

COMPLICATED LIVES OF COLLEGE STUDENTS: THE EDUCATIONAL CULTURE OF UNDER-ACHIEVERS

Our study examines the experience of at-risk students as they arrive at CEGEP. It presents a portrait of their 'educational culture' and it points to a contradiction between this culture of students on the one hand and the institutional culture of the college on the other. The research was primarily based on open-ended interviews conducted with 48 'weak' students during three years at Vanier College in Montreal. This qualitative, longitudinal study is used to evoke a narrative of the transition from high school to college by expressing the points of view of students who were 'just scraping by.' The model of the interface between these two patterns is what we call 'the gulf' between students' needs and institutional offerings; and we suggest educational strategies that might respond more directly to the students' needs.

We posit two educational cultures, or what might be called 'two solitudes'. On the one hand there is the institutional culture that has been the basis for secondary and post-secondary education as long as anyone can remember, or what might be called school culture. And on the other hand there is an educational culture that has been created by a generation of underachieving students who have had difficulty meeting the minimum requirements for advancement in the system and whose connection to educational institutions is tenuous. The intersection of these two cultures of education is often a quagmire of frustrations and disappointments. Every semester at Vanier College (and at many other colleges) about 18% of students fail to meet the minimum requirements to remain in good standing at college. It is one thing to know such statistics about academic failure; however, this is not very helpful when facing a class of flesh-and-blood college students. Those who arrive with weak academic records from high school are most vulnerable to failure and dropout; so we wanted to know what they had to say about the process.

METHOD

Our study was conducted over 3 years from 2002 to 2005 (Mackay, Miller & Quinn, 2006). In the Fall of 2002, we selected incoming students with high-school averages of less than 70%. We had 20% of the new students, the bottom quintile, and from these we drew a random sample for interviews. The findings of the study are based on five sources of primary data: interviews with the sample of 48 underachieving students conducted over a period of three years, an ethnographic report from two feeder high schools, focus groups with scholarship students, a focus group with non-teaching college professionals and interviews with teachers. The secondary

source of data is the collective academic record of the bottom quintile for the A02 cohort and individual records for the Sample of 48. We investigated special programs for underachieving students at several secondary schools, colleges and universities; and we have drawn substantial insight from our longstanding involvement with Vanier College and its Explorations program (*session d'accueil et intégration*).

We present the students' narratives through a network of meaning which is derived directly from the students' stories as told to us and augmented by our commentary on the fit, or lack of fit, between student orientation and institutional response. The essential dynamic revolves around accommodations on both sides of the gulf: students exhibit different levels of "readiness" for college study and the colleges experiment with innovative "patchwork" strategies.

FINDINGS

THE SECONDARY SCHOOL EXPERIENCE

The five years of secondary education are a time when anticipatory socialization is expected to prepare students for CEGEP and these are crucial steps in the shaping of identity and worldview in young people. While strong students quickly connect to the process and adopt the culture that brings success, many other students drop by the wayside or are neglected. The Sample of 48 had developed coping mechanisms that usually got them through high school without incident, this in spite of little stated interest in the subject matter and very little effort. A significant minority, however, had lost interest in school at some point and had made some serious adjustments such as attending an adult centre or alternative high school in order to complete their Secondary V. Many had been buffeted around through several schools and



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languages on their way toward a high school diploma and most were not active in extra-curricular activities. Several students described chaotic high-school classes in which teachers addressed a captive audience of good students at the front of the room while the bottom quintile (at least) languished or clowned around in the back. This dysfunctional socialization delivers them to CEGEP with classroom behaviours, a level of work discipline, attitudes toward their studies and ways of treating teachers that impede their success in college and which quickly result in their being labelled by teachers and staff.

High-school students in the two schools studied in 2004 showed an intense attachment to social life with peers at school and little interest in academic subjects. In both high school and CEGEP they go to school to see their friends.

[...] just like every other kid. When I went to school, I would mostly look forward to, I don't know, seeing friends, that's it.

These students liked teachers who were confident in their subject matter, who focused on individual needs and yet taught to the whole class, who respected them and who took a personal interest in them.

Teachers? There are some teachers that I really, really like and I always joke around with and some that I really hate, that, I admit, sometimes I give attitude to. Like, for example, I won't give names, but my French teacher, she has a problem [...]. Like, since I was in grade seven, eight and nine, I used to get 70s and 80s in French and like, when I had her in grade ten and eleven I ended up failing... it was like, really dumb.

But the overriding element of their daily lives at school was stress that derived from the social pressure of peers, from the demands of school discipline and performance while often also holding a paid job, and from imminent expectations concerning their futures in college.

FAMILY

Family was important to virtually all of our informants but it had a special significance in the case of recent immigrants. Lapierre & Loslier (2003) refer to the orientation of this group as the “family project”. The mission of such families revolves around settling in and pursuing collective socio-economic advancement. Mother, father and children all see their roles through a shared vision of their collective future as a family. The children serve almost as family emissaries in their studies such that their academic success contributes to the family's progress. In the words of a young girl of East Indian background:

What motivates me to get up and go to school is the fact that[...]. I owe it to the people that brought me up. I owe it to the people that pay my school fee. I owe it to the woman that makes my lunch every morning. I owe it to the sister that buys me whatever it is I want for Christmas and my brother that always protects me and my dad that always gives me lunch money [...]. I owe it to those two 50-year-old parents that I have that came off of another country to an unknown other country with one suitcase, a job that, you know, they like doing now, but they had to start off with not liking. I owe it to them to come to school every day.

On the other hand, the family project can impose contradictory pressures, especially if the child is not academically inclined, or if the family does not have a history of academic studies that would provide them with the skills to support their child's efforts at school. Many are “first generation students”, *i.e.*, by coming to college, they are more educated than their parents and therefore must learn post-secondary educational culture on their own. This problem is further accentuated when the language of education is not that of the home. In addition, parents often depend on older children to help in household and child-rearing chores, or to keep a family business afloat.

Family businesses are often successful enterprises in arenas such as landscaping or the food or garment industry; and it is through them that the family has gained considerable security and comfort as well as social status. Everyone in the family has worked in the business and has gained excellent skills as a result. Despite this success, parents insist that their child must have an education in order to escape the struggle that they have endured. When the student knows that a ready-made job is permanently available, it undermines the commitment to academic studies and leads many young people to drop out of school to follow in their parents' footsteps.

Immigrant parents demonstrate an almost blind faith in pursuing education to the university level and a disdain for manual labor or the trades which are regarded as humiliating and inferior. Their goal is to leave behind the drudgery of hard work and long hours. University education is seen as the key to success and dignity in



Quebec. When we asked our informants why they stayed at school even when it was not rewarding for them, the answer was almost universally: *I want to be somebody*. Vague and ephemeral as the answer was, they were mentally locked into the ideological connection between school and success.

There must be a public re-examination of the paradigm that promotes university study as the only appropriate avenue that can lead to a respectable career.

The family project is different from “mere” family pressure that often conflicts with personal interest. Most of these students have studied in more than one language and many have grown up as the second or third generation of immigrant families; hence they are often also “first generation students”.

They usually claim to be deeply committed to their families, and sometimes they attend college in response to parental pressure. Yet they also withdraw from the more quirky or oppressive demands which their families impose and they are conflicted about their commitment to parents as against personal self-actualization. One of our informants lost the support of his parents because he chose to study music.

Some students have encountered exclusion, marginalization or racism; and several have lived in serious poverty most of their lives. Most of them work and many work more than twelve hours a week. These students are usually living the full social and economic lives of young adults in addition to attending college full time (see Roy, 2003). They are straining toward independence while still enjoying many privileges, although also some stigmas, of youth. Studying is only one part of their busy lives.

DISLOCATION

Dislocation was common even among the Canadian-born students; but this was especially so for the newly arrived Canadians, of whom many had changed countries more than once. Two Haitian informants had been back and forth from Haiti to Quebec twice each. These immigrant youths also periodically changed from one school district to another in Montreal as their parents settled in and moved from apartments to houses or relocated as family makeup changed. Many of their families are also challenged, troubled or divided; and this complicates students’ “rite of passage” toward adulthood. With each change of school jurisdiction they found themselves placed at a more junior grade level or had to contend with courses that did not synchronize from one school to another.

When my parents were together, they moved around about three times.... Um, my parents divorced [...]. So we moved around, I’m gonna estimate about seven or eight times. I went to four different schools in grade 1. I went to a different school in grade 2, different school in grade 3, different school in grade 4, so I was never in one place at the same time [...]. The house I’m living in now, I think it’s the longest place I’ve ever been in my life and that’s been like two and a half years about, almost three years, so [...].

LANGUAGE

A significant minority of immigrant students arrives in the system as early teens and for them the process of francisation creates a serious handicap. They are singled

out from their age-mates and peer group in order to be placed in a *classe d’accueil* and this often leads to a sense of marginalization and resentment. They are removed from their friends and once again delayed in their academic progress. This can be humiliating to a young person for whom peer acceptance is critical.

There is a more serious consequence for middle teens whose language acquisition is slow. If they turn 18 before they can be integrated into regular classes, they are too old to remain in regular secondary schools and they are forced into adult education courses to complete their high school diploma. Again they feel marginalized and relegated to an inferior educational path.

[...] So they put me on Sec. III to continue to get the regular diploma, like for under 18. I supposed to continue the *post-accueil*, but they didn’t let me to go to the *post-accueil* because they said I’m over 18. You cannot stay here anymore. But if I was like in Sec. V, they would let me, but they said because of my French, it wasn’t perfect, and I supposed to pass two years something to get better [...].

[...] That’s why I’m late for college, you know. Because I was study two years. One year and a half for the French. Basically they waste my time for French and I was so mad at it, because I didn’t get anything. I’m not good in French, I’m not good in English [...].

THE GULF

Our study clearly delineates two educational cultures.

The culture of educational institutions and its successful participants, namely the teachers, professionals and highly-performing students, are embedded in an ideology of education which is content-based, formal in its definitions of requirements, and “meritocratic” in



its performance standards. This institutional view has academic objectives, it measures performance by standard numeric indicators and it operates as a gatekeeper over entrance to its own programs and to other desirable futures that require formal credentials from post-secondary educational establishments. Most of those who represent the institutional side of the gulf have had personal advantages as a result of their success in this system and they support and respect the values and rules by which that system operates.

These underachieving students must be given opportunities to study toward their college diplomas at a pace which is appropriate in the context of their life demands.

The culture of the underachieving student is a system of values and norms based on life experience in a school system that has rarely provided them with either intrinsic satisfaction or academic success. The educational culture of this bottom quintile is generally one governed by efficiency, *i.e.*, maximum output for minimum input.

[...] School is important. However, I don't work that hard either. I like to do as little as possible. And I'm okay getting by as much as possible. [...] and I just kept getting, like, under 60's, 70's in some classes [...].

They want to validate their places in society by attaining post-secondary diplomas and degrees; but they are only rarely motivated by the subject matter of courses. They sometimes come up against a personal "wall" of dissipation and indifference with respect to their studies, and when they do, they find it difficult to resurrect any commitment to school (see Pomeroy, 2000). Occasionally they experience an "epiphany"

which turns them toward a pattern of accomplishment. However, they often have a poor estimation of their own academic capabilities and frequently they do not understand the criteria of college grading schemes; and therefore they are often only dimly aware of their standing in a course.

Some of these students give up quickly, failing in their first semester and then discontinuing their studies. Others persist almost beyond comprehension, singularly devoted to a dream of their future, even though they might be well into their twenties before they complete a CEGEP program that is comparable to a "grade thirteen".

The most debilitating point of departure for both of these educational cultures is that the skill sets that are needed for effective performance in college study are not effectively developed in either secondary school or college. In addition, the high school educational culture, along with motivational, emotional and adaptive baggage that has accumulated during the high-school experience, is an impediment to the kind of direct commitment to post-secondary study that is required by colleges. A further barrier for such high-school graduates is the obligation to take a full course load at college in order to study tuition-free, thereby making it difficult to work and study at the same time.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Specific programmatic solutions do not flow directly from this research. However, certain patterns emerge in the contradictions between the institutional culture and that of the bottom quintile. These patterns suggest fruitful avenues for an accommodation by which more students in this cohort might succeed in achieving their educational aims or might pursue suitable alternatives that allow them to take a productive and rewarding place in society.

Work and study

These underachieving students must be given opportunities to study toward their college diplomas at a pace which is appropriate in the context of their life demands. Most directly this means that the system must discontinue the practice of financially penalizing those students who cannot afford, in their finances or in their life priorities, to study full-time. Those who must work while studying at a slower pace must pay tuition and they often also accumulate significant debt while studying. The Ministry places strong pressure on the colleges to graduate students in the minimum amount of time and it expects them to meet unrealistic targets in their "success rates". This puts pressure on students to race through their programs as full-time students with burdensome course loads that virtually guarantee high failure rates for those with other heavy responsibilities such as extended hours of paid work.

Learning styles and teaching practices

The traditional delivery of college courses through "chalk and talk", *i.e.*, the lecture or magisterial method, does not generally serve well the students in the bottom quintile. The social nature of these young adults suggests that innovative pedagogies that employ their social desires as teaching tools could help to involve them in the academic conversation. Specific techniques of this type might be more commonly developed if college teachers had some form of teacher training.



Content and process

Underachieving students do not respond well to many traditional forms of classroom teaching. They are often resentful of content-based courses and they insist that what they learn be relevant to their lives in ways which they can immediately comprehend. The institution's singular focus on course content, which is emphasized in most college courses, needs to be moderated toward a process model, one that enables students to construct their learning from a place in their experience which they can recognize. To put it another way, it is one thing to deliver course content; it is quite another for a student to learn something. Normally, teaching through process will also require a higher quotient of individual attention in the instructional strategy; and therefore more favourable teacher-student ratios as well as highly-developed supplementary learning services are needed.

Gatekeeper Courses

Certain courses are mandatory pre-requisites for programs at college and university, or they are required for graduation from a program. These courses have served as stumbling blocks for many students who may be capable of attaining the competencies of the program proper, and might well practice the occupation or profession admirably. One cannot qualify for entry to many programs without a certain level of Mathematics or Physical Science, or a minimum level of performance on a standardized test. Other programs have bottlenecks at the exit end of the program, such as the *Integrative Project* course in Social Science. Special effort needs to be made to improve success rates in such courses through earnest effort, appropriate help, carefully selected or specially-trained teachers, favourable teacher-student ratios, or perhaps an adaptation of course material to honour its service function more than its disciplinary parameters.

Transitional programs

The bridge between high school and CEGEP needs to be a "covered bridge" for the bottom quintile. A successful program needs to address both the academic needs and the educational culture of the students (Tinto, 1996). Since this culture is strongly influenced by many non-school factors, it is important to call on the intervention of professionals who can deal with counterproductive behaviour and attitudes that prevent success in school. Such a program needs to offer a comprehensive orientation early in the first semester, individual tracking for at least two semesters, a complement of non-teaching staff which includes specialists in social helping fields, and it needs to use teaching practices which are appropriate, carefully articulated and coordinated.

While strong students quickly connect to the process and adopt the culture that brings success, many other students drop by the wayside or are neglected.

The trades and other practical pursuits

Many students arrive at CEGEP and aim for university study even though they demonstrate little enthusiasm for any program of study in this stream or aptitude for the kinds of learning activities that will be expected of them. Often these individuals

have not been made sufficiently aware of other forms of career training that can provide a rewarding career and less frustration. There must be a public re-examination of the paradigm that promotes university study as the only appropriate avenue that can lead to a respectable career.

CONCLUDING COMMENT

The democratization of higher education that began in the late sixties is now giving rise to a new and unexpected student reality in Quebec, one to which our informants give voice. We grounded our analysis in the heartfelt testimonies of under-achieving students so as to reflect their educational culture and contrast it with the institutional expectations they face at CEGEP.

The full report more fully reflects their "voices" and it is available on Internet. [Online] <http://www.vaniercollege.qc.ca/acadean/student-life-history.html>

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