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Perspective Chapter: Behind the Exceptional Educational Pathways of Canadian Youth from Immigrant Background - Between Equality and Ethnic Hierarchy

Pierre Canisius Kamanzi and Tya Collins

Abstract

This chapter aims to show that, behind the general exceptional academic pathways of Canadian students from immigrant backgrounds, some of these young people, belonging to racialized ethnic minorities, are less likely to access and graduate from postsecondary education. Its specific objective is to describe the general portrait of their educational pathways. A synopsis of some recent studies shows that these students often face structural barriers at the institutional level. Comparative analyses between young Canadians of immigrant origins and their peers who are not recognize the remarkable success of Canadian immigrants, a rather exceptional phenomenon compared to what is observed internationally. However, this chapter stresses that this portrait must be nuanced: a number of studies highlight significant disparities among young people from immigrant backgrounds according to the ethnocultural and geographic origin of their parents. The situation is less favorable or unfavorable, in the case of certain racialized groups. Therefore, following an overview of the contribution of studies inspired by a postpositivist approach, this chapter highlights some dimensions that have been traditionally obscured. This allows for a better understanding of the relationship between the effects of various factors (individual, institutional, systemic) that structure and perpetuate inequalities and ethnic hierarchy among students from immigrant backgrounds.

Keywords: Canadian immigrants, academic pathways, educational inequalities, racialized groups

1. Introduction

A large international body of research denounces the existence and persistence of significant inequalities in terms of academic success between young people of immigrant origin and their peers whose parents were born in the host country. To various degrees, the academic results of the former are inferior to those of the latter [1–3]. This disparity markedly reduces access to, and perseverance in higher education. In Canada, the situation of young people of immigrant origin seems rather

exceptional: in general, their academic results at the primary and secondary levels are comparable to and even higher, in certain cases, than those of their peers whose parents are Canadian by birth or part of a majority group, i.e., of Euro-Canadian descent [4–6]. In this light, are academic and social inequalities non-existent between Canadians by birth and their fellow citizens of immigrant origin? The situation seems somewhat qualified because the success of students of immigrant origin obscures significant disparities along ethnocultural lines. Though young people whose parents are from European, Arabic (North Africa and the Middle East), and East Asian countries have levels of academic success that are comparable to and even higher than those of their peers whose parents are Canadian-born, those whose parents have immigrated from the Caribbean, Sub-Saharan Africa, Latin America, and, to a lesser degree, South Asia have lower levels of learning achievement and access to higher education than the others [7–10]. Furthermore, even the few who attain university have perseverance and graduation rates that are relatively inferior in comparison to the others' [11]. Consequently, this chapter is proposing to explore why this is happening. Drawing on the existing literature, we will show that these young people have had experiences associated with hidden systemic discrimination.

To begin, it must be noted that this chapter concerns a cross-sectional and critical analysis of recent studies on this issue, rather than primary research. The cases we reviewed made it possible to highlight their convergences and general trends. As such, we demonstrate that, behind socio-economic integration and the undeniable academic success of young Canadians from immigrant backgrounds, there is an emergence and a perpetuation of inequalities as well as a certain ethnic hierarchy.

The chapter is divided into three sections. The first provides a general portrait of young immigrants' academic pathways. The second and the third respectively address the institutional and structural factors of systemic discrimination in the academic environment. We end with a conclusion that identifies potential solutions to reduce these inequalities, and prospects for future research that might inform public policies in education.

2. Young peoples' immigrant origins and academic pathways

Using data from PISA tests (reading, mathematics, and science), Hochschild and Cropper [4] compared the results of students from immigrant backgrounds to those from non-immigrant families in eight industrialized countries (Switzerland, Germany, Belgium, United Kingdom, Australia, France, Canada, and the United States). Their analyses reveal that students from immigrant backgrounds demonstrated inferior performances comparatively to other groups, with the exception of those from Canada and Australia, where the results between immigrant and non-immigrant student groups were comparable. Moreover, in Canada's case, there was no difference in terms of higher education access [8, 12–14].

This exceptional situation has been attributed to the specificity of Canadian immigration policies, which are distinguished both by their selective nature, which favors educated and qualified immigrants, and by concrete measures for integrating newcomers [6, 15]. The situation is also associated with parental educational and cultural capital, manifested in the high educational and professional aspirations they hold for their children.

Nevertheless, this general portrait must be qualified. An abundance of scientific literature testifies to the existence of disparities along ethnocultural lines, particularly in terms of access to and graduation from higher education. If students whose parents are from Europe and East Asia have the highest graduation rates, those

whose parents are from the Caribbean, Latin America, and Sub-Saharan Africa have the lowest rates [8, 13, 16, 17]. Recent studies have highlighted belonging to a racialized group (socially assigned a racial identity within a structural domain of power) plays for parents and students [18]. This situation particularly concerns students from Black communities. Though these students are distinguished by a higher level of aspiration to post-secondary studies than their non-racialized peers [19], they are more inclined to access technical studies in college than other students, and less likely to access university and obtain a diploma [10]. Moreover, adults belonging to these communities suffer more discrimination on the job market, even when they are highly qualified [20]. They are more vulnerable to unemployment and receive salary incomes that are markedly lower than those of members of the non-racialized majority [21], which in turn has negative effects on their offspring's schooling. The influence of their low socioeconomic status seems to weigh heavily and lastingly on their children's schooling, as the work of Abada et al. [16] has shown. These authors show that race and ethnicity are important factors in the production and perpetuation of social inequalities in the educational systems of Canadian provinces.

Research on the academic pathways of young Canadians of immigrant origin is dominated by empirical studies based on quantitative data and methods that emphasize individual and school characteristics, such as the parents' school performance, socioeconomic status, and ethnocultural origin. Although this research provides a good understanding of the pathways of students from immigrant backgrounds in Canada, its scope is limited. Beyond individual and collective attributes, recent qualitative studies highlight the influence of institutional contexts, practices, and policies. Many authors show that educational inequality along ethnic lines is produced through the relationships students have with the schools they attend; in other words, it falls within the responsibilities of the schools and their members [22–24]. This is illustrated in the subsection below, which examines the integration experiences of students from immigrant backgrounds and their interactions with the institutional structures of the schools they attend.

3. Institutional barriers to socio-educational integration

Students' educational perseverance and success are the result of their social experiences and academic pathways, which are formed through the relationship between their individual projects and their commitment to the institution they attend [25]. In other words, perseverance and dropping out can be considered as an effect of the quality of the experiences resulting from the individual's interaction with the school. Integration, which can be defined here as the process by which students engage intellectually and socially in the community, is a decisive factor in persevering in school. As for the academic path of students from immigrant backgrounds, research has identified a number of phenomena likely to have a negative effect on and even compromise integration success. These phenomena may occur prior to their entry into post-secondary studies (preadmission), at the time of transition, or over the course of their studies.

In Canada as elsewhere, even before they access higher education, many students of immigrant origin are likely to have had school experiences that were unfavorable to success. This is the case for members of racialized groups. They are relegated to special education and vocational streams more often, which strongly reduces their chances of admission to postsecondary education, particularly university [10, 16, 26]. This aspect deserves to be highlighted because vocational high school graduates who access postsecondary studies, particularly university, are rare [27], as are vocational college graduates who obtain university diplomas [28]. Studies conducted in the

provinces of Quebec and Ontario highlight the early downgrading of Black students and their subsequent overrepresentation in the category of students with adjustment problems and special needs [29].

Contrary to government discourse, the recent implementation of accountability policies since the 2000s has particularly contributed to increasing educational inequalities based on students' social and ethnocultural origin [30, 31]. Far from improving the social inclusion and success of all students, the use of standardized tests and competition between schools rather marginalizes students from socioeconomically disadvantaged families, racialized ethnic minorities (especially those from Sub-Saharan Africa and Latin America) and Indigenous communities. For these students, such practices are said to constantly fuel anxiety, frustration, humiliation, and feelings of incompetence, which can drive them to dropping out [32].

A study conducted by Anisef et al. [33] in Ontario province (N = 8,443) revealed that students who had been placed in enriched streams in high school had 9.36 times more chances of accessing postsecondary education than their peers in regular streams. Yet, while a growing number of students from immigrant backgrounds are in enriched streams [34], certain groups are excluded from them in subtle ways. This is the case of students whose competencies in the language of instruction are deemed inadequate and of those who belong to racialized groups of Southeast Asian, Sub-Saharan African, and Caribbean origins [10, 17]. A recent study by Kamanzi [35] in Quebec province showed similar findings: Black students from families who had immigrated from Sub-Saharan Africa and the Caribbean were markedly less likely to attend a private or public school offering enriched programs in all or some of the subjects taught. Conversely, they are overrepresented in public institutions exclusively offering regular (basic) programs and are more likely to have repeated a grade or experienced adaptation or learning difficulties. Although they demonstrate resilience and perseverance until college, they are less inclined to graduate from it and access university because of previously vulnerable academic pathways.

Beyond educational competencies, students' academic integration into is conditional to his/her access of information that they and their parents can use to develop future projects aligned with their values, and those of other members of the community. While certain students from immigrant backgrounds benefit more from resources that come from their families (academic, cultural, and social capital), facilitating their pathways to and in postsecondary education, others must demonstrate greater autonomy and resilience to structure their role as students.

Qualitative studies reveal that access to information is a major obstacle. It is a recurring theme in the discourses of the young Canadians of immigrant origin investigated by Magnan et al. [36], who, when the time came for them to make decisions regarding postsecondary studies, were, along with their parents, mistakenly presumed by school personnel to be equipped to decode the mechanisms of the transition from high school to college or university. Such presuppositions can in certain cases lead to obstacles, such as the feeling of being unable to fulfill admission conditions for the postsecondary education program of their choice [37]. This situation particularly concerns students from the Caribbean and Latin America [37, 38].

Immigrants face many other obstacles associated with the quality of their social networks. Among these obstacles are constraints related to a misunderstanding of the admissions process, a lack of information about learning assessment requirements, language tests, and the need for extra courses [39]. Many of the students that were interviewed also reported that they received little aid or services when they needed them and that they dealt with university personnel ill-disposed to listening to them and taking the time to support them [39, 40]. Everything seems to indicate that these students continually face hidden systemic discrimination [22–24].

4. Structural barriers and systemic discrimination

Though the sociopolitical context for welcoming immigrants to Canada is undeniably more favorable to their integration than in other countries of immigration, research has demonstrated that inequalities persist in a number of areas, including education. Though certain groups of immigrants are, for example, overrepresented in university education, others are underrepresented [33]. A study by Abada and Tenkorang [7] based on data from the ethnic diversity survey conducted by Statistics Canada in 2002 revealed that the rate of university attendance at eighteen years of age is higher for students of Chinese origin (54%) and from Southeast Asia (44%), but lower for members of Black communities (31%), in comparison to Canadians by birth (36%). Based on data from a longitudinal survey (the Youth in Transition Survey), Kamanzi et al. [8] and Thiessen [13] came to similar conclusions. According to Thiessen [13], the low level of academic competence and higher education attendance observed in young people from Black and Latin American communities is the effect of interacting cultural and structural factors. Their schooling is undermined by both cultural values that are often unfavorable to educational success, and the poor living conditions of their families. Other work has highlighted the existence of systemic discrimination toward certain ethnic groups through ethno-cultural grouping practices [23, 41]. Such practices particularly affect students from Black communities, as the work of Henry and Tator [23] has shown. Potvin and Leclercq [42] have noted common institutional practices that consist of relegating these students from the youth sector to the general adults education sector (short vocational training), precluding them from pursuing higher studies. Belonging to a racialized group, particularly a Black community, is a major factor of vulnerability, primarily because of the lack of diversity in schools' teaching and administrative staff (associated with a lack of role models), the Eurocentric character of the curricula, and the students' day-to-day experiences of discrimination and racism [23, 36, 39, 43].

Numerous studies in Canada describe perceived discrimination and racism self-reported by students from immigration backgrounds [38, 39]. In quantitative terms, the study by Abada, Hou, and Ram [16] on inter-group differences in university completion in fifteen racialized groups of second-generation immigrants (born in Canada, but whose parents are immigrants) reports that 50% of these students have felt marginalized because of their ethnicity, their culture, the color of their skin, their accent, or their religion. According to the same authors, the feeling of exclusion experienced since childhood, affects academic perseverance and success.

In qualitative terms, examples of perceived discrimination and racism have also been reported by students. Among other things, they refer to a stigmatization of *otherness* founded on a lack of linguistic competence or accent [39], an unexpected, increased categorization of "minority" status and racial difference by the majority group [39, 44], and violence (harassment, bullying, and threats) experienced in the academic environment [23, 45]. In addition, the prejudices and ideology of the dominant group, and the stereotypes, prejudices, and pure and simple ignorance of the teaching staff in relation to the *Other* [racialized students] contribute to provoking stress, despair, and a feeling of alienation in immigrant students and have a negative effect on their school performance. This at least is what can be deduced from a qualitative study of 22 students from Southeast Asia conducted by Samuel and Burney [46] in an Ontario university. According to these students, the outsized importance accorded to Eurocentric curricula elicits feelings of exclusion and marginalization. Even when elements of the curriculum are not Eurocentric, the students observed a penchant for Anglo-Saxon assumptions and premises. Similar perceptions were reported in studies of immigrants from the Caribbean, Central Asia, and Sub-Saharan Africa [38, 44, 45].

Of all students belonging to racialized groups, Black student in particular are most at risk of experiencing discrimination, which considerably reduces not only their chances of accessing postsecondary studies, but also their perseverance in them. Qualitative studies conducted on these students reveal how constantly they are faced with racial stereotypes and prejudices: they describe teachers and, more broadly, academic staff tending to underestimate the students' levels of academic engagement and consequently their academic competency [38, 44]. At the high school level, students mentioned the fact that guidance counselors pushed them toward less demanding and less valued studies, such as lower-level courses, with the effect of restricting and even eliminating their chances of being admitted to university [38, 44]. Once in postsecondary studies, their risk of dropping out is the highest (29%), as shown in a study conducted by Abada and Tenkorang [7] in the province of Ontario. Far from being arbitrary, the prejudices and stereotypes these students face are, in part, anchored in systemic racism and exercise a negative effect on these students' feelings of confidence and motivation and, consequently, on their perseverance and success in school [19].

5. Success and perseverance of racialized students: where resilience and destiny meet

Research recognizes in human beings the ability to produce and mobilize protection mechanisms that enable them to overcome situations of adversity or bypass them to succeed [47]. Commonly referred to as the concept of resilience, this phenomenon refers to the capability and ability of an individual or social group to return to a stable state after disruption caused by personal constraints and environmental factors [48]. In the world of education, resilience refers to students who, despite obstacles related to their personal difficulties or obstacles related to the school and family environment, manage to cope and succeed in their studies [49]. Referring to certain of these students' ability in situations of ethnic or racial discrimination to overcome various discrimination-related obstacles and succeed in adapting exceptionally, Anisef and Kilbride [50] speak of *ethnic resilience*.

Recent research has shown that these students manage to procure resources independently — despite the multiple obstacles barring their access to the information they need to make informed decisions throughout their education up to postsecondary studies—demonstrate motivation for success, and reverse teachers' negative image and low expectations of them—in short, to take control and make it on their own [38, 39, 44, 46, 51]. However, research emphasizes that there is price to pay, often a heavy one. Despite the fact that they are often relegated to second-rate programs and institutions, some of these students use them as a springboard to “get out” and access the most prestigious, or at least the most desired, choices. They even manage to strongly affirm their ethno-racial identity and make it an instrument in structuring their academic and professional careers [38, 39, 44, 46, 51]. However, as mentioned above, many do not escape structural obstacles and end their educational pathways by shortening studies or simply dropping out because of various forms of segregation and systemic discrimination.

Though academic aspirations and commitment to studies are essential conditions to accessing postsecondary studies, they aren't sufficient to succeed and obtain a diploma. Just as it is important to recognize the *compensatory advantage* of resilience, it is also important to take into account the *cumulative disadvantage* that the academic pathway presents in elementary and secondary school [52]. In other words, depending on the scope of the social and academic exclusion mechanisms at work in the context, the former may prevail over the latter and vice versa.

6. Conclusion

The objective of this article was to show that, behind the general portrait of the exceptional academic paths of Canadian students of immigrant origin, some of these young people, belonging to racialized ethnic minorities, are less likely to access and graduate from postsecondary education. The studies reviewed show that these students often face structural barriers at the institutional level. In elementary and high school, they report having been victims of prejudice and stereotypes, which would partially explain their lower levels of success and perseverance in comparison with others. Their cognitive potential is often underestimated by teachers, which causes them to develop a low feeling of competence and motivation to perform. In terms of institutional services, they are more likely to be relegated by guidance services to low-level streams offering little or no opportunity to access postsecondary studies. They also have less access to information on admission requirements for postsecondary studies and receive little help in terms of preparation strategies for various national assessment tests. These different types of segregation form part of a larger world of hidden, indirect systemic discrimination [23]. In another words, there is a kind of ethnic hierarchy as elsewhere like in U.S. [53].

At the root of this type of discrimination, are economic and symbolic power struggles. In the contemporary period that characterized by the expansion of the knowledge economy more than ever, education and academic qualifications have increasingly become tools for maintaining or acquiring strategic social positions. Education, therefore, becomes a field of competition and power struggle between different social groups, ethnic groups included. The winners are those who have the economic, social, cultural and political resources. Despite equal opportunity policies, we find ourselves, to varying degrees between societies, in a situation of effectively maintaining inequalities [54].

In order to eradicate this discrimination, public policies must put in place meaningful institutional measures based on the principle of equity and on fighting exclusion, whatever its form. From a moral and political standpoint, such measures are aligned with principles of equality and social justice. In contemporary societies, equality of access and of success at all levels of teaching, including postsecondary studies, is recognized as a common good [55] and an instrument for promoting individual and collective welfare and social inclusion [56]. From an economic standpoint, these measures are an opportunity to identify, develop, and value the potential of all citizens whose talents in human capital terms are randomly distributed throughout society, including in socioeconomically disadvantaged communities [57]. A range of Canadian research has demonstrated the capacity for resilience of some of these students who belong to racialized groups [35, 50]. Despite the negative influence of the precarious socioeconomic conditions of their parents and of multiple school and social integration challenges, some of these students demonstrate perseverance and performance in postsecondary studies. Often associated with the quality of the different forms of capital (academic, cultural, and social) that their parents—themselves resilient and faced with socio-professional segregation [21, 58]—seek to mobilize, this resilience is also attributed to these students' cognitive potential and commitment to succeed, despite the aforementioned obstacles.

Therefore, public authorities are called upon to put more emphasis on improving conditions for learning and on supporting success. In the present context, such measures would cover not only educational resources (time, the quality of school and extracurricular activities, and material resources) to address the gaps inherent in social origin, but would overcome the effects of the socio-academic segregation to which these of all students are exposed [59]. Among other things, they involve

diversifying the school's teaching and administrative staff, providing access to information and support and assistance services, and giving the staff professional training in interculturality. Such measures build on the strengths of resilience to promote excellence, as Motti-Stefanidi and Masten [59] emphasize: "focusing on strengths and resilience, instead of on weaknesses and psychological symptoms, among immigrant youth has significant implications for policy and practice" (p. 19) That said, in the long term, the solution should rather be to eradicate the racism underlying society and establish true social and academic justice where recourse to resilience and survival mechanisms is no longer required.

It is important to pursue research through different disciplines (particularly sociology, political science, psychology, and anthropology). With the goal of better informing public and institutional policies, this research must take an intersectional approach to appreciate the complexity of the modes of multiple-identity interaction in different contexts [60]. This approach has the advantage of taking into account not only the interaction between an individual's multiple identity markers, but also the way inequalities are constructed and renewed via social power relationships, contributing in this way to forging social identities [61]. By focusing the research on systemic and structural factors, future studies would shine a light on the macro-sociological dynamic of immigrants' academic paths and of inequalities in education.

It would also be possible to call into question the status quo models in higher education, which value certain forms of knowledge over others, and to counteract the processes that can lead to justifying systemic discrimination and resorting to deficit thinking toward groups that are "othered" [61]. Finally, such studies would support and inform the promotion of political and structural changes in higher education for the benefit of all young Canadians, regardless of their origin.

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