STUDENTS AT THE MARGINS

By Karen Robson, McMaster University

Since 1980, the number of university-bound students has more than doubled. The expectations that parents and youth have around attaining post-secondary credentials has become a taken-for-granted reality. No doubt that you have heard that "a university degree is the new high school diploma." Extensive university and college expansions have occurred in all areas across the country to accommodate this growing desire. The 2016 Federal Census revealed that Canada has the highest proportion of university and college graduates in all of the OECD countries, with more than half of adult citizens between the ages of 25 and 64 having such a credential (Statistics Canada, 2017).

There is widespread perception that it is only possible to get a good job by attaining post-secondary education. The stakes for potential college and university students are high. These are their future livelihoods -- their ability to become economically independent adults -- that they are making decisions about. Saying that, it is problematic that so much focus on the transition to post-secondary occurs in the latter parts of high school. As a researcher who studies the factors that help or hinder the transition to university and college, my findings consistently point to much earlier indicators that act to shape the pathways of students.

Although it is clear that going on to college or university requires a lot of hard work on the part of the student, the research that I have been doing with my colleagues at Toronto District School Board, McMaster University and York University have time and time again revealed that there are other factors at play. In the Toronto District School Board, over half of all students speak a language other than English at home. Findings from the TDSB have shown that students who were born in Latin America, East Africa, and the English-Speaking Caribbean were far more likely to drop out of high school. However, this issue of disproportionate drop-out rates is clearly not linked solely to language acquisition. For instance, students from East and South Asia are the least likely of all groups to drop out.

Research undertaken by the TDSB has only briefly examined the connection between ESL, allocation to special education, and drop-out. The results are murky and indeed in need of further study. One problem is that ESL students are difficult to identify in the existing data sets. If we consider that recent arrivals to Canada are more likely to be ESL, data from 2009 show dropout rates of the most recently arrived (two years or less) at around 20%, whereas the rate for those born in Canada was around 17% (R. S. Brown, 2010). Also, ESL students

who have language difficulties as well as special education needs may take a longer time to get an IEP or IPRC because the impact of ESL must first be disentangled to reduce concern over inaccurate diagnosis due to language barriers (R. S. Brown & Parekh, 2010).

However, we also know from our various studies that Black boys, especially those from low-income families, are much more likely to be designated as having special education needs. And having special education needs often means that the majority of high school courses taken are at the applied level. Despite conjecture to the opposite, it remains true that post-secondary options for students who take a majority of applied courses are quite limited. It is disturbing to hear that applied courses are explained to prospective students and their parents as being university-viable or that it is relatively easy to change from an applied to an academic route at some point in one's high school path. Universities do not accept applied courses and it is most definitely not the case that switching between these streams is easy. Also, it is the case that the vast majority of college applicants have taken a majority of academic courses.

People for Education have done remarkable advocacy work in drawing attention to the problem of steering high school students down the applied route (Hamlin & Cameron, 2015). Their research has demonstrated how students from the lower socioeconomic and racialized classes are overrepresented in these streams. In a very real sense, these processes reproduce the social inequalities in society, by limiting the life chances of the students who come from backgrounds that are in very low representation in post-secondary institutions. Students who are the most "at risk" of not completing high school or going on to college or university are funnelled into academic tracks that ensure their choices will be limited.

American education researchers found streaming to be harmful to students *in the 1990*in the very same ways we are revealing in our own research today. It should be noted that our American colleagues have had access to an abundance of school data while in Ontario (and the rest of Canada for that matter), detailed demographic data on students is still very much limited to that collected by the TDSB. When it is obvious that race, economic background, and gender are driving the make-up of an applied stream and that such a stream severely limits the future prospects of a subgroup of students who already on the margins, this seems to be an opportunity to change the system rather that to dig the bureaucratic heels in harder to maintain it.

And so we have the ground-level heroes—the principals that have heard this research from People for Education and the TDSB and could not, in good conscience, continue to funnel students into applied streams that they knew would circumvent the opportunities of their most at-risk students. Pilot projects have been launched at a 16 Toronto high schools so that streaming is eliminated in some grade 9 and 10 courses. Such schools offer extra tutoring and after-school help. Preliminary results are encouraging, as is the call from the TSDB Director John Malloy to phase out Grade 9 and 10 streaming within the next three years.

I recently received an email from a member of the public accusing me of wanting to lower the academic playing field because I had pointed out evidence of how particular groups of students tended to be overrepresented on applied pathways. However, this email was in response to some recent research that I had published with my colleagues on how race was a determining factor of predicting university enrolment had changed between 2006 and 2011 (Robson, Anisef, Brown, & George, 2018). Our research found that while in 2006, Black students were less likely to enroll in university compared to Whites, the reverse was true in 2011. Statistical models run on large data sets like the TDSB Student Census allow us to examine how grades, special education needs, and being in the applied stream also impacted university enrollment. Unsurprisingly, grades were consistently one of the most important factors, as was not being the applied stream and not having special education needs. When we examined the data in both years, we found that in general, Black students had lower grades, and higher proportions in applied and special education. This had not changed between 2006 and 2011. But if Black students had high enough grades, were not in applied courses, and did not have a special education designation, they were *more* likely to go to university than their White counterparts. There is no lowering of the academic playing field here; it is quite the opposite. Black students have to run the gauntlet—the structural obstacle course—to avoid being placed in the pathways that lead nowhere—and when they can manage to do that, they are more likely to go to university than White students.

A student's path to educational success is not something that begins in high school. To focus on high school education as a predictor of later-success is to ignore how the student is shaped and socialized from a very early age. One of the biggest predictors of later post-secondary enrolment is grade 9 credit accumulation. Completing fewer than 8 credits by the end of grade 9 is association with very low prospects for going on to postsecondary, whether it is university or college. While about 15% of students have fewer than 8 credits by the end of grade 9, this percentage is much higher (20–25%) for some subgroups, like Somalis, Afghans, Spanish-speaking students, and Portuguese students (R. Brown, Newton, & Tam, 2015). You can go back even further to the EQAO scores in primary school and find that risk factors for poor academic outcomes are evident even before that. Suspensions and absenteeism are also highly associated with poor academic outcomes. These findings are hardly surprising to any teacher, but the fact of the matter is that from a policy perspective on improving outcomes for the most at-risk students, the findings are almost entirely ignored. Looking at how students are doing in grade 9—and even before—is necessary to shape the student into being college or university-ready. It is not a transformation that can occur in grade 12. Trying to fix these problems in grade 12 is far too late.

Suggestions

I am often asked, after I launch my series of criticisms, to make some suggestions to help students at the margins. The first suggestion I make is to resist putting your child in a majority of applied courses, regardless of what the teacher or counsellor might say. The

conjecture about it being recognized for university application is false and it is also untrue that switching between streams is possible without redoing a large portion of your high school education.

The second suggestion I make is if your child has a special education need, do not write-off university or college. Colleges are particularly accommodating places for students with learning challenges and even have outreach programs to recruit them. Universities are getting up to speed with their offices for student accommodations, and indeed the number of students with academic accommodations has increased considerably in recent years. Sometimes all that is needed to level the playing field is a simple adjustment, like added time for exams or a note taker—accommodations that are fairly easy to implement and can make the difference between success and failure for some students.

LINC teachers are very likely teaching students who are the parents of the high school students I am writing about. One way that LINC teachers can help break this cycle of reproducing inequality is to incorporate reading high-school course description into reading material. How are the applied and academic streams different? Perhaps showing them news articles about the elimination of applied courses in some high schools could get parents armed with information and also provide opportunities to engage in the specialized language being used around course options.

Not all students have family backgrounds with experience in post-secondary institutions. It may be the case that LINC students have foreign credentials from countries whose post-secondary structures are very different from ours. If the parents are interested in post-secondary pathways for their children, examining institutional website for "open days" or other information sessions put on by universities and colleges which are open to prospective students can be a useful exercise to arm LINC students with further information. Also getting them to navigate institutional websites for information on the different programs and admission requirements may assist these students in helping their own children navigate the system.

Students come from a variety of family backgrounds and those from lower socioeconomic groups are often skeptical about the high cost of postsecondary education. Because it is unlikely that they have the thousands of dollars to cover tuition up front, student loans would be necessary. However, it is common for students from modest backgrounds to also be reluctant to enter into debt. This is where educating students and their parents about the Ontario government's Ontario Student Assistance Program is crucial. Students whose family incomes are less than $50,000 are eligible for free tuition. Students who are first generation may not know about these programs or may not even believe in their authenticity.

The application process and understanding of the multitude of different programs can be completely overwhelming. As a first generation student myself, I remember how navigating the field was fraught with mistakes and embarrassment and how my high school

counsellor just handed me a brochure and assumed I could make sense of it. I had high marks—obviously I knew what I was doing. However, I did not know what questions to even ask. More recognition of this lack of "cultural capital" (as it is called in the academic literature) has occurred in recent years, with some pilot programs bringing workshops into high schools that focus on understanding different programs and application procedures. Sometimes just showing students how to fill out an application form can make a huge difference. A simple exercise in showing students and their parents how to apply through Ontario's centralized application system could go a long way in increasing the enrollments of students who would otherwise not apply. Just the simple knowledge that you can apply for multiple universities or colleges through a single application process is something that is not common knowledge for students without a history of Ontario post-secondary experience.

The challenges faced by students at the margins are complex. They are often, through no ill intention, placed on trajectories that simply reproduce generations of inequality. As educators, we can be instrumental in breaking these cycles at various stages along the way, but only when we accept that the *easiest* solutions are often not in the best interests of the student's long term outcomes.

Author Bio

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