action, it is important to really know oneself. Every school has its own characteristics and needs. Every school team, every school has strengths that come from all the members they are made up of. Identifying the needs of students with respect to the progress and success of their learning is very important. But it is equally important to identify the strengths of each student, strengths that could be positive factors when it comes to finding ways of doing things that can meet students' needs. It is sometimes necessary to go beyond what has been done before and to explore new avenues. This is where the different strengths of each team member are necessary. Remember the "Parable of the Cherry Pickers" and think that we, perhaps, should invent our own "ladder."

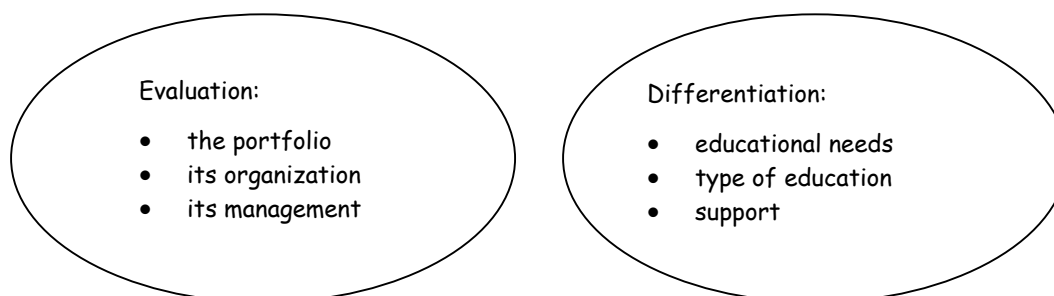
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11. Québec, Ministère de l'Éducation, *Fostering the Success of Québec Students: Secondary School Transformed* (Québec, 2003).

## A) Set targets

What things in the school require reflection and intervention? Reflection by the school team on this subject is a first step towards orienting interventions to be implemented in the school to support progress for all students.

The following are a few elements organized around a central idea: students and their success. It is up to each school team to choose or add what it wants. The elements are presented in table form in Appendix 1. With respect to these elements, the aspects that specifically concern the school should be targeted. Here are two examples.



Dealing with all these aspects at the same time would not be very effective and would lead to a lot of discussion and little action. That is why it is important to target the orientations that the school intends to set for itself and to make choices accordingly. Here is an example.

For the next year, in order to support students' progress and success, the school team wants to explore cycle-based organization. Their reflections and interventions will deal mainly with that aspect. However, along the way, the team will have to question and explore other aspects, because they are all interrelated. But the starting point depends on the priorities set by the school.

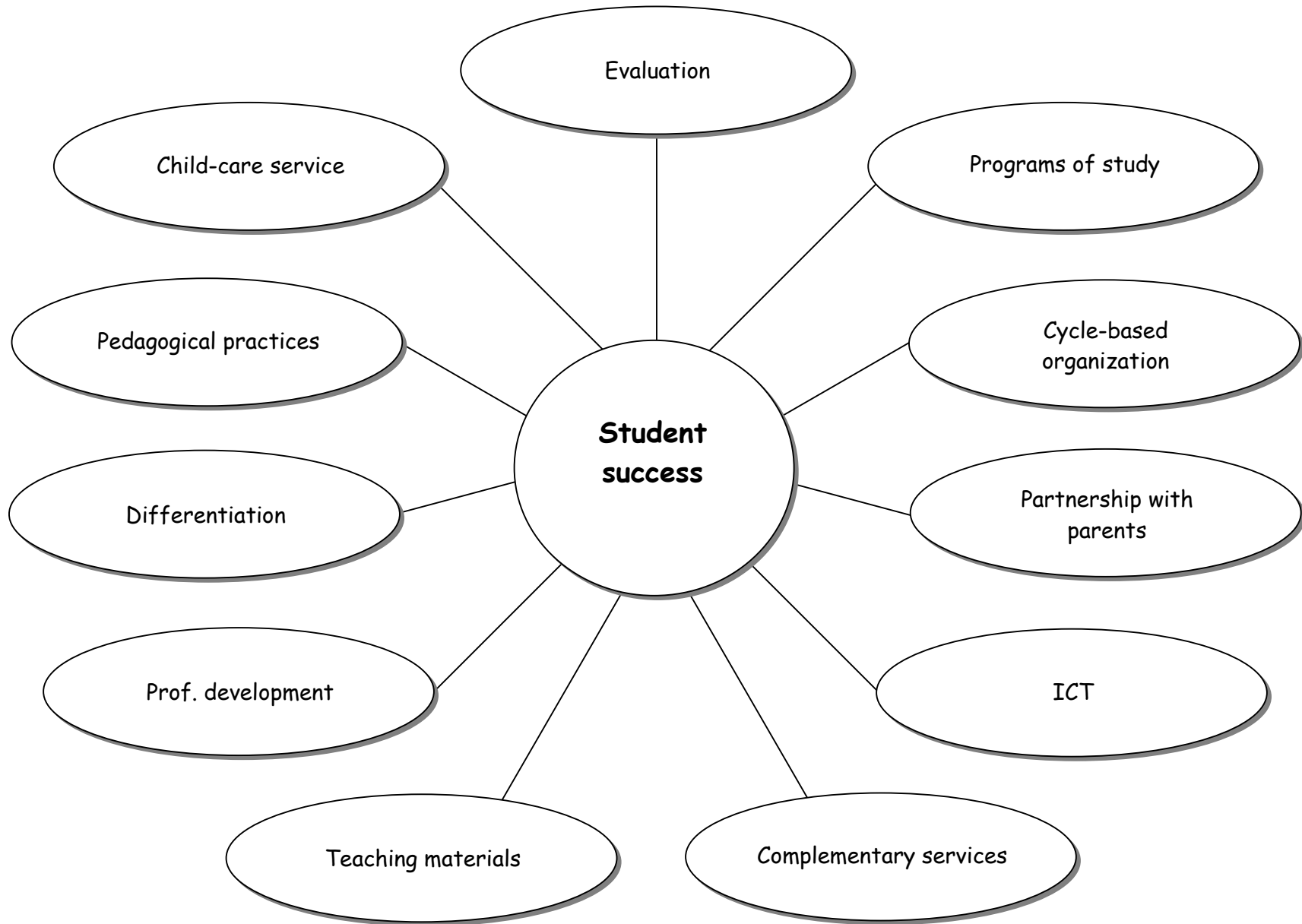
## B) Identify the strengths of the school

With respect to what has been targeted, what are the strengths of the school team? Of the school?

Each member has strengths, competencies that he or she can share to make the school a real school of learning adults as well as learning students. The approach adopted will vary from one school team to another according to the diversity of the members. Every team may have "ladder inventors"!

What avenues could we explore in order to establish actions to support progress in learning for all students and meet the specific needs of those experiencing difficulties in their school careers?

This process really belongs to each school team and its governing board. Everything done during the activities of this workshop should lead to concrete actions in the school. However, the decisions that come out of the workshop should be implemented in the context of the school's educational project and success plan. The school is a whole and its various actions should be coherent and should be directed towards the main objective: success for all its students, particularly those experiencing difficulties in their school careers. In collaboration with all its partners, the school must open all the doors to success.



## APPENDIX 1

WORKING DOCUMENT

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