

Social Studies in Quebec: How to Break the Chains of Oppression of Visible Minorities and of the Quebec Society

Viviane Vallerand
M.A. Student
Educational Leadership and Societal Change
Soka University of America
1 University Drive
Aliso Viejo, CA 92656
viviane.vallerand@gmail.com

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Abstract

Despite having multiculturalism as a core value, the province of Quebec has significant issues affecting the inclusion of visible minorities, such as positive discrimination, reasonable accommodation, and the fact of cultural divide. The presence of these minority groups brings out the tension between respecting differences and protecting 'unity' in Quebec society. The social studies curriculum in Quebec schools offers a traditional multicultural education one effect of which is to reinforce a vague and neutral notion of citizenship. This helps to foster homogenization and oppresses visible minorities by pre-supposing a dominant culture. The paper makes recommendations for a social studies curriculum less content driven and more centered on participatory and critical learning processes to reduce social injustices, to reinforce a more culturally tolerant society and to help visible minorities to emancipate themselves from their oppressive status.

Keywords: Canada, Quebec, Visible Minorities, Social Studies, Intercultural Education, Citizenship Education

Introduction

No pedagogy which is truly liberating can remain distant from the oppressed by treating them as unfortunate and by presenting for their emulation models from among the oppressors. The oppressed must be their own example in the struggle for their redemption. (Pedagogy of the Oppressed Paulo Freire, 2005, p.54)

As a distinct cultural minority in Canada, the people of the province of Quebec have a history of being oppressed by English Canada and with it long-held fears of being

assimilated by the dominant English culture. In spite of this history, Quebec society tends to recreate the same pattern of oppression with visible minorities, including, for example, underrepresentation in public service, under-employment, and poverty (Bouchard & Taylor, 2008). These minority groups are defined as "persons who are, because of their race or colour, in a visible minority in Canada" (S. Li, 2000, p.4) and represent 11.0 % of the Quebec population and 19.1 % of the Canadian population (Statistics Canada, 2011). Their presence in the Quebec society raises issues, false issues in many cases, of the proper balance between respecting cultural differences and fostering 'unity.' In 2006, those social tensions led to a heated debate over what constituted "reasonable accommodations" for visible minorities. In response to this debate the Bouchard-Taylor Commission, created to study the issue, concluded that Quebec's identity insecurities are misguided and that "the real task for the government and citizens is to reflect on and take responsibility for the inequalities experienced by immigrants and ethno-cultural minorities" (Bouchard & Taylor, 2008, p. 21).

Statement of the Problem

Multiculturalism is considered as a core value of the Quebec identity. However, Quebec's identity insecurities lead to a desire to assimilate visible minorities rather than embrace the richness of their cultures. Consequently, these minority groups are still struggling with discrimination, racism and social injustices that have reduced their opportunities for success and a sense of belonging. This alienating state can lead to violent radicalization or passive alienation which can have severe economic and social consequences. These inequities seem to find support in Quebec's educational system, in part, through a social studies curriculum that posits the existence of a dominant culture within an otherwise intercultural society. The resulting approach to citizenship education, purposely vague and undefined and essentially passive, exacerbates the problem.

Analysis of the Policies

The Canadian educational system is decentralized meaning that each of the 10 provinces, including Quebec, and three territories are responsible for curriculum, organization, delivery and assessment of education (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2015). In its educational curriculum, Quebec promulgates Geography, History and Citizenship Education courses during elementary and secondary schooling. On the geographical and historical plan, the program presents the social, economic and political features of the Quebec and Canadian societies throughout time and space starting from aboriginal societies during the 16th century to the contemporary Canadian society. It also covers prehistory, antique civilizations and Western societies (Ministère de l'Éducation, 2004).

Despite educating Quebecer students on the history and the culture of their province, of their country and of some parts of the world, the social studies curriculum can easily fall into a normative and assimilationist discourse which maintains social injustices toward visible minorities. The fact that the program is mainly centered on Canadian and Western history can suggest to the visible

minority that Western and Canadian cultures are superior to the Eastern cultures that are frequently a part of the visible minorities' background. According to Dachyshyn and Kirova, such 'colonial master narratives' can oppress visible minorities as the "newcomers continue to play their part as the object of dominator culture. Thus those who internalize the notion of being guests in their country of residence are unable to feel responsible for their condition" (2011, p.223). This discourse of homogenization can persuade visible minorities to adopt the oppressor culture to release themselves from social injustices:

The very structure of thought (of the oppressed) has been conditioned by the contradictions of the concrete existential situation by which they were shaped. Their ideal is to be men, but for them, to be men is to be oppressors. This is their model of humanity. (Freire, 2005, p.45)

Such a perspective can only result in the repetition of social injustices. To break this ongoing cycle, the social studies curriculum should eschew grand historical narratives for a more personalized, participatory and critical learning process. Such an ideal would help every student to choose to study cultures and specific histories through research, thinking and discussion in the aim of building their own identity and "the diverse histories associated to it" (Papa & Wilmore, 2016, p.203).

The social studies curriculum of Quebec includes intercultural education which can be defined as "an effort to develop a better understanding of different cultures, a greater ability to communicate with people of other cultures and positive attitudes towards other groups" (Fournier-Sylvester, 2014, p.3). The intercultural education of Quebec tries to differentiate itself from the Canadian multicultural education often criticized from fragmenting cultures. However, the difference between the two programs is "virtually nonexistent" (Fournier-Sylvester, 2014, p.3). In spite of its good intentions, intercultural education offers a traditional vision of the cultural complexities and nuances from Quebec and Canadian societies and from the world. First, the intercultural program creates a 'folklorization' of the minorities cultures in the world. According to Dachyshyn and Kirova, "this approach has resulted in multiculturalism that has constructed minority groups in static, essentialist, and exoticized terms while also situating such groups outside the Canadian nation" (2011, p.222). Second, the current citizenship education is becoming irrelevant as it presents outdated geographical, cultural, economic and political boundaries. With the massive migration movement around the globe and interconnections increased by technologies, people considered themselves having multiple cultural identities (Fournier-Sylvester, 2014). Intercultural education must fulfill the needs of visible minorities to build their plural and complex identities to have a better understanding of "who they are and where they come from" (Papa & Wilmore, 2016, p.203).

The Quebec Education Program vaguely defines the concept of citizenship education in three main orientations:

1. Examines social phenomena from a historical perspective;
2. Interprets social phenomena using the historical method; and,
3. Constructs his/her consciousness of citizenship through the study of history. (Ministère de l'Éducation, 2004, p.294)

This definition is similar to the North American concept of citizenship education, which views citizenship as a liberal democratic ideal that promotes equality, an equality that can only be attained, however, by exercising the rights enshrined in governing documents. Yet, this discourse is being accused of “false universalism” neglecting any real and deep reflections on gender, class and race (Fournier-Sylvester, 2014, p.4). This discourse not only harms visible minorities that are relatively unconscious of their oppressive status, it perpetuates the assimilative discourse of the Quebec society. In a research study of Quebec secondary students, the fear of losing their cultural identities with the arrival of visible minority newcomers justified for them the assimilationist discourse of citizenship education in a failure to adopt that discourse to a more culturally diverse and accepting society (Steinbach, 2010). The conception of citizenship can promote unity only if it acknowledges discrimination and inequality (Fournier-Sylvester, 2014). Thus, the citizenship education curriculum should include human rights and social injustice activism so students will have a better understanding of the discrimination that visible minorities and other minority groups struggle with. Also, social studies practices are being criticized as too passive, preventing students from being more active in their learning. By being active, students give more meaning to their knowledge and develop a desire to get involve in their society inter alia to break social injustices (Fournier-Sylvester, 2014).

Social injustices and human rights teaching could also lead oppressed visible minorities to realized their oppressive state: Critical theorists (Brown, 2008; Delgado & Stefancic, 2000; Freire, 2005; Ladson- Billings & Tate, 1995; Lynn & Adams, 2002; Lynn & Jennings, 2009; Vaught & Castagno, 2008) suggest that liberation of a marginalized population begins with facilitating the process whereby the oppressed see how they have been oppressed, pressed, or marginalized (Stewart, 2012, p.181). From this social awareness, visible minorities should have opportunities to apply themselves in the society so they can take concrete social actions because “to surmount the situation of oppression, people must first critically recognize its causes, so that through transforming action they can create a new situation, one which makes possible the pursuit of a fuller humanity” (Freire, 2005, p.47). For those reasons, schools should let students take action on social injustices that affect them, their family and their community (Papa & Wilmore, 2016).

Conclusions

Quebec social studies programs harm visible minorities by privileging a normative culture, by proposing an outdated vision of interculturalism, and by taking a passive approach to citizenship education. To break the chains of visible minorities’ oppression, the social studies program should forsake its historic and dominant culture perspective for a more participatory and critical learning process entailing the study of history, culture, ethnicities, social injustices, human rights and social action. Nevertheless, “social justice includes, but goes beyond, the basic curriculum. It involves the total campus culture and climate and what type of focus it places on relationships between all groups of people” (Papa & Wilmore, 2016, p.205). In spite of the focus over social studies content in this article, groups of people implicated directly and indirectly in the schooling process should also be looked to promote a social studies program that can truly restore social justice.

Policy Recommendations

1. The Quebec Education Program should be less centered on content and should promote skills to build complex and strong ideas from content. Here are skills that could be developed in the social studies curriculum:
 - a. Critical thinking, to have a profound and complex understanding of historic events, cultural diversity, human rights and social injustices.
 - b. Research, to identify independently school subjects that are meaningful and interesting for students.
 - c. Empathy, to be more aware of the status of discriminated groups and to develop the capacity to discuss and work harmoniously with others.
 - d. Creativity, to help students solve concrete social problems through social actions in their community.
2. The social studies curriculum should gradually replace compartmentalized academic subjects with a curriculum constructed on themes and societal issues with a holistic approach. Those themes could create links between geographical, historical, cultural and societal knowledge to have a better understanding of human rights and social injustices that have effects on visible minorities such as xenophobia, racism, discrimination and stereotypes.
3. The social studies curriculum should integrate the historical perspective to citizenship education to show how the past can influence citizens to take social actions in the present so students become inspired to bring social change in the future.
4. The Minister of Education should reduce the social studies content to give more freedom to students so they can decide which history, ethnicity and culture they want to learn about to have a better understanding of their own cultural identity and those of others.
5. Teachers should abandon passive social studies knowledge for a pedagogy that reinforces discussions and projects so students can actively build their understanding of the world, culture and citizenship and can develop a desire to get involved in their society.
6. Students' family, school and community should cooperate to provide opportunities for them to empower themselves by taking social actions which can improve their society.

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