

GETTING AHEAD IN LIFE

by Patrice de Broucker and Laval Lavallée

► *does your
parents
education
count?*

Education is an important determinant of one's position in society, affecting a person's participation in the community and likely success in the labor market. The inherited intellectual capital of the family - forged over the years by generations of family members' achievements at school and work often plays a large role in a child's educational achievement. It can contribute directly to a child's education by providing a more or a less supportive environment for learning, and can contribute indirectly by paving the way for a higher level of educational attainment. This article assesses the role of inherited intellectual capital in children's acquisition of postsecondary education.



Most adults aged 26-35 have as much or more education than their parents¹ (CST)

	Child's level of education		
	Higher	Same (%)	Lower
Parent's Education			
Total	51	34	16
Did not complete secondary	84	15	--
Completed secondary	40	46	--
Postsecondary	--	45	40

-- Sample too small to produce reliable estimate
¹ Parent with highest level of educational attainment.
 Source: Statistics Canada, 1994 International Adult Literacy Survey.

Educational attainment has improved over generations

Educational mobility - that is, the difference in educational attainment between parents and their children - is common in Canada. In 1994, about half (51%) of Canadian respondents aged 26 to 35 reported having a higher level of education than their parents (upward mobility), just under 34% had the same level, while the rest (16%) had less formal schooling.

Because the upward trend is dominant, the average level of educational attainment in Canada has been rising over time. The lower the level of one's parents' education, the greater the scope for increasing one's own level, and so the rate of upward mobility accelerates.

For example: 84% of 26- to 35-year-olds whose parents had not completed secondary school had gone further in their own education. Compulsory school attendance has had a significant influence on this achievement.

The rise in the general level of education throughout society has improved the intellectual capital available to the next generation. However, it remains true that the higher the parents' level of education, the more likely that the child will pursue further studies. Young adults aged 26 to 35 were close to three times more likely to earn postsecondary credentials if their parents had a postsecondary education than if their parents had not completed high school.

CANADIAN SOCIAL TRENDS BACKGROUNDER (CST)

What you should know about this study

This article uses data from the international Adult Literacy Survey (IALS) for Canada, conducted among 5,660 individuals in 1994.¹ It examines the likelihood that an adult has completed a postsecondary education (college or university), given their inherited intellectual capital. The analysis

focuses on young adults aged 26 to 35 because most have completed their initial education and are at the beginning of their careers (sample size of 1,010, representing a population of about 5 million Canadians). Where a comparison over time is illuminating, the young adults are compared to older adults aged 46 to 55 (sample size of 658, representing 3.3 million Canadians). The older cohort is chosen because it is on average 20 years, or an "educational generation," older and is still in the labor market. Since this study is concerned about the most recent level of education attained, the negligible percentage of those respondents still in school was excluded from the analysis.

The size of the sample restricts the analysis to only four levels of education for children (incomplete secondary, secondary, postsecondary non-university, and University) and three for their parents (incomplete secondary, secondary, and postsecondary). This may result in some blurring of the extent of educational mobility. For example, a child with a university degree will be defined as having more education than a parent who also has a university degree (since postsecondary for parents includes both college and university); similarly, a child with a college diploma will be defined as having the same educational attainment as a parent with a university degree.

Inherited intellectual capital: in this study, it is represented by the education of the parent with the highest level of educational attainment (mother or father) and the socio-economic status of the father's occupation.

Socio-economic status of occupations (SES): an index that measures the "importance" of an occupation relative to others. It is calculated for 21 groups of occupations based on three variables: the average level of education of workers, the average income and the percentage of women in the occupation.² The index ranges from a low of 25 (Fishing occupations) to a high of 62 (Natural science and Teaching occupations). In-between lie such occupations as Management, Social Science and Medicine (56 to 57), Mining and Machining (41 to 42) and Clerical and Sales (37 to 38).

¹ For more information about the IALS and its findings, see "Adult Literacy in Canada, the United States and Germany. *Canadian Social Trends*, Winter 1996.

² The calculation is based on the method developed by Bernard R. Blishen, William K. Carroll and Catherine Moore, "The 1981 socioeconomic index for occupations in Canada," *Canadian Review of Sociology and Anthropology*, Vol. 24, no. 4; 1987

Fathers with high-status occupation have a positive effect Parents also contribute to their child's education by passing on attitudes and expectations, providing encouragement and opportunities to learn, helping outside the classroom, standing as positive role models and so on. These elements of the family's intellectual capital arise not only from the parents' education but also from their life experience. If a parent's education is important to a child's educational attainment, what role might his occupation play? Specifically, might fathers with higher status occupations have children with higher educational qualifications?

Indeed, the data strongly suggest that the socio-economic status (SES) of the father's occupation is associated with their children's educational attainment. Men with low levels of education whose children have postsecondary credentials had, on average, higher status occupations. For example, the average SES score for fathers who had not finished high school was 35; but the SES was 39 for those whose children had a university degree, and only 33 for those whose children had not completed high school.¹ In contrast, fathers with a good education who worked in an occupation with below-average status for their level of schooling were more likely to have children with lower educational attainment.²

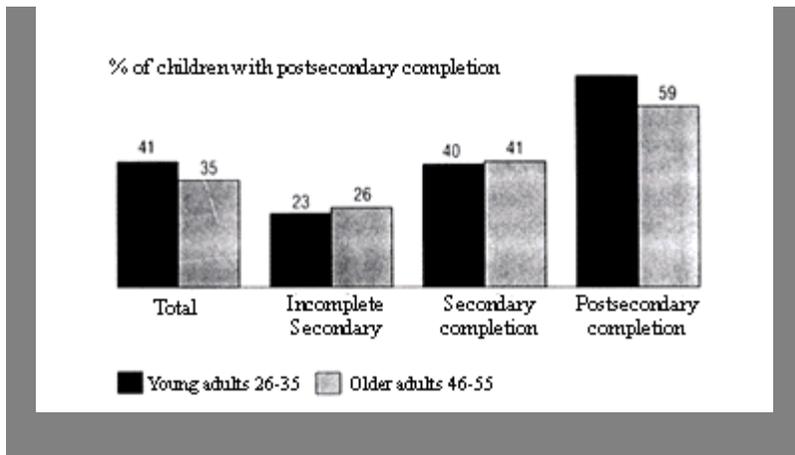
Creating an environment for education achievement The International Adult Literacy survey (IALS) data cannot directly address how intellectual capital may be inherited, but they do offer some hints. Intellectual capital can be transmitted through the "Use of educational investment strategies" that parents use to encourage their children to learn. The IALS does capture data on a number of activities that may be considered useful proxies for the parents' desire to further their children's education: buying books for their children, setting aside time to read and limiting time spent watching television.

By and large, parental support of children's education reproduces the parents' own educational background. The strongest relationships are between education, reading and academic performance. Parents with a college or university education are more likely to buy books for their children, perhaps because they often have higher incomes and can afford to purchase books; while less affluent families may borrow books for their children from the library. However, parents with a university degree have a much greater probability of reading to children, and this habit is not necessarily linked to income levels.

¹ The values for socio-economic status of the fathers' occupation ranged from a low of 25 to a high of 62. With only 37 points' difference between the lowest and the highest SES, a difference of 6 points is quite substantial.

² Unfortunately, the sample size is too small to perform this analysis for both cohorts separately to see whether the influence of the father's occupation has changed over time. However, results of the regression analysis (see "Factors that influence years of schooling") would suggest that its importance has declined.

The probability of earning a diploma or degree is highest for young adults whose parents also have postsecondary education¹ (CST)



Most adults aged 26-35 have as much or more education than their parents¹ (CST)

Child's level of education

	Child's level of education				
	Total	Incomplete Postsecondary	Secondary complete	Post- secondary non- university	University
Father's average SES score²					
Did not complete secondary	35	33	36	35	39
Completed secondary	42	38	40	43	45
Postsecondary	48	44	48	47	50

¹Includes all respondents for whom data are available.

² Value for lowest SES = 25, highest SES = 62.

Source: Statistics Canada, 1994 International Adult Literacy Survey.

No group of parents seems more inclined than any other to limit the time spent watching TV, but TV time would be reduced by other activities (such as reading) without any need for parental intervention. About one child in two starts reading before entering Grade 1, regardless of the parents' education; this is probably the result of experiences that cut across the educational background of parents, such as daycare, junior kindergarten or educational television programs. However, parents with university are least likely to have children who are behind at school.³

CANADIAN SOCIAL TRENDS BACKGROUNDER (CST)

Factors that influence years of schooling

A number of factors can influence the educational attainment of children. These factors include gender, parents' highest level of educational attainment, father's occupation, mother's participation in the paid workforce, and immigrant status. The table below shows the effect of some of these characteristics - measured in terms of the difference in average years of formal schooling - when the influence of all other factors is taken into account.

The higher level of education that used to be enjoyed by men - men aged 46 to 55 had over two-thirds of a year more formal schooling than women their age - has disappeared among younger adults. Although gender may no longer matter, parental education does: young adults aged 26 to 35 whose parents did not complete high school have one less year of schooling than those whose parents graduated from high school.

A man's occupation has a strong effect on the years of education his children receive, and the impact was much greater on older than younger adults. Compared with 46- to 55- year olds whose fathers were skilled agricultural workers, others in this age group had almost 6 years more schooling if their fathers had been professionals, and 3.5 years more if their fathers had been managers. In the next generation (aged 26 to 35), the advantage had dropped to less than two more years for children of professionals and just over one more year for children of managers. Meanwhile, people whose mothers had worked for pay acquired about half (aged 46 to 55) to one (aged 26 to 35) more year of education than those whose mothers had not been not employed outside the home.

Impact of various factors on number of years of education¹

	Young Adults 26-35	Older Adults 46-55
	(Average number of years)	
Base number of years of education	12.8	11.9
Male	-0.1	0.7
<i>Female</i>	--	--
Parent's education²		
Incomplete secondary	-1.0	-1.4
<i>Secondary completion</i>	--	--

Postsecondary	1.2	-0.4*
Father's occupation		
Armed Forces	4.3	-1.4*
Manager	1.3	3.5
Professional	1.9	5.9
Technician	0.2*	3.0
Clerk	1.2	3.4
Service Worker	-0.1*	1.7
<i>Skilled agricultural worker</i>	--	--
Craft worker	-0.8	1.3
Plant & machine operators	-0.6*	0.9
Elementary occupations	-1.1	0.7*
Never worked	3.0*	0.0
Mother's labor force status		
Mother worked	0.9	-0.5
<i>Mother did not work</i>	--	--
Region		
Outside Canada	-0.9	0.7*
Atlantic	-0.1*	-1.5
Quebec	-0.4*	-2.3
<i>Ontario</i>	--	--
West	-0.5	0.1*

-- sample too small to produce reliable estimate.

* Statistically significant

1 Reference group shown in italics. Values for all other groups in the category are shown compared to the reference group.

2 Parent with highest level of educational attainment.

Source: Statistics Canada, 1994 International Adult Literacy Survey.

It seems that parents with higher levels of education are more likely to set their children on the path to educational success. However, this finding should be interpreted with caution, because the data were collected only for children aged 6 to 18 years, and provide no information about the final outcomes of parents' educational strategies, that is, whether the children completed a postsecondary education.

Summary It does appear that parental education plays a significant role in children's ability to match or improve upon their parents' educational attainment. Most probably, this occurs because the learning environment in the home reflects the parents' own academic background. However, it seems that a parent with little formal schooling but a high socio-economic status occupation can also see his children earn high level educational qualifications. This finding suggests that parents provide a sound learning environment for their children -extracurricular activities, books, lessons and so on⁴ - if they can afford to do so. In other words, financial stability is an important agent in the transmission of intellectual capital.

If the family cannot transmit intellectual capital, is the education system able to provide equal educational opportunities to all? An education policy is a powerful instrument to influence human capital formation, but other public policies that recognize the link between low education and low income also play an important role. Such programs could help young low-income parents to complete their higher education, find adequate day care facilities, obtain career counseling and integrate into the labour market.

Recently, a Canadian university advertised on a commercial billboard with these words:

*Not everyone inherits the
family business. No one's about to
hand you your future.*

Rather, to a large extent, it seems that your future is in the hands of your parents.

³ Defined as being at least two years behind the normal grade for their age.

⁴ See "The social context of school for children," *Canadian Social Trends*, Winter 1997.

-
- This article is adapted from Intergenerational Aspects of Education and Literacy Skills Acquisition," *Labour Markets, Social Institutions, and the Future of Canada's Children*, Statistics Canada, Catalogue Number 89-553-XPIB.

Patrice de Broucker is chief of Integration, Analysis and Special Projects, Centre for Education Statistics, Statistics Canada, and **Laval Lavallée** is a consultant with Vestimetra International Inc.

— CST —

**Statistics
Canada's
New Releases**

- Product no. 10F005XCB
StatCan: CANSIM



Do you enjoy reading **Canadian Social Trends**?
Do you use our publication in your business?

directory

\$103 / \$103 US

- Catalogue no. 85-002-XPE

Juristat: Breaking and entering in Canada, 1996
\$93 / \$93 US

**To order publications, dial
toll-free
1-800-267-6677**

How long have you been a reader?

**WE WOULD LIKE TO HEAR FROM
YOU.**

Send your comments to the Editor-in-Chief,
Canadian Social Trends,
7th floor, Jean Talon Bldg., Statistics Canada,
Ottawa, Ontario, K1A 0T6

Fax number: (613) 951-0387. Internet e-mail address:

cstsc@statcan.ca.
