Barriers to employment and training for equity-seeking groups

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Groups underrepresented in Canada's labour market include women, youth, Indigenous persons, newcomers, racialized groups, people who identify as LGBTQ2S+, and persons with disabilities; these groups also tend to be among the least well served by training and employment programs. There is a need to better understand the intersecting factors that pose barriers to these equity-seeking groups in accessing and benefiting from these programs, and in achieving employment success. Employment and Social Development Canada (ESDC) relies on research and analysis of the skills gaps, learning needs, and barriers these groups face, in order to adapt and target its programs and services.

This report provides an overview of up-to-date research in this area to inform ESDC's developing research strategy, intended to improve capacity to measure, monitor, and address barriers faced by these groups. The report's analysis was guided by socio-ecological, intersectional, and life course approaches to capture the needs and experiences of those seeking greater equity in the labour market.

A key conclusion is that the labour market, and the socio-educational institutions related to it, are fundamentally discriminatory. While anyone can face a variety of barriers to skills development and employment success, the research literature identifies many systemic barriers faced by equity-seeking groups, regardless of skill level. Moreover, these barriers affect different aspects of people's engagement with the labour market and career development, whether accessing training and employment support, seeking employment, maintaining or advancing in employment. As a result, groups often self-select into occupations, programs, and workplaces that are perceived to be safe and inclusive, which inadvertently reinforces inequities.

Many of the same barriers operate across these historically marginalized groups, including 'taste-based' or preferential discrimination, statistical discrimination, and pay discrimination; lack of inclusive workplaces; stigma and prejudice; harassment and microaggressions from peers and co-workers. This carries cumulative effects over the life-course and across generations, as families and communities face ongoing limitations in their social capital and opportunities. Furthermore, inequities in the labour market are closely linked to social and health inequities. It is important to discuss any skills gaps within this broader context.

Indeed, for the most part, groups under-represented in the labour market experience skills gaps as a result of the overarching systems of exclusion and discrimination. Where skill gaps do exist, they may be present for specific sub-groups and only in specific sectors or contexts, but not in

others. Consequently, it makes sense to address some of these gaps as a skills development intervention targeting individuals, while others require more structural interventions. The report provides examples of opportunities for addressing gaps, and highlights promising practices employed by existing programs. It concludes by offering several insights for the way data are collected at programmatic, organizational, and policy levels, with implications for developing strategies and approaches designed to improve employment and training outcomes of groups traditionally under-represented in the labour market.

INTRODUCTION

BACKGROUND

Mandate of ESDC

With its mandate to promote skills development, labour market participation and inclusiveness, and labour market efficiency, Employment and Social Development Canada (ESDC)'s Skills and Employment Branch relies on research and analysis of the skills gaps, learning needs, and barriers faced by equity-seeking groups in order to adapt and target its programs and services.

The Branch's Strategic Integration and Corporate Affairs (SICA) Directorate is developing a strategy intended to improve the Department's capacity to measure, monitor, and address barriers faced by under-represented groups in accessing its programs and services, while also improving inclusivity and reducing employment disparities. Development of the strategy calls for a comprehensive overview of the most up-to-date research and practice-based evidence, which this report provides.

Context

Employment support and training programs offered by governments and non-governmental organizations are designed to support people on the path towards employment and career development success, and as such, are increasingly in demand in the modern economy. For instance, skills development programs have begun to focus less on traditional technical skills and more on foundational and social-emotional learning (SEL) skills[i] such as communication, collaboration, complex problem-solving, adaptability, creativity, leadership, and management; such skills are increasingly valued in the workplace.[8,9] Canada needs a robust training system with policies and programs that anticipate skill needs, maintain the relevance of training, ensure accessibility for all residents of Canada, and continuously evaluate the social and economic outcomes of training.[10]

[i] SEL skills are diverse set of non-technical skills needed to succeed in the modern economy, often referred to as soft skills, non-cognitive skills, or 21st century skills.[1–5] These terms have been used over the past three decades to describe a wide range of skills related to emotional intelligence, inter- and intra-personal abilities, and personal traits or attributes favourably associated with career development.[6,7]

While employment support and training programs can lead to many positive labour market outcomes, there is mixed evidence on their success, and who benefits more.[11,12] In fact, marginalized groups and those underrepresented in Canada's workforce – such as women, youth, Indigenous persons, newcomers, members of racialized groups, people who identify as LGBTQ2S+,[ii] and persons with disabilities (hereafter, "equity-seeking groups") – tend to be among the least well served by such programs. This is despite the fact that such groups are disproportionately affected by shifts in the modern economy, including the growing emphasis on SEL skills.[14] These groups face multiple barriers to success in the labour market, including less access to experiences and resources that foster workplace-relevant social capital, such as coaching from mentors and role models as well as positive early learning experiences.

A diversity and inclusivity lens is important to understand skills development and barriers to skills acquisition. For example, because of the ways in which soft skills are typically learned (e.g., through informal, experiential learning), many segments of the population are disadvantaged in their access to the coaching, training, and role models needed to develop these skills. Cultural and other biases may also play a role in the definition and assessment of soft skills.[14] In particular, there is a need to better understand the multiple intersecting factors that pose barriers for – or conversely, support – equity-seeking groups in accessing and benefiting from skills development and training programs, and in achieving employment success.

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

Objective

This project provides a synthesis of research on the skills gaps, learning needs, and systemic barriers experienced by different populations under-represented in the Canadian labour market. Applying a socio-ecological and intersectional research approach and a life-course perspective, the project focuses particularly on the mechanisms of disadvantage faced by those seeking greater equity in the labour market.

The broader goal of this project is to inform and broaden ESDC's understanding of the challenges faced by underrepresented groups, and offer insights on how ESDC's programs can be made more inclusive, accessible, and responsive to the needs and circumstances of those who are

[ii] Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, or Two-Spirit. Two-Spirit is an English umbrella term coined by Indigenous members of the LGBTQ+ community that transcends Western and colonial ideas of gender and sexuality. Often used to describe someone who possesses both masculine and feminine spirits, Two-Spirit is a cultural term reserved only for those who identify as Indigenous. Some Indigenous people identify as Two-Spirit rather than, or in addition to, identifying as lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, or queer.[13]

under-represented in Canada's labour market. By placing special emphasis on identifying research and data needs, it is hoped the results of this report will help inform SICA's developing research strategy.

Research questions

- What are the skills gaps, learning needs, and systemic barriers to accessing and benefiting from skills development and employment support programs faced by groups traditionally under-represented in the labour market?
- Broadly speaking, what kinds of data challenges emerge from these needs, gaps, and barriers?

METHOD

This report builds on and draws from 15 years of research and evaluation carried out by SRDC in the areas of employment supports and skills development. Three data collection and analysis methods were employed: (i) document review, (ii) targeted literature review, and (iii) internal staff discussions.

Document review

The research team identified over 20 SRDC projects related to the population sub-groups identified earlier, referred throughout this report as equity-seeking groups (for a list of relevant SRDC projects, see Appendix A). All documents from these projects were assembled and reviewed, with attention given to primary data collected through the projects as well as external literature reviews and syntheses. A data collection matrix was developed to extract relevant information from the reports and track findings across groups and issue areas. This matrix included key findings, skills gaps (including definition), learning needs, systemic barriers, data challenges, intersectional considerations, and further recommendations.

Literature review

Complementing this document review, a targeted search of academic and grey literature was carried out to augment the evidence assembled for different issues and sub-groups. These sources were identified using relevant search terms in Google and Google Scholar, as well as hand searches of the reference sections of existing reports, and further suggestions from SRDC staff.

Internal staff discussions

Six one-on-one key informant interviews lasting up to an hour were conducted via Zoom with SRDC staff who authored the aforementioned reports. These interviews were used to supplement data gaps, probe for more in-depth, project-specific information, and seek input on research questions specific to this project.

In addition, a two-hour focus group was carried out with seven SRDC staff – content experts in labour market research and programming specific to the equity-seeking groups, as well as those experienced with the conceptual frameworks used for analysis (e.g., intersectionality). This discussion served to validate preliminary findings, contribute further insights, and draw overall inferences. In doing so, questions asked of the participants included the following:

- How can employment and training programs do a better job at addressing intersectionality for their participants?
- What types of tools or strategies help build assets, provide opportunities, and address underlying barriers (including power and equity issues)?
- What are ways of collecting and analyzing data to facilitate a more intersectional approach to supporting people who are under-represented in the labour market (and to facilitate their access and success in programs)?

Analytical approach

Three key conceptual frameworks guided the analysis and theoretical orientation of the project: a socio-ecological model, intersectionality, and a life course approach. Each are explained in more detail below, with the implications for this project outlined.

Socio-ecological approach

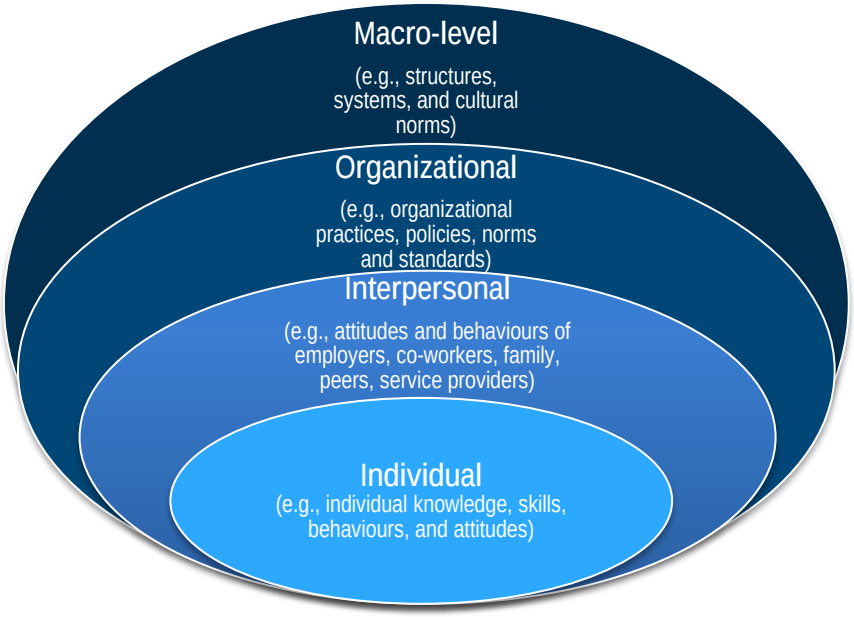
A socio-ecological approach[15] recognizes the multiple levels or systems in which we all live. It articulates the dynamic interactions among various personal and environmental factors that can influence outcomes in any given sphere of human activity, including health and wellbeing, social development, and employment. In this complex system, a person's social location may confer advantage or disadvantage across systems as processes operate in different ways and at different levels. Identities, circumstances, and contexts can also be sources of strength and facilitate achievement of goals.

As seen in Figure 1, the socio-ecological model emphasizes the inter-relationships among multi-level factors that serve to influence individual outcomes, in this case, employment and training.

Macro-level factors refer to societal or industry-level structures, systems, and cultural norms (e.g., gendered roles and expectations). *Organizational* factors refer to organizational practices, policies, norms, and standards (e.g., discriminatory hiring and advancement practices). *Interpersonal* factors include attitudes and behaviours of one's social network, such as employers, co-workers, peers, family, and service providers (e.g., bullying and harassment, informal peer networks, or cultural competence and communication). Finally, *individual-level* factors refer to an individual's knowledge, skills, resources, beliefs, and attitudes (e.g., self-confidence, personal capital).

In the socio-ecological model, barriers are generally conceptualized to "flow" from larger systems to individuals, especially as they accumulate over the life course to form patterns of disadvantage. These patterns are important considerations for employment and training because one's individual agency (e.g., to acquire skills) is both limited and shaped by factors within broader systems, such as the availability of community-level infrastructure, supports, and resources, or organizational policies and practices related to advancement.

Figure 1 Socio-ecological model



Intersectional lens

An intersectional approach[16,17] to this project's analysis builds on the socio-ecological approach, by recognizing the ways in which different social locations can confer advantage or disadvantage through processes of entitlement or conversely, marginalization, exclusion, and oppression. While there has been considerable analysis to date of the challenges faced by distinct groups

under-represented in the labour market, much less has been written about those who belong to more than one group (e.g., Indigenous or racialized youth, newcomer women, women with disabilities), and the implications these multiple identities have for employment and training supports. This approach supports the Government of Canada's adoption of Gender-Based Analysis Plus (GBA+), which challenges the notion that any policy, program, or initiative applies to everyone equally.[18]

An intersectional approach suggests that a person's multiple social locations can interact, creating forms of exclusion and marginalization with respect to a range of employment and training outcomes.[16,17] Therefore, multiple instances of marginalization cannot be adequately understood or ameliorated by unitary approaches that treat elements of one's identity as distinct or independent subjects of inquiry. This underscores the importance of recognizing and engaging with people's identities and social locations beyond single groupings (e.g., women, people who identify as LGBTQ2S+), and highlighting the ways in which individuals' lives are further shaped by race, income/ class, ability, age, ethnicity, religion, geography, and other factors.

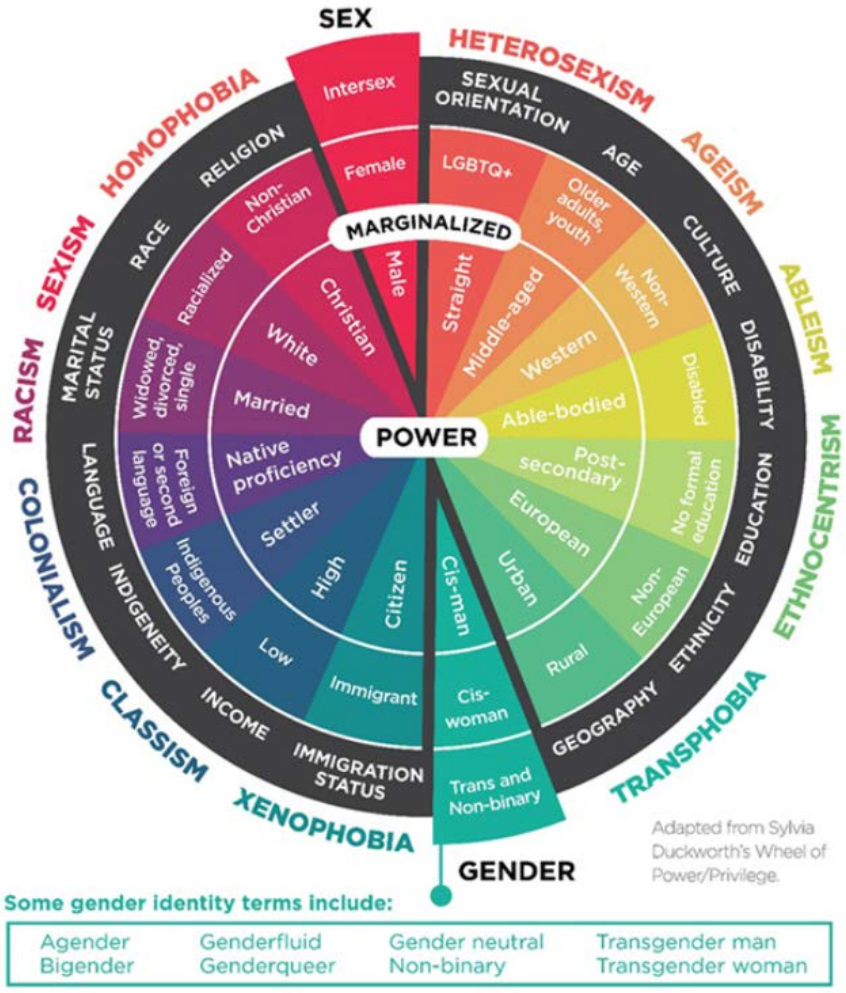
Furthermore, the fact that all persons have multiple or intersecting identities is often overlooked or ignored at the expense of the perceived dominant identity (e.g., a person with a disability). This in turn may result in a lack of resources needed to contest the disadvantage conferred by that identity in certain contexts, such as access to group level-coping and resilience resources, and opportunities for social support through cultural connections.[19,20]

Figure 2 provides a few examples of variables and dimensions of identity and social position, as well as processes of oppression, discrimination, privilege, and power that can be included in intersectional analyses (sourced from Bauer, 2021). What constitutes a position of power may play out differently at different intersections and in different contexts, as will the variables and dimensions that are the focus of research.[21]

INTERSECTIONALITY

Grounded in Black feminist thought, intersectionality proposes that "*race, class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, nation, ability, and age operate not as unitary, mutually exclusive characteristics, but as reciprocally constructing phenomena that in turn shape complex social inequalities*" (Collins, 2015). Intersectionality rejects the notion that axes of oppression, from racism to sexism to ableism and so on, are merely additive. Writing of the experience of Black women, Kimberlé Crenshaw, who coined the term intersectionality, noted that "*the intersectional experience is greater than the sum of racism and sexism*" (Crenshaw, 1989). Rather, racism and sexism interact to create particular forms of exclusion and marginalization. While often used incorrectly – taken out of its initial context or thought of as synonymous with diversity – intersectionality is, at its core, about power structures.

Figure 2 Identity and social position variables and dimensions, as well as processes, that can be included in intersectional analyses[21]



Life course approach

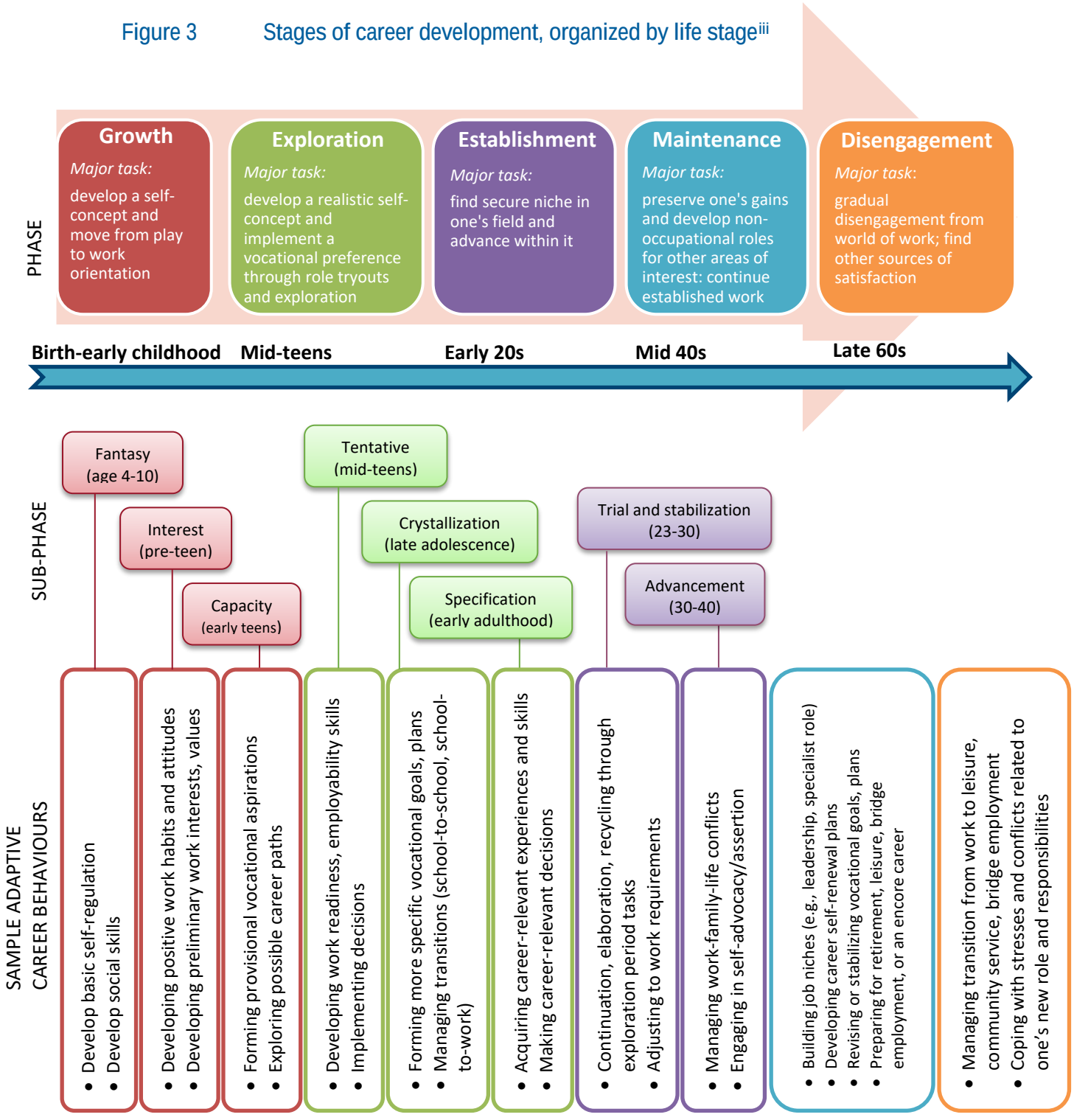
The life course approach, also known as the life course perspective or life course theory, analyzes people's lives within structural, social, and cultural contexts, "*see[ing] our daily experiences as part of a greater process that begins at birth and stretches to death.*"[22] This perspective acknowledges that events at each stage of life influence subsequent stages, and recognizes that experiences are shaped by one's age cohort and historical context.[23] It takes a temporal and societal perspective on the well-being of individuals and generations, recognizing that all stages of a person's life are intricately intertwined with each other, with the lives of others born in the same period, and with the lives of past and future generations. Notably, a life course approach

emphasizes that both past and present experiences are shaped by the wider social, economic, and cultural contexts.[24,25] Figure 3 below, which shows stages of career development organized by life stage, should be interpreted in this context.

Thinking of labour market outcomes, a life course perspective challenges the limitations of individual or human capital approaches, focusing instead on the effects of "*path dependency, gravity, and shocks,*" and bringing together individual agency and choice as well as systemic and structural factors.[23] This perspective focuses less on individual trajectories and more on the ongoing interactions of individuals with social structures, particularly structures of inequality and life-course "scripts." Challenges to the acquisition of human capital thus cannot be examined without reference to where this fits in the life course of individuals, linked lives, and the intersections of life courses with social structures.[22] For instance, Brückner's research on gender wage gaps in Germany draws from life course models to highlight the cumulative effects of earnings gaps over time.[26] McDonald, studying housing evictions from a life course perspective, points to the accumulation of transitions that ultimately lead to homelessness at different stages of individuals' lives.[27]

Contextualization of the life course differs for individuals from historically marginalized communities, who may experience unique as well as common life events as a result of different forms of disadvantage, yet who might also develop distinct resources and resilience in response this adversity.[28] For example, people who identify as LGBTQ2S+ have been found to report distinct life events related to sexual and gender identity development, as well as historical marginalization and discrimination in work and other settings, experiences of prejudice and violence, and unique family and peer relations.[28,29] Research also suggests that the life course trajectories of people who identify as LGBTQ2S+ may be characterized by higher levels of volatility, including risk of financial hardship,[30] though these trajectories may not be shared by everyone within this broader population.[31]

Figure 3 Stages of career development, organized by life stage[iii]



[iii] Phases and sample adaptive career behaviours have been adapted from Lent and Brown (2013, p. 560). Sub-phases have been adapted from Super (1980, p. 289).

Implications

Anyone can face a variety of barriers to skills development and employment success, but in Canada – as in many other jurisdictions – certain groups face multiple, intersecting barriers that result in inequities[32] to accessing programs, services, and supports. This also results in inequities of benefit from these programs in terms of a range of skills development and training outcomes (e.g., obtaining or retaining employment, career development or progression, earnings).

In the context of this project's analytical approach, we focused less on group identity than on the process by which disadvantage is created. For example, it is not about women having certain skills gaps and earning needs, but about the ways in which gender-based barriers can manifest to create disadvantage to and in employment. In other words, these gaps or barriers are not inherent to certain groups or individuals, but rather, they are systematically entrenched and perpetuated.

We also focused less on findings for each group, highlighting instead multiplicity of experience. Indeed, barriers resulting from gendered roles and expectations (e.g., career choice, parenthood) cannot be separated from class-, age-, or culturally-based roles and expectations. For example, barriers experienced by a newcomer woman are not the same as those experienced by women added to those experienced by newcomers. Rather, they represent unique forms of marginalization, such that the interaction of multiple social locations can result in multiplicative effects (i.e., greater than the sum of parts).

INEQUITIES

Inequities are persistent inequalities, many of which are the result of individuals' and groups' relative social, political, and economic disadvantage. Such inequalities affect peoples' chances of achieving and maintaining good employment over their lifetimes. Whether it is inequalities in the labour market, or in access to the resources that support health and wellbeing, they are systematic in that the patterns of difference are consistently observable between population groups). Moreover, to the extent these inequalities can plausibly be avoided or ameliorated by collective action, they may be deemed unjust and inequitable (Government of Canada, 2018).

Finally, it is important to remember that skills development and training can be both prerequisites to employment opportunities as well as part of a life-long, iterative process of learning and upskilling in pursuit of employment and career development goals. While there are some commonalities to career development over the life course (Figure 3), these goals can change depending on life stage, circumstances, and labour market conditions.

FINDINGS

SYSTEMIC BARRIERS AND MECHANISMS OF DISADVANTAGE

What are the systemic barriers faced by equity-seeking groups?

Systemic barriers are policies, practices, or procedures that result in some people receiving unequal access or benefit, or being fully excluded.[33] The research literature identifies many systemic barriers faced by equity-seeking groups. These barriers occur over the life course, affecting different stages of career development – whether accessing training and employment support, seeking employment, maintaining, or advancing in employment – and often have cumulative effects.

For many groups, the underlying barrier or mechanism of disadvantage may be the same, such as discriminatory hiring practices or pay discrimination. However, in practice, the barrier may take different forms for different groups (e.g., lived experiences of racism or misogyny), or in different sectors (e.g., cultural norms). For instance, racial discrimination on the job as experienced by a woman will be different from how it is experienced by a man. Similarly, discriminatory advancement practices may take different forms on a construction site compared to a research lab. Although the ways in which systemic barriers operate to disadvantage people in the labour market differ by individual and contextual characteristics, intersectional considerations are not always explicit, since the focus of research, programs, and policies tends to be on population subgroups as unitary, separate groups.

Below we highlight examples of mechanisms of disadvantage identified in the literature as key barriers to employment and training for equity-seeking groups. Starting with barriers found to be applicable across groups, we then report select barriers for distinct groups. Where possible, we highlight the ways in which barriers occur at intersections of identity, as a multiplicity of social locations results in unique barriers.

- 'Taste-based' discrimination refers to prejudice or dislike from employers, co-workers, and customers for working with certain groups of employees, regardless of an employee's productivity.[34]

- Statistical discrimination refers to discrimination from employers, co-workers, or customers resulting from having imperfect information about individuals' productivity.[35] This type of discrimination can result in a self-reinforcing cycle, whereby individuals from the discriminated group are discouraged from participating in the labour market,[36] or from

improving their skills because their (average) return on investment (for example, in education) is less than for the non-discriminated group.[36]

- Pay discrimination occurs when groups of employees performing similar work do not receive similar pay. For example, across the Red Seal trades, women earn on average $31,400 or 47% of what men earn ($67,200) in the first year following certification.[37]

- Unconscious bias refers to the deep-seated stereotypes and prejudices we all absorb due to living in deeply unequal societies, and is contrasted with explicit bias, which leads someone to deliberately and wilfully discriminate against others.[38] Unconscious or implicit bias can lead to instinctive assumptions that a nurse must be a woman or an engineer must be a man, that an Asian woman won't make a good leader, or that a Black man will be an aggressive competitor. Unconscious bias can be present even in people who genuinely believe they are committed to equality; it is harder to identify and eliminate than obvious discrimination.[39]

- Name-based discrimination, whereby people with more 'ethnic-sounding' names experience bias during the hiring process and are less likely to be called back for roles they are qualified for compared to their counterparts.[40,41]

- Stigma, discrimination, prejudice, negative perceptions and attitudes are generally forms of explicit bias.[42–46] These can be expressed as workplace bullying and harassment, in addition to race-based and sexual violence.[42,43]

- Limited social capital includes limited professional networks due to historical and ongoing under-representation in and access to specific fields (e.g., women in science and engineering; women in trades), informational barriers, and continued challenges finding sponsors and mentors.[42,43]

- Self-selection into (a) "safe" occupations based on perceptions they are more likely to be welcoming and free from prejudice; and (b) "appropriate" occupations based on stereotypes (e.g., women in caregiving professions) – both of which reinforce inequities.[42,47] For example, women may self-select into occupations with higher concentrations of women, where pay tends to be lower (i.e., women are over-represented in the lowest paying Red Seal trades such as baking or hairstyling). There is also evidence to suggest that as women become more representative in a male-dominated field, the average pay drops.[48]

- Lack of representation within sectors, occupations, or organizations, whereby a group is unable to see themselves reflected – and protected – within them, or to draw upon like role models, mentors, and resources. For example, research suggests that women are likely to be seen as tokens or exceptions in certain fields until they reach a critical mass of representation (typically between 15 to 30 percent), which can begin to stimulate a chain reaction to lead to more women-friendly processes and outcomes.[43,49]

- Lack of infrastructure, including scarce training facilities, daycare, and transportation. This is particularly challenging for those living in smaller centres and rural areas,[45,50] women,[43] youth,[45,51] and newcomers.[52]

- Workplaces that are not inclusive due to lack of cultural awareness,[45] and limited capacity of employers to work appropriately with employees with different identities and from different backgrounds (e.g., youth, Indigenous persons, newcomers).

- On average, groups seeking equity in the Canadian labour market earn less than their non-disabled, white, cisgender and other peers, further exacerbating both the general and group-specific barriers (including through the interconnectedness between poverty and health).[53–56]

When it comes to **gender-based barriers**, several specific barriers have been identified in the literature, including but not limited to:

- A lack of workplace protections for transgender and gender non-conforming employees, including a lack of policies and procedures around transitions and benefits for any gender-related surgeries.[57] The lack of trans-positive attitudes as well as trans-inclusive policies within workplaces presents access barriers to employment and creates unhealthy and unsafe working conditions.[58] Additional barriers arise from the need to provide transcripts, references, and other personal documents that necessitate outing oneself, and carries the risk of resulting discrimination or harassment.[42,58]

- Inadequate capacity to provide safe and inclusive workplaces to women, particularly in environments and industries dominated by men. This applies to women in the trades, for instance, who lack access to properly-sized safety equipment or whose work environments have become sexualized.[43,59] These barriers are reinforced by a lack of policies and procedures regarding parental and family leave.[43]

- Unavailability of affordable childcare, largely attributable to the gendered division of labour and women's disproportionate burden of unpaid care and domestic work.[60] A lack of affordable childcare is a particularly prominent barrier for visible minority newcomer women who face multiple compounding barriers in addition to their family and childcare responsibilities (e.g., discrimination by race and gender, the need to overcome cultural norms, a lack of support networks).[61]

It is important to note that it is difficult (if not impossible) to disentangle gender-based barriers from other factors. For example, cultural expectations regarding family roles and motherhood, as well the psychological impacts of placing children in daycare, pose different barriers for different groups of women, even as all may face the lack of affordable, accessible daycare. Indeed, for newcomer women, cultural norms in their home country and attitudes within their

cultural community that emphasize a woman's role as a home-maker play a major role in predicting women's labour market participations rates.[62]

Regarding **sexual identity-based barriers**, discrimination against people who identify as LGBTQ2S+ was identified as a systemic barrier in the research literature we reviewed. Identity expression/presentation and disclosure or "outness" were identified as key individual-level factors, which are closely affected by workplace culture (including practices regarding disclosure and culture of "doing gender"[iv]) and one's ability to conceal one's sexual identity or to "pass." In fact, the literature points to higher-level barriers as being key to labour market outcomes for LGBTQ2S+ individuals, particularly organizational capacity to provide safe and inclusive workplaces that discourage or sanction interpersonal micro aggressions, bullying, and other discriminatory attitudes and behaviours.[42]

While ageism and age-based factors serve as key barriers for older adults, the research literature reviewed for this project was focused on **age-based barriers** for youth. Specifically, there are fewer opportunities in the labour market and a lack of jobs available for youth, who are competing against a higher proportion of older adults with more qualifications and experience.[65] By virtue of their age and limited work experience, youth are usually placed in entry-level positions. These positions are characterized by low pay and limited upward mobility, and combined with the fact that youth are often the first group to be laid off during economic contractions, this can create a cycle of limited work experience.[51,65,66]

Youth also spend more time in post-secondary education, which means delayed entry into the workforce and risks increased burden of debt.[65] At the same time, jobs requiring university education are increasing, creating more barriers for individuals with lower levels of education.[67,68] It is important to note that youth represent an exceptionally diverse group, and to consider age-based barriers at intersections for young people's other identities and social locations. For example:

- LGBTQ2S+ youth may be dealing with housing instability, a lack of supportive adults, role models or mentors, and limited social networks, as well as multiple other barriers.[42]
- Indigenous youth face compounding systemic barriers, which may include a lack of local training and employment options, a lack of cultural awareness from employers, a lack of inclusive workplaces, as well as pressures to relocate for work and training (resulting in loss of community and culture), and depending on location, transportation barriers (e.g., poor public transit infrastructure in rural and remote Indigenous communities). These barriers

[iv] "Doing gender" is the idea that gender is a social construct that is performed in everyday interactions and assessed based on socially accepted conceptions of gender, rather than being an innate quality of individuals.[63,64]

are often compounded by well-documented experiences of discrimination, racism, and trauma, including inter-generational trauma.[45,69,70] Systemic racial discrimination and a history of colonialism play a significant role in Indigenous youth's overrepresentation in government care, forming multi-faceted barriers in getting a quality education.[71,72]

- Youth with mental health and substance use issues often feel a "*dehumanizing*" sense of not belonging in the labour market[73] (p. 35) and face the consequences of the broader stigmatization of mental health. With some exceptions,[74] support programs tend to be siloed, focusing on either youth in general or those with mental health challenges, but seldom both at once.[73]

- Youth who are involved in the criminal justice system face additional barriers to employment, including stigma from employers, and the need to obtain criminal record checks, while lacking supportive peer groups, access to professional networks, and other key resources.[67,75]

- Youth from low-income families may not be able to afford sufficient food, transportation, or housing to enable them to focus on job searching or to maintain employment; they may also not be able to afford tuition, starting materials such as uniforms or tools, and may lack reliable computer and Internet access to engage in job searches and online training. Some youth may enter jobs because of income pressures rather than to develop specific skills, while others may be unable to get paid placements or training internships.[51,75]

Key **disability-based barriers** to employment include discrimination, stigma (particularly for those with mental health and substance use challenges), as well as inadequate workplace accommodation policies and environments. The latter is often related to poor employer capacity, and attitudes and perceptions related to hiring and onboarding persons with disabilities.[44,76] Physically inaccessible workplaces present a barrier, as do ableist attitudes, such as those related to the perceived costs of accommodations.[46] Lack of flexibility in how work is done has been identified as a key barrier for people with episodic disabilities, for whom many policies and programs designed to support vocational rehabilition and ongoing employment are still based on a binary definition of disability (i.e., disabled or not). Such definitions do not take fluctuating capacity into account, or the complexity of dealing with co-occurring conditions.[46,76]

Top systemic barriers to program engagement and skill development for persons with disabilities relate to a lack of coordination among programs, a lack of wrap-around social and community supports, informational barriers, and the complexity and bureaucracy of disability-related social systems that are difficult to navigate, including potential disincentives to work for fear of losing financial and other supports.[77,78] Finally, inflexible program rules such as firm deadlines and attendance requirements can exacerbate fears and anxiety, particularly for those with experiences of trauma or mental health challenges.[79]

Finally, systemic barriers may operate differently at the cross-section of disability with other characteristics. For example, a gender lens is important as family expectations and perceptions of safety can serve as barriers for women with disabilities.[80] Youth with disabilities face unique barriers and needs,[81] particularly during critical periods of transition such as to post-secondary education or to adult systems for support and/or treatment. Age-based and other rigid eligibility criteria, lengthy waitlists and intake processes, and a lack of appropriate supports (e.g., that are wrap-around, flexible, and developmentally appropriate) are well-documented barriers for youth with disabilities. The result is opportunities missed, and youth with disabilities being prevented from reaching their full potential in the labour market.[82,83]

Race-based barriers centre around systemic racism and discrimination affecting Black, brown, Asian, and Indigenous persons in the labour market, in workplaces, and in training and support programs.[45,50,69,84,85] At an organizational level, a lack of wrap-around[v] supports and programs – particularly those that are culturally appropriate and relevant – can operate as a barrier (and vice versa: culturally sensitive and relevant programming can reaffirm one's sense of cultural identity, promote community connections and increase confidence[45]). Furthermore, systemic challenges facing Indigenous people include historical and institutional racism and colonial practices, including paternalistic approaches to programming and supports, resulting in historically rooted mistrust of institutional settings and programs.[86] Workplace bullying and discrimination cause some Indigenous persons to leave employment.[87]

Poverty can pose additional barriers for racialized persons, including through its impacts on health and social capital at individual-, neighbourhood- and community-levels. This may manifest as inadequate housing, food insecurity, and a lack of access to intergenerational wealth. At a community-level, these barriers may further extend to poor transportation links, insufficient communication infrastructure to support e-learning, a shortage of trainers and training facilities, and a lack of local labour market information and career counselling, especially in remote communities. This absence of community-level resources and infrastructure can further result in a lack of opportunities to build social capital and develop skills. In this context, a narrow focus on job placement – typically into entry-level positions – and without consideration of the nature of the job or training opportunity (e.g., whether it is culturally safe or meets broader social and community goals) can have direct effects on advancement and retention, and reinforce the long-term, cumulative disadvantage of racialized groups.[45,69]

While many of the same systemic barriers operate for visible minority newcomers as they do for other racialized populations (e.g., racism, unconscious bias, taste-based and statistical

[v] The term 'wrap-around" is used to describe any program that is holistic, flexible, family or person-oriented and comprehensive to meet a wide range of needs, such as when a number of organizations work together to provide a holistic program of supports.

discrimination), the literature also identifies several barriers related to **immigration status**.[52,61,88] Examples of barriers for immigrants and refugees include:

- Employer attitudes, including reluctance of employers to hire newcomers (i.e., employer perceptions of risk), discriminatory hiring practices, and intolerance of non-Canadian accents.
- Lack of Canadian work experience and Canadian-recognized educational credentials or certifications. This means newcomers often end up working in lower-paying occupations or jobs that are not matched to their skills and experience.
- Lack of knowledge of the Canadian labour market, and ways to prepare and tailor one's resume to suit desired work. Limited professional contacts and limited access to mentors results in and further reinforces informational barriers.
- Unique barriers related to other identities or social locations, including those specific to different linguistic and cultural communities (e.g., acceptance of women working non-standard hours in shift positions), as well as unique family responsibilities (e.g., newcomer youth's responsibilities to translate for parents and accompany them to appointments). In most cases, these barriers are often not recognized or accommodated by employers or training programs.

How do barriers operate to create disadvantage?

At its core, the labour market is discriminatory. No matter the talent or skill, the fact is that certain groups in Canada continue to experience major systemic barriers that result in their under-representation in the labour market in general and in specific segments or sectors.

> *"Talent is equally distributed across all sociocultural groups; access and opportunity are not. This is particularly true in science, technology, engineering, mathematics, and medicine… The underrepresentation of marginalized groups in STEMM contexts is pervasive"* (Byars-Winston & Dahlberg, 2019).

Moreover, these groups also experience other inequitable outcomes , such as to wages and career advancement.[38,42,89] No matter the intervention, individuals from equity-seeking groups continue to face post-program barriers. This carries cumulative effects over the life-course, but also inter-generational effects as families and communities face ongoing limitations in their social capital and opportunities. For example, in sectors like technology, skills gaps are known not to be the issue – women are skilled, and often more educated than their male peers. Rather, sexism and discrimination are at the root of their under-representation.[89] Similarly, there are documented

gaps in income and labour market outcomes for LGBTQ2S+ people in Canada despite higher or equivalent education levels.[42]

Many of the same barriers operate across groups that are historically marginalized – from taste-based discrimination and pay discrimination, through discriminatory hiring and advancement practices and lack of inclusive workplaces, to environments and cultures of harassment and microaggressions from peers and co-workers. Groups are often found to self-select into safe occupations, programs, and workplaces, which inadvertently reinforces inequities. While many mechanisms such as pay discrimination and a lack of inclusive workplaces are relevant across all equity-seeking groups, the literature reviewed does not always use the same terminology or examine barriers the same way. In particular, examination of systemic and organizational barriers is less evident in the available literature than individual or interpersonal barriers, though there are notable exceptions (e.g., in the field of feminist economics).

As shown earlier in Figure 2, different dimensions of identity and social position operate in conjunction with each other through processes of discrimination, privilege, and power. These interactions create conditions that accumulate employment disadvantage over time. However, relatively less is known about how these barriers operate *in combination*. Where possible, we highlighted above examples of barriers that operate for specific population subgroups, as well as at intersections of different identities or social locations.

It is critical to remember that disadvantage tends to flow from larger systems to the individual, as portrayed in the different levels of the socio-ecological model in Figure 1 (i.e., structural, organizational, and interpersonal levels); moreover, each level reinforces the others below and above. Below we detail a couple of examples of how barriers operate to create disadvantage for some equity-seeking groups in specific contexts:

- Due in part to societal attitudes regarding gender roles and expectations, girls and young women systematically receive less exposure than boys and men to the construction trades, whether in the form of information, access to tools, knowledge, or skills development opportunities, both in schools and at home. Consequently, they often have less social capital and fewer resources available to them when they enter training and apprenticeship programs. The lack of critical numbers of women in the trades restricts the availability of professional networks and limits mentoring opportunities, either on-the-job or in a more formal setting. This combination of barriers often affects women's careers very early on and can continue to put them at a disadvantage compared to their male peers throughout training and employment. Note that the same barrier can have different effects depending on the woman's career stage. For example, experiences of discrimination, bullying, and harassment tend to take a different form in pre-apprenticeship (e.g., being ignored or not being taken seriously), in apprenticeship (e.g., being tested; sexist and vulgar comments), and in journey (e.g., persistent exclusion and isolation).[43]

- The historical and ongoing institutional racism and colonial practices experienced by Indigenous peoples have created systemic conditions of inequity. For example, a lack of community-level resources and infrastructure in remote communities (e.g., poor transportation links; lack of banking infrastructure; shortage of trainers and training facilities; inadequate housing; lack of community-based healthcare, to name a few) has resulted in a systemic lack of opportunities to develop skills and to build social capital across generations.

Furthermore, inequities in the labour market are closely linked to social and health inequities – poverty affects health and social capital, which affects one's ability to participate in education and training. Indeed, it is impossible to discuss skills gaps without this broader context. Other larger factors noted to be operating across equity-seeking groups are related to the ongoing cycle of poverty as a result of exclusions from the labour market. These factors include financial barriers such as the costs of training, the way provincial income supports and the federal EI system often work at cross purposes (e.g., affecting program eligibility), and exclusion and inclusion criteria for programs.

A key issue identified in the literature is that interventions tend to focus on individuals (e.g., skills in a specific area), whereas individuals exist and operate within the context of broader issues that limit and shape their ability to achieve certain goals. This raises the question of *who* or *what* needs to change. For example, the onus is often on 'fixing' skills gaps, yet this approach tends to leave unaddressed the underlying structural barriers at play. Moreover, it puts the onus for change on the individual rather than the workplace culture or organizational policy at the heart of the barriers.[43]

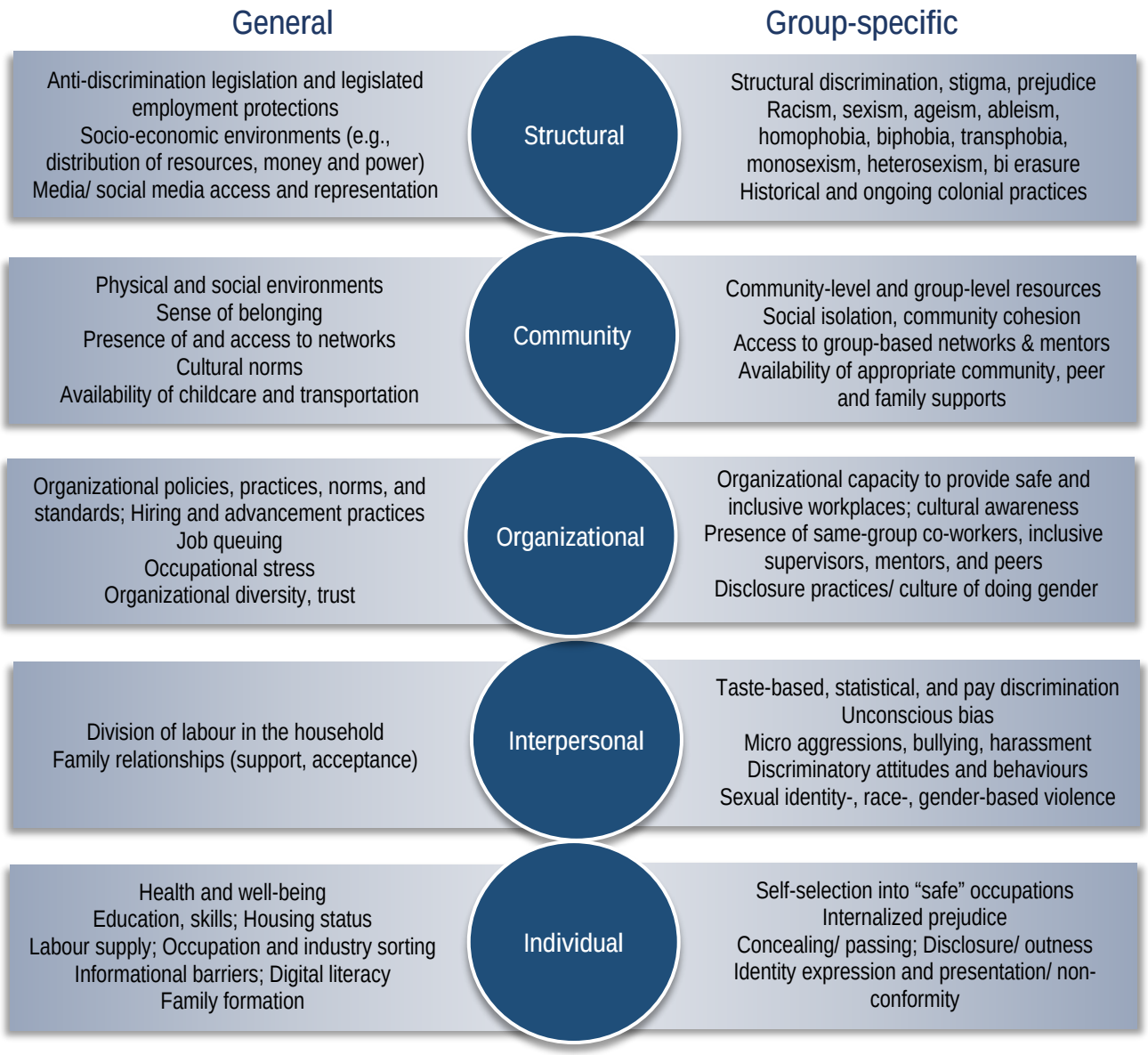
In the case of pay discrimination, for example, interventions might more correctly – and effectively – target a lack of inclusion or presence of discrimination in the workplace culture, rather than require members of equity groups to change. Returning to the example of women in the trades, the assumption is usually that women need skills to effectively transition into the workplace. A counter argument could be that if it were an inclusive workplace, women would not need support to transition effectively.

Similarly, there is often an assumption that in order to address pay discrimination, women need better negotiation skills. The counter argument to this, of course, is that if the remuneration system was fair and transparent, women would not need to upskill to negotiate their wages to ensure equal pay for equal work. Targeting these types of structural factors will require investment in training for different groups of people, including those who manage, support and, in some cases, profit, from the current structural systems.

In this complex context, SRDC has developed a conceptual framework for understanding the ways in which mechanisms of disadvantage operate for equity-seeking groups in the labour

market, including in employment support and training (see Figure 4 below). This framework portrays the ways in which the identified barriers operate at various levels of the socio-ecological model and how they differ between and within groups, recognizing the heterogeneity of populations.

Figure 4 Conceptual framework of mechanisms of dis/advantage for equity-seeking groups in the labour market



Explanations for differences in labour market outcomes across population groups largely fall within the realm of *general mechanisms*, that is, explanations applicable to or experienced by an entire population, not only equity-seeking groups. Studies of general mechanisms focus on differences in the *shared factors* (e.g., networks, skill levels) that specific equity-seeking groups experience *more or less* compared to their more privileged peers. Indeed, much of the available research falls in the bottom left of the figure, in being focused on individual-level general factors such as skills, education, or labour supply.

However, when looking at *disparities,* it is critical to distinguish between general and group-specific mechanisms. Evidence from the field of mental health suggests that while general factors are important, they are insufficient in explaining observed disparities; in other words, the disparity persists after controlling for general factors.[90] This is because studies of general factors leave unexamined group-specific factors that only members of specific equity-seeking groups experience or to which they are exposed, such as race-based discrimination in hiring, homophobic micro aggressions in the workplace, or prejudice towards people with disabilities.

As discussed later in this report in reference to data gaps, population-level datasets capture general factors experienced by the population, but the vast majority does not contain group-specific data measures. This is important because, in the absence of group-specific information, interventions designed to improve outcomes are likely to be limited in effect, since universal interventions may ameliorate but will not substantially diminish the disparities.[90] An intervention that does not explicitly consider (or is informed by) barriers relevant and specific to equity-seeking groups is likely to leave unexamined and unaddressed the underlying factors responsible for the continued disparity. As a result, equity-seeking communities may continue to see few if any improvements from programs and interventions designed to ameliorate their outcomes.

SKILLS GAPS

What skills gaps exist and how can they be characterized?

It is important to remember that, for the most part, groups under-represented in the labour market experience skills gaps as a result of overarching systems of exclusion and discrimination (i.e., systemic barriers as described in the previous section). Where skill gaps do exist, they may be present for specific groups and only in specific sectors or contexts, but not in others. For example, systemic barriers drive the under-representation of women in science or the income inequities for LGBTQ2S+ people, regardless of skill and education levels. Consequently, it makes sense to address *some* of these gaps as a skills development intervention targeting individuals (e.g., work experience and language skills for newcomers). Others may be *perceived* skills gaps

(e.g., confidence and leadership skills), which are deep-rooted in societal stereotypes and prejudice, and which may require education and re-framing. Still others may be best addressed through legal protections in employment, or policies and programs in health, education, and other social systems.

While we provide examples of opportunities for addressing gaps identified in the literature for particular groups, these do not exist in isolation. For instance, examples provided for newcomers will vary for different intersections of identities such as newcomer women, racialized newcomer youth, and so on. Finally, it is important to emphasize that these opportunities go hand in hand with demand-side improvements (e.g., changes undertaken by employers).

- Women: increase leadership opportunities, and further applied job skills for specific groups of women (e.g., newcomer women) or in specific occupational contexts (e.g., skilled trades and young women).

- LGBTQ2S+: opportunities to improve access to networks and mentors for segments of the LGBTQ2S+ community (e.g., youth or racialized people) and improve access to education and training opportunities (e.g., trans and gender-diverse individuals).

- Youth: opportunities to increase soft skills; build confidence and hope (especially for Opportunity[vi] and racialized youth); improve access to networks, mentors, and labour market information; improve job search and application skills; and improve essential skills (literacy and numeracy) for specific sub-populations (e.g., newcomer youth and Opportunity youth).

- People with disabilities: opportunities to increase soft skills and communication (acknowledging the need for employers and training providers to also be more adept to non-neurotypical communication styles, for example); improve employment readiness; improve essential and foundational skills; build life skills,[vii] coping skills and resiliency (especially for sub-groups, such as those with mental health challenges).

- Racialized groups and Indigenous people: opportunities to improve access to networks, mentors, and labour market information; improve essential and foundational skills; increase

[vi] Opportunity youth describe young people who are not in school or employment and are at risk of facing disadvantage within society. These young people are at a critical period of life but without investment and supports, their potential may not be fully realized, becoming missed opportunities for society.[91]

[vii] Life skills refer to psychosocial skills that enable humans to deal effectively with the demands and challenges of life.[92,93] They represent a group of psychosocial competencies and interpersonal skills that help people make informed decisions, solve problems, think critically and creatively, communicate effectively, build healthy relationships, empathize with others, and cope with and manage their lives in a healthy and productive manner.[94]

access to training certification and work experience; provide training on how to deal with discrimination in the workplace (e.g., report racist accidents, respond to racist customers).

- Newcomers: opportunities to improve language proficiency, especially applied language skills; increase soft skills and build confidence; improve access to networks, mentors, and labour market information; improve job search and application skills (e.g., resume, interviewing) as well as skills navigating the immigration and social supports system. Opportunities depend on immigration class (e.g., essential skills for refugee class newcomers; applied/context-based skills for economic class newcomers).

Further insights

In many of the reports reviewed, skills gaps were represented in one of two ways: (a) as a 'deficit' or lack of skills necessary to successfully find or maintain employment, and therefore requiring improvement in individuals' skills or knowledge; or (b) more positively, as 'misalignments' between the individual's skills and the needs or opportunities in the labour market. This typically meant that overcoming skills gaps focused on 'strength-based' approaches and looked to align the skills/knowledge taught with the current/relevant needs of the labour market.

Skills gaps were typically categorized in the literature as:

- *Skills* – technical/job-related, 'soft' skills (interpersonal, behavioural, etc.), essential skills, or the ability to 'translate' skills between jobs;
- *Knowledge* – where to find job postings, how to make a CV;
- *Qualifications* – skills that are recognized/certified; even if an individual has the skill, the lack of formal education/training/certification is a barrier;
- *Behavioural/psycho-social/attitudinal* – not necessarily skills related, but sometimes represented individualized needs and perceptions, such as fear of rejection/failure, lack of hope, lack of connections.

Skills gaps were also categorized as those necessary to achieve goals along the employment pathway, including for:

- *Seeking* employment, such as knowing how to find job postings, or how to write a CV;
- *Accessing* employment, such as through formal education, training, 'hard' skills and certifications, interpersonal or communication skills, or interviewing techniques;

- *Maintaining* employment, such as with conflict resolution, coping and interpersonal skills, as well as the unwritten rules of a workforce (e.g., "professionalism," presenteeism);
- *Succeeding* in employment through career development and growth, promotion, earnings, and job retention.

Note that while skills gaps can be categorized in the different ways described above and can be more or less pronounced along the pathway to employment, less is known about which types of gaps matter and to what effect for different populations. This lack of knowledge is exacerbated by the fact that skills operate and result from bigger systemic issues which may serve to worsen (or ameliorate) observed outcomes.

Again, this begs the question of who is responsible for skills gaps and who needs to change or act to improve the labour market outcomes of equity-seeking groups. For example, in our review of research specific to people with disabilities, some reports pointed to skills gaps related to employment readiness, while others suggested that the gap is with service providers not preparing individuals adequately for employment. Testing used in employment pre-programming may be inappropriate for members of equity-seeking groups, since poor test scores can result in them being screened out from programs. For instance, behavioural testing may have different results from experiential testing for racialized groups or people with disabilities.

Similarly, there are important implications arising from the ways in which gaps and barriers are framed, and therefore measured. Because skills gaps tend to be driven by structural barriers, they could be conceptualized as the inverse of *privilege*. For example, factors typically measured in research, such as access to mentors, networks, and exposure to labour market information, are quantifiable and important to both understanding and improving employment outcomes. At the same time, exposure to and opportunities for building these forms of social capital can be termed and understood as privilege, which some groups have unequal access to, over the life course and across generations. Privilege is linked to social and cultural forms of power and confer advantage or disadvantage.[95] The implications of privilege for population groups are based on intersections of identity and social position, as highlighted earlier in Figure 2.

When looking at skill gaps in the context of systemic barriers across inter-related systems (e.g., of health, justice, and education), it is important to consider factors *outside* of those researchers typically think of when studying the labour market, such as the broader context of intergenerational trauma and the availability of culturally appropriate services and supports. Furthermore, several reports pointed to the need to reframe what success looks like and on whose terms, which we expand on in the sections below on learning/support needs.[67,74,96]

LEARNING/SUPPORT NEEDS

What are groups' learning needs and how can they be characterized?

Learning needs were rarely directly labelled as such in the reports we reviewed. Instead, learning needs can be conceptualized as "the how" – characteristics of program design or delivery deemed essential to its effectiveness, or an element of the learning environment that promotes ability to fill a skills gap or overcome a barrier. Detailed information on learning needs was generally limited in the reports reviewed. Examples of identified learning needs for equity-seeking groups are provided below but are not intended to be an exhaustive list.

- **Approaches** programs take to teaching skills, or aspects of program structure. This includes establishing an environment conducive to learning, such as through positive, strength-based approaches;[viii] flexibility in programming; or individualized programming. Some of these approaches help clients overcome specific challenges caused by structural barriers – for example, flexibility in programming format and timing is useful for youth with mental health and substance use issues who may have difficulty with scheduling, or for those who do not have access to reliable, affordable transportation. Other approaches focus on providing financial incentives or increasing motivation, or ensuring a pathway into the workforce through work placements or other means;

- **Recognition** of diverse learning needs based on distance from the labour market or readiness to enter the workforce (or in the case of youth, their developmental stage). These recommendations typically advocated for teaching soft skills to younger, recently arrived, or less skilled workers and getting them ready to enter the workforce, or equipping them with specific training and certifications;

- **Supports** made available or integrated into services that did not target specific skills or knowledge gains, but rather, were aspects of programming that improved accessibility of programs by addressing the impacts of systemic barriers such as with financial support, mental/physical health support, or childcare. In particular, the importance of providing trauma- and violence-informed services came up consistently as key to learning for all groups;

[viii] Strength-based approaches set up conditions for a person to see themselves at their best, in order to see the value they bring by just being them, and moving forward to capitalize on their strengths rather than focusing on negative characteristics.[97] These approaches value the capacity, skills, knowledge, connections and potential in individuals and communities. Practitioners working in this way work in collaboration with clients, helping people to do things for themselves so they can become co-producers rather than consumers of support.[98]

- **General**/other needs included aspects of programming that are not necessarily skills-focused, but include demand-led components and targeted programming;

- For **youth**, research pointed to the importance of strength-based approaches, experiential learning (especially culturally relevant skills and learning), learning soft skills and life skills in context, and mentoring. Learning should be flexible, meeting the youth where they are (literally and developmentally) and be reinforced with ongoing, wrap-around supports;[45,65,67,69,74,96]

- For **newcomers**, our review underscored the importance of in-person learning, peer support and peer learning, with the view to build a sense of community and strengthen networks and engagement. Research also emphasized the need for learning in the context of the Canadian labour market, with one-to-one 1-1 job coaching, job customization, and individualized supports;[52,61,88]

- For **Indigenous peoples**, findings pointed to learning that centres around strengthening community capacity, is community-led and driven.[45,69] Since culture is paramount and shapes the ways adults and young people relate to one another, mentoring should be consistent with Indigenous ways of knowing and being. It is important for jobs themselves to be meaningful and aligned with cultural values, making use of cultural knowledge and skills. Concepts of empowerment and self-determination are critical to learning, and approaches allowing and supporting Indigenous people – Indigenous youth in particular – to create their own solutions are paramount.[85] Finally, flexibility is key, since youth may not want to be assigned a primary identity and put into an identity-based program;[45,85]

- For **racialized populations** (including Indigenous peoples), research focused on the need to acknowledge and recognize histories of trauma, bias, discrimination, and racism, all of which affects preferences for programing and employer match.

DISCUSSION

PROGRAMMING INSIGHTS

Although not the focus of this project, we assembled insights gleaned from the research related to the design and delivery of employment and training programs for equity-seeking groups. Applying an *intersectional lens* to this analysis, below we highlight these additional insights for programming, with illustrative examples:

1. *Many programs are siloed*, often serving and streaming individuals based on one identity characteristic (e.g., women vs. newcomers; youth vs. people with disabilities). Assumptions about underlying skills gaps and learning needs based on these identities can create challenges to learning and reinforce barriers experienced by these groups.

   Streaming individuals into a program based on one characteristic can happen for a variety of reasons, including underlying drivers and incentives related to program funding. However, challenges arise when eligibility criteria do not consider multiplicity of experiences, nor how experiences or barriers associated with one group identity apply to an individual in connection with their other needs. For example, programs for underemployed women may elect to refer newcomer women to a specialized program for newcomers. While this may be appropriate for some individuals and offer a safe space to learn and make connections, it may not meet everyone's needs. Moreover, from a systems perspective, the program keeps serving a particular type of woman, reinforcing assumptions around newcomer women and the barriers they face rather than building programming around individual needs, and creating further barriers to integration.

2. *Many programs are not structured around a "whole" person*, to allow for different needs or life events to be recognized and supported (e.g., lack of flexibility to pause and restart programming) or address broader barriers faced (e.g., transportation and childcare for newcomer women; housing supports for LGBTQ2S+ youth; individualized pre-employment counselling for people with disabilities).

   For example, programs for youth may not be prepared to support the "bumps" and challenges in young peoples' lives that are linked to systemic barriers. Programs could support learning by using positive youth development and strength-based approaches; providing sustained access to diverse social and structural supports; and acknowledging and focusing on identity development (which recognizes that different youth need different supports and that development is not linear and not strictly age-based).

3. *Program designs could benefit from considering clients' multiple identities.* There are benefits to tailoring programming to participants' identities, including the potential for addressing group-specific barriers and factors. Starting from an understanding of each person having multiple identities, characteristics, and experiences would mean adapting the design and delivery of programming to consider "no wrong door" approaches to intake across multiple service locations. These approaches may be particularly successful for specific subpopulations (e.g., programs that conflict with youth's emerging identity; automatic streaming of an Indigenous person to Indigenous programming may contribute to stigma).

   Since people accessing employment and training programs may allow them to be connected to a variety of supports and resources within their communities, a unitary approach (i.e., a focus on group membership only as Indigenous youth or as newcomer women, for example) can prevent programs from making connections across resources, sustaining relationships with program participants, and supporting and nurturing their existing strengths.

4. *Programs could benefit from having diverse staff who share and/or have training to better understand participants' identities, experiences, and backgrounds.* It is important for participants to see themselves reflected in the programs with which they are engaging. Service providers are often from dominant or comparatively privileged social groups and/or may not have the training needed to appropriately and effectively work with clients from equity-seeking groups. As a result, some challenges may be unfamiliar to the service delivery staff, and they may not be equipped to support those needs.

   One example where staff training is key to building program capacity is related to the use of inclusive, appropriate, and affirming language with participants. Using inclusive and appropriate language is one key practice of allyship, and also provides a common ground for conversations. For example, knowing what language to use when referring to LGBTQ2S+ individuals has several practical applications, such as when developing program materials, conducting assessments, or delivering group-based curriculum. This could include avoiding cis/heteronormative language (e.g., using "parent/guardian" instead of "mother/father"); avoiding pathologizing or "othering" language; and using gender-neutral terms (e.g., replacing "he/she" with "they").

5. *Programs could benefit from expanding how success is defined and measured*, incorporating outcomes relevant to equity-seeking groups. The design of programming and how learning is approached is often guided by expected outcomes for participants. A strong theme emerging from our review concerned which outcomes were deemed desirable and by whom. In general, programs tend to focus on narrow outcomes (typically a job placement or its length) regardless of the broader impact on the individual and their social or community needs. The literature points to different ways of defining success and placing value on goals and milestones as defined by participants themselves.

Focusing on narrow outcomes may mean, for example, that a racialized youth is placed in an employment situation that is not culturally safe; or that a woman with a disability is referred to a training program without consideration that it requires commuting by inaccessible public transit in the evenings. Particularly in the absence of wrap-around supports, flexibility

> *"Indigenous cultural values position individual success within the success of the collective (…). Success may be the completion of a degree or program to launch a career, or skill-building to contribute to community success. It may also be the completion of a handful of courses as part of a journey of self-discovery that leads to a different path to life goals. By understanding how Indigenous people consistently value connections with other Indigenous people within their field and by supporting the development of such cultural networks, employers can help Indigenous employees achieve a good life."* – Pidgeon et al., 2019

in how individuals attend programs and how their success is measured are key considerations, even if program staff may be hesitant to take on clients who will need more supports. In practice, this means programs may accept those most likely to be successful as determined by the program's criteria (i.e., those with greatest privilege).

6. *Inclusion drives diversity, not the other way around.* It is through increasing capacity to provide inclusive programming for individuals from diverse backgrounds that participation and success of these groups will increase. Specifically, the ability to meet learning needs is highly affected by programs' capacity to deliver safe and culturally competent programming.

   Our review of program evaluation reports found several examples of situations where programs lacked cultural awareness (e.g., poor communication with LGBTQ2S+ youth; and inappropriate cultural assumptions made during intake). These situations can not only inhibit learning or result in individuals dropping out, but can themselves serve as barriers. For instance, matching racialized youth with job opportunities considered unsafe or inappropriate can stem from an inadequate understanding of their family dynamics or cultural community values, and is in fact how some youth experience racism. This extends to employers as well, where the lack of cultural awareness in the workplace continues to affect racialized employees' or trainees' skills development and learning.

Promising programming practices

Over the course of the project, we identified examples of promising strategies and practices used by existing programs. These practices were either identified directly by members of equity-seeking groups as being helpful, or they explicitly considered participants' intersecting identities, different social contexts, and life stages. While an extensive list of such practices would require a

comprehensive literature review, we highlight examples below as a starting point for further inquiry. Although the list is oriented largely towards service providers, it does hints at the power imbalance inherent in decision-making and the need to increase autonomy (e.g., engaging clients in designing and implementing programs, and self-directed program choices).

Finally, it is important to recognize that the current programming landscape is shaped by and operates within the context of policy and funding requirements (e.g., eligibility constraints, narrow funding envelopes, and targeted outcomes) that may not be well aligned with the breadth of clients' needs. While considerations such as funding envelopes were not the focus of this project, we recognize that these additional considerations may limit innovation and the ability of programs to design and deliver novel solutions.

PROMISING PROGRAM PRACTICES

- Recognizing that people may need many different types of supports regardless of their identity or group membership (e.g., wrap-around supports, one-to-one customization).
- Providing opportunities to try things out, and doing so in a safe space, without fear of getting kicked out of program. For example, trying and "failing forward" was noted as a key part of successful youth programs.
- Offering programming that is strengths-based, experiential, and culturally-relevant.
- Extending options for supports and follow-up after the program is completed.
- Redefining and broadening definitions of success, including offering programming options to work with a person whatever success means, and incorporating markers of success as defined by the participants.
- Building in opportunities within programming to shift the power balance. Giving participants choices and options of organizations, programs, or courses they engage with (e.g., via learning and training accounts).
- Building outreach strategies and taking time to engage with employers, including building confidence and capacity in the workplaces where programs are sending applicants (e.g., cultural competence).
- Investing in tools and instruments able to capture assets (rather than deficits). This includes taking a community building approach including by focusing on solutions that come from within the community, and that recognize and recognize community strengths.
- Establishing clear procedures for referrals when a program cannot meet the client's needs, including through building program capacity to understand the landscape of resources and supports.
- Building extensive flexibilities within programing in the way participants enter, interact with, and exit programs (e.g., asynchronous and synchronous programming; low barriers to access).
- Providing program staff with training on language and issues relevant to equity-seeking groups, including intersectionality, anti-oppression and trauma and violence-informed approaches, cultural competence, etc.
- Taking the time to understand the emerging needs people are not willing to disclose right away, including taking the time to determine how to tailor services to individuals, based on their multiple identities, contexts, experiences, and life stage.
- Providing opportunities for people to know themselves in terms of their identities, recognizing people may not always be comfortable sharing. Providing opportunities to become mentors is a key strategy for building confidence and a self-esteem in this process.

DATA INSIGHTS

In the same way that the identified structural barriers, skills gaps, and learning needs of equity-seeking groups have implications for employment support and training programming, there are specific data issues that affect what is known about who participates in and benefits from such programming. Below we identify some of the more evident data gaps and challenges, as well as additional insights about data collection and analysis.

Data gaps

- There is a dearth of data from the perspectives of members of equity-seeking groups themselves. Typically, skills gaps and learning needs are identified by government policy-makers, service providers, and employers, which reinforces power imbalances and assumptions (including paternalistic attitudes) about client groups.
- Where data from the perspectives of the equity-seeking groups are collected, inquiries tend to be small-scale and qualitative in nature. This results in a disconnect between the intelligence gathered by this means versus by conventional practices to roll up and capture quantitative data in the standardized metrics typically used to monitor progress.
- Most standard metrics tend not to capture factors that are critical for marginalized groups, such as discrimination, safety on the job, opportunities for promotion, flexibility, and so on.
- It is not easy to measure the complexity and nuance of people's experiences, especially multiple factors, and this further contributes to gaps in data. It is also very difficult to measure discrimination, although there are ongoing efforts to capture unconscious bias.
- The focus of research projects tends to be on data actionable for the client while systemic or broader issues are likely to be set aside as being either too complex or challenging, if acknowledged at all.
- Diversity and inclusion efforts need to be data driven, and data collection (e.g., on proportions of applicants, hires, promotions, and pay of various groups) can play an important role in driving change. However, in Canada, most organizations are not required to report these data, so the extent of issues such as hiring discrimination, for example, is not known.
- There is a general lack of employer data, which limits the ability to demonstrate return on investment, for example.

- There is a dearth of post-program and longitudinal data available (e.g., to capture the dynamic nature of disability). Often identifiers are not standardized, so it is difficult to compare across datasets or over time.

- With some exceptions, most national datasets lack appropriate identifiers to capture diverse identities. Data gaps are particularly pronounced for specific equity-seeking groups such as bisexual, trans and gender minority individuals, and about intersections with other identities (e.g., Two-Spirit). Available sample sizes typically do not allow for stratified analyses, deepening inequities.

- Lack of data on the specific experiences of equity-seeking groups serves as a key barrier to designing programs and interventions to address inequities. Economic, health, and social outcomes are closely interrelated, but research bridging these areas is limited, in part by the challenges of linking disparate datasets.

Early insights for data collection

- *Involve people with lived experiences in research design and data collection.* Meaningful inclusion of equity-seeking groups in the data collection process (e.g., via a community research team) can create safe and inclusive spaces for its members, and prove key to shifting the underlying power imbalances. Enabling such involvement (such as in project budgets) is likely to increase the use of language that resonates with clients, and the collection of indicators that are meaningful to the target groups. Finally, reformulating the entire data and research endeavour through the collection of data grounded in OCAP principles has critical implications for advancing reconciliation with Indigenous peoples.[99]

- *Collect data on the underlying mechanisms that ultimately drive outcomes* (e.g., the prevalence of safe and inclusive workplaces). Focusing solely on individual-level characteristics such as language levels risks over-emphasizing deficits and reinforcing power imbalances. Involving evaluators and clients with lived experience in program design can help ensure that milestones are clearly articulated through the use of logic models and theories of change.

- *Build in flexibilities in how questions about identity are asked to allow participants to self-identify and express their whole selves and experiences*. For example, youth who do not see their identities and circumstances reflected in the response categories listed at assessment may perceive the program as unwelcoming, and may disengage from the program at the start. Collecting appropriate data can help programs operators better understand how (and how well) their programs address intersectionality in practice, and build a reputation of being viewed as trustworthy and inclusive of the communities it aims to serve.

- *Expand how success is defined and incorporate broader outcomes relevant to equity-seeking groups*. For example, evaluations of programs that focus on narrow outcomes like employment status or wages would miss outcomes critical for members of equity-seeking groups, such as opportunities for advancement, self-efficacy, sense of belonging to city and community, integration of social networks, and well-being. This could be achieved through strategies such as a *milestones approach*, which uses completions of any significant task, event, occurrence or decisions (rather than quantitative, long-term outcomes), as measures of progress and opportunities to highlight and reinforce continued success.

- *Collect data that cover a wide range of outcomes, especially through data linkage.* As programs can have many effects on participants, take advantage of government's ability to capture diverse experiences of individuals across programs (e.g., health, social, income security, education and training, family, disability, housing). There are opportunities to collect data across different types of services (e.g., people not making progress in education because their social assistance funding would be cut), and considering intersections between these sectors (e.g., progress in health, emergency admissions, and so on).

This brief overview of data challenges and opportunities identified over the course of this project can provide a foundation for potentially more in-depth exploration of promising practices in data collection and analysis in a subsequent project designed to inform SICA's developing research strategy.

CONCLUSION

This report provides a synthesis of research on the systemic barriers, skills gaps, and learning needs of different populations who are under-represented in the Canadian labour market. The analysis was guided by socio-ecological, intersectional, and life course approaches as key to capturing the needs and experiences of those seeking greater equity in the labour market. In doing so, the report articulates a conceptual framework of the mechanisms of disadvantage faced by equity-seeking groups in the labour market, highlighting factors either common or unique to specific population subgroups.

It bears repeating that the labour market and related socio-educational institutions are discriminatory. The research literature we reviewed identified many systemic barriers faced by groups over the life course that, regardless of their skill level, affect different aspects of their engagement with the labour market and stages of career. Inequities in the labour market are also closely linked to social and health inequities experienced by individuals and communities. No matter the intervention, individuals continue to face post-program barriers. It is important to discuss any skills gaps within this broader context. Indeed, groups under-represented in the labour market experience skills gaps as a result of the overarching systems of exclusion and discrimination. It makes sense to address *some* of them as a skills development intervention targeting individuals.

The findings from this project can serve to inform existing programing to affect better outcomes for equity-seeking groups and support their participation in the Canadian economy. This report pointed to some programming insights, including promising program practices. In addition, there are several insights from our analysis for the way data are collected, both at program-, organizational-, and government- levels, with implications for developing strategies and approaches designed to support employment and training outcomes of groups traditionally under-represented in the labour market.

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APPENDIX A: RELEVANT SRDC RESEARCH REPORTS

Project	Funder	Dates	Populations
Employment Supports for Youth with Barriers to Employment[73,74]	Michael Smith Foundation for Health Research	May 2020 – January 2021	Youth; mental health/ substance use challenges
Effective labour market programs and services to assist youth and social assistance recipients to integrate into the labour market[100]	Employment and Social Development Canada	November 2019 – July 2020	Youth; social assistance recipients
Career Pathways for Visible Minority Newcomer Women (CPVMNW)[52,61]	Immigration Refugees and Citizenship Canada	July 2018 – March 2022	Visible minority; newcomers; women
Advancing Women in Engineering and Technology[38]	Applied Science Technologists and Technicians of BC	February 2019 – April 2021	Women
Canadian Work Experience Pilots Evaluation: A Comparative Evaluation and Analysis[88]	Employment and Social Development Canada	January 2018 – April 2020	Newcomers
Pathways to Work: Co-designing improved employment pathways for Inuit youth in Nunatsiavut, Labrador[45,69]	College of the North Atlantic	July 2018 – December 2019	Youth; Indigenous; Inuit
Determinants of Participation in Indigenous Labour Market Programs[50]	Employment and Social Development Canada	February 2016 – March 2016	Indigenous
Analysis of PIAAC Data and Development of Evidence Base on Adult Learning for Ontario[68,86,101]	Ontario Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities	March 2015 – September 2015	Youth; newcomers; Indigenous; Older workers;
Forum of Labour Market Ministers' Senior Officials – Best Practices Session[44]	Employment and Social Development Canada	September 2016 – September 2016	Youth; newcomers; women; Indigenous; older workers; people with disabilities

Project	Funder	Dates	Populations
SkillsLink Enhancing employment programming for vulnerable youth[96,102]	Employment and Social Development Canada	November 2018 – October 2022	Youth
Pay for Success[103]	Workplace Education Manitoba	September 2013 – June 2017	Individuals with barriers to the labour market
Needs Analysis for Mentoring and Support Services for Women in the Trades[43]	SkillPlan	May 2016 – December 2016	Women
UPSKILL[104,105]	Human Resources and Skills Development Canada	February 2010 – February 2014	Those with labour market barriers/ lower literacy
Manitoba Works! Evaluation[106]	Manitoba Department of Jobs and the Economy	November 2013	Social assistance recipients; complex needs
Strathcona County Youth Needs and Assets Assessment[65]	Yardstick Assessment Strategies Inc.	March 2019 – December 2019	Youth
Employees perspectives on intermittent work capacity in Ontario[46]	Human Resources and Skills Development Canada	July 2010 – March 2011	People with disabilities
Episodic and Moderate Disabilities and Employment[76]	Ontario Ministry of Community and Social Services	January 2014 – August 2014	People with disabilities
Understanding Current Employment Programming & Services for BC Youth[51,75]	BC Centre for Employment Excellence	2013-2014	Youth
Formative evaluation of HR Tech Group's Diversity and Inclusion Tech Project[107]	HR Tech Group	June 2019 – July 2021	Newcomers; women; Indigenous; people with disabilities: LGBTQ2S+
CreateAction: Inclusive Social Innovation[108]	Canadian Community Economic Development Network	August 2020 – March 2023	Youth; newcomer; people with disabilities; Black; racialized; LGBTQ2S+

Project	Funder	Dates	Populations
Assessing the Effectiveness of the Government of Canada's Outbound Mobility Pilot[109]	Employment and Social Development Canada	November 2019 – March 2020	Youth; Indigenous; people with disabilities
Building the evidence base about economic, health and social inequities faced by LGBTQ2S+ individuals in Canada[42]	Status of Women Canada	May 2020 – May 2022	LGBTQ2S+
Soft Skills as a Workforce Development Strategy for Opportunity Youth[67]	Anonymous sponsor	May 2020 – June 2021	Youth
Enhancing outcomes for vulnerable youth: trauma, mental health, and employment and skills training[79]	Public Health Agency of Canada	May 2019 – July 2021	Youth

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