

Inclusivity in Higher Education:  
Ethnic Differences in Post-secondary Educational Pathways

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Abstract

Ethnic group differences in educational attainment at the post-secondary level are evident in Canada and the United States. The factors contributing to the lack of inclusivity in higher education are complex. This paper explores outcomes and mechanisms of educational stratification by providing an overview of structural and cultural explanations of educational disparities. Assimilation, segmented assimilation and blocked mobility theories are explored first, followed by socioeconomic origins, social capital resources, skill deficits, aspirations, and oppositional culture theories. This paper argues that the educational landscape is indeed an uneven one for immigrants and their families, particularly when belonging to an ethnic minority group.

Introduction

In today's global climate, higher education is necessary for economic advancement within the current knowledge economy. Since its inception, the knowledge economy has gained strength, creating an arena of competition based on "school-taught" (Rosenbaum, 2001, p. 25) credentials leading to an increasingly stratified labour market (D. Brown, 2001; Goldin & Katz, 2008; Schofer & Meyer, 2005). The Canadian Council on Learning predicted that by 2015, 70% of all new jobs in Canada will require some form of post-secondary education or training (Learning, February 2009). Despite the importance of educational achievement for successful labour market outcomes, many Canadian and American youth do not continue on to tertiary educational institutions after high school (Sweet, Anisef, Brown, & Walters, 2009).

Broad educational trends in Canada indicate that there are vast differences between ethnic groups and their educational success (Anisef, Davies, & Walters, 2008; Boyd, 2002, 2009; Boyd & Grieco, 1998; R. Brown, 1994, 2006; Cheung, 2007; Chiswick & DebBurman, 2003). High school dropout and post-secondary participation rates are closely connected to ethnicity and socioeconomic status in the Canadian context (Cheung, 2007). Similarly, American research points to substantial effects between ethnicity and educational attainment (Kao, Tienda, & Schneider, 1996; Rong & Grant, 1992). For example, Hispanic students have been shown to have lower achievement levels and higher dropout rates, compared to Asian and non-Hispanic White students in the U.S. (Arias, 1986; Velez, 1989).

For many visible minority students, post-secondary education remains an elusive goal. The new world-model of schooling is marked by inequality of access and participation, which is only expected to become more pronounced over time (Anisef, Brown, Phythian, Sweet, & Walters, 2008; Thiessen, 2009). It is predicted that inequality will take on a "maximally maintained" (Gamoran, 2001, p. 144) quality, where levels of education will continuously become saturated, causing competition to shift upward thus maintaining the relative differences between groups. Since schooling is the major sorting mechanism in contemporary society, individuals in positions of power will use education to maintain their positions and those of their offspring as a form of social closure (Gamoran). The pronounced variations that persist in educational attainment among visible minority immigrants highlights the need for inquires into the degree of inclusivity within educational systems.

This paper explores the processes of educational stratification and addresses the systematic inequalities that lead individuals to seek different post-secondary pathways. First, this paper will discuss outcomes of minority inequality, variation, and lack of inclusivity in higher education with respect to assimilation, segmented assimilation, and blocked mobility theories. Second, processes of inequality and inclusivity in educational stratification will be addressed with respect to the mechanisms of socioeconomic origins, social capital resources, skill deficits, lack of aspirations, and oppositional culture theories.

### *Structural and Cultural Frameworks*

Explanations for ethnic minority educational disparities differ in their attention to structural or cultural forces (Kao & Thompson, 2003). Structural explanations can be better understood by reviewing the classic status attainment model of Blau and Duncan (1967), which discusses how educational attainment, skill and ability translate into jobs ranked by prestige. In their study, Blau and Duncan explain social mobility patterns by identifying the movement of individuals into desirable occupations, strengthening the notion that individuals could in fact escape their backgrounds. Important implications for meritocracy and equality of opportunity followed these findings, bringing variations in issues of labour market outcomes to the forefront as explanations for lack of mobility. Since external factors such as the economy, rather than ascriptive characteristics, are viewed as being responsible for the successes and failures of individuals, a defining feature of social mobility is that individuals can move up the metaphorical ladder of opportunity, but they may also lose whatever progress they have made.

The essentialist or biological view of ethnicity implies that there are inherent differences between ethnic groups (Steinberg, 1989). This line of reasoning originates from socially constructed cultural understandings of difference, which emphasize ethnic diversity as a causal factor in explaining variation in educational achievement. According to Miles and Brown (2003), while beliefs in hierarchies of race and difference along the lines of physical traits have become less popular over the years, there is still an underlying current that uses cultural and ethnic factors as explanatory variables for a number of issues, including educational attainment. The main assumption in ethnic arguments is that persistent, recurring lower educational attainment of certain groups can be understood and explained by referring to the cultural specificities of that group. Likewise, reappearing higher educational achievements of other groups can also be explained by referring to certain aspects of that culture. At its core, in order for the cultural thesis to be persuasive in explaining educational attainment, it must prove that certain ethnic groups value education more than others. The evidence must indicate that ethnicity operates as a determinant of educational achievement. Issues of gender are also essential to understanding within and among minority differences; however, intersections of gender and ethnicity are beyond the scope of this literature review.

Defining ethnicity is not straight-forward, rather interpretations of ethnicity differ from author to author. The purpose of this paper is not to analyze the uses of ethnicity in the literature, but to logically present the literature on inclusivity in higher educational attainment from the perspective that preconceived understandings of ethnicity are always present. For Miles and Brown (2003), ethnicity is used as a starting point for understanding cultural and social norms between groups. They argued that ethnicity exists because of individuals' social attachment to others like them, with whom they share language, culture, national origin, ancestry and customs. In contrast, subjective interpretations of ethnicity are concerned with the social construction of reality; ethnicity is a negotiated process and operates as a result of identification, either by others or by self-identification as belonging to a specific cultural group (Satzewich, 2008). These interpretations characterize ethnicity as a fluid process, changing over time and place (Fleras & Elliot, 1996).

When examining issues of ethnic group differences, as well as within group differences in higher education, it is important to consider that educational pathways involve complex decision making processes that can include varying contexts, family resources, and individual expectations that can either enhance or mitigate educational attainment.

### *Background Factors*

#### *Contexts*

Given ethnic groups' challenges when emigrating and the varying social and political climates they face in the host country, it is applicable to question how different contexts affect interpretations of ethnicity and educational achievement (Davies & Maldonado, 2008). Key characteristics of schools and neighbourhoods that can influence attainment beyond resources are addressed. Individual's actions can be channelled by the formal structure of schools as well as informal relationships in neighbourhoods, with parents, teachers, and other students. An example of the formal structure of schools in the Canadian context is the practice of streaming. As in many other countries, lower SES students in Canada are more likely to be streamed into less challenging programs in high school than their middle-class counterparts (Krahn & Taylor, 2007). Curtis, Livingstone, and Smaller (1992) argued that streaming actually disadvantages working-class students. They would fare better in a non-streamed high school environment where opportunities to rise in school and learn are not as limited as in lower streams where they are exposed to less challenging work.

#### *Resources*

Porter, Porter, & Blishen (1979) discussed how “money matters” even in K-12 public schools that do not charge tuition since performance in school can require additional money for trips, books and other learning materials. More recent Canadian studies show that access and participation in higher education is conditioned by parental SES (Frenette, 2007) and as expected, American research also shows that a family's wealth shapes their children's odds of attending a post-secondary institution (Conley, 2001). The quality of public schooling also plays a role in student outcomes. While the research in this area is not decisive, students living in more affluent neighbourhoods tend to achieve at higher levels than their counterparts living in poorer neighbourhoods, regardless of family resources. This trend is likely since more affluent neighbourhoods attract better teachers and schools enjoy superior resources as Boyle, Georgiades, Racine, & Mustard (2007) found in the Canadian context.

#### *Expectations*

While money matters contribute in many ways to educational attainment, they have not figured well in classic explanations of disparities in education. As a result, from the 1950s to 1990s, sociologists explained educational disparities mainly through cultural forces and the structure of schooling (Davies & Maldonado, 2008). Non-material resources are emphasized instead, as passing from parents to their children in the form of “human capital” (Chiswick & DebBurman, 2003, p. 5)—basic reading, writing, and vocabulary skills, and disciplined work habits—actually give children a distinct work advantage in school. However, the translation of this appreciation for education into practice is a complex process that differs from family to family. Expectations are created through a variety of avenues by comparing ourselves to others similar to us and by bringing our aspirations and efforts in line with theirs. We also use significant others as frames of reference, looking to parents and friends in occupations that we desire and gaining input on our decisions about what to pursue in school. In sum, while everyone “values education in an abstract sense” (Davies & Maldonado, p. 164), the resources available for navigating the educational terrain remains inclusive to those with the appropriate contexts, resources, and expectations.

### Outcomes: Minority Inequality, Variation and Lack of Inclusivity in Higher Education

#### *Assimilation*

The main assumption behind assimilation perspectives is that immigrants' integration into mainstream society will start their path toward educational and economic success. According to this perspective, immigrants and ethnic groups will fare better if they leave their ethnic pasts behind and adopt the customs and norms of the host society. Success is measured by the extent to which ethnic groups have assimilated into society, whereby economic non-success is related back to non-assimilation. This perspective emphasizes the underlying assumption that there is something inherently troublesome about ethnic groups that challenges their ability to succeed, whereby assimilation into the mainstream would adjust for these concerns.

Previous studies of how immigrant groups achieved academic success in the host country used a straight-line assimilation framework to predict how immigrant groups would eventually blend into mainstream society (Gordon, 1964; Park, 1914). Sassler (2006) pointed out that the phenomenon of immigrant children struggling within the host country's education system is not a new one. Rather, data from the 1920s is used to point out that the historical process of assimilation was not a smooth one for immigrant families; rather, just as today, it was filled with contradictions and non-uniformity. Therefore, using Sassler's insights into the somewhat tenuous road to assimilation highlights the importance of validating immigrant groups' varying needs and goals in the host country.

Using this framework to understand the educational success of immigrant youth, Kao and Tienda (1995) "predict that immigrant youth will have the lowest educational achievement, but that achievement will increase with generational status" (p. 5). The authors acknowledge that these effects operate differently depending on the ethnic or racial group (see Glick & White, 2003). Further, given the expected increase in educational success for generations beyond the first, Kao and Tienda argued that "second generation youth (i.e., native-born children of foreign-born parents) are best positioned to achieve scholastically" (p. 5).

These re-interpretations of assimilation were to account for the varying degrees of economic and educational success of assimilated and non-assimilated ethnic groups, casting doubt on the notion that assimilation is an inevitable process (Gordon, 1964). As Hiebert & Ley (2003) pointed out, the legacy of the assimilationist perspective has been a rocky one. A main criticism of the assimilation paradigm is that it is no longer applicable to the multicultural context of countries such as Canada and the United States. Substantial variations exist among the different immigrant groups which are studied when the groups are distinguished between traditional and non-traditional minority groups (recent European and non-European groups) (Hiebert & Ley). It can no longer be expected that immigrants will attempt to position themselves in line with native-born peoples, given the option of the many different immigrant enclaves that exist in most metropolitan cities (Hiebert & Ley).

### *Segmented Assimilation*

To understand the links between this greater diversity and intergenerational mobility, Portes and Zhou's (1993) signature work on segmented assimilation offers a more synthesized perspective on assimilation that accounts for the special issues faced by the second generation, whose adaptation process cannot be fully understood by examining their parents' experiences (see Portes & MacLeod, 1996; Portes & Rumbaut, 2001; Zhou, 1997; Zhou & Bankston III, 1994). In light of the inconsistencies between the first and second generation, the authors identified three distinct paths to assimilation in the U.S. context in order to account for the various routes taken by immigrants toward social and economic success or underachievement.

The first, parallel integration into the White middle class represented the usual acculturation process discussed in much of the earlier literature (see Wiley, 1967), the second referred to an oppositional assimilation process into poverty and the underclass, while a third process discussed rapid economic advancement with the deliberate preservation of the immigrant groups' values accompanied by tight solidarity (Portes, 1998; Portes & Rumbaut, 2001; Zhou, 1997). Portes and Zhou (1993) also accounted for newer immigration patterns of Asian, South East Asian, and Hispanic individuals to the United States, as opposed to previous European immigrant groups of the turn of the century.

With respect to Portes and Zhou's (1993) third avenue of segmented assimilation, the authors discussed the immigration process of Cubans to the Miami area. They highlighted their economic and educational success via accelerated advancement within society, while maintaining the values and solidarity of their community. Portes and Zhou argued that the role of context for new immigrants in the host country played a decisive role in the course of the second generation as well. Context is represented as "broad variables such as political relations between sending and receiving countries and the state of the economy in the latter and such specific ones as the size and structure of pre-existing co-ethnic communities" (Portes and Zhou, p. 82-83).

Portes and Zhou (1993) discussed the differences between Cuban and Mexican immigrants to Miami and recognized the importance of having "mobility ladders" and in "proving" to second generation children the importance of having aspirations for upward mobility; however, they did not outwardly acknowledge the role of monetary resources and class as critical factors in propelling immigrants forward (p. 83). A gap in their argument about first

and second generation assimilation is their neglect of the role played by class distinctions between different immigrant groups and the opportunities that this affords them in the community.

With respect to the Cuban community, the authors mentioned that the Cuban upper middle class emigrated to the U.S. as a result of the Cuban Revolution; however, they did not highlight the fact that they were from the upper class, which was a pertinent factor in their ability to move up the economic and social ladder so quickly, in the process becoming business owners and opening their own private schools for their children. Given Cubans' economic resources, they had the ability to maintain their cultural traditions while at the same time achieving further economic and educational mobility. As Portes and Zhou (1993) argued, it was not their "development of an enclave that created economic opportunities" (p. 19). Instead, it was their economic head start that afforded them the ability to maintain their traditions and strengthen their presence in Miami, and ultimately allowed them to create their own enclave in the Miami area.

Similarly, the Nicaraguan ability to excel in the Miami area is discussed by the authors as being interlinked with the Cuban community, as Cubans acted as a model group for Nicaraguan assimilation, when they offered a helping hand to the recently escaped individuals from the Sandinista government during the 1980s (Portes & Zhou, 1993). However, rather than focusing on the modelling of the Nicaraguan community on the Cuban, what should be examined is the Cubans' role in offering monetary resources to the Nicaraguans upon their arrival, which ultimately spearheaded their economic and social advancement in the host country. Without these monetary resources, even with the Cubans as an example, the Nicaraguans would not have been able to succeed in the host country to the extent that they did.

Portes and Zhou (1993) discussed expectations within the Cuban community as being an intrinsic characteristic to the group, without delving deeper into the origins of these expectations and aspirations. It is insinuated that the aspirations of the second generation come from within the group as cultural traits inherent to the Cuban community. However, when interpretations of Cuban success are analyzed more closely, it becomes apparent that the second generation were free to form aspirations of educational and economic success given their social class status in Miami. They had seen others in their community move up the socio-economic ladder with successful results, which made their goals tangible and accessible. Aspirations cannot be interpreted without acknowledging the Cuban community's prior economic stability which gave them a head start in the race to success. Understandings of ethnic variations need to acknowledge and examine prior socio-economic status.

Segmented assimilation can also be applied to discussions of Canadian patterns of immigration, given the similarities of immigrant groups to the United States and Canada. Canadian researchers argued that Canada lacks the urban ghettos, concentrated visible minority populations, and an identifiable underclass evident in the U.S. (Boyd, 2002; Boyd & Grieco, 1998; Reitz, 1998), emphasizing that most Canadian immigrant parents expect their children to attain education beyond high school (Glick & White, 2004; Taylor & Krahn, 2005). However, given recent immigrant cohorts' lower at-entry earnings, higher rates of unemployment, and higher low-income rates compared to the Canadian-born population, it is likely that some immigrant groups in Canada may be experiencing some segmented assimilation and a lack of upward mobility.

Evidence of segmented assimilation in the Canadian context has been documented by Boyd and Grieco (1998) who investigated how the magnitudes of achievement differ depending on the ethnic immigrant group. Two models addressed how immigrant offspring remain embedded in ethnic communities. The first "ethnic segmentation" discussed how "socioeconomic improvements take place across generations" (Boyd, 2009, p. 343). The "reactive segmentation" model "depicts youth as rejecting mainstream mechanism of mobility, including education, which results in no mobility or downward mobility into the underclass" (Boyd, p. 343).

### *Blocked Mobility*

According to Kao and Tienda (1998), minority youth experiencing blocked mobility either take on one of two responses—overachievement (Sue & Okazaki, 1990), or underperformance (Ogbu, 1991). Status attainment models are useful in understanding how blocked mobility develops (Wilson & Portes, 1975). According to Wilson and Portes, the status attainment model falls into two camps—it is either seen as a function of or causally related to structural or individual factors. During the 1970s, the literature was most reflective of the latter. Within this

perspective, individual agency or rational action (see Chiswick & DebBurman, 2003) was emphasized with respect to a relatively passive structural environment (Wilson & Portes, 1975). As such, individuals born into distinct class groupings would experience important consequences for life chances, making upward social mobility very difficult in this respect.

Social origin factors are emphasized in this model of social mobility. The natal family of orientation carries important predictors of educational success for the second generation; particularly, the natal family is “the primary source of emotional, social, and economic resources” (Boyd, 2009, p. 344). The source of these factors are a combination of “parental education and occupations (SES), level of investments and expenditures of parents into children’s human capital skills, and how parents socialize their children through aspirations and expectations of higher educational achievement” (Boyd, p. 344).

As a result, even if everyone enjoyed the same access to education and began with the same economic resources, differences would still exist as a result of parents’ differential values, which are passed on to their children (Bowles & Gintis, 2002; Haverman & Wolfe, 1995). Social reproduction emphasizes socially advantageous individuals’ ability to reproduce these features in the lives of their offspring, while also highlighting that educational stratification among racial and ethnic groups and different socio-economic groups at the post-secondary level is extreme (Grodsky & Jackson, 2009). In the United States, college attendance after high school has become the most common pathway; however, attendance rates differ along racial and ethnic lines, generational status, and with respect to socioeconomic background (Adelman, 2004).

Wiley (1967) discussed how, in the late 1960s, assimilation into mainstream Anglo-society was very much intertwined with notions of an ethnic mobility trap. In other words, with assimilation comes an inevitable release from the ‘trap’ and resulting upward mobility, with little attention paid to structural barriers. The literature on mobility has come a long way, with the introduction of segmented assimilation, which validates the medley of assimilation patterns available to ethnic groups. More importantly, it frees ethnic group theory from an all or nothing agenda, where without proper assimilation, there is no upward mobility. This thinking about mobility with respect to social origins and reproduction extends to a broader issue: how to theorize about the methods that generate and reproduce minority inequality, variation, and lack of inclusivity in higher education.

#### Hypothesizing Processes: Mechanisms of Minority Inequality, Variation, and Lack of Inclusivity in Higher Education

Understanding the educational trajectories of ethnic minority immigrant families and their children requires investigating the structures that lead some individuals to excel in the educational system, while others fail to succeed. Part of this process also involves considering the factors that explain why the higher educational system is exclusive to a select few. This next section will explore the various hypotheses surrounding the system of higher educational inequality. Understanding educational inequality involves addressing the processes of cultural capital accumulation within varying socioeconomic realities, and addressing the consequences of these social class predictors for educational outcomes. Social capital networks are useful for gaining information about higher education, thus mitigating low aspirations. Also, understanding why some students form oppositional cultures may help to explain patterns of school disengagement.

#### *Socio-Economic Status Origins*

Cultural capital has been used in different ways in different contexts according to different authors. For Bourdieu and Passeron (1990), culture is stratified wherein some forms are recognized to be more legitimate and elite, particularly the culture that is reinforced in schools. According to this interpretation, the cultural repertoire that parents invest in, such as exposing their children to museums, pays off in school.

In Bourdieu and Passeron’s (1990) terms, middle class parents are successful in providing their children with the linguistic and cultural advantages that will eventually give them a head-start in the pathway to higher educational attainment. Armed with cultural capital, middle class children fare better in school because they already have the advantages of having been exposed to the type of cultural cues at home that are rewarded in school. It can be argued

that social reproduction of upper middle class culture is not as easily facilitated in the Bourdieu sense of the term; the cultural mobility model is better suited to a changing social sphere, where class is not the site of difference as it used to be. Rather, it is more as Kingston (2001) argued that “cultural capital facilitates the academic success of anyone who has it and is not the resource of a particular class” (p. 92); therefore, anyone (no matter their background or class) can provide their children with the tools for advantageous educational outcomes.

The use of high status in schools is considered to be arbitrary (Kingston, 2001), but not at the sole disposal of the dominant classes. Kingston tackled deeper theoretical controversies with respect to how cultural capital is interpreted in different settings and whether the concept, in Bourdieu and Passeron’s (1990) sense of the term, actually pans out. According to Kingston, the term “cultural capital” has been extended so much that its definition has now come to address features such as good work habits, rather than the initial high status cultural features of Bourdieu and Passeron’s logic. Particularly, cultural capital does not get displayed in North America to the extent that it does in France, simply because North American culture does not place value on such high status activities such as going to the opera. Consequently, cultural capital theory has not lived up to its expectations in terms of its exclusionary “class-related practices and dispositions” (Kingston, p. 91), since it does not substantially account for the relationship between social privilege and educational success.

What is important to take away from Kingston’s (2001) theoretical distinction between the expression of cultural capital is that cultural practices such as reading to one’s children is not an exclusionary practice, but one that promotes academic excellence because it “directly stimulates intellectual development and engagement” in all children (p. 97). Therefore, elite cultural capital, reminiscent of Bourdieu and Passeron (1990) does not get rewarded in everyday school life, but the more basic “home practices, such as verbally stimulating conversations, reading sessions, and educationally related resources are substantial” (Kingston, p. 96). Consequently, the link between social privilege and academic success can be navigated and accessed by the disadvantaged; it is not inaccessible, as elite cultural capital would suppose.

Lareau and Weininger (2003) also acknowledged that cultural capital is not exclusively related to “highbrow” cultural activities; rather, it is intertwined with technical and social skills, and human capital used by parents and students. The more informed middle class parents regularly advocate for the individualized needs of their children, and transmit these skills about how to interact with authority figures to their offspring. However, a key feature in Lareau and Weininger’s findings is that social class is no longer the site of cultural capital transmissions, given that this perspective promotes the reproduction of “elite status cultures” (p. 597). Their approach acknowledged that cultural capital transmission may occur in less elite status cultures. Therefore, parents from all backgrounds and classes may use these skills and techniques to advocate on behalf of their children in educational institutions.

This focus of cultural capital leads to the issue of inequality of access to educational rewards and occupational goals via the family. Social reproduction emphasizes the ability for socially advantageous individuals to reproduce their privilege in the lives of their offspring. This line of reasoning only works if “social privilege is strongly related to cultural capital and cultural capital is strongly related to school achievement” (Kingston, 2001, p. 91). In terms of interpreting the relationship between social privilege and academic success, cultural capital plays a key role in social reproduction models.

Lareau and Weininger’s (2003) concept of capital has made it possible to view culture as a resource that provides access to scarce rewards. Lareau’s (2002) work offers an analysis of the informal social processes discussed by Kerchoff (2001), specifically, the parent-child dynamic. Lareau is concerned with whether family life and social class background are strong determinants of children’s life chances. The findings revealed that middle class parents participate in ‘concerted cultivation’ where they engage their children in intensive and organized leisure activities, and undertake a ‘reasoning’ parenting style where children are encouraged to provide their feedback. Working class and poor parents participate in a ‘natural growth’ parenting style, which emphasizes a directives oriented disciplining style, and children are given much more free reign over their choice of leisure activities.

Invisible forms of inequality are recreated through the differing forms of parenting styles among middle class and working class/poor parents. Specifically, the ‘reasoning’ approach taken by middle class parents fosters a more individualistic and entitled sense of self for children. According to Lareau (2002), this is then transmitted into long term lessons about challenging authority, and how to make bureaucratic entities work to one’s individual advantage. Through the natural growth parenting style, working class and poor parents pass along their feelings of frustration

and powerlessness to their children. In the long run, these perceptions impede children from acquiring the skills needed to compete in a highly competitive world, where individualism and negotiation skills are advantageous for academic and economic success.

Kalmijn and Kraaykamp (1996) examined cultural capital and how it is used by different ethnic groups—particularly how “the integration of Blacks in traditionally Euro-American culture has made a positive though modest contribution to the Black-White convergence in schooling” (p. 32). Similarly, Lareau (2002) found that the key trend of “concerted cultivation” (p. 748) as a modern parenting trend is participated in by Black and White families alike. Therefore, differences in parenting styles were not based around race lines, but were class based. Inequality was then a function of how much parents invested in their child’s cognitive development, which in turn was shown to promote a sense of entitlement in children later in life.

Inequality may also be transmitted through the types of social resources available to families, leading to consequences throughout the life course (Lareau, 2000, 2002). The home-school road to educational attainment, particularly, resources, such as tutoring and extra-curricular activities parents invest in their children yield social profits for their children later in life (Lareau, 2000). Parents consciously invest in their children’s human capital via the cultural channels they possess and the social networks they are able to navigate because of this. For example, as Lareau (2002) described, when children belong to after-school sport programs, they are building up social capital, which they may be able to draw upon later in life. In addition to the direct educational benefits children gain from extra-curricular activities, they are also exposed to interaction with adults, during which they develop a keen sense of entitlement and learn how to navigate social networks to their advantage.

While parents of all economic backgrounds may have the desire or intention of providing their children with educational resources, these activities become sites of inequality. Families that engage most frequently in these behaviours are those that have the financial resources to do so. The resulting link to broader notions of inequality is evident in that the middle class in the U.S. is increasingly able to access prep courses for their children. Since competition is strong, those with the most resources and knowledge about the system will likely have a competitive edge when trying to gain entry into top tier educational institutions (Lareau & Weininger, 2003).

### *Social Capital Resources*

Not only are monetary resources needed in order to escape a low socioeconomic background, but social capital resources are required as well. Whether families have social capital resources to tap into and if so, how they navigate these social networks is essential to understanding how some students are able to access the higher ranks of the educational strata and some do not. Social capital is understood as the sociological version of human capital, particularly how social conditions lay the foundation for individuals to build and invest in human capital skills (Coleman, 1988). These “resourceful social connections” are seen by many researchers as critical to “various forms of social attainment”, through “inclusion in a collectivity, a family, a peer group, a church, or social organization” (Carter, 2005, p. 137).

The accumulation of social capital is a crucial form of currency for immigrants as it opens doors to job contacts and networks which act as a cushion when new immigrants navigate new home and employment territory. However, recent immigrants tend to lack the social capital to turn human capital skills into valuable connections, which are valuable in promoting success in the labour market (Kunz, 2003). “Bonding and bridging” are essential strategies that immigrants use to connect themselves to their community through “common interests, religion and languages” (Cooper, 2006, p. 39). Bridging with mainstream society, outside immigrant groups’ own neighbourhoods is also necessary in order to facilitate better employment prospects and for building relationships with members of the White mainstream (Cooper).

Examining the experiences of a particular immigrant group highlights some key social capital processes. Zhou and Bankston III’s (1994) study on the adaptation of second generation Vietnamese youth in New Orleans framed social capital as a positive attribute rather than a hindrance. They argued that immigrant’s cultural orientations can indeed have a positive or negative impact on how well their offspring achieve in the host country. In order for the second and plus generations to excel, when families are located in adverse neighbourhoods, parents may form ethnic solidarity among other community members in essence to shield their children from integration into the underclass

(Zhou & Bankston III). This scenario is most likely to take place when families lack the necessary financial capital or human capital to move their families into more desirable neighbourhoods where the networks would exist to connect their children with better jobs and better educational opportunities. Instead, when poorer families have no choice but to live in lower income neighbourhoods, they encourage close knit family orientations and enforce positive cultural norms such as respect for elders and honour. These parenting strategies serve to buffer violence and negative influences present in the neighbourhood. Therefore, while the offspring of immigrant parents may have access to less social capital overall compared to the native-born, they may benefit from “unique rewards of their own” (Kao, 2004, p. 174). For example, Kao (1995) pointed to the level of guilt and obligation many immigrant youth feel with respect to their parents, as a result of the sacrifices their parents have made to emigrate to the United States. This increased level of honour that many Asian youth experience may serve to make them more highly aspiring than their native-born counterparts.

Similarly, according to Coleman (1988), it is not the level of education or income parents possess, but rather, their involvement in the child’s educational career that makes a difference. For example, when Asian immigrant parents in a public school district in the United States were found to purchase two textbooks (one for their children and one for themselves), they were making up for their lack of human capital by using social capital skills to their child’s advantage (Coleman). Brint (1998) also recognized that parent motivation and ability to pass on knowledge is important, such as through the purchasing of learning material. However, Brint (p. 208) also made clear that the daily interactions between parents and children, such as through the use of “good grammar, advanced vocabulary, and computational skills” (p. 208) are invaluable in the long run. Therefore, families can overcome their cultural capital deficiencies by drawing on their social capital and making rational choices about how to help their children academically (Breen & Goldthorpe, 1997), making a case against the “habitus” proposition of cultural capital in the Bourdieu and Passeron (1990) sense. Families can escape their cultural and class backgrounds, given they have social capital resources and connections.

The practical side of educational attainment involves having the correct information about post-secondary programs and educational institutions. Gaining access to details about how to apply and succeed in gaining entry to higher educational institutions opens up channels of previously un-navigated educational terrain and thus may enhance the educational ambitions of parents and their children. Families that do not have these informational connections may consequently minimize their educational expectations.

#### *Skill Deficits/ Lack of Aspirations*

As key socializers, parents are vital links for offspring in forming and maintaining specific aspirations (Kao & Tienda, 1998). Parents’ aspirations for their children’s post-secondary education has also been shown to play an influential role in post-secondary educational participation (Goyette & Xie, 1999). Parents either view higher education as a necessity or as an expensive financial burden (Winn, 2005). Parents who focus on the necessity of education for success are more apt to say that their children will pursue post-secondary education (Winn). On the other hand, parents who are preoccupied with the contingent value of education tend to come from lower income levels and education themselves. In the same token, higher income parents tend to be less concerned with the expensive nature of post-secondary education, which translates into perceiving post-secondary education as a practical next step after high school. For these parents, higher education is not intrinsically linked to money-making strategies, or seen as a direct route to the work force (Winn).

Race based explanations of aspirations and goal formation for post-secondary educational attainment can be traced back to pre-high school knowledge of college and university (Kao & Tienda, 1998). In Canada, ethnic oriented explanations of aspirations are often discussed with respect to the “visible-minority immigrant effect” (Krahn & Taylor, 2005, p. 405), which points to the higher post-secondary educational aspirations of visible minority youth when compared to Canadian-born youth. However, Kao (2004) pointed out that immigrant parents may not have the crucial information about how to apply to post-secondary education that native-born families have. Nevertheless, some low income families manage to pool their social resources from a variety of avenues, such as employers, neighbours, or church (Carter, 2005). It is these extra-group ties that enable parents to reach out into the community through “resource-bridging actions” in order to accumulate the social capital resources they lack (Kim & Schneider, 2005, p. 1182).

### *Oppositional Culture*

George Dei's (1993, 1995) studies of Black students' disengagement from school in Canada highlighted factors such as the lack of Black role models in schools, how students are labelled and receive lack of encouragement from teachers, the negative impacts of streaming and standardized testing, little parent involvement in offspring's education, and the lack of inclusive environment and curriculum in Canadian schools as key issues that affect Black students' achievement levels. Harper (1997) also recognized that how difference and diversity are treated in Canadian schools impacts students' school identity. The current Canadian focus on valuing difference has opened the channels to increased positive relations among groups (Harper). However, the problem with simple discrimination arguments is that they cannot account for segmented assimilation patterns.

Ogbu's (1978) oppositional culture theory discussed how minority youth may have different orientations toward schooling that lead them to be less attached to education as a means of upward mobility. The main example Ogbu provided is that of Black students who do not adhere to the North American White conformities of schooling, and instead form oppositional groups that inherently reject "symbols and behaviours that are viewed as White" (p. 268), in the process confining themselves to lower levels of educational achievement (Downey & Pribesh, 2004). Oppositional culture theory has been discredited by survey evidence arguing that oppositional culture is not the salient feature of Black/ White educational inequalities, but rather that it should be understood as an issue that has compounded the problem and played a role in preventing minority students from catching up to White students (see Ainsworth-Darnell & Downey, 1998; Cook & Ludwig, 1998; Ferguson, 1998; Gamoran, 2001).

By distinguishing between voluntary and involuntary or non-immigrant minority groups Ogbu (1991) more fully accounted for the different adaptation patterns of minority groups and addressed the possibility of segmentation. Involuntary minority groups are those individuals who have been conquered or enslaved and did not emigrate to North America by choice. For this reason, involuntary immigrants may experience detachment to schooling given their historical connections with colonialization and enslavement. Voluntary minorities arrive in North America by choice and represent more recent immigrants; as a result of their voluntary status, they are apt to experience increased educational success in the North American school system due to their ability to "maintain a positive attitude towards North American society" (Samuel, Krugly-Smolska, & Warren, 2001, p. 63). Ogbu's "cultural-ecological theory of voluntary minority groups" (Samuel, et al., 2001, p. 69) was tested in the Canadian context with a sample of Caribbean, Chinese, East European, South Asian, and Latin American adolescents, finding that these voluntary minority students excelled academically "despite language barriers and the prevalence of racial discrimination" (p. 69).

These findings about oppositional culture demonstrate how minority and immigrant youth may experience high levels of cultural dissonance; yet despite this fact, some youth are able to close the chasm of difference and excel academically. Understanding youths' different reactions to this cultural discord is key to making sense of their different educational pathways; specifically, how youth "straddle both cultures at home and at school" (Reyes, Gillock, Kobus, & Sanchez, 2000, p. 539). Attempting to navigate being from two cultures is closely connected to the family environment – how parents are involved in their children's acculturation process, but also how parents plot their own course through the host country (Carranza, 2008).

This research on oppositional culture theories and acculturation processes of the children of immigrants leads to a set of responses put forth by Carter (2005) that helps to explain why some African American and Latino students thrive academically, and others do not. Carter noted that the most "successful [educational] negotiators" are those students she coins as "multicultural navigators" (p. 149). These students "know how to possess *both* dominant and nondominant cultural capital and how to be adept at movement through various sociocultural settings, where cultural codes and rules differ" (Carter, p. 150). In other words, these successful students "possess several cultural repertoires" (Carter, p. 150). In order for these students to succeed in their attempts to straddle both cultures they require successful adult role models with whom they can build meaningful and lasting relationships. Role models must enable the upward mobility of their group by "working to narrow the social divide between the privileged and the disadvantaged by acknowledging and communicating the values of both dominant and nondominant cultural capital" (Carter, p. 151-152).

## Conclusion

As evidenced by the previous analysis, understandings of educational stratification among ethnic groups must take into account numerous and often competing factors, including but not limited to resources, context, and expectations. However, documenting trends of how higher educational attainment is often only within the reach of an exclusive few is easier than forming grounded explanations for these disparities. The process of exploring how various background factors affect educational pathways becomes even more difficult in an era of higher levels of educational attainment.

In this literature review, I explored the outcomes of higher educational inequality as well as the possible explanations for the lack of inclusivity in educational access and participation for some youth and their families. For many visible minority youth, post-secondary education represents a daunting goal. Factors that enhance unequal footing when plotting an educational course involve school and neighbourhood features, monetary resources, and frames of reference (for example having role models who have attained post-secondary success).

Family finances may indeed emerge as a prime factor in reinforcing already pronounced exclusionary processes in education. The past decade has seen a marked presence of finances in the inclusivity landscape, in the form of deregulated tuition fees in some professional programs and a steady rise in undergraduate tuition fees in many provinces. There is increasing evidence that this deregulation is in fact discouraging lower socioeconomic groups from entering post-secondary education (Dooley, Payne, & Robb, 2009). Further, immigrant parents' intentions for their children to continue on to post-secondary education may be hindered by more pronounced features of poverty and financial burden than their native-born counterparts, given that recent studies have shown that immigrant groups are experiencing a decline in incomes over the last 20 years (Sweet, Anisef, & Walters, 2008).

Often educational realities are discussed with respect to the extent of assimilation immigrant families have attained. Inconsistencies with assimilationist explanations are balanced by invoking segmented assimilation outcomes, which recognize the role of socioeconomic status and social networks. Understandings of intergenerational mobility can be explained by the process of parent-child value transmission, social reproduction and recognizing the variety of assimilation pathways that are available to families.

Hypotheses about the system of inequality and exclusivity in education include cultural capital use among families and particularly the idea that academic success can indeed be navigated by the economically disadvantaged. Further, cultural capital can be viewed as a resource to be tapped into and made use of in the educational landscape. Social capital can be understood as currency in the search for educational connections and careers after graduation, especially when parents overcome their human capital shortcomings by participating in social capital activities to benefit their child's education. While maintaining closed cultural networks may help to insulate immigrant youth from the negative effects of street crime and deviance in their lower income neighbourhoods, these networks may also prevent them from accessing other educational information outside their cultural frames of reference. This lack of information about post-secondary options may lead to lower educational aspirations. Visible minority immigrant youth may also struggle to straddle cultures at home and at school, leading to oppositional culture formation in the school environment, disengagement from school, or the internalization of negative labels.

The theoretical difficulties that arise in this new era of educational growth are how to continue to make meaningful conclusions about how individuals make decisions about higher educational participation. In order to compete in the new job market, individuals understand the need to pursue and succeed in post-secondary education. However, marked disparities in inclusivity persist among the middle and working classes, which are even more pronounced along ethnic lines. Therefore, the theoretical challenge is how to combine rational choice, structural limitations and cultural understandings of educational decision making in an era of continuous change.

Future research will have to balance these issues with respect to inclusivity and ethnic disparities. Particularly, key similarities and differences must be acknowledged between American and Canadian research, given the heterogeneous nature of the immigrant population in Canada. An important contribution to these theoretical debates is to unravel the segmented assimilation experience in the Canadian context. Understanding ethnic groups' underachievement involves investigating the extent to which SES can explain educational disparities and how much of the remaining effects can be explained by cultural factors. While issues related to inclusivity in higher education will

likely continue, new research must keep up in order to make sense of the changing patterns of inequality in education.

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