

INTEGRATING SECONDARY STUDENTS OF IMMIGRANT ORIGINS IN THE EASTERN TOWNSHIPS: HOW WARM IS THE WELCOME?

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Abstract

Schools have the important mission of welcoming increasing numbers of immigrant students to regional Quebec, and this study considers their welcoming role. We adopt a reciprocal concept of integration, considering the importance of intergroup contact and diverse acculturation orientations of host society members. In a two-year longitudinal study, we followed the integration process of 48 adolescents into three secondary schools. Perspectives of these immigrant adolescents, their host society peers, and eight teachers are presented and discussed. Findings indicate that the warmth of the welcome could be improved with more inclusive policies and practices.

Résumé

Les écoles ont une mission importante d'accueillir un nombre croissant d'élèves issus de l'immigration et cette étude examine leur rôle de les accueillir. Nous utilisons un concept réciproque de l'intégration, compte tenu de l'importance des contacts intergroupes et des diverses orientations d'acculturation des membres de la société d'accueil. Dans le cadre d'une étude longitudinale sur deux ans, nous avons suivi le processus d'intégration de 48 immigrants dans trois écoles secondaires. Les perspectives de ces adolescents, de leurs pairs locaux et de huit enseignants sont présentées et discutées. Les résultats indiquent qu'un accueil plus chaleureux pourrait être obtenu par des politiques et des pratiques plus inclusives.

Welcoming newcomer students

The warmth of the welcome of a host society involves political, economic, social, and cultural factors. As Quebec actively seeks immigration for economic and demographic reasons, the process of welcoming and integrating these immigrants theoretically involves

the participation of all members of the host society. However, this role may not be obvious to most citizens. Schools, more than any other institution in society, are the place where young newcomers are expected to learn to integrate into their new environment (Ledent, Murdoch & McAndrew, 2011). As such, the welcoming role of schools is of utmost importance in the integration process (Vatz Laaroussi & Steinbach, 2010). In order to explore the welcome offered to newcomer students in three secondary schools in Sherbrooke, this article reports on interviews with a cohort of immigrant students, their host society counterparts, and their teachers. Data drawn from a series of interviews with immigrant and host society students and teachers gives us some indication of the warmth of the welcome in the Eastern Townships.

Immigrating to Quebec

Quebec society continues to struggle to define and maintain a unique cultural and linguistic identity, as evidenced in the prevalent discourses around diversity issues leading up to the 2012 provincial elections (Ibbitson, 2012). The integration of students of immigrant origins is challenging in a society juggling between embracing growing ethnocultural diversity and protecting the French language and culture so important to Quebec identity. Quebec has an official policy of interculturalism in opposition to Canadian multiculturalism, which is seen as a threat to Quebec's national self-affirmation (Belkhdja, 2008). Whereas Canadian multiculturalism has been critiqued as a fragmenting ideology and popular discourse posits Quebec's interculturalism as being more dialogical, the policy differences are virtually nonexistent (Kymlicka, 2004). Interculturalism promotes respecting ethnic diversity and sharing a common identity, with an emphasis on social cohesion, and this model has influenced education policies in Quebec. The Quebec Ministry of Education (Gouvernement du Québec, 1998) policy on the integration of immigrant students and intercultural education focuses on the theme of *vivre ensemble*; harmonious relations which are to be attained by newcomers mastering the French language and learning the common cultural values of Quebec society, although the role of Quebec-born students is not evident in this policy (Steinbach, 2009).

Due to an increase of immigrants settling in regions outside of the metropolitan city of Montréal (Gouvernement du Canada, 2011), in the past ten years the number of students of immigrant origins in the Sherbrooke School Board dramatically increased from under 700 to over 3000, now 17% of the student population in primary and secondary schools (S. Dupuis, personal communication, May 29, 2012). In a preliminary study conducted in 2007, newcomer students

in Sherbrooke reported challenges in social integration due to discriminatory and assimilationist attitudes of their host society peers (Steinbach, 2010b). As in other regions of Quebec, this school board has historically adopted the Quebec Ministry of Education policy of all newcomers attending closed *classes d'accueil* (welcome classes) where numbers permit (De Koninck & Armand, 2011). The objectives of *classe d'accueil* are to learn oral and written French language and to integrate into Quebec school and society (Gouvernement du Québec, 2004). In *classes d'accueil*, newcomer students spend all their time at school in their class-group with other immigrant students, including art, physical education, and English as a second language classes, with no contact with students from regular stream classes.

However, since 2009 the local school board has introduced a hybrid policy with the possibility of direct integration of certain newcomer students into regular classes, with some hours of linguistic support per week (called *francisation*), rather than closed *classes d'accueil*. This policy change raises questions as to the best practices in the integration of newcomer secondary students. Although the system of closed *classe d'accueil* has long been critiqued for the social isolation it causes (Allen, 2007; McAndrew, 2001), the hybrid system with more direct integration has met resistance in the local school context. Aside from the resistance of Quebec-born students to the increasing population of newcomers in their school (Steinbach, 2010a), anecdotal evidence from many practising and future teachers indicates their opposition to a system of more direct integration of newcomer students because of the perceived increased workload for regular stream teachers and their lack of preparation to deal with direct integration. In order to learn more about the welcome offered to newcomers in secondary schools in our region, we followed a cohort of adolescent immigrants during their first two years in Quebec.

Reciprocal process of integration

This study draws on a socioconstructivist perspective (Vygotsky, 1962), where knowledge is co-constructed by both parties involved in dialogue. Therefore newcomer students are not alone in creating the discourses of integration, but are in dialogic interaction (Bakhtin, 1981) with host society students. Acknowledging this reciprocal nature of integration is essential in understanding the co-constructed process of transformed cultures in societies receiving immigrants. From this theoretical viewpoint, intergroup contact between newcomers and host society students leads to a process of cultural changes, possibly on the part of both groups involved, which is referred to as the process of acculturation (Berry, 1997). Following a dialogic approach,

and focusing on the role of the receiving society, the Interactive Acculturation Model (Bourhis, Moïse, Perrault & Senécal, 1997) outlines five acculturation orientations (integration, assimilation, segregation, exclusion, and individualism) of host society youth as they interact with their immigrant peers, which we found very useful in organizing the themes from our interviews with Quebec-born students. Another important theoretical contribution to this study is the body of work following Allport's (1954) theories of intergroup contact, which confirms the importance of the four conditions of equal group status, common goals, intergroup cooperation, and institutional support which are necessary for positive intergroup contact. From this bidirectional perspective on integration, acculturation, and intergroup contact, we explored the integration process of a cohort of newcomer students.

One cohort in Sherbrooke

There were 48 students between the ages of 12 and 16 who immigrated to Sherbrooke in the last six months of 2009 (according to school board enrolment), and we documented their first two years in three secondary schools. We conducted individual in-depth interviews with 31 students after six months, 25 students after 12 months, and 22 students after 24 months in Quebec (six students moved away, two were said to have gone to adult education schools but we could not locate them, and one died). Semi-directed interviews were used to provide a cohesive structure for all three rounds of interviews, and to obtain authentic perspectives on their integration experiences with host society students and teachers, the acculturation strategies they employ, and their perspectives on the receiving strategies of the host society students and school culture. The 48 students of this cohort were from Columbia (14), Congo (11), Afghanistan (5), Nepal (4), Iraq (4), U.S. (2), Senegal (2), Algeria (2), Tunisia (1), Morocco (1), Russia (1), and Mexico (1). There were 15 boys and 33 girls, aged 12 to 16 on arrival; 26 of these students began at school A, 18 at school B, and 4 at school C in direct integration (without *classe d'accueil*). There were also seven students at school A and one student at school B who began in direct integration without *classe d'accueil*. Two years later, at the time of the third round of interviews, 18 of the original 48 students had moved away, eight had moved into adult education programs, and four into special education programs. The 22 students remaining through our third round of interviews were from Congo (7), Columbia (6), Nepal (4), Iraq (2), Senegal (1), Tunisia (1) and Morocco (1), with nine in school A, two in school B, five in school C, three in adult education, and three in special education programs.

We interviewed 39 Quebec-born students in the same three schools, in order to understand their roles and perceptions of this integration process. With the local students, a mixture of individual and focus group interviews were employed to understand their perspectives on the integration process of their newcomer peers. We also interviewed eight of their teachers. In each school we conducted interviews with the *francisation* teacher, as well as a *classe d'accueil* teacher in the two schools where *classes d'accueil* were offered. In all three schools we interviewed teachers of regular stream classes who received some immigrant students in their classes. All interviews were recorded, transcribed verbatim, and the data were coded using N'Vivo software.

It is important to mention that the three secondary schools have quite different sociodemographic profiles. School A is situated in the most multiethnic neighborhood of the city, where immigrants have traditionally settled, and this school has offered *classe d'accueil* for forty years. This neighborhood is characterized by a relatively low socioeconomic status. In 2010 there were 1055 students in the school, with 55 in *classe d'accueil* and 46 in *francisation*, primarily from Latin America, Africa, South Asia, and the Middle East. School B is also situated in a low socioeconomic level neighborhood, but this neighborhood is ethnically homogenous (Quebec-born) with very little diversity. In 2010 the student population was 1340, with 37 students in *classe d'accueil* and 20 in *francisation*, primarily from the Middle East, with some students from Latin America and a few from Africa and South Asia. School C is in a neighborhood with a high socioeconomic level and almost no ethnic diversity. Now that the hybrid program permits selected students who are judged capable to enter directly into regular classes, this school has begun to receive immigrant students. In 2010 there were 1381 students in the school and 24 in *francisation*, primarily from Columbia, with a few African students. In the differing contexts of these three schools in Sherbrooke, we gathered data from a cohort of newcomers, some of their Quebec-born classmates, and a few of their teachers, in order to paint a portrait of their integration process from various perspectives, as described in the following results of our study.

Perspectives of immigrant students

The four major themes that emerged from the interviews with immigrant students were segregation, differences, discrimination, and language barriers. As in previous research (Steinbach 2010b), the interview data demonstrate a strong desire on the part of newcomer students to make friends with host society students. Although further data analysis of the second and third rounds of interviews reveals

some ambiguity and contradictory desires, the importance of having Quebec-born friends remains essential in all of the interview data. However, many newcomer students reported feelings of isolation and segregation in their new school contexts.

Mes amis ne sont pas québécois. Ils ne parlent jamais avec nous... c'est difficile de trouver un ami québécois. EIL31:12¹

My friends are not *Québécois*. They never speak with us... it's difficult to find a *Québécois* friend.

They explained that they did not have access to speak with host society students because there were none of them in their *classe d'accueil*, and that Quebec-born students socialized only with each other.

Peut-être quand j'irai dans la classe régulière, là je pourrai avoir des amis québécois parce que ce seront des gens de ma classe... mais comme je suis encore dans la classe d'accueil là, c'est encore difficile. EID18:11

Maybe when I go to regular classes, there I will be able to have *Quebecois* friends because they will be people from my class... but as I'm still in *classe d'accueil*, it's still difficult.

When students were probed as to the reasons behind their difficulties in forming friendships with Quebec-born students, aside from the obvious institutional barrier of the physical segregation of *classe d'accueil* students from regular stream students, they spoke of differences in culture, religion, and values as barriers to these relations.

Je ne peux pas être trop proche d'eux parce que je respecte toujours ma religion...des soirées dans les discos, de l'alcool... mes parents ne me laissent pas. EID48:13

I can't be very close with them because I still respect my religion... evenings at nightclubs, alcohol... my parents don't allow me.

They explained that they did not have the same socialization patterns, habits, customs, or religions, and that the values of their families were very different. Discrimination came up as one of the most important themes in interviews with both newcomer and host-society students. Aside from a few cases of physical harassment, they primarily described discrimination in the form of unpleasant looks, aggressive body language, and a lack of openness or willingness to communicate.

Je marche avec des copines et quand ils nous croisent, face à face, ils nous regardent d'une façon étrange, comme s'ils avaient vu quelque chose de pas plaisant. EIL35:11

I walk with girlfriends and when they pass us, face to face, they look at us in a strange way, as if they had seen something unpleasant.

Finally, these immigrant students continued to mention the language barrier as a considerable challenge in their social and academic integration process. They described the frustrations of being unable to communicate well enough and impatience with the time required for learning enough French to be able to thrive academically and socially.

Perspectives of Quebec-born students

The four most important themes from the host society student interviews were intergroup conflicts, ethnocentrism, positive intergroup relations, and diverse acculturation orientations (assimilation, segregation, integration, individualism). From the perspectives of the host society students interviewed, the conflicts described between the two groups of students stemmed from their view of immigrants as a threat to their space and identity. This resentment seemed also to derive from a hierarchical idea that immigrants have unfair advantages in a competition for limited resources and social status which should be the domain of Quebec-born citizens.

Moi je dirais que pour s'intégrer premièrement ils ont juste à ne pas faire des quartiers chinois... c'est comme s'ils étaient chez eux pis on leur donne ce qu'ils veulent là...

C'est ça. 'Faque' là, ils continuent comme s'ils étaient là-bas, mais avec nos avantages. Pis en plus avec leurs avantages... dans le fond, ils ont droit de tout faire là. (GQB1)²

I would say that to integrate first of all they have to stop creating ghettos... it's like they are at home and we give them everything they want...

Yeah. Like, they go on as if they were there, but with our advantages. And on top of it they have their advantages... in the end they have the right to do anything.

The second theme of ethnocentrism helps to explain how the confrontations between the two groups of students result in mistaken generalizations, especially where there is only negative intergroup contact. Several students interviewed attributed stereotypical common cultural traits to all immigrant students, and used terms such as *les Tamouls* to refer to all students of immigrant origins.

Aside from these negative themes, principally from students interviewed at schools A and B, there was also some interview data on the theme of positive intergroup contacts, especially at school C where several of Allport's (1954) conditions for positive intergroup contacts were in effect. Some students in this school were more understanding of the challenges of immigrant students, and thought that their host-society classmates usually attempted to welcome newcomers.

La majorité... ils essaient de voir des Québécois, on les aide aussi, des fois s'il y a quelque chose qu'ils ne connaissent pas, on fera qu'ils apprennent, vraiment à parler correctement le français, puis, non je pense qu'ils font des efforts. ÉQC1

The majority... they try to approach Québécois, we help them also, sometimes there's something they don't know, we arrange it so they understand, really to speak French correctly, so, no, I think they make efforts.

Finally, almost the whole range of acculturation orientations (Bourhis *et al.*, 1997) were represented by host society students. Those interviewed in schools A and B held assimilationist or segregationist orientations. Students with an assimilationist orientation thought that newcomers should reject their culture of origin in order to adopt Quebec culture. Several students held a segregationist orientation, indicating that newcomer students should not mix with host society students, and they did not have any interest in integrating these students into their school or their social group. However, some students from school C displayed integrationist orientations. These students believed that newcomers could adopt Quebec culture while maintaining their own culture of origin. While there were some examples of this type of discourse, about half of the students interviewed at school C still had mitigated views on the limits of an integrationist orientation. Finally, some students at school C expressed an individualist orientation, viewing newcomers as students who are there to study, regardless of their skin color, their culture, or their country of origin.

Perspectives of teachers

The interview data from the teachers was divided into four themes: the importance of socioaffective factors, difficulties of social integration, structural challenges to integration, and logistical and administrative challenges. Rather than the expected linguistic and cognitive challenges, these teachers focused on the importance of socio-affective factors such as psychological fragility and feelings of security. On the second theme, the teachers interviewed spoke at length of their students' difficulties in social integration, and the rare possibilities of socialization outside of class. One teacher explained the importance of mastering social codes of the host society, such as learning to see behaviors which were acceptable in their home country (girls holding hands or playing skipping games in secondary school), as inappropriate in their new context. Another teacher mentioned discrimination as an important obstacle to their social integration, explaining that despite the pluricultural environment of the school, students describe experiences of discrimination at the hands of students and teachers.

The third theme of structural challenges has to do with the difficulties of changing one's perspectives and ways of functioning to adapt to a new and different system. Students must forget the structures they are used to and learn to function within a different system, where, for example, memorization is not highly valued. Finally, these teachers explained the considerable logistical and administrative challenges involved in meeting the learning needs of this student population. The lack of pedagogical materials is keenly felt, but there is no easy solution in such heterogeneous class contexts. A teacher may have to prepare several different activities for 19 students in a *classe d'accueil* who are at very different levels, from a student who has never attended school to one who has finished secondary school in his country. Other administrative challenges include the challenges of placing students in the most appropriate classes, the transition between *classes d'accueil* and regular classes, organizing time schedules for *francisation*, collaboration with regular class teachers, the precarity of positions of *classe d'accueil* teachers (due to the constant flux in student enrollment), a lack of opportunities for professional development, and perpetual underfunding.

Discussion

While teachers, host-society students, and newcomer students all have different perspectives on this welcoming process, there are some common issues to discuss. The one common issue running throughout all the interview data is the complexity and heterogeneity of perspectives. While the data from newcomer and host society students and their teachers all reveal difficulties in the process of social integration, the individual voices within each of these groups were not homogeneous. Although the immigrant student interview data consistently spoke of the desire to form friendships with Quebec-born students, in-depth data analysis revealed conflicting and contradictory desires and behaviours on the part of the immigrant students interviewed. When probed on their individual reactions and strategies in response to the segregation, discrimination, or language barriers they experienced, we discovered conflicting attitudes toward host society students and their values which are sometimes difficult to accept. Some host society students expressed criticism at the way immigrant students did not make enough effort to adapt to Quebec culture:

On dirait qu'ils ne veulent pas laisser leur culture. Comme dans leur tête, ils sont toujours dans leurs anciens pays. Mais ils vivent au Canada...Mais pourquoi t'es venu si tu détestes le pays ? 'T'sais' ça m'énerve ! Parce qu'au pire, tu pouvais rester là-bas. GÉQA2

You'd think they don't want to leave their culture. Like in their head, they are still in their former country. But they live in Canada...So why did you come if you hate this country? You know, it annoys me! Because in the end, you could have just stayed there.

Some immigrant students described their difficulties in accepting the individualist values prevalent among host society youth.

On a des règles à suivre comme des adolescents ne peuvent pas manquer de respect à des adultes. EID11:I2

We have rules to follow, like teenagers cannot lack respect for adults.

While some Quebec-born students held acculturation orientations of assimilation or segregation, based on stereotypical ideas of the other group or rooted in insecurities such as the perceived threat of immigrants in a situation of limited resources (Stephan, Renfro, Esses, Stephan & Martin, 2005), some immigrant students held unrealistic ideas about the values and lifestyles of Quebec-born students.

Au niveau de leur comportement, les enfants québécois ont plus de liberté, ils peuvent faire ce qu'ils veulent. Ils font des conneries, ça c'est de mauvais comportements. Dans mon pays, tu n'as pas vraiment le droit de faire cela. EID19:I2

In terms of their behaviour, Québécois kids have more freedom, they can do whatever they like. They do crazy stuff, and that's bad behaviour. In my country, you really aren't allowed to do that.

Both groups of students displayed ethnocentrism in their categorisations of the other group as homogeneous without diversity (Abu-Rayya & White, 2010), which is a common consequence of the natural process of social categorisation (Tajfel, 1981).

Although the interview data from the host society students included themes of conflicts, ethnocentrism, and more negative acculturation orientations of segregation and assimilation than positive ones of integration or individualism, the theme of positive relations demonstrates diversity in the perspectives of host society students. Particularly in school C, interview data indicates the presence of some positive intergroup contacts which may have been facilitated by a relatively lower population of a different type of immigrant students (those judged capable of direct integration), and the absence of a segregated *classe d'accueil*. These factors seem to have fostered some positive intergroup contacts such as a reduction of anxiety and an increase in empathy for the other (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2011). Thus we see heterogeneity with the perspectives of both groups of students interviewed.

The complexity in the teacher interview data lies more within the interconnected web of logistical and administrative challenges of integrating immigrant students into existing programs. Although the lack of pedagogical materials was a major concern of *classe d'accueil* and *francisation* teachers, their descriptions of the extremely heterogeneous groupings, not only of levels of French language but also of school experience, complicates the possibility of using prepared pedagogical materials for the group. The logistics of placing students in appropriate classes is also very complicated because of multiple advantages and disadvantages for language learning, social integration, future academic trajectories considering students' age, mastery of subject matter, and probability of academic success. Teachers' focus on socioaffective factors and the difficulties of social integration for immigrant students reinforces the themes from interviews with both groups of students.

Conclusions and implications

Despite the diversity and complexity of the perspectives of immigrant and Quebec-born students, the intergroup contacts described by these students and their teachers are mostly negative, as we only found evidence of positive intergroup contacts for the small minority of immigrant students integrating into school C. The students' themes of segregation, discrimination, intergroup conflicts, and ethnocentrism, combined with the teachers' focus on the importance of socioaffective factors and the difficulties of social integration, paint a picture of a rather cool welcome for newcomer students to these schools. While it is not within the scope of this study to compare administrative practices at various schools, it may be useful to note some administrative practices and elements of the contexts that seem to foster more positive intergroup relations at school C than at the other two schools. The presence of *classes d'accueil*, which by definition segregate newcomer students both physically and symbolically from the rest of the student body, seem to reduce the possibility of positive intergroup contacts, inherently devalorising intercultural relations. The higher density of immigrant students in schools A and B seem to augment the risk of their being perceived as a threat and an irritant, thereby diminishing the warmth of the welcome. As a high density of immigrant students is an unalterable element of the context, and *classes d'accueil* are still the most common way of language learning for most immigrant adolescents in Quebec, administrative practices and policies concerning funding and program planning should consider the importance of the possible negative consequences of these contextual elements.

The teacher interview data also indicate some administrative and pedagogical adjustments that could facilitate the welcome process. Increasing the financial and human resources available to *classe d'accueil* and *francisation* programs in order to better meet the needs of newcomer students would go a long way in improving the welcome that educational institutions can provide for immigrant students. A different system of financing could provide more stability of teaching staff and resource staff, as well as the possibility for these staff members to allocate more time and energy into collaborating with each other to coordinate the academic integration process of immigrant students (TCRI, 2011).

However, the effects of some of the negative issues involved in the process of social integration can only be reduced by the creation of more inclusive school discourses, which cannot be simply solved with more financial resources. Although linguistic and academic integration are obviously major concerns, all three sets of interview data place much more importance on social integration, which is sometimes seen as a precursor to linguistic and academic integration. The political will necessary to create more inclusive school discourses would lead to more inclusive policies and programs. For example, one administrator or teacher responsible for the welcome process of each immigrant student, including relations with their parents, could also ensure these students' involvement in extracurricular school activities by seeking out their interests and encouraging their participation. Each immigrant student could be paired with a volunteer host society student who would act as a mentor in their social integration process. The school could prioritize cultural and educational special activities that necessitate the participation of immigrant students and their families, with the aims of educating all students on current international events and fostering intercultural relations. Wherever possible, budgetary choices could favor the language learning process of newcomers and facilitate their academic and social interactions with host society students. Many of the structural and systemic challenges to school integration are rooted in discriminatory discourses, which indicates a great need for intercultural education for all students, both those of immigrant origins and those born in Quebec, as well as for their teachers. Initial and continuing teacher education should prepare teachers to function effectively in diverse settings and to foster their students' attitudes of openness to diversity (Steinbach, 2011) and to practice pedagogical differentiation in order to meet the needs of all students.

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NOTES

1. The first letters indicate the school of the student and their number in the cohort of 48, and I2 indicates the second interview with that student.
2. The letters indicate the school and a focus group interview; the number is the focus group number.