

Abstract:

York Region District School Board's (YRDSB) initiative entitled 'Modern Learning Strategy' helps students develop the necessary mindset and skills, through deep learning opportunities, that will prepare them to be future ready. The initiative's focus on teaching 21st century competencies, including life values, is providing students with the opportunity to actively engage in the curriculum, while also helping them become independent critical thinkers who will be prepared to overcome challenges outside of school. These opportunities are available since the initiative provides teachers with the means to create an environment that is built on trust and respect.

Key Words:

Modern Learning Strategy; Democratic Purpose of Schooling; Transcendence-orientated Interaction; Future Ready; Life Values

Modern Learning Strategy in York Region District School Board:

One of the major questions in the education field is, "Are educators responsible for teaching students more than the curriculum expectations?" According to Beck and Kosnik (2014) learning becomes relevant for students when course material is linked to the real world and when teachers support "students' way of life development" (p. 55). However, educators may not focus on this latter aspect. According to Cranston (2013), leaders implement school initiatives in an effort to meet one or more of the three purposes for schooling: (1) Democratic, (2) Individual, and/or (3) Economic. He claims that each purpose of schooling helps to serve a public and/or private interest of the students. The democratic purpose of schooling serves a public interest since it is concerned with helping students become competent citizens. The individual purpose of schooling serves a private interest as it is concerned with helping students achieve their social and economic goals. The economic purpose of schooling serves both private and public interests since it is about helping students contribute to the economic prosperity of the country (Cranston, 2013, p. 133). I am interested in his observation that school initiatives are typically geared towards achieving the individual and economic purposes of schooling rather than the democratic purpose. His observation is problematic since "schools are

operating in ... times of discontinuous, unpredictable and turbulent change” (Cranston, 2013, p.131). Thus, it is imperative that leaders acknowledge the value of the democratic purpose of schooling by helping teachers “pursue relevance by *integrating* real-world and way of life learning into the mandated curriculum and the life of the classroom” (Beck & Kosnik, 2014, p. 44). If leaders do not promote the democratic purpose of schooling then students will continue to mainly “memorize material without really understanding it” (Beck & Kosnick, 2014, p. 43).

I want to focus on York Region District School Board’s (YRDSB) ‘Modern Learning Strategy’ since it emphasizes the democratic purpose of schooling. The board’s goal, since the 2015-2016 school year, is to help students develop the skills and attitudes necessary to become ‘future ready’. According to YRDSB, as outlined in their board improvement plan, ‘modern learning’ is defined as a strategy to “engage students in authentic, relevant and deep learning that enables them to create, connect, communicate and share their learning with the world and to be future ready” (YRDSB, Modern Learning Strategy, 2015). Moreover, the ‘Modern Learning Strategy’ aims to “provide learning environments which prepare students to adapt, achieve and excel in a world that is constantly changing. School engagement has far-reaching social implications; therefore, schools must be places where students are deeply engaged in learning and challenged to develop the skills and mindsets that are integral to modern learning” (YRDSB, Modern Learning Strategy, 2015).

YRDSB created a ‘theory of action’ that briefly outlines what teachers can do to help students become future ready. City, Elmore, Fiarman, and Teitel (2009) define theory of action as “a working hypothesis of what an organization thinks it will take to move an initiative forward” (p. 41). YRDSB’s theory of action argues that “*If we* build knowledge and capacity; foster deep learning, innovative teaching and sound assessment; plan for sustainable and flexible environmental design; and create collaborative learning communities, *then* students will be engaged in authentic, relevant and deep learning that enable them to create, connect, communicate and share their learning with the world and to be future ready” (YRDSB, Modern Learning Strategy, 2015).

Beck and Kosnik (2014) note that schools already promote certain life values, such as “hard work, academic learning, care and respect for others, responsible citizenship” (p. 49). However, the problem is that these life values are not explicitly taught nor do teachers explain how these values will help them in their daily interactions (Beck & Kosnik, 2014, p. 49). YRDSB leaders realize that the ‘Modern Learning Strategy’ will help teachers explicitly teach these life values in their classrooms without compromising the delivery of their curriculum.

When teachers make a conscious effort to teach life values, they are also creating engaging classroom environments for students. In part, the students are more likely to be engaged in the learning process because teachers create an environment that promotes trust and respect. Trust in the classroom is important in that if “students do not experience trust from their teachers, they will be less likely to engage in learning processes” (Maele & Houtte, 2011, p. 86). In addition, Klem and Connell (2004) note, “students who perceive teachers as creating a caring, well-structured learning environment in which expectations are high, clear, and fair are more likely to report engagement in school” (p. 270). According to O’Hara (2005) one way to actively engage students is to establish a transcendence-oriented interaction. She stresses that a “transcendent teacher-learner interaction is mutually reciprocal, liberating, and growth oriented” (O’Hara, 2005, p. 332). One of the benefits of the ‘Modern Learning Strategy’ is that students are actively engaged in the learning process with both teachers and classmates. For instance, in the school improvement plan, teachers will “co-learn with students through inquiry based learning, authentic tasks and critical thinking approaches” and “engage in a process of assessment for and as learning when co-designing learning with/for students to promote student voice and engagement” (YRDSB, Modern Learning Strategy, 2015). With purposeful learning opportunities, teachers will have time to move towards a student-centered classroom. More importantly, creating a transcendence-orientated interaction will allow for a greater chance of implementing the “Modern Learning Strategy” and, in turn, prepare students to become future ready.

In order for transcendence-orientated interaction to occur, there not only needs to be trust but also control and intimacy (Dobransky & Frymier, 2004, p. 219). These three variables are important not only for

the modern learning initiative, but also to motivate students to learn the curriculum. Thus, these variables are interconnected. When teachers share control with students, it is a sign of trust. For instance, teachers can share control by allowing students to have input in their learning experiences, such as choices in tasks (Dobrasky & Frymier, 2004, p. 219). Due to trust and shared control, students also feel intimacy, or connection, with their teachers. When this occurs as outlined in the board improvement plan, there can then be “classroom-based collaborative learning communities in which safety, risk taking, innovation and shared ownership for learning are central” (YRDSB, Modern Learning Strategy, 2015). This is important since “students [who] perceive shared power ... feel more positively toward the class and its content” (Dobrasky & Frymier, 2004, p. 220).

The ‘Modern Learning Strategy’ is purposeful and meaningful since it: (1) emphasizes the relevance of the democratic purpose of schooling, (2) explicitly promotes life values, (3) helps to create a collaborative classroom environment, and (4) enhances the delivery of curriculum expectations. By making the ‘Modern Learning Strategy’ a priority, YRDSB teachers are helping students gain opportunities to become future ready.

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