

The "Public" in Public Schools: A School Board Debate

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In this article I explore the debate about common schooling in an increasingly diverse and less deferential Canada. In a case study, I describe how one school board reacted when dissatisfied parents tried to establish a traditional school. The board rejected two such proposals, consistent with its policy of inclusion. The parents made it clear that there was no agreement about the meaning of inclusion and the nature of schooling in the district. This "politics of difference" poses questions about teachers' work, democratic decision-making, and school policy that are not addressed when school choice is treated as a market phenomenon.

Utilisant une étude de cas, l'auteure fait état des discussions entre une commission scolaire et certains parents au sujet de la politique d'inclusion en vigueur dans le Conseil scolaire. Les parents ont mis en relief l'absence de consensus quant au sens du terme « inclusion » et au type d'éducation à mettre en œuvre dans la circonscription. La politique traditionnelle de la différence suscite des questions qui ne sont pas considérées quand le choix de l'école est traité comme un simple phénomène de marché.

The tradition of the common school is long and venerable. Educators have argued that common schools would create a single, cohesive public out of a diverse and fragmented population, a position that has resulted in compulsory, state-funded education in North America (Prentice, 1977; Tyack, 1974), Europe (Green, 1990; Miller, 1995), and Asia (Anderson, 1991). The state used schools to provide children from diverse backgrounds with a common experience, language, curriculum, and qualification for the labour market. Common schooling continues to be passionately defended as the crucible of citizenship, equal opportunity, and social cohesion (Barlow & Robertson, 1994). However, in an increasingly diverse and well-educated society, Canadians are subjecting the assumptions underlying common schooling to new kinds of debate.

Current political theories point out that any notion of shared belief, and therefore of the common school, is based on acts of exclusion, and an unwillingness to recognize difference and opposition. Theory has taken a turn towards the postmodern, seeing in consensus the power of a dominant

discourse, and in the preservation of difference, a way to promote democratic debate and enhance equality through legitimizing different cultures, beliefs, and perspectives (Benhabib, 1996; Good & Velody, 1998; Young, 1990). "Pluralism is not merely a fact . . . it is constitutive at the conceptual level of the very nature of modern democracy and considered as something we should celebrate and enhance" (Mouffe, 2000, p. 19). Feminism and multiculturalism have motivated and elaborated this critique, arguing that institutional recognition of the culture and discourse of the other is necessary for justice and equality (Modood, 1996; Squires, 1998; Taylor, 1992).

Such theorizing challenges common public services from medical care to education, forcing discussion of their underlying cultural assumptions (Fadiman, 1997; Feinberg, 1998). In Canada, Kymlicka's (1995, 1998) work has been particularly important in pointing out that traditional conceptions of citizenship, democracy, and education may be based on unstated assumptions about ethnic or cultural homogeneity; with growing recognition of the importance of culture, these conceptions need to be questioned. He has argued that Canada enjoys more support from its immigrants than other countries because it has allowed for difference in its institutions, including its schools.

Despite the rhetoric about common schooling, Canada has never had a version of the common school with national citizenship as an agenda because conflicts about what constitutes a nation have been at the heart of the country's politics (Jenson, 1995). Schools have been the locus of some of the most difficult contests over the meaning of the constitution and citizenship in Canada (Riffel, Levin, & Young, 1996). Recognition of Quebec and the First Nations has meant recognition of their right to shape the education of their children in distinctive ways. The constitution recognizes provincial jurisdiction over schooling, and it allows for religious schools. But the way in which Canadian schooling recognizes group difference continues to be controversial, as Newfoundland's elimination of religious schooling and Ontario's funding of private schools indicate. The treatment of minority ethnocultural communities and religions other than Catholicism is particularly contentious as such groups seek greater recognition and accommodation of their differences. The treatment of difference in schooling is never static and is highly politically charged because it references "our" assumptions about what children should learn in common, as citizens.

School boards are an important locus of debate about the nature of the common school: the "public" in Canadian schooling. Their influence varies

over time, and from province to province, but everywhere school boards adapt provincial regulations to reflect the culture and needs of local communities. They must make decisions about how much difference and what kinds of difference should exist in schools. In this article, I have explored how one Canadian school district grappled with the problem when challenged by a demand from parents for a traditional school to provide a more structured experience for their children. Although the debate is usually taken up as a question of markets and choice, it is viewed here as a challenge to the idea that the common school entails the same kind of instruction for all students and as an exploration of the meaning of pluralism, difference, and democracy in education.

METHOD AND SETTING

This is a case study of one school board, chosen because of its conscious commitment to inclusive policies. I focused on how this board understood inclusion. The board approved the research and I began with a particular focus on the dilemmas in one school. While the study was underway, the demand for a traditional school put the politics of inclusion directly on the school-board agenda.

The research team, which included myself and several graduate students, spent about a year in the district, gathering documents, attending meetings, and interviewing parents, school-board trustees, administrators, teachers, and students. We obtained videotapes of two board meetings from the community television station. Every person who agreed to be interviewed received information about the study and signed a consent form agreeing that the interview be tape recorded and transcribed. We promised that all publications would conceal the names of the interviewees and of the district, and we have allowed some time before publishing the findings in an attempt not to exacerbate tensions. The superintendent received a draft of this article and responded with very useful comments. Involvement in the research is characteristic of the district's commitment to openness and debate.

The research site was a suburban community where almost half the school population is of Asian heritage, mostly Chinese speaking. Because city planners created mixed neighbourhoods across the district, poorer or immigrant families did not predominate in any area. People at the board office spoke of the district's distinctive cohesion and the ability of different groups to work together. However, the relationships between the white and immigrant Asian communities have not been easy. Old-timers raised

concerns about monster houses being built for extended Asian families. Some lamented that it was no longer necessary to speak English to live in the district because Chinese-language radio stations, supermarkets, and civic organizations have developed to serve the new immigrants. Political conflicts were often represented as cultural conflicts between the Asian and white communities, though the English press examined the views of Asians solely for their cultural underpinnings.

Some of what people are mourning is the lack of . . . a white rural farming community where we all knew each other . . . it's about social economic change, it's about rural versus urban. Bedroom communities turning into cities . . . those who want to use it, can think of it in racist terms. (board administrator)

The increasingly visible differences in language, architecture, culture, and socio-economic status across the district concerned the board, especially because the board had fewer resources for schools.

My view is society is fragmented and people's commitment to common values is weakening. It's happening in schools. You've got financial cutbacks and all sorts of diversity and stress, and all of those things conspire to make people kind of jittery, and look at each other funny. (school administrator)

The district, then, is a microcosm of an increasingly plural and urban society where old cultural norms are being challenged, while the ideal of shared values is still widely, but not universally, held.

THE SCHOOL BOARD AND ITS INCLUSIVE IDEAL

Most of the seven school-board members had long roots in the community, were Caucasian, and spoke English as their first language. Two locally constructed political parties participated in school-board elections. Although candidates' affiliations were listed on the ballot, the distinctions between the parties have not been strongly drawn. "You would have people that were provincially or federally New Democratic and Conservative on the same slate municipally. . . . Most of the groups do not have a particular agenda. Mostly they pool together for advertising purposes," said one trustee. They can, however, be loosely distinguished in their views of how public schooling should reflect Canadian citizenship. One party emphasized the importance a common version of schooling, of doing what is "right, not politically expedient." As one candidate put it, "You have to decide what you want as a Canadian citizen and deal with that and not

just deal with who your clientele is." The other party was open to a plurality of views and was more market-oriented. As one of their candidates put it, "I used to be a buyer for a department store. That experience has conditioned me to be responsive to people in the community . . . Never mind what you like, it's what the public wants. And also, you have to be aware of the competition." The balance of power has changed over time, with the second group in a slim majority position at the time of this research.

Trustees from both parties have endorsed an inclusive philosophy for the district. The board's mission statement says that the district's "success is dependent on the existence of a common vision which results in collaborative action on the part of all." This policy developed out of a widely admired attempt in the 1980s to mainstream students with disabilities by doing away with segregated schools and classes. The policy requires that all students, including students with severe handicaps, attend their neighbourhood schools in regular classrooms. Trustees, teachers, and administrators described inclusion as "a belief system, a value system," the district's "religion," the district's "culture." Board administrators were its guardians.

Inclusion . . . is a value system which embraces not only integration of special needs students but also the understanding of individual differences and diverse learning styles which characterize all classrooms. . . . While an inclusive school provides special programs and services when needed, it rests fundamentally on the attempt to create an inclusive curriculum in every classroom. (1993 board policy paper)

The policy encouraged all schools to teach the same comprehensive program. While there were a few specialized programs, including French immersion, the International Baccalaureate, and some vocational programs, the board had "an aversion to magnet programs" because it feared "separateness and informal hierarchy of experiences and program offerings between the schools in the district." The district policy limiting cross-boundary enrolment was strictly enforced as a way of building community, avoiding competition, and solving the administrative problems of allocating students to schools.

In the real world you don't get to work with like-minded people. You have to learn to deal with everybody in the world. (trustee)

[The problem with allowing cross-boundary transfers is that] instead of staying at the school and building the school and dealing with the personalities and improving the situation, they're [students are] always wishing they were somebody else, or somewhere

else. . . . You don't get the building process from that, you get a competitive process.

As the number of ESL students grew, the district integrated them into neighbourhood schools. School trustees tried to avoid "testing and labelling" and the institutional separation of the newcomers. The district-wide parent organization did not want the board to meet with a Chinese-parent association, founded to help newcomers cope with the school system. Some trustees and administrators agreed with them.

We have said there's only one parent association and we're not going to relate to parents based on their ethnicity. It would be considered to me totally racist to consider only speaking to German parents as a German Association, or English parents or Chinese parents. (trustee)

In this system, diversity occurred within, rather than among, classrooms, leaving the teacher "with central responsibility for designing, implementing and evaluating the student's educational program." The teachers' union was strongly committed to maintaining the inclusive policy, being a partner in educational decision-making, and recognizing and protecting the professional expertise of its members.

[We have adopted] a conception of the role of teachers as educational leaders, as doing professional development, as collaborating on decision making that is different than the traditional notion of a union which is to be oppositional and just there to protect rights. (teacher union leader)

The Teachers' Federation . . . believes that teachers really should be the ones that say what counts as good pedagogy. (administrator)

This climate of collaboration with teachers has produced the flexibility necessary for the inclusion of special needs and second-language students. The collective agreement allowed the district to exceed the designated maximum number of students with special needs in a class if the teacher felt adequately supported. The district has been "very successful" in obtaining such agreements. As one trustee noted, "We're lucky we have a contract that allows us to do that."

To summarize, the board's policy of inclusion was based on trying to build district consensus in the face of conflict, rather than giving public form to different views. It left teachers with the responsibility for pedagogy in their own classrooms.

CHALLENGES TO THE CONSENSUS: PROPOSALS FOR A TRADITIONAL SCHOOL.

In the late 1990s, two different proposals to create what was labelled a "traditional school"¹ stimulated a major debate about the policy on inclusion. The two proposals came from two different groups of parents over a period of about four years.

The first proposal came from a group of primarily Caucasian women who were unhappy for a variety of reasons with the pedagogy at their local school. The initiating mothers lived in a cohesive and geographically distinct lower-income community, with its own community newspaper: "It's a nice little community." The residents had organized previously for better community services and against an attempt to bulldoze their houses. The primary school, described as "a precious accomplishment," was reopened after ten years because of community pressure. But it did not suit everyone. One mother said she was "trying to find an alternative (pause) method of teaching that would bring out the best in our children because we were finding, at least I will say for myself, I was finding my daughter slipping through the cracks." Another mother commented, "My daughter was getting bored." The mothers tried home schooling for a short time, found the private schools too expensive, and "started looking around." They found out about a traditional school that had opened in a neighbouring district, did some research, and linked up with the provincial traditional school network. They decided that they wanted a traditional school and invited other parents and some founding members from the traditional school network into their homes for a meeting.

They were unable to get a lot of support at their first meeting. It became, as they put it, "very difficult" because some of their neighbours resented their attacks on the local school. They ran an advertisement in an English-language district newspaper that produced the names of 200 families with an interest in a traditional school. However, a public meeting was poorly attended, a phenomenon the organizers blamed partly on parents' fear of teachers' power, "because, you know, they'll take it out on our kids in the classroom" (parent). After meeting with many committees for almost a year, the mothers gave up when the board turned down their proposal.

A second proposal for a traditional school was brought to the board two years later and it received considerably more support. The main organizer had grown up in Hong Kong, where he had run for city councillor. He came to North America for his graduate education with "a

very big hope" for his children's future because of the "very good" educational system here. He thought his son "learned nothing" in kindergarten. Then he saw his son in grade one "sitting on the ground playing with toys." He could not afford a private Christian school for his son, though it was what he wanted, and he became determined to change the public school system. He ran for the school board as an independent candidate and was defeated. He conducted his own survey of parents, handing out questionnaires, in English and Chinese, at shopping malls. The results, published in Chinese and English newspapers, indicated concerns about homework and crime. This publicity attracted the attention of the media and the provincial traditional school network.

The English-language press and the school-board office strongly identified this proposal with the Chinese community. Community meetings about the proposal were held in Cantonese, and one meeting was cancelled because it conflicted with a Chinese holiday. A Chinese-language open-line radio program touted the traditional school and publicized the meeting supporters were holding. About 300 parents attended, about 95% of whom appeared to board administrators to be Asian. Observers at the board understood the demands to be related to Asian traditions of literacy and the organization of schooling in China, which one of them described as more "teacher centred, textbook centred, and examination centred."

The leader of the second attempt to get a traditional school was adamant that there was nothing "Chinese" about his demands, and that he had developed his ideas in Canada, in response to his experience in the district. The infrastructure of the Chinese community was very helpful, however, in enabling the committee to gather more than 3000 names on a petition and become a powerful political force.

Although the second proposal was more successful than the first, both proposals can be seen as an attempt to do what social movement theorists describe as "mobilizing diversity," giving a collective political form to the discontent of a few. Both proposals were a vehicle through which groups of parents envisaged a school community where teachers shared their values and beliefs about education. But they represented different communities. As one mother put it,

If they [the second group] got their school and they set it up, I would have to think twice about putting my child in an Asian school. I'm wondering, is my child going to be prejudiced against? Is it going to offer what my child needs? (parent)

In opposing the supposed consensus of the district, the proposals for traditional schools opened up not just a debate about pedagogy, but a

debate about the merits of recognizing difference in public educational space. And, as found in the substantial literature on school choice, the debate led to increased public participation in formal and informal educational politics (Brandle, 1998; Schneider et al., 1997).

DECISION-MAKING: DELIBERATIVE DEMOCRACY, ELECTORAL POLITICS, AND TEACHER AUTONOMY

The district's policy of inclusion involved a commitment to deliberation and discussion as a mode of decision-making. The board believed that involving partners in a conversation would develop understanding, modify hardened positions, and build the agreement and trust necessary for professional discretion by both teachers and administrators. They had adopted a version of "deliberative democracy" (Gutmann & Thompson, 1996), believing public policy deliberation should appeal to reasons that are shared or could be shared by fellow citizens and should take place in public forums.

Deliberative democracy is a demanding ideal. The parents' association, the teachers' union, and the trustees invested considerable time in focus groups, which the leaders of all three groups found effective in building shared understandings.

We've made a very special effort to communicate, to get them to understand. . . . We did a lot of focus groups. And when you've got to share your understandings and you've got to elevate your concerns and verbalize them and have people hear them and they understood you and we began to understand them. I mean it changed my attitude personally. I thought I was fairly open and democratic and I wasn't. Or considerate, you know. (trustee)

The first traditional school proposal went through a year's discussion, although most members of the board were predisposed to reject it from the start. As one proposal proponent recounted,

There was a year of meetings. We went to education committee (pause) I don't know how many times. Several times. Meetings with [the superintendent], meetings with [the associate superintendent], school board meetings, meetings with the Parents' Association. The proposal was sent out to the district and the only people who responded were the Parents' Association, and of course they didn't like it . . . we got quite a runaround. The education committee was very much opposed to the proposal from the beginning . . . continually asked the same questions. Then they sent us back to the board and the board turned us down. (parent)

Despite, and partly because of, the discussion, the proponents felt the

board did not treat them seriously. They described the discussions as “a runaround.” One parent described the attitude of the board: “We’re the teachers, we’re professionals, we know what we’re doing. You just go home and bake your cookies, and away you go.” The school board voted six to one against the proposal. Each trustee voting against the proposal mentioned the lack of consistency between the traditional school and the district’s stated philosophy.

The second traditional school proposal had more political support, and the chair of the board, who had been supportive of the first proposal, decided to hold a vote in principle before he invested much staff time in discussing the details of funding and implementation. Two long, well-attended, school-board meetings were held, and televised. The local teachers’ federation, the staff union, and the principals’ association argued strongly against the proposal on procedural grounds because the trustees were voting before discussion with teachers and administrators. They felt that traditional school supporters were making misinformed, arrogant, and critical claims about the existing system, that trustees needed to hear more from the professionals before making a decision, and that this was making political what should be an educational decision.

The administrators spoke of “utilizing established processes,” “consultation,” and “wanting to be part of a discussion.” The teachers’ union spoke of damage to the uniqueness of the district’s culture as a “genuine collaborative community,” the importance of “consensus building,” “honour,” and “respect” for the input of teachers, and not “accommodating threat.” They were “unequivocally opposed” to the traditional school. Parents spoke about the threat to the respect and trust that the board had built up. The Canadian Union of Public Employees staff were also “unquestionably opposed” to the manner in which a vote might undermine “our cherished collaborative culture.”

Everyone, every stakeholder group was just so angry. They said, well, where’s consultation on this, there’s no discussion..., how can you approve something like that? (board administrator)

Although it was overshadowed by discussions of process, there was some substantive discussion about the value and use of phonics in the district, about educational research, and about “splintering” the system or “providing choice.” Teachers were concerned that classrooms would become less diverse and that their professional autonomy would be compromised. Those opposed to the proposal used the language of inclusion to argue against a traditional school.

This is not inclusionary. . . . It presupposes that a parent would know how a child learns, and say that only these kinds of learners go to that school. (teachers' union spokesperson)

Those in favour of the proposal said they had been consulting with parents, had enough parents signed up for a traditional school, and wanted a vote.

system, and their concerns for their children in the "global economy." They referred to line-ups for traditional schools in other districts and suggested,

After two school-board meetings, the board voted four to three, along party lines, in favour of a traditional school "in principle." Trustees against

Those in favour argued for responsiveness to parents and the need to compete with the private system. One school administrator described the

However, a trustee who voted for the school commented,

My vision of inclusion is this: we are including people system wide. It's still inclusion but you, who have a difference. (trustee)

At this point, the board set up a 16-member committee that included administrators, trustees, and the district parents' association to look at how to implement the agreement-in-principle. A trustee and a retired special education policy, co-chaired this committee. It met 11 times for two-and-a-half-hours every other Friday morning.

for their nightmares and their dreams for their children. At the level of general ideals, it was hard to tell the traditional school supporters from

from the traditional school or not" (committee co-chair). The educational concerns of the critics were redefined into the larger issues of

classrooms in the same school. One chair said there were the "two big issues I knew from the beginning."

after what the co-chair described as a few "outbursts." They did not agree with the redefinition of the issues, and they felt powerless to resist. They

not being paid, as were the school officials and teachers' federation representatives.

This is fooling around. . . . They have to pay money for the committee and we have to pay our time, volunteer, to join a meeting every week, three hours. And then finally only one statement — "we agree with everything you said," period. Then we do something else. (traditional school supporter)

The teachers persisted in the discussion, making some compromises, recognizing limits to their autonomy by accepting the need for more consistency, routine, and discipline.

The final issues were around the relationship with the union and the issue of professional autonomy. To what extent can you push teachers to teach in a more consistent kind of way and what are the mechanisms for making that work? It's got to work on the ground so parents can see it. (school administrator)

The committee report recommended against setting up a designated traditional school, instead advocating for a program emphasizing consistency and communication in every school. The committee argued that one traditional school would not meet the demand, that it would cost a great deal, that it was likely to attract mostly Asian students, and that all schools needed to examine their pedagogy. It reiterated the district's commitment to the integration of students in neighbourhood schools.

The report convinced the trustees to vote unanimously in favour of the new program.

The Teachers' Association is happy; they said we're working together. Parents' Association is happy, everybody is happy. . . . There's a lot of hard work on everybody's side. (committee co-chair)

The traditional school supporters, however, were not happy. In the local newspaper, the prime organizer denounced the committee report as "not sincere or responsible" and designed to "throw us a curve ball." And he was not happy about being criticized publicly for opting out of the committee before the final report. As he said,

[The superintendent] said that we are worried about the Asian community who . . . will not come out for the discussion. . . . We discussed that for how many years? And you still ask me to come back to the table and discuss the subject again? What a stupid statement! . . . My goodness. . . . We talk too much already.

The local newspaper quoted an administrator as saying that a traditional

school "would only isolate and insulate the Asian community even more and increase the tension that already exists in the community between Chinese and Caucasians." In interviews, school-board administrators reiterated the concern.

I'm really concerned . . . [that] it would become a Chinese school. My concern is where are they going to learn English? Who are going to be the models? How are we going to teach our kids to integrate while we separate? And also it is contrary to our philosophy of inclusion. We've been working our butts off to get the kids included and now we're looking inadvertently to approve a motion to get kids excluded. . . . We've already got some tension here, racial tension, potentially ugly. (board administrator)

At least one Asian parent activist believed these were "dangerous" and discriminatory views because Caucasians supported traditional schools, attended them in other districts, and presumably would attend this one.

The committee's deliberative process rebuilt consensus at the board level and among key stakeholder groups, but did not change the minds of the traditional school advocates. The process of committee deliberation structurally favoured educators, comfortable with the language of education, and paid for the time they spent in educational committees. It effectively marginalized the views of parents who wanted a traditional school, even though they had won a vote. The existence of racial tension, the necessity of large time commitments, parents' lack of familiarity with the system, and varying interests in and beliefs about schooling created differences that the opportunity for deliberation could not reconcile.

There's a lot of individual anger that people have, which is based on prejudice and bias. There's also a lot of truly valid concerns that people are afraid to raise because of the charged environment and the ability of certain groups to point at them and call them racist or sexist or whatever. (school administrator)

We're in a partnership here, but that partnership has become an exclusive inner circle, in truth, . . . people are discriminating against [the Chinese parents] because they don't have the language. And I'm not talking about Chinese parents advocating in an English system. I say that because they don't have the educational language. (trustee)

The district renewed its commitment to outreach and consultation after the decision was taken, recognizing that consensus about its policy on inclusion had to be built anew. School officials went on Chinese-language radio and invited community leaders to the board. One trustee summed it up: "We almost lost it on that one, but everybody is working and speaking in the same language now. A lot of people are watching us too."

Mansbridge (1993) has pointed out that appropriate forms of democracy

differ depending on the degree of common interest in solutions and that deliberation “usually requires a strong leaven of commitment to the common good” (p. 342). Electoral politics, on the other hand, is designed for adversarial politics and the resolution of disagreements by the brute force of elections. In its commitment to a common vision, the board ultimately relied on committee processes to develop, or redevelop, a fragile consensus. This consensus reflected the power of professional educators and continued to silence the minority view.

CONCLUSION

This study has pointed to a continuing tension in many school boards between the appeal of the common school and the desire to recognize group differences. The board’s policy had a distinguished history, a principled rationale, and considerable institutional force, but groups of parents who wanted a different kind of schooling were increasingly challenging all those institutional resources. As Nevitte (1996) has pointed out, vigorous and increasingly sophisticated interest groups have become a more prominent fact of Canadian political life in many spheres, demanding recognition, mobilizing difference, and challenging any illusory consensus about the nature of what should be represented in shared public space.

This understandably worries professional educators concerned about equity, the professionalism of teaching, and the traditions of public schooling. Barlow and Robertson (1994) described it as an “assault” on Canada’s schools, which are in danger of “continuing to cede to selfish and political interests” (p. 236). Kalaw, McLaren, and Rehnby (1998) saw choice as allowing “like minded families to seek refuge from the diversity that must be served in public schools” (pp. 2–3) and traditional schools as “agenda items of neo-conservative (New Right) social and political movements engaged in a larger campaign to redirect and redefine public education” (p. 14). The board administrators in this study found the ideal of a common kind of schooling for all children was getting harder to sell. They had to devote an increasing level of commitment, expense, and hard work to maintain consent to a strong, inclusive version of schooling in a diverse urban district.

Demands for change are often framed in the language of school choice and markets, but they can also be seen as a demand for recognition in a plural democracy and a critique of the cultural assumptions that underpin current versions of the common school. As Kymlicka (1995) has pointed out, ethnocultural conflicts have not been resolved simply by ensuring

respect for basic individual rights and common schooling. These groups want greater recognition and accommodation of their cultural differences in public space. The notion of a common, non-discriminatory public space, with the expression of difference confined to the private sphere (through eating, clothing, religion, and sexuality, for example) fails not only because of the impossibility of separating the public and the private, but also because of the impossibility of neutrality in public space. Whatever its comprehensive and liberal character, public space is not neutral, and does not give equal recognition to all cultural beliefs and practices.

This goes for schools as well as other public institutions. The language, the public holidays, and the type of pedagogy in public schools are closer to the culture of some families and students than others. Schools are not neutral in relation to students' cultural identities.

Integrated schools in Toronto are inhospitable for Caribbean Black students because of the low numbers of Black teachers and guidance counselors, invisibility of Black authors and history in the curriculum, the failure of school authorities to crack down on the use of racial epithets by fellow students, double standards in disciplinary decisions, and the disproportionate streaming of Blacks into dead end non-academic classes. Among the consequences are rising drop out rates and reinforcement of the feeling that success in white society is impossible. (Kymlicka, 1998, p. 84)

Canadians have struggled over, and ultimately defined, citizenship in a way that allows for the recognition of group differences. As a consequence, public education must provide space for different groups to have different kinds of schools, within limits set by provincial authorities. The differences that emerge in Canadian schools reflect the beliefs and values of their communities, from Grandy's River in Newfoundland to downtown Vancouver. There is no common schooling for all Canadians, uneasy as some feel about that fact. Public educational space is fractured, and the fracturing is constitutionally guaranteed. The extent and nature of this fragmentation, however, is unlikely to ever be settled for long.

An educational politics that recognizes the legitimacy of group, not just individual, differences starts from the idea that public schools can and must serve different groups of students in different ways, not from any conception of the common school. It recognizes the value (rather than the threat) of pluralism and difference. As feminist political philosopher Iris Marion Young (1990) argued, "Attending to group-specific needs and providing for group representation both promotes social equality and provides the recognition that undermines cultural imperialism" (p. 191). She concluded that "a politics that asserts the positivity of group difference is liberating and empowering" (p. 166). Differences in schooling, within

common institutions and a shared commitment to the larger political order, are part of a vibrant civic society and a pluralist democracy, as any number of other political theorists point out. Touraine (1995) argued that democracy is above all a political regime that encourages new social actors to emerge and to act. Keane (1998), working from the experience of Eastern Europe, saw democracy as “the obligation to defend greater pluralism, and the emphasis on institutional complexity and public accountability as barriers against dangerous accumulations of power, wherever and whenever they develop” (p. 8).

A politics of difference provides a progressive way to reframe the debate about difference and choice in public schooling, but it requires continuing debate about the limits and possibilities of difference, about what is equitable and about what encourages discussion. Instead of defending a single notion of common schooling, the challenge for boards becomes defining what kinds of difference they should accommodate in educational programs, and what procedures can ensure a fair distribution of resources and access among them. Human rights legislation appropriately limits the kind of difference that can be expressed; finances, buildings, and curriculum shape what is possible. For teachers, the question becomes not preserving a neutral professional autonomy, but interacting effectively with different communities, recognizing the cultural assumptions embedded in all teaching practices. As much educational research points out, students learn in different ways, and their learning is embedded in their culture. For public policy, the issue is encouraging dialogue among fragmented public spheres, and enhancing participation in democratic decision making. Educational institutions must ensure that minority cultures are well represented and recognized while they continue to enter into dialogue with the majority.

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NOTE

- 1 A traditional school involves a more structured curriculum, more homework, more phonics instruction, and more focus on discipline than other schools

(Coleman, 1998). A province-wide network does research and provides support for such proposals, and some school districts have approved them. Coleman (1998) concluded that boards respond not to the quality of the proposal in any particular case, but to the political issues involved.

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