

# Assimilation to Accommodation Immigrants and the Changing Patterns of Schooling

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The continuous inflow of immigrants into Canada, particularly in metropolitan cities like Toronto, Vancouver and Montreal where most immigrants tend to settle, has changed, and continues to change the social, cultural and educational realities of schooling. Many of the changes have resulted not only from the presence of immigrant students in the educational system, but also from their advocacy and efforts in helping to create a system that would be responsive to their needs, interests and expectations so that they may realize their dreams of “making it” in their new society. And to the extent that, as new members of the society, they frequently lack economic, social and cultural resources, many immigrants look to education – specifically, their academic credentials – to compensate for their limitations and to enable them to procure the resources they need. While ethnicity, race, language and religion do not define the experiences of immigrants, in varying ways, they do inform their participation and outcomes in Canada. Hence, no discussion of immigrants, particularly those of minority backgrounds, would be complete without reference to these characteristics.

Immigrants, themselves, have played an important role in helping to establish an educational system in which the assimilationist approach and the claim that “all students are the same” give way to a vision of equitable education based on principles of justice, fairness and respect for difference. According to this vision, merely having access to schooling and education (equality of educational opportunity) is not enough, for how useful is the education if it fails to provide students the means of attaining the educational and occupational goals to which they aspire? Indeed, as Evans and Davies argue, “it is crucial to uphold a distinction particularly between equality of opportunity and equity because the achievement of the former is no guarantee that the latter is also evident.”<sup>1</sup>

As in other nations, schooling and education<sup>2</sup> in Canada developed in relation to the political, economic and social conditions and goals at the time. The early promoters of public education, many of whom were men closely associated with Christian churches, advocated for an education system that was grounded in Christian values and for schools that would cultivate in students a “sense of citizen-



ship, loyalty, respect for property, deference to authority” and good work habits.<sup>3</sup> And as large numbers of immigrants entered the country during the mid-nineteenth century with the onset of industrialization, schools played an assimilative role by teaching Anglo-Canadian values with the expectation that immigrants would come to “identity with Canada’s British heritage.”<sup>4</sup> According to Paul Axelrod, “on the one hand, the concept of assimilation suggested inclusiveness and social equality; on the other, it privileged Canada’s dominant racial, ethnic, linguistic and religious communities.”<sup>5</sup> And the failure of immigrants to assimilate was attributed to, as Axelrod points out, their foreignness and the related question: “Why can’t they be like us?”<sup>6</sup>

This perspective of schooling, imbued with Canada’s brand of nationalism, equality of opportunity, human rights, and related educational practices in the 1970s, began to shift in response to the federal policy of multiculturalism and provincial multicultural education policies, which sought to promote sensitivity to and respect for ethno-cultural differences and the integration of immigrant/minority students. It is worth noting that it was

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around then (1967) that the immigration policy changed to give preference to immigrants with both educational credentials and “immediate employable skills and capital productive potential.”<sup>7</sup> As a result, many highly educated, middle class immigrants had not only the necessary social capital, but also the understanding and skills needed to navigate and negotiate the social and political structures in their efforts to realize their ambitions.

The introduction of multicultural education programs and curriculum, particularly in large urban areas with a growing immigrant population, was, to a large extent, a response to the demands of immigrant parents advocating for education that would meet their own and their children’s academic, cultural, linguistic, and religious needs and interests. Parents, for example were concerned that their children were feeling alienated from school, due in part to educators’ lack of awareness of, and insensitivity to their educational needs and interests. They also felt that their children were losing their culture and their language (which contributed to distancing between parents and chil-



dren). Acting on these concerns, parents and community members advocated for changes to school programs that would ensure equitable educational treatment and outcomes for their children.

In response, school boards in urban centres with large immigrant populations recruited racial and ethnic minority teachers and community relations workers and initiated professional development sessions in areas of cultural sensitivity, racial awareness and racism. They introduced curricular activities such as “multicultural days,” field trips to “cultural communities,” lessons about the holocaust, and others in which students would study and/or be invited to talk about the “cultures” of places like India, Africa, Italy etc. And there were celebrations and observances of holidays such as Channukah, Chinese New Year, African Heritage Month. In response to language needs, school boards also provided “English as a Second Language,” “English as a Second Dialect” (especially for Black Caribbean immigrants), and “Heritage Language” classes (e.g. Italian, Greek, Portuguese, Mandarin, Cantonese, Urdu); the latter classes were at first held after school and on Saturdays, and despite initial protests, were later incorporated into the school day. Today, these are referred to as “international languages.” Also, starting in the 1970s, the Toronto Board of Education led the way in collecting data on their students’ experiences, educational performances and school activities by ethnicity, immigrant status, language, and by the 1990s, race.<sup>8</sup>

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By the late 1980s, dissatisfied with the fact that there had been few, if any, changes to the Eurocentric curriculum, and that multicultural education initiatives were simply a recognition of culture in terms of food, music and costumes, parents, community members, and some educators advocated for an anti-racism approach to education, whereby the effect of individual and – more importantly – structural racism (e.g. streaming)<sup>9</sup>, would be acknowledged. Some school boards began to introduce anti-racism education, and in Ontario, the anti-racism educational policy of the New Democratic Party government echoed in part the expectations of community members when it said, “The intent of antiracism and ethnocultural equity education is to ensure that all students achieve their potential... as well as confidence in their cultural and racial identities. It should equip all students with the knowledge, skills and attitudes, and behaviours needed to live and work effectively in an increasingly diverse world.”<sup>10</sup> Even though critics – including myself – have argued that anti-racism education as implemented is essentially multicultural education because of the continued focus on culture rather than on structural racism, the fact remains that concerns about racism are no longer being silenced or dismissed as in earlier times.

Despite all the talk of multiculturalism, cultural democracy, and anti-racism, there are still the worrisome issues and struggles over religious freedom and the rights of students to carry religious symbols like kirpans, or wear hijabs in schools. Take for example the case of Émile Ouimet, a young Muslim girl, who in 1994 was suspended from a Quebec school for contravening the school’s dress code by wearing a hijab. The principle reasoned that she risked marginalization because of her “difference.”<sup>11</sup> This idea of erasing difference is also reflected in the Peel Board of Education’s handling of the kirpan issue. Displeased with the board’s 1988 policy prohibiting the wearing of kirpans, Peel teacher Harbhajan Singh Pandori took the matter to the Ontario Human Rights Commission, which ruled that the policy had “an adverse impact on Sikhs who cannot teach or attend school in Peel region and at the same time honour the requirements of their religious faith.” The Commission went on to say that since ‘there have been no incidents of violent use of the kirpan by Sikhs in any Canadian schools, the policy was unjustifiable as a bona fide requirement of the board to ensure safety in schools.’ It was determined that “Khalsa Sikhs, whether teachers or students, are entitled to wear kirpans to school in the Peel region, as long as the kirpans are of a reasonable size, are worn under the wearer’s clothing, and are secured.”<sup>12</sup> The ruling handed down on July 6, 1990, was appealed to the Ontario Divisional Court, which upheld the earlier decision.<sup>13</sup> Unlike this precedent-setting decision, the Quebec Court of Appeal in 2004, overturned a lower court judgment that allowed a 12-year-old Montreal student to wear the kirpan. Agreeing with the Quebec government, the Marguerite-Bourgeoys School Board, and the administration of l’École Sainte-Catherine-Laboure in their opposition to the wearing of the kirpan for safety and security reasons, the court ruled in support of the “zero tolerance” rule against knives in school, saying that public safety takes precedence over religious freedom. The student’s family said that they would appeal to the Supreme Court.<sup>14</sup>

**EN BREF** Nous ne pouvons plus concevoir la scolarisation et l'éducation en tant que mécanismes d'assimilation des élèves. Nous devons désormais y voir les processus par lesquels les élèves et leurs parents peuvent contribuer à la création de systèmes et de programmes qui répondent mieux à leurs besoins. Les immigrants ont aussi contribué à changer les modèles de scolarisation et d'éducation au Canada. Et même si, par moments, leurs demandes d'inclusion, d'équité et de reconnaissance ont suscité des tensions, celles-ci ont contribué – et continuent de le faire – à ouvrir de nouvelles dimensions de scolarisation et d'éducation, et à créer de nouvelles possibilités pour les élèves.

In their efforts to accommodate the growing number of non-Christian students, schools have also had to contend with issues of school prayer and religious holidays. In Ontario, for example, in 1991 the Ministry of Education issued a memorandum forbidding the traditional group recitation of the Lord's Prayer in public schools. At the same time, it allowed schools to provide students the opportunity to privately engage in their religious practices (e.g. Muslim students are allowed space in schools for Friday prayers). In keeping with this principle of accommodation, the Toronto Board of Education, with the help of members of different faiths, compiled a multifaith book of readings and prayers that is used in schools as an alternative to the Christian Lord's Prayer.

The issue of religious holidays remains problematic. Although it has become common practice to avoid holding and introducing new lessons when students are away from school because of religious observances, there is still debate about the appropriate limits to religious accommodation. For example, in September 1994, the Ottawa Board of Education delayed the opening of its schools for two days because the days coincided with Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year. The Jewish Community Council of Ottawa welcomed the decision, suggesting that such action helped students “to avoid a situation where one's school is in direct conflict with one's religious values.”<sup>15</sup> But in 1995, when the Islamic Schools Federation requested that schools be closed for Muslim holy days – Eid-ul-Fitr (March 3) and Eid-ul-Adha (May 11) – their request was denied. The matter was appealed to the Ontario Divisional Court, which ruled on April 22, 1997, that the school board “had not discriminated against Muslim students by failing to recognize Islamic holy days,” and described the Christian holidays of Christmas and Easter as “secular pause days... not religious holidays.”<sup>16</sup>

With the overall growth in student population, due partially to immigration, governments have also had to re-visit the question of funding religious schools. In Ontario, for instance, the government began funding Catholic high schools in the late 1970s, with the requirement that they be accessible to non-Catholic students. Immigrant parents welcomed this change, often preferring religious – in this case Catholic – schools because of their belief that such schools would provide their children a moral and more disciplined education than public schools. Today, we see not only Protestants, but also Muslims, Hindus, and students of other faiths attending Catholic schools, diversifying these schools and opening them to different kinds of discussions about religion, faith and spirituality. As well, a recognition of students' entitlement to an education that takes into account their religious beliefs has contributed to an increase in the number of faith-based (e.g. Muslim, Seventh Day Adventists) educational institutions in many parts of the country.

In sum, informed by their immigrant drive, cultural values, religious convictions, and ambitions, immigrants have helped to bring about changes in the pattern of schooling and education in Canada. And while their demands for recognition, inclusivity and equity may at times have contributed to tensions, these tensions have helped – and continue to help – open up new dimensions in schooling and education as well as possibilities and opportunities for all

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students. No longer can we view schooling and education as processes by which we assimilate students; we must view them instead as processes by which students and parents can contribute to the evolution of systems and programs responsive to their needs, interests and aspirations, respectful of their differences, and able to accommodate their rights and freedoms. ★

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#### Notes

- 1 J. Evans and B. Davies, “Equality, Equity and Physical Education,” in *Equality, Education and Physical Education*, ed. J. Evans (London: Falmer Press, 1993), 24.
- 2 I use education to mean the formal and regulated aspect of learning; while schooling refers to the environment or structures in which education (or learning) takes place.
- 3 Paul Axelrod, *The Promise of Schooling: Education in Canada, 1800-1914* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997), 25.
- 4 K. Osborne, *Education: A Guide to the Canadian School Debate – Or, Who Wants What and Why* (Toronto: Penguin, 1999), 9.
- 5 Axelrod, 81.
- 6 Harney and Troper, as quoted in Axelrod, 85.
- 7 Harold Troper, “Becoming an Immigrant City: A History of Immigration into Toronto since the Second World War,” in *The World in a City*, eds. P. Anisef and M. Lanphier (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003), 47.
- 8 M. Cheng, M. Yau and S. Ziegler, *The 1991 Every Student Survey, Part II: Profiles of Toronto's Secondary School Students* (Toronto: Toronto Board of Education, 1993).
- 9 C. E. James, “Multiculturalism, Diversity and Education in the Canadian Context: The Search for an Inclusive Pedagogy,” in *Global Constructions of Multicultural Education: Theories and Realities*, eds. C.A. Grant and J.L. Lei (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2001), 175-204.
- 10 Ministry of Education and Training, *Anti-Racism and Ethnocultural Equity in School Boards: Guidelines for Policy Development and Implementation* (Toronto: Queen's Printer for Ontario, 1993), 5.
- 11 H. M. Lenk, “The Case of Émilie Ouimet: News Discourse on Hijab and the Construction on Québécois National Identity,” in *Anti-Racist Feminism: Critical Race and Gender Studies*, eds. A. Calliste and G. Dei (Halifax: Fernwood, 2000) 73-89.
- 12 Pandori v. Peel Board of education, 1990.
- 13 Peel Board of Education v. Ontario Human Rights Commission and Pandori. 1991.
- 14 “Sikh Student Loses Fight to Wear Kirpan,” *Globe and Mail*, 6 March 2004, A10.
- 15 L. Sweet, *God in the Classroom: The Controversial Issue of Religion in Canada's Schools* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1997), 200.
- 16 *Ibid.*, 203.

