Does education equalize opportunities? The implications of the TDSB cohort analysis for democracy and meritocracy

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Thank you very much to the Ethnocultural Community Network and the organizers of this forum, especially my dear friend and colleague Ilda Januario, for inviting me to be here today at this opening panel, and thank you all for coming on a cold Saturday so early in the morning when it is so tempting to be warm in bed.

Although I was invited to this forum as a member of the Faculty of Education of this university, I also came here as a member of the Spanish Speaking Education Network and as an immigrant parent who lives in Scarborough and has two children in the public school system. I was asked to be brief, so I will limit myself to make a few remarks, and later I can expand on some points during the open conversation at the end of this panel.

The first point I want to make is that, generally speaking, poor people have two main avenues for upward social mobility. One is winning the lottery, and the other is education. Since the odds of winning the lottery are very low, in many societies characterized by income inequalities and limited redistributive policies we tend to put a lot of faith in education as a key avenue for poor children to get ahead in their lives. Indeed, many poor families have great hopes in education as a path to the progress of their children. Many immigrants who come to Canada are willing to make big sacrifices and to suffer poverty and discrimination as long as their children have a fair chance of succeeding in the educational system. For this reason these immigrants are known in the literature as the sacrificial generation. At the same time, policy-
makers and the public at large also believe that education should be, and still is, the main social tool for social mobility. To a great extent, this belief is based on reality. Of all existing institutions in our unequal modern societies, education is one of the few agencies that promotes some degree of equalization of opportunities. For this reason, education is often dubbed as “the great equalizer”, and I am saying “the great equalizer” in quotation marks because education does not always fulfill this role to the degree that is expected or assumed. This is a fair question to ask: To what extent does education equalize opportunities? This question leads us to my second point.

My second point is about democracy. One of the conditions of a democratic society is that there is a certain degree of economic and social equality. Since some economic and social inequalities will still persist, a second condition is that everyone has equal opportunities to succeed, regardless of their economic or social background. As I just noted, education can help significantly to ensure the second condition. Equality of success does not necessarily mean that everyone will achieve the same goals, but that everyone has the same opportunities to achieve those goals. One of the good things of Canada is that it has an extended public education system, unlike other countries that are segmented into an affluent private education for the upper classes and an underfunded public education for the lower classes. This extended public education system is indeed a good thing, and we tend to believe that since public schools are open to all children with no exception, we live in a meritocratic system. A meritocratic system is one in which rewards and positions are allocated on the basis of merit –that is, based on factors like effort, talent, diligence and intelligence- and not on ascriptive factors over which we have no control, like class, gender, race or ethnicity. In a meritocratic system, all students have the opportunity to reach their full potential, regardless of their socio-economic situation. If we live in a truly democratic and meritocratic society, educational achievement should be equally distributed among all social groups. Put it in a different way, and in the context of this forum, in a democratic society there should
be no correlation between the social class, the ethnic background and the country of origin of the learners, on the one hand, and their educational achievement, on the other. At this point, we can ask ourselves: How democratic and meritocratic is our educational system? This is an important issue for us today, and leads us to my third point.

My third point is that, according to the data we have from the Toronto District School Board (TDSB), some groups in this city have a much higher rate of school dropout than the average. In a society that claims to be democratic and meritocratic, this should be an issue of concern. The most accurate way to assess dropout rate is to do a cohort analysis, but this is seldom done because it is very costly and complicated to follow a large group of students year after year. As you know, we know more about dropout rates than before because the TDSB—in a team led by Rob Brown—conducted the first cohort analysis, following grade 9 students for five years, since 2000 to 2005. The TDSB study found many interesting things worth mentioning, but given time constraints I will only note a few.

One finding is that whereas the average dropout rate is about 23%, among students who speak Portuguese it is 42.5%, among those who speak Spanish 39.1%, and among those who speak Somali 36.7%. This means that in some ethnocultural communities, the dropout rate is twice as much as the average, and we should note that many students in these communities speak English better than the “ethnic” language because they are second or third generation Canadians. So, it is not only a language issue. And for those who speak English as a second language, the issue is to what extent language support programs are offered and to what extent they are supporting students to succeed. So, why are 40% of these students are dropping out?

A second finding, that confirms that language is not the only issue at stake here, is that, when examining the data by country of birth, the TDSB found that students born in the English-speaking Caribbean have a dropout rate of 40%, which is double
than the average. Here we are not talking about students who do not speak English, but about racialized communities. Again, why 40% of these students are dropping out?

A third finding, that relates to social class, is that in poor neighbourhoods only 57% of students graduated at the end of grade 12, a much lower percentage than the 84% graduation rate in students from more affluent neighbourhoods. Likewise, the dropout rate in the poor neighbourhoods was 33%, three times as much as the rate observed in rich neighbourhoods (11%). This is not surprising, because study after study since the 1966 Coleman Report has shown that there is a correlation between socio-economic status and school achievement. The question is: why is this so? Why are students in poor neighbourhoods three times more likely to drop out than children living in wealthier neighbourhoods? The sociology of education has several theories about this, including the argument that wealthier kids have more access to cultural goods, and the one proposed by the late French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu that schools tend to discriminate against the cultural capital of poor children. I would add to those theories a double dynamic that is currently happening in Toronto, and that is the increased pace of gentrification, that is generating ghettos of the poor and ghettos of the rich, compounded by the increased reliance of school programs and activities on fundraising, which generates a situation in which schools in rich neighbourhoods raise hundreds of thousands of dollars a year for extracurricular activities whereas schools in poor neighbourhoods can not offer those opportunities to their students. In my view, this combination of gentrification and increased reliance on fundraising and fees is creating a de-facto privatization that is clashing against the egalitarian and democratic principles of public education.

In conclusion, we know from the TDSB study that students living in low-income neighbourhoods are less likely to complete school, and the same can be said about students from some ethnocultural groups, like Portuguese students, Latino/a students, Somali students, and Black Caribbean students. The survey does
not say anything about Aboriginal students – since they were born in Canada and speak English at home they are not identified as a distinct group – but we know from other sources and studies that Aboriginal students have high dropout rates as well. This means that we still have a long road ahead of us to achieve a more democratic society and a more egalitarian educational system. In several of our communities we are creating a new generation of underclass youth – and we are talking about 40% in some communities – that in the next decade will be unable to find meaningful work and will face lots of challenges. We know that students dropout from school for many different reasons. Some are social and economic factors that are beyond the control of schools. Some factors are more related to personal or family reasons that often are also beyond the control of the school.

However, there is a third group of factors. These are institutional factors, which have to do with the school and with the education system. These institutional factors range from educational policies and programs to the curriculum to fundraising practices to teacher-student interactions in each classroom. These are factors that the educational system can modify, and the ones that we could discuss today. We know that many teachers and principals are doing excellent work with our children, and we should celebrate and support that. However, we also know – from research and from children’s daily experiences in school – that sometimes certain practices may openly or subtly discriminate against some students and provoke a process of gradual disengagement. Think about streaming, for instance. For this reason, some people prefer the term pushed-out instead of drop-out, and they have a point. In many cases this is done unconsciously by well-meaning teachers, as has been shown by many studies since Rosenthal and Jacobson’s research in the 1960s. In their study, Rosenthal and Jacobson found a relationship between teachers’ expectations and student achievement, producing a self-fulfilling prophecy that they called “the Pygmalion effect.” To what extent do we still have this Pygmalion effect in our schools?
Hopefully, today we can have a frank and open discussion about these problematic issues, but at the same time we can also identify what schools are doing well to promote equality of opportunity so those efforts can be supported and expanded, and also used to propose recommendations for new policies and practices that can change the situation that we have today. In a nutshell, that is my suggestion for today’s conversations in the panels: first, discuss what is going wrong; second, identify what is going well; and third, propose recommendations for improvement. Since we have parents, students, teachers and policy-makers in this room, I also hope that we can go beyond the typical ‘blame the other’ attitude so prevalent in discussions about these issues, and we engage in a fruitful and respectful dialogue looking for viable recommendations and implementation strategies. Thank you very much.

Daniel Schugurensky, Toronto, November 17, 2007