

Can We Afford to Turn the Other Way?

As the summer roles to an end, we are witnessing educators and students returning back to classrooms. I noticed this year that many youth are excited, ambivalent, unsure, and anxious to see what this school year will bring. Expectations include new hopes, lesson to be learned, friendship, and hopefully some enlightening moments. However, there are now many racialized youth that cannot afford to continue their schooling. Funding is less available and student loans are also becoming less attractive. Many cannot or are unable to secure financing or simply do not want to put themselves in debt for years to come. Others are looking at the job market and realizing the more schooling does not necessarily equate a good paying job. As a result, education beyond high school is less of an option for many of our youth today.

What is visible is how many are not choosing education or perhaps reluctantly enrolled in post-secondary education. During the recession the economy has repeatedly proven that the amount of letters after your name does not guarantee employment. It is a daunting time for educators to be standing up in front of students, professing the importance of doing homework and paying attention in class. How relevant are the subjects we teach? How well is the curriculum preparing our students for the 'real world'?

Recently I spoke with some young people. I learned from one new high school graduate that he was unable to secure a summer job for the third time in a row. He was accepted to a college but was unmotivated and did not feel he was ready. He is interested in computers and video games specifically, but felt his chosen college program was too limiting. "What if I change my mind and don't want to do computers anymore?" he asked me. I understood his dilemma and attempted to convince him that any education is an option that *will* create opportunities. Eventually, he ended up paying part of his tuition with the help of his parents for the first semester. Still worried about getting a job, he seems to be much more interested in making money than learning. And who is to say, working your way up in a part-time job might end up being more attainable than securing one after he graduates. Regardless, he still had the option to attend college.

Another young girl aged 21 wants to finish her degree at the University of Toronto but has to take one course at a time due to financial constraints. This will dramatically prolong her stay in school as she has 24 more credits needed to receive her undergraduate degree. Her parents came to Canada from Trinidad and have recently separated. She has two younger brothers and lives with them and their mother. While contributing household bills, she has dreams of being a doctor or a school board psychologist. She is motivated to go to school but faces a huge barrier that is common for many Canadians: the lack of funds. How are we helping this younger generation?

Jean Augustine, the new Fairness Commissioner is responsible for ensuring that the credentials of newcomers are assessed fairly and openly. In measuring the 'success' of immigrants the government examines certain areas. The Canadian government defines successful integration with the unemployment rate, level of education, and residential concentration. The latest census reveals

that joblessness and acquired schooling lags behind in visible minority populations – even among first and second generation Canadians. Having the privilege to receive post-secondary education is now becoming more and more scarce among racialized groups.

As educators we must continue to support our families, our communities, and others around us to pursue their dreams beyond high school. Even if you feel frustrated with your own situation, helping others will grant us a better world to live in. I also recognize that there are some young adults receiving post-secondary education who are facing additional challenges. However, I believe in the saying 'as you rise, you lift a hand' which speaks to fostering community building. Donating money is something that is tangible but speaking to younger people, cousins, friends, and parents about their educational or life goals is a good step. Being available as a mentor or sharing knowledge about what you have learned may be the first step in building a young person's dreams towards life and long term fulfillment.

If everyone is too busy dealing with their own situation, we are choosing to ignore the future generation. As educators we do have a great influence in the direction of our young people and taking another step with them can translate to making even more of an impact in their lives. We have to ask ourselves: what are we doing outside of the walls of education to help the youth of today face life's new challenges? Supporting causes such as scholarships, programs, mentors, and events that promote and teach our youth about how to survive and realize their potential are all things that will provide dividends for many years to come.