

The Commitment to Promoting a Culture of Equity in Quebec Secondary Schools: Insights from School Stakeholders — A Secondary Publication

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Abstract: This paper presents the results of a research project on the intercultural climate in schools and the academic success of immigrant students in Quebec. The intercultural climate in eight secondary public schools is documented from the standpoint of various school and community stakeholders, students, and parents. More specifically, the paper focuses on the commitment to promoting cultural equity, which is identified through interviews with the targeted stakeholders on exclusionary practices and processes and the practices implemented to counter them. The results identify five areas of vulnerability among certain minoritized groups of students: the transition from welcoming to regular classes for those students learning French, evaluation and support for those experiencing learning or behavioral difficulties, the referral of these students to adult education programs or work-oriented training programs, their participation in extracurricular activities, and their access to special school projects. Nonetheless, some schools do report the introduction of many equity practices in response to the exclusionary ones. However, these initiatives are mostly occasional and voluntary and pertain to interactions between individuals. These findings call for a discussion on the importance of systemic and concerted initiatives towards achieving equity.

Keywords: Educational inclusion and exclusion; Educational inequalities; Immigration and ethnicity; Canada

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1. Introduction

The international scientific literature shows that the adoption of multicultural, intercultural, anti-racist, and citizenship education policies and practices in schools is likely to play a significant role in the school integration and sense of belonging of students from immigrant backgrounds ^[1-3]. Despite their terminological, epistemological, ideological, and pedagogical differences, these educational approaches converge within the inclusive approach ^[4], which requires educational environments to implement equity policies and practices that take into account the diversity of students, especially those from minority groups, and promote social justice to facilitate the full current and future participation of all in teaching/learning as well as in social and cultural life ^[5,6].

In Quebec, the recent Policy on Educational Success ^[7] aligns with this approach. In 2016, the Superior Education Council ^[8] already called for a focus on equity, relying notably on the definition proposed by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development ^[9]: “Educational equity implies that personal or social circumstances such as gender, ethnic origin, or family background are in no way obstacles to the realization of the educational potential (equity) of each individual.”

However, despite the overall perception among students from immigrant backgrounds and their parents that the Quebec school system offers significant opportunities for social advancement and that their success is equivalent or even superior to third-generation and beyond students, various tensions related to cultural misunderstandings and systemic issues have been identified in Quebec research ^[10]. On the one hand, various studies confirm the existence of significant problems in practices and school processes concerning students from immigrant backgrounds, particularly regarding the recognition of credentials and academic ranking. These practices have exclusionary effects, especially on newly arrived students receiving support for learning French ^[11], students completing their secondary education in the adult education sector ^[12], and students facing difficulties in their academic journey, especially those belonging to certain racialized groups ^[13]. On the other hand, students and parents belonging to marginalized or stigmatized communities more often report exclusionary behaviors or practices ^[14,15].

In light of these findings, this article addresses the perspectives of educational community actors regarding commitment to a culture of equity within their institution. Indeed, “a teacher who perceives inequalities and subscribes to the fight against them can be a valuable partner in implementing measures on the ground” ^[16].

First, we will define what is meant by a culture of equity and its operationalization in the context of this research. Subsequently, the methodological choices of the study focused on in this article, as well as those of the research project from which it emanates, will be presented. After giving voice to participants regarding the five vulnerability zones and equity practices aimed at countering them, we will discuss the contributions of our approach to the implementation of equity by school actors.

2. Conceptual framework

Often defined in contrast to formal equality, equity involves considering the specificities of students to ensure the reduction of potential obstacles to their success ^[17,18]. It constitutes one of the objectives of the inclusive approach, specifically centered on “the most vulnerable” students to guarantee their right to education: “[e]quity challenges the system’s ability to provide resources, implement means adapted to needs, make its services and resources accessible without discrimination, and adapt its practices and curriculum to make them meaningful and relevant” ^[19]. Thus, by its systemic nature, we prefer the term “culture of equity” here, similar to other works, to surpass a prescriptive and decontextualized logic where equity is reduced to a list of practices to be implemented, recognizing the importance of a shared vision among educational community actors in this regard ^[20,21]. Equity practices are conceived as bidimensional, consisting of the actions taken, as well as the strategies and ideologies carried ^[22,23]. They refer to both the practices actually implemented and those desired by school actors.

Literature also highlights favorable conditions for implementing a culture of equity, including:

- (1) Recognition of inequalities and exclusion processes within the school space;
- (2) Presence of monitoring indicators related to the success of students from minority groups;
- (3) Mobilization of the entire educational community to promote the educational success of all students;
- (4) A systemic vision of students’ academic difficulties questioning the school’s responsibility in this regard ^[5,6,24-28].

However, several challenges related to the implementation of this culture of equity emerge from the literature. On the one hand, implementation involves determining who these “vulnerable students” are, i.e., target groups consisting of “those who actually have the least chance of benefiting from standard educational services” [29]. However, focusing on “characterizing and counting the excluded” [30] is not enough; it is also necessary to understand the processes of constructing them. Equity requires recognizing exclusion processes and their effects by challenging equal treatment for everyone. In this sense, based on historical waves marked by the different legal foundations of the international inclusive education movement [31], exclusion processes are defined as resulting from various unequal social relationships, including the segregation of student populations, the reproduction of educational inequalities, as well as symbolic violence and the imposition of identities. These unequal social relationships can hinder the physical and pedagogical accessibility of the right to education for students from immigrant backgrounds, as well as their recognition in the school space [32]. Physical accessibility, addressed in a specific article of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, states that schools and their activities must be affordable and accessible to students, without architectural, financial, transportation, or informational constraints for participation [3,33]. This physical accessibility, which some authors qualify as a “technicist conception of accessibility” [34], should be combined with pedagogical accessibility, aiming to develop students’ potential through cooperative and innovative pedagogies and collaborations with the educational community, recognizing the diversity of students from school staff, relying on a “contextual and ecological apprehension” of the latter, as opposed to “too essentialist an apprehension or considering that the child’s characteristics are the foundation of what ‘poses a problem’” [34]. These unequal social relationships become visible within zones of vulnerability, “aspects of the education system or specific situations that raise questions regarding access to education or access to educational success” [35]. On the other hand, equity practices can sometimes contribute to reinforcing exclusion processes or even to generating new ones. Like exclusion processes, which can be based on a lack of support or inappropriate support, equity practices aimed at countering them can end up widening the gaps between the most advantaged and the least advantaged, and between the most advantaged among the least advantaged and the latter [29].

Thus, in this contribution, the commitment to a culture of equity will be understood based on the vulnerability zones identified by educational community actors and on practices, implemented or desired, aimed at countering the exclusion processes on which they are based.

3. Methodology

The data presented here are derived from a larger project focusing on the intercultural climate of schools and the educational success of students from immigrant backgrounds. Data collection took place in eight Quebec public high schools, five located in the greater Montreal area (schools A, B, C, D, and E) characterized by significant ethnocultural diversity (50% or more of students from immigrant backgrounds) and three outside this area (schools F, G, and H) with less than 50% of students from immigrant backgrounds. These schools are diversified concerning the socioeconomic environment index [36].

The project employed a mixed methodology involving semi-structured interviews with various members of the educational community (about 13 per school) and a questionnaire administered to students aged fifteen to eighteen (n = 1598). The interviews covered the five dimensions that allow understanding the intercultural climate:

- (1) The school’s commitment to a culture of equity;
- (2) The status and legitimacy of cultures and languages of origin in classroom practices and in the norms

and regulations of institutions;

- (3) The attitudes of staff towards students and families of diverse origins and diversity in general;
- (4) The quality of intercultural relations between students and staff of diverse origins;
- (5) The school's support for the identity construction of young people from diverse backgrounds ^[37], as well as the state of the educational success of students from immigrant backgrounds.

These interviews were based on a common template but adapted according to the profiles of the encountered categories of actors.

A progressive data analysis approach ^[38] was conducted. Initially, a descriptive overview of the intercultural climate of each school was created based on the interview template and the different dimensions of the intercultural climate already documented ^[39]. This analytical step allowed an initial organization of the data by school and the identification of the interview corpus for each dimension. Consistent with the definition of a culture of equity presented earlier, the participation of actors both inside and outside the school, capable of taking a systemic perspective beyond the classroom boundaries on the exclusion processes of students from immigrant backgrounds, was favored. In this sense, the statements of school principals (DIR, n = 23), non-teaching staff members (PNE, n = 35), and representatives of community organizations (OC, n = 12) constitute the corpus.

4. Results

The analysis of semi-structured interviews revealed five vulnerability zones identified by school actors and actresses. These zones will be discussed one by one, and for each of them, effective or desired equity practices aimed at addressing them will be presented, where applicable.

4.1. Transition from reception to regular education for students learning French

Within the collected statements, the most significant vulnerability zone discussed in all schools concerns the concerns of the encountered school actors, including directors, non-teaching staff members, and representatives of community organizations, regarding the transition from reception to regular education. In this context, the role of physical isolation in reception classes is mentioned, along with the lack of professional preparation of teachers working in these classes, the lack of continuity between the functioning of reception and regular classes, undue prolongation in reception, and the lack of support for integrating students into regular classes, as well as the resistance of teachers in these classes to such integration. The following excerpts illustrate some of these concerns:

“It is not bad teachers, but to say, ‘Well, I cannot stop for them [students who attended reception]. My other students are in regular, they have to succeed.’ Okay, but you have to adapt. You know, making statements like that, out loud, is exclusion.” (PNE, C)

“I always feel deeply uneasy about the poor students who spend years in reception classes, and then they arrive here, they come in grade 9 [secondary 3], and they are already eighteen.” (PNE, A)

Actors and actresses from all job categories and all schools in our sample also referred to equity practices related to this vulnerability zone. They suggest developing or enhancing supplementary language support offered to students in regular classes after attending reception, as well as implementing a protocol to support collaboration among school actors during the transition:

“Over the years, we realized that there are students who, when integrated into French, still need support. So, for the past two years, we have allocated a person for specific follow-

up when they are integrated.” (DIR, F)

“Earlier, I was telling you that we have an integration process. If this process is done well, that is, we present the student individually, not just send an email. [If] this presentation is done very well, progressively with an intervention plan and the presence of the teacher who will have the student, it will work.” (DIR, G)

4.2. Evaluation and support for difficulties of immigrant students

Interveners from seven schools, primarily PNEs, identified a vulnerability zone related to the categorization of students as “in difficulty.” Their statements reveal, on the one hand, the obligation for some students to be identified as disabled or having difficulty in adaptation or learning before receiving support and, on the other hand, the lack of available tools that consider the specificities of immigrant students.

“We cannot necessarily label them, leading to services because it is complex and all the rest. Or sometimes, the *evaluation takes so much time... Some arrive; it is been a year, I am sure there is something, but they just arrived, we have to give them some time. I do my evaluation, make assumptions, but the entire process that is normally done in elementary school at a young age [...] we have not done it. So, they arrive at twelve-thirteen years old. At fifteen, we determine that there is still something, and services arrive much later. Well yes, I admit it is not fair in that sense.*” (PNE, G)

“*Conducting a psychological evaluation in a student, it follows American standards. If we evaluate a student who comes from immigration, it is sure that our test could score practically deficient when it is not the case. We have to be very careful about that.*” (DIR, H)

Actors and actresses from each school, mainly PNEs, identified equity practices implemented or desired concerning this vulnerability zone. Some propose the realization of informal evaluations, such as classroom observation and the collection of information involving the family and community, the use of interpreters during interviews with the family, and prioritizing support for the student’s progress rather than evaluation:

“*Certainly, when I conduct evaluations, parents must be included because I need the child’s history. Trying to understand, at a young age and all that. Parents must be involved. Ideally, in certain situations, yes, I try to involve parents because often the child’s difficulties are also linked to the family. So, it is good to be able to meet the parents. Not all children agree to let me see [their parents], but when I can do it, I like to do it.*” (PNE, E)

“*When it is a student who has not been here long, I think it undervalues significantly. And I think we need to be very careful about that because it sticks. Often, I fight for them not to be evaluated right away, and even after two years... Some say, ‘evaluate anyway, but write: it has not been long.’ Yes, but I do not like that because it sticks. Someone else will interpret it who reads it later... And instead of evaluating, we should provide help anyway. You know, a student with difficulty, is it always necessary to evaluate them forcibly? At a certain point, evaluation clarifies the profile, but I think sometimes we can provide help without evaluating.*” (PNE, B)

4.3. Orientation of immigrant students toward general adult education or employment-focused training paths

Interveners from all employment categories representing five schools mentioned the orientation of students towards other sectors or training paths as another vulnerability zone for immigrant students. Here, the

orientation towards these sectors would result from a funding constraint related to keeping immigrant students in the youth education sector or a transition of immigrant students who arrived during secondary schooling or had accumulated a significant academic delay towards less valued pathways:

“In general, they do not accumulate too much delay, but when you do not speak the language and you arrive after primary school, it is very difficult [...]. At eighteen, the rule is that if you are not eligible for graduation the following year, I cannot keep you. So, a student who, in the third year of high school, turns eighteen before June 30, I cannot keep them. [...] In fact, it is the funding we do not have. This student would not be funded because they have exceeded the age set by the Ministry.” (PNE, A)

“At some point, well, they [students from welcome classes] have academic delays and are referred to PPT [work preparatory training] or FMS [training leading to a semi-specialized trade]. They are disadvantaged, for sure. They have accumulated delays. It is a limitation of the system.” (PNE, D)

In four schools, directors, as well as a PNE and a representative from OC, identify some equity practices related to this vulnerability zone. According to them, information and awareness activities about the functioning of the Quebec education system for students and their parents, especially regarding vocational training or general adult education, help diversify the qualification paths for some of these vulnerable youth. Additionally, initiatives to align the pedagogical functioning of adult education centers with that of secondary schools and the establishment of a partnership with the community promote their academic perseverance:

“But, overall, it is a project [implemented in our school board] for students who have reached about Levels 2–3 [of language, school, and social integration program language skills development] [...]. They are adults, but the organization resembles high school more. [...] They stay in their groups [class]. [...] As they progress through the levels, we decrease the number of hours of language integration to increase the number of hours, for example, in mathematics, we will integrate sciences, history, etc. so that they can earn credits [to obtain their high school diploma].” (DIR, E)

“We are associated with an external organization, and it is to prepare young people for employability who we could not graduate because there are young people who arrive with very significant academic delays and [even] though we can keep them until eighteen, they will never have a diploma in Quebec. So, we prepare them either for the job market or to integrate adult education.” (DIR, F)

4.4. Participation of immigrant students in extracurricular activities

Interveners from five schools also identified various non-mandatory activities offered outside of school hours as another vulnerability zone for immigrant students. Indeed, directors and PNEs mentioned various obstacles to such activities, including financial and logistical aspects, as well as the lack of information among immigrant students about them, especially regarding their operation. As a result, these students would participate much less.

“It is open to everyone [trips]! The only real capacity is the financial capacity of parents. [...] There are [immigrant students], but I would say very few have done this type of trip. [Among] young people who specifically arrive for French language integration... No... [it is] a bit more difficult.” (DIR, F)

“But extracurricular activities, which are more implemented on the regular side, I do

not think the clientele of French language integration, which is not really integrated into the regular program, participates that much. [...] They will participate in what is organized by French language integration. [But] what is organized by the school itself [...] I do not hear that they go there.” (PNE, F)

In response to these findings, directors, PNEs, and representatives from OC in each school identify different equity practices, such as personal initiatives to inform students, an offer of activities specifically for immigrant students, and various practices aimed at reducing constraints related to transportation and incurred costs.

“There are [students from welcome classes] that I try to integrate into extracurricular activities, in lunchtime activities because things that seem obvious to us, well, in retrospect, I realize that for them [...] it is more abstract, less clear. Now, they come to me: ‘Madam, what can I do at lunch?’ [...] They have understood this because at the beginning, they did nothing. So, now, they know where to get [information]!” (PNE, C)

“In fact, they [immigrant students] are engaged, but they are engaged a lot, I think, by the structure that we have set up. The fact that we can have a committee [...], which is a committee where we gather them, they do social actions, and so on... It greatly helps the sense of belonging of these young people. So yes, these are involved young people.” (DIR, F)

“You know, to adapt or, in any case, to offer a variety of sports that can appeal to more people. Maybe football is not something [...] that is accessible to everyone, but basketball is still something that should not be so complicated to set up in a school. [...] It is because it should not cost much. You know, since it is often disadvantaged youth. If it is expensive, parents cannot afford to enroll them. [...] For there to be extracurricular activities, they would have to be free, and they would have to be accessible. There would have to be transportation for these young people who often do not even have the money to buy a bus pass to get around.” (OC, C)

4.5. Access of immigrant students to special projects

Lastly, directors, PNEs, and a representative from OC from three schools also highlighted the limited access of immigrant students to special projects offered in their establishments as a vulnerability zone, due to the selective nature of these profiles.

“Basically, when they leave the welcome classes, usually they will not be in concentrations [special projects] because they need to have an upgrade done by the regular program so that they can keep up. It does not predispose them to have concentrations at that time.” (PNE, C)

“It is a program that is contingent and based on performance essentially at admission, so there are very few students from French language integration who enter the program directly. However, students who have arrived from immigration, who have done part of their elementary education in French language integration [...], but who are subsequently integrated into the international education program... We have several of them, and these students perform as well as other students who are of local origin, as we could say.” (DIR, F)

In this regard, directors, PNEs, and a representative from OC working in three schools propose, as equity practices, individualizing the student’s schedule or providing material support and raising awareness among parents to facilitate immigrant students’ access to a special project.

“We will integrate a student [into a special project], and we will look at who the student is and which group could receive him. So, we have discussions; let’s say the student, we know that we have a very good group, for example, second-year music. [...] We also look at who the teachers are. So, we will say: ‘Well, this student, with the profile he has, well, he could fit well into that group.’ But in that case, suppose he is not good at all in music or has never done it, we will remove his music concentration periods and put him back in French language integration or in French support measures. So, we integrate him into a concentration group that we judge is best for him.” (DIR, G)

“With all our families, we try [...] to have them enroll their children in programs because they find themselves... [...] they end up in the regular program. So, I try with families to say: ‘Try’! [...] we ask parents to try to choose [these] programs. And if there is no money, the school has a foundation.” (OC, G)

5. Discussion

5.1. Documented vulnerability zones

The documented vulnerability zones suggest that educational actors are capable of recognizing various aspects and situations within the Quebec education system as indicative of exclusionary processes. This is a prerequisite for the implementation of a culture of equity, as some express a tendency towards the “invisibility of discrimination”^[16] or lament the “lack of clear identification and recognition of exclusion mechanisms” among staff^[19]. Moreover, three of the vulnerability zones align with challenges already explored in Quebec research^[10-13]. Some recent works also share concerns about the other documented vulnerability zones.

Regarding the participation of immigrant students in extracurricular activities, the lack of opportunities to engage in such activities would disadvantage these students^[40]. Indeed, our results tend to show that costs and required equipment, constraints related to transportation, and lack of information about registration are obstacles to the physical accessibility of immigrant students to these activities.

Concerning access to special projects, the limited number of spaces, associated costs, and selection criteria hinder their physical accessibility, thereby impeding their pedagogical accessibility, especially for immigrant students with higher-risk profiles^[10], particularly for newcomers with limited proficiency in French^[39]. In this case, these programs would favor “those who understand the power dynamics of the school game”^[41].

Furthermore, regarding the orientation towards employment-focused educational pathways, internationally, the OECD^[9] reiterates the negative impacts of early orientation and selection on students from minority groups. In this case, it would be a relegation mechanism whereby immigrant students are directed towards a path that does not lead to a high school diploma and “move from a rather valued sector to those that are less and less valued, resulting in the construction of a one-way path between sectors”^[42].

Although these zones have been documented separately here, they are often addressed in an interconnected manner. Given its prevalence and the fact that it is a recognized critical period^[41], the transition from welcome to regular classes has close relationships with other documented vulnerability zones. This is the case, for example, with the orientation towards general adult education, which is often discussed as a follow-up to the transition to welcome classes, the low participation in extracurricular activities, linked to the lack of contact between students from welcome and regular classes, and restricted access to special projects, often justified by the absence of academic prerequisites. The preeminence of the welcome-to-regular transition in the collected statements converges, at least in part, with the focus of the statements of the interviewed actors on welcome class students, mainly first-generation students, regarding both vulnerability zones and declared equity practices.

Thus, although the term “students from immigration” used in interviews refers to a plurality of experiences and realities, there are few references in our results to specific issues related to first-generation French-speaking students or second-generation students, indicating a hindrance to their recognition. However, the results of the broader project demonstrate that second-generation students are more likely to struggle to “benefit” from the school experience and perceive the intercultural climate of their school as less equitable^[37].

Finally, these vulnerability zones constitute spaces where exclusionary processes become evident. They involve obstacles of different kinds that can be associated with the segregation of school populations, the reproduction of school inequalities, as well as symbolic violence and the imposition of identities. These zones are based on barriers to accessibility, initially physical and then pedagogical, related to measures of schooling or valued extracurricular activities: regular classes, the general education sector, extracurricular activities, and special educational projects. These barriers act as dividing lines within the school, segregating students into determined spaces for schooling and school socialization. This spatial organization is also accompanied by a particular pedagogical organization (differences in functioning, programs, materials) that contributes to reproducing hierarchical school experiences. Finally, the practices of evaluating and supporting the learning and behavioral difficulties of immigrant students justify the distribution of students in this spatial and pedagogical architecture by assigning labels or even identities that reveal their “needs.”

5.2. Equity practices

In addition, faced with these vulnerability zones, various equity practices, often punctual, voluntary, and individualized, have been identified. These include providing material and logistical assistance to students and transmitting information, as well as supporting students and their families in navigating the educational system.

Other declared equity practices rely on interventions specifically targeting immigrant students. While these interventions aim to address their needs and serve as a guarantee of equity, they run the risk of contributing to the crystallization or even segregation of this group as the “other,” contradicting the sought-after equity. Indeed, “[t]his exclusion is not intentional, and the various situations that lead to it often start from a principle of benevolence or even an intention of inclusion. It is the cumulative implementation of actions that ends up harming those it aims to help, contributing to what Deniger, Lemire, and Germain call ‘morbid benevolence’”^[41]. For example, this is evident in extracurricular activities specifically for welcome class students that may limit their opportunities to socialize with their regular class peers or in practices that fail to critically question the organization of the Quebec school system into streams and its effects on immigrant students.

Finally, few stated equity practices aim to establish new structures or ways of doing things that challenge the entire educational community. In this regard, it is believed that the implementation of initiatives focused on the voices of immigrant students, dialogue with the community, and the expansion of different forms of engagement contributes to making educational opportunities more equitable^[40]. Although few declared equity practices move in this direction, two require a transformation of the work of educational actors to collaborate with the educational community in questioning and collectively transforming the exclusionary processes affecting them. This includes efforts to harmonize pedagogical organization between general education for young people and that for adults, as well as the desire to prioritize support for students over the evaluation of their difficulties. In our opinion, these systemic equity practices have the potential to benefit various students, whether they are immigrants or not.

6. Conclusion

Our approach has revealed the ability of educational actors to recognize vulnerability zones concerning

immigrant students within their establishments, contrary to the assertions of some authors. While “structural changes could certainly improve school equity”^[29], our results suggest that the lack of systemic initiatives in response to identified vulnerability zones seems to contribute to their persistence. Indeed, a commitment to a culture of equity allows the school to move towards greater social justice, distancing itself from its role as a reproducer. However, it exposes itself to a tension that calls for vigilance. Since equity is based on a certain categorization of audiences, such an objective may contribute to the marginalization of certain groups of students or the invisibility of others. A concerted reflection, allowing the development of a common vision of equity, is an avenue to be favored, as stated by one participant:

“To make differences, I would fear that it would create sparks... Frictions, explicitly naming... I do not see how it could be experienced positively. [...] I think that the staff, to start with... having this debate at the adult level, that would already be a big challenge.”
(PNE, A)

Finally, while our approach has only focused on one dimension of the intercultural climate, a connection of these findings with the other documented dimensions is necessary to understand more precisely how perceptions of immigrant students and their families can impact the way equity is envisioned, especially in a social context increasingly polarized around these issues.

Disclosure statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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