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Quebec schools and immigrant children

by Claude Ryan

translated by John Richards

Marie McAndrew, *Immigration et diversité à l'école: Le débat québécois dans une perspective comparative*. Montreal: Les Presses de l'Université de Montréal, 2001. 266 pages.

Earlier this year, Marie McAndrew received the Donner Foundation prize for having written the best Canadian policy book in 2001. *Immigration et diversité à l'école (Immigration and diversity in schools)* is an important book on an important subject. Unfortunately, it has received relatively little attention in *English Canada*. Some time in 2003, an English translation will appear. Meanwhile, as a modest gesture to make amends, we invited Claude Ryan to write a review. – Editors

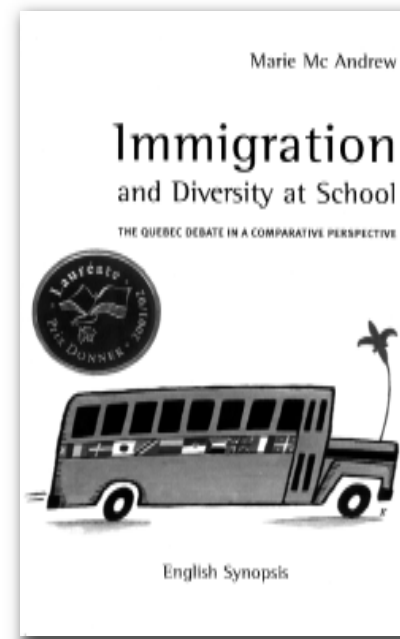
For anyone interested in the successful integration of immigrants and their children, Quebec – in particular Montreal – offers an important case study. For two reasons. First, over the second half of the 20th century Montreal experienced demographic changes that in turn had major repercussions on the composition of the school population. Second, at both the municipal and provincial levels, Quebec undertook many policy experiments and much research on the matter.

In Quebec taken as a whole, students either born abroad or born to parents born abroad represent about 10 per cent of the total school population. On the other hand, such students represent 46 per cent of the French-language school population in Montreal. Moreover, in more than a third of French-language Montreal schools, the “ethnic” share of the student population is above half.

How have Quebec schools been affected by these large demographic changes, and by political decisions to direct these chil-

dren into French-language schools? How does Quebec's performance compare with that of other societies that have striven to integrate large numbers of immigrants? What is likely to happen in the future? In a thoroughly documented book, Marie McAndrew provides answers that are sometimes debatable but always instructive and stimulating.

This is not Marie McAndrew's first sortie onto this terrain. Her book contains an impressive 43-page list of references; her own publications on the subject, beginning in 1982, comprise more than 40 articles. Several of her publications were undertaken for the Quebec education ministry or various school boards. Her past work inevitably influences her present perspective, which closely resembles that of senior officials and education ministry experts. Her book does not leave much room for the perspective of teachers, elected school board members or students themselves. Having made this observation, I hasten to add that McAndrew's work is of an undeniable quality. It repre-



sents the conclusions of an author with a deep knowledge of the research undertaken in her chosen domain, someone who always leaves her door open to new developments.

McAndrew does not add much that is new to the facts bearing on the integration of immigrant

children into school systems. What she does provide is a synthesis of policy experiments and research on the subject, not only in Quebec but also in other Canadian provinces (notably Ontario and Alberta), the United States, France and Britain. For any politician, analyst, teacher or education administrator anxious to base his or her ideas on a solid foundation, this is a valuable – indeed indispensable – work of reference.

The first question that concerns teachers and school officials, one that has been posed ever since large numbers of immigrants have attended public schools, is this: should immigrant students be integrated into regular classes or should special classes be organized for them? McAndrew summarizes Quebec policy responses to this question over the years. For many years, the

Claude Ryan served as Quebec's education minister (1985–90), among many other positions and accomplishments in his long career as a public servant, social activist and commentator.

policy was to create “*classes d’accueil*” (separate classes for recently arrived allophone children); current policy favours direct integration into regular classes. Given the extra work direct integration places on classroom teachers, it has in practice proved impossible to apply such a policy fully.

McAndrew is not persuaded by the new orthodoxy. According to her, it would be better to maintain, for a lengthy period of adaptation, distinct *classes d’accueil* for immigrants. There does not exist, she insists, “a magic formula that always works. Variety and flexibility appear preferable to a uniform model. One reason is that students themselves are diverse, both in characteristics and expectations.”

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A second question is what place to give to an immigrant child’s mother tongue in the process of integration. For some, the strategy is to orient students as soon as possible toward the target language, the language spoken in the community, and thereby avoid too strong an attachment by immigrant students to their respective mother tongues. For others, by contrast, integration works better if a student remains in contact with his or her mother tongue.

The *Programme d’étude des langues d’origine* (PELO – program for study of languages of origin) has been the main educa-

tion tool in Quebec on this matter. It was launched in 1977, in the wake of the controversy surrounding adoption of Bill 101, a law that immigrant communities opposed. Its goal was to reconcile learning of the immigrant’s language and the normal operation of school classes. Usually, PELO classes were offered outside regular school hours. Until recently, PELO has been of most interest to Italian students, the linguistic community most affected by Bill 101’s education provisions. On the whole, it has remained a marginal program. It is still in existence, and is now of interest to immigrant communities other than the Italians. Its results and relevance have never been evaluated.

Because of the simultaneous concentration of immigrants in Montreal and the higher poverty rate in Montreal than elsewhere in the province, it makes sense to explore whatever links may exist between these two phenomena. Until recently, observes McAndrew, policies for integrating immigrants and aiding students in poor neighbourhoods were conceived and applied by separate sections of the education bureaucracy, and without effective links between them. Only after 1997, when the education ministry published *L’École montréalaise*, did officials start to take systematically into account neighbourhoods which were simultaneously poor and multiethnic. Contrary to what one might expect, the academic achievement of immigrant children in schools located in poor neighbourhoods is somewhat better than that of others in the same neighbourhoods. The main problem in such schools is the weak participation by immigrant parents in

school activities. McAndrew notes that, in Quebec, follow-up of immigrant students is practically nonexistent. This makes evaluation of programs put forward by the ministry or school boards next to impossible. U.S. and British schools have a better record of accounting for outcomes to their immigrant communities.

From the early 1980s, Quebec schools have been concerned with increasing the recognition accorded to the province’s multiethnic reality. The Chancy report, published in 1985, was an important stage in this process. For several years, it appeared to have little impact. However, it inspired a good number of administrative initiatives that eliminated racist stereotypes in school programs, instructional material and textbooks. For example, all school texts, to be approved, must contain a minimum number of references to different cultural communities.

Publication in 1998 of the *Politique d’intégration scolaire et d’éducation interculturelle* marked a decisive step in favour of recognizing multiethnicity. Henceforth, according to the education ministry, “The heritage and common values of Quebec, notably an openness to ethnocultural, linguistic and religious diversity, must be present throughout the curriculum and school life.”

As an illustration of the new direction, McAndrew refers to reforms in the teaching of history put forward by the Lacourcière report in 1994. It was time, this report concluded, to free the teaching of history from the apologetic and integrative function that had long been assigned to it. The curriculum needed a better equilibrium between Quebec’s national history and international

history, greater discussion of themes bearing on immigration and intercultural relations.

To some, the concept of multicultural education, unless it is promoted within a unifying vision of society, risks creating an impasse. The solution, it is argued, is to teach the rights and obligations of a shared citizenship, including among other features, “*l’intégration de toutes les communautés à une langue commune*” (integration of all communities such that they use a common language).

This passage from a multicultural to an intercultural vision is increasingly present in the writings of Quebec nationalists. It is not enough, however, to invoke a civic ideal; what is needed is to specify the content of this ideal. And here lies the rub: some nationalists identify civic culture, in a more or less confused manner, with the culture of the dominant cultural community. Rather than complement or extend the meaning of multicultural education, they distance us from the effort of defining multicultural policy. Such a policy requires, McAndrew writes, “a systematic effort to develop among both the majority and the minority a better understanding of different cultures, a greater capacity to communicate with those from other cultures, along with positive attitudes toward other groups in society.” She continues, “The confusion between civic culture and culture of the ethnic majority is in effect a real danger, corroborated by complaints made by many community and advocacy groups.”

With good reason, McAndrew distances herself from many stereotypes of Quebec nationalism. But she does not escape from

its influence; for example, she joins the current of secular Quebec nationalism in her manner of analyzing the educational structure of the province. Two illustrations: her treatment first of the role of English, and second of the religious factor in education.

Admittedly, there are allusions to English-language instruction in McAndrew's book. However, there is no clear recognition of the existence of two linguistic systems, systems often having the same rights with respect to education and also with respect to health services and communications. Likewise, there is no explicit mention of the constitutionally guaranteed protection which official language minorities enjoy in all provinces, including Quebec.

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Overall, the book gives the impression that Quebec is a unilingual French society, whereas the daily and legal realities are much more complex.

It is also surprising that this book makes no allusion to the fact that the weakness in the teaching of English as a second language in French-language schools was a major reason for the choices many immigrant families made – in a time fortunately past – in favour of English-language instruction. More than three decades have elapsed since the major conflicts in Quebec over this matter. Unfortunately, McAndrew seems not much troubled by the limited improvements since then in the teaching of English. It is

not by adding a third language to the education program that people will forget the importance of learning English and the weakness of the francophone school system on this score. Many opinion polls confirm that a great majority of parents want improvement in English-as-a-second-language instruction.

McAndrew's treatment of the place of religion in schools is also unsatisfactory. According to her, the 1997 constitutional amendment of section 93 reflected a widespread will among Quebecers. In order to realize social harmony over this matter, she implies it would seemingly suffice to minimize the few advantages that Catholics and Protestants still enjoy in the school system, and to place controls over the small number of private schools having an ethnic and religious nature and receiving public subsidies. These conclusions reflect in my opinion a superficial and incomplete understanding of our history and the true sentiments of the Quebec population, and furthermore a questionable conception of education itself. The 1997 constitutional amendment was undertaken in a climate of haste which precluded genuine expression of public opinion. McAndrew makes mention of the small number of subsidized schools for Jewish, Greek and Armenian children. But more than 200 private francophone institutions also receive subsidies while offering in many cases an education explicitly infused with moral and religious values.

Fortunately, toward the end of her book, McAndrew shows herself open to a more nuanced approach:

The supporters of an integrative pluralism, which stresses the sharing of common institutions, dominate most liberal societies. However, one can conceive of a dynamic pluralism, one in which the co-existence of communities with radically different values would be accommodated by a much less substantive civic framework. Ethnically specific schools would assure the intergenerational reproduction of culture and would serve as a guarantee of the maintenance of pluralism at the heart of society, a pluralism that the superficial multiculturalism of present public schools effectively reduces.

Allowing that there are no certainties, McAndrew rightly concludes that, in the final analysis, "The debate over different models of educating the population turns on different conceptions of citizenship." We are led to reopen a debate that seemed closed. Far from being distressed, I rejoice over this perspective. Experience teaches us that what is done one day in a hurried or incomplete manner must often be redone sooner or later, in order to satisfy the demand for truth and justice inherent in the nature of things. ■