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The Pursuit of Post-Secondary Education: A Comparison of First Nations, African, Asian and European Canadian Youth

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The pursuit of post-secondary education: A comparison of First Nations, African, Asian, and European Canadian youth

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Abstract

Using the nationally representative longitudinal Youth in Transition Survey, this paper examines the argument that inferior educational outcomes of various visible minorities and immigrants can be attributed to their socio-economic disadvantages, while superior outcomes of other visible minorities is due to their cultural supports. The analyses document sizable inequalities in educational pathways of First Nations, visible minorities, and immigrants. However, neither structural location nor cultural attributes (nor both in conjunction) totally account for differences in their educational pathways nor can they be reduced to a simple pattern whereby structural disadvantages account for inferior pathways and cultural factors for superior ones.

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Executive Summary

This paper explores the links between socio-economic structural location and cultural features on the educational pathways among First Nations, African, Asian, and European Canadian youth. The analyses are based on cycles 1 and 2 of the older cohort of the nationally representative Youth in Transition Survey (YITS).

All measures of structural location and cultural attributes (except for number of siblings) have direct effects on educational pathways that are not attributable to measures of academic performance. Academic performance is the primary basis on which respondents appear to make their decisions about whether to participate in PSE and whether to pursue a community college or a university credential. Nevertheless, both structural and cultural factors have direct effects on educational pathways in addition to their indirect effects on academic performance. This is another way of saying that both structural advantages and certain cultural practices not only facilitate academic performance but also directly increase the likelihood of PSE participation.

The multivariate analyses show that neither socio-economic location nor cultural attributes (nor both in conjunction) totally account for population group differences in educational pathways. Further, the findings presented cannot be reduced to a simple pattern whereby structural disadvantages account for inferior pathways and cultural factors for superior ones. Indeed, the patterns are decidedly more complex with distinctly different effects on the magnitude of the population group gaps, particularly with respect to pursuing a university degree. Structural and cultural factors together are sufficient to reduce all population group gaps in community college enrolment to statistical insignificance. With respect to the pursuit of a university education, after controlling for structure, culture, and academic performance, only native-born East Asians remain anomalously high and other Asian immigrants have significantly lower likelihood of this pathway than do Canadian-born youth of European descent. The conclusion is that except for these two groups, differences in educational pathways are accounted for by a combination of structure, culture, and academic performance.

This paper provides strong evidence against the practice of treating visible minorities as one group. The variation in educational pathways between the different visible minorities is arguably larger than the difference between white and visible minority youth. In particular, after controlling for structural and cultural differences, Canadian-born East Asian youth are the most likely to pursue a university education while immigrant other Asians are the least likely, even less likely than First Nations and African Canadians. It may be true that visible minority immigrants as a group have higher educational aspirations and expectations than mainstream Canadian-born youth of European descent. Yet this is misleading, since *none* of the visible minority immigrants have higher

university aspirations or expectations than their Canadian-born visible minority counterparts. Instead, it is Asian visible minorities, regardless of their immigration status, that have exceptionally high university aspirations and expectations.

With respect to population group differences in educational pathways, the goal of social policy should be to ensure that educational pathways are equal once legitimate bases for differences are held constant. The findings presented in this paper suggest that in some respects, Canadian educational social policy has been relatively successful in creating equitable educational pathways. The high university participation rate of East Asians, for example, is not because the link between academic performance and educational attainment is especially strong for them. Rather, it is because they are more likely to have taken university-preparatory math and language classes than the other population groups. The important policy issue, then, is how to optimize the proportion of young people who take these classes at the more advanced levels.

The educational pathways of First Nations youth are fundamentally a manifestation of both structural and cultural disadvantages. After controlling for structural and cultural factors, their academic performance has negligible independent effects on their decision to pursue PSE. While it is corroborated here that First Nations youth consistently score lowest on all indicators of academic performance, their structural and cultural barriers appear to be what accounts for both their low academic performance and their non-participation in PSE.

The barriers and facilitative mechanisms among African Americans (both immigrant and Canadian-born) are quite different from that of First Nations. Controlling for structural disadvantages increases their likelihood of participation in both forms of PSE, indicating that their non-participation can be traced back partly to these disadvantages. On the other hand, controlling for cultural features decreases the odds of participation in both community college and university. This suggests their participation in PSE would be even lower if they didn't enjoy the benefits of culturally protective factors, such as their parents' high aspirations. In contrast to First Nations youth, however, their non-participation in PSE is substantially a matter of their academic performance. In other words, in addition to structural disadvantages, the non-participation in PSE of African American youth is a function of their marks, grade retention/prior dropout, and streaming into non-university preparatory classes, but it is not a function of their lack of academic effort or lack of educational supports from parents and peers.