What do migrant parents expect from schools?

By Hanna Torsh  |  August 29, 2018  |  Education

When she was in kindergarten, my oldest daughter came home one day talking about “our soldiers” who “went to war for us”. It was the Anzac Day history lesson, a day which commemorates Australia’s involvement in World War 1 and the loss of life which resulted. However, just who was that “us” supposed to be?

My daughter has past and present relatives from the (former) Austro-Hungarian, British and Ottoman empires. As is true of most Australians, during WW1 my daughter’s ancestors would have actually been on both sides of the battle. This made me particularly uncomfortable with the idea of pitching a unified “us” against “them”.

As a parent, I expect my school to utilize a curriculum which is inclusive, not exclusionary and divisive. In fact, most of the time, they do. This was the only time I could recall that our school had tapped into this way of thinking about culture and belonging.

Educational curricula are powerful sites for the construction of national identity.

How does that work in a diverse society? What happens to newcomers who may not fit the dominant imagined identity? How can schools fulfill their obligation to meet the needs of students of different backgrounds while still attempting to instill a shared sense of identity and belonging?
in Francophone schools, which have as a central role the maintenance and construction of a Canadian Francophone identity. As part of the Lectures in Linguistic Diversity series at Macquarie University, Dr. Boutouchent presented her research on these schools in the small city of Moncton in New Brunswick, Canada.

New Brunswick is a province with a bilingual language policy, which means that citizens have the right to access services in either French or English. In addition, New Brunswick prioritizes French-speaking immigrants, in order to maintain its Francophone community.

In the Canadian context, research into immigrant students has tended to focus on Anglophone schools which are in the majority, have more experience with and are better resourced to manage the needs of diverse students. In contrast, little is known about the experience of migrant children in Francophone educational contexts, which are managed by the Francophone community.

So how do recent migrant families fit into this picture? Dr. Boutouchent and her team sought to understand how immigrant families perceive their children's education before and after their arrival in Moncton, and how they are involved in their social and educational integration.

The researchers interviewed 14 parents of families who had migrated from Africa or the Caribbean between 3-10 years prior and whose children were enrolled in Francophone schools. They found that there were some key issues for immigrant parents across the group.

The first was that immigrant parents felt they were not informed about the school system before arriving in Moncton. In particular, they did not know about the existence of Francophone schools. This group of parents was mostly highly educated and had very high expectations of their children's educational success. Although they had trusted that the school would be good quality because it was in a developed country, some were disappointed, and one mother even said she would have liked to teach her daughter at home if she had been able to.

These issues of quality were at times compounded by language. The local variety of French is quite distinct. The Acadian French identity is historically very strong, and is marked by an accent which may
arrival.

We know from the previous lectures in the series that children’s willingness to speak different languages changes over time and that schooling is a key time for the formation of language habits. A particular challenge for immigrant children in Moncton is constituted by the fact that local youths speak a variety called Chiac, a mixture of French and English. Francophone migrants raised with standard French found Chiac incomprehensible and alienating.

One participant reported that her son began to stay inside during break times because he could not understand or speak to his fellow students.

If you can’t speak to other kids, how can you feel like you belong?

Parents also reported that their children experienced bullying and racism, and that the schools were not always well-equipped to manage the needs of refugee children who were not at the same educational level as their peers. They also regarded the lack of inclusive, multi-ethnic content in the curriculum as a problem.

There are no easy answers as to how to balance the educational and linguistic needs of newcomers with those of old-timers, but a good first step is to listen to the voices of those who are living the encounter. Small cities, like small schools, have the advantage that the distances between people and institutions are smaller, making both problems and solutions more visible. This also means that change is potentially easier to implement.

Dr. Boutouchent finished her lecture by making the case that Moncton is a site where Francophone schools could become “spaces for intercultural communication and nourish a culture of understanding and acceptance”. That sounds like a goal which all schools and parents could agree on.
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Hanna Torsh is a PhD candidate at Macquarie University. Under the supervision of Prof. Ingrid Piller and Dr Agnes Terraschke her sociolinguistic research focuses on the experience of linguistic intermarriage in Australia between English speaking background Australians and migrants of other language backgrounds. She is also interested in language policy, multilingualism and second language learning and teaching. Hanna has a Masters Degree in Applied Linguistics from the University of Technology Sydney and has a background in English Language teaching in Sydney and Germany.

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Rémi Léger
August 30, 2018 at 11:20 pm

Hello there, it’s the Acadian, not Arcadian population. Also, I find the observation about Acadian v. Brayon curious. The Brayons in the northwest of New Brunswick, mę
Thank you for pointing that out and apologies for our mistake! We have now corrected the spelling of “Acadian” in the post and have removed reference to Brayon.
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