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

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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.

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. 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 implemented.

From this perspective, programs that aim at fostering respect for pluralism have only a marginal impact as they are limited to ethnic minority students and leave unchallenged the general functioning of schooling, notably its ethos, values and informal practices.

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-
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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 thorough 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 preoccupations 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 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, clienteles.

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 citizenship 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.

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.

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