

## Itinéraires scolaires des étudiants : une recherche menée au cégep Vanier

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### REPORT ON THE STUDENT LIFE HISTORY PROJECT

The Student Life History Project examines the educational culture of the under-performing student and has evolved from our work with the Explorations program. This is a bridging or transition semester for students who leave high school with marks below 70% or who lack the prerequisites for the program of their choice. We spoke very little of ethnicity in our project application for funding. Perhaps, this was a conscious decision, but more likely it was because we live in an extremely mixed social environment in terms of ethnicity. This reality is such an everyday backdrop to our work at Vanier that we sometimes become blasé about it. Nevertheless, as we collected information, it became more and more evident that this backdrop has a primordial importance in several key aspects of the students lives. This included such areas as, the secondary schools they attended, language issues, a factor we called "dislocation", the developing self-identity, marginality and most especially their families.

First a little background. The research project consisted of a three year longitudinal study and is qualitative in nature. In the Fall of 2002, we selected the incoming population with high school averages of less than 70% and found we had 20% of the new students or what we came to call the bottom quintile. We interviewed 48 students and managed to get subsequent interviews from about 24 in 2003 and 19 in 2004. From the same cohort, we also interviewed 16 scholarship students in focus groups to have some points of comparison. They were the successful side of the Gulf that we feel exists between the majority of students and the institution. We also interviewed 15 teachers for their perspectives on what happens to the weaker students. A very important element of the research was an ethnographic study we organized in 2 of our feeder high schools. A graduate student from McGill's Education faculty spent considerable time with students in Secondary 5 in order to paint the picture of the anticipatory socialization that occurs at the secondary level, before the students arrive in Cegep.

In terms of ethnic background our final sample contained people from 21 different national origins, 6 people of mixed heritage, 15 born outside of Canada. and only 9 came from families who have been established for several generations in Canada, including a young Black woman from Nova Scotia. The only Quebecois were partners in the mixed



families. This is a random sample drawn from Vanier's population and therefore is relatively representative.

Some reflections on secondary school. The five years of secondary education are crucial steps in the development and shaping of young people as human beings, and in terms of identity and world view. This is a time when anticipatory socialization is supposed to occur to prepare students for life in Cegep. While the strong students connect to the process and quickly adopt the culture which brings success within the institution, there are nonetheless, a large number of students who drop by the wayside or are neglected. These arrive at Cegep with classroom behaviour, work discipline, attitude to their studies and ways of treating their teachers that are completely unacceptable.

What we found. Many secondary schools have become almost mono-ethnic. There are those in the donut around Montreal island which are almost pure French Quebecer. On the island of Montreal certain schools, like those in Montreal North, are divided into Italian and Haitian. Many private schools also reflect this trend with their ethnic or religious vocation. Armenian, Greek, Jewish and Islamic schools are examples of these. Even in the mixed schools, there are often obvious and negative consequences, such as the ethnic based street gangs that fight over their "turf".

On the other hand, a number of the schools are quiet and peaceful. The two where we undertook the ethnographic study allowed us to question the students in great depth and we found no sign of tensions. In fact, the students proudly claimed to hang with a very ethnically mixed peer group. Upon closer examination, however, they would acknowledge that, in fact, the membership of their closest friendship group was mostly based on ethnic affinity. The groups even installed themselves in different parts of the building – this is the Tamil floor, this is the Black corridor, the Italians hang out here. Nevertheless, it is still very true that the students have friendly extended contacts with all the communities through the classroom, sports and extracurricular activities. In addition, at this stage in their lives they also associate through meeting again in outside community activities or in the workplace like Macdonald's where members of this age group find their entry level jobs.

Language is another major issue facing the students coming into Vanier College. The majority have followed French language instruction for the greater part of their education and have profited from Law 101 by speaking fluent French. We often see this in the college, when groups of Asian, or Tamil students will choose French over English to socialize, for relaxing banter and heated discussion. Nevertheless, there is a significant minority who arrive in the system as early teens for whom the process of francisation creates a serious handicap. As young teens they are singled out from their age-mates and peer

group to be placed in the classe d'accueil. This distinction often leads to a sense of marginalization and resentment. They are removed from their friends and depending on the evaluation of the teacher at the end of the program, they are often placed in grades junior to their age group. This can be extremely humiliating for a young person for whom peer acceptance is of critical importance.

In addition, there is a more serious consequence for the middle teen who finds that the acquisition of language skills can take considerable time. If they turn 18 years old before they can be integrated into regular classes, they are too old to remain in regular secondary schools so they are forced into Adult Education courses to complete their high school diploma. Once again there is a sense of marginalization and of being relegated to an inferior education. This is not only what their peers may tell them, but even the colleges will discount the marks acquired in the modules that the Adult Education Centres use to help the students get through this phase of their schooling.

Dislocation was another theme we identified and which took several forms. We all know how some parents can become so upset whenever their child has to move from the comfort and security of one level and move on to the next step or even change schools. And there is no doubt that such changes can disrupt the academic continuity of the child. Among our informants, dislocation was a frequent occurrence, even amongst the Canadian born, but more so among the newly arrived Canadians. Many changed from country to country. Among our Haitian informants, 2 had been back and forth from Haiti to Quebec twice each. In addition, they periodically changed from one school district to another in Montreal as parents settled in and moved from apartments to houses. With each change of school jurisdiction they found themselves placed at a more junior grade level or they have to contend with courses which do not synchronize from one school to the other.

One extreme example of dislocation, is a young Cambodian who was the only surviving child of a mother who lost all her other children during the genocide in Cambodia. He spent his early childhood in a refugee camp in Thailand before moving to Canada. Settling in the Cote-des-Neiges district, he went through a classe d'accueil before attending a high school that was at the time dealing with some difficult situations of ethnic gang violence. School was never easy for him but he persisted nonetheless.

The dislocation of immigration often imposes enormous stresses on family relations. In one case, a father had come from Iran 7 years in advance to lay the groundwork for bringing his family to Montreal. Once re-united, the parents were no longer able to live together and very quickly after their arrival, a bitter separation occurred that left the children completely alienated from their father. The subsequent struggle was Herculean as the newly arrived single mother tried to help her children continue their education.



The family theme was one that resonated throughout the interviews of both established and immigrant informants, but had a special significance in the case of young newly arrived immigrants. Here, we derived considerable inspiration from the work of Louise Lapierre and Sylvie Loslier in their research<sup>1</sup> on immigrant students at Cégep St-Laurent, in particular their definition of the "family project". The mission of the family newly arrived in Quebec almost always revolves around settling in and pursuing collective socio-economic advancement. Mother, father as well as children, all see their role as an integral part of this project. For the children, this includes their studies and academic success contributes to the family's progress. Let's read it 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, you know what, I might actually be somebody when I grow up, that's what motivates me. Like I don't owe it to the work, I owe it to myself. 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 people to come to school. 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.*

She clearly understands her role in the family project and faithfully attends school despite the challenges that she faces as some who is not particularly academically inclined.

The family project is very different from family pressure. In the long-established families, whether immigrant or many generations in Canada, whether francophone, anglophone or allophone, we saw several cases where the young person was in school at the insistence of the parents or siblings. In several cases, they were responding badly to this pressure because it did not reflect their interests or wishes.

On the other hand, the family project can represent some contradictory forces at work. In some cases, the family does not have a history of academic studies that would provide them the skills to support their child's efforts at school. This problem is further accentuated when the language of education is not the one they speak as a family. This becomes more complicated when the parents also depend on the nearly adult child to help in household and child rearing chores.

Another problem in the immigrant milieu is the almost blind faith in pursuing education

<sup>1</sup> Lapierre, Louise et Sylvie Loslier. *Identité immigrante et apprentissage en contexte collégial*. Montréal, cégep de Saint-Laurent, 2003.

to the university level and the disdain held for manual labour 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 when it was not even rewarding for them to do so, 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.

The family business is one other area where family relationships can complicate a young person's life and create contradictions to the faith in higher education as the route to success. Several of our respondents have worked since a very young age in their family's business, such as landscaping, restaurant, or textile. Often these are successful enterprises through which the family has gained considerable security and comfort as well as social status. Everyone in the family has worked in the business, including the children, and has gained excellent skills as a result. Despite this success, the parents insist that their child must have an education to escape the difficulties that they have been through. 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 and follow in the parents' footsteps.

This short resume of the project's results, examines some of the ways ethnicity and immigration affect the lives of students who enter Vanier College, particularly those who leave high school with low marks. The full document will be available on line or in book form in the Fall of 2006. The project's great value is in giving "voice" to the heartfelt testimony of our informants. This presentation clearly lacks the aspect of being in their own words. We tried to ground our analysis in their testimonies to reflect the kind of educational culture they have evolved and to contrast their reality with the institutional expectations they face at Cegep. The move to democratize higher education starting in the late sixties is now giving rise to a new and unexpected student reality in Quebec. In many ways Vanier is a very real forecast of what could face many other colleges in the future.