

## **Socioeconomic Status, Bourdieu's Capitals, and Higher Education Attainment**

Summer Juliet Cowley

University of Toronto

*Attaining a degree from a higher education institution has the potential to positively affect students' career outcomes and to enable their social mobility through the acquisition of powerful social and cultural capitals in the form of social relationships and credentials. However, the path to acquisition of these capitals varies between individuals from different demographic backgrounds. Through unequal access to and participation in various K-12 schooling and extracurricular activities, students gain powerful social and cultural capital at unequal rates leading up to the transition from secondary to post-secondary schooling. Through gaining different capitals via early schooling experiences, students engage with higher education in ways that are stratified by socioeconomic status.*

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A country's rate of post-secondary educational attainment by its citizens can be interpreted as an indicator of its prosperity and standard of living (Bauer, Schweitzer, & Shane, 2006; Eurostat, 2018). Canada currently enjoys one of the world's higher participation rates in post-secondary education; with 54% of Canadians aged 25-64 holding some form of higher education qualifications. Canada lies well above the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) countries' average of 36.7% (Statistics Canada, 2017). The variety of higher education options available to students in Canada ranges from short-term continuing education or certificate programs, through to baccalaureate and advanced university degrees (Statistics Canada, 2017). With a vast array of available post-secondary programs (Universities Canada, 2019) and with available government funding and student loans (Government of Canada, 2019), it may seem as though all Canadians have the opportunity to enjoy improved personal success through working diligently to graduate from higher education institutions. In such a scenario, the image of higher education as a social and economic equalizer drives students and families to prioritize post-secondary schooling (Marginson, 2016) in pursuit of higher salaries, higher social status, and improved long-term outcomes over the span of an individual's life (Elder, Johnson, & Crosnoe, 2003; Marginson, 2016). With seemingly widely accessible higher education opportunities, talented and capable students from all socioeconomic

backgrounds may consider themselves poised to leverage their abilities in the pursuit of economic and social gains.

However, higher education attainment is not a wholly meritocratic process but instead is strongly linked to the socioeconomic status, demographic characteristics, and economic, social, cultural, and symbolic capitals of students (e.g. Davies & Aurini, 2011; Parekh & Gaztambide-Fernández, 2017). In the context of readily available higher education, individuals lacking the inherited and economic capital common to the privileged children of advantaged families are able to strive for increased social and material advantage through successful completion of post-secondary programs. However, the route to and through higher education is neither as simple nor as equitable as many individuals and families might hope. Individuals from historically disadvantaged groups remain disadvantaged in their pathways leading up to and moving through post-secondary schooling (Davies & Aurini, 2011; Frempong, Ma, & Mensah, 2012; Perry & McConney, 2010). Rather than empowering students through engagement with new intellectual challenges and broader social environments, it has been argued that current higher education systems result in the strengthening of existing social stratification and the replication of pre-existing patterns of inequity in incomes (Corak, 2013) and in broader society (Marginson, 2016). In order to effectively address the inequities that individuals hope to remedy through higher education, researchers should consider systemic inequities that exist at earlier points in the schooling process.

### **Higher Education Attainment: Unequal Beginnings, Unequal Paths, Unequal Results**

In Canada in particular and North America in general, children born to wealthier families from dominant linguistic, ethnic, and religious groups, and who live in affluent neighbourhoods tend to find greater success in the school system than their peers of ethnic, linguistic, and religious minorities and of lower socioeconomic classes, who live in poorer neighbourhoods (Kohen, Oliver, & Fritz, 2009). The compounding effects of socioeconomic disadvantages on schooling success begin to accumulate in early childhood and grow through primary and secondary schooling, continuing into and through higher education (Hannon, 2003; Kao & Thompson, 2003; Maaz, Trautwein, Ludtke, & Baumert, 2008). These effects have been seen across broad categories, with voices in the literature pointing to early childhood as a crucial moment for education in order for students to have an equitable playing field in university and college (Heckman, 2011; Reynolds, Temple, Robertson, & Mann, 2001; Reynolds, Temple, Ou, Arteaga, & White, 2011). Since inequities affecting early childhood are tightly bound to inequities affecting families and parents, the entirety of the systemic inequities of a society play into any student's schooling experiences and educational success and attainment, whether positively or negatively.

Looking forward through students' educational pathways, this article argues that inequities within society are not reduced by individuals' formal schooling. Rather, according to the literature cited throughout this article, the schooling process serves to reproduce and maintain the inequities of the surrounding social context through the stratified nature of K-12 schooling systems. Schools in neighbourhoods of lower socioeconomic status often have fewer resources and amenities than schools in neighbourhoods of higher socioeconomic status and, perhaps more

pertinently, children living in neighbourhoods of lower socioeconomic status have lower academic achievement than those living in higher socioeconomic status ones, regardless of the presence or absence of school poverty (Wodtke & Parbst, 2017). From unequal beginnings, individuals experience inequities in their schooling experiences that compound over time. These inequities may be maintained due to unequal accumulations of markers denoting economic, social, cultural, and symbolic status, which are referred to as *capitals* (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990; Bourdieu, 1986). That is, the capitals that an individual bears and acquires through their life act as both markers of success and prerequisites to success, creating a causality paradox (where capitals are needed to gain capitals) that bars true social mobility (Marginson, 2016).

### **Capitals and Schooling**

Consider the distribution of capitals at the moment of a person's birth. When an individual is born, they are born into a particular country, region, city/town, and neighbourhood, to a particular family unit within a larger social milieu, within a particular culture with its various religious and cultural practices, and within an environment in which particular languages are spoken, particular jobs are worked in the local area, and older individuals serve as various positive or negative exemplars. Through the lottery of birth, any individual's positioning within society can be highly advantageous, disadvantageous, or mixed, and each individual has the duration of their life to try to position themselves as best they can into their surrounding physical, social, and mental environment in a way that they can enjoy or at least that they can bear. For individuals born into positions of economic, social, or cultural privilege, attaining a satisfying position in life is aided by the wealth of opportunity afforded to them at birth. For those born into disadvantageous positions, additional effort must be put into attaining the objective manifestations and symbolic markers of status that help their more advantaged peers to succeed. These markers of status have been described by Bourdieu as capitals (Bourdieu, 1986; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990) and go beyond the financial definition of capital as the accumulation and measurement of monetary wealth. Similar to economic capital, the other capitals are theorized to bestow advantage upon their bearers in the contexts which define them.

The capitals, as outlined by Bourdieu (1986; 1988) and Bourdieu and Passeron (1990), include economic, cultural, social, and symbolic capital. In brief, economic capital refers to money and wealth; cultural capital refers to markers of possession of rare and valued traits within a society, such as a particular rank or a particular certification; social capital refers to relationships and connections between people; and symbolic capital refers to the perceived value or power of a person through the eyes of others (Bourdieu, 1986; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990). The markers of status—capitals—within economic, cultural, social, and symbolic contexts, relate to the position that an individual holds within their society (Bourdieu, 1986). So, social mobility appears as though it should be possible through the acquisition of diverse forms of capital. Consider formal schooling: through education, individuals have the opportunity to strengthen existing skills, acquire new ones, make social connections with other individuals and groups, and eventually gain certifications and credentials that mark the successful completion of their educational program. However, individuals' engagement with formal schooling systems and acquisition of various forms of capital may depend too heavily on the socioeconomic status and social connectedness of their families to provide equitable access to the capital-building benefits

that schooling can offer. Through implicit or incidental filtering processes, students may be divided into groups based on socioeconomic status and demographic characteristics. For example, consider situations in which students can only participate in certain school and extracurricular programs if they are able to pay program fees or be available outside of the regular school-schedule. In these scenarios, school populations can become divided by possession of economic, cultural, social, and symbolic capitals. These divisions in access can result in an environment in which opportunity to acquire capitals is largely available only to those who already possess them in large amounts. Now, let us consider literature that describes in greater depth the ways in which achievement-boosting capitals accrue at variable rates over time.

Literature pertinent to the arguments of this paper covers three major domains: K-12 schooling registration, explicit and implicit within- and between-school streaming practices, and higher education achievement and attainment. The theoretical frameworks used to analyze these phenomena include Bourdieu and Passeron's (1990) framework of social reproduction and economic, social, cultural, and symbolic capitals and Marginson's (2016) framing of "The universal family desire for betterment" (p. 414) through education as driving global growth in high participation higher education systems. Below, I discuss the ways in which the presence or accumulation of various forms of capital affects students' schooling trajectories. Combined, findings from these three bodies of related literature indicate that the inequalities that are present at an individual's birth persist over time and that the achievement gaps between advantaged and disadvantaged students early in formal schooling widen as students advance through K-12 schooling and into higher education. One such process of socioeconomic stratification occurs even before children are exposed to inequitable school activities: parental choice of school for their children.

### **Unequal Beginnings: Families, Neighbourhoods, and K-12 School Choice**

An examination of K-12 education in Canada reminds us that although education systems in Canada are governed by separate provincial and territorial governments and can differ broadly between jurisdictions as a result, some general statements apply to Canada's K-12 schooling as a whole. First, elementary student school choice is often bounded by location within the province, town, or city (e.g. Government of Ontario, 2013) and although families may request to enroll their children into schools outside of their home neighbourhood, their acceptance into the schools may be determined via lottery, interview by school administrators, or on a first-come-first-served basis (e.g. Edmonton Public Schools, 2013a, Saskatoon Public Schools, 2005; Vancouver School Board, 2018). The matter of parental choice in school registration creates opportunities for inequitable registration patterns. When school enrollment is bound solely by location and there is no opportunity to choose a school other than the one designated by the school district, then student enrollment is dependent upon the neighbourhood in which they live. These scenarios can create a system of filtration or segregation in schools by wealth, as families' abilities to enroll their students into particular schools is determined by their ability to afford to live in particular neighbourhoods. Although scholars have noted neighbourhood effects on academic achievement (Chetty, Hendren, & Katz, 2016; Kohen, Leventhal, Dahinten, & McIntosh, 2008; Kohen,

Oliver, & Pierre, 2008; Wodtke, Harding, & Elwert, 2011), the accumulation of social capital through in-school relationship-building creates an additional form of capital accumulation outside of purely academic bounds. That is, by living in a particular neighbourhood, students build social relationships with students from the same neighbourhood and accumulate social capital along lines divided by economic capital.

When families are able to choose the schools in which students are enrolled, then registration patterns may be affected by families' differing transportation patterns for getting their children to the school (Larsen et al., 2009); importance placed by the family upon specific school types (Davies & Aurini, 2008); and overall family beliefs about the importance of schooling and the ways in which it should take place (Davies & Aurini, 2011). In these scenarios, families' hopes of improving their children's future careers and social status through education (Marginson, 2016) are, unbeknownst to the families, supported to varying degrees depending on the ways that the families interpret and address the matter of engagement with their children's formal schooling. For families who are aware of the significance placed by others on particular types of schools and school programs, it may be more obvious which types of schools and which types of school programs would best help them to achieve an advantageous position. For families who recognize the significance of education but are unaware of the nuances that others around them may see in school choice, the relative advantages of their children's school may be largely left to chance. Through lack of knowledge regarding the school environments and programs that may confer greater social, academic, cultural and symbolic capital advantages on their children, parents may miss opportunities for their children to build their stores of the various capitals and be perceived more favourably by others as they progress through formal schooling. After the issue of registration in a school is addressed, analysis of the unequal paths through K-12 schooling can begin with questions of how school administrators, teachers, and staff perceive students and interpret their interests, behaviours, and abilities, and how those perceptions can result in student streaming.

### **Unequal Pathways: Within- and Between-School Streaming**

*Streaming*, in the context of K-12 education, describes processes by which students are separated into groups based on school assessments of academic and social characteristics (Schroeter & James, 2015). Also known as *tracking*, streaming has been criticized as subjective and biased (Gaztambide-Fernández, Saifer, & Desai, 2013; Tsuchida, 2016). These streaming practices, which have led to different secondary schooling preparation for students from different socioeconomic classes, ethnicities, and genders (Chmielewski, 2015), may lead to different exposure to concepts, training, instructors, peer groups, and most damningly, different expectations of career and post-secondary futures (Gaztambide-Fernández et al, 2013; Schroeter & James, 2015). For example, when high-achieving students are streamed into classrooms with peers of similar ability levels, they tend to receive higher grades than before they were streamed while their peers streamed into a non-academic designation do not, resulting in an increase in the achievement gaps between students streamed into academic and non-academic streams (Johnston & Wildy, 2016). Similarly, students in the academic stream in Ontario in grades 9 and 10 take university-level courses in the last grades of high school, while their peers in the applied stream

enroll in college-level courses, setting students from each stream along different academic pathways (Brown, 2010; Parekh, 2013). Here, the issue of streaming broadens the discussion of the relationship of socioeconomic status to higher education attainment and adds the spectre of gender and race-based discrimination. The effects of streaming, however, are not agreed upon in education literature. Between-school streaming is described as subsidiary to neighbourhood effects on student achievement (Wodtke & Parbst, 2017) and, conversely, as perpetuating inequality (Betts, 2011). Similarly, Schroeter and James (2015) found that, regardless of school administrators' best intentions in streaming students to provide language-background-specific instruction, separating students into groups can have unwanted negative impacts on students' self-perception and on students' perceptions of the school. However, when comparing the effects of within- and between-school streaming and course-by-course tracking in 14 countries and regions across Europe and Asia, Chmielewski, Dumont, and Trautwein (2013) found that students' self-concept of academic ability varied depending on the type of streaming/tracking environment they were placed in. Within Canada specifically—and according to the scholars cited above—streaming is not currently well-received.

Within the Canadian context, the effects of streaming are described in bleak terms. In studies focused on First Nations students, racial bias was found to frequently result in inaccurate placement of First Nations students into non-academic or general streams (Galabuzi 2014; Riley & Ungerleider, 2011). In the Ontario public school system, teacher and family attitudes towards streaming have been recorded as largely negative, with participants displeased with their impressions that race, gender, and socioeconomic class are more predictive of where students are streamed than is academic ability (Kinon, 2016). In Toronto, where Fogliato (2017) and Tsuchida (2016) echoed arguments from broader contexts that streaming can negatively impact student self-perception (Riley & Ungerleider, 2011; Rubie-Davies et al., 2010; Schroeter & James, 2015), the Toronto District School Board (TDSB) has begun to enact de-streaming processes (Toronto District School Board, 2018). De-streaming processes described by the TDSB include a move away from separate classes for students “generally identified with the exceptionalities of Learning Disability, Autism, Language Impairment or Mild Intellectual Disability” (Toronto District School Board, 2009, p. 2) and the inclusion of those students into “the regular class at their neighbourhood school” (Toronto District School Board, 2013b, p. 12). Through de-streaming, it is hoped that social inequalities made worse by inequitable streaming processes might be remedied. However, with the continued existence of specialty programs across public schools in Canada, family and student self-selection into particular pathways through K-12 schooling goes on. Whether through student choice or parent advocacy, students continue to be divided through programming participation in which students of higher socioeconomic status and in the hegemonic majority are overrepresented in academic and “elite” programs (Parekh & Gaztambide- Fernández, 2016).

In a context of inequitable student streaming, the potential for loss and gain of various capitals is high. When streamed into a high-status group, a student may experience an increase in societally-valued academic and social capital, while another student streamed into a different, lower-status group may experience the opposite. Separate from the symbolic and social capital at stake when gaining membership into one or another group through streaming, individual students

will be exposed to different content, instructional styles, instructors, and peers (Kalogrides & Loeb, 2013). Through exposure to these differing phenomena students in different streams at school will find themselves acquiring different social, cultural, and symbolic capitals than their peers in different streams (Galabuzi, 2014).

To understand the ways in which the capitals held by students affect the outcome of streaming decisions, teachers' judgments of students' abilities must be considered. Although parental expectations of students (Rubie-Davies et al., 2010) and involvement in schools (Altschul, 2010) have been found to influence student outcomes and experiences at school, decisions to stream students are often catalysed by teacher judgments (Glock, Krolak-Schwerdt, Klapproth, & Böhmer, 2013; Kalogrides & Loeb, 2013). Studies of the relationships between the various capitals and teacher expectations of academic achievement have emphasized the need for acknowledgment of the impact on streaming decisions of teachers' implicit biases against students who are not members of the dominant ethnic, religious, or cultural groups (Riley & Ungerleider, 2012; Smaller, 2014; Van den Bergh, Denessen, Hornstra, Voeten, & Holland, 2010). When implicit biases are seen as related to perceptions of the economic, social, cultural, and symbolic capitals held by another, they can be interpreted as affecting the acquisition of capital and as powerful factors in students' eventual educational achievement and attainment.

### **Unequal Results: Higher Education Entry and Attainment**

Finally, by the time the application window for post-secondary institutions opens for students in their final year of high school, the window for effective intervention and practical assistance programs has already begun to close. For groups of students who have been historically disadvantaged or underrepresented in higher education attendance, support programs are most powerful when they take place well in advance of the application process itself, as in the College Horizons program for Native American students detailed in Keene (2018). In addition to practical aid, early support may help to combat self-stratification, a process whereby high achieving students from lower socioeconomic classes may choose not to apply to higher-ranked institutions, removing themselves from the competition before it begins (Kao & Thompson, 2003; Marginson, 2016). In fact, the choice to pursue higher education in Canada has been found to vary with ethnicity (Abada, Hou, & Ram, 2008; Abada & Tenkorang, 2009a; Gordon & White, 2014), socioeconomic status (Caro, 2009), urban versus rural residence (Newbold & Brown, 2015), gender (Abada & Tenkorang, 2009a), and language background (Grayson, 2009). Given the economic, social, cultural, and symbolic capitals apparent in the diverse characteristics associated with differences in Canadian higher education attainment, it would be prudent to reflect upon how capitals play into higher education attendance and attainment.

Higher education enrollment and attainment are related to the family and parental capitals of students, which are often comorbid with socioeconomic status and demographic characteristics. The importance placed upon higher education by families in Canada and the kinds of higher education that are accessed varies, often dependent upon students' own demographic characteristics and on those of parents. Abada and Tenkorang (2009a), for example, found that educational attainment of female children of immigrants into Canada is

more strongly tied to their mothers' education, whereas male children's attainment was tied to a self-identified sense of ethnic ancestry. These connections between higher education attainment and parent and family capitals suggest the significance of social and cultural forces similar to those noted by Grayson (2009), who found that ethnic and language background relate to students' university Grade Point Averages (GPAs), with Canadian-born anglophones achieving generally higher GPAs and Korean, Black, and South Asian students generally lower. The family capitals implicit in students' socioeconomic status, ethnicity, gender, immigration status, language background, and educational achievement highlight the importance of recognizing the ways in which formal schooling is not meritocratic. Although individual students and their families may desire social mobility through educational attainment (Marginson, 2016), their achievement, to a certain extent, may be hindered by the characteristics of their parents or families (Picot & Hou, 2012; Sen & Clemente, 2010)—factors entirely outside of students' control.

Higher education attainment levels and their connection to socioeconomic status and demographic characteristics are the final set of circumstances in this discussion of the inequitable pathways from birth through schooling. Although completing higher levels of university education may provide some economic status gains in Canada (Statistics Canada, 2013), this improvement of career outcomes through education is not equally accessible across socioeconomic status or ethnicity. In their analysis of data from 42,476 survey respondents from diverse backgrounds in Canada, Abada and Tenkorang (2009) found that race was related to enrollment in or completion of higher education, with South Asian and Chinese individuals the most likely to obtain a university degree, and with Black respondents "25% less likely than Whites to be in university rather than high school or community college" (p. 195). Writing on differences between people from different ethnic groups in education and career outcomes in Canada, Kunz, Schetagne, and Milan (2001) found that "regardless of education, non-racialized groups still fare the best in terms of employment. On a national as well as regional level, non-racialized groups had the lowest unemployment rate, especially if they had a university education" (p. 18). In a study of individuals who attended post-secondary schooling, Bastedo and Jacquette (2010) found that while the number of students from low socioeconomic status backgrounds to attend higher education increased significantly from 1972 to 2004, growth "is concentrated in community colleges and non-competitive 4-year institutions" (p. 326). Similarly, when looking at longitudinal survey data from 12,376 students in the United States, Walpole (2003) found that "low SES students have lower incomes, lower levels of educational attainment, and lower levels of educational aspirations than their peers from higher social strata nine years after college entry" (Walpole, 2003, p. 263). In such a situation, it may seem that little hope can be offered to families and individual students in Canada with an interest in upward social mobility. Individual mobility, as discussed above, is hampered by inequitable accumulations of various capitals through life; and intergenerational mobility, though present, is not agreed upon as a strong or weak force (Aydemir, Chen, & Corak, 2009; Pfeffer, 2008; Sen & Clemente, 2010). To address unequal educational attainment, one must consider the roots of the inequities faced by students and look beyond the short timeframe in which students apply to and register in higher education institutions.

## **Unequal Ranges of Opportunity: Possible Interventions**

Several large and small-scale early interventions might offer some aid. These interventions could include early childhood education and K-12 outreach; subsidized high-status extracurricular programs (e.g. hockey, gymnastics, dance); termination of streaming/tracking in K-12 education; and mandatory teacher training coursework addressing social stratification in society and in schooling. Let us consider the potential impact of each of these attempts to mediate the unequal distribution of the capitals throughout society and their corresponding shortcomings.

### **Outreach**

First, consider outreach programs in early childhood education and K-12 schooling. Programs focused on increasing academic achievement for students with lower socioeconomic statuses (e.g. ABC Headstart, 2018) may enable these individuals to develop academic capabilities (e.g. Phillips, Gormley, & Anderson, 2016) and to benefit from high-expectation schooling environments. However, given that parents must take action to seek out such programs and enrol their children in them, these programs may require connections to parental-education programs.

### **High-status Activities**

Certain extracurricular activities in Canadian schools, such as hockey, are expensive, creating a de facto filtration system by socioeconomic class. Participation in activities such as hockey and other organized sports may confer social, cultural, and symbolic capital. Subsidizing such programs has the opportunity to provide students with lower socioeconomic statuses or from groups outside of the hegemonic majority with capital-building experiences, expectations, and relationships (Holt, Kingsley, Tink, & Sherer, 2011). On the other hand, continued valorization of elite activities such as hockey perpetuates the value system of the hegemonic majority while doing nothing to raise the capital that can be accrued through participation in other cultural activities.

### **Terminating Streaming**

Putting an end to streaming/tracking practices in Canadian K-12 schools and to the corresponding separation of students by perceived ability provides the same classroom environments for all students and the same access to capital-building experiences (Parekh & Gaztambide-Fernández, 2017). Nonetheless, with family choice in specialty program registration still available, the possibility for student division into in-group and out-group will continue.

### **Teacher Training**

Since inequity for students begins in early childhood, with access to educational services and access to teachers with strong skills and high expectations, the field of education should turn to teacher and administrator training in the K-12 systems within Canada as sites for potential intervention. By providing teacher candidates instruction on the deleterious effects of social stratification and its reproduction in education systems, small steps might be taken towards

building more equitable school and higher education experiences for Canada's youth (Reifer & Davis, 2011). This suggests the significance of educational foundations aspects of teacher education, in which philosophical, historical, and potentially political content is made integral to teacher training.

### **Shortcomings of the Interventions**

Overall, these potential interventions have the possibility to improve educational experiences for students from underserved populations. However, various pitfalls in each intervention exist. Most notable in the current Ontario education context, the movement towards de-streaming is fundamentally flawed in that it removes some of the opportunity for individualized support for students who benefit greatly from advanced academic placement or targeted remedial skill building. Noting this flaw, the Toronto District School Board (2018), although it supports de-streaming processes in general, “[does] not recommend phasing out Gifted programs” (p. 11). Although speciality programs exist that focus on the delivery of specific programs—such as French immersion, advanced placement, fine arts (Toronto District School Board, 2014)—the onus to become aware of and enrol in these program is placed on parents and families (Toronto District School Board, 2018, p. 12). As de-streaming moves towards a general model of education, students who require either more challenging material or more structured support may be underserved by “one-size-fits-all” school programming. Another notable downside of interventions aimed at increasing access to high-status capital-building activities and organizations is that this method does not attempt to change the kinds of capitals that are valued in broader society. Teacher training as an intervention, for example, ignores the larger problem of systemic inequities in broader society and widespread discriminatory processes and practices faced by groups. Nonetheless, given that teacher assessment of student capabilities can affect student streaming decisions where streaming exists (Glock et al., 2013; Kalogrides & Loeb, 2013), and given the significance of implicit biases to children's academic achievement (Riley & Ungerleider, 2012; Smaller, 2014; Van den Bergh et al., 2010), interventions aimed at teachers' perceptions of students have the possibility of creating more equitable outcomes for the students in their care.

### **Conclusion**

There are vast numbers of students who participate in higher education in Canada (Skolnik, 2018) but the levels at which they participate are stratified by a variety of factors, including gender, race, and socioeconomic class (Krahn & Taylor, 2005). Before students begin to choose the schools to which they want to apply, their perceptions of where they best fit in the higher education system have already been shaped by the expectations of their family, K-12 teachers, and peers (Marginson, 2016). Despite variable success rates for individuals from minoritized (non-dominant) and hegemonic majority (dominant) groups, the range of opportunities for each group of students appears to be unevenly distributed.

With the possible interventions and their corresponding shortcomings that have been discussed above, the appropriate direction seems unclear. Given the “chicken-or-the-egg” problem of needing capitals to build capitals, it seems likely that a two-tiered (at minimum)

confrontation of inequity is required. Beginning with groups and individuals of lower socioeconomic status or outside of the hegemonic majority, greater higher education attainment and greater benefit from higher education attainment may be pursued through strategic participation in school and extracurricular programming. By this means, upward social mobility can be envisioned as a process of scaling a high mountain through preparing for the obstacles that lie ahead and choosing the best teammates with which to make that climb. This method of addressing inequity takes a deficit approach to the situation and aims at increasing highly valued social, cultural, and symbolic capital markers to achieve the betterment to which Marginson (2016) refers. In opposition to this analogy of climbing a single steep mountain, a twinned approach involves looking to other heights to be climbed and elevating the symbolic value of different characteristics and experiences and the capitals that they can confer. In this scenario, rather than accepting the value of the capitals of the hegemonic majority and trying to train to gain those capitals, students, families, and groups can advocate for the value of the social, symbolic, and cultural capitals of something that builds capitals separate from those of the current majority. Although it seems likely that neither of these approaches alone will solve the problems of inequity in formal schooling and higher education attainment discussed here, a slow movement of broad societal perceptions may help to build more equitable systems for future students.

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