

“Growing Up In”: The Transfer Program in Windsor, Ontario, 1983

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ABSTRACT

In 1983, stand-alone vocational schools that had been built less than two decades earlier, were struggling to remain open. In an effort to make the most of the recently built schools, new special education programs were offered there. Transferring grade 8 students from the local elementary school kept the doors of the vocational school I attended open in the early 1980s. Vocational studies claimed to provide more options to students. For me, going to vocational school was not an option. I was “advised” that I was suited for the program and transferred to the school with no way of refuting or challenging the decision. Students destined for academic high school streams could interact with the process of going to secondary school as active agents in their own education. Me, my two siblings, and many other students from my working-class neighbourhood were “advised” of a program that supposedly matched our achievements—advised by the same people who gave us the failing grades that prompted our transfer to the program.

RÉSUMÉ

En 1983, les écoles secondaires de métiers, construites moins de vingt ans auparavant, peinaient à rester ouvertes. Afin de rentabiliser ces établissements récemment bâtis, de nouveaux programmes d'éducation spécialisée y ont été proposés. Le transfert d'élèves de 8^e année provenant de l'école primaire locale, a permis à l'école secondaire de métiers que j'ai fréquentée de rester ouverte au début des années 1980. Les études offraient prétendument davantage d'options aux élèves. Pour moi, fréquenter une telle école n'était pas un choix. On m'a « suggéré » que ce programme me convenait et j'ai été transféré dans cette école sans possibilité de contester ou de remettre en cause la décision. Les élèves destinés aux filières générales du secondaire pouvaient participer activement à leur orientation scolaire. Mon frère, ma sœur et moi-même, ainsi que de nombreux autres élèves du quartier ouvrier où nous vivions, avons été « dirigés » vers un programme censé correspondre à nos résultats—lequel était recommandé par les mêmes personnes qui nous avaient attribué les mauvaises notes ayant motivé notre transfert vers ce programme.

I started attending Shawnee Vocational School in 1983. By the time I got there, the Windsor Board of Education had been operating its transfer program for a dozen years at least. The program was supposed to help “students enter the type of [high school] program which best suit[ed] their needs and interests.”¹ It was the elementary school principal who recommended grade 8 students’ secondary school programs to the superintendent for final approval.² As a transfer student, the local board, the administration in my school, and my grade 8 teacher “advised” my parents and me that I was going to a vocational school. The new vocational subject areas, and even vocational schools, were purported to provide options. For me, going to vocational school was not a choice. I was transferred to the school. Sure, the bureaucratic and formal nature of going to secondary school was applied to all students, but not equally. Students destined for academic streams could interact with the process of going to high school as active agents in their own education. For me, my two siblings, and many other students from my neighbourhood, we were “advised” of a program that matched our achievements, represented in the failing grades given to us by the same people “advising” us. A landscape was created for a successful ambush, an ambush that couldn’t fail, and I was ambushed in the fall of 1982. This anecdotal account is backed by a secondary literature on school streaming in Ontario.

In the 355 pages of data and analysis of streaming in Ontario contained in “Restacking the Deck,” a special issue of *Our Schools/Our Selves*, there is a thorough explanation of how I was streamed through the transfer program. “Both official and unofficial streaming practices are still [in 2014],” the authors of “Restacking the Deck” write, “very much in evidence within the province’s elementary schools and classrooms.”³ It is those unofficial or informal practices that are so difficult to challenge, though research has identified streaming’s methods, deconstructed its practices, and has given critics a vocabulary and strategies to call it out and oppose it.⁴ In writing about my transfer program experience, I hope to encourage an appreciation of the informal methods at play and why they are difficult to disrupt. The transfer program had a devastating effect on my sense of self-efficacy. I struggle to put this experience into words. Being transferred to a vocational school was like an ambush attack from a movie western.

I know the metaphor of an ambush might seem peculiar, even violent. But that is how the transfer program felt: like a well-planned surprise attack. And, like an ambush, just as I thought I was getting through unscathed, I was surrounded. I come by this comparison honestly. My childhood included watching dramatic cheesy westerns, a genre of movie marred by stereotypical tropes and one-liners better left in the past. I admit, though, the ambush would always draw me in. Even once I was familiar with the genre and knew it was inevitable, it still fascinated me. Perhaps this was because the more familiar I became with the ambush strategy, the more I could identify the building tension leading up to the ambush—the building tension made it exciting. The storyline in these westerns varied, but as soon as a group of travellers set out on horseback, there was often a familiar crossroads of sorts—the canyon pass, a dangerous shortcut through a ridge. The travellers would discuss their options in front of the dramatic landscape. Looming deadline, injured member of their party,

an enemy closing in: these were the circumstances that made going through the pass the only real choice they had.

My experience of being streamed into a vocational high school felt to me like the ambushes in those old westerns. Like them, vocational high schools had their moment and were a product of their time. I am not opposed to learning a skilled trade, but I am opposed to creating an educational landscape that has a narrow canyon pass where grade 8 students are ambushed and streamed into a high school program they neither desire nor freely choose. Now that we better understand the factors involved in creating and sustaining streaming at all levels of education, we know that there are better ways to teach trade skills than streaming adolescents into programs they have no real option to avoid. Recounting my experience illustrates that it was necessary to close stand-alone vocational schools, like the one I attended, which contributed to educational inequity for working-class kids like me. But even this does not get all the way to the root of the problem. These schools did not just stream the working class. They helped to reproduce it by streaming it.

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Myriad factors made up my experience at vocational school in the early 1980s. Federal initiatives, shifting political views in the province, provisions for special education, and streaming formalized by federal and provincial governments and local school boards—all had a hand in it.

More than two decades before I attended vocational school, Ontario had capitalized on federal legislation passed in 1960, the Technical Training and Vocational Assistance Act (TVTAA), to build schools like the one I attended.⁵ Under the TVTAA, the federal government funded 75 per cent of capital costs for new, stand-alone vocational high schools and technical wings in composite secondary schools. School boards kicked in the remaining 25 per cent. It was a huge boon to boards such as the Windsor Board of Education. By 1967, when the TVTAA ended, the \$806 million in funding the act provided nationally had helped build 335 brand new schools and 83 new school additions.⁶ Under this plan, my small town of less than 200,000 people had no less than 6 stand-alone vocational schools in the 1960s.

All that money came with a catch. The federal government dictated that students attending TVTAA schools had to have timetables in which half the subjects students took were in technical or trade practices.⁷ To meet that requirement, Ontario overhauled its high school programs. The Robarts Plan rolled out in 1962 and was fully operational by 1966. It was a complete reorganization of the secondary program. Fatefully for me, that reorganization created a two-year course with a vocational focus to meet TVTAA program expectations. "Students in this category were 'transferred' to the high school rather than promoted," Gidney writes, "and their program of studies was predominantly non-academic."⁸ Hence the transfer program that entrapped me two decades later. Then, in 1967, the federal government abruptly pulled all funding for secondary school education, and turned its attention instead towards funding Ontario's new Colleges of Applied Arts and

Technology.⁹ This left most school boards in Ontario scrambling. Vocational education in high schools was expensive and programs needed students to justify their existence.

The Windsor Board of Education discovered that pupils were both reluctant to choose vocational schools and reluctant to stay in them for long. Many students dropped out. Vocational school enrolments remained low, calling the future of these schools into question. As early as 1971, the Windsor Board of Education had instituted the version of the transfer program that I experienced.¹⁰ It was noted at a school board meeting that students did not want to go to the vocational schools because of the stigma attached to vocational learning. The board's answer was to remove the title "vocational" from the schools.¹¹ By the 1980s, with school boards still desperately trying to hold onto existing vocational high schools, new special education legislation also helped to populate schools like the one I went to. Bill 82, passed in 1980, required all Ontario school boards to provide special education, including for older students, and provided funds for that purpose.¹² The Windsor Board of Education's transfer program, by the time I encountered it in 1983, was presented as a win-win scenario, an offer my parents couldn't refuse. It was not what I wanted, but as most research on streaming has noted, the deck was stacked against me.

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The previous year was to have been my last in grade 8. I was overjoyed to be leaving elementary school. My then-undiagnosed attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and the open concept design of the elementary school I went to had been a disastrous combination for me. Open concept schools were "a favourite sixties nostrum,"¹³ sharing a vintage with the TVTAA.

For those readers who have never been inside an open concept school, I will describe it for you. Except for kindergarten and grades 7 and 8, all other classes were held in one large, open concept area. This space was divided into twelve classrooms and a library. The library was the centre of the design, with three open wings radiating out from it. Each wing held four classrooms. Four classes of grades 1 and 2 were grouped together. The next wing was for the four groups of grades 3 and 4. Grades 5 and 6 were in the other wing. At full capacity, 360 students occupied this sprawling field of desks. There were no windows except for the tiny ones on the emergency exit doors located at the end of each wing. The cinderblock walls were painted high-gloss white. The floors were covered in a grey indoor/outdoor wall-to-wall carpeting. I existed in this space each school day for four years—from grades 3 to grade 6. It was bright and busy and full of distraction. For students who had the ability to regulate their attention, this may have been fine, but my struggles with ADHD showed on my report cards. I squeaked by year after year with mediocre grades, with occasional outliers at either end of the spectrum. Luckily, I would occasionally ace a test or get an "A" on a project or assignment. These occasional glimpses of potential were reminders of my capability. This afforded me some resistance to the damage done to my self-esteem.

In grade 8, I stood at the proverbial canyon pass. I was ready for a clean slate in a new school, one with windows and interior classroom walls. Like many before me, and many after, I failed grade 8. Then, practically by default, I became part of the transfer program. But first I returned to elementary school to begin repeating grade 8. I put in my best effort, to no avail. When fall mid-term report cards were issued communicating more failing grades, the transfer began. My parents were called in for a meeting and presented with a "choice." One, to take the canyon pass—abandon my second try at grade 8 half-way through, go to vocational high school in January, and avoid having to repeat a full year. Or, the second option, take the long way around the mountain—finish doing grade 8 over, with no guarantee of success. Options? Actually, there was no turning around, no escape from the trap. I think this sums up why: "For capitalism to continue ruthlessly grinding on, those of us [expected to do] stupid/or dangerous work must believe we are not as smart as the people who boss us around... but if enough people believe it—even partially believe it—this idea will reinforce and strengthen capitalism. After all, if we believe brains lead to success, we'll blame ourselves... not systemic oppression."¹⁴ As near and dear to my heart as this quotation is, a simple change in belief is far from enough to create systemic change. The system built to oppress must be understood in terms of how it functions to reproduce inequality in the day-to-day practices of the school.

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By the time I arrived at my high school, Shawnee Secondary School, it appears the transfer program was essential to keeping the doors of stand-alone vocational high schools open. Shawnee, by the 1980s, was carefully monitored because of its low enrolment and attendance and its high dropout rate. The board set population minimums for schools with declining enrolment. In 1978, the minimum enrolment for Shawnee was 300 to 400 students. This was the second lowest high school enrolment in the Windsor board. The cut-off limits and the actual numbers of students enrolled in my school were never far from each other. It is plausible that the transfer program in any given year could have tipped the balance in favour of keeping a school open for another year. This is not a far-fetched allegation.¹⁵

There were many reasons to keep Shawnee and stand-alone vocational schools like it open. These schools diverted students with behaviour problems away from "regular" high school classrooms. Stand-alone schools also provided jobs to vocational teachers. These schools needed vice-principals and principals too. The closing of a stand-alone vocational school would have faced a serious challenge from most stakeholders, even special education students, who under Bill 82, were able to access secondary education for the first time.

The transfer program effectively funnelled an unknown number of students to the Windsor Board of Education's vocational schools each year. Many students from my elementary school went on to the vocational school nearby. Regardless of my personal struggles with open concept design during elementary school, I was far from alone in my experience of being transferred. As far as I know, sometimes students would

willingly choose to attend the local vocational school. But often enough, students who failed grade 8 were ambushed like I was.

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Failing grade 8 set in motion events that other kids like me experienced. Failure came as a shock to me: I was trying harder than I had ever tried before, and I was in a traditional classroom. (Open concept classes only went to grade 6). My parents were called in to discuss “options.” The principal explained to them, showing my report cards as proof, that I was not capable of traditional academic studies. My only hope, according to school administrators, was accepting the transfer to a vocational school. There, it was hoped, I could learn a trade and get into an apprenticeship. The mid-year transfer in 1983 was presented as not only a way to save me from having to repeat grade 8, but as a way to avoid the graduation ceremony. I would find out much later that my parents were told by the vice-principal that I was not even capable of graduating from elementary school. Like many others in this scenario, my parents “chose” Shawnee. And why wouldn’t they, considering the awful circumstances I was in? I could get out of elementary school faster. Yet the transfer program came with many long-term consequences for me.

It would take me decades to understand and unpack the gatekeeping that went on in the transfer program and the impact it had on me. Without fanfare or celebration, I went to my new school, embarrassed about what it said about my intellectual abilities. I was expected to make a significant social adjustment halfway through the school year and begin at a new school, a secondary school, alone. Sure, I knew people at the school, including my brother, now one-and-a-half years ahead of me. I would do my best once again, knowing though that the people in charge of my education deemed me incapable of even graduating from elementary school. From that point on, I would spend a great deal of energy defensively trying to prove to myself and others that I was worthy and capable. Once I started attending vocational school, I went into survival mode and then looked for constructive escapes any way I could.

Vocational school was socially rough, and I wanted to spend as little time there as possible. A friend at a nearby high school made an appointment for me to meet the principal of her school (a regular high school) to discuss a transfer there—to no avail. It was explained to me that my mid-year transfer to a vocational school made going to a regular high school an impossibility.¹⁶ Hearing those words in that moment, I understood two things. One, my experience was part of a larger protocol in

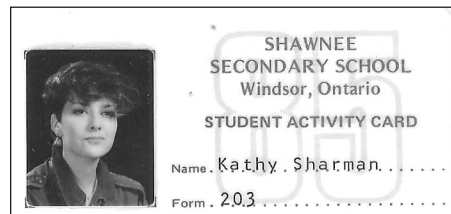


Figure 1, Student Card, 1984. *My 1985 student card with my previous female name. My given name was legally changed in 2014. Some of my documentation, such as my hairdressing licence, was reissued to me to reflect the change. Other documents remain as they were.*

the board.¹⁷ Second, this larger system had taken away my options and agency.

I trudged through the first year. The following year brought at least the hope of getting out of the building because of co-operative education classes that gave me school credit for working at a hair salon for part of a semester. Co-operative education was my favourite part of school because I didn't have to be in a school. This program was implemented between 1979 and 1981, part of the "HS1," which in 1973 had replaced the Robarts Plan as Ontario's secondary school program document.¹⁸ And thankfully, co-op was present when I arrived in 1983.

After that first year and my relatively positive co-op experience, I made it my mission to get an apprenticeship and leave school for at least a half day. Working in a hair salon was a much-needed reprieve from vocational school. I skipped school whenever I could. After barely earning twenty credits, I was given a "Certificate of Participation." It was essentially a piece of paper that represented the fact that I could legally leave school—and I did.



Figures 2: Certificate of Participation, 1986

These certificates were validation that I had completed one of the major components thought to assist me in gaining workplace skills before leaving school. Successful co-op placements were also an indicator that a student was ready and able to begin an apprenticeship. At sixteen years old, I began officially logging my hours in a salon for the purpose of becoming a licensed hairdresser.

After a few months of working long hours doing hair, I enrolled in correspondence courses through a program called the Independent Learning Center (ILC, now

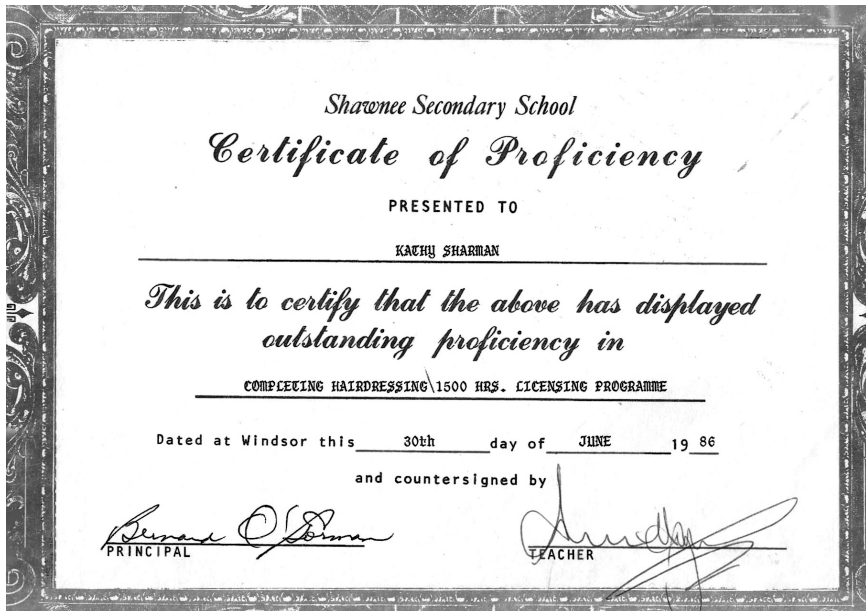


Figure 3: *Certificate of Proficiency, 1986*

TVO ILC¹⁹), and I began earning good grades for the first time in my life. I studied when I got home from working full-time. It was a busy schedule, but sitting down to read after an eight- to ten-hour workday was just what my strain of neurodivergence needed. I was making good grades consistently. Doing schoolwork at my own pace gave me a chance to redirect my education.

I did eventually graduate from high school, earning my Ontario Secondary School Diploma (OSSD) from the ILC. Then I enrolled in my first university class in the early 1990s. That opened the opportunity to attend university for a degree, studies that eventually helped me to answer many of the questions I had about my vocational school experience. I was a single parent by this time, and that influenced my studies. I focused on developmental psychology, but also on gender studies, particularly in history.

After earning my Bachelor of Education degree, I found some difficulty on the teacher job market with primary/junior credentials and intermediate/senior credentials in social science and history. After teaching grade 1 for two years, I decided to accept a position in a vocational high school to teach cosmetology on a letter of permission.²⁰ My plan was to get the additional qualifications in technical education that I needed to teach this subject permanently.

As it happens, I ended up teaching cosmetology at the vocational high school that my own high school was amalgamated into. The amalgamation meant that I would have access to some of my own high school archives. There was not much. Just a scattering of yearbooks. I managed to find dozens from the 1970s and 1980s. I brought them to my classroom and intended to use them when I introduced myself

to my new students. I told them about attending a vocational school. I passed old Shawnee yearbooks around to get students to look at how hairstyles and fashions have changed, how schools have changed. This plan soon went out the window. One by one, my students would get a yearbook to leaf through and would begin pointing out their parents, aunts, uncles, and cousins. I was looking out at my students—most of them second-, third-, and even fourth-generation vocational students. I was shocked.

Nothing could have prepared me for this. I knew that taking the teaching position at a vocational school was going to be a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it might be retraumatizing. But on the other, it might be an opportunity to see change, and heal. The realization of who my current students were marked the beginning of my interest in graduate research. I wanted to find the reasons why my students had somehow inherited their vocational student status. My master's thesis, "The Origins and Significance of the Toronto Technical School, 1891–1904," went a long way towards providing some of the historical context. My PhD dissertation, "Gender, Class, and Curriculum at W. D. Lowe Technical School, 1923–1973: A Study in Continuity and Change," helped me understand my experience of vocational education. I still wrestle with what could have been. I will never know. I like to think the experience has made me a more compassionate parent and teacher of history.

I became a history teacher because, after a few years of teaching cosmetology, I was unable to get additional qualification in that subject. Each time that I signed up for the additional qualification class I needed, the class ended up cancelled. My letter of permission for cosmetology expired. The school board transferred me to another secondary school, where I taught social science and history. I never ended up getting technical teaching qualifications. It was easier to get into graduate school than it was an additional qualification course in cosmetology. This is yet another experience of vocational schooling that has made me a harsh critic of the systemic bias built into secondary education.

Going through the transfer program shattered my confidence. I have spent too much of my time attempting to heal the damage. Even while writing this essay, I struggle with the reasons why I am doing it. I am contributing to our collective understanding of education, but I also want to be seen as capable of contributing. I survived the ambush physically, but some scars remain. They are my imposter syndrome and my constant self-doubt whenever I face a new challenge professionally or academically. Like cheesy, stereotyped westerns, the transfer program is better left in the past.

Notes

- 1 "Plans for Changes in the Organization of Vocational Schools," Appendix A, Enclosure D-7, minutes of the Windsor Board of Education, January 21, 1971, Greater Essex District School Board Archives.
- 2 "Plans for Changes," minutes of the Windsor Board of Education.

- 3 David Clandfield, Bruce Curtis, Grace-Edward Galabuzi, Alison Gaymes San Vicente, D. W. Livingstone, and Harry Smaller. "Restacking the Deck: Streaming by Class, Race, and Gender in Ontario Schools." Special issue in association with Everybody's Schools: An Education Policy Institute, *Our Schools/Our Selves* 23, no. 2 (Winter 2014): 264.
- 4 Clandfield et al., "Restacking the Deck," 261.
- 5 George S. Tomkins, *A Common Countenance: Stability and Change in the Canadian Curriculum* (Prentice-Hall, 1986), 298–99.
- 6 Robert M. Stamp, *The Schools of Ontario, 1876–1976* (University of Toronto Press, 1982), 203–04.
- 7 *Technical and Vocational Education in Canada* 1, no. 1 (December 1960): 5–6.
- 8 R. D. Gidney, *From Hope to Harris: The Reshaping of Ontario Schools* (University of Toronto Press, 1999), 46.
- 9 "Government to Withdraw from Cost-Shared Education Programs," *Technical and Vocational Education in Canada* 10 (Fall/Winter 1966–1967): 33.
- 10 "Plans for Changes," minutes of the Windsor Board of Education.
- 11 Minutes of the Windsor Board of Education, Appendix, July 10, 1981, 2.
- 12 Gidney, *Hope to Harris*, 154–55.
- 13 Gidney, *Hope to Harris*, 115.
- 14 Joanna Kadi, *Thinking Class: Sketches from a Cultural Worker* (South End Press, 1996), 44–45.
- 15 Minutes of Windsor Board of Education, Appendix A, Enclosure E-7, October, 1978, 2.
- 16 Unlike later options, such as transfer courses (see "Restacking the Deck," 94), my mid-year transfer without successful completion of grade 8 insured that I would not be able to change programs or schools.
- 17 This was substantiated with minutes from board meetings in which the criteria and rules for the transfer program were discussed. In this moment, it was more of a point of personal awareness that the program was part of a larger system at work. While writing this article, more questions about my experience have been answered.
- 18 Gidney, *Hope to Harris*, 94–96.
- 19 ILC in the 1980s consisted of correspondence courses delivered through Canada Post. It is no longer dependent on the mail and has a digital platform. A brief description of the current program: <https://www.ilc.org/pages/faq#q1>.
- 20 This means that I did not have the secondary school credentials needed to teach these courses, but that the minister of education gave me special permission to teach the subject anyway.