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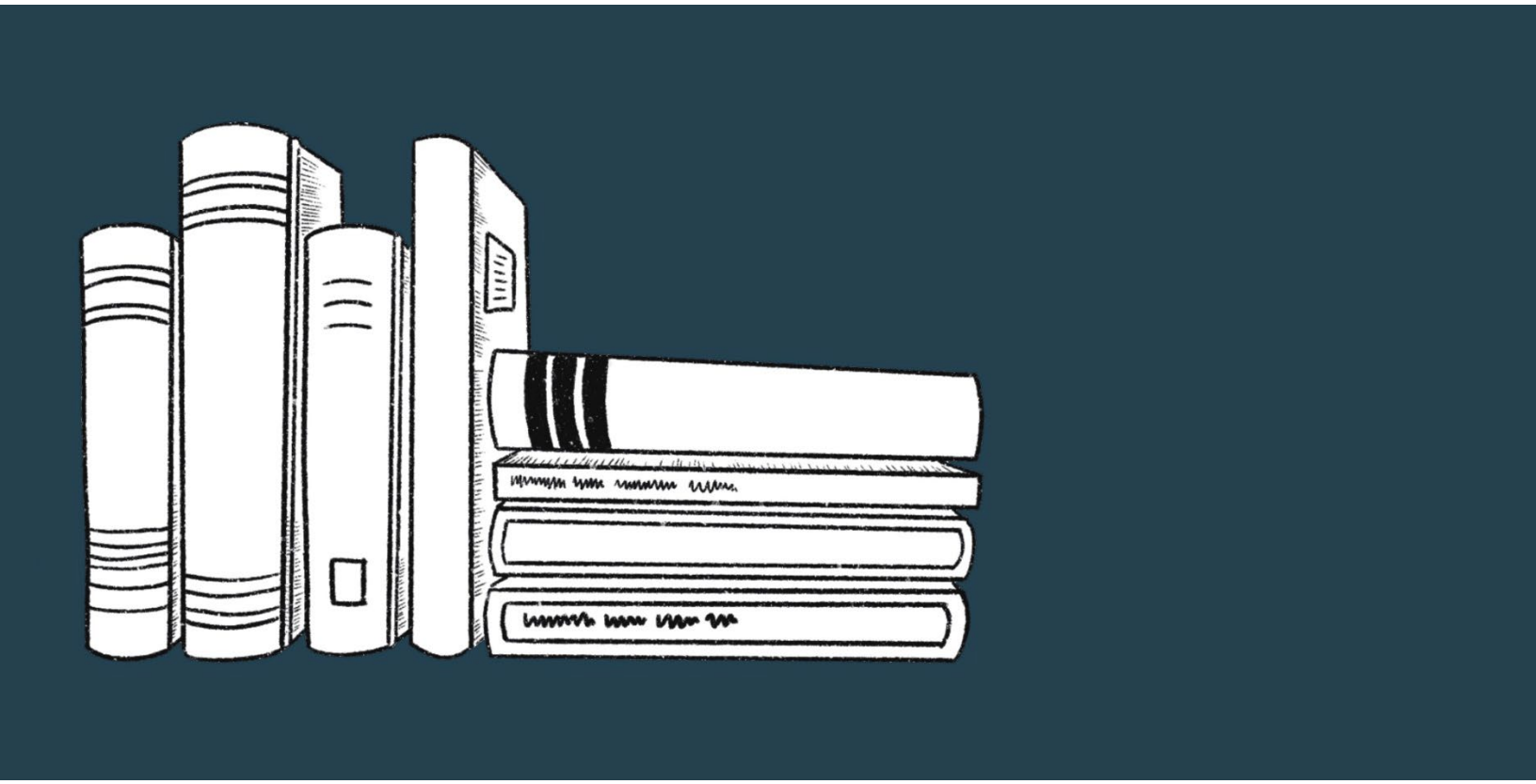

Learning from Educator Experiences with Grade 9 Destreaming Supports and Strategies

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Introduction

Ontario's historic practice of streaming, or separating high school students into academic and non-academic courses based on perceived ability, has systematically disadvantaged students from equity-deserving groups. Racialized and low-income students were disproportionately encouraged to pursue non-academic pathways, restricting their access to postsecondary education (PSE) (James & Turner, 2017; Follwell & Andrey, 2021). To address this inequity, the Ontario Ministry of Education (EDU) destreamed compulsory Grade 9 courses, starting with math in September 2021 and followed by science, geography, English and French in September 2022 (Government of Ontario, 2020; Alphonso, 2021). This change gives students an additional year to reflect on their interests and goals before choosing their pathways. If the destreaming policy is implemented successfully, it will allow for more equitable outcomes after high school.

Ontario attempted to destream multiple times since the 1960s, each time encountering failures with policy implementation (Pichette et al., 2020). To avoid history repeating itself, The Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario (HEQCO) championed ongoing evaluation to ensure students have the support they need to succeed in a destreamed environment. In 2021-22, we partnered with two Ontario school boards to gather evidence about the efficacy of destreaming supports and strategies. In our survey of approximately 1,500 students in destreamed math classrooms, most students found available learning supports helpful and reported feeling safe and supported (Pilla et al., 2023). Students with special education needs (SEN), however, were more likely to find destreamed math demanding and less likely to expect a high grade in the course. Most students were unaware of the province's destreaming policy or its potential impact on PSE pathways.

Educators play a key role in implementing Ontario's destreaming policy, and understanding their experiences and concerns can help improve implementation progress and plans. To complement student perspectives, HEQCO organized a full-day, in-person workshop to discuss impressions of various destreaming supports and strategies with teachers, in-class support staff, department heads, principals/vice-principals and board administrators from the same two school boards. This summary highlights key themes emerging from those discussions, including educators' ideas for ensuring that Ontario's destreaming policy is successful.

Research Questions and Methodology

Workshop discussion topics were designed to address two research questions:

- What are educators' experiences with and impressions of destreaming supports and strategies?
- How do educators feel destreaming supports and strategies could be improved?

The in-person workshop was held on March 30, 2023 and attended by approximately 80 educators, all of whom were involved with destreaming implementation in at least one Grade 9 compulsory course. Discussions were structured as a "world café" activity in which participants rotated through topics and were encouraged to build upon previous groups' key ideas (The World Café Community Foundation, 2023). Topics included student learning supports, teaching strategies, destreamed curricula, outcomes (e.g., postsecondary pathways) and professional development.

Participants were also invited to complete a brief survey at the end of the workshop to share additional thoughts. In total, 55 participants responded. Close-ended survey responses were analyzed in Excel, while open-ended survey questions and discussion notes were coded thematically in NVivo.

Key Themes from Educator Discussions

The following three themes emerged from workshop discussions:

1. Concern that students and families are uninformed about pathways

To make informed choices about pathways, students need to understand how the courses they select affect their options after graduation, which include college, university, apprenticeship training, entering the workplace and community living (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2013). Many university degree programs, for example, require Grade 12 university- or "U"-level English; similarly, programs like biology or engineering typically require additional Grade 12 U-level credits in math and/or science (University of Toronto, 2023; York University, 2023). To enrol in these courses, students need to complete academic and U-level prerequisites in Grades 10 and 11.

Participants shared that many students and families are not aware of the relationship between course selection and pathways after graduation. Some attributed this lack of awareness to structural barriers, including issues with the timing of course selection: in a semester format, students choose their courses for the following year in February or March, which is often too early for teachers and guidance counselors (or students themselves) to have a good sense of their interests and career goals. Participants suggested moving course selection to later in Grade 9, as well as moving the Grade 10 Career Studies course (GLC20) to Grade 9 and adding a module explaining the relationship between course selection and pathways (see Ontario Ministry of Education, 2019 for more information on the Career Studies course). Some also suggested that guidance counsellors visit classrooms more often to talk about how course selection may broaden or limit post-graduation pathways.

Participants also shared that terminology used for high school courses and PSE pathways can add confusion and prevent students from receiving adequate advice and making informed choices. For example, students may believe that they can pursue any college program with college- or "C"-level high school credits; however, college bachelor's degree programs typically require U-level courses. Despite recognizing that U-level courses can help ensure students have more options available to them after graduation, some participants expressed discomfort with this "U" label. They felt encouraging students to take these courses could be seen as prioritizing university pathways over college or apprenticeship training. Re-labelling Grade 11 and 12 course names, participants felt, could help avoid confusion around pathways and their relationship to course selection.

2. Need for new teaching frameworks grounded in equity and inclusion

Ensuring all students benefit from rigorous instruction and high expectations in destreamed classrooms is essential to realizing the policy's equity goals (Pichette et al., 2020). Participants shared, however, that teachers and support staff struggled to accommodate the broad range of student learning needs and styles that are often present in a destreamed environment. Some

described a tendency to “teach to the middle,” or teach in a way most suited to the “average” skill level, which limits attention given to students who are advanced, struggling or have SEN. This issue was compounded by what participants described as large class sizes, which make it more difficult to provide individualized attention to students.[1]

Several participants described using the “thinking classroom” to help overcome this challenge (Liljedahl, 2020). This approach emphasizes collaboration between teachers and students, as well as strategies such as group work, whiteboards (digital or physical) and tiered assessments, which tailor evaluations to individual skill levels and prioritize incremental improvements. Some workshop participants were hearing about the thinking classroom for the first time; these participants felt they would benefit from more opportunities to learn about this and other strategies aimed at meeting the diverse learning needs of students in destreamed classrooms.

Participants also noted a need for ongoing province- and board-wide initiatives aimed at supporting cultural change. They shared that not all teachers understand the equity goals of destreaming nor the rationale behind inclusive teaching strategies. Participants described colleagues, for example, who were hesitant to use tiered assessments because they felt doing so would sacrifice the quality of instruction or “water down” learning materials and outcomes. They suggested that increased professional development, including training in culturally relevant and responsive pedagogy (CRRP) and equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI) initiatives, would help address these misconceptions and ensure educators have the tools and training needed to understand the goals of destreaming and support all learners.

3. Need for timely, adequate and consistent student support and updates to curriculum

Like in any learning environment, students need adequate support to be successful in destreamed classrooms. Participants reported, however, that students have insufficient and inconsistent access to learning supports across destreamed courses. None of the 55 exit-survey respondents strongly agreed that students had the support needed to excel in Grade 9 destreamed courses. Just under half (45%) somewhat agreed with this statement, and math teachers and staff were more likely (68%) to give this response than teachers and staff from other courses (33%). Those who somewhat agreed (45%) that students had the support they needed equaled the combined number of respondents who somewhat disagreed or strongly disagreed (45%).

Many dialogue participants described how supports implemented alongside the destreaming rollout were aimed disproportionately at math students. The Ontario government provided funding for Mathify, a free online service that provides tutoring to math students from grades 4 to 12 (TVO Media Education Group, 2023); a number of Ontario school boards connected students with math-specific resources, such as Knowledgehook, an online instructional platform through which teachers and students interact via game-based math activities (Knowledgehook, 2023). Workshop participants shared that other destreamed courses lack equivalent supports. Educators focused on these subjects relied instead on existing, informal teaching strategies, such as encouraging students to work together in different combinations (“random groupings”), facilitating peer tutoring and using digital whiteboards. While participants found these

[1] HECQO previously highlighted small class sizes as important to the destreaming policy's success (Pichette et al., 2020).

approaches helpful, they felt they were less effective than dedicated, subject-specific supports, like those available for Grade 9 math; they hoped to see similar supports introduced for other destreamed courses.

Participants similarly noted inconsistent curriculum development across destreamed subjects. EDU developed new destreamed curricula for Grade 9 math and science; in contrast, Grade 9 English, French and geography courses used existing academic curricula.[2] Participants using new curricula described not having enough time to learn course material and prepare lesson plans, while those using existing academic curricula struggled to adapt materials to suit a wider range of learning styles and needs (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2021; Ontario Ministry of Education, 2022b).[3] These challenges led to burnout from working additional hours over summer months and early in the school year, ultimately disadvantaging students as educators had less time to learn about equitable teaching frameworks and inclusion practices. Participants suggested educators be involved in the development and implementation of destreamed curricula for the remaining compulsory courses (geography and French); moving forward, they also hoped for more time to familiarize themselves with new curricula, develop learning plans and participate in aligned professional development opportunities.

Summary and Conclusion

In addition to contending with issues similar to those encountered during previous destreaming attempts (Pichette et al., 2020), the current policy rollout has been complicated by remote learning and other pandemic-related challenges. Ongoing evaluation, including through engagement with stakeholders, will be essential to ensure this policy is implemented successfully and leads to lasting, positive change.

HEQCO's workshop gave educators an opportunity to share their experiences with destreaming and offer recommendations for improvement. They emphasized a need for better communication with students and families about post-graduation options, in addition to ongoing professional development that enables equity and inclusion. Educators felt that students would also benefit from subject-specific learning supports across all destreamed courses, as well as updated curricula designed with educator involvement and released with time to adjust corresponding teaching practices.

Educators represent a key stakeholder group whose views should continue to be captured in future destreaming research, evaluation and policy implementation efforts. HEQCO is grateful to its school board partners for facilitating access to educator perspectives during the workshop and for their ongoing interest in supporting students in destreamed courses.

[2] In December 2022, the Ministry announced a new destreamed English curriculum set to take effect in September 2023 (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2022a)
[3] The Ontario Teachers' Federation has also expressed concern that educators were not given enough time to learn the new math curriculum and prepare before its September 2021 launch (Ontario Teachers' Federation, 2021)

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