

The School Experience of Montréal Secondary School Students of South Asian Origin

The current situation and prospects for action
conductive to their success in school

Key words

Academic success • Immigration • French secondary school • South Asia • Montréal

Summary

Students from South Asia have the lowest graduation rates of all immigrant students attending public secondary schools in Québec's French-language sector. This study deals with the socio-academic experience of these young people and the factors that influence them. Qualitative interviews with various stakeholders and partners in the province's education system - schools, families and communities - have revealed the existence of a large number of undereducated students among this group of young people. Research has highlighted, moreover, some resistance on the part of South Asian families to the provisions of Bill 101 that deal with schooling. It has also shown different levels of socio-academic integration among girls and boys in this group and also between Indian students as compared with their peers from other countries on the Indian sub-continent. Numerous factors prevent these students from being successful in Québec's French-language schools: late entry into the school system (i.e. only at the secondary level); cumulative academic delays; the disadvantaged socioeconomic status and language difficulties of their parents; the community's limited educational resources; and systemic prejudice with regard to the placement of these students upon their entry into the Québec school system.

Context

Students from many ethnic backgrounds attend Québec's French-language secondary schools. They include immigrants from North Africa and the Middle East, Central and South America, the Caribbean and Sub-Saharan Africa, East Asia, South Asia and Eastern Europe. Of these, students of South Asian origin (India, Bangladesh, Pakistan and Sri Lanka) exhibit the highest dropout rates, even when one adjusts for the frequency with which they leave Québec before the age of 15 (McAndrew, Ledent & Murdoch, 2011).

Quantitative research by Mahsa Bakhshaei (2011) has shown that the problematic profile of these students can be explained in part by the negative characteristics of their group. These characteristics are sociodemographic and linguistic in nature, as well as related to the schooling process. However, a qualitative study proved to be imperative for an in-depth understanding of these students' particularities and needs. This study is intended to document the academic and social experience of these young people, whether they are first- or second-generation immigrants, and sets out to answer the following questions:

- 1) What family, academic and social dynamics affect the academic success of these students?

- 2) What measures should be implemented to help them?

Methodology

This research project gave rise to a research study in two French-language secondary schools under the jurisdiction of the Commission scolaire de Montréal (CSDM). The two schools in question were selected because a large number of students of South Asian origin attend them.

We began by interviewing, singly or together, one or two members of each school's administration. We then turned to certain teachers and non-teaching staff members, conducting three or four individual or group interviews, based on the administrators' suggestions. These were followed by three individual or group interviews with Secondary IV or V students of South Asian origin. We tried to select first- and second-generation students from different South Asian countries, including boys and girls. We likewise put questions to representatives of various South Asian communities and to members of civic organizations who work with South Asian families (four individual interviews). Finally, we relied on certain organizations to interview four parents of South Asian origin. In all, we conducted 21 interviews with 29 respondents.

Highlights

Academic progress and performance

The school stakeholders interviewed said that a large number of their students of South Asian origin entered the Québec school system part way through their studies. However, their level of education at the start of secondary school varied widely. Indeed, with the exception of those students who completed some or all of their elementary education in Québec, many students of South Asian origin were identified as being under-educated by the time they made the transition to secondary school. In other words, they were three or more years behind where they should have been, based on Québec standards. These students often spend

over two years in welcoming classes and the majority of them take programs leading to a Certificate in Life Skills and Work Skills Education. Given the differences between South Asian languages and French, the "educated" students, for their part, generally remained in these classes for two years. When they reached the ages of 16 or 17, the teachers said, fewer of them pursue the study of French. After a year or two in a welcoming class, they prefer to continue their studies in English in the adult education sector; or they drop out.

With regard to academic performance, school stakeholders stress the fact that students of South Asian origin do not constitute a homogeneous group. They adduce such variables as sex and country of origin as factors that set these students apart from one another - to the advantage, for the most part, of girls and students of Indian origin.

Social integration

With regard to social integration, the school and community stakeholders we spoke to were unanimous in stating that students of South Asian origin often stick together and speak to one another first in their mother tongue, and then in English and French - in that order - especially in disadvantaged areas. In contrast to the situation with academic performance, where girls have the upper hand, our respondents were of the opinion that boys are in a better position when it comes to social integration due to the greater freedom they enjoy. The students we interviewed all said they liked their school and they brought up, in this connection, the problems of their peers in welcoming classes, where they are apparently isolated and without much support or supervision. Some students from a less disadvantaged area exhibited some resistance to the sections of Bill 101 that pertain to schooling and would prefer to have the option of attending school in English. The parents, for their part, believe that it is important that their children attend schools that are less multiethnic and segregated. In addition, most parents would prefer that their children have access to English schooling.

Explanations

The main factors that negatively impact the academic success of students of South Asian origin seem to be related to their **educational paths**: entry into the Québec school system only at the secondary level; arrival part way through secondary school; cumulative academic delays following immigration; time spent in welcoming classes; and problems with French.

Moreover, there is a broad consensus to the effect that most of these students come from families with a low or very low **socioeconomic status**. Most of the respondents, including the students and parents stressed the parents' low level of education and their busy work schedules as factors that have a negative impact on the students' academic success. All the respondents agreed that families of South Asian origin tend to choose English over French as their **second language**. English is also the language they are most familiar with, even if a large number of parents from this region speak neither of these two languages.

Various respondents cited low socioeconomic status and poor language skills to explain South Asian **parents' limited involvement and participation** in their children's school life. Nonetheless, a number of respondents mentioned the promotion of education and the respect accorded to teachers as positive cultural factors that foster the academic success of young people of South Asian origin. However, many stakeholders expressed concern over the frequency with which students of South Asian origin visit their countries of origin during the school year. This situation, they said, seems inconsistent with the parents' high expectations for their children's education. All the respondents identified **differences between what is expected of boys and girls** as factors that can have different ramifications for young people's academic performance and social integration.

The most plausible systemic explanation for the problematic integration of South Asian students in French schools concerns the insufficient quantity and poor quality of **the school's relationships with their parents**. According to the

teachers, this is connected not only to the socioeconomic challenges facing these parents and their limited understanding of French, but also to the fact that the school does not have a budget sufficient to provide for outreach activities directed at them. Moreover, there are no South Asian **community organizations** with a mandate to facilitate such a relationship.

Another possible systemic explanation concerns the **placement of students upon their entry** into the Québec school system. Some of them are mistakenly identified as undereducated, or placed at levels below their prior learning, and this is due to a lack of sensitivity to the linguistic or cultural biases that may play a role in initial placement. On the other hand, some teachers mentioned a reluctance to identify new arrivals who have trouble learning as "students with handicaps, social maladjustments or learning disabilities". On the other hand, there is reason for optimism in the view expressed by a broad segment of our respondents that South Asian students are not subject to **discrimination** in their day-to-day relationships in school.

Contributions with regard to intervention

On the basis of this exploration of the experience of students of South Asian origin in two Montréal secondary schools, the report proposes five courses of action for various stakeholders.

- 1) To help school and community stakeholders develop a knowledge of South Asian students and families and of the specific problems they have to contend with:

Information on the prevailing situation in their countries of origin, as well as on the emigration process as experienced by the families could contribute to a better understanding of the strengths and weaknesses within this community and of the problems that some of its students encounter. An in-depth study of the differences in socialization between boys and girls, and their impact on socio-scholastic integration, also seems essential.

- 2) To provide more support toward the francisation of parents of South Asian origin as well as toward the development of positive attitudes to French by the students and their parents:

It is important, first of all, to increase the number of measures likely to help parents of South Asian origin learn French and to offer more strategies designed to convince them of the importance of learning the language. Approaches promoting the use of French among students of South Asian origin must also be developed. If they are to be effective, these approaches must stress the complementarity - not the opposition - of languages and involve all the school's partners, particularly families and community organizations.

- 3) To encourage the establishment within the South Asian community of organizations focusing on integration in the host country and support to ensure that students enjoy a successful school experience. Formal ties between these organizations and the school system should also be developed:

The MICC and MELS should work with organizations in the South Asian community to ensure that they pay special attention to the question of the schooling of the community's young people. Multiethnic organizations that support the academic success of students of immigrant origin also need to develop their own specific approaches toward the children in the South Asian community.

- 4) To foster the development of better cooperation between the school and families of South Asian origin:

The use of documentation in South Asian languages, as well as recourse to interpreters, appear necessary to offset the poor understanding of French within the community. Less "bookish" and more dynamic instruments (e.g. video clips) must be developed for parents.

- 5) To improve the quality of the services provided to allophone students or students

with learning difficulties, and to work against the processes that lead to exclusion.

The most important recommendation pertains to increased support for the learning of French and more resources designed for this purpose, particularly for undereducated students in secondary school. It is also important to prevent the exclusion often experienced by students in welcoming classes, who are isolated in certain sections (sometimes even in the basements) of the schools in question. A final course of action concerns the development of evaluation competencies among teachers and non-teaching professionals so that, in their dealings with students of immigrant origin, they do not place students with handicaps, social maladjustments or learning disabilities in welcoming classes, or unduly keep students of immigrant origin in welcoming classes when they could benefit from integration into regular classes. Improved evaluation skills should ensure that students with handicaps, social maladjustments or learning disabilities are properly evaluated.

References

Bakhshaei, M., Mc Andrew, M., Georgiou, T. (2012). *Le vécu scolaire des élèves montréalais originaires de l'Asie du Sud au secondaire : État de la situation et perspectives pour une intervention en faveur de leur réussite*. Final report submitted to the ministère de l'Éducation, du Loisir et du Sport. Montréal: Ministère de l'Éducation, du Loisir et du Sport.

Bakhshaei, M. (2011). *La réussite scolaire des élèves issus de l'immigration au secondaire: portrait des jeunes Québécois originaires de l'Asie du Sud, secteur français*. Research report. Ministère de l'Éducation, du Loisir et du Sport, Direction des services aux communautés culturelles.

Mc Andrew, M., Ledent, J. & Murdoch, J. (with R. Ait-Saïd) (2011). *La réussite scolaire des jeunes québécois issus de l'immigration au secondaire*. Final report submitted to the ministère de l'Éducation, du Loisir et du Sport. Montréal: Ministère de l'Éducation, du Loisir et du Sport.

Translated by:

- Direction de la communauté anglophone, Services langagiers, Ministère de l'Éducation, du Loisir et du Sport