



The Influence of Social and Cultural Determinants on Post-Secondary Pathways and Transitions

Summary of Research Paper 6

This study aims to gauge, using recent empirical data, the influence of social and cultural determinants on various dimensions of access to PSE. The data used come from the Youth in Transition Survey (YITS) conducted by Human Resources and Skills Development Canada (HRSDC) and Statistics Canada. Our analyses will deal with respondents of the four cycles of the YITS between 2000 and 2005 who have also participated in the PISA tests in 1999, a survey conducted by the OECD in more than sixty countries: a total subsample of 18,843 subjects.

The overall perspective adopted is one founded on examination of educational pathways in post-secondary education. Made up of a series of decisions and events that influence the trajectory of schooling, these pathways can be analyzed according to four axes: 1) transactions between traits or attributes of individuals and the characteristics of the educational institution; 2) dynamics between the objective or objectifiable aspects of educational pathways and their subjective meanings; 3) interactions between school-based and extra-curricular experiences; and 4) transactions between the different timeframes in an individual's life.

This research paper specifically explores the first and fourth axes. We seek to understand how heritage, acquired knowledge and past experiences act upon access to and persistence in PSE. We are therefore interested in the linkages between past and present. The idea is to understand how dispositions, cultural traits, and competencies acquired by students during the process of their socialization and prior schooling influence their post-secondary educational pathways, with a distinction drawn between the two major types of institutions involved, colleges and universities, each of which has its specific characteristics.

The study delves into different dimensions of the pathways. First, we will examine the question of access, conceived of as the moment when post-secondary education begins. Incidentally, there are multiple pathways for those enrolled in PSE. Some students follow *linear pathways*, neither interrupting their studies nor changing programs of study until graduation; others follow various forms of *discontinuous pathways*, involving either temporary interruption with a possible return to studies or definitive withdrawal.

The study will attempt to answer the following questions:

1. What influence do characteristics of social and cultural relatedness have on the decision whether to continue education after secondary school?
2. How do those characteristics influence post-secondary persistence and pathways (linear or discontinuous)?

The paper is divided into three parts. In Part 1, to establish some theoretical signposts, we briefly review a number of previous studies on the issue of access to studies and post-secondary pathways in Canada. In Part 2, we outline our methodology and describe the data, the variables and the analytical model. Finally, in Part 3, we present and interpret the results.

Methodological elements

We provide a descriptive analysis as well as a multivariate analysis. The first seeks to determine whether there is a significant relationship between the different dependent variables and each of the independent or control variables. It also enables characterization of the various pathways based on the three groupings of variables. The second will allow estimation of the relative influence of the “social and cultural belonging” factors on access to PSE (the effect of the other variables is controlled for). We have used multinomial logistic regression to identify the factors explaining inequalities in access to PSE and in persistence, as well as differences in academic pathways in PSE. Independent variables are classified in three groups: social and cultural background, schooling background and PISA reading scores.

Results on access and persistence

The results of the descriptive analysis show that access to PSE (both college and university) is influenced by social and cultural factors as well as the characteristics of prior schooling. The attainment rate is considerably higher (80%) for girls than for boys (66%), but the widest discrepancies are seen at the university level: 36% for boys vs. 52% for girls. Social background also plays a determining role but, once again, inequalities are more marked in university than in college. The rate of university attainment is much higher among children of professionals, managers and owners and among those whose parents attained PSE or are in middle or upper income brackets. Conversely, children of modest social origins (defined as those whose parents are in white-collar or blue-collar professions, or are artists or unemployed) and those whose parents are in lower income brackets or did not attend post-secondary institutions are slightly more numerous at the college level. The discrepancies at this level are narrow, however. In addition, attainment varies according to urban/rural status. Generally speaking, a greater proportion of youth from urban settings enrol in university, while those from rural communities tend to attend college in larger numbers.

Attainment rates vary similarly depending on cultural background. The proportion of students progressing to PSE is higher among Anglophones living in Quebec (83%) and allophones (86%), those born abroad (85%), and members of visible minority communities (87%). The choice of a college education is also more frequent among Canadian-born youth (29%) than those born abroad (24%).

Our analysis reveals that the characteristics of one’s secondary schooling appear to influence post-secondary education attainment: it tends to increase among students who earn high marks in the basic subjects: languages, mathematics and science. The better the academic record in secondary school, the greater the odds of attaining PSE. The rate of PSE attainment for respondents whose average grades in language studies varies between 90% and 100% is 93%, including 16% in college studies and 77% in university. The attainment rate for those with average grades below 60%, however, is 44% (31% in college and 13% in university). One observes that academic results in secondary school strongly influence the choice of a college versus a university education. Those with higher grades are more likely to choose university studies, while those with average or low grades tend to opt for college. In addition, access to university studies is more likely among students who attended a private secondary school (62%).

To determine whether variables that are social and cultural in nature have a direct effect on access to a college or university education, or whether their effect acts through the student’s secondary schooling, we performed multivariate analyses. Our results show that the effect of certain variables of social and cultural belonging remains significant even when the characteristics of prior schooling are taken into account, although the effect is felt differently in college than at university.

More globally, both social background and prior schooling have an influence on PSE attainment. The two “series of variables” can act in two ways. At times, the influence of belonging to a particular social or cultural group (gender or visible minority status, for example) persists when other variables are introduced. At other times, the effects of one variable disappear with the introduction of other variables. For example, the effect of social background diminishes if the parental academic background, family cultural capital, living conditions and secondary school experience indicators are taken into account.

Thus, the meritocratic nature of school functioning is evident in several cases. It would explain, among other things, the overrepresentation of allophones and members of visible minority communities as well as the progressive increase in the rate of attainment of college or university

studies among youth from working-class backgrounds. This effect of mobilization toward access to PSE is also perceptible in other social groups: Francophones (college and university learning), children born abroad (college and university levels), and youth from lower-income families.

Looking beyond access to PSE, do the social and cultural background variables also exert a significant influence on academic persistence? There is an association between persistence and the fact of belonging to a given social or cultural group. The proportion of non-continuers who leave without graduating is higher among males and among those whose parents did not attend university (so-called first-generation students or FGS's). It tends to increase slightly among youth from families at middle or lower socioeconomic levels, including those whose parents are in an artist profession, are self-employed white-collar workers or are unemployed, and have lower incomes. This trend is also observed among those living in Quebec (both Francophone and Anglophone), those who do not belong to a visible minority, and youth from rural areas. In fact, this group essentially consists of students who enrolled in a professional or technical college program.

As for the proportion of continuers who were still studying in 2005, it is higher among women, non-FGS's whose parents went to university, youth living in families with high annual incomes (\$65,000 or higher) and those whose parents are owners or professionals (whether wage earners or self-employed). This proportion is also higher among immigrant youth and members of visible minorities, as well as allophones.

Examination of the variables describing prior schooling reveals that persistence varies depending on academic success, time spent on homework and whether the individual experienced irregularities in his or her academic career. The rate of non-persistence tends to be higher among students who earned lower grades, devoted less time to homework, dropped out for any period of time, or more generally had trouble at school.

The proportion of young people having already left the system with a post-secondary diploma or degree is also greater among those who had lower grades during their secondary schooling. This observation is associated with the fact that the students who had less satisfactory results in secondary school enrolled mostly in college studies.

When we examine the situation of the students who are still studying, the reverse relationship emerges: the higher their grade averages in secondary school, the greater the odds that they will continue with their education. More time spent on homework also increases those odds. Having dropped out at some point is a factor that decreases the likelihood of the student still studying. The fact of having attended private school or having taken remedial courses, however, does not seem to modify, or else modifies only very slightly, the odds that the student will still be studying.

The influence of the PISA test scores parallels that of academic results: persistence is slightly higher among respondents who obtained high scores. The results of the multinomial regression confirm those of the descriptive analysis. Examination of the gross effects reveals a significant link between persistence and the various social background variables, prior schooling and PISA reading scores. The results also show that the three groups of variables all had limited influence on academic persistence.

College and university pathways

For a number of reasons, young people who attend college have varied educational pathways. We remind the reader that, based on the results obtained from our sample, 30% of secondary school graduates were still attending a college-level teaching institution as of 2005. Among those students, 40% had followed linear pathways and were still enrolled, 7% had followed a linear pathway and already graduated, 33% had temporarily interrupted their studies and later returned to school, and 20% had interrupted their studies without returning (see Table 7)—as of 2005, at least (since there is nothing to prove that these departures were permanent). Based on the results of the descriptive analysis, these college pathways vary slightly with the social and cultural variables, academic background and reading skills.

The results of the multivariate analysis point to a situation comparable to that which prevails for persistence: the various sociocultural variables have almost zero effect on the nature of pathways. Thus, there is little to set students who interrupted their studies and later returned apart from those respondents who followed linear pathways (our reference variable). Departures after the student

completes a diploma are influenced by gender, rural/urban status, province of residence (New Brunswick, Manitoba and Saskatchewan) and having fallen behind at school. Only one variable has an influence on interruptions before completion of a degree: having fallen behind at school.

To sum up, there are three groups that stand out: girls, who have certain characteristics promoting rapid completion of a diploma; respondents who had had trouble at school and as a result chose a shorter program of study; and respondents living in provinces where secondary school does not last as long as in Ontario.

University pathways also were not influenced very much by the variables studied. The descriptive analysis allows us to make some observations, however. We note first that the vast majority of respondents enrolled in university studies followed a linear pathway to university (82%) and only a tiny minority (2%) had interrupted their studies. Lastly, 16% of respondents who attained the university level left without returning.

In sum, only a few social and cultural factors have a significant impact on university pathway, but the lower proportion of respondents who returned to studies limits the scope of the analysis. Province of residence has a significant influence on pathways, but, rather, reveals an effect of context. In this regard, it is difficult to differentiate the effects of education systems (the specific characteristics of the Ontario system, for example) from broader effects such as that of economic growth. The fact of living in a rural area also has an effect on interruption of studies. Lastly, more challenging living conditions during studies may explain a larger number of withdrawals.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the analysis suggests that post-secondary education is subject to two different logic systems: one of mobilization and another of reproduction. The first manifests itself in the easier access to PSE for women and various ethnocultural groups such as Francophones, allophones and members of visible minority communities. The system of reproduction, meanwhile, is perceptible first of all in the differences between socioprofessional positions or between certain sociolinguistic groups. It is also illustrated by the fact that the various social factors weigh more heavily on access to university studies than on college attainment. The choice between a college and a university education seems increasingly aligned with social inequalities. Indeed, this is not surprising, insofar as young people who have chosen a college education have tended to favour vocational and technical training, as previously mentioned.

The results obtained via this analysis are doubly interesting. First of all, they show that there are still significant gaps in access to PSE according to social background and cultural background. Second, they allow us to get an overall picture of educational inequality within the higher education system itself: the categories that predominate across the post-secondary system are more overrepresented in universities than in colleges. The proportion of youth pursuing a university education is appreciably higher among girls, among young people whose parents are in the upper income brackets or who themselves had a post-secondary education, and among urban youth. When controlling for the effect of level of schooling, one notes that the probability of choosing a university education is greater among members of visible minority communities, allophones, Francophones living in majority anglophone provinces, and Anglophones living in Quebec. Likewise, enrolment in university institutions is systematically higher among those who earn higher grades, devote more time to homework, and experience no irregularity in their educational pathways (e.g., dropping out or falling behind).

To sum up, it is notable that the characteristics of social and cultural origin mainly influence the decision to progress to post-secondary education, but have little effect on persistence.

But how are we to explain the very weak influence of sociocultural characteristics on persistence? An initial hypothesis posits that, once the student begins post-secondary studies, differences in cultural and learning capital are felt to a lower degree. Some studies of first-generation students suggest that the differences between FGS's and non-FGS's tend to fade after the start of PSE, or instead influence the nature and duration of studies. More mundanely, however, we might also consider that our analysis was conducted too early in the academic careers of respondents, who have not yet had time to either graduate or withdraw from studies without obtaining a diploma or degree. If that hypothesis

is correct, we should obtain different results if we conduct the same analysis using the data from the subsequent cycle of the survey.

At the end of this study, we can conclude that the influence of social and cultural determinants on access to post-secondary education persists. It acts both through reproduction of social inequalities (via variables such as parental income and education) and through the scholastic motivation movement seen in certain social groups (women, immigrants, members of visible minorities). Social determinants and prior schooling, however, exert a greater effect on access to studies than on persistence, the latter being explained more by the characteristics of the school system. It is possible that modes of social anchorage and prior schooling influence the decision to pursue studies, and that persistence is instead influenced by other factors, including students' initial experiences in post-secondary education. We know (Tinto, 1993, and Coulon, 1992) that social or intellectual integration and the shift from being a secondary student to being a post-secondary student influence the later unfolding of educational pathways. This is why, in our effort to understand educational pathways, we suggest taking into account the characteristics specific to post-secondary schooling, and posit the theory that the unfolding of educational pathways is also modulated by individuals' initial experiences in post-secondary education.

Reference:

Pierre Canisius Kamanzi, Pierre Doray, Jake Murdoch, Stéphane Moulin, Élise Comoé, Amélie Groleau, Catherine Leroy et Frédéric Dufresne (2009). *The Influence of Social and Cultural Determinants on Post-Secondary Pathways and Transitions*. (Projet *Transitions*, Research Paper 6). Montreal: Canada Millenium Scholarship Foundation (Number 47).

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