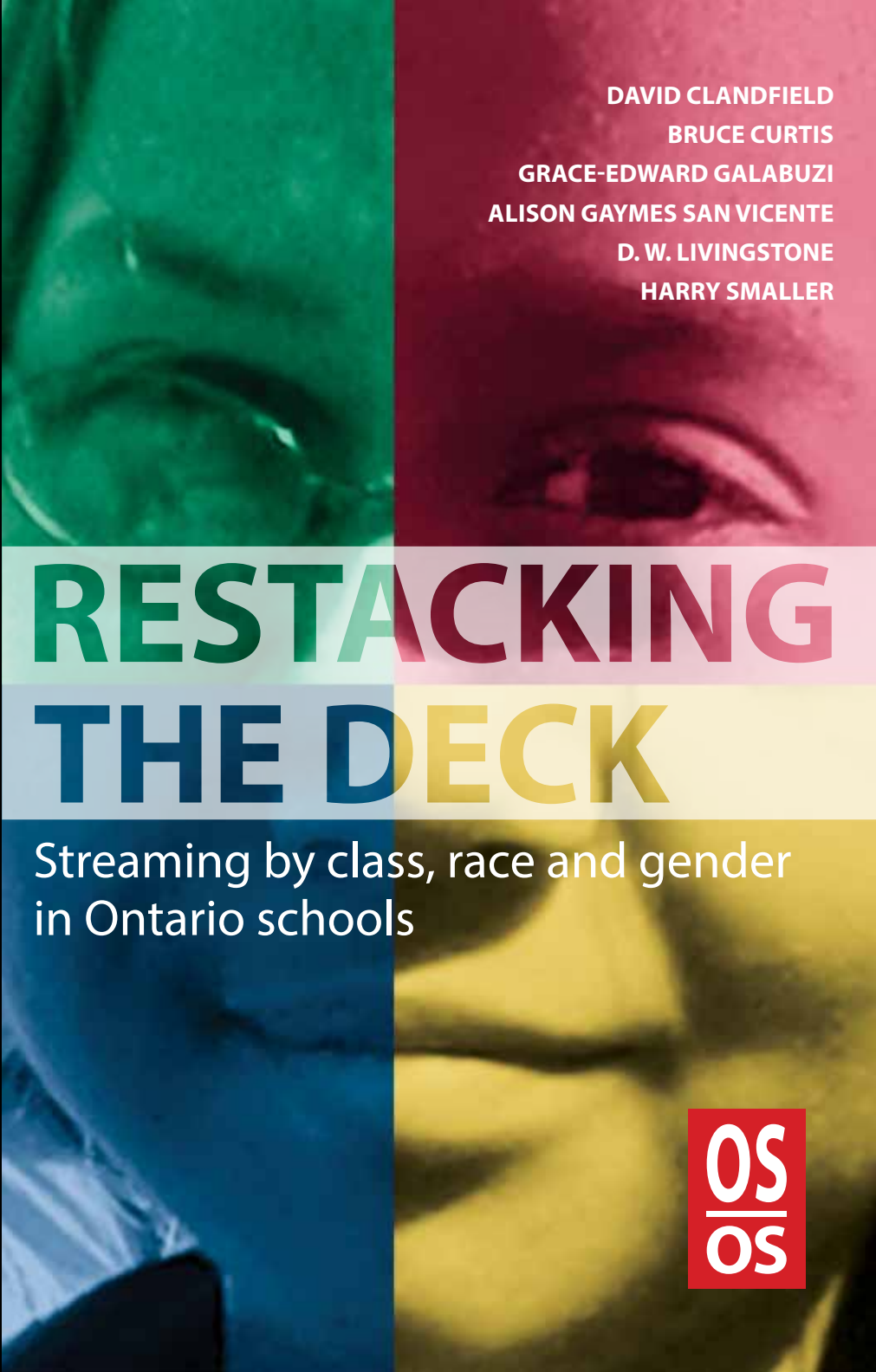
DAVID CLANDFIELD
BRUCE CURTIS
GRACE-EDWARD GALABUZI
ALISON GAYMES SAN VICENTE
D. W. LIVINGSTONE
HARRY SMALLER
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INTRODUCTION

"Will we waste another generation?" This is the question posed in *Stacking the Deck: The Streaming of Working Class Kids in Ontario Schools*, published over 20 years ago. It is time to answer this question. Some may say the question is now irrelevant in light of the growth of post-secondary education, some form of which is now accessible to a majority of Ontario youth. This prior book was written in the wake of a government commission that recommended the abolition of ability grouping and the deferral of streaming in schools until Grade 10, and after the election of a New Democratic Party government that appeared to be committed to this goal too. Destreaming initiatives met strong resistance from some parents and teachers committed to the status quo. Today, destreaming — and the deepening of student equality that goes with it — is not really part of the public debate about education. Yet the research evidence indicating that working-class and minoritized youth do better in schools with mixed-ability grouping and that youth from more affluent backgrounds do no worse under these circumstances remains compelling. The current book documents how streaming based on class, race, gender and imputed special needs still occurs extensively in our schools. What has changed is that the most evident consequences of streaming are being deferred. Higher proportions of working-class and minoritized kids are now completing secondary school and getting offers to post-secondary institutions. But they are still suffering from substantial discriminatory treatment in elementary and secondary schools and their odds of completing post-secondary education are still relatively poor. So the answer to the question we posed 20 years

ago is yes, we have indeed continued to deny equal opportunities to far too many talented youth from working-class and some minoritized backgrounds. Another generation of these children is in the process of being wasted. The purpose of this book is to document the current extent of these educational inequities and to make the case for resurrecting destreaming as the most obvious solution to the problem.

Two generations ago, Loren Lind (1974) concluded that:

> [T]hrough streaming the schools retain the dominance of the middle class at the expense of those at the bottom, promoting students on an apparently equitable basis that remains harshly discriminatory … it fosters a smug elitism that maintains the gross disparities of Canadian society. To change this, at this late date, requires a very radical beginning. (pp. 227-228)

As later chapters will show, streaming continues to exist throughout Ontario, with devastating consequences for many socially disadvantaged children. Children from working-class and some minority families continue to be pejoratively labelled with exceptionalities and special needs in elementary school, streamed into dead-end programs that encourage many of them to drop out of secondary school, and excluded from post-secondary education. These conditions continue to represent both a severe social injustice and a tremendous waste of human learning potential, particularly in light of the increasingly widespread view that advanced formal education is an essential ingredient for the future well-being of our society.

Biases against those from less affluent backgrounds remain inherent in the form and content of the public school system. From its origins in the middle of the 19th century, public education in Ontario has worked to ensure that the majority of working-class people will remain in their class of origin, while recruiting a small and select minority of them for social mobility. Demands from the working class and from progressive educational reformers have frequently shaped aspects of the public educational system, but the core programs of public schooling in Ontario continue to embody the interests of powerful business and affluent middle-class groups.

Major post-war reviews of public education, from the Hope Commission in 1950, through the Hall-Dennis Report of 1968 and the

Secondary Education Review Project in 1982, to the Radwanski Report of 1987, noted that members of different social classes receive different kinds and different qualities of education in Ontario. While deploring educational inequality, these reviews consistently ignored the political processes that lie at its root. These processes are grounded in the differences of economic wealth and political power that characterize our society. The responsiveness of public education to the interests of the business community and of the upper middle class has ensured the existence of discriminatory patterns of schooling, from system-wide policy planning to the making of local classroom decisions.

To propose less discriminatory forms of schooling, without addressing the underlying political and economic mechanisms of inequality, is to aspire to very marginal changes at best. A more "radical beginning" that exposes these political processes and identifies practical alternative programs and collective actions is what we sought in *Stacking the Deck* and continue to pursue in this book.

During the 1980s, public sentiment against the early streaming of elementary school students grew. This sentiment was clearly expressed in the policies of numerous organizations, from the Ontario Federation of Labour to local parents' groups, as well as the NDP's long-standing policy commitment to abolish streaming. In the early 1990s, the political conditions for progressive educational change were relatively open, despite the mobilization of the business community against such attempts at reducing social inequality.

Times have changed. Globalization of economic activities and fiscal austerity measures of neo-liberal governments have weakened organized labour and led to a general preoccupation of disadvantaged social groups with the fight to maintain existing social entitlements rather than for social justice beyond them. These times will only be changed significantly for the better if such groups can be mobilized to fight for progressive change.

The purpose of this book is to offer some ingredients for a social movement to end discriminatory streaming in Ontario schools. As we shall see, streaming occurs in many forms, from different types of schools to different types of programs within schools, to different forms of treatment of students within classrooms.

The first chapter begins with profiles of current differences in secondary school completion and post-secondary acceptance by

parental occupation, education and neighbourhood income levels, as well as some indicators of race/ethnicity and gender differences. We then trace changes over time in university completion by family class origins, race/ethnicity and gender as well as the enduring effects of schooling. We go on to document the continued streaming of children into different schools, programs and classrooms by family origins. Competing explanations for these disparities in schooling are then examined: innate differences; environmental factors; and social power theories. The class power theory informing our analyses is outlined. Contrasting views of class leaders on disparities in schooling are offered to illustrate that systematic differences in wealth and power lie at the root of the form of social violence that is streaming.

In the second chapter, we examine briefly the historical origins of the present model of mass compulsory schooling in mid-19th century class struggles. We suggest that, from the very beginning, our public school system was designed and developed in order to socialize the young into accepting their status in various levels of a stratified society. Public funds were initially provided only for schools providing classical education for the male children of the elite. When it became clear, in the midst of increasing social unrest in the mid-1800s, that a broader mechanism was needed in order to socialize children of the working classes, "public schools" were developed for this purpose — with prescribed curriculum, textbooks and pedagogy provided by teachers who were examined, certified and supervised by carefully selected community leaders. As secondary schools expanded during the first half of the twentieth century, their programs were increasingly diversified into academic, technical/commercial and vocational streams.

Chapter Three offers an overview of the general streaming process in the current elementary and secondary school system. Streaming happens in many different ways in schools. At the elementary level students are often placed in different classes, and in groups within classes, on the basis of their perceived capacities and/or interests. At the secondary level, students starting Grade 9 are placed in streamed courses and overwhelmingly remain in those streams for their entire secondary school career. We are also now seeing a rapid growth of "schools of choice" focusing on specific curricular areas — languages, arts, physical education, etc. In addition, research suggests that teachers' expectations (often unrecognized) play a major role in

affecting individual students' achievement. As this chapter explains, not only is this streaming ubiquitous, it also works most predominantly against the interests of working-class and minority children.

Chapter Four reveals how the education of children once excluded for reasons of disability has produced a form of streaming by (dis) ability in ways that reinforce stratification by class, race and gender, too. The influence of medical sciences and psychometrics along with quasi-judicial processes, which, taken together, sift and select children for special attention have masked these inequities. After all, it is hard to challenge those who claim to offer services and support to children otherwise left to struggle unaided in a system that seems alien to them. Indeed the provision of service to these children is the motivation of many who venture into this field. At the same time, the processes by which special knowledge and expertise are brought to bear are impenetrable to those who worry that their children are not benefiting from the experience. Despite all that we have learnt about psychological testing, labelling and special classes over more than one hundred years, and all that we now know about the virtues of inclusion and accommodation for all, however different, the same inequities persist that we observed when Special Education first became mandatory in Ontario Schools in the 1980s. In the two decades since the first edition of *Stacking the Deck*, the advent of high-stakes standardized testing, public spending cutbacks, and the expansion of private alternatives have served to exacerbate these inequalities in ways we are only just beginning to appreciate.

In Chapter Five, major forms of streaming by racial origins are identified and inequitable outcomes summarized. At the centre of this form of streaming is the constitution of distinctive identities based on racial and religious differences that become the basis for differential treatment in the system. Identity formation ends up as an essential part of the practice of streaming, especially for Aboriginal and racialized students. For our schools, these identities are formed primarily out of the intersection of race and social class and particularly out of racialized poverty. This process of racialization leads to the well-discussed achievement gap between racialized and non-racialized students. These key identities also intersect with the 'youth at-risk' identity to harden the streaming process. Overall, racialization should be seen as an act of social construction that seeks to maintain the dominance

of the White power structure that uses the ideology of meritocracy to maintain the dominant order in education and society, consistent with the current hierarchy of globalizing capitalism. We are interested in how processes of racialization and colonization are mobilized to enable the practice of streaming, and how it manifests within schools and across the education system to deny Aboriginal and racialized students the full benefit of the learning experience.

In Chapter Six, significant forms of streaming by gender are recognized and estimated. In both race and gender terms, some of these effects are difficult to measure but nonetheless persistently damaging to educational opportunities. A conversation around gender as a social construct and how education streams girls and boys according to this construct is examined. Here we suggest the streaming of students, at all levels in their educational experience, is shaped by how females and males are socially constructed resulting in a system where females often do very well with respect to academics in school, but are underrepresented in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) fields as well as secondary level business positions. At the same time, the experience of females of colour (especially those who are poor) differs dramatically from their while middle-class counterparts. On the other hand, males as a group are over-represented in many Special Education programs, General/Applied course types, as well as the dropout rate, and yet are likely to earn more money than females.

The final chapter offers a summary of our analyses of present streaming conditions, identifies some of the essential features of de-streamed schools (co-operative management, common curriculum, flexible mixed-ability grouping, etc.) and suggests some practical democratic strategies for moving toward them.

Once more, this book has been written with the hope that it will reach as wide an audience as possible — including parents, students, academics, educators, educational researchers, school administrators and politicians. Classroom teachers are at the top of this list, for a number of reasons. First, teachers have the most invested in the schooling system; their direct contact and interaction with students — day in and day out, year after year — speaks clearly to this fact. Secondly, teachers, and students, are most affected by change in schooling routines. However, schooling reform has usually been designed and

dictated "from the top", with little or no input by classroom teachers themselves. Ironically, as many studies have shown, such attempts at schooling reform often fail, precisely because teachers have been left out of the planning and implementation process. Schooling reform occurs most effectively when teachers know that it is needed, and take an active part in all phases, from planning to implementation.

The book speaks about the need for a destreamed schooling reform because many students are not being served well by the present streamed system. The way the system has been structured by those in power and the ways in which teachers are required to work within these prescribed boundaries are mainly at fault: the grouping, selective treatment of students, differential program streams, differential expectations, the large classes, the pressure on teachers to cover a standardized curriculum, the lack of opportunities and resources for teachers to offer innovative curricula, courses and programs to students, not to mention the multitude of regulations, policies and procedures that determine where and how teachers will carry out their duties. These factors, and many more, result mainly from conscious decisions made by administrators and politicians, not by teachers. Ironically, teachers are being held more and more responsible for the results of a system over which they are given less and less control.

Teachers, of course, have to find ways of resisting these structures. But that's not an easy task. Many teachers in Ontario continue to think that grouping or streaming of students by achievement or ability should occur, in the belief that it is the most efficient and/or fair way for children to be taught. Teachers themselves are, for the most part, products of a highly streamed schooling system and, by definition, have "succeeded" at these schools. Secondly, most teach in streamed settings, and to believe otherwise would raise troubling dissonance in their own minds. In this regard, it is interesting to note the number of studies that have shown conclusively that teachers who do teach in non-streamed settings believe as strongly in the value of their programs as "streamed teachers" do in theirs (Dar, 1985). But most importantly, streaming occurs in schools because, as we show in the following chapters, those who have been in the position to make decisions about schools have decided that schools, programs and students should be streamed. Alternative, non-streamed approaches within regular schools have generally not been attempted, and those

in charge of our school systems have, over the years, made sure of this. Few teachers have had the opportunity of learning or teaching in a truly integrated setting. Some efforts are now being made to address discrimination on some gender and racial grounds by providing separate schooling experiences. But the alternative of de-streaming and mixed ability grouping, which could demonstrably be of great benefit to many working-class and minoritized kids, remains beyond the realm of possibility in our current school order.

In the following chapters, we describe many of the ways in which schools, programs and classrooms have been structured in order to stream kids, and the reasons why this streaming should be eliminated. For many teachers, as well as for students, the streaming structures are clearly in place; the deck has merely been restacked higher over the past generation. Will we allow it to persist for another?