INTERCULTURAL EDUCATION IN QUEBEC: PREPARING TEACHERS AND STUDENTS FOR DIVERSITY

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ABSTRACT

Among the many challenges of balancing protection of language and culture with embracing the growing ethnocultural diversity of Quebec society, preparing teachers and students to work effectively in diverse educational situations is of paramount importance. Despite the barriers to intercultural education in the cosmopolitan center of Montreal, and even more so in other regions, government policies must uphold the goals of intercultural education to promote harmonious relations in schools and in society at large. The gaps between educational policies and practices could be addressed by placing more emphasis on pedagogical practices which foster future teachers' intercultural competencies.

Although Quebec is ethnically and linguistically diverse, and continues to actively recruit immigrants, public schools are not all well equipped to manage diversity, and teachers and professors are often unprepared to work in diverse educational contexts. This lack of teacher preparation for diversity has also been noted in the rest of Canada (Jacquet, 2007; Mujawamariya, 2006) and in the United States (Cochran-Smith, 2003; Shinew and Sodorff, 2003). University teacher education programs in Quebec are beginning to put more emphasis on intercultural education, but the challenges in this field are numerous (Audet, 2003; Carignan, Sanders and Pourdavood, 2005; McAndrew, 2008). Considering the growing diversity in Quebec (Gouvernement du Québec, 2009), and the emphasis on social cohesion and *vivre ensemble* (getting along well together) by the Ministry of Education (Gouvernement de Québec, 1998), the lack of teacher preparation for diversity is a very important issue for Quebec society.

CHALLENGES IN INTERCULTURAL EDUCATION

Since 86% of immigrants to Quebec settle in Montreal (Gouvernement du Québec, 2007*b*), there is a high density of immigrant students in Montreal schools compared with schools in other regions of the province. Several studies from the past fifteen years demonstrate the challenges of intercultural education in Montreal schools. For example, Perron (1996) mentions the lack of pluriethnic consciousness among teachers. McAndrew (2001) outlines several studies confirming the gap between theory and policies and practices in education. Allen (2006) found a lack of inclusive discourses in Montreal schools, leading to dropout or failure for immigrant youth. Potvin *et al* (2010) outline the challenges facing minority youth in secondary schools in Montreal.

While these challenges have been well documented in the cosmopolitan capital of Montreal, the situation is even more difficult in the outlying regions where the ethnocultural density is much lower and people are not as accustomed to diversity (Vatz-Laaroussi, Kanouté and Rachédi, 2008). In a medium-sized city in a region outside of Montreal, immigrant students have the most difficulties in social integration (Steinbach (2010*a*), and assimilationist and protectionist discourses on the part of the host society's secondary students are reported (Steinbach, 2010*b*). In regional areas, while there may be a lack of exposure to diversity and little interest in intercultural issues, there are also advantages such as increased opportunities for schools to work collaboratively with families, although these opportunities will not become fruitful unless educational policies and programs assure adequate support (Vatz-Laaroussi & Steinbach, 2010).

The work of the Bouchard-Taylor commission on reasonable accommodations (2008) and

the media sensationalism surrounding this process (Belkhodja, 2008; Potvin, 2008) highlight tensions between a growing cultural diversity and the protection of language and common values in Quebec society. These public debates created polemic discourses that belittle the *Other* (Rachedi, 2008). The final report of the Bouchard-Taylor commission recommends reconciliation and an openness toward the *Other*. In Quebec, the challenges surrounding linguistic and cultural diversity call for appropriate government policies, particularly in the domain of education, which is so important for the socialization of future generations.

GOVERNMENT POLICIES AND PROGRAMS IN INTERCULTURAL EDUCATION

The Quebec Ministry of Education has been promoting the ideal of *vivre ensemble* since 1998 (Gouvernement du Québec, 1998), yet school contexts are not always very welcoming for newcomers. This Ministry of Education policy document states that the integration of newcomer students is the responsibility of all school staff of every teaching institution (*Ibid,* p. 18). The Ministry sees the role of the teacher education program concerning intercultural education as fostering a consciousness of diversity among students, and preparing students to live in a democratic, pluralist, French-speaking society (Steinbach, 2009). The Quebec Ministry of Education, by promoting the policy of *vivre ensemble* and by including intercultural education in the official policy on the integration of immigrant students, thus underlines the shared responsibility of all students and teachers in the process of integration of students of immigrant origins into Quebec society.

However, ten years after the publication of this Ministry policy on the integration of immigrant students, in the context of the media hype surrounding the *crisis* of reasonable accommodations, the Quebec Ministry of Education was reiterating the importance of promoting *vivre ensemble* in the school milieu. Fleury (2007) despairs the lack of an intercultural competency among the twelve competencies which future teachers develop during their university training (Gouvernement du Québec, 2001). The report on integration and reasonable accommodations in the school context (Gouvernement du Québec, 2007*a*) outlines intervention strategies to take diversity into account, such as defining common cultural values and supporting schools in view of the ideals of *vivre ensemble.* At a Ministry of Education day of reflection, major concerns that surfaced were the lack of preparation of school staff and the weaknesses of university programs in educating future teachers in the area of intercultural competencies (Fortin, 2007).

Although the Quebec Ministry of Education recognizes the inadequate pre-service and in-service preparation of teachers in intercultural diversity, and acknowledges that the integration of immigrant students and intercultural education is the responsibility of all teachers, the policies and programs concerning the roles and responsibilities of host society students in this integration process are less clear. The program for learning language and culture in *accueil* (welcome) classes is quite specific in outlining expectations of newcomer students: they must become aware of the common values in Quebec society such as equality, justice, liberty and democracy; and if these values are in contradiction with their family values, the newcomer student must "undertake a process which enables him/her to establish a harmonious balance between these two value systems" (Gouvernement du Québec, 2004, p. 20) *[author's translation].*

If this sort of mandate is given to newcomer students, surely the roles of teachers and host society students must be taken into consideration in this process of integration. For teachers, this role requires an adequate preparation in intercultural education which allows them to modify their own attitudes, behaviours and perceptions, and which prepares them to teach the principles of intercultural education to their own students, in order to promote a bidirectional process of integration among all students.

IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHER EDUCATION PROGRAMS

How can teacher education programs successfully prepare future teachers with the intercultural competencies necessary to practice intercultural education pedagogy in their own classrooms, and foster an openness toward the *Other* and harmonic intercultural relations among their future students? Resistance to intercultural education on the part of teacher candidates is widespread (Jacquet, 2007; Kanouté, 2007; Moldoveanu and Mujawamariya, 2007). While intercultural education is important in developing a better understanding of other cultures and intercultural communication abilities, Ouellet (2002), along with several other Quebec scholars (Ghosh & Abdi, 2004; McAndrew, 2001; Pagé, 2004), signals the risks of emphasizing cultural differences and notes the absence of serious reflection fostered by monocultural activities such as intercultural days or weeks at schools. In order to be effective, the focus must be on developing attitudes and abilities rather than on simply developing knowledge of other cultures. Ouellet (2002) defines the objectives of intercultural education as recognizing and accepting cultural plurality as a reality of society, promoting a society with equal rights, and creating harmonious intercultural relations. Kanouté (2006) proposes sensitizing student

teachers to pluralism and cultural diversity through a process of decentering values, and using case studies to integrate theory and practise in future pedagogical interventions. I have experimented with innovative pedagogical activities such as intercultural exchanges, in person and online, which have been very effective in intercultural education classes for future teachers (Steinbach, forthcoming). Given the task of preparing students to live in a more and more diverse world, the importance of preparing teachers for cultural diversity cannot be underestimated.

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