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Educating for Pluralism: The Role and Limits of Schooling in Canada

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To state that our societies, institutions, and schools have become pluralistic is almost self-evident. What we mean by this statement, however, is far less obvious. Indeed, even if one limits oneself, as I will do in this paper, to diversity emanating from "ethnic" markers – that is, 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.

As with other words ending with "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 and so on, is preferable to homogeneity. But we are well aware that, at the grassroots 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 and so on. 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 work of democratic institutions.

A second clarification concerns the nature of "ethnic" (religious, "racial", cultural and so on) identities. The dominant perspective now rejects essentialism and stresses the dynamic character of group and individual allegiances, as well as the criteria used to define in-groups and out-groups – that is, what the sociology of ethnic relations describes 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 is 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 communitarian school of thought answers that group inequalities should be paramount in defining our priorities. But neither is 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, communitarism can open the door to some anti-democratic practices such as imposing group choices over individuals.

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

These mandates 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 third nourishes a debate on the structural and pedagogical arrangements most susceptible to produce the kind of citizens different segments of society consider desirable. Moreover, we are looking at an institution with an inherently transformative program, which does not simply reflect adult identities and cultures as they have been gradually chosen by individuals as other institutions can. Thus, when interacting with children, schools must take into account not only the wishes of their parents, but also the protection of the current and future rights of the children 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 – that is, to produce a school system that would, at the same time, treat minority and majority languages and cultures fairly, 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 debates 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 when they conflict. 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 strong focus on reproduction has been promoted and contested on multiple fronts. Regarding its relationship with equality of educational opportunity, minority control of specific educational institutions has often been presented as a positive step rather than as an obstacle, either for the group itself or for the bulk of students excluded from privileged

institutions. Moreover, with regard to pluralistic socialization, however counter-intuitively, in many contexts, including in Canada, the control of specific institutions by competing groups is often credited with keeping together otherwise loosely linked political communities.

Because of Canada's historical legacies, different groups do not have the same autonomy to make the choices they consider most appropriate to reflect their priorities and/or their preferences for various structural arrangements, programs or activities. This reflects a broader international pattern in distinguishing between "national" and "immigrant" minorities.

For national minorities, the collective nature and the historical roots of their incorporation into the state favour wide recognition of their group right to use schooling to foster cultural reproduction. Indeed, when their incorporation into the state was voluntary, many national minorities made the granting of constitutional protections in matters of education a condition of joining the new state.[1] Even the cultural claims of groups whose integration into the state as minorities was the result of organized violence now enjoy a high degree of normative legitimacy.[2] In contrast, in the case of immigrants who have freely chosen to join an 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, and the political power of various community pressure groups at the local and national level.

Some policy issues and lessons from the Canadian context

Having set the stage for our general discussion of the potential contribution of schooling to fostering 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 treatment 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. Education in Canada is the exclusive responsibility of the 13 provinces and territories, each with its own structure, policies and programs. I will therefore limit my remarks to the most relevant settings. Moreover, I will focus only on diversity emanating from migration. The ways in which migrant diversity interacts with education is much less defined by legal and structural constraints, making it an easier space for experimentation and innovative practices within shared institutions. Further, within this frame, I have chosen to discuss issues linked to the first mandate of schooling – linguistic and cultural reproduction – as they are most closely associated with the issue of pluralism. But I will offer some

reflections, when relevant, on the way in which different policy choices are interacting with equality and common socialization.

Teaching heritage languages in public schools

Until the mid-1970s, Canadian schools were not supportive of immigrant languages. They mainly stressed unilingualism or, at the best, official bilingualism. Language preservation was considered a task for minority groups themselves through families or private institutions. Although stemming from many ideological and political factors, this attitude was strongly influenced by the subtractive 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. Outside schools, attitudes toward immigrant minority languages began changing in the early 1960s. Following in the wake of decolonization and the questioning of Western superiority, multilingualism began to enjoy much more support. At the same time, a new cognitive and pedagogical hypothesis known as additive bilingualism – which was strongly supported by Canadian research – contended that metalinguistic and metacognitive abilities developed in the first language were transferred to the second language and that, if basic concepts and skills were not strengthened in the mother tongue, the full mastery of other languages would be impeded.

As a result, by the late 1970s many provincial school systems in Canada made room for some teaching of heritage languages in public schools. The Ontario Heritage Language Program (HLP) is the most significant undertaking in this area, both in terms of the size of its clientele (more than 130,000 students) and the number of languages taught (more than 60). Its success is credited to the large degree of freedom accorded to the organization of 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 flexibility has also been criticized by members of linguistic minorities for the lack of equivalent status accorded to heritage language instruction. Indeed, initially HLP fell under the responsibility of the then Ministry of Continuing Education[3] with few stated objectives or teaching programs. Moreover, minority-language teachers were instructors, not regular teachers. Over time, though, this situation gradually improved. Some school boards, especially in the Toronto area, gave HLP significant support, with regard to its integration into an extended-day program and the development of curriculum and teacher training. At the high school level, since the 1990s, the program is also associated with 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 during the same period (1978), but from a slightly different perspective. While the Ontario government responded, without much enthusiasm, to repeated minority community calls for better recognition, in Quebec minority groups were more interested in preserving their historic rights to assimilate to Quebec's anglophone community and its

institutions than in fighting for their languages and cultures. The Quebec government therefore sought to reassure newcomers – whose children from 1977 had to attend French schools due to the adoption of Bill 101 – that the goal of this legislation was the sharing of French as the language of public use, not linguistic assimilation. Thus the program achieved much greater legitimacy. A detailed curriculum was developed for the initial five languages, provision was made for integrating it in the regular school program, and teachers were given the status of regular teachers.

Despite these differences, the Quebec program never experienced the same level of popularity as its Ontario counterpart – in part because some groups resented its association with Bill 101[4] but also due to many other factors.[5] The Quebec program, which caters to 7,000 students learning more than 10 languages, has also been the object of a considerable scrutiny of late. It is especially criticized in three areas: (1) Although the strongest impact of linguistic alienation is felt by teenaged minority students, the program is offered almost exclusively in primary schools; (2) with the exception of Arabic speakers, it benefits mostly older established groups, such as Italian, Portuguese and Spanish speakers because they are more numerous and often more concentrated in specific schools; and (3) it focuses on mastery of the oral language, while socio-linguistic theory tells us that to facilitate learning of the host language, the teaching of mother tongue languages must attain an equal mastery of the written language and sophisticated literacy.

Nevertheless, the two provinces shared common limits on their relationship to the teaching of heritage languages. First, the main objectives of the programs remain ambiguous in both cases. In Quebec, official discourse has oscillated from a compensatory perspective – whereby heritage languages are taught as a support for learning French – to a more pluralistic perspective – where linguistic maintenance is portrayed as a fundament for identity formation and family links. Ontario has sometimes also stressed the benefits of multilingualism among English speakers. In neither province, however, have these claims been seriously substantiated by research. Neither the impact of these programs on minority or majority linguistic competency nor their consequences for long-term minority linguistic vitality have been assessed. Similarly, the relationship of these programs to equal educational opportunities is mostly inferred from the international literature. But as the research underpinning this literature is rather inconclusive, these claims are not well supported.[6] Some research is starting. In response to teacher resistance to heritage language programs and some instances of public concern, a limited amount of research has shown that students learning a heritage language succeed in school as well as students who do not.

For a mix of practical and ideological reasons, both Ontario and Quebec have been reluctant to go beyond teaching heritage languages and to adopt heritage languages the language of instruction. Indeed, in Canada the only public bilingual education programs that treat English and minority languages at par – both in respect to curriculum and teacher status – are found in Western Canada[7]. Alberta has been at the forefront of this practice since 1974. In that province, more than 5,000 pupils are enrolled in Hebrew, Arabic, Mandarin, Polish or Ukrainian classes (with the latter accounting for 80 percent). The

majority of these students are third or fourth generation Canadians who are not learning a language they actually speak, but a language related to their extended family heritage. Program participants come from mostly middle-class families. The Ministry of Education has granted significant pedagogical support to this endeavour and developed a systematic evaluation protocol. Program evaluation results confirm what the international literature reveals about "elite" immersion or bilingual programs – that students are able to master both languages adequately while enhancing their educational mobility.

One interesting feature of the Canadian experience is the extent to which multilingualism is seen much more as an asset when it involves longer-standing, well-integrated (and thus less threatening) communities. Requests from more recent immigrant communities are usually met with more resistance, or at least with formula giving less status to the language in question. Thus one is confronted with a paradoxical situation: organized communities whose children are facing neither great school challenges nor an important sense of alienation from the dominant culture actually enjoy more language maintenance support than communities whose children are facing significant schooling and identity problems and likely need it more. In addition, if heritage language teaching was considered a serious educational activity, then arguably school systems would pay more attention to its evaluation.

Taking cultural and religious diversity into account

The place of cultural and religious diversity in Canadian schools and schooling is a topic of heated controversy. In the last ten years especially, cultural and religious conflicts in schools and over schooling have increased in complexity as the range of normative models that decision-makers, principals, teachers, parents and even students can invoke to legitimate different positions or claims has multiplied. In the past, an assimilationist conception of citizenship delegitimized recognition of cultural and religious diversity in school norms and practices. This position enjoyed a strong consensus even if *ad hoc* accommodations were not unknown. The dominant epistemological paradigm was also realism, which contends that a "neutral" and universal knowledge exists and that it is possible to define a school curriculum whose mastery would generate consensus among all social groups.

Today, a number of competing paradigms – largely influenced by Canadian thinkers – have emerged. Both communitarians and renewed liberals have entered the arena, defending the recognition of diversity in the public sphere as a condition of equity and as an asset resulting in better integration of immigrant students. Curricular issues have also become much more contested, especially under the influence of anti-racist educators. As well as highlighting the social construction of knowledge and its selection for school purposes, these educators advocate replacement of the current Eurocentric bias with a multiplicity of perspectives and of voices. Thus, although assimilationism as a normative position is slowly dying (although many researchers show it still largely marks school norms and practices), it has not been replaced by a clearly dominant alternative paradigm. Indeed,

while a better recognition of cultural and religious identities within school settings is gaining momentum, many educators stress the potential pitfalls of cultural, and in some instance cognitive, relativism.

In the current context, where globalized religious movements are on the rise, the faith-based claims of immigrant parents and students have proved especially difficult to accommodate. On the one hand, even if various Canadian provinces have different histories of the school-religion relationship, most have gradually evolved toward a clearer separation. 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 to sometimes limit the expression of diversity in schools. The perfect formula to balance religious rights and other important social values, such as gender equality or critical thinking, has yet to be found in any Canadian province or indeed 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 and local school authorities, as well as by some professional unions (such as the British Columbia Teachers Federation in 1999).

The most exhaustive of these guidelines are found in the Toronto District School Board's *Guidelines and Procedures for the Accommodation of Religious Requirements, Practices and Observances* (2000) and in the Quebec Department of Education's *Report of the Consultative Committee on Integration and Reasonable Accommodation in Schools* (2007). Both documents share many elements: a positive evaluation of the impact of cultural and religious diversity recognition within the school system; a commitment to help teachers, parents and students adapt to this diversity while respecting other fundamental values and the mission of school; and a certain courage in discussing more contentious religious issues. However, they differed significantly in the role given to religious minority representatives in the production of the guidelines (much more in Ontario than in Quebec) and in the extent to which they prioritize normative principles over practical solutions.[8]

Although these differences may stem from the nature of the two documents – the Toronto document is a guidebook while the Quebec document is a committee report – they also reflect some substantive variations in the two provinces' relationship with diversity. The French republican influence, although not dominant, is clearly perceptible in Quebec: the role of public schooling in ensuring shared common values and a critical distance from community allegiances is given priority over the recognition of diversity, even if it is, most of the time, compatible with it. Ontario, in contrast, seems to favour a renewed liberal – but not fully communitarian – perspective. Here 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 both immigrant and non-immigrant backgrounds. School practices, indeed, usually consist of a mix 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 the relationships it fosters, which often inhibit, for better or worse, the consistency of institutional responses towards diversity. Based on ethnographic studies, it is still possible to distinguish five groups of practices on a continuum, ranging from more to less committed to diversity:

- The selective integration of elements of immigrant cultures and religions for integrative purposes.[9] These practices are found in many schools in various degrees and in general engender very little debate, even among those professionals who favour an assimilationist or civic model of citizenship.

- The implementation of activities specially tailored to the needs and characteristics of immigrant minorities constitutes an equalization-of-opportunity perspective.[10] These practices are also widespread but they are often justified not for the sake of preserving pluralism but because they help close the socio-economic and educational gaps experienced by some minority students.

- The integration of specific content and/or perspectives into the regular school curriculum inspired by immigrant cultures or experiences, where the differences and even the conflict of interpretations are acknowledged and examined.[11]

- The response to religious claims made by certain immigrant groups, through the adaptation of norms and regulations governing school life.[12] Numerous adaptations seem to be made every day, at least in metropolitan schools with significant percentages of religious minorities, but such demands are often questioned by majorities as exemplified by the "reasonable accommodation" debate that shook Quebec in 2007.

- The tailoring and/or transformation of various elements of the curriculum in response to the demands of the "organized" community.[13] 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 lack of large-scale research makes it difficult to assess the impact of religious and cultural diversity norms and practices on student educational experience or identity development in Canadian schools. For the same reason it is almost impossible to draw useful conclusions about a school's relative degree of openness to diversity and the impact on 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 matters of religious or cultural recognition (or non-recognition) might well be linked to numerous other variables.

But the Canadian experience certainly illustrates an inescapable reality of modern schooling: the need to invent new paradigms for balancing majority and minority identities and cultures, individual rights, and critical thinking in the formal and actual curriculum of

schools. Canadian schools and educational authorities have certainly not found any panacea in this regard. In contrast to 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), in Canada pluralism is at least a work in progress. There is also very little doubt that we will continue to follow this route, although at what pace and along which paths remains to be determined.

Endnotes

[1] It is the case of francophones in Canada (the main factor for the exclusive jurisdiction that provinces hold over education), but similar realities exist in other countries, such as Belgium and Switzerland.

[2] For example, the conquest of native people in Canada or the enslavement of Blacks in North America provided very little room to negotiate specific arrangements in matters of education.

[3] And not under the Ministry of Education

[4] Opposition in this regard wavered, though, when the program was offered as much in English schools as in French schools.

[5] Ethno-specific institutions, which are largely funded by public money in Quebec, attract the families most preoccupied by the survival of their languages and cultures.

[6] Fundamental studies show a positive impact, but evaluation of actual programs, such as bilingual education in the US, is much more mixed.

[7] Similar types of trilingual programs are offered in private ethno-specific schools in Quebec (Hebrew, Greek, Armenian or Arabic, French, English).

[8] 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.

[9] 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.

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

[11] 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.

[12] Examples include adaptation of school cafeteria menus, tolerance of certain non-recurring absences during major religious holidays, adaptation of school uniforms, and so on.

[13] 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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