



CSSHE
SCÉES

Canadian Journal of Higher Education
Revue canadienne d'enseignement supérieur
Volume 36, No. 1, 2006, pages 103 - 111
www.ingentaconnect.com/content/csshe/cjhe

Book Reviews / Comptes rendus

Sweet, R. & Anisef, P., Eds. (2005) *Preparing for post-secondary education: New roles for governments and families*. Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press. 440 pages. Price \$80.00 CAD (hard cover).

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The main theme of this book is access to post-secondary education in post-budget-balancing Canada. The authors' main line of argument is that Canadian families are being required to provide both a greater share of the rising financial costs of post-secondary education, and a higher level of "social capital" (i.e., social and academic skills) for their children in order for the children to successfully compete for admission to, and successfully complete post-secondary education programs.

The focus of concern is that the increased level of both monetary and social capital contributions that families are increasingly being required to provide will produce greater inequities in the distribution of post-secondary admissions and program completions in Canadian society. In particular, children from the lower socio-economic classes may be increasingly excluded from post-secondary education opportunities, thus leaving them with fewer opportunities for meaningful participation in an economic system that increasingly requires post-secondary credentials for access to well-paying jobs. The sub-text of the book is fairly clear: the authors want to show that when the federal and provincial governments cut funding to post-secondary education during their various neo-liberal or neo-conservative budget-balancing exercises of the 1990s, they did the wrong thing.

The "back-story" may be briefly summarized as follows. During the 1990s, both federal and provincial governments in Canada felt a need to balance their budgets. The federal government cut transfer payments to the provinces drastically. The provincial governments, who were having fiscal problems of their own, couldn't keep up with the rising costs of post-secondary education, so universities and colleges began raising tuition fees to make up the difference,

also drastically in some cases. Non-repayable grants and bursaries funded by federal and provincial governments all but dried up, and the Canada Student Loan Plan became more selective. This left students and their parents to pay for a bigger share of the cost of their education than had previously been the case, either through savings or other public or private loan arrangements. The federal government set up the Millennium Scholarship Foundation, intended to alleviate student debt levels, and the Canadian Educational Savings Grant program, intended to augment existing registered educational savings plans. But reaction to the Millennium Scholarship Foundation has not been favorable, and low-income families have not participated in the Canadian Educational Savings Grant program in large numbers. As well, low-income families seem resistant to taking on debt. Hence, there is concern that many young people, especially young people from low-income families, may be frozen out of post-secondary education as a result of the new financial arrangements.

Meanwhile, merely having the money to pay the tuition fees and other costs that students are expected to bear is no longer enough. Because of the post-secondary institutions' financial shortfall (or government policy as the case may be) the number of available student places in post-secondary educational institutions in Canada has not kept up with demand, so admission is becoming more and more competitive. Parents are realizing this and, as a result, are beginning to perceive the elementary and secondary school systems as more competitive also. One's own children need to do better in school than other parents' children to ensure their admission to preferred post-secondary institutions and programs. Hence, many parents are taking whatever steps they can to give their children an edge in elementary and/or secondary school.

This parental involvement typically includes encouraging the children to participate in community and extra-curricular activities, initiating and maintaining contact with the school and their children's teachers, and providing support at home for homework and study. Privately operated tutoring services are also growing in number and one franchise chain has actually advertised that their service can give your children an advantage in school. (This last point is not mentioned in the book.) The concern here is that some parents, especially low-income parents, may not have the post-secondary experience, the ability, the time and/or the money to help their children in these increasingly necessary ways. As a result, their children may not develop the kinds of social and academic skills they need to successfully complete secondary school, gain admission to university or college, and then complete university or college.

The book, which is a collection of twelve chapters written by various authors, purports to report results from a *Survey of approaches to educational planning* (SAEP). The SAEP project was a national study of educational planning in Canadian families. Data were collected in 1999 through a survey of 34,000 households. The survey was conducted by Statistics Canada and produced a sample of families with 18,000 children ages 0-18. The project had two purposes: to inform policy-making by Human Resources Development Canada

(now Human Resources and Skill Development Canada), the federal government agency responsible for implementing the Canadian Educational Savings Grant program, and to examine the nature and extent of parents' involvement in their children's schooling (p. 6). The questionnaire had three broad aims: (1) "to examine parents' educational aspirations for their children," (2) "to gauge parents' awareness of the financial prerequisites and the scope and nature of their financial plans and intentions," and (3) "to examine the pattern of parents' involvement in their children's schooling" (p. 6).

Regrettably, the introductory chapter does not make adequately clear the nature of the relationship between the authors and Statistics Canada and/or Human Resources Development Canada. Did the authors help to conceptualize and plan the project? Did they develop the 1999 questionnaire? Or were they contracted merely to analyze the survey data on behalf of Statistics Canada? Did they pay a fee to Statistics Canada to have access to data from a project planned and carried out by others who had previously carried out analyses for their own purposes? Perhaps the data were made available to them under the Data Liberation Project? When the acknowledgments page thanks the CESP staff for "valuable comments" as well as sponsoring "a workshop in 2002 that helped shape the chapters in the present volume," one begins to wonder about the nature and extent of government involvement and/or interference in the project. Was the survey conceptualized by the federal government as market research for the Canadian Educational Savings Grant program? That is, to help sell the savings grant program, as opposed to judging its value? The reader wants and needs more information about these relationships in order better to assess whether the work presented represents genuine scholarly activity, whether the authors are merely ghostwriting for a government agency, or something in between. (I have done enough contract research work for both the federal and provincial governments to know the kind of tightrope one sometimes needs to walk in order to work with them.)

In the same vein, it is regrettable that the book does not provide any biographical information about the authors. We don't even know, for example, the institutional connections of the authors. Are they from universities? Are some of them from Statistics Canada or Human Resource Development Canada? Are they sociologists? Economists? Educators? We don't know. Again, this oversight makes it difficult for the reader to assess the reliability of the book. The exception is that some biographical information is provided about the two editors, but only on the back, inside flap of the book jacket, not in the book itself.

With regard to the easing the increasing financial burdens on families, the scope of the research seems unnecessarily narrow. This is probably because of the involvement of the people from the Canadian Educational Savings Grant program, who have a particular product to promote. In addition, the federal government has limited constitutional and political options available to use when it comes to intervening in provincial areas of responsibility such as

education, one of which is to give money to parents or students. Hence, the financial issue has been presented as being merely about whether the parents are saving money for their children's post-secondary education, how much, whether the savings to be equitably distributed among the children, and how a federal savings grant program can help. This is not to say that the savings grant program is not important. Rather, it is to say that it is not the only option we should examine.

A significant factor that has been largely overlooked is whether or not the children are helping to finance their own education by working in the summers, or part-time during the academic year. The notion of students working to help pay their way through post-secondary education is mentioned only in passing in Chapter 1, and then doesn't appear again until Chapter 8 where it gets another brief mention. After that, I don't recall it coming up again. My experience has been that many students do, in fact, rely on their summer and part-time earnings, and it may be a very desirable thing that they do contribute in this way. This factor cannot simply be ignored in what purports to be a major study of how families finance post-secondary education.

In the same vein, another issue that is virtually ignored is the question of whether post-secondary education must be taken as full-time, continuous years until completion, or whether the structure of post-secondary programs should be reworked to make it much easier for students to drop out for a semester or two to work full-time while continuing to study part-time. As a child of a two-parent family of five children with parents of modest means, who became a single parent family of even more modest means, I can vouch for the viability of the latter option. I entered university in 1960, and studied on both a full-time and part-time basis, as well as spending 30 months abroad, until I finally graduated from my undergraduate program in 1969, with only a small amount of student debt. Yes, I did receive some non-repayable grants in the first two years, but various full-time, part-time and combination options may help resolve the financial issue. At least we need to talk about and research optional patterns.

Following the introductory chapter by the editors, the book is divided into two sections. Part 1 deals with the relationship between public and private study costs, and presents an overview and critique of policy in this area, providing a national and international context. Part two is devoted mainly to an examination of the data from the survey.

A highlight of Part 1 is chapter 2, which attempts to develop and test a model of the relationship between demand and capacity in post-secondary education. The results are very interesting, including some counter-intuitive results.

Not all of the authors are in complete agreement with each other. For example, in Chapter 1, the editors admit, "Research is equivocal on the relationship between family income and post-secondary participation," though they do follow up by saying, "preliminary evidence suggests that post-secondary access for low-income families has suffered in the years of 'fiscal restraint'" (p. 4).

The authors of Chapter 4 are much more strident in declaring that “there is little doubt that private costs and participation in higher education are directly related” (p. 87). They cite only one of the two studies cited by the editors in this regard, presumably the one that agrees with their own views, but not the other, presumably the study that arrived at a different conclusion.

Chapter four presents a useful comparison of post-secondary funding policies in Canada, Australia, and four European countries: Denmark, the Netherlands, Sweden and the United Kingdom. The authors explicitly exclude the United States from this comparison because, as they explain in an endnote, the American post-secondary system is different from ours, and the analysis would be too complex. In other words, the tiered system of universities and colleges in the U.S., including private, not for profit universities and proprietary institutions makes a comparison between Canada and the United States too difficult. This omission is very unfortunate, given the reluctant conclusion arrived at by the author of Chapter 6, that our Canadian post-secondary education system is unlikely to become more equitable and that it will likely be “marked by greater institutional stratification” (p. 162). I take that to mean that our system is likely to become more multi-tiered, more like that of the United States. It may be true that the American post-secondary system is more complex than ours and this may or may not be adequate reason for exclusion; however, given the well-known strain of rabid anti-Americanism among some circles in Canadian academia, as well as an ideological rejection of anything other than government funded, single tier education and health care, one is left to speculate on whether there is not also an additional, unstated reason at play in the selection of countries from which data will be permitted. Have countries with socialist leanings been selected for inclusion, while a country with capitalistic leanings has been excluded for the purpose of furthering ideological ends? Given the context, this is a fair question for the reader to ask.

Chapter 5 examines the idea of Learning Accounts. This idea is related to the concept of lifelong learning, which apparently has evolved into a concept to be used for skill-formation and upgrading for adults in the new economy. While this is an important and interesting policy area to think about, this chapter really does not fit with the rest of the book.

Some interesting findings come from Chapter 7, which concludes that parents attempt to share their resources for post-secondary education equitably among their children, and Chapter 9, which argues that parental encouragement is a more useful measure of social capital than family structure. Chapter 11 views the mother as being principally responsible for children’s school adjustment and achievement. The father’s role is explicitly excluded. This is unfortunate, given current discourse relating to the role of fathers, the effects on children - especially boys, of absent fathers, and the increasing absence of male role models in schools, especially elementary schools but increasingly in secondary schools. Again, it is fair for the reader to question whether there is an ideological sub-text underlying this exclusion.

In Chapter 12, the editors' concluding chapter, I looked for, but did not find a concise and explicit consolidation of the various chapters' findings and conclusions with regard to the three broad aims of the questionnaire, which were to examine parental aspirations for their children's post-secondary education; parental awareness of financial costs of post-secondary education, and the scope and nature of their financial planning for it; and patterns of parental involvement in their children's schooling. Such a bringing together of disparate pieces of the puzzle from the various chapters, explicitly referring back to the original aims, would have been helpful.

Finally, a couple of quibbles. The title of the book, particularly the subtitle, does not seem to capture the essence of what the book is really about. Neither does the image of the bowl of thin alphabet soup on the front of the book jacket. The dollar signs floating in the spoon that is poised above the bowl give the impression that the content of the book is all about money. The image does not incorporate anything relating to the other main concern of the book, parental involvement in the development of social capital, or about post-secondary education for that matter. It has the aura of having been chosen from a discount image bank.

While *Preparing for post-secondary education: New roles for governments and families* has some shortcomings, it is a valuable contribution to the current discussion of access to post-secondary education in Canada, and should be read by people who are concerned about policy in this area, including academics, persons involved in the governance and administration of post-secondary institutions, student organizations and policy advisors, both within and outside of government. ♣