

IMMIGRATION AND DIVERSITY: SOME POLICY ISSUES CONFRONTING THE QUEBEC SCHOOL SYSTEM

Marie McAndrew

The education system is one of the main instruments with which a society helps immigrants integrate into their new communities. Marie McAndrew recounts how the Quebec school system has lived up to this challenge over the last 40 years. From specific measures such as language-training and preparatory class that placed most of the burden of integration on children and did not involve the general functioning of the schools, Quebec's policy has evolved toward incorporating intercultural teaching into the school curricula as a whole. Thus it now calls on the broader society to also adjust to the reality of immigration. But there are sometimes important gaps, she warns, between the official policy and actual implementation in the classroom. Addressing issues of religious diversity (as opposed to cultural diversity) has also proved to be difficult to negotiate. Moving from heritage-language teaching to third-language teaching to meet the requirements of the globalized world into which today's children will graduate, and shifting from intercultural education toward citizenship education, she concludes, are challenges that Quebec schools have now to address.

Le système éducatif est l'un des principaux instruments dont dispose une société pour favoriser l'intégration des immigrants à leur nouvelle communauté. Marie McAndrew décrit comment le système québécois a su relever ce défi au cours des 40 dernières années. D'abord fondée sur des mesures comme les cours de langue et les classes d'accueil, qui faisaient reposer sur l'enfant l'essentiel du fardeau de l'intégration sans modifier le fonctionnement du système, la politique québécoise a ainsi évolué vers l'insertion d'un enseignement interculturel dans les programmes scolaires, invitant ce faisant l'ensemble de la société à s'adapter à la réalité de l'immigration. Il peut toutefois exister d'importants écarts, observe l'auteure, entre la politique officielle et sa mise en œuvre dans les salles de classe. Sans compter les questions soulevées par la diversité religieuse (par opposition à la diversité culturelle), qui se sont révélées plus difficiles à gérer. Les écoles du Québec doivent maintenant relever deux défis : passer de l'enseignement de la langue d'origine à celui d'une troisième langue, de manière à répondre aux exigences de l'économie mondialisée dans laquelle vivront les futurs diplômés ; passer d'une éducation interculturelle à une éducation à la vie civique.

Over the past thirty years, the Quebec school system — notably the traditionally homogeneous French-language sector — has been radically transformed by the impact of the ethnocultural diversification of its clientele. This evolution is the result of three major socio-political changes: the redefinition of linguistic relations due to the adoption of Bill 101 in 1977, the constant involvement of the Quebec government in the selection and integration of immigrants and, finally, the opening of institutions and civil society to pluralism,

reflected in the evolution of discourses, policies and programs in this regard.

Today, 95 percent of new immigrants attend the French sector. Over time, this trend also implies that 75 percent of students whose mother tongue is neither French nor English attend a French language school. Moreover, because of the concentration of immigration in Montreal, 46.4 percent of the student population there is first or second generation immigrants, and over one-third of schools has more than 50 percent of this clientele.

Quebec's French language schools are, thus, assuming a double mandate — hosting and integrating the children of the newly arrived immigrants, and preparing all future citizens to live together in a pluralist society. Many issues facing the Quebec school system are not unlike the experiences of other Canadian provinces and of many immigration countries. For example, the recent controversy concerning the relevance of introducing the teaching of English at the early start of elementary education, as proposed by the newly elected Liberal government, clearly echoes some of the preoccupations raised in the 1990s by American parents, especially in California, regarding bilingual education. Likewise, the extent to which schools should adapt to different religious traditions, and their specific requirements, such as the wearing of the kirpan that made the headlines in Montreal last spring, has divided, on different occasions, both Quebecois and other Canadians.

But, Quebec's socio-linguistic complexity, as well as the fact that it has only recently begun to confront the challenges linked to pluralism, make the educational debate there interesting and unique.

As is the case in most societies and school systems when they start to face the challenge of immigrant integration, the policies and programs that were first implemented in Quebec in the beginning of the 1970s were concerned mainly with the linguistic integration of newcomers. The Department of Education set up the Bureau des Services aux communautés culturelles (cultural communities services bureau) in 1969, while the Montreal Catholic Schools Commission was developing, on an experimental basis, the first *classes d'accueil* (preparatory class). Later, following the adoption of Bill 101, these classes became established in metropolitan school boards. They consist of special full-time classes with reduced students/teacher ratios for immigrants who have been in the country for less

than five years. Students are initiated to everyday life in Quebec and taught the basics of the French language and other school subjects until they are ready to integrate into regular classes, normally after one year, but sometimes longer. Moreover, guaranteed universal access for immigrant clientele to some compensatory linguistic measures, i.e. supplemental French as a second language (FSL) teaching, where numbers do not warrant the opening of specific classes, was added to the *Public Education Act* in 1988. Thus services of this nature are more extensive in Quebec than in any other Canadian province. Recently, due to the diversification of the immigration flux, a linguistic support program that follows students during the first two years of their integration into regular classes was implement-

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ed in schools where the proportion of allophone students exceeds 25 percent.

Other measures that were taken in Quebec show that a certain awareness of the importance of respecting pluralism in public schools existed as early as 1977. For example, the *Livre Blanc sur la politique de la langue* (White Paper on Language Policy) devoted ample attention to the promotion and teaching of other languages, and was the origin of the *programme d'enseignement des langues d'origine*, or *PELO* (Heritage Language Program), which was established in Quebec public schools. Thus, in 2002-2003, there were 13 different languages being taught in Quebec's schools, mostly before or after school hours or at noon time. But this vision of the impact of pluralism on the school system was limited. It can be characterized as "additive multiculturalism." From this perspective, programs that aim at fostering respect for pluralism

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Nevertheless, over the years, there has been a growing awareness of the multidimensionality of the adjustments needed to foster a social integration that would go beyond linguistic integration or maintenance of heritage languages. This awareness has been sustained by the publication of various reports, research and policies since 1983. Generally written from the perspective of an "intercultural rapprochement within a francophone society," these documents have fostered various *ad hoc* measures, initiated by the Quebec education department and school boards in the Greater Montreal area, that are more directly concerned with the integration of immigrant students. Among other initiatives, there are guidelines to ensure the elimination of stereotypes in the teaching material; intercultural education objectives that have been included in various programs;

teaching materials to support these objectives; and in-service training programs and intercultural activities for teachers and principals. Special funds were granted to multiethnic schools to allow them, among other options, to hire liaison officers to promote good relations between parents and the school at the elementary level, and between students at the secondary level. More recently, the education department has studied the issue of value conflicts in multiethnic school settings and prepared a guide to support decision-making by school principals in these matters. Intercultural training for teachers, which for a long time was in the universities' domain, became a criteria required by the education department for the new programs that were implemented in 1995.

But it was not until 1998 that the Department of Education made public its *Politique d'intégration scolaire et d'édu-*

cation *interculturelle* (Educational Integration and Intercultural Education Policy), which was to apply to all boards in Quebec (not just those where there were high numbers of immigrants). In this document, the school system's approach to diversity was more clearly defined to be largely in line with the more general *Énoncé de politique en matière d'immigration et d'intégration* (Policy Statement on Immigration and Integration) of 1990, which covers all departments in the province. In it, the Quebec position can be characterized as a third way between Canadian multiculturalism — often accused in both Quebec and Canada of essentializing cultures and separating them from one another — and French Jacobinism. The refusal of the latter ideology to acknowledge intermediate identities between the state and the individual citizen and its relegation of diversity to the private sphere renders it hardly compatible with the North American ideology of strong recognition of pluralism, which is widespread in Quebec. Thus, the third principle of the “moral contract,” proposed in the 1990 policy statement and broadly reflected in the 1998 document, recognizes the pluralistic character of Quebec society “within the limit imposed by the respect for fundamental democratic values and the need for intergroup exchanges.” This search for a better equilibrium between the respect for diversity and the need for social cohesion when defining policies and programs targeting immigrants has lately been considered with interest in anglophone Canada, whose preoccupations, in this regard, are more recent, a fact most likely due to the somehow simpler socio-linguistic context there.

More recently, following current trends in many societies, the Department of Education also proposes to integrate curricular and extracurricular activities formerly included under the label of “intercultural education” into the wider concept of “citizenship education within a pluralistic context.” But, as we will see, the ramifications of this proposition remain difficult to evaluate.



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The Quebec school system has been radically transformed by the diversification of its clientele. Today, due to the adoption of Bill 101, 95 percent of new immigrants attend French schools.

This enumeration of governmental and local measures could give the impression that the Quebec school system has definitely shifted toward a systemic adoption of pluralism, or that it now predominantly practices “multiculturalism as an integral part of the curriculum.” The actual situation is, however, more complex. As in other contexts, various studies have noted a gap of some significance between official policies and programs and their local interpretation and implementation, especially regarding the intercultural dimension. For example, the unsystematic nature of both initial and in-service teacher-training, on the one hand, and the persistence of ethnocentrism in the learning material, although revised, on the other, have often been deplored. Some have also argued that objectives pertaining to intercultural education in various programs are not seen as priorities and are thus not always covered by teachers, especially outside Montreal.

If cultural diversity is at least making headway in the Quebec school system, religious diversity has proved more difficult to negotiate. This is particularly the case for Islam, which separates less clearly the private and the public spheres than do modern versions of other great religions. Quebec has thus experienced some conflicts, broadly covered by the media, regarding the adaptation of schools' norms and regulations. The most notable has been the hijab crisis, which aroused wide public debate in 1995-96. The latter concerned, among other issues, the importance of respecting religious pluralism when faced with other fundamental values such as gender equality, which some (mostly women) perceived as being challenged by the symbolism of the veil. This controversy, which was settled by a Quebec Human Rights Commission's Advice, which decided for tolerance, produced two disparate coalitions that had no close links with ethnic allegiance. Those promoting

tolerance for the wearing of the hijab included human rights associations from the majority community, union officials, professional associations, feminist groups and some spokespersons of the Muslim community, generally of older establishment. Those opposing any accommodation on both sides included recent immigrants from those Muslim countries where fundamentalism exists, grassroots feminists, teachers nostalgic for "genuine integration" and left-wing groups taking advantage of the crisis to call for the complete secularization of the system.

Recent debates are more likely to concern services for students than institutional adaptation to pluralism. The 1998 policy questioned the relevance of maintaining *classes d'accueil* as principal tools for teaching French. The appropriateness of keeping young children (age 5 to 8) who are not encountering particular problems in separate classes was especially challenged. Pressure is thus increasingly being put on regular teachers to allow for some integration of these students, at least for the less academically oriented subjects. Different boards are also exploring — not always successfully — various formulae that would better meet the needs of underschooled students who integrate into high schools during their adolescence, especially through increased use of their heritage languages.

These proposals by the education department correspond with Canadian and international tendencies regarding the teaching of host languages. They also are more appropriate considering Quebec's evolution over the last thirty years, which makes less justifiable the rigid distinctions between the *classes d'accueil*, responsible for the integration of newcomers, and mainstream, largely homogeneous classes. They have, however, aroused great resistance from teachers' unions, which have significantly slowed the pace of the reform. This reaction can probably be attributed — in equal amounts — to corporatist motives, pedagogical preoc-

cupations and socio-political concerns regarding the long-term linguistic consequences of some of these proposals.

Following the redefinition of linguistic relations in Quebec, the future of heritage-language teaching is also debated. Aiming essentially at elementary students from second or third-generation cultural communities (80 percent of them Italian), this program is not really adapted to the pressing needs of underschooled, newly arrived students in high schools nor to the demands of parents from all origins, including francophones, for third-language teaching at this level. Unless it gives way to the pressure from some older established communities and maintains the program in its original form, the education department — and probably Quebec society — are today at a

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crossroads. Either, following the American model of bilingual education, the department redefines the teaching of heritage languages as a compensatory measure limited to "children at risk", or, in line with the Ontarian approach, it turns it into an element of a larger strategy aiming at increasing plurilingualism in the population as a whole. Decision-makers, who are caught in a double political bind, might show wisdom in trying to do both, i.e. limit the "third language" option to major international languages while developing transitional bilingual programs only for targeted, especially heavy, clientele.

Furthermore, although this element has aroused less interest from the general public, the shift from intercultural education to citizenship education has raised some questions from school personnel and groups that are more directly involved. Most have welcomed the proposal, first, to create a compulsory citi-

zenship education program associated with the teaching of history and, second, to promote this aim as a cross-curricular competence that needs to be acquired in all disciplines and activities at school. They saw it as an initiative that could contribute positively to existing measures regarding institutional adaptation to pluralism. This proposal is also in line with the general evolution of intercultural education in Quebec and elsewhere in which the definition of a common ethical framework within which pluralism can blossom, as well as the negotiation of value conflicts, have become more and more central.

However, various concerns remain. On the one hand, some fear that citizenship education might mask the return of the "good old" cultural assimilationism or, at least, a certain insensitivity to diversity. On the other hand, associating the compulsory program with the teaching of history reinforces, for some, the feeling that the aim is to promote allegiance to the specific trajectory of the francophone community. How legitimate this fear is needs to be evaluated keeping in mind the pluralist redefinition that has occurred in the teaching of history in Quebec since the 1980s, which is even more pronounced in the new program.

Be that as it may, the fact that, in the coming years, the Quebec school system will continue to become more and more adapted to diversity does not appear to be at stake. But the pace of this transformation, as well as the resistance and controversy it will raise, should be of interest for decision-makers, professionals and observers of the educational scene in other Canadian provinces faced with similar challenges

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