TEACHING AND LIVING IN QUEBEC

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ABSTRACT

This paper will provide an overview of four Quebec educators as they speak about their teaching experiences in Montréal. Their accounts provide interpretations of the challenges that lie ahead for Québec, as the province continues to assert its French-Canadian political, cultural and linguistic identity within Canada, and as it faces an evolving definition of what it means to be a Quebecker, in terms of the multilingual, multicultural, multifaith presence of its immigrants, who live primarily in the large metropolis of Montréal. The teachers' insights regarding teaching and living in Québec provide a number of alternatives. Language is at the core of Québec's identity. Along with culture, ethnicity, geography, and until recently, Roman Catholicism, language embodies the history of Quebeckers and their struggle to survive. This paper will examine how Quebec teachers negotiate this linguistic reality in their classrooms.

Teaching and Living in QuebecLanguage is at the core of Québec's identity. Along with culture, ethnicity, geography, and until recently, Roman Catholicism. Language embodies the history of Quebeckers and their struggle to survive. Teachers are shaped by powerful social and economic forces, which have an impact on the classroom and the teaching and learning environment.

In this paper, I will provide an overview of four educators as they speak about their teaching experiences in Montréal. Their accounts provide multiple interpretations of the challenges that lie ahead for Québec, as the province continues to assert its French-Canadian political, cultural and linguistic identity within Canada, and as it faces an evolving definition of what it means to be a Quebecker, in terms of the multilingual, multicultural, multifaith presence of its immigrants, who live primarily in the large metropolis of Montréal.

Québec's policy of interculturalism was officially adopted in response to the perceived affront to the province by the federal government's multicultural policy. The federal multicultural policy encouraged Canadians to accept cultural pluralism, while Québec's response was a policy of interculturalism, which recognized the acceptance of immigrants within the context of the province's distinct identity as a Francophone community, and the paramount importance of the French language and culture.

QUEENIE

Queenie was born in Jamaica and came to Canada to pursue her studies in commerce in Montréal. She began teaching in 1976, and in 1992 became principal at the school where she currently works.

I'm an Anglophone. I've never been any good at languages, even though I've tried. I took French in Chicoutimi, Jamaica and here in Montréal, but I just can't speak French. I understand about 75% of what I hear. Not being able to speak didn't stop me from sending our children to French immersion. They're fluent in both languages.

Queenie recognizes that her inability to speak French has limited her opportunity for promotion in the field of business, and later in teaching. When she saw

interesting job postings in the *Montreal Gazette*, she wanted to apply, but never did because fluency in French and English was a prerequisite. Later, when she became principal at the English school where she currently works, she inherited a French immersion program which had started two years earlier.

When this program was first started, there was a lot of animosity. You'd hear, 'The English teachers are losing their jobs and the French are coming in'. You see, it's an English school that offers a French immersion program. Most of our parents are primarily Anglophones, with some Allophones.

I feel really comfortable encouraging French immersion. I try to give the children as much support as possible. I try to explain to the parents that this [Québec] is home, and this is best for their children in Québec. My limitations shouldn't stop others from doing what is best for them. I wish I could speak French. It certainly isn't because I don't want to or haven't tried.

Often, I have to remind the French teachers to send their correspondence to the parents in English, otherwise the parents get upset because they don't understand what the teacher is trying to tell them. We are, after all, a school serving the English community.

Despite the resistance that Queenie faced when she continued to offer and develop the French immersion program in her Anglophone school, she nevertheless believes that she is providing her students with an education that accurately reflects the direction the province will eventually take, with the status of French assuming even greater importance. Queenie recognizes that her inability to speak French has closed doors for her professionally, and would like to offer her students a future different from hers by giving them the opportunity to feel comfortable speaking and living in French in Québec. Interestingly enough, in order to avoid confrontational discussions with the parents in her school, Queenie has taken on a conciliatory role between the French teachers and the Anglophone parents. Her constituents are the parents, and although she may not always agree with them, she continues to ensure that all necessary information and services are available in English, even though she encourages French immersion in every aspect of her school.

SORIN

Since Sorin arrived from the former Yugoslavia in 1974, he has been teaching in Montréal, and primarily in the 'classe d'accueil'. He has known bilingualism all his life as a Romanian in Yugoslavia, and has learned from his own experience that bilingualism can bring personal enrichment. Apart from school, Sorin does not have much contact with Anglophones or Francophones, because once the summer holidays arrive, he returns to Yugoslavia to visit his family, so in essence his colleagues are his friends.

J'ai grandi baigné dans le bilinguisme parce que je suis originaire de la Yougoslavie mais je suis roumain. Lorsque je suis venu au Canada, c'était un progrès par rapport à ce que j'avais connu dans mon pays; par contre, si quelqu'un vient d'une grande ville comme Paris ou Londres, je ne suis pas certain que Montréal représente alors un progrès.
Pour moi, il est très enrichissant de tomber sur une ville avec des gens d'origines aussi diverses et qui proviennent d'un aussi grand nombre de pays. Prenez cette école par exemple, qui compte 64 nationalités. Dans mon pays, je connaissais des Allemands et des Hongrois mais je ne suis jamais beaucoup entré en contact avec eux comme je suis ici entré en contact avec des gens de nombreuses nationalités. En raison du fait que nous avons tellement de contacts, on est obligé de connaître un peu l'autre. J'essaye d' amener les enfants à tenter de connaître un peu les autres.

For me, it is very enriching to be in a city with people of so many diverse cultures. Look at this school, for example, with 64 nationalities represented here. Where I come from, I knew Germans and Hungarians, but I never had much contact with them like I have with so many nationalities here. Because we have so much contact, we cannot help but know a bit about each other. I try to teach this to the students. What I mean is, I try to encourage the kids to get to know one another.
I grew up immersed in bilingualism, because I grew up in Yugoslavia, but as a Romanian. When I came to Canada, it was an improvement upon what I had known in my country, but if someone comes from a big city like Paris or London, I'm not sure if Montréal would be an improvement.

Sorin hopes that his students will fall in love with the French language, the way he did. He encourages his students to speak French because he wants them to integrate into Québec society as quickly as possible. Sorin believes that the best way to integrate is to speak the language and express oneself well in that language.

> *Je ne veux pas forcer les élèves à apprendre le français. Je veux qu'ils aiment le français, qu'ils tombent en amour avec la langue comme je suis moi-même tombé amoureux de cette langue lorsque j'étais en Yougoslavie. Je veux qu'ils s'expriment en français en toute confiance et alors ils vont tirer plaisir du fait de parler la langue.*
> *On fait aimer la langue au lieu de l'imposer. Je connaissais des gens dans mon pays qui ont été contraints d'apprendre le hongrois à l'époque de l'empire austro-hongrois. Ils l'ont appris à la perfection, littéralement, d'un point de vue grammatical. Ma grand-mère, par exemple, a appris le hongrois et le parle maintenant parfaitement. Elle n'a par contre jamais aimé parler le hongrois parce qu'on lui défendait de parler la langue qui était la sienne.*

> *I don't want to force the students to learn French. I want them to enjoy French, to fall in love with the language, like I fell in love with it when I was in Yugoslavia. I want them to have confidence expressing themselves in French, and then they will enjoy speaking the language.*
> *I want to make them love the language rather than impose it upon them. I knew people back home who were forced to learn Hungarian during the Austro-Hungarian Empire. They learned it to perfection, literally, grammatically. My grandmother, for example, learned Hungarian flawlessly. She never liked speaking Hungarian, though, because they didn't allow her to speak her own language.*

When students speak their first language, Sorin asks them about it. He tells them he wants to hear how their language sounds. The students are unquestionably pleased with such a request and are fascinated when there are similar sounds from one language to the other.

> *Certains de mes élèves parlaient le persan un jour et je leur ai demandé de répéter lentement ce qu'ils venaient de dire. Nous avons découvert qu'un mot persan veut dire la même chose en roumain. Les élèves adorent ce genre de choses. Lorsque nous parlons de la culture et de la société québécoise, j'encourage les élèves à me parler de leur pays – en quoi il est semblable, en quoi il est différent.*
> *Plusieurs élèves parlent l'anglais et c'est pourquoi j'indique parfois dans une dictée l'équivalent anglais de certains mots français (par exemple « is » pour « est » et « and » pour « et »). Je ne suis pas opposé à l'idée de recourir à l'anglais de cette manière si cela me permet d'offrir une explication de ce genre.*
> *Lorsque j'en ai la chance, j'insiste sur la beauté de la langue française. C'est de cette manière que j'encourage les élèves à parler français. J'imagine qu'un Québécois dirait que je prépare les élèves pour le Québec. Je dirais que je prépare plutôt les élèves pour le monde. Je voudrais leur faire aimer la langue, par des poèmes, la littérature, la musique. Il n'est pas possible d'imposer une langue. Regardez ce qui est arrivé aux autochtones, à leur culture et leur langue.*

> *Some of my students were speaking Iranian one day and I asked them to repeat slowly what they had said. We discovered that a word in Iranian means the same thing in Romanian. The kids love this. When we talk about Québec society and culture, I encourage the kids to tell me about their country—what is the same, what is different.*
> *Several students know how to speak English, so sometimes English words crop up in the dictation, like 'est' and 'et.' So I write 'is' and 'and' and it seems to help them out. I have no problem using English if I need to explain a point like that.*

> *Whenever I can, I come back to the beauty of the French language. That is how I encourage the students to speak French. I guess a Quebecois would say they're preparing the kids for Québec. I would say I'm preparing them for the world, really. I want them to love the language by learning poems, literature, music. You can't impose a language. Look at what happened with the First Nations people, with their culture and language.*

Sorin's keen interest in his students' first language and culture is refreshing. By demonstrating such an interest, he is able to make a link between the students' lived experiences to life in Québec and speaking French. In essence, Sorin believes that if his students appreciate the elegance of the French language and gain confidence in speaking it, they will be more motivated to live and work in French. According to Sorin, the focus should therefore be on the student and the language, rather than on linguistic maintenance and its political implications. He wholeheartedly encourages the development of a curriculum in which children develop an interest in wanting to learn French and in making it a part of their life.

JOHN

John, whose parents were originally from Guyana, was born and raised in Montréal. It has now been over twenty years since John began teaching English to high school students. He learned French in the streets of inner city Montréal, so as a result, his 'street' French is far better than his 'book' French. However, he still feels most comfortable communicating in English.

English is my first language, and I figure that if I want to impart knowledge to students, I'd better do it in my own language. Although I'm in an English school, there is a French stream and I hear French in the halls. I speak French in the staff room to the French teachers. It's a matter of being respectful.

John's daughter is bilingual. When she was young, John and his wife wanted the best for her and therefore decided to send her to a bilingual school. John thinks that *Bill 101* is unfortunate, since, as a mandatory law, it has the ability to alienate people. Furthermore, he believes that with *Bill 101*, Québec is creating '*Bill 101* kids' whose future may not be as promising because of their limited mobility in society.

If a culture is strong it is going to survive—it will stand on its own. When new immigrants come to Québec, they should be given the choice. Perhaps the students can begin with five months to a year in the French system, and then five months to a year in the English system. The parents and kids could make a decision after the first few years they're here. I think it could work because it is not so Draconian.

You see, unless these kids learn English, they are stuck in Québec. When the parents come to Québec, many of them can speak some English. So what starts to happen is that the parents become more mobile, in a way, because they can speak English, whereas their children are less mobile only knowing French. Quite the irony! Usually it's the kids [of immigrants] that are more mobile than the parents, right? In Québec, it's the other way around. I call these kids 'the Bill 101 *kids.' There's a lot of drawbacks with them only knowing French. They should learn both languages.*

After the 1995 Referendum, John followed the media coverage on how Québec intended to address its political and linguistic situation. He believes that the value of his house has decreased considerably and he is concerned about his pension. Québec is his home, where he was born and where his family lives. In the last few years, John has taken the time to become more informed about the political and linguistic situation in Québec, although he has always experienced its realities. He wanted to become better informed, but grew weary of the inflammatory representations in the media. So, he decided to join the executive of a provincial political party to become better informed as to what people were really saying and what was happening behind the scenes.

I was looking to get a handle on the situation without media involvement. After the Referendum, I decided that worrying was going to do me no good, so I became pro-active, as best I could. This is my home. When I was in Toronto this summer, I realised how much I missed hearing French in the streets, how Toronto has become so American. Montréal is still unique that way in North America. It's my home.

John advocates that all Quebeckers should have the freedom to choose the language in which they conduct their working lives, rather than have this mandated by the government. He also believes that learning only French is disadvantageous to the social mobility of Québec students. Although John sees great value in learning both French and English, the global importance of English leads him to question how many Allophones and new Quebeckers would choose to attend school and pursue their studies in French were it not obligatory.

SARAH

Sarah was born in northern Québec, as were both her parents. She considers herself an Anglophone, even

though her mother is French-Canadian. For over ten years, Sarah has been teaching Moral and Religious Education to high school students in a French school. Oftentimes, discussions in her class turn to the debate on tolerance and what it means to live in a tolerant, democratic society. In Sarah's discussion with her students, tolerance emerges as a contentious issue that is quite fragile in our society.

> *Cela me dérange lorsque les gens disent que les Canadiens sont tolérants et que le Canada est une société tolérante. La tolérance est présentée comme étant la valeur suprême des Canadiens. Cela reflète une étroitesse d'esprit et n'est pas du tout l'indice d'une réflexion approfondie.*
> *Je demande à mes étudiantes et étudiantes s'ils désirent être perçus simplement comme une « personne tolérante ». Qu'en est-il du fait d'être une personne accueillante et compréhensive ? La différence entre la personne qui est tolérante et celle qui ne l'est pas tient à peu de choses et lorsque les temps sont durs, qu'il s'agisse de problèmes socio-économiques ou des conflits politiques, la tolérance est à la baisse. Un tel changement d'attitude peut survenir très soudainement.*

> *It upsets me when people talk about Canadians being tolerant and Canada being a tolerant society. Tolerance is held up as a supreme Canadian value. It is short-sighted and not indicative of any serious reflection [on the matter].*
> *I ask the students "Do you want to identify yourself as just a 'tolerant person?" How about as an accepting person, or an understanding person? The difference between being tolerant and not being tolerant is very small, and when we go through hard times—socio-economic hard times or political battles—we become less tolerant. This change in attitude can happen very quickly.*

Sarah also talks to her students about issues of identity and to what degree their first language and culture play a role in shaping their identity while living in Québec. The citation below demonstrates the complexity of the identity issue with regards to Allophone students, and why it is important for Sarah to broach the discussion on tolerance in Canadian society.

> *Mes étudiants et étudiantes, qu'ils soient immigrants ou allophones, me disent qu'ils ne veulent pas devenir des Québécois parce qu'ils n'ont pas l'impression de faire partie du Québec. Ils ne se sentent pas acceptés ici. C'est pourquoi je reviens souvent à cette question de la tolérance parce que chaque fois que les Québécois font des déclarations ou manifestent leur intolérance envers les immigrants, ceux-ci font encore moins confiance aux Québécois.*

> *My [immigrant, Allophone] students tell me they don't want to be Quebeckers because they don't feel a part of Québec. They don't feel accepted here. That is why I often come back to this question of tolerance, because every time Quebeckers make statements or demonstrate their intolerance towards immigrants, the immigrants distrust Quebeckers even more.*

Although Sarah enjoys teaching in a French school, she reminds me that at the first school where she taught, there was a French Committee that would inquire if she spoke English in class and if she made spelling mistakes in French. In essence, she believes that such a 'Comité de francisation' does little to encourage French instruction in schools, for each school should be able to approach the subject in a way suitable to its community and its students.

> *Le Comité aspire à être différent de ce qu'il est. Ils désirent franciser les immigrants et les allophones et en faire des francophiles et non pas seulement des francophones. Ils veulent les amener à tomber en amour avec la langue française et d'une certaine manière c'est précisément ce que l'école parviendra à accomplir. Ces étudiants et étudiantes viennent ici avec leur propre identité et leurs propres expériences et ils sont contraints d'apprendre une nouvelle langue. L'école pense être capable de les*

amener à aimer cette nouvelle langue. C'est pourquoi ils veulent que les étudiants et étudiantes s'expriment uniquement en français et qu'ils fonctionnent uniquement en français et lorsque les choses ne se passent pas comme cela, l'école perd son calme. Mais tout cela est très irréaliste.

Le fait de surmonter les résistances à une culture est semblable au fait de surmonter des idées sexistes ou racistes. Il doit exister un désir véritable d'embrasser la culture et la langue. Lorsque vous voulez embrasser une culture, c'est le signe d'une ouverture fondamentale. Il y a un amour de cette culture, vous êtes attirés par elle, vous établissez des amitiés. Il n'est pas possible d' imposer une langue ou une culture contre le gré de quelqu'un. Les élèves doivent découvrir la langue et la culture au contact de la littérature, du cinéma, de la musique, et non pas de la manière prévue par un Comité.

L'intégration ne sera vraiment possible que s'il existe de plus grands contacts entre les immigrants et la culture francophone. Je suppose que cela signifie continuer à faire ce que nous faisons déjà mais sur une plus grande échelle. Les allophones eux-mêmes ont des préjugés au sujet des Québécois francophones. Les amis et l'amitié rendent possible des liens positifs. Lorsque vous rencontrez des gens d'une autre culture et que vous les appréciez, vous voulez embrasser leur culture et leur langue.

D'une certaine manière, mes étudiants et étudiantes allophones ne se sentent pas les bienvenus. Pour commencer, on ne leur permet pas d' étudier dans la langue de leur choix. C'est la loi. Donc, dès le début, ils commencent sur un mauvais pied et la résistance ne va qu'en augmentant. J'ai appris le français au contact de mes amis qui, pour la plupart, sont francophones de naissance.

Je pense que l'important est de susciter une émotion chez ces jeunes. Vous pouvez insister et implorer mais le fait est que le français n'est pas la langue qui prédomine. La culture anglaise est tellement prédominante au sein de notre école. Je n'arrive pas à le croire. Il y a des étudiants et étudiantes francophones qui nous arrivent sans parler l'anglais mais qui sont bilingues lorsqu'ils nous quittent et ce phénomène n'est pas dû exclusivement aux cours d'anglais comme langue seconde.

L'anglais devrait être une culture secondaire alors qu'elle est en fait la culture dominante. La langue française et la culture française sont imposées aux allophones mais en réalité l'anglais prédomine. C'est la langue de la culture populaire, de la musique, de la technologie et il ne faut pas se le cacher, son influence est énorme.

The Committee wants to be something that it is not. They want to francize the immigrants and the Allophones and turn them into francophiles, not just Francophones. They want them to fall in love with the French language and somehow school will make that happen. These students are coming with their own identities and their own baggage and they're forced to learn a new language. The school thinks that they're going to be able to make them love it. So they want them to speak only French all the time, and function only in French all the time, and when that doesn't happen, the school gets very upset. But all of this is quite unrealistic.

Overcoming resistance to a culture is like overcoming sexist or racist ideas. There has to be a willingness and an emotional movement towards the culture and the language. When you want to embrace a culture, there is a fundamental openness there. There's a love of it, an attraction to it, you build friendships. You can't force a language or a culture on someone. The students need to discover the language and the culture through literature, movies, music, and not according to what a committee wants.

In order for integration to be more effective, there has to be greater contact between immigrants and the French culture. I guess it's doing what we're already doing on a grander scale.

> *Allophones themselves have prejudices about the Francophone Quebeckers. Positive contact could be nurtured through friends and friendships. When you meet people from another culture and you like them, you want to embrace their culture and language.*
> *Somehow, my Allophone students don't feel welcomed. To begin, they are not able to study in the language they choose. It's the law. So, from the beginning, they're off to a bad start and a resistance builds from there. The way I learned French was through my friends, most of whom have always been French.*

I think it's going to work on an affective level with these kids. You can insist, implore, but the reality is that at our school, it is not French that is the dominant language. There is such a dominance of the English culture in our school. I can't believe it. There are Francophone students that come to our school and don't speak English, and when they leave us they are bilingual, and the ESL classes can only help to a certain extent.

English should be the sub-culture, but in actual fact it is the real culture. The French language and culture is imposed on the Allophones, but in reality English predominates. It is the language of pop culture, music, technology, and let's face it, that's a pretty strong influence.

Sarah tries to reconcile learning French with the notion of tolerance and asks her students to reflect on the way in which they want to live in Quebec. In the end, she encourages her students to be critical thinkers regarding their choices and their emerging identity as new Quebeckers. According to Sarah, unless Quebeckers demonstrate a genuine interest in welcoming and accepting immigrants to Québec, Allophones and neo-Quebeckers will learn French with resistance. The 'fundamental openness' Sarah speaks of echoes the same approach that Sorin encourages: have the students discover the history, culture and language of Quebec through music, literature, movies and, most importantly, through authentic, congenial rapport with Quebeckers.

The teachers' insights regarding teaching and living in Quebec provide a number of alternatives. Although Queenie does not speak French, and John speaks only 'street' French, they each chose (was this a choice or was it a product of bill 101?) to send their children to French immersion schools, knowing that their children's opportunities in Quebec would be limited were they to remain unilingual. Each of the teachers advocates the importance of being bilingual in Quebec, and is intent on providing their children with greater opportunities to live well in Quebec, in Canada, and abroad.

When the discussion turns to their students, the educators also speak openly of the importance of learning French, but differ somewhat in their reasons regarding why and how French should be taught. Queenie does not want the future prospects of her Anglophone students to be limited in Quebec because they did not have the opportunity to learn French. Sorin would like to see his students fall in love with French, and discover the beauty of the language, as he once did. He also believes that only when his students learn French well, will they become fully integrated into Quebec society. By teaching his students French, he maintains that he is also preparing them for the future. John states that Allophone students should learn both French and English, without being forced to study only French. He also believes that if Allophone students only learn French, it will limit their opportunities to live and work elsewhere in Canada. Sarah indicates that although her Allophone students learn French because they are required to do so, they fully recognize the importance of English in media, technology, travel, and popular culture, and therefore learn English on their own.

In the end, although each teacher's position reflects their distinct vantage point, each believes that it is in their students' best interest to be bilingual. Whether the teachers or students are Francophone, Anglophone, or Allophone, whether or not they continue to reside in Quebec, they will have a more promising future if they are able to express themselves aptly in both French and English. With life in Montréal being bilingual, it is no surprise that these educators encourage their students to become bilingual so they may participate fully in their society.