THE SCHOOL INTEGRATION OF SOUTH ASIAN YOUTH IN A FRANCOPHONE SOCIETY: THE ROLE OF THE EDUCATION SYSTEM

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INTRODUCTION

The history of South Asian immigration to Quebec began around 1960 (Buchignani, Indra and Srivastiva, 1985). Commonly referred to as South Asians, this population is principally composed of immigrants whose ultimate roots are in the cultures of India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka. In the 2006 census, 76,990 individuals in Quebec declared themselves as South Asian. Among them, 81.1% were born outside of Canada, out of which two thirds have arrived in the province over the last 15 years: 19.0% arrived from 1991 to 1995, 20.3% in 1996-2000, and 27.1% during the most recent census period, from 2001 to 2006 (MICC, 2010). Statistics Canada (2010) predicts that this population will double from 2006 to 2031 in Montreal. Consequently, issues of immigration and integration form an important part of the experience of the majority of South Asians in Quebec.

This paper examines the integration of South Asian youth in French-language secondary schools in Quebec. The study of the integration of these students in French schools is especially important because the Quebec Charter of the French Language makes it compulsory for them – as for all students of immigrant origin – to attend French schools, even though South Asians mostly use English as their second language. Since their mother tongue is of South Asian origin, French would then be their third language. By highlighting certain findings of a very recent qualitative research project (Bakhshaei, Mc Andrew and Georgiou, 2012), the present article will first discuss the state of the school integration of these youth, and will secondly consider the role of the educational system in this regard. Before presenting the results of the study, based on two quantitative research projects conducted under the Canada Research Chair on Education and Ethnic Relations (Mc Andrew *et al.*, 2010; Bakhshaei, 2010), an image of different characteristics and the overall school achievement of these students will be presented. This portrait will show in fact the relevance of investigating the quality of school integration of South Asian students in the French school system. In conclusion, we will discuss some systemic practices which may improve the integration of these students in French schools in Quebec.

WHO ARE THE STUDENTS OF SOUTH ASIAN ORIGIN IN FRENCH SECONDARY SCHOOLS IN QUEBEC?

According to Bakhshaei (2010), in French-speaking high schools in Quebec, the large majority of South Asian origin students are born outside of Canada, and their mother tongue as well as the language spoken at home is different from their language of instruction. Moreover, the majority of their families are over-represented among the population with a low socio-economic status. Half of them arrived in the Quebec school system at the high school level, more than half entered high school with at least one year of delay, and 54.6% require or required French support services in high school. Moreover, one third of these students are identified as suffering from handicaps, social maladjustments and learning difficulties (HSMLD), "at risk students." All of these characteristics differentiate these students from the general population of immigrant origin and native-born who, on the whole, have more positive portraits. The majority enrols in schools, and mainly in those located in under-privileged and high multi-ethnic concentration neighbourhoods. Therefore, most of these characteristics appear to exert an important effect on the educational performance of these students. Indeed, compared to other students in the French sector, those originating from South Asia (including both those born in Canada and outside of Canada) have the highest dropout rate, even when we take into account their rate of graduation in a more generous time frame (four years later than expected). They also indicate a significant rate of departure from the province before graduation, and their rate of enrolment is greater in the adult education sector (Mc Andrew *et al.*, 2010).

However, important variations emerge when looking at the different geographical sub-groups of these students.

For instance, students originating from India tend to have a more positive profile than those originating from Bangladesh and Pakistan. This trend is observed when considering a number of variables, such as the family socio-economic status, the level of entry into the Quebec school system, the age upon which students enter secondary school, the need for support services in French in secondary studies, the rate of identification as at-risk students, the type of public school attended, and the rate of on-time graduation. However, despite these disparities between South Asian sub-groups, there is no lasting difference between their net dropout rates.

STUDY OVERVIEW

The viewpoint that school integration is shaped not only by individual, family, and community characteristics, but also by the school environment, informs the conceptual framework of this paper. The concept of school integration refers not only to school trajectory and performance, but also to participation in social life at school.

The data presented in this article was collected through 15 interviews with 22 respondents (school principal(s), teachers, non-teaching staff, and students of South Asian origin) in the two secondary schools of the Montreal school board with the highest number of these students. In the sample, there are students from different South Asian countries, both females and males, born in Canada and outside of Canada. The students were all in the last two years of their secondary studies at the time of the interviews. Members of four community organizations were also interviewed, either because of their direct links to targeted schools, or because of the services they provided to a larger South Asian population. While the two selected schools share similarities, they differ in some aspects. Both are considered socio-economically under-privileged, but one more than the other. Regarding ethnic composition, the more under-privileged school was slightly less multi-cultural, but more students born outside Canada attended that school. As for the population of South Asian origin, it was larger in the more under-privileged school. In that school, the sub-group from Pakistan and India was dominant, while in the other, the students from Bangladesh and Sri Lanka made up the majority of South Asians.

FINDINGS

Academic Trajectory

According to the data collected from our respondents, it is difficult to describe a typical school trajectory for Quebecer high school students of South Asian origin. However, some shared characteristics were uncovered. For example, given the recent establishment of the community in Quebec, an important proportion of these students enter the Quebec school system in secondary 1 (the equivalent of Junior High School) or later in high school. Furthermore, according to their pathways in elementary school, the socio-economic environment of their family, and their age when entering high school, several differences emerge when examining the level of entry into the secondary system. Indeed, with the exception of students who have partly or completely attended primary school in Quebec, a large number of students of South Asian origin are identified as "under-educated" (experiencing three or more years of delay compared to the Quebec standard), at the time of their arrival in secondary schools in the province.

This is mostly the case in the more under-privileged schools – with the exception of whether they are 12 or 13 years old. The latter group of students are divided into "educated" and "under-educated," which largely correlates to the socio-economic status of their family and to whether they attended private or public schools in their country of origin. With regard to the "educated" students, after a maximum period of a year and a half in welcoming classes, they are able to attend regular or mainstream classes in secondary 1 or 2. It is noteworthy that, according to teachers of welcoming classes, despite being "educated," these students remain a bit longer in these sheltered second language classes than do students whose mother tongue has Latin roots. Students identified as "under-educated" spend an average of two years in welcoming classes. They generally continue their studies in programs which are geared towards vocational training or employment instead of college or university programs. When South Asian students arrive in Quebec secondary schools at 16-17 years, according to our respondents, it is less common for them to achieve fluency in the French language. After one or two years in welcoming classes, they usually either continue their studies in English in the adult education sector, or completely abandon school.

Most of the school representatives agree that South Asian females succeed better than their male counterparts. Respondents identified cultural expectations placed on males to contribute to the economic well-being of their families as being linked to their higher dropout rate.

SOCIAL INTEGRATION AT SCHOOL

In general, the picture that emerges of the social integration of students of South Asian origin in French schools differs according to the respondents. For example, school and community representatives systematically held more pessimistic views than the students themselves. They unanimously agreed that students of South Asian origin socialize a lot among themselves. Furthermore, they stated that most speak mainly in their mother tongue, and then in decreasing order of importance, in English and in French.

This was especially the case in the less under-privileged school. All the school respondents insisted that there is a difference between the social integration of girls and boys of South Asian origin. The male students were viewed as being culturally freer than their female peers, and as such were perceived to have a greater chance of integration into Quebec society.

The community respondents also believed that students educated in Quebec from the onset of their educational trajectory, for example in the early years of primary school, achieve better social integration than those who arrive in Quebec in their teenage years and begin their educational trajectory in the province in high school. As for the students interviewed, they held positive views of the schools that they attend, but recalled some problems faced by their peers in welcoming classes. In particular, they perceived these students as being isolated in sheltered classes. Furthermore, most of the South Asian Quebecers interviewed in the less under-privileged school showed some resistance towards the Charter of French language, and they voice the wish of being granted the choice to attend Quebec English schools.

THE ROLE OF THE SCHOOL SYSTEM

According to our respondents, challenges to the integration of students of South Asian origin in French schools in Quebec appear to be linked to three main factors: the generally weak socio-economic status of their families, their late arrival to the Quebec school system, and their poor knowledge of French. However, our findings suggest that some systemic factors may also impact the school integration of these students.

One of the first explanations concerns relationships between the school and South Asian families. While all the respondents reported helpful, understanding, and trusting relationships among students and school staff, teachers often complained about the poor quantity and quality of their relationships with South Asian parents. They reported two main barriers to this relationship: communication difficulties related to the parents' lack of competency in French, and socio-economic challenges of South Asian parent (especially the newly-arrived ones). Teachers also reported that tight budgets prevented these schools from taking up activities geared towards building closer relationships with families. Moreover, there is no organization in the South Asian community which works in the educational domain, or focuses on family-school relationships.

Another explanation for the poor performance of South Asian students in French schools in Quebec is related to grading and evaluation practices performed by certain school boards. Some teachers reported the existence of ethno-linguistic biases in some school boards, which may lead to the over-identification of certain groups of immigrant origin students (including those of South Asian origin) as "under-educated" at the time of their initial registration in Quebec schools. By contrast, other teachers mentioned that school boards are often reluctant to identify at-risk students, which may also lead to a high level of heterogeneity among the students grouped together in the welcoming classes. As we mentioned earlier, according to Bakhshaei and Mc Andrew (Forthcoming), there is a considerable number of at-risk students among the South Asian population in Quebec. This challenge is likely even more significant in public schools located in under-privileged environments that also suffer from a lack of funding required to improve their programs and services.

Finally, we were relieved to uncover the perception that students of South Asian origin are not subject to discrimination or to prejudice in the Quebec school system. In general, the respondents portrayed a positive image of this group of students. However, community stakeholders believe that some of these students experience situations where they may be excluded or rejected in Quebec schools. These difficulties appear to be linked not to their ethnicity, but to their religion. For example, veiled Muslim girls have been mentioned in this regard.

CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

The poor relations of Quebec schools with South Asian parents and community organizations have led, to some extent, to the teachers and school staff having very little knowledge of the South Asian population. South Asian students in Quebec schools are often overlooked or mistaken as belonging to groups from other regions (e.g. Southeast Asia), or are not well distinguished on the basis of their particular ethnic group. Therefore, it seems that teachers and school staff in Quebec require more information, not only about South Asian cultures, but also about the living situation in these countries and the family migration process, in order to achieve a deeper understanding of the strengths and weaknesses within the community, as well as challenges experienced by some of these students. More activities designed to build relationships between home, school and community organizations may help school staff to overcome this obstacle. Regarding the language barrier, the use of documents in several languages, as well as the use of interpreters may be helpful.

Furthermore, while the Ministry of Education in Quebec and the local school boards have developed many instruments aiming to educate parents about the Quebec school system, lack of knowledge in this regard remains a significant obstacle to full participation by South Asian parents, as is the case with most immigrant parents. In

this case, as in that of many other Allophones and/or disadvantaged communities, developing instruments that rely less on textbooks and more on images and sound (e.g. video clips) is recommended. It should be considered by school systems.

Some thirty years after the establishment of the Charter of French Language, it is perhaps a naïve assumption that all children of immigrants enrolled in French-language schools fully understand the origin of this language policy. In this regard, initiatives aimed towards increasing the positive image of the French language among the South Asian community may be beneficial, as this community has traditionally been inclined towards developing English as a second language. More educational initiatives based on the concept of additive bilingualism, or on how the mother tongue and the official language do not have to be viewed as being in conflict, but rather as part of the linguistic repertoire of immigrant students, should be considered.

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L'INTÉGRATION SCOLAIRE DES JEUNES SUD-ASIATIQUES DANS UNE SOCIÉTÉ FRANCOPHONE: LE ROLE DU SYSTÈME D'ÉDUCATION

Selon le recensement canadien de 2006, 76 990 Québécois se sont déclarés « sud-asiatiques » (Inde, Pakistan, Bangladesh et Sri Lanka). Parmi eux, 81,1 % sont nés hors du Canada, dont les deux tiers sont arrivés au Québec au cours des quinze dernières années. Ainsi, l'immigration et l'intégration font partie intégrante de l'expérience de la majorité des Sud-asiatiques au Québec.

Cet article s'intéresse à l'intégration des jeunes d'origine sud-asiatique à l'école secondaire de langue française au Québec. Deux raisons motivent ce choix: premièrement, selon Mc Andrew, Ledent et Murdoch (2010), au secondaire francophone, ces élèves présentent un taux de diplomation très faible comparativement aux autres élèves. Deuxièmement, selon la Charte québécoise de la langue française, ces élèves doivent – comme tous les enfants d'origine immigrée – fréquenter l'école francophone, tandis qu'ils proviennent d'une communauté anglophile. Le présent article, présentant certains résultats d'une recherche qualitative récente discutera de certains aspects de l'état de l'intégration de ces élèves et le rôle du système scolaire à cet égard. Les données ont été recueillies par l'entremise de 15 entrevues avec 22 répondants (directeurs d'école, enseignants, personnel non enseignant et élèves d'origine sud-asiatique) dans deux écoles secondaires montréalaises, caractérisées par une concentration importante d'élèves d'origine sud-asiatique. Quatre organismes communautaires ont été également interrogés, soit en raison de leurs liens avec les écoles ciblées, ou des services qu'ils offrent à la communauté sud-asiatique.

Aux dires des intervenants scolaires interrogés, une proportion importante de leurs élèves d'origine sud-asiatique ont intégré le système scolaire québécois au secondaire. Cependant, leur niveau à l'entrée au secondaire varie beaucoup. En effet, à l'exception des élèves qui ont fait, totalement ou en partie, leur primaire au Québec, la grande majorité des élèves sud-asiatiques, au moment de leur arrivée au secondaire, sont identifiés comme sous-scolarisés, donc comme accusant trois ans de retard ou plus par rapport à la norme québécoise. Cela ne s'applique pas à ceux de 12 ou 13 ans qui se partagent entre les « sous-scolarisés »

et les scolarisés, principalement selon leur fréquentation d'une école publique ou privée dans leur pays d'origine. Les élèves scolarisés, normalement après un an et demi en classe d'accueil, intègrent le régulier. Quant aux élèves sous-scolarisés, ils restent généralement deux ans en accueil. Ces derniers poursuivent majoritairement en formations visant l'insertion professionnelle. Quand les élèves d'origine sud-asiatique arrivent à 16-17 ans, selon les enseignants, ils apprennent moins fréquemment le français et, après un an ou deux dans les classes d'accueil, ils préfèrent continuer leurs études au secteur des adultes en anglais ou abandonner leurs études.

L'intégration sociale à l'école

À cet égard, les intervenants scolaires et communautaires ont une vision plus négative que les élèves. Ainsi, ils affirment unanimement que les élèves sud-asiatiques ont tendance à se regrouper entre eux. D'après eux, ceux-ci se parlent principalement dans leur langue maternelle et par ordre d'importance décroissant, en anglais et en français. Ils pensent également que les élèves scolarisés au Québec dès le primaire s'intègrent socialement mieux que ceux arrivés au secondaire. Les élèves interviewés aiment tous leur école et évoquent plutôt les problèmes de leurs pairs en classes d'accueil, qui sont isolés et peu encadrés. Certains élèves interviewés préféreraient avoir le choix de l'école anglophone.

Le rôle du système scolaire

L'explication systémique la plus probable concernant l'intégration problématique des élèves québécois d'origine sud-asiatique à l'école de langue française concerne la quantité insuffisante et la qualité médiocre des relations de l'école avec leurs parents. Selon les enseignants, ceci est lié à la méconnaissance du français par les parents, à leurs défis socio-économiques, ainsi qu'au manque de budget scolaire pour entreprendre des activités de rapprochement. Par ailleurs, il n'existe aucun organisme communautaire sud-asiatique qui se concentre sur les relations famille-école.

Une autre explication systémique envisageable concerne le classement des élèves au moment de leur arrivée dans le système scolaire québécois. Certains enseignants croient qu'il existe des préjugés basés sur l'origine ethnique ou la langue maternelle des élèves nouvellement arrivés, ce qui mène à une sur-identification des élèves sud-asiatiques comme sous-scolarisés. À l'inverse, certains mentionnent que l'on hésite souvent à identifier comme handicapés ou en difficulté d'adaptation ou d'apprentissage certains élèves nouveaux arrivants qui ont des troubles d'apprentissage, ce qui génère une hétérogénéité dans les classes d'accueil. Cependant, on peut se réjouir de la perception très largement partagée par nos répondants voulant que les élèves sud-asiatiques ne font pas l'objet de discrimination dans les relations quotidiennes à l'école.

Conclusion

La faible relation des parents sud-asiatiques avec l'école influence le fait que la clientèle sud-asiatique à l'école québécoise reste souvent invisible, confondue parfois avec celle d'autres régions ou non distinguée selon ses pays d'origine. Des informations sur la situation prévalant dans le pays d'origine, ainsi que sur le processus migratoire des familles, contribueraient à une meilleure compréhension des forces et des faiblesses au sein de cette communauté ainsi que des problèmes vécus par certains de ces élèves. Davantage d'activités conçues pour renforcer les relations école-famille-communauté aideraient le personnel scolaire à surmonter cet obstacle. À cet égard, l'utilisation de documents en langues sud-asiatiques, ainsi que le recours à des interprètes s'avèrent des pistes nécessaires pour contrer les barrières linguistiques. Par ailleurs, le manque de connaissances du système scolaire québécois demeure un obstacle non-négligeable à la pleine participation des parents sud-asiatiques. Dans ce cas, comme dans celui de nombreuses autres communautés allophones et/ou défavorisées, il faudrait envisager de développer des instruments moins livresques et plus dynamiques (capsules vidéo).

Par ailleurs, après quelque trente ans de mise en œuvre de la Charte de la langue française, peut-être assume-t-on de manière trop optimiste que tous les élèves d'origine immigrante scolarisés dans les écoles de langue française comprennent pleinement les raisons derrière la politique linguistique. À cet égard, les initiatives visant à valoriser le français, particulièrement auprès des élèves des communautés anglophones, peuvent être bénéfiques. Cependant, celles-ci devraient reposer sur la complémentarité et non l'opposition des langues.