ALISON GAYMES SAN VICENTE

Marginal at Best
A narrative on streaming in public education

> *Streaming is a form of institutionalized violence that works to convince many working-class and racialized students, as well as their parents, that they belong in dead-end programmes with stunted curricula, which almost always lead to insecure, low-paid employment". (Clanfield* et al.*, 2014, p. 261)*

Andre's story

> "I'm confused and frustrated. I just don't know what to do… I feel like Andre's programming is all wrong and nobody is focusing on his academics. But I don't know." He paused, exasperated. "I have all these papers, been to so many meetings and have all these acronyms in my head … can you help me?"

My mind was racing as I listened to this father speak of his attempts to navigate an education system and advocate for his son Andre[1], who had been placed in a Special Education Behavioural program. As an educator who is committed to issues of equity and justice, I was reflecting on the plethora of challenges that too often act against the best interests of particular students. This parent reached out to me, a principal and friend, for advice on how to position his child for

academic success in a situation in which the focus of intervention was on behaviour. It was a sad reminder of all the barriers that families face in order to access the best learning conditions for their children. Here was a well-educated, two parent family who had gone to every school-based meeting, advocated for their child, accessed every support and up until this point had followed the suggestions and advice provided by those responsible for educating their son. Yet, with all the social capital they carried, they remained threatened by the educational system, and in were need of support from someone they trusted.

> Andre's father continued: "I want him to be able to go to college or university; I want him to have opportunities. I know he is in a Behavioural class, but can he still go to university? He can, right?" He continued. "I don't think he needs to be in a Behaviour class anymore … do you think he needs to be in this program? How do I know? I have so many questions. I am so sorry to lay all of this on you."

I felt unsettled and nauseated. Nauseated because I was keenly aware of, and all too familiar with, the negative ramifications of streaming special education students into congregated classes[2]; the structural and systemic barriers that impede the success of students with special education designations; and my position within a system that normalizes the persistence of disadvantage.

The trajectory of children in separate (congregated) elementary special education classes (outside of gifted)[3] offers very limited opportunities to fulfill the achievement goals expressed by this father. Clanfield *et. al*., (2014) asserts "Rare is the student, once classified as Behavioural, who even contemplates application to post-secondary education (5%), since almost two-thirds drop out of secondary school within five years of entering it." (p. 175).

Labeled as "behavioural" and "learning disabled" (LD), I knew that the chances of this child gaining access to an Academic rather than an Applied program of study (POS)[4] in secondary school was structurally unlikely and *marginal at best*. I also knew that the intersectionality of his gender and race would exacerbate this trajectory and compound increasing marginalization as he moved toward graduation in our K-12 system. I struggled with how to share with this parent the many structural factors that would impede Andre's success, or how his

identity as a Black male with special education needs would play out in a system where institutionalized racism was a reality.

This article is about Andre and other students like him who are the victims of institutionalized structures and bias in their education. It asserts that children streamed into lower-track programs/pathways (e.g. Applied and Locally Developed/Essentials POS in the Ontario contexts) are able to access fewer post-secondary opportunities and, therefore, have reduced life chances. It also asserts that *all* children benefit from rigorous curricula, and that streaming as an educational practice is a structural barrier that supports class and race-based stratification. It is a reminder of the urgency to respond to streaming as well as our own culpability in the persistence of inequity in public education.

Many students experience disadvantage in public education in response to structural and institutionalized racism and classism.

Andre is not unique: Meet Amanda and Jason

Unfortunately, Andre's story is not uncommon. Many students experience disadvantage in public education in response to structural and institutionalized racism and classism. Let's take for example the educational trajectories of two other students, Amanda and Jason (figure 1). Their narrative stems from data shared in the *TDSB Structured Pathways Report* (2013), and a presentation on streaming that was created by the board's Equity and Inclusive Schools Department as they shared the work of a collaborative inquiry on streaming titled *Sifting, Sorting and Selecting (SSS)* (2014)[5]. This project was facilitated in collaboration with authors from *Restacking the Deck: Streaming by class, race and gender in Ontario Schools* (2014) and was an attempt to explore the problem of streaming with participating schools and then pilot locally-developed models of intervention.

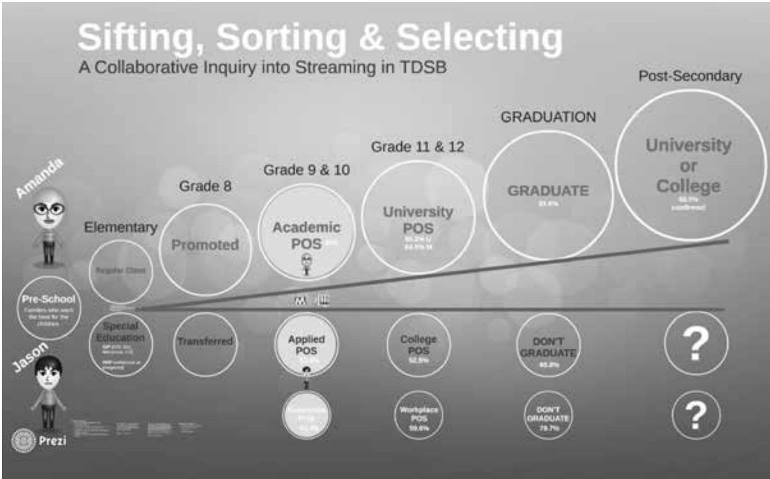

Figure 1. R. San Vicente (2015)

The graphic in Figure 1 (from the SSS project) tells the story of Amanda and Jason, friends since the age of four. Their parents are good friends and the kids have frequent playdates together.They both burst through the doors of the freshly cleaned school on the first day of Kindergarten with every opportunity in front of them. Both Amanda and Jason are poised to learn and become contributing members of society. Unbeknownst to them and their parents, it is at this point that the sifting, sorting and selecting begins. As Amanda and Jason complete their first few years of formal education, the initial signs of an imposed trajectory emerges which, unless there is an intentional interruption, will continue.

The Kindergarten teacher has noticed that Amanda can identify and name all of her letters. In fact, she has strong phonemic awareness and will be reading in no time. It isn't long before she sounds out words and has moved beyond pattern books. Amanda is reading by the end of JK.

Jason, however, has struggled. Unlike Amanda, he did not know all of his letters and had limited phonemic awareness when he walked into class on the first day. Where Amanda could already write her name, Jason could not. Jason's teacher has already made a decision about him, unconsciously viewing him as less capable when compared to Amanda, and she feels sorry for him. She hugs Jason more and,

without realizing it, she imposes deficit thinking on Jason and reduces her expectations of him. While Amanda's parents had reaped the benefits of their own education and were in professions that provided life stability, Jason's parents were casualties of streaming. They worked long hours for low pay and didn't have money for shelves full of books, computers, internet and other experiences that were central to Amanda's family life.

By the time both children entered Grade 1, they each feel quite different about themselves as learners. Although teachers often encourage Jason, all he hears is the teachers praising Amanda for reading sentences so easily. He sees her getting all of those stickers, and she even wins a prize at an assembly in front of the whole school. Jason never gets an award for academics. Amanda felt very confident, while what Jason knew about himself in this context was that he was not a great reader like Amanda. He loves his teachers and friends but he wishes they would stop talking about reading because it seems to cause enormous stress for his parents. He sometimes hears his mom talking to Amanda's mom on playdates and she always sounds worried.

As Amanda and Jason embark on their primary years, Amanda enters the regular class with the majority of her peers. Much as Andre was in the introduction of this article, Jason is sorted a little differently. After many conversations between Jason's parents and his teachers, as well as extensive paperwork for the school staff, Jason is "identified" as having a Learning Disability (LD). Despite the fact that Jason's LD still places him at average intelligence, this diagnosis is cause for concern. His teachers have expressed that Jason cannot manage in a "regular" setting. By the end of the Identification Placement and Review Committee (IPRC) meeting, Jason now carries the special education label and is sorted into an ISP (Intensive Support Program). The weight of expertise represented by the IPRC (this typically includes a chair, psychologist and consultant among others) make it difficult for any parent to challenge the recommendations put forth by this committee even when it is well within their rights to do so. Jason's parents take some solace in knowing that their son's new class will be small and staffed by two adults. They expect that in this setting his needs will be met. To Jason's parents this sounds reasonable; they have put their trust in the "educational experts" and have been convinced that this is the best option.

Without malice, no one ever tells Jason's parents the rest of the story. Certainly, neither Jason nor his parents are aware of the trajectory that Jason has been set on and the assumptions about his abilities that educators will no doubt make — assumptions that will in turn negatively impact his educational and life opportunities. Nobody shares with this family the likelihood that Jason's placement will make him feel *less* confident about his potential; that he will probably feel stigmatized by his peers; that together these will negatively affect what he believes he can do as well as his interest in school. While Jason is years away from secondary school, no one has explained that it is doubtful that he will enter an Academic POS in secondary school and therefore will have greatly reduced his post-secondary options (G. Parekh, 2013). With the decision of an IPRC and a signature on a paper, Jason has just been sorted. Amanda, on the other hand, has not.

Amanda and Jason: Elementary experience

As Jason moves through his early elementary years in an ISP, he begins to enjoy school less as he internalizes the belief that he is "different" from other students. His programming is not as rigorous as it once was, but he comes to school every day and tries anyway. At his playdates with Amanda, he notices that his friend seems to do really different things. She talks about walking to school with her mom and attending various after-school clubs. She is even on the school robotics team and enters competitions. Although Jason enjoys problem-solving, building, and the programming apps that Amanda has, he doesn't get to do this at his school. He takes what feels like a long bus ride to school (far from his community), is rarely offered schoolwork that requires critical thinking, and is back on a bus before the after school activities begin. After four years in an ISP class his parents realize that the gap between Jason and Amanda continues to grow wider. She seems to get so much more from her educational experience. They appeared to have so much more in common in Kindergarten — Jason's parents question what happened. In fact, in his ISP class Jason continues to fall further and further behind his grade level even though he has what seems to be the advantage of two adults in a smaller class. It is now clear to Jason's parents that the ISP was not an opportunity for Jason to catch up, learn some strategies and go back to the regular class. Jason's ISP was a destination.

As Amanda and Jason enter their final year of elementary school, both parents attend meetings about the transition from Grade 8 to 9. Jason's parents see this as a fresh start where he will be in a "normal" class again; they hope to see the return of that spark Jason had when he first entered school. Because Jason has been working below grade level for many years and the gap between him and his peers has widened with the passing of each year, it is suggested that he take the Applied POS. Jason's parents were initially worried about placing him in the Applied pathway, but the Grade 8 guidance counsellor puts them at ease during the information evening as they are told that Applied is an equal and viable pathway and that Jason can transfer to Academic at any time. Nobody shares with Jason and his family that while it is *possible*, it is improbable that anyone taking an Applied POS in Grade 9 will have access to university (G. Parekh, 2013).

If equality means opportunity of access to all post-secondary options for all children (regardless of their social identity), the prerequisites set for admission to colleges and universities make it clear that all programs of study are not intended to leave all choices open to all students. In other words, if Jason enters an Applied POS his life trajectory will be streamed in a specific way that closes opportunities. While it has been informally argued that the Applied pathway leads to college as an "acceptable" alternative to university, TDSB data indicates that only 10.9% of students graduating through the Applied stream confirm an offer to college (4.2% confirmed an admission to an Ontario University for a total of 15.1% (pg. 23)) (G. Parekh, 2013). For children with special education needs like Jason the likelihood of applying or acceptance to college is even lower. The only "pathway" that reflects true choice is the Academic one from which students can choose the workplace, college or university as a post-secondary destination. Unfortunately, this information was not shared with parents at the Grade 8 information evening. The presence of this information may have swayed the decision of Jason and his parents when selecting a pathway for Grade 9.

In Ontario, Jason's experience is not atypical. When educators are asked by parents of students transitioning to secondary school if Academic and Applied classes are equal, many educators defer to Ministry (and by proxy, Board) messaging that Academic and Applied programs are *different but equal pathways*. Despite the overwhelming

research establishing that taking an Applied POS in Grade 9 reduces the likelihood of graduation and narrows the scope of post-secondary opportunities (Burris 2014; Clandfield *et. al.*, 2014), misleading claims of equal opportunity outcomes between streams continues to be promoted to educators and parents.

Beyond the reduced post-secondary options, Jason's parents are also not made aware of international research which suggests that, for those without access to post-secondary education, not only are opportunities more limited, but physical health and quality of life are more at risk (TDSB, 2015). Like all parents, Jason's view education as preparatory for a life path that can establish opportunities for financial and employment stability, work satisfaction, quality of life, access to social networks and supports, and so much more. When Jason's educational choices were cut off by placement decisions early in his educational career, at no point were his parents made aware that he now had a much higher probability of increased instability and poverty over the course of a lifetime.

So when faced with Andre's story — a child who as a Black male is underserved and already viewed as an underachiever — I knew that the opportunity gap he was already stuck in was likely to widen into a chasm as he travelled through the system. All of this data, as well as my understanding of the risks and ravages of classism and racism, were in the forefront of my thoughts. This parent was at a critical juncture in his child's life. My recommendation about his next moves could change the trajectory of his life in the same way every decision at every school-based meeting and on every Individualized Education Program (IEP) had up to this point in his young life.

Amanda and Jason: Secondary experience

Jason is transferred to Grade 9 along with 53.5% of the students who populate the Applied POS[6]. He now has a 39.3% chance of graduating on time and only a 20.7% chance of applying to post-secondary education (pg. 20 and 23). This study indicates that very few students with SEN enter the academic program of study. In fact, only 8% of the academic population has a SEN, while 54% populate the Applied POS and 86% the Essentials/Locally Developed POS. With respect to students in a special education program in secondary school, 93.9%

of these students do not apply to post-secondary education at all (pg. 73). The current structure of education that sorts our population continues to disproportionately and clearly sift based on historically stigmatized social identities including race, class, ethnicity and gender. This reality both creates and maintains the illusion that members of these groups are inherently incapable and destined for placement in less challenging Programs of Study. The assumptions — of which both Jason and Andre are victims — surrounding ability that perpetuate educational marginalization are rejected with critical pedagogical frameworks and named for what they are — inequitable. Critical education practitioners (McLaren & Kincheloe 2007; Friere, 1972; Giroux, 2003; Wink, 2005) advocate for an educational re-visioning that constructs education as transformative in that it both recognizes the structural disenfranchisement of marginalized students and challenges the social inequities that underpin them. They advocate for equal opportunities for both Amanda and Jason as opposed to a separate and unequal education.

Not surprisingly, Amanda was promoted to Grade 9 along with 93% of her peers in the Academic POS and has an 81.6% chance of graduating on time (pg. 20). In her Academic POS she has tripled her chances of being accepted to a post-secondary institution as well as increased long-term earning power and long-term health when compared to students without post-secondary attainment (TDSB, 2015). In referring back to the visual of Amanda and Jason's educational journeys in figure 1, it is important to note the intentionality around Amanda's circles that grow as her opportunities widen, while Jason's circles do not.

Although Jason tries to achieve success in grades 9 and 10, he struggles and really does not feel like he belongs in school at all. He often sees Amanda in the hallway with her friends. She gives him a big smile and a wave, but they now move in different worlds. Along with 60% of his peers in the Applied POS, Jason does not complete secondary schooling in the allocated four years. Hopefully, he will return to a post-secondary institution as an adult knowing the impact this level of schooling has on quality of life.

Amanda graduates within the allocated four years and due to her Academic POS has numerous options available to her. She spends a great deal of time weighing her post-secondary options and chooses

a university program with many of her peers. As she finishes up her four-year program and is interviewing for jobs she hears from her mom that Jason is applying for college as a mature student. She is really happy for him. If he gets in and stays the course, by the time Jason graduates Amanda will have acquired significantly more social and economic capital. Even if Jason remains determined enough (and has the supports from his family and friends) to move forward, unlike Amanda, decisions made about his placement and educational experiences during his primary years have created a strong determination with respect to his economic well-being, long-term health and career options. The decisions made during his elementary schooling and into his Grade 9 program of study have shaped his entire life. In fact, for thousands of students like Jason, decisions about their educational placement, made on their behalf, change their life trajectories and seldom in positive ways.

What happens to Andre?

> "Well." He said again, bringing me back to our conversation. "I want him to be able to go to college or university; I want him to have opportunities. I know he is in a Behavioural class, but can he still go to university? He can right?"

During our brief conversation, I am consumed by these thoughts and the knowledge of what I've described in the previous paragraphs and for a moment I feel like I've stopped breathing. When I realize this, I inhale and calmly say "Tell me more".

I had heard this father's story many times before. I listened as he shared the contents of Andre's IEP, a document that didn't quite make sense to him. When I actually reviewed the IEP, I found that it was completely inadequate. It lacked current assessment data; the modification recommendations were much lower than his academic ability; and the program goals were not measurable which meant nobody would ever know if Andre achieved them. He was just floating through his educational program with no real expectation to achieve.

However, this barely scratched the surface of what was wrong with this poorly written IEP. As a principal, it was easy to see the

many inadequacies. The parents, however, had no idea that this legal document was a clear indicator that their child's learning needs were not being met. Without intervention, their child had arrived at a final destination and on the fast track to a life of limited opportunities, low pay and lower life expectancy; all a probable by-product of the Applied POS and more so in the Locally Developed/Essential POS.

This parent continued to share the struggles he had at every stage of his efforts to ensure options and opportunities for his son. The inadequacy of this child's education had been well-documented. Perhaps what is most disturbing is that this case is not an outlier. This is not an anomaly. This family had struggled to get information about Assistive Technology, had to push to get access to a Special Equipment Amount (SEA) claim that would allow for Andre's increased academic success.

Andre's father finished his story talking about his experience at an IPRC the prior year. It was at this meeting (where parents are supposed to have the strongest voice) that Andre's parents attempted to remove him from the Behaviour program. However, the experts advised that he should finish his last few years in his current program. Andre's parents listened to this advice and reluctantly kept their son where he was. Andre had lost years of intentional instruction, with achievement gaps growing wider over time, and now believed that he was "stupid." This was the overriding result of his experience in special education, in a public system, where the provincial mission statement includes "[We are] committed to the success and well-being of every student and child. Learners … will develop the knowledge, skills and characteristics that will lead them to become personally successful, economically productive and actively engaged citizens" (Ontario Ministry of Education, pg.3, 2014).

"So?" The parent asked, as if to snap me back to our conversation.

What could I say to him? His instincts were acutely precise and, in addition, I knew that racism and classism were at play in Behaviour ISP programs where the majority of the time Black males and low-income families were overrepresented (G. Parekh, 2013). Good educational practices dictate that a solid pedagogy should inform our practice and that praxis should be our goal. I felt it was one of our educational purposes to create an avenue for children to become critically aware,

contributing members of society and that all students should have access to all opportunities. If that were true then parents must understand the differences in what various POS yield along with the limitations and perils of special education programs. Furthermore, it is our responsibility as educators to share this information.

I could not, in good conscious, tell Andre's parents to maintain the status quo. Without sharing all that I have in my retelling of Andre's story above, I simply said:

> "You need to continue to advocate for your child with everything that you have. Your child is LD with average intelligence. He can be anything. At your IPRC, get him out of that program where academics do not appear to be a focus. Work toward getting him into an Academic POS when he transitions to Secondary School (in a few short years) and I will help you navigate the system to make this happen."
>
> "Okay" he said both slowly and cautiously. I continued: "For so many reasons, Andre's opportunities in that program are marginal at best… Marginal is not good enough. It is time for him to move in the same world as Amanda and her peers."
>
> "What? Who is Amanda?" he replied. "A psychologist? I don't know that name; let me look in my folder of papers on Andre."
>
> I smiled inside. "Don't bother" I replied. "With your new course of action maybe it won't matter anymore."

ALISON GAYMES SAN VICENTE's work to disrupt educational practices that marginalize historically disadvantaged children, and her passion for equity and justice has led to a secondment at York University, and her current position as an administrator with the Toronto District School Board. It has also been the impetus for her work in girls' mentorship, elementary to secondary transitions and teaching praxis initiatives. She is an author in *Restacking the Deck: Streaming by class, race and gender in Ontario schools*, *Rhymes to Re-education: A Hip Hop Curriculum Resource Guide for Educators with Social Justice Activities* and has written several articles including "Doing Just Fine? Giving Attention to the Needs and Interests of Girls" and "Is Social Justice Helping or Hurting? Mentorship Programs: Girls and the Human Responsibility".

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author would like to thank Ramon San Vicente and Tracy Williams-Shreve for their invaluable assistance with this article.

ENDNOTES

1. The name and minor details of this story have been altered to protect the identity of this student and his family.

2. As defined in TDSB's Special Education Plan (2015) "Special Education Class" is the IPRC placement decision for those students with special education needs, for whom 50% or more of instructional time is delivered by a special education teacher, in a special education classroom with a prescribed pupil-teacher ratio (i.e. class sizes outlined in Regulation 298 (R.R.O. 1990), Section 31). Elementary students may receive this level of support in the Home School Program, as well as in congregated programs providing longer periods of intensive support with some opportunity for integration. (pg. 42).

3. For the purpose of this paper, when special education or SEN (Special Education Needs) are mentioned the Gifted designation is excluded.

4. Toronto District School Board's Program of Study Overview (2013) states "The Toronto District School Board (TDSB) offers secondary school students the opportunity to enrol in classes within various Programs of Study… For Grades 9-10, students can enrol in courses within Academic, Applied, and Locally Developed/Essentials Program of Study.… Students are classified according to the majority of courses taken. For example, if the majority of the student's courses are in the Academic Program of Study, the student is classified as an "Academic" student." (pg. 1)

5. Conversations about the impact of streaming at the secondary level have recently become a central focus at The Toronto District School Board in Ontario, Canada. In response to a sense of urgency in a variety of spaces, secondary schools in the Sifting, Sorting and Selecting project began offering subject-specific academic only courses at the grade 9 level, as early as January 2015. The final report, *Sifting, Sorting and Selecting: A collaborative inquiry on alternatives to streaming in the TDSB* (Equitable & Inclusive Schools, 2015), has since generated much conversation. The main recommendation of the final report was to phase out streaming and make the move towards greater inclusion and heterogeneous groupings a board priority.

6. Data in this section is taken from TDSB's Structured Pathways (G. Parekh, 2013).

REFERENCES

Burris, C. (2014). *On the same track: How schools can join the 21st century struggle against re-segregation*. Boston: Beacon Press.

Clanfield, D., Curtis, B., Galabuzi, G., Gaymes San Vicente, A., Livingstone, D. W., &

Smaller, H. (Eds.). (2014). Restacking the deck: Streaming by class, race and gender in Ontario schools (2nd Ed.). Ottawa: Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives.

Equity and Inclusive Schools, TDSB. (2015). Sifting, Sorting and Selecting: A Collaborative Inquiry on alternatives to streaming in the TDSB.

Freire, P. (1972). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. New York: Herder and Herder.

Giroux, H. A. (2003), Public Pedagogy and the Politics of Resistance: Notes on a critical theory of educational struggle. Educational Philosophy and Theory, 35: 5–16.

McLaren, P., & Kincheloe, J.L. (2007). Critical Pedagogy: Where Are We Now? New York: Peter Lang Publishing Inc.

Mitchell, D. (2010). *Education that fits: Review of international trends in the education of students with special educational needs*. Christchurch, New Zealand: University of Canterbury. Retrieved from http://www.educationcounts.govt.nz/__data/assets/pdf_file/0016/86011/Mitchell-Review-Final.pdf.

Ontario Ministry of Education. (2014) Achieving Excellence. A Renewed Vision for Education in Ontario.

Parekh, G. (December 2013). Structured pathways: An exploration of programs of study, school-wide and in-school programs, as well as promotion and transference across secondary schools in the Toronto District School Board (Report No. 13/14-03). Toronto: Research and Information Services, Toronto District School Board.

Toronto District School Board (TDSB). A Case For Inclusive Education. (2013). Organizational Development/Research & Information Services.

Toronto District School Board (July, 2015). Special Education Plan 2015.

Toronto District School Board (TDSB). Overview of Streaming: Programs of Study in Grades 9-10. (2015). Research & Information Services.

Toronto District School Board (TDSB). Facts: Programs of Study: An Overview Issue 7. (2013).