CHAPTER 9

ETHNO-CULTURAL DIVERSITY AND EDUCATING FOR PLURALISM
The Role and Limits of Schooling in Canada

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1. Ethnocultural Diversity and Education: A Complex, and Often Uneasy, Relationship

Stating that our societies, institutions or schools have become pluralistic is almost an evidence. But agreeing about what we mean by such a statement is far less obvious. Indeed, even if one limits oneself, to the diversity emanating from 'ethnic' markers (e.g. the real or putative belief in a common origin and in the sharing of characteristics such as language, religion, culture or 'race') the concept of pluralism warrants some clarifications.

To begin with, as other words ending by 'ism', pluralism refers to a normative ideal, widely shared in modern liberal societies: the belief that, all things being

equal, a diversity of cultures, creeds, languages, etc., is preferable to homogeneity. But we are well aware that, at the grass-root level, challenges surrounding this ideal are complex. On the one hand, 'all things' are rarely 'equal', and the recognition of diversity sometimes enters into competition with other important social goals (such as efficiency, unity, mobilization of resources, equality, etc.). On the other hand, some types of diversity are more 'problematic' to accommodate than others, either because they are closely linked to inequality or because they have crystallized over time in ways that render them less compatible with the sharing of democratic institutions.

A second clarification concerns the nature of 'ethnic' (religious, 'racial', cultural, etc.) identities. The dominant perspective now rejects essentialism and stresses the dynamic character of group and individual allegiances as well as that of the criteria used to define in-groups and out-groups (what we refer to in the sociology of ethnic relations as *ethnic boundaries* and *ethnic markers*). This perspective stresses the role of material and symbolic inequalities and of competing interests of different groups and sub-groups, such as ethnic elites, in this regard. But if such a vision is intellectually convincing, at the level of action, it clearly brings us back to normative choices. If, indeed, the merging or disappearance of specific identities is as much the rule as their maintenance, why, when and under which guidelines should we promote pluralism, at the expense of homogeneity? The liberal School of Thought stresses individual choices, while the antiracist or communautarian School of Thought answers that group inequalities should be paramount in defining our priorities. But neither are without flaws. In the first instance, individual choices may well mean that cultures less powerful or less equipped to resist the pressures of

modernity disappear. In the second instance, the fact that public policy would favour less powerful groups raises ethical dilemmas. Moreover, communautarism can open the door to some anti-democratic practices (such as imposing group choices over the individuals).

These dilemmas are especially striking when one considers the social mandates schooling, and especially compulsory schooling, plays in modern societies.

They can be synthesized as (1) the production/ reproduction of languages and cultures, (2) the selection and allocation of future human resources and (3) formal and informal socialization to shared values. The first mandate raises the delicate issue of the balance between majority and minority languages and cultures within the formal and informal curriculum. The second questions the degree to which equality of access, treatment and result is achieved between all groups, while the latter nourished a debate on the structural and pedagogical arrangements most susceptible to produce the kind of citizens different segments of society consider deamable. Moreover, we are looking at an institution which implies an inherently transformative process and cannot limit itself, as other institutions, to reflect adult's identities and cultures as they have been gradually chosen by individuals. Thus, when interacting with children, schools must take into account, not only the wishes of their parents, but also the protection of their current and future rights and the interests and values of the collectivity to which they belong.

A somehow *politically correct* multicultural perspective argues that it is possible to reconcile these three objectives, e.g. to produce a school system that would, at the same time, treat fairly minority and majority languages and cultures, ensure equal educational performance and mobility to every student and prepare sophisticated

citizens, at ease both in their local or ethnic community and in the larger political community. But, on the ground, a comparative perspective on policies, programs and public debate shows that things are a little more complex.

Indeed, very little consensus exists on the priority to be given to linguistic and cultural reproduction, equality of educational opportunity and pluralistic socialization, whenever they are conflicting. And in Canada as in many other policy contexts, they often do. For example, to focus here on one single but widespread issue, minority control of specific educational institutions, a classical example of a high focus on reproduction, has been promoted and contested on multiple fronts. Regarding its relationship with equality of educational opportunity, it has been presented as often as a positive step than as an obstacle, either for the group itself or for the bulk of majority students excluded from privileged institutions. Moreover, with regard to pluralistic socialization, although common sense would spontaneously consider separate schools as negative, or, at least, not as positive as common schooling, in many contexts, including in Canada, the very control of specific institutions by competing groups has, on the contrary, been considered as what kept together, otherwise loosely-linked political communities.

Historical legacy in Canada also implies that different groups do not have the same autonomy to make the choices they consider the most appropriate to reflect their priorities and/or their preferences for various structural arrangements, programs or activities. This reflects a classical international distinction opposing "national" and "immigrant" minorities.

In the first instance, the collective nature and the historical roots of their incorporation into the national state favour a wide recognition of their collective rights to use

schooling to foster their cultural reproduction. Indeed, when their incorporation into the state was voluntary, many national minorities made the granting of constitutional protection in matters of education a condition in joining the new state[1]. Even for groups whose minorisation was the product of organized violence (such as conquest for native people in Canada or slavery for Blacks in North America – a foundation which gave them very little room to manoeuvre to negociate specific arrangements in matters of education), cultural claims now enjoy a high degree of normative legitimacy. On the contrary, in the case of immigrants who have freely chosen to join a pre-existing political community, school policies are mainly defined by educational authorities dominated by the majority group. The place of immigrant languages and cultures within public institutions is thus usually influenced by a variety of factors reflecting recognized international and national human rights, the current state of knowledge regarding the programs most likely to embody them, a well-placed "national" interest, as well the political power of various community pressure groups at the local and national level.

2. Some Policy Issues and Lessons from the Canadian Context

Having set the stage for our general discussion of the potential contribution of schooling to foster pluralism, and its many challenges and complexities, I will now turn to two policy issues that have been recurrent in Canada for the last 20 years: the teaching of Heritage Languages and the taking into account of cultural and religious diversity within school norms and practices. Based on research and evaluation, I will try to assess what they reveal about the relationship of our educational institutions with pluralism

as well as the lessons that could be drawn from them for an international audience.

I first must make clear that I do not pretend to be exhaustive in this endeavour. Indeed, on the one hand, education being the exclusive responsibility of the 13 provinces and territories of Canada, which have fairly different structures, policies and programs, I will limit myself to the settings which are of most interest for us, given the theme of the seminar and the specific topics considered. Moreover, I focus on the diversity emanating from migration for two main reasons. First, the way in which it interacts with education is much less defined by legal and structural constraints, making it an easier space for the experimentation of innovative practices within shared institutions. Secondly, it is my main area of expertise and I would not dare pretend having the same grasp of schooling issues as they relate to linguistic minorities and First Nations.

I have also chosen to discuss issues linked to the first mandate of schooling – linguistic and cultural reproduction But I will offer some reflections, when relevant, on the way in which different policy choices are interacting with equality and common socialization.

2.1 Teaching Heritage Languages in Public Schools

Until the mid-70's, Canadian schools were not supportive of immigrant languages: they mainly stressed monolingualism, or at the best, bilingualism in the other official language. Language preservation was considered a task of minority groups themselves through families or private institutions. Although stemming from many ideological and political factors, this attitude was strongly influenced by the *substractive bilingualism hypothesis* shared by many decision-makers and educationists, which

stressed that, within the brain, the learning of one language was done at the expense of the other (thus bilinguals had to be less intelligent than monolinguals...). The relationship with immigrant minority languages changed radically, though, by the beginning of the 60's. On the one hand, following a wake of decolonization and of questioning of Western superiority, multilingualism was enjoying much more support. On the other hand, at the cognitive and pedagogical level, a new hypothesis *additive bilingualism*, strongly supported by Canadian research, now contended that metalinguistic and metacognitive habilities developed in the first language were transferred to the second and that, if basic concepts and skills were not strengthened in the mother tongue, the full mastery of other languages would be impeded.

Which is why by the end of the 70's, many provincial school systems made room for some teaching of Heritage Languages within public schools. The Ontario Heritage Language Program (HLP) is the most significant undertaking in this area, in terms of both the size of its clientele (over 130,000 students) and of the number of languages taught (more than 60). This success is credited to the degree of freedom that exists in the organization of these courses, which can be offered by a community organization on Saturday or Sunday mornings or by a school-board, either outside normal school hours or as part of the school curriculum. But this aspect has also been criticized by members of linguistic minorities as associated with a lack of status. Indeed, initially HLP was under the responsibility of the then Ministry of Continuing Education[2] with very little stated objectives nor available teaching programs. Moreover, minority language teachers were mere instructors, not regular teachers. Over time, though, this situation gradually improved. Some school-

boards, especially in the Toronto area, gave HLP significant support, both with regard to its integration during an extended-day program as well as to the development of curriculum and the training of teachers. At the high school level, since the 90's, the program is also associated to the teaching of *foreign languages*. Thus many students receive credits for Heritage Language courses organized by community organizations whose programs follow a basic curriculum guideline developed by the government of Ontario.

In Québec, the *Programme d'enseignement des langues d'origine* (PELO) was implemented at the same period (1978), but from a slightly different perspective. While the Ontario government responded, without much enthusiasm, to reiterated community pressures for a better recognition, the Quebec government was facing minority groups more interested in preserving their historical rights to assimilate to the Anglophone community and its institutions, than in fighting for the preservation of their languages and cultures. So it aimed at reassuring newcomers who, from 1977 on, would have to go to French schools due to the adoption of Bill 101, that the goal of this legislation was the sharing of French as a language of public use, and not linguistic assimilation. Thus the program was given much more legitimacy: a detailed curriculum was developed for the initial five languages, provision for integrating it in the regular school program was put forward and teachers were given the status of regular school teachers. Nevertheless, the program never experienced the same level of popularity as its Ontario counterpart, in part because some groups resented its association with Bill 101[3] but also due to many other factors[4]. The program, which caters to 7,000 students learning more than 10 languages, has also been the object

of a major questioning lately. Three limits are especially targeted: (1) it is offered almost exclusively in primary schools, while the strongest impact of linguistic alienation is felt by teenaged minority students; (2) it benefits mostly older established groups, such as Italian, Portuguese or Spanish speakers (with the exception of Arabic) as they are more numerous and more concentrated in specific schools and (3) it is focused on the mastery of the oral language, while socio-linguistic theory tells us that in order to have an impact on the learning of the host language, the teaching of mother tongue must aim at an equal level of mastery of the written language and sophisticated literacy.

Nevertheless, the two provinces shared common limits in their relationship with the teaching of Heritage Languages. First, they have been rather ambiguous about the main objective of the program. In Quebec, official discourse has oscillated from a compensatory perspective where Heritage Languages would be taught in support of the learning of French to a more pluralistic perspective where a linguistic maintenance is seen as an asset for identity formation and links within the family. In Ontario, an alternative stress has sometimes been put on the asset HLP would represent for the development of plurilingualism among majority English speakers. In neither case, though, have these claims been seriously substantiated by research. The impact of both programs on the linguistic competencies of minority and majority speakers has never been ascertained nor their long-term consequences on minority linguistic vitality. As regard their relationship with equal educational opportunities, it is mostly assumed from the important international literature in this regard. But as the later is rather inconclusive, we are not standing here on firm ground.[5]

A limited amount of research, responding to teacher's resistance, and in some instance public opinion concerns, has proven, though, that at least students who are learning a Heritage Language succeed as well as students who do not.

Both provinces have also been reluctant, for a mix of practical and ideological reasons, to go further than the teaching of towards the teaching in the Heritage Languages. Indeed, the only public bilingual education programs targeting immigrant plurilingualism, which treat English and the minority languages at part, both with regard to curriculum and teacher status, are found in Western Canada.[6] Alberta has been at the forefront in this regard since 1974: more than 5,000 pupils are currently involved in Hebrew, Arabic, Mandarin, Polish and mostly Ukrainian (80%). The majority of students involved are third or fourth generation and are not learning a language they actually speak, but a language they are related to due to their extended family heritage. Participants also come mostly from middle-class families. The Ministry of Education has granted a significant pedagogical support, as well a systematic evaluation to this endeavour. Results in this regard confirm what the international literature reveals on 'elite' immersion or bilingual programs, e.g. students are able to master adequately both languages and their educational mobility is thus enhanced.

One interesting feature of the Canadian experience is the extent to which plurilingualism is seen much more as an asset when it involves longer-standing communities, well-integrated, and thus less threatening. Requests from more recent immigrant communities are usually met with more resistance, or at least, with formula giving less status to the language at-stake. One is, thus, confronted with a paradoxical situation, where organized communities,

whose children are not facing great school challenges nor an important sense of alienation with the dominant culture, actually enjoy much more support for the maintenance of their language than communities that would probably need it more, as their children are facing significant schooling and identity problems. Also, one could argue that if Heritage Language Teaching was considered a serious educational activity, school systems would pay much more attention to its evaluation.

3. The Taking Into Account of Cultural and Religious Diversity

This has been a most controversial and most heated topic in Canada, especially these last ten years. Indeed, even if cultural and religious conflicts in schools or over schooling were not unknown in the past, they have become much more complex as normative models that decision-makers, principals, teachers, parents and even students can invoke to legitimize different positions or claims, have multiplied. In the past, the assimilationist conception of citizenship, which delegitimized the recognition of cultural and religious diversity in school's norms and practices enjoyed a high consensus, even if *ad hoc* accommodations were not unknown. The dominant epistemological paradigm was also realism, which contends that a 'neutral' and universal knowledge exist and that it is possible to define a school curriculum whose mastery would generate consensus among all social groups.

Today, other competing paradigms, largely influenced by Canadian thinkers, have emerged. Both communitarians and renewed liberals have come into the arena defending the recognition of diversity in the public sphere as a condition of equity and as an asset for a better integration of immigrant students. Curricular issues have

also become much more contested, especially under the assault of anti-racist educators who highlighted the social character of the construction of knowledge and of its selection for school purposes, and advocated that the current eurocentrism be replaced by a multiplicity of perspectives and of voices. Thus, *good old assimilationism* as a normative position is slowly dying, although many researches show it still largely marks school norms and practices. But it has not been replaced by a clearly dominant paradigm. Indeed, while a better recognition of cultural and religious identities within school settings is getting momentum, many stress the potential pitfalls of cultural, and in some instance cognitive, relativism.

In the current context where globalized religious movements are on the rise, faith-based claims of immigrant parents and students have proved especially difficult to accommodate. On the one hand, even if various Canadian provinces have a different history of School/Religion relationship, most of them have gradually evolved towards a clearer separation in this regard. On the other hand, religious beliefs are less amenable than mere cultural traditions to the necessary critical review of facts associated with schooling or to the practical need of sometimes limiting the expression of diversity in schools. The perfect formula to balance religious rights and other important social values, such as gender equity or critical thinking, has not yet been found in any Canadian province, as elsewhere in the world. But many innovative guidelines for supporting school principals and teachers in their decisions in this regard have been developed by provincial or local school authorities as well as by some professional unions (such as the British Columbia Teachers Federation in 1999).

The most exhaustive are found in the *Guidelines and*

Procedures for the Accommodation of Religious Requirements, Practices and Observances, developed by the Toronto District School Board in 2000, as well as in the Report of the *Consultative Committee on Integration and Reasonable Accommodation in Schools* published by the Quebec Department of Education in the fall of 2007. Both documents share many common elements: a positive evaluation of the impact of the recognition of cultural and religious diversity within the school system, a commitment to help teachers, parents and students to adapt to this diversity while respecting other fundamental values and the mission of school, and a certain courage in discussing more contentious religious issues. They, nevertheless, significantly differ in the role they gave to religious minority representative in the production of the guidelines (much more in Ontario than in Quebec) and on the extent to which they priorize normative principles vs. practical solutions.[7] Although these differences may be linked to the nature of the two documents (a guidebook vs. a committee report), they also reveal some substantive variations in the relationship with diversity in the two provinces. The French republican influence, although not dominant, is clearly perceptible in Quebec: the role of public schooling in ensuring the sharing of common values as well as a critical distance from community allegiances is considered as having priority over the recognition of diversity, even if it is, most of the time, compatible with it. A renewed liberal, but not fully communautarian perspective, seems to be favoured in Ontario: the expression of pluralism is clearly paramount and the legitimacy of refusing to respect it is limited to cases where a direct conflict exists with laws and regulations.

While normative models differ to a certain extent between provinces, various positions on this continuum

can be found everywhere in Canadian schools, among principals, teachers and parents of immigrant and non immigrant background. School practices, indeed, usually consist of a merge of approaches where one can recognize elements of an assimilationist, civic, intercultural, multicultural or anti-racist perspective. This hybridization of daily routine is also influenced by the intensive aspect of schooling and the personal nature of relationship it brings, which often inhibits, for better or worst, the consistency of institutional response towards diversity. Based on ethnographic studies, it is, nevertheless, possible to distinguish five groups of practices on a continuum, from more or less committed to diversity:

- The selective integration of elements pertaining to immigrant cultures and religions for an integrative purpose.[8]
  These are found in many schools at various degree and give rise to very little debate, even among professionals who adopt a rather assimilationist or a civic model of citizenship.
- The implementation of activities specially tailored to the needs and characteristics of immigrant minorities in an equalization of opportunity perspective.[9]
- These practices are also widespread but they are often justified not for the sake of preserving pluralism but because they permit to fill the socio-economic and educational gap experienced by some minorities.
- The integration of a specific immigrant content and/or perspective into the regular school curriculum, where the differences, or even the conflicts of interpretations, are acknowledged.[10]
- The response to religious claims made by certain

immigrant groups, through the adaptation of norms and regulations governing school life.[11]

Numerous adaptations seem to be made every day at least in metropolitan schools with an important percentage of religious minorities, but such demands are often questioned as exemplified by the 'Reasonable Accommodation' debate which shook Quebec in 2007.

• The tailoring and/or transformation of various elements of the curriculum in response to the demands of the 'organized' community.[12]

Although they meet with many forms of resistance, these non consensual and sometimes questionable practices do exist and have on occasion received support from public authorities.

The lessons that could be drawn from the Canadian experience of taking into account religious and cultural diversity in school's norms and practices would be scarce if one was to focus on the rather limited large-scale research to ascertain its impact on student's educational experience or identity development. Moreover, it would be very difficult to make a clear link between the fact that a school is more or less opened to diversity and its results with minority students. "All things being equal" is almost an impossible goal in such a matter. What one might be tempted to attribute to specific practices in matter of religious or cultural recognition (or non-recognition) might well be linked to numerous other variables.

But the Canadian experience certainly illustrates an unescapable reality of modern schooling: the need to invent new paradigms of balancing majority and minority identities and cultures, individual rights, and critical thinking in the formal and actual curriculum of schools. Canadian schools or educational authorities have certainly

not found any panacea in this regard, but, unlike school systems in many other societies, which have reacted to this challenge by intensifying their rigidity and clinging to the *good old ways* (when values, knowledge, norms and practices were taken for granted) one could dare to say that education for pluralism is, at least, a work in progress in our context. There is also very little doubt that we will continue to follow this route, although at which pace and through which specific paths, is still to be defined.

NOTES

1. It is the case of Francophones in Canada (who were the main factor at the origin of the exclusive jurisdiction that provinces hold over education), but similar realities exist in other countries, such as Belgium and Switzerland.
2. And not under the Ministry of Education
3. Opposition in this regard wavered, though, when the program was offered as much in English schools as in French schools.
4. Including the fact that ethno-specific institutions, largely funded by public money in Quebec, attract the families most preoccupied by the survival of their languages and cultures.
5. Fundamental studies show a positive impact, but evaluation of actual programs, such as bilingual education in the US, is much more mixed.
6. Similar type of trilingual programs are offered in private ethno-specific schools in Quebec (Hebrew, Greek, Armenian or Arabic, French, English).
7. The description of religious minority practices and values and of specific arrangements that can be done to respect them is much more developed in the TDSB document, while the Quebec report offers a more complex and encompassing description of issues raised by the accommodation of diversity and the extent to which it is happening, or not, at the grass-root level.
8. For instance, characters of all origins or various cultural events

depicted in learning materials; individuals of various origins among the teaching staff; intercultural or inter-religious aspects of the events celebrated and of the special activities conducted throughout the year.

9. For instance, multilingual and/or culturally adapted information documents on the school system; implementation of special school outreach activities directed towards the community; intercultural training of teachers so as to provide them with a better understanding of student characteristics or enable them to diversify their teaching strategies.

10. This is the dominant rhetoric of most of the social sciences, history, geography and citizenship education provincial curriculum, but the degree to which these practices are actually widely implemented in regular classrooms is opened to debate.

11. For example, adaptation of school cafeteria menus; tolerance of certain non-recurring absences during major religious holidays; adaptation of school uniforms, etc.

12. For instance, non-presentation of elements deemed offensive in sexual education; setting-up of segregated male/female classes for physical education or for the teaching of all subject matters; warning teachers about any value judgment on elements that would be deemed racist or sexist within the minority culture.

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