

**IMMIGRANT AND REFUGEE YOUTH ISSUES – A PERSPECTIVE FROM YORK
UNIVERSITY STUDENTS**

**York University Students research project on immigrant and refugee youth issues carried
out as part of the
*OCASI Serving Youth in Newcomer Communities (SYNC) project***

**Winning entry of research competition
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**High School Credential Assessment Program:
Valuing Students from All Backgrounds©**

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Introduction to OCASI:

The Ontario Council of Agencies Serving Immigrant (OCASI) is an umbrella organization that co-ordinates the activities for over 170 community associations that operate in the province.¹ As such, the organization does not reach out to newcomers directly, rather it operates on a referral based system where newcomers can approach them, and then they direct people to individual associations such as the South Asian Women's Centre or Culture Link which provide actual settlement services.² Since its inception in 1978, OCASI has authored many fundamental publications that have defined how Immigrant Service Agencies (ISAs) operate in Ontario.³ They provide research on issues that affect the day-to-day lives of immigrants and refugees in Ontario. They also address settlement issues relevant to youth in Ontario – in particular through their SYNC project (Services for Youth in Newcomer Communities). The SYNC project utilizes community based research when working with newcomer youth. Through an advisory committee, the Ontario Youth Network acts as facilitators for focus groups with newcomer youth and youth workers across Ontario. The research in this paper is of direct relevance to SYNC, as it addresses the issue of credential assessment by high schools in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA) for newly settled youth (aged thirteen to nineteen). In particular we focus on how the high school credential assessment programs across the province frequently under assess students in their scholastic ability and subsequently place them in a grade level that may be inappropriate given their education and

¹ Ontario Council of Agencies Serving Immigrants. "About OCASI." OCASI Website, 2009 <<http://www.ocasi.org/index.php?catid=148>> (18 April 2009)

² Sarah Wayland. "Immigrants into Citizens: Political Mobilization in France and Canada." University of Maryland, 1995. <<http://ceris.metropolis.net/virtual%20library/other/wayland1/wayland1h.html> > (1 April, 2009)

³ Ibid.

experience levels. This research can be used to inform a best practices guide for settlement workers and other service providers who work with youth.

How Our Community Based Learning Project was Performed:

This project was carried out in consultation with OCASI and Settlement Workers in Schools (SWIS). Information was gathered on what kinds of issues needed attention according to the group. This included English as a Second Language courses (ESL) and how they are delivered, successful family integration, subjectivity in standardized tests, and maintenance of cultural sensitivity for newcomers in schools where they may be minorities.⁴ These in class consultations provided the guidelines necessary to focus our efforts on something that has not been previously looked at very much, and that is the manner in which students from other countries are assessed academically for their scholastic ability in GTA high schools.

In addition to this an extensive literature review was carried out to search for what the problems are in terms of credential recognition for students. Also a collection of best practices was gathered from jurisdictions around the world. Such an approach is necessary to take into account the diversity of people coming into the GTA.

Errors in Student Assessment:

The factors that contribute to inaccurate assessment are multiple and varied. Firstly, the existence of cultural barriers between high school administrators and foreign born students hinders communication efforts. Students may be under assessed because they for example do not make direct eye contact with their elders.⁵ This can be interpreted as a lack of confidence and may influence an administrator's perception of a

⁴ SWIS, "SWIS Class Presentation". York University. Vari Hall, Toronto. 21 April 2009

⁵ Jennifer Wenshya Lee and Yvonne M. Hebert. "The Meaning of Being Canadian: A comparison between Youth of Immigrant and non-immigrant origins" *Canadian journal of education* 29 (2006): 500.

student.⁶ Also, the high level of discretionary power given to administrators in deciding placements for students is problematic. Hegemony exists within the school system that defines a set standard against which all students are compared, regardless of their cultural background. Jakubowski explains how this hegemony, which is based on “race, gender or class [is a] relation of subordination...and there are potential sites of antagonism, conflict and struggle”.⁷ A study by Chavira et al., explains how racialized minorities feel excluded because their cultural needs are not being met, unlike those who are a part of the dominant culture.⁸ They call for more recognition of their culture in the classroom; part of this is recognizing their prior educational experiences and assigning this a value in the new classroom setting.⁹ Teachers and high school administrators need to be aware of these differences, and with programs such as SWIS and SEPT (Settlement and Educator Partnership in Toronto) they are beginning to understand this need, however more must be done to assess foreign students properly.¹⁰

The existence of a language barrier or bias against certain countries of origin inhibits cultural exchange and understanding.¹¹ As such students from these countries are put at a disadvantage because their efforts put into high school in their country of origin are devalued. This is particularly true for students where English is not an official language.¹² Even where English is the state language students face discrimination because of their accent as they are assessed to be not speaking English “properly”.

⁶ Ibid, 500.

⁷ Lisa Marie Jakubowski. “Immigration and the legalization of racism (Halifax: Fernwood Publishing, 1997), 26.

⁸ Victor Chavira, Jean S. Phinney, Lisa Williamson. “Acculturation Attitudes and self esteem among high school and college students.” *Youth and Society*. 23 (1992): 301.

⁹ Ibid, 302.

¹⁰ SWIS, “SWIS Class Presentation”. York University. Vari Hall, Toronto. 21 April 2009

¹¹ Desirée Boalian Qin, Niobe Way, Preetika Mukherjee “The Other Side of the Model Minority Story The Familial and Peer Challenges Faced by Chinese American Adolescents”. *Youth & Society*, 39 (2008):480

¹² Ibid., 485

Jamaican youth, for example, found that language presented a challenge because they were routinely placed in ESL classes, despite the fact that English is their first language. In a survey of youth in Toronto high schools, Elisete Bettencourt cited one Jamaican student as saying "I already knew English, but it was like when I come here I could understand them but they could not understand me. They wanted to put me into an ESL program. Probably because I had an accent and I spoke fast."¹³ This demonstrates a lack of understanding on the part of school officials.

The Student Experience:

In many high schools in the GTA, an inability to speak English is equated with an inability to perform academically. Consequently, newcomer students are forced to repeat grades once they come to Canada in order to “catch up”. Placing a newcomer student in a classroom where they are older than their peers is alienating and has negative implications for an individual's self perception and self worth.¹⁴ Bettencourt writes that students are frustrated around the grade and level of placement within the school system. She cites a South Asian youth who says ““they see a brown person who doesn't speak English well and think that all brown people can't speak. They'll stick them in ESL”.”¹⁵ This report also states that “many of the youth felt that they were often placed in lower levels and grades of course work than they were capable of handling.”¹⁶

Being older than everyone else in a classroom is another factor that is demoralizing and leads to frustration with oneself. This can lead to poor academic

¹³ Elisete Bettencourt, “Recent Research on Newcomer Youth” *Citizenship and Immigration Canada*. www.teslontario.org/uploads/research/bettencourt.pdf (1 May, 2009). 8.

¹⁴ Desirée Boalian Qin, Niobe Way, Preetika Mukherjee “The Other Side of the Model Minority Story The Familial and Peer Challenges Faced by Chinese American Adolescents”. *Youth & Society*,39 (2008):480

¹⁵ Elisete Bettencourt, “Recent Research on Newcomer Youth” *Citizenship and Immigration Canada*. www.teslontario.org/uploads/research/bettencourt.pdf (1 May, 2009). 6.

¹⁶ Bettencourt, 6.

performance.¹⁷ This produces a vicious cycle of lowered value by the school system for foreign students, and lower performance because of the emotional impact of devaluing the student's educational background.¹⁸ There is also the added emotional burden of familial responsibilities of immigrant youth who often have to act as translators for their parents. A lack of understanding by the school system therefore has a ripple effect that can influence the well being of newcomer students in Canada.¹⁹

At the root of the problem of underassessment is a lack of recognition by the Toronto District School Board of foreign school credentials. Students from countries that are in the developing world, and non-English speaking are at a particular disadvantage by the current credential recognition schema. Bettencourt writes that "youth that were frustrated with what they perceived was an inaccurate assessment of their language ability and skills identified the need to have more accurate ways of assessing their knowledge and skill level".²⁰ They felt that schools should develop aptitude tests that are less discriminating.²¹ Too much influence is placed in the hands of high school officials and guidance counselors in determining where a student should be. Breeding such feelings of contempt among students is a clear signal that credential assessment needs to be restructured. Not only is it unfairly discriminating against students who have under developed English language skills, but also there are systemic barriers to acquiring the services that would help improve language skills for students.

¹⁷ Ibid., 7

¹⁸ Ibid., 7.

¹⁹ Judith K. Bernhard, et. al. "Living with Precarious Legal Status in Canada: Implications for the Well Being of Children and Families" *Refuge: Canada's Periodical on Refugees*, 24 (2007): 101.

²⁰ Bettencourt, 8.

²¹ Bettencourt, 8.

One such barrier is the economic exclusion of racialized communities. In a paper by Grace Edward Galabuzi (appearing in Walker), he identifies a 15% income gap between the economic performance of racialized communities and the rest of the Canadian population.²² His in-depth analysis shows other disturbing trends among immigrants, particularly the precarious nature of their employment and reduced access to post secondary education. If immigrants are at a disadvantage to begin with in that their credentials are not recognized, than they are the ones who need the most access to services in order to gain the recognition necessary and have access to better jobs and higher incomes. This process starts in high school, but even here there are barriers to access. For example, the firm World Education Services (WES) provide assessment of high school students from other countries; however there is a fee of \$115 to \$200 just to be assessed. This is no small amount of money especially for newcomer families that are already marginalized by the lack of recognition of their credentials in the job market.²³ Newcomers frequently have to work in minimum wage positions – earning \$200 for credential assessment at the current minimum wage of \$9.50 would require at least three full days of work assuming an eight hour work day.²⁴ Furthermore, mere assessment does not guarantee correct placement in a grade level that is commensurate with the intelligence and experiences of a newcomer to Canada. Changes need to be made as to how students are valued by the Canadian system, and it is in the latter half of this report

²² Grace Edward Galabuzi in Walker, Barrington. *The Economic Exclusion of Racialized Communities – a Statistical Profile*. In *The History of Immigration and Racism in Canada*. Toronto: Canadian Scholar's Press, 2008. 279

²³ World Education Services. "Academic Credential Evaluation", 2009. <www.wes.org.ca> (7 May, 2009).

²⁴ Ontario Ministry of Labour. "Ontario's Minimum Wage Increased", 2007. <<http://www.labour.gov.on.ca/english/news/2007/07-63b3.html>> (May 2, 2009).

where research and the subsequent recommendations are made on just how students should be assessed.

Biases in Testing:

Youth frequently struggle to adapt to their new environments in Canada. More anxiety arises when the students are faced with placement testing that is highly subjective. Sociologists believe that cultural knowledge can be tacit knowledge or explicit knowledge. Tacit knowledge is achieved through being immersed in a society, in other words, it is common sense knowledge²⁵. Newcomers have to gain tacit knowledge to be able to integrate in the community. This is why it is argued that standardized testing is a way of determining how well a person can pick up implicit cues²⁶ and how well their tacit knowledge is applied. The problem is, tacit knowledge is only achieved once a person becomes immersed in the society; therefore placement testing remains bias. All students are evaluated based on standards that are laid out by the school system; they are rated as being either advanced, average or behind²⁷. This type of evaluation is bias because newcomer students can be advanced in some areas while not in others. This should not affect their overall acknowledgement of their foreign credentials.

Acknowledgement of foreign credentials has been an issue that several newcomers face in finding a job in line with their education, but rarely, if ever, is the issue discussed when it comes to acknowledging youth's foreign credentials in school systems. Among the programs in place to help newcomer youth in schools are the SWIS and SEPT programs. These programs focus on sending settlement workers to schools to

²⁵ W. Lawrence Neuman & Karen Robson, *Basics of Social Research: Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches* (Toronto: Pearson Education Canada, 2009), 288.

²⁶ Ibid, 288.

²⁷ *Education That Works: An Action Plan for the Education of Minorities*. (Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Cambridge, 1990), 41.

help with newcomer youth integration²⁸. One technique used is getting to know the cultural differences of students' families²⁹. The SWIS program began twenty years ago in Ottawa. Toronto began a pilot program, SEPT, within the small areas of the city³⁰. These programs begin by assessing newcomer families so that they can be placed in adequate programs based on their needs³¹. The programs were honoured with a gold medal in 2007 and have been exemplary for other provinces³². Also, encouraging parents to be actively involved in their children's education may encourage youth to remain in school and have higher achievements³³. Parents also have to do their part to ensure that their children are always being challenged and their needs are met if they happen to be struggling. There needs to be more programming to help parents integrate and learn the language to positively affect their children. Although parental involvement will encourage students to stay in school, staff also plays a major role in students' school experiences.

Student and Teacher Perceptions:

It has been argued that teacher attitudes can change a student's involvement within the school environment and potentially disengage them from school³⁴. For example, if a student's first impression of a teacher is one that is discriminatory, he or she will feel like an outsider, consequently feeling alienated. The purpose is not to alienate these youth, rather to make them feel comfortable in a learning environment. This is why it is important for testing to properly evaluate student aptitudes so that they will not have to relearn subjects. For instance, if a student is ahead in math while behind in English, he

²⁸ SWIS, *SWIS Class Presentation*. York University. Vari Hall, Toronto. 21 April 2009

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.

³³ *Education That Works: An Action Plan for the Education of Minorities*. (Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Cambridge, 1990), 80.

³⁴ Ibrahim Alladin, *Racism in Canadian Schools*. (Toronto: Harcourt Brace & Company Canada, 1996), 47.

would be placed in a math class that would help him continue learning from where he left off. With regard to the class that the student was behind in, he would be offered in and after school help to reach the level he is expected to be at. The purpose is to encourage a forward momentum in school which will hopefully encourage them to stay in school. The issue of low teacher expectation has also been identified as hindering minority youth involvement in school³⁵.

Teachers should expect the same academic achievements of all students regardless of their personal biases³⁶. Teachers have also been identified as being label and stereotype followers and enforcers³⁷. Minority youth want the racism and discriminatory practices to be addressed³⁸; in fact some students have pointed out that they dislike a staff because they were racist or discriminating at one point³⁹. Didi Khayatt discussed this issue in her article, “The Boundaries of Identity at the Intersection of Race, Class and Gender”. She spoke about a time in university when her British professor singled her out as an immigrant woman, a label that she felt did not represent her as she had never thought of herself in that way⁴⁰. Khayatt said that she felt like she had become the centre of attention when she has been singled out as an immigrant woman⁴¹. Situations like this put students in a position of inferiority. Within the classroom there exists a power dynamic in which teachers have the power to impose labels and knowledge on their students. Teachers also have the power of grading their students. Student grades can be

³⁵ Ibid, 47.

³⁶ Ibid, 47.

³⁷ Ibid, 46.

³⁸ Ibid, 46.

³⁹ Ibid, 46.

⁴⁰ Didi Khayatt. *Canadian Women Studies*. (Spring, 1994), 6.

⁴¹ Ibid, 6.

subjective because each teacher grades based on a highly subjective, hierarchical, and prejudice curriculum.

Institutional Racism:

No institution has been able to escape racism including the Canadian school system.⁴² Some educators even acknowledge that this is part of the school experience⁴³, but in no way is it justifiable. Racism should not be an action that people become accustomed to. No one deserves to be subjected to labels and a hegemony that oppresses them. During the course of the years the government has not acknowledged that many immigrants are being oppressed by the hegemony which places immigrants of colour at a lower level as their Caucasian counterparts. Some people still try to deny that racism plays a major role in the school system⁴⁴, but there has been proof that Hispanics and Blacks receive less schooling than their Caucasian counterparts in the United States⁴⁵. Although this is the case in the U.S, this was a key argument when introducing the idea of Black focused schools in the Greater Toronto Area. An explanation for this may be the lack of accessibility to education in their country of origin. This lack of education is then reflected on newcomer youth in Canada. Interestingly immigrants from Africa, South and East Asia, the Philippines and North and Western Europe receive more education than other English speaking nations⁴⁶. The school system silences students of colour because they are exposed to a situation of isolation⁴⁷. This silence only allows for further oppression. The system is failing the immigrant youth, but students are blamed for their

⁴² Ibrahim Alladin, *Racism in Canadian Schools*. (Toronto: Harcourt Brace & Company Canada, 1996), 43.

⁴³ Ibid, 43.

⁴⁴ Ibid, 43.

⁴⁵ Noyna Deb Burman. *Immigrant Education: Variations by Generation, Age-at-Migration, and Country of Origin*. (New York: LFB Scholarly Publishing, 2005), 139.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 139.

⁴⁷ Ibrahim Alladin, *Racism in Canadian Schools*. (Toronto: Harcourt Brace & Company Canada, 1996), 44.

lack of success⁴⁸. The way the school system works is rarely questioned and the groups and individuals who manage it have simply conformed and accepted the way it functions. School systems as bureaucracies work because they are highly organized, but they only serve to further alienate its members.

A curriculum is created to reflect the social reality of those who control the institutions; which happen to be those who dominate and run other institutions⁴⁹. This systematically excludes minorities' social reality and acknowledgment within the curriculum. A similar argument was made during the debate of black- focused schools in the Greater Toronto Area. It is believed that the current school system focuses on a Eurocentric curriculum. Immigrant youth come into the school system with their cultural knowledge that could be beneficial in a classroom but it is ignored⁵⁰. School knowledge reflects biased assumptions about human life⁵¹ that is not in line with those held by students. The students that come to Canada are educated in different areas. The cultural knowledge that they can bring to the table should be valued, otherwise this cultural knowledge can fade, making it challenging to contribute to the multicultural fabric of the nation. Canada claims to be multicultural, but as Anthony Richmond argues, "...as diversity increases, so does the temptation to impose uniformity."⁵². This temptation to impose uniformity creates a loss of global cultural knowledge in Canada. The idea of knowledge is the basis of social control. If the 'other' obtains knowledge, he or she will recognize that he or she is being oppressed and resist the oppression. The elimination of the process of 'othering' will help in reconstructing a more inclusive school system. The

⁴⁸ Ibid, 44.

⁴⁹ Ibid, 96.

⁵⁰ Ibid, 44.

⁵¹ Ibid, 96.

⁵² Anthony Richmond. *Refuge: Canada's Periodical on Refugees*. (York University), 1.

process of othering has been conflicting because the dominant groups aim at achieving self definition at the hand of the dominated; meaning that the dominant group defines themselves through what they are not. Those who are deemed different become oppressed by labels that are imposed on them.

An inclusive curriculum (or accurate representation) will help with awareness and understanding of various cultures⁵³. In Alberta, curriculum writers receive feedback from a committee consisting of people from various different backgrounds⁵⁴. Before the curriculum is implemented, it is field tested to see whether the ideas work at the micro level⁵⁵. It is believed that by providing programs, like social studies and language learning, and not anti racist programs, it will offer the opportunity to go beyond and get a better social understanding⁵⁶ of others' social reality. People will have the opportunity to gain social knowledge that will help reduce prejudices. The programs used in Alberta should be exemplary for all Canadian school systems because it provides more than an anti-racist structure, it provides knowledge opportunities.

Several minority students express that there is a lack of opportunity for them to succeed⁵⁷. One of the explanations is this issue of a mismatch between the school's culture and language and that of the students⁵⁸. In other words, the language, subjects and the way they are taught are not reflective of the people who are learning; therefore making it difficult for them to learn and succeed. From an accreditation standpoint, the

⁵³ Ibid, 97.

⁵⁴ Ibid, 97.

⁵⁵ Ibid, 97.

⁵⁶ Ibid, 97.

⁵⁷ Ibid, 44.

⁵⁸ Ibid, 44.

language used in tests and interviews contribute to the improper judgment of a student's academic capabilities.

How to Approach Accreditation Fairly:

There are several ways that this issue of accreditation can be addressed. One way of addressing biases in schools is through hiring teachers that have a genuine interest in helping newcomers⁵⁹. These staff should be in charge of developing and administering tests and interviews. Along with hiring these teachers, retention becomes an issue as well. Teachers need to have decent salaries and professional work environments⁶⁰ to perform at a prominent level. It is also important for teachers to increase their expectations of minority youth to help them achieve academic excellence⁶¹. Having knowledge about the culture and language of the youth will help address difficulties in school. Although many of these suggestions involve only teachers, it is important that all levels of the administration take part in providing support for the teachers. With the implementation of after school and summer school programs, newcomers will have the opportunity to take an active role in their education.

These programs would help students reach the expectations of the Canadian school system. There have been discussions of the idea of 'learning loss' during the summer months. It is suggested that there should be high quality summer education that is affordable for minorities with low incomes⁶². Through summer school programs both teachers and students will benefit. Teachers will have the opportunity to make more money, hence increasing the quality of life of the teacher and his or her family, while also

⁵⁹ *Education That Works: An Action Plan for the Education of Minorities*. (Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Cambridge, 1990), 80.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 79.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 79.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 80.

increasing the future quality of life of the student through education. Education is an overall investment because it places the students and the teachers in a position to obtain higher achievements that will eventually go back into the economy. Therefore if the newcomer students are going to be in the Ontario school system, it is only fair that they receive help in obtaining a high quality education.

There seems to be an over reliance on testing that fails to address any of the biases in testing, in fact it is a human ill. People think that IQ tests determine how smart someone is, but it is based on ideas assumed to be common knowledge. If a recent immigrant took an IQ test, he or she would fail because they do not have the same assumptions of what is perceived as common knowledge in Canada.

Ultimately the objective is to properly place newcomer youth in grades that will help them move forward in their education. Immigration in teen years conveys the greatest disadvantage⁶³, but the lack of recognition of credentials poses an even greater disadvantage. By developing an inclusive curriculum, students, teachers and administrative staff will have the opportunity better their understanding of other cultures. Family size, income, parental education also factor into school enrollment⁶⁴, so it is imperative that the funding come from the government. As discussed before, the greater the education of the newcomer students, the more opportunities they will have to give back to the economy. The way that Alberta has approached the creation of their curriculum will help eliminate biases when students are entering the system. The transition from school to school is difficult, let alone from another country. The transition

⁶³ Noyna Deb Burman. *Immigrant Education: Variations by Generation, Age-at-Migration, and Country of Origin*. (New York: LFB Scholarly Publishing, 2005), 139.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.* 139.

should be smooth and in no way should an investment on immigrants be considered a burden.

Sociological analysis of High School Credential Assessment:

As mentioned previously, the focus of this CBL project is the flawed system of assessing foreign credits in Ontario high schools. Due to the lack of a standardized accreditation system for assessing foreign student credentials, individual assessments are left to the guidance counselors at each school. This leaves the door open to improper assessments that will vary from school to school, thus putting newcomer students in unnecessary situations that usually interfere with their academic progress. Not only do these students have to deal with being in a new country, but also have to deal with being in a classroom full of other students that they are unable to relate to in anyway due to differences in cultural practices, language, age and maturity levels. “Data from the U.S. component of the World Health Organization Study of Health Behavior in School Children showed that non-English-speaking adolescents experienced higher psychosocial and parental risks than European American adolescents” (Bornstein, Deater-Deckard & Lansford, 2007). This meant that newcomer “immigrant youth [faced] alienation from classmates and are being bullied, while in-home risk factors included the feeling that parents were not able to or willing to help them”⁶⁵ and this usually leads to depression, loss of interest in studies, and a loss of self esteem and confidence for these newcomer immigrant students.

To begin with, from a social view point, new immigrant families find it tough to adapt and adjust with the rest of Canadian society as many of them have financial troubles in the first few years. The families of the newcomer students usually tend to

⁶⁵ Bornstein, Deater-Decakard & Lansford, 2007

struggle initially upon arrival in Canada, and this also puts pressure on the student to perform well. This is because most “immigrant families come to Canada generally seeking to provide a better life for their children than what might have been available in their country of origin” (Direnfeld, 2009). Some families pressure their children to be academically successful to ensure a well paying job in the future. So when the high school credentials of newcomer immigrant/refugee students are improperly assessed, the parents may feel that they have to push their children to succeed. The fact that immigrants new to Canada struggle financially also piles on the pressure. This can be noted in the Peel Region where “non-profit and education sectors aiming to help immigrants integrate [showed that] 33 per cent of the region’s recent arrivals lived in poverty”.⁶⁶ Furthermore, when comparing newcomer’s income with those already settled in the Peel Region, “newcomers’ median income is \$15,000, compared to \$28,000 for the total population”.⁶⁷ These statistics indicate how there is a very huge gap between income earned; the rest of society makes almost double the amount that immigrants earn. A foreign student living in poverty cannot be expected to excel in school, as in some circumstances may be forced to take a part-time job to help with the daily expenses. The financial restraints could mean that new students may not feel as if they can integrate with the rest of the class, as other students might be wearing the latest fashion trend and they are not. One must not forget that high school is a place where others can be very judgmental of others. The financial situation definitely puts a strain on the learning experience of high school students and is compounded by the fact that their credits were not properly assessed to begin with.

⁶⁶Nicholas Keung. 2008. “Many newcomers face poverty”. *Toronto Star*, November 6. Retrieved April 29, 2009 (<http://www.thestar.com/News/GTA/article/531551>)

⁶⁷ Ibid.

In addition, another major issue that newcomers have to deal with is culture shock when they first arrive in Canada. It is impossible to expect a newcomer student who is forced to repeat a grade or two to immediately assimilate and make friends in a closed environment such as a high school. It is important to receive help from teachers with homework, but as well socializing and feeling more comfortable in their environment really makes a difference in the high school experience for these students. Because of this lack of a standard accreditation system, students who are forced to repeat a school grade level really suffer socially and tend to feel alienated by the rest of their class. Alienation is a major theme that is associated with immigrants in a new country, and the feeling is no different for newcomer students in high schools.

Cultural differences are the main reasons for the culture shock, but there are other factors that also play a role. For example, the different foods, clothes, traditions and languages all contribute to the sense of confusion present when first entering Canada's diverse society. This confusion generally leads to the point where newcomers have an identity crisis and try to figure out where they fit in their new society.

From another social perspective, questions must be asked as to why the Toronto District School Board (TDSB) has allowed such a practice to continue in its schooling system. The improper assessment currently practiced by schools places many obstacles in newcomer students' way when it can be avoided in the first place. It seems that fulfilling the many requirements for the English language, such as the TOEFEL exam, is not enough and they expect more from newcomer immigrant students. As well, the discretionary power awarded to guidance counselors should be questioned. This seems to be a sign of hegemony as it enables the School Board to "socially construct and impose

on a people [in this case, other Canadian students] the idea that immigrants are different from mainstream Canadians”.⁶⁸ Hegemony can be seen as an ideology where the few in power impose their beliefs on the masses. This concept usually is involved in politics and policy decision makers. Looking at the history of Canada’s immigration policies, the Canadian immigration policies all reflect a hegemonic ideology. And traces of this can be observed in the high school accreditation system currently implemented in Canada.

Looking at the TDSB website, I found that there was ambiguous language being used in describing how international students were going to be allocated:

Many secondary schools in the Toronto District School Board now accept international students. Students may indicate their preferences for three schools on the application form. The Toronto District School Board will try to accommodate the student’s preference for placement, provided that the requested school has space and an appropriate program. The Toronto District School Board reserves the right to make the final decision regarding the student’s placement. Should a student decide not to indicate any school preferences, the Toronto District School Board will place the student in the most appropriate school.⁶⁹

There is no real way of knowing who will decide what the ‘most appropriate school’ is and on what basis this decision is going to be made on. Even though a student gets to choose the school of their choice, there is no guarantee and no way of proving any decision made by the TDSB. Such usage of ambiguous terms leaves the door open for possible segregation, i.e., placing certain students in certain schools for various reasons. One such reason could be the income status of the newcomer’s family, sending the newcomer student to a school in a low-income part of the city. And another reason for this could be the student’s ethnic origin. This policy by the TDSB does what the *Live-In Caregiver Program* does by using “deliberately ambiguous terminology [that causes] the

⁶⁸ T. Das Gupta, “Review class”, Feb 3, 2009

⁶⁹ TDSB website. 2009. “Toronto International Student Programs”. Toronto District School Board. Retrieved May 5, 2009 (http://www.tdsb.on.ca/_site/ViewItem.asp?siteid=180&menuid=729&pageid=584).

meaning or intent of various claims confusing.”⁷⁰ This method used in policies is known as equivocation. An example of such method of not explicitly stating certain requirements was the grade 12 equivalent education requirement that was needed for caregivers to be accepted into Canada. In this case, it was not clear what a grade 12 equivalent was, and how it would be assessed. This meant that having a grade 12 education was not enough because it could not be ‘equivalent’ (notice how this term makes the difference and gives whoever is assessing discretion in deciding what is and is not equivalent). As well, since there is an obvious stigma attached with immigrants and their children, many Canadian parents might believe that putting immigrant children in the same class will lower the quality of education in the Canadian system. To prevent such an outcry and to not make this point explicit to newcomers, the TDSB is using “equivocation [as] an effective means for providing different responses to divergent interests.”⁷¹ This way the TDSB will not find any problems in using its current assessment and placement policy that only adds to the number of social problems that foreign high school students have to deal with in Canada.

Conclusion and Recommendations

In conclusion, the one major issue with the lack of a standard high school accreditation program is that it leaves discretionary power to the individual guidance counselor. This means that one person will make the executive decision about whether a student is good enough to be in a certain grade. This scenario is very similar to the immigration system of Canada and how they accept or reject immigrants on the basis of a point system. As well, there are many personal biases that go along with an individual

⁷⁰ Lisa Marie Jakubowski. “Immigration and the legalization of racism (Halifax: Fernwood Publishing, 2002)

⁷¹ Ibid.

assessment. It is very common to believe that all immigrants do not speak or properly understand the English language. This is the common “stigma attached to being a newcomer”,⁷² when in reality, there are students from other countries who are very fluent in English and in some cases are even better at it than those who live in Canada. There is a belief that a newcomer’s educational background is not sufficient and up to standard to the Canadian standard, and therefore will lower the overall quality of education in Canada.

OCASI mentioned programs such as SEPT and SWIS, which focus on counseling students and focusing on their family situations and deal with explaining any cultural differences. The idea here is that the student’s home situation heavily affects school life. This is true to a certain extent, but it does not guarantee any academic or social success. It was mentioned in the SWIS class presentation that “schools should know the family background and cultural differences [and that they had] 16 settlement workers assigned, all with different ethnic backgrounds and who speak 20 languages”⁷³ to ease the integration process for newcomers. The SWIS and SEPT programs are credible because they deal with individual cases and their presentation used personal and real life newcomer experiences. However, according to the TDSB website regarding this issue:

Our teachers and counselors are particularly sensitive to the needs of international students. We know from experience that overseas students often need help adjusting to life in a new country. Our staff speak a variety of languages and they are always willing to offer friendly guidance on academic and personal issues.⁷⁴

Both claims by the SWIS and the TDSB are contradictory. The TDSB is advertising itself without providing any actual evidence such as the diversity of their teaching staff and

⁷² OCASI Class Panel, 2009

⁷³ SWIS, “SWIS Class Presentation”. York University. Vari Hall, Toronto. 21 April 2009

⁷⁴ TDSB website. 2009. “Toronto International Student Programs”. Toronto District School Board, Retrieved May 5, 2009 (<http://www.tdsb.on.ca/site/ViewItem.asp?siteid=180&menuid=729&pageid=58>)

their multicultural backgrounds. This is to attract international students because there is a fee involved, which means economic gain for the school board. There is a high possibility that guidance counselors make students repeat grades to keep them in the school system longer to gain more money for the TDSB. As well, it should be noted that the TDSB only focused on international students, and addressed that they have accommodations for some common obstacles that they may face when first arriving in Toronto. The main point that should be taken from this is that newcomer immigrant youths face many of the same obstacles as international students do. Both groups of youth experience being away from their home countries and the culture shock of being in Canada. The TDSB website just focused on international students and accommodating their needs while there are other newcomer students who need that accommodation as well and in some cases might even need it more.

The SWIS and SEPT programs are good initiatives as they approach the problem from a different perspective. But they do not provide a long-term solution to this problem, rather they provide “short-term emotional counseling,”⁷⁵ This counseling usually involves family related issues that may result from cultural differences. For example, “some immigrant parents may hail from cultures where the norm is to tell a child what to do and expect obedience. This quickly erodes for the children socialized particularly in western culture where individual freedom is valued and rewarded” (Direnfeld, 2009). This approach is useful from a social perspective outside the classroom and it does assist in classroom performance. But, the availability of such programs “depend heavily if schools make facilities possible”⁷⁶ such as office space and supplies; making this program very

⁷⁵ SWIS, “SWIS Class Presentation”. York University. Vari Hall, Toronto. 21 April 2009

⁷⁶ Ibid.

limited in its nature and scope. In order to solve this issue and encourage the existence of such useful school programs, the TDSB must greatly improve and change its assessment approach. In addition, the TDSB website advertises its schools as very accepting of international students and a very “rewarding experience” (TDSB website, 2009). The website also mentions the tuition fees required and school locations but there is no way of finding out how any credits will be assessed. I believe a prospective student should know such important information beforehand.

During the OCASI panel, it was mentioned that they had not done any research or looked into the issue of high school accreditation. The reason they had not done any research or looked into this matter was because the government did not allocate any funds for them to do research in this area. This is a very important issue that affects many newcomers coming to high school in Canada and more attention should be paid to it. Here are some recommendations to improve the current situation:

- To train teachers to be more culturally sensitive to students. This does not mean that all the teachers have to be of an ethnic background, but should have a general understanding and acceptance of different cultures and practices.
- Not putting emphasis on the fact a student is a newcomer, like making them walk out of class to attend English as a Second Language (ESL) classes. Such school practice make the newcomer feel alienated to the rest of the class and hinders any socializing.
- Guidance counselors should not be given discretionary power when assessing newcomer immigrant/refugee students as well as international students. There could be many personal biases that affect the outcome of the credit assessment.

- An alternative would be to have a standard list of requirements for all students regardless of their nationality. Just because a student is from a third world country does not mean that they lack the skills to excel academically in Canada. This applies to English skills as well; there are private schools that teach students English perfectly in developing countries.
- Instead of having select schools that accept international students, all schools should be willing to accept them. There should be no reason for 'select' schools to admit them. Allowing international students in all schools will allow the TDSB to gain as much as possible of what international students have to offer. The same should apply to newcomer immigrant/refugee students as well.
- The concept of SWIS and SEPT in the TDSB and Catholic School Boards should be allowed more access to schools. Even if all schools can not afford to provide office space for SWIS programs, at least they should make accommodations for seminars and assemblies for students at least once or twice a year.
- Currently, according to the TDSB website, only a select few schools accept newcomer international students. In order for the TDSB to be fully accepting of diversity, all public schools under the board should be open to accepting international students.
- Just like international students in Canada, newcomer immigrant/refugee students should have accommodations made for them in public schools. The TDSB needs to address this issue and mention it on their website as well.
- The problem of integration of newcomer youths in Canadian high schools is not a new concept, as Canada is known as an immigrant accepting nation. Therefore,

funding by the government should be made available to organizations such as OCASI and the SWIS & SEPT programs to solve the current problems and prevent similar problems in the future.

It is clear that a lot of work still has to be done to address the needs of newcomer students. The recognition of high school credentials is an important aspect of the overall success and social as well as emotional well being of students. It is important for the state to fund programs that would help better serve immigrants, especially when effective programs have been shown to work in various settings across various jurisdictions both within the GTA and around the world.

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