From your standpoint as an educational sociologist, what does “access to education” mean to you in 2014?

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Access to education is a notion that has evolved considerably since the Parent Report published in the 1960s, at which time advanced education was limited only to the social and economic elite. There was at that time though, a movement to throw open the doors of schools and facilitate access to education, an objective that has been reached. Today, democratization of education has largely been achieved as enrollment rates have significantly increased and limited barriers to post-secondary education are increasingly rare.

Back in 1960, it was extremely unusual for young people to go beyond the ninth grade, and for those who did, one would wonder what were the motivating factors underpinning their persistence. Given today’s accessibility, we now try to figure out why students don’t stay in school! The issue of accessibility as such and education for all has, in my opinion, been settled. The focal point now to achieve higher levels of schooling is perseverance. The aim of an eventual Parent report should be to instill the desire to stay in school as widely as possible. By that, I mean striving to develop, in the greatest number of people possible, a frame of mind—which the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu would probably have called a *habitus*—that would foster student persistence (intrinsic motivation). The new ideal in 2014 would therefore be to instill in everyone, at all levels of society, shared values associated with student persistence and lifelong learning.

While various factors of a psycho-pedagogical nature could prevent this ideal from being achieved, the greatest impediment, in my opinion, is social inequality. Some families don’t support their children’s academic career choices, not out of malice, but rather due to a lack of resources. Families with a single parent or struggling with unemployment or low income don’t always have the financial means to adequately support the schooling of their children. Because of that, they cannot easily adopt the values associated with student persistence and lifelong learning.

The situation is different in middle-class families. Some parents, who are so busy with their own career plans, lose the focus on their children’s education and offload their educational responsibilities onto the school, having at the same time an aggressive attitude towards the school. This attitude gives children a highly negative image of the institutional framework for essential learning and education; it can dampen the attraction of learning as a personal development tool throughout their lifetime.

For a six-year-old living in an underprivileged area, starting school can also be perceived as a form of emigration. In other words, it’s like moving from one society into another, requiring integration and adaptation to another environment and new values. It can have a negative impact on persistence when the differences between the original society and the family, and the host society and the school, are too great.

It can happen that once in college, young people with hard earned success, who come from families unable to promote the value of education, find themselves drained because of the lack of resources and of an intellectually supportive environment.
Access to Higher Education

Unfortunately, research on academic success and psycho-pedagogical factors tends to often take into account only the psycho-pedagogical factors.

These families transmit to their offsprings the idea that learning is stimulating and that not only will it provide them with a more comfortable life, but also a humanly richer one. With this in mind every family in Quebec, without exception, should support education in order to promote student persistence and perseverance.

The Scandinavian countries have risen to this challenge. I have opted for this comparison, because they resemble Quebec: small northern countries neighboring on powerful nations. Yet the Scandinavians have achieved a higher level of political maturity and a broader sense of sharing than we have. Their shared values include furthering education and the love of learning. These values are now integrated into their customs through social consensus. They deploy the resources necessary to share these persistence-related values and ensure they are shared. Moreover, while Scandinavian teachers are not paid more than ours, the profession is so highly regarded that young people are practically beating down the doors of faculties of education to get admitted to teacher-training programs. We need to draw inspiration from that.

I think that we are fully capable of putting into motion provincial measures to enhance persistence and, at the same time, the state of public schools. Since Quebec’s Quiet Revolution, we have accomplished the impossible in getting people to subscribe to new values promoting the province’s progress. Some examples that come to mind are universal access to health care, nationalization of electricity production, no-fault automobile insurance, school secularization, regionalization of school boards, education reform, and same-sex marriage. I think that we are able to go further now. What I propose related to university. What we have to aim for is to help everyone get to where they want to go and to equip them for lifelong learning. All paths in life should be equally valued. The government should focus more on personal success rather than on success as a provincial objective expressed as numbers. Rather than worrying about provincial statistics, our leaders should: make sure that each individual can complete his chosen journey; facilitate early detection of learning difficulties; and offer all the assistance necessary so that every individual can not only learn, but learn how to learn.

Moreover, it is not necessary to limit educational institutions. Everyone who needs to go to school should be able to do so and in the areas that suit them. This means letting people choose their own field of study and stressing the importance of every area, particularly technical and vocational training. I have the impression that, as things stand now, those educational streams are considered to be something to avoid. It is regrettable.

What other means should CEGEPS consider to facilitate access to higher education for the greatest number of people?

University prerequisites are among the greatest impediments to college accessibility. For students, college should represent a final opportunity to broaden and deepen their general education. College should provide students with the foundations of their humanity through intellectual and emotional training, enabling them to better appreciate what is beautiful, good, and true. College students are at a time in their lives when they shouldn’t be rushed to take a narrow, irreversible career path that will soon turn obsolete. The prerequisites imposed by universities wreck this opportunity for exploration and discovery by forcing students to make choices prematurely, which can spoil the entire school experience, from high school on, as a result of what I call the “domino effect of prerequisites”.

University faculties demand very specific prerequisites of colleges, which do the same thing to high schools. Instead of being an opportunity for students to develop in a field of their own choosing, colleges—because of prerequisites—have the means for selecting the strongest students and, of course, there is the well-known R score. While that probably facilitates the admission process for universities, it doesn’t really do justice to the potential of applicants. There should not be any prerequisites that must absolutely be mastered from one educational level to another, but rather options that students are free to choose on their own. Once in university, it is up to students to fill in any
gaps in their education required to pursue their chosen field of study.

The work/study relationship also needs to be re-examined. Working, especially more than 15 hours a week, while pursuing a college education can become a major distraction and cause student interest to flag. Couldn’t we consider providing more generous funding, better allocation programs, and financial aid that would free students from having to earn money while at school? I propose a very simple solution that is more realistic than it would appear on the surface: all funding for postsecondary education, including student aid, should be generated through a tax on the profits of businesses that realize profits from hiring college and university graduates. In other words, there would be a kind of royalty proportional to a business’s need for qualified employees in order to increase its productivity and profits.

Moreover, to throw the doors of schools open even further; we could opt for greater diversity in educational streams, specifically, making more room for self-directed learning, distance learning, MOOCs, and so on. Why don’t Quebec educational institutions take the initiative, like Stanford and Berkeley, to facilitate access to education that is not classroom based: solutions such as Cégep à distance; and such as the Université du Québec à Rimouski, which offers an undergraduate degree in vocational education entirely via distance learning? Furthermore, contrary to all expectations for this last program, the level of satisfaction of the online instructor–student relationship was quite high, indeed. The idea is that CEGEPs would no longer have to provide cutting-edge, “how-to” training courses, which rapidly become obsolete. In other words, it’s the kind of training that equips the person to “hit the ground running.” With the dazzling development of production technologies, job categories will quickly disappear, which will result in many changes and readjustments. Frey and Osborne (2013) at the University of Oxford state that, within 20 years, 47% of jobs in all sectors will be automated, which means that human work will be replaced by computers. CEGEPs must therefore stop training students for specific trades or technical jobs and rather deliver basic technical training in broad sectors of activities such as mechanics, aeronautics, or the chemical industry. In doing so, CEGEPs would be facilitating reorientation and retraining, which will be increasingly needed. It would then fall to businesses to provide the “how-to” type of training to make employees immediately functional, a bit like in Germany’s dual education system.

Indeed, in your book, you propose “disconnecting” CEGEP from the labor market by limiting technical training there to basic technical training and letting business take care of specific technical training (2013, p. 41–42). That’s a rather audacious suggestion! What is your basis for it?

You often refer to the “healthy and normal indecision” of CEGEP students (2013, p. 184, 190). Could you explain to our readers what that means? How can this concept relate to accessibility and student persistence at the college level?

The work of employment has significantly changed as the result of market globalization, globalization of economies, and changes in production technologies. Consequently, this has shaken the world of paid employment, which is now characterized by precariousness and technological/computer changes. This means that young people are less and less able to plan their lives linearly, as was the case in the past. Since businesses can no longer guarantee sustainable employment, new models and new meanings related to working life are appearing. Today’s young people have grown up in this climate of uncertainty and have learned to deal with the instability and impermanence. So, what might appear as indecision on their part is rather an intuitive, empirical way of adjusting to a context that is vague, changing, and resistant to planning.

In CEGEP, it is still considered that taking more than two and a half years to complete pre-university education is not normal. No one seems to have put this administrative sophistry into question. Today, however, taking time at CEGEP should be considered as one way for an individual to broaden the base of their general training by multiplying and diversifying their experiences. This could have the effect of promoting the development of adaptability as an aptitude to adjust to increasingly variable life situations. Therefore, CEGEPs must be “disconnected”—not only from university prerequisites, but also from the labor market—so as to shift the college level towards a deepened general culture, sort of a last chance for humanism. Pierre Bourgault rightly said that people rarely remember their time at university, but that they are often nostalgic about their CEGEP days.

1 For more detailed information about MOOCs, see “Exploring new frontiers in access to higher education: the case of MOOCs” in this issue of Pédagogie collégiale.
enterprises can no longer guarantee job security, it should accept an educational system aimed at preparing students to deal with the insecurity and the unpredictability of work. Furthermore, this new division of vocational- and technical-training responsibilities should be handled by three-party agreements between CEGEPs, as the disseminators of education and educational specialists, the unions, to safeguard future workers, and the industries.

Postscript

I often say that my role as an educational sociologist consists in leading people from the educational setting to looking at the dark side of the moon and analyzing educational realities from a different perspective. That often leads me to think of what Jacques Ferron called in L’amélanchier “the other side of things.” It could also be said that this is a dialectic vision of education: so while school people usually operate according to the dominant thesis of educational realities at a given time, I have always liked to take emerging social and educational trends into account. While teachers believe that a child entering school is embarking on an educational path, I proposed considering it as an emigration process with all that that entailed. 

REFERENCES


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