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## Research Report: Caribbean students in Montreal schools

### Abstract

**This research on Caribbean students in the Montreal schools was conducted by Don Carlos Keizer. It is summarized here in an address given by Professor Thomas Owen Eisemon, Professor, in the Department of Administration and Policy Studies, McGill University, and was presented as the Don Carlos Keizer Memorial Lecture, on November 28, 1985.**

My purpose tonight is to summarize the principal findings of Mr. Don Carlos Keizer's dissertation research on career decision making among Caribbean immigrant students and to draw some implications for school authorities, parents, and others concerned with the education of Black students in Montreal schools. Don Carlos died before submitting his dissertation. The data and much of the text of this presentation are drawn from the dissertation which was in the final stages of completion.

Don Carlos began doctoral studies in Comparative Education at McGill with an interest in the consequences of racial discrimination for Black youth, especially for those of Caribbean origin who had become demographically important in English schools in Montreal in recent years. In his capacity as a psychologist at the Protestant School Board of Greater Montreal, Don Carlos counselled Caribbean students of secondary school age to remain in school, to undertake collegiate studies; in brief, to fully benefit from the educational and economic opportunities which Quebec society afforded and which prompted the parents of these students to emigrate to Montreal. Still, many of them

dropped out of school when it was legally possible for them to do so, or completed secondary school with no aspirations for further studies, even those who had demonstrated in their academic work, the potential for a different and better future.

Don Carlos' dissertation was conceived with the two-fold objective of determining why the Caribbean students had lower educational and occupational aspirations than other Canadians and what could be done to change this situation. His research focused on students who had completed at least some schooling in Caribbean countries before transferring to schools in Montreal, and who were enrolled in grades eight and ten, age factors which previous research indicated were crucial periods in the formation of educational and occupational aspirations. Caribbean youth, Don Carlos observed, enter Montreal schools with very high expectations of academic and eventual economic success. Most received schooling in countries where admission to academic secondary education is quite selective, and where classroom discipline and standards of instruction and examination are much more rigorous than in North American schools, generally. A high proportion have taken national primary school leaving examinations and failed to gain admission to schools offering an A-level stream leading to university entrance. In Canada, they discover that promotion to secondary school is virtually automatic. Their schooling will not be abruptly terminated by an examination, and their educational future -- so they are told by their teachers -- will be determined by the effort they are willing to make to succeed. However, by the time many of these students have to make decisions about whether they will stay in school, about what subjects they will take, about the occupations they are likely to enter as adults, their earlier optimism seemed, Don Carlos noted, to give way to a common view that these decisions would be influenced by factors beyond their control.

In 1981, Don Carlos carried out a random sample survey of about a hundred and fifty students (144) in grades eight and ten in two Montreal schools with large populations of Caribbean students. The survey was designed so that comparisons could be made between students of Caribbean origin, who completed at least two years of previous schooling in a Caribbean country, and other Canadians in the same grades. In addition, a large number of the students were interviewed to facilitate interpretation of the survey findings. About a third (36%) of the Caribbean students had received schooling in Jamaica, and another third (34%) were Barbadians. (See Table 1 below.) The remainder of the Caribbean students went to school in Trinidad (14%) and the smaller Caribbean countries. Almost two thirds (64%) completed four or more years of schooling in a Caribbean country before emigrating to Canada.

**Table 1**

**Country of Origin of Caribbean Students  
(N=64)**

<b>Country:</b>	<b>%</b>
<b>Barbados</b>	<b>34.4</b>
<b>Jamaica</b>	<b>35.9</b>
<b>Trinidad</b>	<b>14.1</b>
<b>Guyana</b>	<b>4.7</b>
<b>St. Vincent</b>	<b>10.9</b>
	<b><u>100.0</u></b>

The Caribbean students studied obtained somewhat lower marks than other Canadian secondary students in grades eight and ten but the difference between the two groups in cumulative scores for academic subjects was not significant. Few Caribbean students obtained marks of 60 or better (32% in grade eight and 33% in grade 10) compared to non-Caribbean Canadian students (62% and 65% respectively), and more had very low marks. The Caribbean students' average marks placed most of them at the lower end of pass range, but high enough to enable them to complete secondary school and obtain admission to a CEGEP.

Almost two thirds (61%) of the Caribbean students had taken an eleven plus examination or its equivalent in their countries of origin. Only 5% of those who sat for such examinations indicated that they passed it. Most of the students were doing much better in Canadian schools than such an examination would predict.

However, comparison of the educational and occupational aspirations of Caribbean and non-Caribbean students' aspirations were much lower. Almost twice as many Caribbean students (21%) were planning to drop out of secondary school, for instance. More seriously, educational and occupational aspirations decreased with the number of years spent in Canadian schools.

Lower educational and occupational aspirations coincided with increased perception of racial discrimination in Canadian society. While less than half (48%) of the Caribbean students in grade 8 perceived and/or had experiences of racial discrimination, more than three fourths (75%) of the grade ten students reported discrimination. Of special concern to many of the Caribbean students was the language legislation which the government of

Quebec introduced in the late 1970s and which they perceived to compound the disadvantages of being Black English-speaking immigrants. Older students expressed more awareness of the implications of these policies for their educational and economic future. It was mentioned as a concern by 70% of the Caribbean students in grade ten. One indication of how seriously this concern was felt is a finding that the majority (62%) of these students predicted that they would return to live in their country of origin or emigrate to another country, usually the United States, by the age of thirty.

How secondary school students formulate their educational and occupational aspirations was investigated in the dissertation by separately examining the influence of family background, school achievement, the role of significant others and similar factors, followed by an analysis of their effects in combination. Don Carlos was interested in whether different factors were important for Caribbean students, and what kinds of individuals had the most influence on their educational and occupational aspirations. Two findings from Don Carlos' dissertation have serious implications for education of these students. First, in contrast to non-immigrant Canadians, the Caribbean students' expectations were much **less** likely to be influenced by their academic performance. Even those students who did well in school had low expectations of what they would accomplish. Second, most of the significant others who served as models for educational and occupational attainment (and provided guidance in these matters to the Caribbean students) were family members or close kin, and comparatively fewer were teachers, guidance counsellors, or other school board personnel.

The findings challenge some accepted notions about how educational and career plans are made by individuals who are members of racial and ethnic minorities. The process is quite different among Caribbean students, and the differences are more apparent in the later years of schooling. Caribbean students do not build career plans on the basis of what they see themselves as competent to do. Their expectations are based, in large part, on what others in similar circumstances have achieved. They are more conscious of the limitations imposed by the social and political environment in which they find themselves. And they are more likely to have higher aspirations if a teacher or someone they come into contact with at school takes an interest in them and encourages them to do well.

Don Carlos concluded that while Caribbean students have been able to profit, to some extent, from the opportunities provided by Canadian schools, special efforts are required to assist them to take full advantage of the opportunities that immigration has afforded. More specifically, he proposed that guidance counsellors and teachers be more attentive not only to Caribbean

students that are in academic difficulty, but to those who are achieving passing marks and require their support and advice.

Few teachers of Caribbean students in Montreal have much knowledge of the social and educational conditions in the countries from which these students come, and which strongly influence their school performance and expectations of Canadian society. Teacher training programs in Quebec do not require students to take coursework on multiculturalism and related topics nor is this emphasized in the continuing education of teachers. Many difficulties in educating immigrant children arise from ignorance of their cultural background. What is considered educationally appropriate in one society may result in a diagnosis of learning disabilities and/or maladjustment in another. For example, in most societies outside North America (and certainly throughout the English-speaking Caribbean) students indicate their respect for teachers by being silent unless spoken to. In North American schools quiet, respectful classroom behaviour is often interpreted by teachers as indicative of difficulty in comprehending English or the subject of instruction, or both. As a result, Caribbean and other immigrant children are often misplaced in special education programs where they are likely to fall further and further behind in their schoolwork.

Don Carlos was particularly concerned about the representation of Blacks and other visible minorities in counselling, administration, and in the teaching profession in Montreal schools. In recent years, the gains made in the late 1960s and early 1970s in increasing minority representation in the school system have been threatened by the demographic decline of the English community and the reduction of teaching staff on the basis of seniority. While Black students are accounting for an increasing percentage of students in the English educational sector, Black representation among school teachers, administrators, and counsellors has not grown in proportion. The consequences of this, Don Carlos felt, are very serious insofar as the encouragement which the schools give to Black students to succeed educationally is concerned. The school system, far from affording examples of what Black students can accomplish by staying in school for post-secondary education and thereby entering a profession, is now providing an illustration of how difficult it is for Blacks to break into and stay in professional preserves in the dominant society.

Don Carlos believed that Montreal schools with large numbers of Caribbean students should seek to ease the transition from Caribbean to North American schooling. It might be necessary, he thought, to organize special programs particularly for recent immigrants that involved, in addition to whatever remedial academic instruction these students may require, an emphasis on peer teaching. This would be a more effective way not only of preparing immigrant children to cope with the

different academic demands of Canadian schools but also to facilitate their social adjustment. The responsibility for organizing such programs should, he believed, be shared by the various community organizations and the schools if they were to become truly effective.

Finally, Don Carlos felt that it was important that the school curricula reflect the positive and enduring contributions of Blacks to Canadian society. The virtual neglect of Black studies in the school curricula implies for many students especially those from immigrant backgrounds that their future status in Canadian society will be peripheral notwithstanding the fact that Blacks have participated in Canada's development from its earliest beginnings. It was Don Carlos's hope that these conclusions would guide local school authorities in their efforts to improve instruction for Caribbean and other Black students in Montreal.

\*Mr. Don Carlos Keizer was a doctoral student in the Comparative Education Program at McGill University. He died in early 1985. An annual lecture series has been organized as a memorial to his contributions to the Black community of Montreal by McGill, the Protestant School Board of Greater Montreal, and various Caribbean community organizations.