

Marginalized Youth in Contemporary Educational Contexts: A Tranquil Invitation to a Rebellious Celebration

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Education Canada 59(5), 6-10

Retrieved from: <http://www.cea-ace.ca/education-canada/article/marginalized-youth-contemporary-educational-contexts-tranquil-invitation-re>



When any groups are systematically excluded from meaningful participation and achieve below their levels of competence, they become both “marginalized” in their current school environments and economically and socially disadvantaged over their lifetimes. For many young people, these intersecting marginalities come in the form of lowered expectations from those around them, schools which negate their cultural ways of knowing, stalled academic and social accomplishments, a hopeless sense of being on the outside of the educational journeys they had imagined for themselves, or even an inability to access a school. Our evaluations of current and future outcomes and expectations for these young people must be measured against what we know can be done as opposed to what we have been doing, and educators need to play a new role in helping build young people’s capacity for reflexive action and helping them to become aware of the very real structural barriers that must be negotiated.

First get off the streets, second get a job, and third finish your education so you can get a career. So it is like steps at a time. It is like some people have those things already and they are lucky that they have those things already, handed to them, and they don’t have to start at the bottom

and work their way up. They don't understand what that is like. Starting at the bottom is...I am slowly getting there. I'm not there, but I am slowly getting there.

- "John" speaks about his education.

I thought how unpleasant it is to be locked out; and I thought how it is worse, perhaps, to be locked in.

-Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*

Contemporary educational practices remain locked in to faulty ways of doing things, and as a result they continue to lock out many young people. The academic success of young people is of critical interest to societies and individuals for both social and economic reasons. General levels of educational attainment have now been clearly linked to economic productivity, and it is widely accepted that meaningful participation in the democratic process requires a level of literacy and understanding that allows one to sort through the complex issues of the 21st century. For young people today, economic stability and a sense of belonging in society depend in large part on step-wise experiences and achievements in the pathways provided in the formal education systems. Since the invention of the schooled society, with days filled with age-segregated formal schooling, young people have been at the mercy of educational ideas and practices. For these reasons, when any groups are systematically excluded from meaningful participation and achieve below their levels of competence, they become both "marginalized" in their current school environments and economically and socially disadvantaged over their lifetimes.

We begin with this tranquil invitation to rebellious celebration: tranquil in that we make space to discuss and reflect on these critical concerns; rebellious in that debate and action are crucial.

Thus, we have urgent reasons to be on the watch for such tendencies and to work to quickly address and avoid them. We are also well advised to map these trends over time and point out those that persist in the face of policy or program attentions. This special issue of *Education Canada* provides a focused conversation about the ways in which many young people are continuing to be marginalized by contemporary educational processes. One does not need to look far into the literature to see the lasting and abject effects of poverty, culture, or region on youth education. For many young people, these intersecting marginalities come in the form of lowered expectations from those around them, schools which negate their cultural ways of knowing, stalled academic and social accomplishments, a hopeless sense of being on the outside of the educational journeys they had imagined for themselves, and/or even an inability to access a school.

Each of the articles presented in this special issue discusses such marginalities for young people. The authors have lived and worked with young people who are injured and excluded by their social class, poverty, visible minority status, regions, cultural status, mental health challenges, gender, sexual orientations, and so on. While not claiming to speak for, hear, or represent all young people, the purpose of this issue is to share in collaborative conversations about what we know, what has been done, and what must be accomplished. We begin with this tranquil

invitation to rebellious celebration: tranquil in that we make space to discuss and reflect on these critical concerns; rebellious in that debate and action are crucial. Even though many excellent programs and projects have been launched by dedicated communities, celebration is premature while so many young people continue to flounder in the boat of contemporary education and society

We should acknowledge from the outset that western democracies have shared the hope that public education would be the “great equalizer” for their societies. Despite the progress in societal prosperity and public education through the 20th century, in most countries educational inequities remain large and persistent.[1] It is clear that we first need to examine our expectations and assumptions about public education systems and how they function. What should we expect of contemporary schools and education systems with regard to producing socially just outcomes for youth?

On one hand, international data shows that schools appear to account for only about 20 percent of the variation in student outcomes.[2] While this knowledge might tempt us to moderate our expectations, we have to remember that this reflects the performance of our systems, institutions, and the people in them as they now function; it does not tell us about their potential impact. On the other hand, we also know from the same international data that schools do make a difference! In fact, the research carried out in the last three decades makes it clear that students in classrooms with the most effective teachers may gain on average 1.5 years (standardized achievement measures) while students with the least effective teachers gain only 0.5 years in the academic year.[3] Furthermore, the last two decades of research have brought us a wealth of knowledge focused on evidence-based teaching practices that are effective with a variety of students facing academic disadvantage for a number of reasons (socio-economic struggles, learning a new language, learning disabilities, etc).[4] At this point in time then, our evaluations of current and future outcomes and expectations must be set against the framework of what we know *can be done* as opposed to what we have been doing. Our students deserve nothing less!

One especially persistent inequality in education is socio-economic. Often intersecting with cultural and regional inequalities, the relative wealth of families has made, and continues to make, a good deal of difference to the educational treatment, opportunities, and pathways of young people. As a recent *Globe and Mail* article succinctly attests, the elephant in the room of current U.S. educational policy *is* income inequality. And, we know that countries with the highest levels of equality in income have the most effective education systems.[5] Thus, the persistence of class-based inequalities in education is disappointing but perhaps not surprising given that, despite some positive policy changes, many core inequalities remain unchanged.

Children’s early experiences within the family still provide them with an essential preparation for formal education and lay the foundations for patterns of inequality and marginality. Some children begin school able to read simple words, identify colours, count, and do simple arithmetic. Others have to acquire these skills within the school environment and may be poorly regarded by their teachers from the outset. Throughout their time in schools, those from more advantaged families often have access to educational resources in the home environment and support from family members who have some knowledge of the curriculum and who can help with homework. In addition, middle class families frequently stress the importance of education,

highlight potential benefits, and are able to use their knowledge to secure advantages in an educational marketplace. By contrast, working class families may have narrow occupational horizons, less direct knowledge of educational benefits, and be unable to support their children beyond the end of compulsory education. In short, current notions and aims of education tend to match those of a mainstream middle class. As a generation of critical researchers and pedagogues has shown, there are myriad ways in which school and classroom practices continue to help in stacking the deck against young people from poor families.[\[6\]](#)

They may not necessarily appreciate what goes on in school every day, but young people are aware of their desire and right for quality education to set them along good paths as they define them.

At the same time, education has undoubtedly become more important to young people. The labour market has changed and opportunities for poorly qualified young people are severely limited. In the new knowledge economy, a lack of skills can lead to even further marginalization and exclusion.[\[7\]](#) In these circumstances, young people are participating in education for much longer, and the majority has a strong awareness of the link between educational attainment and subsequent life chances. In our recent studies, young people (those who have left high school and those who have not) clearly state their yearning for quality education, which to them means a system of schooling that is responsive, relevant, flexible, youth-attuned, caring, and proactive.[\[8\]](#) They are interested in “tough but fair” practices and teachers who are “good at teaching” and can make learning fun and engaging while teaching difficult content. This is a reasonable set of expectations for which they do not wish to be short-changed. They may not necessarily appreciate what goes on in school every day, but young people are aware of their desire and right for quality education to set them along good paths as they define them.

The ways in which young people approach education and establish learner identities, therefore, shapes educational experiences. The cultures associated with socio-economic challenges and social classes are important and can impact on educational outcomes. Previous research suggested that a clash between working class cultures and the middle class culture of schools led some young people to resist the authority of the school and reject school-based values that placed a premium on academic success.[\[9\]](#) This process of resistance was regarded as central to the marginalization of working class pupils. But, with education having become much more central to the lives of all young people, such explanations have started to fall out of favour. At the same time, young people living in poor communities may develop waning confidence in their academic abilities and may distance themselves from school. Indeed, conformity to the school may come at a price: in lower working class peer groups it is often not “cool to be clever”, and therefore the educational rewards for breaking with peer values have to be made clear.[\[10\]](#) Such subtleties require serious consideration.

Increased participation in education, therefore, may come at a further price to young people and lead to the emergence of fresh inequalities. Not all families can afford to support their children through long periods of post-secondary education or training. And even if state support is available, there are still important dividing lines. Evidence from the UK shows that young people from less affluent families are frequently debt adverse and reluctant to take out student loans to finance their studies.[\[11\]](#) Young people from poorer families frequently select courses on the

basis of cost – not simply in terms of fees, but overall costs, which may include the need to move away from home, travel costs, the length of course, and the perceived linkages between their course and future employment. This can result in selecting courses in less prestigious institutions, choosing shorter courses, and considering courses with strong vocational orientations.[\[12\]](#) In addition, less affluent students frequently work long hours to survive in education, which can interfere with their studies and prevent cross-class social interaction.

In modern contexts, an ability to manage the complexity of educational structures, make informed choices, and negotiate educational careers is increasingly important. Education has been subject to a process of marketization in which knowledgeable “consumers” with spending power are advantaged while others may be marginalized. For those with inside knowledge who have direct experience of the ways in which education is delivered and the implications of various choices, the process can be relatively straightforward, but for those from families with little experience of post-compulsory education, it can be difficult to navigate effectively and further marginalization can occur through inadequate support and poor choices.

Young people are the divining rods and tropical frogs of contemporary society and our system of schooling. If they are increasingly intellectually *disengaged* from school at the very time society is asking for further and deeper intellectual engagement, where does that leave them?[\[13\]](#) If more young people are precariously perched along the folds of marginalization, what are they feeling and how are they reacting? What does it mean for education? If they lose confidence in the intellectual aspects of schooling when being called to further demonstrate critical thinking and coping abilities, how are the cultures of schools, families, and communities positioned to respond? The paradox of providing the deep intellectual engagement required for the knowledge economy alongside the creeping watering down and rationalization of education requires discussion, especially for those young people who have traditionally been excluded and made marginal in schools.

In Canada, the importance of attending to youth confidence (in their learning and futures) is gaining some focus. A meaningful way to assess the pulse of young people is currently on the table at the Canadian Education Association and in many community efforts. If class cultures are serving as reference points through which educational opportunities are evaluated and negotiated, then we come to appreciate that active and prolonged engagement in education requires deeper understanding and accommodation of learner identities over their life course. Young people have always had the challenge of developing and negotiating identity processes and today must be comfortable to describe themselves as students. They must, with our help, work out what that means in terms of involvement in their communities, in the here and now, and in the context of future lives and careers. A class-based “authenticity” must include the effective participation of working class students and those from low socio-economic situations who are not asked to cast aside their identities, but seen to be driven by a desire to accommodate their school experiences within a framework that respects their class roots.[\[14\]](#)

Understanding how young people make sense of their lives within the dynamic processes of transition and change is crucial. There are many advantages derived by educators who are able to act as “biographical engineers”, and help young people to write their life stories and also recognize that some young people have limited “coping resources”.[\[15\]](#) Young people reflect on

past experiences as a way of framing future plans and try to make sense of their lives through putting together a coherent story. In the past, young people were, to an extent, able to use the experiences of significant others (especially family members or peers from the same class positions or with similar educational attainments) to help them construct road maps. In the modern world, rapid processes of social change and the fragmentation of experiences make it extremely difficult to plan for the future and manage lives.

In this context, it can be argued that educators have a new and important role to play in helping build young people's capacity for reflexive action, and helping them to become aware of the very real structural barriers that must be negotiated. Educators must become a part of an entire community of helpers who are, at bottom, human developers with a core mission to address and act on the inequalities young people carry to school. Equipping all young people to develop a lucid life story with a stronger sense of themselves – a “room of their own” in Virginia Woolf's sense – and a place in the future is of the essence. But, do we see this as education? Just as Plato's original symposium incited debate on the meanings and merits of “love”, so too do we invite critical dialogue on the meanings of a “good education” for contemporary young people – most especially for those who continue to be locked out and/or locked in by socio-economic inequality.

EN BREF - Quand des groupes sont systématiquement exclus d'une participation significative et que leurs résultats sont inférieurs à leurs niveaux de compétence, ils deviennent à la fois « marginalisés » dans leurs environnements scolaires actuels, ainsi qu'économiquement et socialement défavorisés tout au long de leur vie. Pour de nombreux jeunes, ces marginalités recoupées prennent la forme d'attentes moindres de la part de leur entourage, d'écoles qui nient leurs manières culturelles de connaître, de réalisations scolaires et sociales moindres, de l'impression désespérée d'être à l'extérieur des trajets éducatifs qu'ils avaient imaginés ou même de l'impossibilité de fréquenter une école désirée. Nos évaluations des résultats actuels et futurs et des attentes pour ces jeunes doivent être fonction de ce nous savons qui peut être fait, au lieu de ce que nous faisons. Les éducateurs doivent jouer un nouveau rôle, contribuer à bâtir la capacité d'action réfléchie des jeunes et les aider à prendre conscience des obstacles structurels très réels à contourner.

[1] R. Wilkinson and K. Pickett, *Why More Equal Societies Almost Always do Better* (London: Penguin, 2010).

[2] D. Willms, *Learning Divides: Ten Policy Questions about the Performance and Equity of Schools and Schooling Systems* (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 1995).

[3] W. L. Landers and S. P. Horn, “The Tennessee Value-Added Assessment System: Mixed Model methodology in Educational Assessment,” *Journal of Personnel Evaluation in Education* 8 (1994): 299-311; “Teachers Matter: Evidence from Value-Added Assessments,” *Research Points* 2, no. 2 (American Education Research Association, 2004).

[4] L. B. Stebbins, R. G. St. Pierre, E. C. Proper, R. B. Anderson, and T. R. Cerva, *Education as Experimentation: A Planned Variation Model*, vol IV-A (Cambridge, MA: Abt Associates, 1977); C. Bereiter, "A Constructive Look at Follow Through Results," *Interchange* 11 (1981).

[5] R. Wilkinson and K. Pickett, *Why More Equal Societies Almost Always do Better* (London: Penguin, 2010).

[6] See for example the work of Jean Anyon, Michael Apple and Bruce Curtis.

[7] A. Furlong, F. Cartmel, A. Biggart, H. Sweeting, and P. West, "Complex Transitions: Linearity and Labour Market Integration in the West of Scotland," in *Young Adults in Transition: Becoming Citizens*, eds. C. Pole, J. Pilcher, and J. Williams (London: Palgrave, 2005).

[8] K. Tilleczek, ed., *Why Do Students Drop Out of High School? Narrative Studies and Social Critiques* (New York: Edwin Mellen Press, 2008); K. Tilleczek, S. Laflamme, B. Ferguson, et al, *Fresh Starts and False Starts: Young People in Transition from Elementary to Secondary School*. Report to the Ontario Ministry of Education. Toronto, 2010.

[9] P. Willis, *Learning to Labour: How Working Class Kids Get Working Class Jobs* (Farnborough: Saxon House, 1977).

[10] H. Williamson, *The Milltown Boys Revisited* (London: Berg, 2004).

[11] A. Furlong and F. Cartmel, *Higher Education and Social Justice* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 2009).

[12] Ibid.

[13] See D. Willms, S. Freisen, and P. Milton, *What did you do in school today? Transforming Classrooms through Social, Academic and Intellectual Engagement*, First National Report (Toronto: Canadian Education Association, 2010).

[14] D. Reay, *Who Goes Where in Higher Education: An Issue of Class, Ethnicity and Increasing Concern* (Institute for Policy Studies in Education, London Metropolitan University, 2005).

[15] S. J. Ball, M. Maguire, and S. Macrae, *Choice, Pathways and Transitions Post-16* (London: Routledge-Falmer, 2000).