



EDUCATIONAL SUCCESS AMONG HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS FROM BLACK COMMUNITIES

Marie McAndrew

Professor Marie McAndrew is specialized in the education of minorities and intercultural education. She has made a significant contribution to the field in terms of research and policy development and evaluation. Her most recent book *Immigration et diversité à l'école: le cas québécois dans une perspective comparative* (Immigration and diversity in school: the Quebec case from a comparative perspective) won the 2001 Donner prize for the best book on Canadian public policy.

In a recent study,¹ Marie McAndrew and her colleagues followed some 6,700 students from black communities,² from grade 7 to the end of college (1994, 1995, 1996 cohorts) in the French (87%) and English (13%) sectors. The fruit of a partnership between Immigration and Metropolis, the Chair in Ethnic Relations at Université de Montréal, Quebec's Ministère de l'Éducation, du Loisir et du Sport and the Quebec Board of Black Educators, the study produced an initial evaluation of the educational trajectory and achievement of black youth across five sub-groups: youth from the Caribbean with English, French or Creole as their mother tongue, and youth from Africa with English or French as their mother tongue.

Universal accessibility and equal chances of success still aren't a reality in Montreal public schools, despite the attempts of current and past reforms. Individuals and groups who confront inequalities daily know too well the harsh consequences. The *Different angles on education and social justice* series was launched to make academic research useful to advocate for school policies and practices that help create equality. (Disponibile aussi en français)

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Current situation

One of the first findings concerns the difference between the two student groups in the French sector and English sector in terms of demographic, socioeducational and socioeconomic factors. In the French sector, students from black communities represent a particularly vulnerable group compared to the overall school population and even to students from immigrant communities. Overwhelmingly from disadvantaged neighbourhoods, over 60% of these black youth are born outside Quebec and 40% enter the Québec school system only in high school. Creolephone and anglophone students originally from the Caribbean systematically have the least favourable profile while francophone students from the same region have more positive characteristics, although often inferior to those of comparison groups. The situation for English- or French-speaking students from Africa varies more widely, depending on the indicator used.

In the English sector, students from black communities have more positive characteristics prior to their entry into high school. However, compared to the overall school population or students from immigrant communities in this sector, they are slightly more likely to enter the system in the middle of high school and to come from disadvantaged neighbourhoods.

In both sectors, students from black communities face problems in terms of educational trajectory and achievement. However, as could be expected in terms of student characteristics, the scope of the problem cannot be measured in terms of a single factor.

¹ McAndrew, M., J. Ledent and R. Ait-Said. *La réussite scolaire des jeunes des communautés noires au secondaire*. Research report. Montréal: Immigration and Metropolis (2005).

² For the purposes of this study, we counted the students who were born in an English- or French-speaking country in the Caribbean or Africa or who had one parent who was born in one of these countries. Clearly, this is not representative of all students from black communities. For example, Afro-Canadian students, invisible in school statistics, or students who were born, or who have one parent who was born in another country, such as the United States or Dutch, Spanish or Portuguese-speaking countries.

High school graduation rate of students from black communities

(1994, 1995, 1996 cohorts), French sector (all of Quebec)

Student origin	After five years (%)	After six years (cumulative) (%)	After seven years (cumulative) (%)
Students from black communities	37.1	47.3	51.8
Caribbean (French mother tongue)	51.4	61.4	65.4
Caribbean (English mother tongue)	27.4	35.0	41.2
Caribbean (Creole mother tongue)	23.7	34.6	39.5
Africa (French mother tongue)	49.0	59.7	62.3
Africa (English mother tongue)	33.3	43.6	47.0
Students from immigrant communities	45.5	53.7	57.4
Overall population	57.8	65.7	69.0

In the French sector, black students, close to 25% of whom have two or more years of academic delay when they begin high school, continue to accumulate delays in Grade 9. This is the case for one-third of students who begin high school at the normal age and for more than two-thirds of those who enter late. These students also have a much lower graduation rate after 7 years compared to the overall population (51.8% versus 69%). Moreover, their access and graduation rates at the college level are also markedly lower. However, it is important to note some positive points. To begin with, fewer black students are identified as handicapped or suffering from adaptation or learning difficulties contrary to community perception. In addition, students who perform well enough academically to attain grades 10 and 11, achieve fairly positive results overall. Lastly, students with high school diplomas are highly motivated to pursue their studies at the college level.

Furthermore, intergroup differences in terms of academic trajectory and achievement are significant, which excludes any essentialist explanation of the difficulties experienced by these students. In fact, the situation for Creole- and English-speaking students from the Caribbean is consistently more negative than that of other groups, within which French-speaking students, originally from the Caribbean or Africa, distinguish themselves in particular. In terms of various indicators, the latter group often enjoys more positive results compared to all students from immigrant communities and, in some cases, the overall school population. With the exception of English-speaking students from Africa whose success is, in short, quite surprising, non-French-speaking students comprise the group that experiences the most problems.

In the English sector, English-speaking students originally from the Caribbean and Africa enjoy a more favourable situation in terms of educational success than their peers in the French sector. However, students from the Caribbean have a more negative profile than the overall school population or students from immigrant communities.

Prospects for the future

In light of this initial statistical portrait, the authors came to the conclusion that, in the future, educational success must be the focus of the debate about integrating students from immigrant communities, and that the reality of black students is of great enough concern to warrant increased support to ensure their success, first and foremost in the French sector, but also in some English-language schools.

Promoting equal opportunity is already a guiding principle of the *Policy Statement on Educational Integration and Intercultural Education*, which emphasizes not only the obligation of the State to ensure equal access to basic services to all members of the school population, but also the need to offer special means for newcomers as well as compensatory measures for students from immigrant communities who are experiencing difficulties at school.

Numerous initiatives to raise awareness of the difficulties experienced by students must be launched in the various communities concerned. And these initiatives must include all bodies involved in decision-making and the resource allocation (department of education and school boards) as well as communities that develop innovative strategies to respond to the problems and needs related to education (schools, CEGEPs and universities). Moreover, to prevent yet another insular debate among members of the majority group, it is crucial to add the voice of organizations active within the communities concerned and, as much as possible, the voice of parents themselves or the different associations to which they belong.





In addition to raising awareness, we must also develop our knowledge and understanding of this phenomenon. Three priorities must be met to achieve this:

- Intensify the systematic follow-up of the trajectory and graduation rate of black youth.
- Develop a better understanding of the dynamic interrelationship of individual factors that influence graduation rates, such as mother tongue, socioeconomic standing and age at entry into the school system (which, to a large extent, depends on whether the student was born inside or outside Quebec).
- Despite potential resistance, further explore the institutional factors that impede the full equality of students from immigrant communities. In this respect, it is not enough to merely speak out against the inadequacy of resources allocated to students and parents, but also fully analyze the differentiated expectations, or prejudices, of teachers, and to examine the ethnocentrism that continues to underpin many educational strategies.

At a more practical level, in light of the successes and failures at the international level (McAndrew, 2001), action is required on two fronts. To begin with, we must pursue and intensify various measures already in place that are specifically aimed at immigrant populations, but whose means have clearly been inadequate in recent years. Two priorities stand out in this respect:

1. Maintain and emphasize compensatory measures aimed at newcomers and disadvantaged communities in a context of increased migration, poverty and educational difficulties.
2. Develop innovative approaches among subgroups whose problems are only partially due to the fact that they were not born here or are living in extreme poverty (for example, even second-generation black youth, or those whose roots date back even further, and who are from middle-class neighbourhoods, have a lower graduation rate than the overall population).

But, it is also important to take this one step further by launching a small copernican revolution with regard to priorities and strategies. On a radically different level than what has been done thus far, we must make the issue of educational success among immigrant populations, including black communities, the focal point of educational practices already in place.

Four measures are particularly important:

1. Encourage, both authorities from the Ministère and from the institutions themselves, to integrate the objectives specific to each subgroup, particularly black youth, in the institutions' success plans.
2. Encourage institutions responsible for the intervention strategy in disadvantaged neighbourhoods (*École montréalaise, Agir autrement*) to develop a discussion on the specific needs of disadvantaged multiethnic communities and to set up an intervention component adapted to their reality.
3. Encourage bodies responsible for teacher training (particularly universities) and upgrading (MELSQ, school boards, but also union organizations) to re-adjust the focus of their "intercultural" educational approaches—deeply rooted in the linguistic and cultural characteristics of students—on the issue of equity in educational equality.
4. Encourage the participation of parents from black communities and all immigrant communities aimed at transforming schools (empowerment). Indeed, if schools are to question their practices, they must find the means to see and hear alternative visions and voices. This measure speaks first and foremost to authorities who support these kinds of parent groups (MICC, MELSQ), but it should also reach schools in the day to day.

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Action Outlook

By putting figures on a reality that black communities and progressive circles had suspected for some while, this research has made an important contribution to the movement for equality and social justice in school. Moreover, it makes a strong case for the collective role of parents from black communities in developing understanding of the problems their children face and in finding solutions to them. This research suggests to parents in general, and those from black communities in particular, their community associations and the school system that its time to take a new look at their relationship.

How will these parents get the necessary resources to take on this long-term WORK and also demand accountability from the school system regarding their children's success?

How will they get the system to really respond to their demands considering the discrimination that they and their children face in school as in the rest of society?

How will black parents find allies amongst other parents and in various parent bodies within the school boards that will support their right to participate in decision-making processes?

And finally, how will parents organize themselves to be able to identify discriminatory and racist practices in education and eventually bring about the absolutely necessary "transformation" of public schools?

*Corina Borri-Anadón, Violaine Gagnon and Nadine Mondestin
on behalf of Parents in Action for Education*

Parents in Action for Education is a Montreal-based movement that brings together parents, community workers and educators advocating for school democracy and equality in education.

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Third Avenue Resource Centre

The Third Avenue Resource Centre is a non-profit organization that has been promoting human rights and social justice since its creation in 1974. In collaboration with parents facing poverty or other forms of exclusion, the Centre develops the supports, tools, alliances and solidarity networks to work towards improving public schools their children attend. Through various education and training initiatives, the Centre also strives to raise public awareness about educational issues, while helping individuals from communities and institutions renew their practices and shape effective family support structures within their organizations.

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