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EDUCATIONAL ASPIRATIONS OF VISIBLE MINORITY
IMMIGRANT YOUTH IN CANADA**

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RESILIENT TEENAGERS: EXPLAINING THE HIGH EDUCATIONAL ASPIRATIONS OF VISIBLE MINORITY IMMIGRANT YOUTH IN CANADA*

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Although schools may “damage” visible minority immigrant students in unseen ways, in general these students have high educational aspirations. National survey data from the 2000 *Youth in Transition Survey* (YITS) show that the educational aspirations of 15-year old visible minority immigrant Canadians are much higher than those of their native-born non-visible minority counterparts, even when we control for a wide range of socio-demographic, social psychological, and school performance factors. While these factors account for much of the observed difference between the aspirations of visible minority immigrant students and others, future research is required to better understand these differences and their implications for educational and occupational achievement.

** The 2000 Youth in Transition Survey (YITS) was conducted by Statistics Canada. The data analyzed in this paper were accessed via the Statistics Canada Research Data Centre at the University of Alberta. The opinions expressed in this paper are those of the authors, but do not necessarily reflect the views of Statistics Canada.*

Keywords: Educational Aspirations; Immigrants; Visible Minorities; Canadian Youth; High School.

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Introduction

Post-secondary enrollments in Canada have continued to rise over the past several decades, despite increasing tuition, as the belief that higher education is required for career success becomes ever more widespread (Bowlby & McMullen, 2002). National survey data from the 2000 *Youth in Transition Survey (YITS)* show that the educational aspirations of 15 year-old Canadians are very high. Despite concerns about the educational disadvantages faced by particular groups of visible minority youth (e.g., Dei, Mazucca, McIsaac, & Zine, 1997) and immigrant youth (Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 2001), it is noteworthy that the aspirations of visible minority immigrant youth who participated in this survey were even higher than those of their native-born non-visible minority peers. Employing YITS data, we attempt to explain these high aspirations by examining the relationship between visible minority immigrant teenagers' aspirations and a wide range of socio-demographic, school performance, and social psychological variables.

Situating Our Study

Three areas of research are particularly relevant for our study. The first documents the rising educational and occupational aspirations of Canadian youth, the second profiles visible minority and immigrant families in Canada, and the third explores the educational aspirations and experiences of visible minority and immigrant youth.

Educational aspirations and attainment of Canadian youth

Young people in Canada have high educational aspirations. For example, a 1996 province-wide Alberta study showed that 63% of 2681 grade 12 students planned to enter a post-secondary program in the fall, 16% planned to return to high school, and the remaining 21% had decided not to continue their education, at least in the short term (Lowe, Krahn, & Bowlby, 1997). Further, more than three-quarters of those planning a return to high school were in an academic program and hoped to enter the post-secondary system in the future. Of those intending to immediately enter the post-secondary system, 46% planned to go to university and another 30% expected to enter college.

The YITS national survey of 18 to 20 year-old youth (Bowlby & McMullen, 2002)¹ found high levels of post-secondary participation in 2000, although not quite as high as

the aspirations of the 12th grade students in the earlier Alberta study. Just over half of the YITS participants who were no longer in high school were attending a post-secondary educational institution. Close to half of this sub-group were in a community college or CEGEP, one-third were in university, and the remainder were registered in a wide range of other post-secondary institutions (p. 55). Therefore, compared to the more widespread university aspirations of 15 year-old YITS participants (discussed in more detail below), only 17% of 18 to 20 year-old Canadians were actually in university in 2000.

However, it is likely that a higher proportion of this cohort will eventually attend university. For example, a follow-up survey of participants in the 1996 Alberta study introduced above found that, by 2003, 32% of these 25 year-olds had acquired a university degree (Krahn, 2004). And there is strong evidence that higher educational (and occupational) aspirations translate into more extensive investments in post-secondary education and, in turn, into higher occupational attainment (Krahn & Lowe, 2002, p.122).

Researchers have identified a range of factors that appear to influence the educational aspirations of young people, including: gender; parents' socio-economic status, investment in educational resources, work values, aspirations for their child, and involvement/supervision; family structure; community size, grades and other indicators of student performance; student self-perceptions and attitudes toward school; and social support networks (Dinovitzer, Hagan, & Parker, 2003; Garg, Kauppi, Lewko, & Urajnik, 2002; Kao & Tienda, 1998; Lowe et al., 1997; Perron, 1997; Trusty, 1998). Specific to the educational aspirations of immigrants and ethnic/racialized groups, Perron (1997) and Dinovitzer et al. (2003) refer, respectively, to ethnic identity and age at immigration as influential factors.

Visible Minority and Immigrant Families in Canada

Today, a majority of immigrants to Canada come from non-traditional source countries and are members of visible minority groups (Anisef & Kilbride, 2004). Between 1991 and 2001, the top three global regions for Canadian immigrants were Eastern Asia, Southern Asia, and South-East Asia (Statistics Canada, 2001). Almost eight in ten recent immigrants to Toronto and seven in ten recent immigrants to Montreal were visible minorities (Chard & Renaud, 2000). In 2001, Chinese, South Asian, and Black Canadians represented close to two-thirds of the visible minority population (Statistics Canada, 2001).

Beiser, Shik and Curyk (1999) report that “family class” and “independent class” immigrants represent approximately 90% of the total immigrants entering the country each year, with refugees comprising the remainder. Most immigrants settle in large urban centres (Reitz, 2000). On average, adult immigrants have higher education levels than native-born Canadians, partly because of selective immigration policy in recent decades (Lam, 1994). Based on its *Longitudinal Survey of Immigrants to Canada*, Statistics Canada (2003) reported that 69% of newcomers aged 25 to 44 years who arrived in Canada between October 2000 and September 2001 had a university education—compared to 22% of the Canadian-born population in the same age group. However when they enter the workforce, immigrants often find that their foreign credentials are under-valued (Krahn, Derwing, Mulder & Wilkinson, 2000; Bauder, 2003). A number of recent studies have documented a decline in immigrants’ earnings relative to native-born Canadians, and an increase in poverty among immigrants, over the past few decades (Reitz, 2000; Picot, 2004).

Analysis of data from the *National Longitudinal Study of Children and Youth* (NLSCY) found that more than 30% of all immigrant children live in families whose total income falls below the official poverty line (Beiser et al., 1999). Milan and Tran (2004) add that 44% of Black children compared to 19% of non-Blacks live in low-income households. Visible minority and immigrant children are therefore more likely to be living in poverty than are their native-born counterparts. Anisef and Kilbride (2004, p. 16) suggest that “ethnic resilience” or the ability to achieve unusually good adaptation in the face of severe stress and family stability may help foster personal achievement. Close community ties can also provide support to immigrant and visible minority groups. However, Li (2004, p. 187) points to the costs associated with social capital and cautions that it “cannot replace other forms of capital to produce economic opportunities and outcomes beyond the confines of material resources.”

Educational aspirations and experiences of visible minority and immigrant youth

Despite increased likelihood of economic disadvantage, research suggests that visible minority and immigrant youth in Canada have high educational expectations. One of the earliest studies on the topic, Anisef et al.’s (2000) longitudinal study of 1973 Ontario high school graduates, revealed that sample members from non-white racial and ethnic minority groups had high aspirations and that, in most

cases, these young people fulfilled these aspirations (p. 170). Using 1991 Census data, Davies and Guppy (1998) show that visible minorities in Canada are more likely to continue in post-secondary education, after controlling for gender, region, mother's birthplace, family structure, and parental socio-economic status. In fact, a recent survey of applicants to Ontario universities found that 34% were from visible minority groups (Council of Ontario Universities, 2002). Since 2001 Census data show that visible minority groups comprised only 19% of Ontario's population, it appears that they are overrepresented in these institutions (Statistics Canada, 2001).

Lam (1994) points out that there are ethnic variations in educational aspirations and attainment. He notes, for example, that individuals of Jewish or Chinese origin were two to three times more likely than the national average to have completed a university education. Black youth were also slightly above the national average, despite their lower socio-economic background. Similarly, 1988-94 US data from the *National Educational Longitudinal Study* show variations across racial/ethnic groups in educational aspirations (Kao & Tienda, 1998). For example, the proportion of grade 10 Asian students aspiring to one or more university degrees was higher than the proportion of White students. These authors also report that, among males who aspired to graduate school in tenth grade, Asians were most likely to maintain their aspirations in the next few years while Blacks were least likely.

Some studies refer to parental expectations when explaining the high aspirations of immigrant and visible minority youth. For example, Anisef et al. (2000, p. 164) suggest that, for racial minority parents in the 1970s, education was perceived as the instrument that would remove barriers to achievement. In a later study of 60 young adults, James (1993) echoes the idea that Black men and women have high career aspirations and that education is seen as a key strategy for achieving these aspirations. He writes: "some youth believed that they could get around racism and achieve their career goals if they made the right contacts, obtained the appropriate educational qualifications, worked harder and proved themselves" (p. 8). However, differences across groups must be acknowledged. For example, Peng and Wright (1994) argue that Asian American parents set higher expectations than all other parents—in their study, 80% expected their child to achieve at least a bachelor's degree. These studies suggest that some visible minority members believe they may compensate for the liabilities of minority group status by overachieving scholastically (cf. Kao & Tienda, 1998).

Despite the aggregate evidence of high investments in post-secondary education by visible minorities and immigrants there is also extensive research documenting the barriers faced by some of these groups within the school system (e.g., Anisef & Kilbride, 2004; Dei et al., 1997; James, 1993; Kilbride, 2000; Watt and Roessingh, 2001). Authors highlight, among other barriers, the absence of visible minority teachers, lower expectations held by teachers and counselors, "colour-coded" streaming, Eurocentric curricula, values conflicts, and language issues (Dei et al., 1997; Kilbride, 2000).

Dei et al. (1997) focus on the disengagement of Black youth in Toronto schools, citing a school district survey which showed that 36% of Blacks (compared to 26% of Whites and 18% of Asians) were at risk of dropping out because of failure to accumulate sufficient credits to graduate (p. 10). In their examination of 1991 Canadian census data, Davies and Guppy (1998, pp. 139-40) find that while "Asians appear to have above average educational attainment, Blacks have mixed attainment (above-average high school completion rates; below-average university completion rates); and Aboriginals rank near or at the bottom on all measures." Studies of English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) students in Alberta find that high school completion rates are much lower among ESL students than in the non-ESL population (Derwing, DeCorby, Ichikawa, & Jamieson, 1999), and that ESL learners disappear from the system in the early years of high school at triple the rate of the general population (Watt & Roessingh, 2001).

Kao & Tienda (1998) observe that previous US research has either emphasized the extent to which negative experiences undermine the educational aspirations of minority youth or highlighted the characteristics that promote high educational aspirations. Our literature review has revealed the same pattern among Canadian studies. Furthermore, previous Canadian research has, by necessity, typically focused on relatively small sub-samples of students in different communities and regions. The availability of the YITS database allows us to utilize a large, nationally representative sample to examine in detail the educational aspirations of visible minority immigrant youth and the factors that influence these aspirations.

Research Design and Measurement of Core Concepts

In this study we examine the educational aspirations of 15 year-old Canadians. YITS respondents, randomly selected from a representative cluster sample of over 1,100

Canadian schools, completed questionnaires in class in April/May of 2000. A parallel telephone survey collected family-related information from parents of these 15-year-olds. The 26,063 teenagers included in this unique student-parent database represent a Canadian population of more than 348,000 15 year-olds in 2000.² While we use information provided by both students and parents (weighted up to provide population estimates) in our analysis, the student (rather than the family) remains the unit of analysis.³

YITS participants were asked: *“What is the highest level of education that you would like to get?”* and were instructed to *“mark all that apply”* from a set of seven standardized responses that ranged from *“less than high school”* to *“more than one university degree.”* The inclusion of *“more than one university degree”* among the fixed response categories probably led to higher reported post-secondary aspirations than we might have observed if this category had been omitted. However, other research on high school seniors also reveals very high educational aspirations among 17 and 18-year-olds (Lowe et al., 1997). Hence, we should not be surprised by even higher aspirations among 15-year-olds, many of whom would not be fully aware of the costs and entrance requirements for university. Parents of YITS participants were asked: *“What is the highest level of education that you hope [child’s name] will get?”* and were offered the same response categories.⁴

Parents of YITS participants were also asked about the immigration status (born in Canada or elsewhere) of their child and themselves. Only 9% of the 15-year-old sample participants were born outside of Canada while 22% of the (responding) parents had been born outside of Canada.⁵ Parents were also asked about their child’s and their own *“cultural or racial background.”* While detailed responses (e.g., South Asian, Black, Chinese, Aboriginal) were recorded, Statistics Canada subsequently suppressed this information to maintain confidentiality and replaced it with a derived *“visible minority”* measure (for both parent and child), with *“visible minority”* defined as *“persons who are identified according to the Employment Equity Act as being non-Caucasian in race or non-white in colour.”*⁶ Based on this derived variable, 13% of all 15-year-old YITS participants were identified as belonging to a visible minority group. A majority of both first- and second-generation immigrant youth were classified as members of a visible minority group (66% and 52%, respectively). This is the pattern we would expect, given the non-traditional source countries for recent immigrants to Canada.

Since the concept / category that really interests us is “visible minority immigrant,” we constructed a new three-category variable that distinguished between: (1) visible minority immigrants (VMI) (1st or 2nd generation,⁷ based on either parent, if applicable); (2) individuals who were native-born and not a member of a visible minority group (NBNVM); and (3) a “mixed” category containing non-immigrant members of visible minority groups (e.g., 4th generation Chinese-Canadians) as well as non-visible minority immigrants (e.g., a White teenager who had immigrated with his or her family from Australia). Twelve percent of the teenage YITS participants were in the VMI category, 11% were in the “mixed” group, and 75% were NBNVM youth (2% could not be classified because of missing data).

A number of other variables containing information provided by either YITS participants or their parents were used to index other key concepts in our analysis. The source and measurement metrics for these variables are noted when we introduce them in our analyses that follow.

Findings

Post-secondary educational aspirations

One in four YITS participants (27%) stated that they would like to complete a university degree, while 34% said they hoped to acquire two or more university degrees (Figure 1). Thus, in total, six out of ten (61%) of these 15-year-olds aspired to a university education. One in six (16%) said they wanted to complete college (including CEGEP), but considerably fewer (only 6%) reported that they hoped to acquire a technical college diploma. The same proportion (6%) reported aspirations that did not extend beyond high school (including a small number who said they did not expect to finish high school), but 11% answered “don’t know.”

Female teens had higher aspirations; 39% of the young women in this study indicated they would like to complete a second university degree, compared to 30% of male respondents (results not displayed). If we combine the proportions aspiring to one and two degrees, we find that two-thirds (67%) of the female respondents, compared to just over half (55%) of the young men, hoped to complete at least one university degree. Male respondents were a bit more likely to aspire to college or technical school diplomas, or to simply say that high school would be sufficient for them.⁸

Figure 1

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[Figures and Tables.pdf](#)

Parents' aspirations for their children were also high (results not shown), but not quite as high as their children's aspirations. Specifically, while similar proportions of parents and teenagers (64% and 61%, respectively) mentioned a university education, fewer parents (only 16%, compared to 34% of the 15-year-olds) were hoping their child would acquire two or more degrees. In turn, a somewhat higher proportion of parents (26%, compared to only 16% of their children) mentioned a college/CEGEP education. Only 7% of the parents interviewed hoped their child would complete a technical school program, and even fewer (3%) reported aspirations that did not extend beyond high school.

Figure 2

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Visible minority and immigrant status effects on aspirations

Figure 2 shows that over three-quarters (77%) of (first generation) immigrant youth aspired to a university education (26% one degree; 51% two or more degrees), compared to 60% of native-born sample members (27% one degree; 33% two or more degrees). In turn, native-born YITS respondents were more likely to aspire to a college/CEGEP or technical school education.

Not surprisingly, since a majority of the immigrant youth were members of visible minority groups, we also observe that visible minority youth were more likely than their non-visible minority peers to hope to complete a university degree (78% and 59%, respectively). Thus, while Canadian teenagers have very high post-secondary aspirations, visible minority and immigrant youth have exceptionally high aspirations.

Using the three-category variable described earlier, we find that 79% of the VMI group hoped to acquire a university education (one or more degrees), compared

Figure 3

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to 68% of the “mixed” group, and 57% of the NBNVM respondents (results not shown). Parents of VMI youth had even higher aspirations for their children; 88% hoped their child would acquire a university education, compared to 71% of the parents of the “mixed” group and 59% of the parents of NBNVM teenagers. However, when parents were asked: *“have you or your partner done anything specific to ensure that [your child] will have money for further education after high school,”* VMI parents were only slightly more likely to say “yes” than NBNVM parents (69% vs. 64%).⁹

When we examine the relationship between visible minority immigrant status and teenage aspirations separately for female and male respondents, we observe the higher aspirations among female respondents that we noted earlier. However, we continue to find a strong “visible minority immigrant” effect among both male and female 15 year-olds (Figure 3). Specifically, among 15 year-old females, NBNVM youth were least likely to aspire to a university education (63%) compared to their peers in the “mixed” category (74%) and the VMI group (84%). The same three-step pattern, but at a lower level, was observed among male YITS respondents (51%, 63%, 75%).

Figure 4

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Family structure and post-secondary aspirations

We might expect lower post-secondary aspirations among children from lone-parent families, given previous research linking family structure with educational attainment. For example, the 2000 YITS survey of 18 to 20 year-olds found over three-quarters of high school graduates living in two-parent households, compared to just under two-thirds of dropouts (Bowlby & McMullen, 2002). Similarly, among Canadian-born adults aged 20 to 44 in 1994, more than 80% from two-parent biological families had completed high school, compared to 71% from lone-parent families and 70% from blended or step-parent families (Frederick & Boyd, 2000, p. 134).

Following this line of argument, if VMI youth are more likely to be living in two-parent families, their higher post-secondary aspirations might simply reflect the effects of family structure. However, when we examine the YITS data we find slightly more nuclear families and single parents (and fewer “mixed”

Figure 5 Please download PDF file that contains the Figures and Tables.
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families) within the VMI sub-group (results not displayed).¹⁰ More importantly, when we control on family structure, we still find the strong “visible minority immigrant” effect on post-secondary aspirations within each of the three family structure categories (Figure 4). In fact, for VMI youth, “family structure” seems largely irrelevant, with three-quarters or more of this subset of teenagers aspiring to university education within each of the three family structure categories.

Geographic region, community size, and post-secondary aspirations

Quebec has a unique post-secondary system; large numbers of young people choose a college education via the CEGEP system, rather than a university education. In fact, the YITS data show that only 52% of Quebec 15 year-olds aspired to a university education, compared to 61% of their peers in the prairie provinces, and 65% in Atlantic Canada, Ontario, and British Columbia (results not displayed).

Perhaps, then, the “visible minority immigrant” effect on post-secondary aspirations that we have observed in the national sample is a result of fewer VMIs in Quebec? If a relatively high proportion of VMI youth are living outside of Quebec, the apparent preference for university education of these young Canadians may be a spurious relationship. Figure 5 puts this hypothesis to the test and shows that, despite generally lower university aspirations in Quebec, within each of the five regions highlighted we continue to observe the “visible minority immigrant” effect.¹¹

We also know that very high proportions of visible minority immigrants settle in large urban centres, particularly in Toronto, Montreal, and Vancouver (Reitz, 2000; Chard & Renaud, 2000). Other research has demonstrated that community size is associated with higher levels of post-secondary activity. Young people growing up in larger urban centres are more likely to attend university because more have been exposed to such a post-secondary option and because it would be easier (and cheaper) to attend (Looker & Dwyer, 1998; Andres & Looker, 2001; Frenette, 2003). Consequently, the higher post-secondary aspirations of VMI youth may simply reflect the fact that most of these young Canadians live in larger communities where they would have easier access to post-secondary education.

The YITS data do reveal higher educational aspirations among teenagers living in larger communities. For example, only 56% of 15 year-olds living in communities with populations of less than 100,000 aspire to a university education, compared to 70% of their peers in larger Canadian cities. And, as expected, we also find very small proportions of VMI youth (less than 4%) in communities with fewer than 100,000 residents, compared to 21% in cities with 100,000 to 1,000,000 residents, and 35% in cities with more than 1 million inhabitants.

However, as Figure 6 demonstrates, within smaller and mid-sized communities, VMI youth are still considerably more likely than their peers to aspire to university education. The same relationship is observed within Canada’s largest urban centres, although here it is not quite as strong. The varying strength of the “visible minority immigrant” effect across different sized communities suggests that further research on educational aspirations and experiences of visible minority and immigrant youth in smaller communities would be useful, since most of the research to date has focused on young people living in Canada’s largest cities (e.g., Dei et al., 1997; James, 1990).

Figure 6

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Socio-economic status and post-secondary aspirations

Because Canada's immigration system gives preference to well-educated applicants, we would expect the parents of VMI youth to be more highly educated, on average. Data obtained from interviews with the parents of YITS participants confirm this hypothesis; 35% of the VMI teenagers come from households where one or both parents had a university degree, compared to only 21% of NBNVM 15 year-olds. Given this pattern, we might speculate that the "visible minority immigrant" effect on post-secondary aspirations simply reflects a more highly educated set of parents for this sub-group of young Canadians.

Figure 7 demonstrates that there is some merit to this argument since within households where both parents have a university degree the "visible minority immigrant" effect is very small. However, at the other end of the continuum, we continue to see a very strong effect. Specifically, within households where neither parent has a university degree, 74% of VMI youth aspire to university education, compared to only 50% of NBNVM 15 year olds and 60% of teenagers in the "mixed" category.

Figure 7

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Previous research has documented the higher educational aspirations (and subsequent educational attainment) of young Canadians who grow up in more affluent households (Krahn & Lowe, 2002, p. 122). To some extent, the effects of household income (data obtained from parents) mirror those of parents' education, but there is also an independent income effect on young people's aspirations. While VMI youth tend to have more highly-educated parents, they are also over-represented in lower income households. Specifically, we find that 59% of visible minority immigrant youth lived in households with a total annual income of less than \$60,000, compared to 46% of NBNVM youth and 45% of the "mixed" sub-sample. Thus, we cannot hypothesize that the "visible minority immigrant" effect will be "explained away" by statistically controlling on household income.

In fact, we observe a powerful impact of VMI status on teenage educational aspirations in all but the highest household income category (Figure 8). Even in the very poorest households (annual incomes under \$30,000), we still see three-quarters

Figure 8 Please download PDF file that contains the Figures and Tables.
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of the VMI youth aspiring to a university education, compared to less than half (43%) of NBNVM youth. Rather than being held back by lower household incomes, most VMI youth continue to aspire to a university education despite this disadvantage.

Academic performance and post-secondary aspirations

Continuing our quest to “explain away” the “visible minority immigrant” effect on educational aspirations, we now examine the impact of several school performance variables – self-reported overall grades and enrollment in university preparation courses. If VMI youth report higher grades, on average, or are more likely to be enrolled in university entrance stream courses, their higher post-secondary aspirations may simply reflect what we would expect from better-performing students.

The YITS data do show slightly higher self-reported grades among VMI youth.¹² Specifically, 73% of this sub-sample indicated that their overall average was above

Figure 9

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70%, compared to 65% of NBNVM youth, and 67% of the “mixed” sub-sample. However, when we control on grades (Figure 9), we still observe the strong “visible minority immigrant” effect within each of the four academic performance sub-samples. Even among 15 year-olds with very low overall grades (under 60%), almost half of the VMI youth hope to complete at least one university degree.

We repeated this analysis using a three-category measure of whether the young person was enrolled in university-preparation level courses (Math, Science, and Language Arts), and found essentially the same pattern (results not shown). Whether the teenager was taking no university preparation courses, one or two such courses, or three, we still observed a strong “visible minority immigrant” effect on post-secondary aspirations.

Figure 10

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First language and post-secondary aspirations

As we would expect, given that most recent immigrants to Canada have come from non-traditional source countries, only 36% of the VMI youth in the YITS sample spoke English or French as their first language (according to their parents), compared to 99% of the teenagers in the NBNVM category and 70% in the “mixed” sub-sample. Our literature review noted that ESL students are more likely to encounter difficulties in the school system and may be less likely to complete high school. While we recognize that “other first language” does not necessarily correspond with enrollment in an ESL program, we might nevertheless expect lower post-secondary educational aspirations among 15 year olds whose first language was neither French nor English.

However, the data reveal the opposite pattern – 76% of the “other first language” sub-sample aspired to a university education, compared to only 59% of those with English or French as their first language. This is a somewhat surprising finding, but one

in line with the consistent pattern observed whereby VMI youth (whose first language would typically not be one of Canada's heritage languages) have higher aspirations. In fact, when we control on first language (Figure 10) we still observe the "visible minority immigrant" effect within both the English / French and the "other language" sub-groups.

Other barriers to attainment

In addition to potential language barriers, one might expect VMI youth and their parents to be more concerned about discrimination. For example, 23% of VMI youth either agreed or strongly agreed that their job opportunities might be limited by discrimination,¹³ compared to only 10% of NBNVM youth. However when parents were asked, with respect to their educational aspirations for their child: "How certain are you that [child's name] will get that far?," 58% of VMI parents said they were "very certain" compared to only 39% of NBNVM parents. Further, when asked: "Is there anything standing in [child's name] way of going that far?," 38% of NBNVM parents said "yes," compared to 33% of the "mixed group, and only 27% of VMI parents.¹⁴ Although these findings initially appear to be contradictory, they do suggest that VMI families have high levels of confidence in education as a way of countering potential discrimination in the workplace, as discussed in our review of literature (James, 1993).

Inter-related determinants of teenagers' post-secondary aspirations

Many of the predictor variables examined above are correlated with each other. For example, university educated parents tend to have higher incomes, are more likely to live in larger communities, and are more likely to have their children enrolled in university preparation courses. More importantly, our measure of VMI status is systematically related to a number of these variables, but in somewhat more unusual ways (e.g., parents of VMI youth are more highly educated but report lower household incomes). Hence, to understand the net effects of all the predictor variables on teenagers' post-secondary aspirations, we require a more complex multivariate analysis. Table 1 displays the results of a step-wise logistic regression analysis in which all of the variables have been coded as binary variables. The cells in the table contain the odds-ratios describing the net effect of each variable on university aspirations at that particular step in the analysis.

In Equation 1 we clearly see the very strong impact of visible minority immigrant status on university aspirations prior to "controlling on" any of the other predictor

Table 1

Table 1 is unavailable in electronic format. To order a copy, contact Lenise Lévesque at jimi@ualberta.ca

variables. The odds of aspiring to a university education for visible minority immigrant youth are almost three times the odds for all other 15 year-olds (an odds ratio of 2.94). Equation 2 introduces gender and family structure to the analysis. Both of these variables have noticeable but smaller net effects (partial odds ratios of 1.66 and 1.42, respectively). Controlling on VMI status, young women and teenagers from nuclear families are more likely to want to complete university. However, even taking these gender and family structure effects into account, the visible minority immigrant effect remains almost unchanged (a partial odds ratio of 2.89).

The four structural variables discussed earlier (region, community size, parents' education, and household income) are added to the analysis in Equation 3 of Table 1. Controlling on these four predictors, visible minority immigrant status continues to have a very strong (albeit somewhat reduced) effect (partial odds ratio = 2.34). Turning our attention to the other four predictors in Equation 3, we observe the strongest net effect for parents' education (partial odds ratio = 3.36). Other things being equal, the odds of aspiring to a university education for a child with at least one parent with a degree are more than three times the odds for a teenager without a university-educated parent. Taking these other factors into account, YITS respondents from more affluent families (i.e., household incomes above \$60,000) were more likely to aspire to a university education (partial odds ratio = 1.48), as were those living in larger communities (partial odds ratio of = 1.34). In contrast, in Quebec where many young people choose to attend a CEGEP following high school, 15 year-olds were less likely to aspire to a university education, compared to their peers across the country (partial odds ratio = 0.72), other things being equal. We also note that once these structural variables are taken into account, the impact of family structure on university aspirations (partial odds ratio = 1.07) is no longer statistically significant.¹⁵

Equation 4 adds school performance (overall grades and university preparation courses) and first language to the logistic regression equation. Not surprisingly, overall grades has a dominating net effect (partial odds ratio = 3.25) while enrollment in (at least one) university preparation course has an additional, but weaker, positive net effect (partial odds ratio = 1.73). As for the impact of first language, controlling on all the other variables in this equation, young people whose first language was English or French report significantly lower post-secondary aspirations (odds ratio = 0.75). The inclusion of these three additional variables in the regression equation "explains away" some of the impact of several of the other predictor variables, including VMI status (partial odds ratio = 1.95) and parents' education (partial odds ratio = 2.83). However, it is noteworthy that even after accounting for this wide range of alternative explanations, VMI youth are still twice as likely as the reference group (all other young people in the sample) to aspire to a university education. What else could account for this persistent "visible minority immigrant" effect?

Identity formation and post-secondary aspirations

Teenagers' educational aspirations are shaped, no doubt, by their parents' hopes and dreams, that is, by parents' post-secondary aspirations for their children. In addition, parents' direct involvement in their children's schooling might affect post-secondary aspirations, as could parents' monitoring and supervision of their children's extracurricular activities. Related to these factors, but perhaps also independently, teenagers' own engagement with school would surely be an important factor, as would the school engagement of their close friends. If any or all of these identity formation processes are particularly salient among visible minority immigrant youth, they might help account for the unusually high post-secondary aspirations we have observed within this sub-group of teenage Canadians.

Appendix 1 lists the component variables used to construct indices of parent(s) school involvement, parent(s) supervision of their 15-year-old, student's school engagement, and friends' educational engagement. Table 2 displays bivariate correlation coefficients describing relationships among these identity formation measures (including parent(s) aspirations) as well as other key variables already examined in our analysis. As we have already observed, visible minority youth have higher educational aspirations ($r = 0.136$), aspirations are higher among teenagers with university-educated parents ($r = 0.242$), teenagers with higher grades are more likely to plan to attend university ($r = 0.322$), and parents' aspirations are strongly correlated with children's aspirations ($r = 0.398$).

Turning to the new findings in Table 2, we note that the relationships between parents' school involvement and their children's aspirations ($r = 0.030$) and between parents' supervision of their children and their children's aspirations ($r = 0.086$) are weak. In contrast, the effects of teenagers' own school engagement ($r = 0.252$) and their friends' school engagement ($r = 0.236$) on aspirations are quite strong.

We have already noted that VMI parents have higher aspirations for their children, a statistical relationship reflected in a positive correlation coefficient in Table 2 ($r = 0.179$). But Table 2 also demonstrates that VMI parents are somewhat less likely to be involved in their children's schools ($r = -0.076$) and no more or less likely than other Canadian parents to monitor their children's extracurricular activities ($r = 0.013$).¹⁶ However, VMI youth report a higher level of engagement with school than do their NBNVM peers ($r = 0.101$).

Table 2

Please download PDF file that contains the Figures and Tables.

Figures and Tables.pdf

Some of these social psychological factors could cancel each other's effects on teenagers' post-secondary aspirations. In addition, they might be related to some of the socio-demographic and school performance measures already examined in the first four columns of Table 1. To assess the net effects of these identity formation variables, we added them to our multivariate logistic regression analysis (Table 1, Equation 5).¹⁷ We note, first, that the net effects of gender, parents' education and, in particular, overall grades, are further reduced once these social psychological measures are taken into account. Second, we find that parent(s)' aspirations have a powerful net effect on children's aspirations (partial odds ratio = 3.60), while students' own school engagement (partial odds ratio = 1.93) and their friends' school engagement (partial odds ratio = 1.60) have moderately strong effects. However, parent(s)' school involvement and supervision of their children's extracurricular activities are of little consequence.

Third, and most important, we find that the "visible minority immigrant" effect is further reduced with its partial odds ratio dropping from 1.95 to 1.46 when these identity formation variables are added to the analysis. Thus, to some extent, the high post-secondary aspirations of VMI youth are a function of their parents' higher

aspirations and their own greater school engagement, along with their parents' own higher education. The educational values promoted within visible minority immigrant families clearly leave a mark on the children within these families.

Discussion and Conclusions

Our analysis demonstrates that VMI youth have significantly higher post-secondary educational aspirations than do NBNVM youth. We were able to account for some of this difference by factoring out the effects of gender, family structure, region, community size, socio-economic status, academic performance, and first language. Even so, VMI youth were still almost twice as likely to aspire to a university education as were all others in the sample. By introducing "identity formation" variables (parents' post-secondary aspirations, school involvement, and supervision; students' engagement with school; friends' engagement with school) to the analysis, we were able to account for some of the remaining variation in educational aspirations. However, after controlling on as many predictor variables as possible, we continued to see some evidence of a "visible minority effect" on Canadian teenagers' post-secondary aspirations.

What other factors might help account for the higher post-secondary educational aspirations of visible minority youth? Previous research suggests that visible minority and immigrant parents' hopes for their children's future are influential. For example, Suárez-Orozco and Suárez-Orozco (2001, p. 105) suggest that immigrant parents, especially those who have been disappointed with their own decline in status within a new country, may "will ambition" to their children. James (1990) similarly argues that the parents of Black youth in his study passed on to their children their belief that people will be rewarded through hard work and individual effort.

The fact that the majority of VMI parents in our study did not perceive barriers to their children attaining their educational aspirations suggests acceptance of a meritocratic ideology. Similarly, in an ethnographic study of youth living in a public housing development in the US, MacLeod (1987) contrasts the acceptance of a discourse of equality of opportunity by a group of Black youth that he calls "the Brothers" with the rejection of this ideology by White youth living in similar circumstances. He attributes the Brothers' optimism partly to the feeling that they

are part of “a collective upward trajectory” (p. 131). One could argue, then, that the high aspirations of VMI youth reflect recognition by parents of the discounted value of their own credentials in the job market and the need for their children to work harder and prove themselves. Such aspirations may have a positive effect if they encourage young people to strive for excellence. However, Ma (2003) suggests that unreasonable academic pressure at home may adversely affect students’ academic achievement. While we included parents’ educational aspirations as a predictor variable in our analysis, further qualitative research is needed into the understandings of opportunity structures within VMI families and how they translate into teenagers’ aspirations. Longitudinal research could also address the relationship between educational aspirations and actual achievement for VMI and NBVMI youth.

Some researchers have also argued that ethnic communities may provide social and economic resources to members (Boyd, 2000; Li, 2004). Boyd (2000, p. 139) suggests that the “monitoring actions of [ethnic community] members can reinforce parental efforts at communicating values, norms, and expectations to young children.” Although we agree with Li (2004) that social capital cannot replace other forms of capital, the existence of ethnic networks may serve some visible minority and immigrant youth well. The YITS data are limited in the extent to which they allow us to measure such social capital. Again, further qualitative research may shed light on the influence of ethnic communities on the identity formation and aspirations of VMI youth.

Related to this, Suárez-Orozco and Suárez-Orozco (2001, p. 118) suggest that young people who develop “bicultural competencies” are best placed to take advantage of opportunities because they have a strong sense of ethnic identity but also develop “hybrid identities and cultural formations that transform the ‘old’ ethnic culture and the ‘new majority’ culture in creative ways” groups. Perron (1997, p. 133) similarly argues that the more students explored and affirmed their own cultural group while showing openness to members of other cultural groups, the more likely they were to aspire to post-secondary education. Further research could explore this notion of bicultural competence and its relationship to educational aspirations and visible minority immigrant groups.

The evidence in our analysis of very high post-secondary aspirations among VMI youth highlights a second issue requiring further discussion and research – to what extent will these high aspirations be realized? Our findings suggest that some of the influences on the aspirations of NBVMI youth (e.g., community size, family income,

and grades) seem to have less effect on VMI youth. For example, although we know that youth in small communities are less likely to attend university, VMI youth in such communities are considerably more likely than their NBNVM peers to aspire to university education. Similarly, although we know that youth from low-income families are less likely to attend university, the range in aspirations across different income levels for VMI youth is far less than the range for NBNVM youth. Finally, although high grades are a key predictor of post-secondary attendance, VMI youth with grades under 70 are aspiring to university in much higher numbers than their NBNVM peers. The question then becomes – will some VMI youth encounter unexpected barriers to the realization of their educational goals? Since YITS is a longitudinal study (i.e., Cycle 2 data were collected in 2002 from the same respondents who were now 17 years old), future research could examine how the aspirations of VMI and NBNVM youth change over time.

Further research is needed to see if aspirations hold the same significance across different VMI groups. For example, Mickelson (cited in Kao & Tienda, 1998, p. 355) distinguishes between “abstract” attitudes about the promise of education as a means of socioeconomic mobility and “concrete” attitudes, which reflect the actual experiences of a particular group including employment obstacles. MacLeod (1987, p. 74) suggests that the aspirations of Black youth in his study tended to be “vague” because little was known about the world of further education and middle class work. The extent to which aspirations are rooted in a realistic understanding of opportunity structures (e.g., are students aware of the minimum entry grades for specific post-secondary programs) is therefore a useful question for future research. Whether more concretely-understood aspirations are more likely to be realized is an important corollary question.

Although we see a need for further research in several areas, we nevertheless believe that our findings have immediate relevance for policy makers. Young people, and particularly VMI youth, value education and embrace the promises made by proponents of the new “knowledge economy.” However, as James (1990, p. 112) suggests with reference to the Black youth in his study, it is possible that as these youth become more exposed to systemic racism and blocked opportunities in their pursuit of career goals, their confidence and optimism could turn to disillusionment. Therefore it is important that policy makers, post-secondary institutions, and employers work to deliver on human capital promises by ensuring that opportunity structures are meritocratic, that young people’s skills are used in the workplace,

and that returns on educational investment are equitable across groups. Given that three-quarters of 15 year-old visible minority immigrant youth from families with household incomes of less than \$30,000 a year aspire to university education, yet approximately a third of 18 to 20-year olds cite financial barriers to going as far in school as they would like (Bowlby & McMullen, 2002), ensuring the affordability of university education could be a key part of delivering on these promises.

However, evidence that over 60% of 15-year-old YITS participants aspired to one or more university degrees also confirms the need for more transparency around educational and career pathways so that young people and their families can make realistic decisions. The fact that many fewer young adults actual attend university suggests that some, or many, students may be disappointed. While we are not advocating for earlier streaming in schools, we agree that the societal denigration of non-professional occupations and the primary focus of high schools on university-destined students is problematic. A wider range of educational and career possibilities needs to be presented to all students.

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Appendix 1:
Component Items for Indices ¹
Used in Logistic Regression Analysis

Parent(s)' School Involvement

[YITS parent telephone survey] [Alpha = 0.535] [Mean = 3.59]

This school year, how often have you (or your partner) ...

[Not this year; Less than once a month; Monthly; Weekly; Daily]

- Talked with [child's name] about his/her experiences at school?
- Discussed [child's name]'s school work with him/her?

How well do you know the following people?

[Not at all; Not very well; Fairly well; Very Well] ²

- One or more of [child's name]'s teachers?
- The principal of [child's name]'s school?

Parent(s)' Supervision of Child

[YITS parent telephone survey] [Alpha = 0.676] [Mean = 4.59]

In the last six months, how often did the following occur?

[Never; Rarely; Sometimes; Often; Always]

- You know where [child's name] goes at night?
- Know what [child's name] is doing when he/she goes out?
- Know who [child's name] spends time with when he/she goes out?

¹ Indices created by summing scores (1 – 5, with 5 indicating a higher amount of involvement, supervision, or engagement) and dividing by the number of items.

² Four-value response scales were transformed into 5-value scales (1 = 1; 2 = 2; 3 = 4; 4 = 5) to maintain comparability with other items included in the index.

Friends' Educational Engagement

[YITS student questionnaire] [Alpha = 0.711] [Mean = 3.24]

Think about your closest friends. How many of these friends ...

[None of them; Some of them; Most of them; All of them]

- Think completing high school is very important?
- Skip classes once or more a week? [values reflected]
- Have dropped out of high school without graduating? [values reflected]
- Are planning to further their education or training after leaving high school?
- Think it's OK to work hard at school?

Student's School Engagement

[YITS student questionnaire] [Alpha = 0.802] [Mean = 3.51]

Think about all of your classes this year. How often are these statements true for you?

[Never; Rarely; Sometimes; Often; Always]

- I pay attention to the teacher.
- I complete my assignments.
- I participate actively in class discussions.
- For my courses, I do more than just the required work.
- I do as little work as possible; I just want to get by. [values reflected]
- I get along well with teachers.

How do you feel about the following this year?

[Strongly disagree, Disagree, Agree, Strongly Agree] ²

- I feel proud to be part of my school.
- School is one of the most important things in my life.
- Many of the things we learn in class are useless. [values reflected]
- School is often a waste of time. [values reflected]

Endnotes

1 Statistics Canada's YITS research program is built on two longitudinal surveys, one of 15 year-olds and one of 18-20 year olds. Both cohorts were first surveyed in 2000, with follow-up surveys conducted in 2002 (see Bowlby and McMullen 2002).

2 The YITS research program was integrated with the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) Program for International Student Assessment (PISA). Thus, 15-year old YITS participants also completed standardized reading, mathematics, and science tests in a PISA questionnaire. In addition, school administrators in each of the participating schools completed a questionnaire asking about school characteristics. While approximately 30,000 teenagers completed the YITS/PISA questionnaire, only about 26,000 parents responded in the telephone survey.

3 With two exceptions, neither the school-level data nor the individual-level PISA data are examined in this study. Information on the size of community in which the school is located was obtained from the school-level file, while information on family structure was obtained from the PISA individual file.

4 A small number of parents answered "any level of education after high school." In our analyses, we included these individuals in the "college/CEGEP" category.

5 Five out of six (83%) of the adult respondents described a second parent resident in the household; 24% of these individuals were immigrants (i.e., had not been born in Canada).

6 Aboriginal youth (and parents) were included in the non-visible minority category.

7 Small sub-sample sizes meant we could not distinguish between 1st and 2nd generation immigrant youth. However, unreported analyses using a six-category variable that did make this distinction showed only very minor differences in the educational aspirations of 1st and 2nd generation immigrant visible minority youth.

8 The 2000 YITS survey of 18 to 20-year olds found that, in fact, more young women than men (57% versus 47%) do participate in post-secondary education (Bowlby and McMullen 2002: 45).

9 The three most common steps taken by parents to ensure that their child had money for further education were savings accounts (27%), RESPs (19%), and investments (16%). VMI parents were somewhat more likely than NBNVM parents to have started a savings account (34% versus 26%) and to have set up an RESP (23% compared to 18%), but less likely to have made investments (11% versus 17%).

10 Students completing the PISA questionnaire were asked who usually lived at home with them. Statistics Canada grouped their responses into “single parent families” (only one parent/guardian present), “nuclear families” (father and mother present), “mixed families” (other combinations of two adults present), and “other.”

11 The unusually high proportion of visible minority immigrant youth in Atlantic Canada who wish to attend university (93%) should be interpreted cautiously, given the relatively small sub-sample size for this group.

12 Ma’s (2003) analysis of the same YITS/PISA database shows that immigrant students had slightly lower scores in reading and science, as measured by the standardized tests used in the Programme for International Assessment (PISA), than did their non-immigrant peers. The YITS survey asked the same individuals about their overall grades, and shows slightly higher self-reported grades for VMI youth.

13 The actual wording of the question was: “I think my job opportunities will be limited by discrimination (for example, because of my gender, race or disability).”

14 The most commonly mentioned barrier for all parents was “finances,” followed by “child’s motivation.”

15 When the YITS data are weighted up to provide national population estimates (i.e., about 26,000 sample members come to represent approximately 348,000 15 year-old Canadians), virtually any relationship between variables, no matter how inconsequential, appears to be statistically significant. Consequently, to determine the statistical significance ($p < 0.001$) of the partial odds ratios displayed in Table 1, the national weights were multiplied by the ratio of the sample N to the population N. This adjustment ensures that the sample weighting introduced to correct for disproportionate sampling remained in effect, while the weighting introduced to provide population (rather than sample) estimates was eliminated.

16 Our findings regarding parental involvement are consistent with Sun's (1998) report that East-Asian American parents tended to invest in resources within the family rather than, for example, belonging to organizations with other parents. However, further research is needed to examine differences across different ethnic/racialized groups.

17 For each of the four identity formation indices, we created binary variables to distinguish index scores above (high = 1) and below or equal to the mean.

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