The Muslim Community and Education in Quebec: Controversies and Mutual Adaptation

Marie Mc Andrew

Abstract In this article, the author first deals with an overview of the socio-demographic characteristics of the Muslim community in Canada, especially in Quebec, and of its educational experiences in Quebec schools. She then analyzes in more depth three important controversies that have targeted the Muslim community in the last 20 years, respectively, regarding the teaching of Arabic at the end of the 1980s, the wearing of the Muslim veil in the mid-1990s and the wider reasonable accommodation debate, which did not specifically target it, in 2007–2008. In the third part based on a major survey of Quebec schools, she, nevertheless, argues that to some extent, these controversies have permitted to foster, to a certain degree, the adaptation of public schools to Muslim students' needs.

Résumé L'auteure donne d'abord un aperçu des caractéristiques socio-démographiques de la communauté musulmane au Canada, et plus spécialement au Québec, ainsi que de son expérience éducative dans les écoles québécoises. Elle analyse ensuite, de manière plus approfondie, trois controverses qui ont visé la communauté musulmane ces vingt dernières années qui concernent respectivement, l'enseignement de l'arabe à la fin des années 80, le port du voile islamique au milieu des années 90 ainsi que le débat plus large sur l'accommodement raisonnable en 2007–2008 qui ne la visait pas spécifiquement. Dans la troisième partie, en se basant sur une enquête quantitative importante dans les écoles québécoises, l'auteure fait valoir que ces conflits ont toutefois favorisé une certaine adaptation des écoles publiques aux besoins des élèves musulmans.

M. Mc Andrew (✉)
Chaire de recherche du Canada sur l'Éducation et les rapports ethniques, Université de Montréal, CP 6128, succursale Centre-ville, Montréal, QC H3C 3J7, Canada
e-mail: marie.mcandrew@umontreal.ca

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Introduction

Everywhere in the world, especially in Western immigration societies, the extent to which educational institutions should adapt to diversity is highly debated. As seen in many other articles of this special issue, normative positions in this regard range from a rather uncritical multiculturalism, fostering a tight relationship between students' origin and the services they received, to a strict republican model where schools are expected to "liberate" students from their family and community attachments. But, in most instances, decision makers, teachers, community organizations, as well as ordinary citizens are looking for a more nuanced approach that reflects a compromise between two important values widely shared by stakeholders in democratic societies: a respect for the variety of points of view and values that students bring to school, and the fostering of common civic values that insure the protection of individual rights and equality. Due to the current international context and local specificities, the Muslim population has often been at the forefront of some of the controversies regarding the right balance in this regard.

The Quebec case can be interesting to study for many reasons. First, as opposed to many European contexts, the Muslim population there enjoys a relatively high economic status and a fair degree of linguistic integration. At the crossroad of North American, British, and French influences, Quebec has also tried to develop its own model of diversity management, stressing intercultural relations, and critical acceptance of diversity. Many public and private bodies have, thus, been pretty active in formulating concrete guidelines that can help stakeholders in their common search for negotiated solutions when religious or cultural values come into conflict. Recent developments seem to indicate, however, mixed results in this area. Public debate has revealed high level of concerns about the adaptation to diversity, often intertwined with stereotypical views, while observations of the actual functioning of institutions point to a much more positive situation in terms of mutual adaptation.

In this article, I will first give an overview of the socio-demographic characteristics of the Muslim community in Canada and especially in Quebec, and of its educational experiences in Quebec schools. I will then analyze in more depth three important controversies that have targeted the Muslim community in the last 20 years, respectively, regarding the teaching of Arabic at the end of the 1980s, the wearing of the Muslim veil in the mid-1990s, and the wider reasonable accommodation debate, which did not specifically target it, in 2007–2008. I will try to show how in all of those public debates, genuine democratic concerns and stereotypes were entangled, and to identify to which extent they, nevertheless, permitted to reach some progress in the adaptation of public schools to Muslim students' needs. In the third part, based on a major survey of Quebec schools, I will give some examples of this paradoxical grass-root process, which is happening largely in isolation from the vivid and more conflictual public debate.

Muslim Students in Quebec Schools: An Overview of Their Current Situation

Although one can trace the presence of Muslims in Canada back to the mid-nineteenth century, it became significant from the mid-1960s onward, following the

adoption by the Canadian government of a nondiscriminatory immigration policy that enabled many migrants from the Third World to enter the country (Abu-Laban 1980, 1997). The first important waves in the 1970s and 1980s came from the Indian subcontinent, Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, and Iran and these migrants settled mostly in Ontario. Later on, with the 1990s, source countries diversified as Muslim immigrants arrived from Jordan, Algeria, Morocco, and Tunisia. They also started to be much more evenly distributed between the main immigrant-receiving provinces (Ontario, Quebec, British Colombia, and Alberta). Thus, the 2001 Canadian census, the most recent one in which a question regarding religious affiliation was asked, revealed a major increase of Muslims in Canada. With 579, 640 members, the Muslim community represented 2% of the total population. 60.8% of Muslims lived in Ontario, 18.7% in Quebec, 18.1% in British Columbia and Alberta, and 2.3% in other provinces. Moreover, according to some estimates, there would have been an increase of 30% of Muslims in Canada since the 2001 census and their number would continue to rise (Council of Foreign Relations 2006).

While Quebec is not the main province of destination of Muslims in Canada, the Muslim community there exhibits many special features. Quebec is the only province with a dominant francophone majority (over 83% in 2006) and as such, has a unique profile, politically, culturally, and sociologically. Furthermore, the province has been extremely active in areas less attended to by other provinces, such as international relations and immigration (Ministère de l'Immigration et des Communautés culturelles—MICC 2005; Mc Andrew 2007a). Quebec has been managing the selection of a large part of its immigration since the 1990s and has developed its own selection criteria, which give an important weight to the knowledge of French. Moreover, Quebec maintains a network of immigration offices abroad, which specifically target francophone countries.

This priority has contributed to the important and rather striking presence of Muslims in recent waves of immigration. Even though there were only 108, 620 Muslims in Quebec in 2001, which is less than 1.5% of the total population, this represents a 141.8% increase since 1991. Seventy percent of Muslims in Quebec have indeed migrated in the last 10 years. Moreover, since 2003, two Muslim countries (Algeria and Morocco), which accounted in 2008 for 15.5% of the total migrants to Quebec, have figured among the five most important source countries. Muslims in Quebec today originate mostly from North Africa and the Middle East (more than 60% in 2001), while less than 20% come from South Asia and 15% from West and Central Asia (MICC 2003a, b; 2008).

These three groups exhibit very different linguistic and socio-economic characteristics. As many as 90% of the North African and Middle-Eastern Muslims speak French: 25% claim that language as their mother tongue, and 40% as the language they speak at home. Furthermore, 30% of the members of this group have a university degree, a number of which is significantly above that of the general population of Quebec (14.3%). On the other end of the spectrum, only 35% of South Asian Muslims know French and most of them speak English at home. Although their percentage of university graduates (22%) is still higher than the Quebec average, it is lower than that of North African or Middle-Eastern Muslims. West or Central Asian Muslims exhibit a middle-of-the-road pattern on both indicators, as 70% of them know French, but very few have French as a mother tongue or use it at

home. They also share with the North African population a very high percentage of members with a university degree (30%) but major intergroup differences, however, exist in this regard.[1]

Given its remarkable diversity, the Muslim community is not highly segregated occupationally or residentially. Muslims in Quebec occupy a wide range of jobs in a variety of sectors. Moreover, it is more often language and/or national origin than religion that influences the pattern of housing. Thus, most of the time, Muslims share neighborhoods with fellow country members of another religion and with either francophone or anglophone Quebecers, depending on their language of affiliation. However, as all ethnic minorities in Quebec, the Muslim population tends to be concentrated in Montreal, but to a lesser extent than other groups: recent waves of francophone North African immigrants settle more than average in outlying regions (MICC 2003b).

With a median age of 28.2 versus 38.4 for the whole Quebec population, the Muslim community is rather young. But very little data specifically concerning Muslim students is available in the statistics gathered by the Quebec Ministry of Education. This can be traced to a reluctance to ask questions pertaining to religious affiliation.[2] The best proxy one can find to ascertain the presence of Muslim students in Quebec schools is, thus, the student's mother tongue. For example, in 2006–2007, based on official forms filled by the parents, there were in the Quebec education system: 21, 621 Arabic-speaking students (of which one can estimate 70% were Muslims), 2, 179 Bengali-speaking students (of which one can estimate 90% were Muslims), 1, 412 Farsi-speaking students, 1, 350 Berber or Kabyle-speaking students, and 1, 076 Turkish-speaking students (all of these three last groups being overwhelmingly Muslim). So minimally, one can state with certainty that there are at least 25, 000 Muslim students in Quebec schools. But this number may actually be higher as many Lebanese and North African families may have declared French as their mother tongue (Ministère de l'Éducation, du Loisir et du Sport—MELS 2007a).

Ninety percent of these students attend French-speaking schools in part because of their francophone country of origin, but mostly because almost all of their families arrived after 1977 when the Charter of the French language made schooling in French compulsory for all students, unless, their parents or siblings had previously attended an English school. Seventy-five percent of Muslim students are also found in schools belonging to the public network, a figure which coincides with the data for the whole school population in Quebec. Indeed, attendance at private school is higher in Quebec than in other provinces, as most of these institutions receive public funding from the Quebec government and are, thus, accessible to lower middle class and middle class families. Moreover, when Muslim families opt for private schools, they clearly favor nondenominational or even Catholic ones, given their reputation for excellence. Thus, in 2008, the total enrolment in Muslim private schools recognized by the Quebec government was limited to 1, 621 students (MELS 2007b, c).

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[1] For example, between the highly schooled Iranian population and the much less educated Turks.
[2] This has been a characteristic of Quebec school culture since the decrease of the influence of the Church in education in the 1960s, long before the official transformation of the school system from a denominational one (Protestant or Catholic) to a linguistic one (French or English) in 1998 (Proulx 1999).

Muslim students also tend to exhibit overall positive educational characteristics and outcomes, which point to the selective nature of Canadian and Quebec immigration policies. For example, according to a recent study (Ledent et al., forthcoming), 79.3% of students from North Africa who entered high school in 1998 had graduated by 2006, a proportion that is significantly higher than that of the general school population of Quebec (69%). However, it was the case of only 45.2% of students from South Asia.[3] North African students also attended a school identified as educationally challenged (25.8%) less than the average school population (30%) and significantly less often than South Asian students (57.1%).

Past and Current Controversies

Given their recent and rather limited presence in the school system, Muslim students have been the subject of an important number of educational controversies in the last 20 years. Moreover, while it would have been logical to expect that the subgroups most at risk linguistically, socio-economically, or educationally would have been targeted, the reverse has occurred. The educational experience of South Asian students has neither being studied nor discussed as yet, while Arabic-speaking Muslims have been at the forefront of debates.[4] This paradoxical situation can probably be explained by three factors: the number and presence of Arabic students in many schools, including outside of Montreal; the high socio-economic status and good mastery of the French language of the parents, which permit them to be actively involved in the fight in favor of institutional adaptation in the school milieu; and finally, the international media coverage, which with the recent exception of Pakistan, usually targets these regions (Mc Andrew 2002, 2003).

The Teaching of Arabic at École Henri-Beaulieu

For example, in 1988, the Arab community was put in the forefront of media attention with the first public conflict surrounding the teaching of heritage languages in Quebec schools (a program that had been implemented 11 years earlier). The Heritage Language Program (PELO) (Mc Andrew 1991; Mc Andrew and Cicéri 1998) had indeed provoked resistance within school milieus, but until then it had been rather of low profile. In addition to corporatist frictions between regular and heritage language teachers, there was a general fear that this teaching would hinder the mastery of French or the educational performance of non-French speakers. But in the autumn of 1988, the crisis that gripped École Henri-Beaulieu, a school situated in an upper-class suburb of the Island of Montreal, was of a truly different nature. The Arabic-speaking community was predominantly francophone or francophile and was middle or upper class. Moreover, the conflict did not involve the teachers as much as the parents. The parents' school committee, made up of mostly traditional third

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[3] In either case, out of province migration was not accounted for, so numbers are probably actually higher.

[4] In many instances, this controversy had also targeted the Arabic-speaking community as a whole, e.g., also its Christian component, because neither the media nor public opinion always make the distinction.

generation plus francophones, refused to offer the teaching of Arabic even if theoretically the Arabic-speaking parents had the right to such a program. It is also important to note that the school board had offered Chinese and South-East Asian languages courses since the beginning of the PELO program and that this teaching had never elicited any resistance.

The ways in which the opponents addressed the issue proved to be extremely illuminating (Journal de Montréal 1988; Pratte 1988; Mc Andrew 1991). Some of the concerns that were raised are indeed nonspecific to the Arabic community and could clearly be linked to a conflict between upper-class groups for the sharing of a neighborhood under transformation.

> The neighborhood is becoming Arab and the teaching of Arabic will exacerbate this phenomenon.

These fears evoked similar controversy elsewhere in Canada (Toronto Board of Education, 1982; Shamaï 1985) regarding other communities (for example the refusal of the Scarborough Board of Education in Toronto to grant Chinese parents a similar type of heritage language teaching). However, the central role that the Arab stereotype, which was also starting to become the Muslim stereotype, plays is clear (Mc Andrew 1991):

> Teaching Arabic is only the first step in a larger plan: next it will be the Koran.
> Arabic boys are already macho enough, one wonders what types of values this heritage language teaching will communicate to them.
> The Arabs should stay in their home countries. We must defend our quality of life and we must protect our values over theirs.
> They are currently playing the game of democratic participation but when they achieve a dominant role they will impose their rules on us.

The Arabic-speaking parents who were involved in the fight for Arabic instruction were mostly Christian women, well educated, and very articulate. They should, therefore, not have been easily confused with the stereotype of the dominated Muslim woman. However, these attributes were either not recognized by the francophone parents or they were presented as a group strategy to hide its real intentions.

> They put forward the Christians and those women, but we should not be mistaken (Mc Andrew 1991).

The Henri-Beaulieu case was finally settled peacefully, mostly for two reasons. Firstly, the school board showed leadership and refused to concede to surrounding hysteria (they were skillful at complex diplomacy by implementing the teaching of Arabic as a pilot project that was to be reviewed after 1 year). Secondly, the Arabic-speaking parents were rather sophisticated and knew how to fully and adequately use all the mechanisms of participation accessible to them, such as getting themselves elected on the school committee.

This conflict revealed two important trends, which were to become recurrent in following years. On the one hand, a strong and specific anxiety towards the Muslim community exists within civil society, which generates a resistance to its demands far greater than to those from other ethnic groups. On the other hand, the institutional response until now has been rather adequate from a democratic point of view: it has

generally been articulated with a respect of the principles of equal rights for all citizens and a refusal to impose on the Arab/Muslim community any differential negative treatment.

The Wearing of the Islam Veil

Nevertheless, the debate in 1995 regarding the wearing of the Islamic veil, known in Quebec as in other francophone countries as the hidjab, in public schools was different for several reasons. Contrary to the issue at Henri-Beaulieu, a tiny island isolated in a sea of the then dominant linguistic controversies, it was clearly situated in the wake of many religious and cultural conflicts of the 1990s concerning the adaptation of educational programs, practices, and norms to the new diversity of the school clientele. Overall, research carried on this issue (CCCI 1993; MELS 2008; Mc Andrew et al. 1997) show that requests for accommodation within the school milieu provoked markedly less resistance when they were perceived by teachers as dealing with cultural issues, such as the conception of discipline, of the rights of the child, or of relevant teaching method. On the other hand, when religious prescriptions were invoked by parents, such as the respect for celebrations or times of fasting, the right to wear distinctive religious symbols, or the need to offer prayer spaces, resistance was higher. Moreover, for the management, conflicts where religious rights that were put forward are also more difficult to negotiate at a grass-root level because parents' rights in these situations are strongly protected by the Quebec and Canadian Charters.

Here, again, the Muslim community appeared to have been specifically targeted, as revealed by the frequency of conflicts as well as by their magnitude. This over-representation can certainly be traced in part from the more tenuous division between the sacred and the profane that prevails within Islam, when compared with modern versions of other minority religions (Lewis and Schnapper 1992; Ramadan 1994). But as we see in the case of the hidjab, one cannot overlook the fact that a scapegoating effect was also at play. For example, many religious requirements of the Jehovah's Witnesses, whether they belong to the French-Canadian majority or to various minority groups could have more detrimental effects on students' performance or on the development of their capacity to think critically, an important mandate of schooling in modern societies. Nevertheless, requests for exemptions of common rules made by this group or other groups have never attained the same visibility as issues concerning Muslims.

When compared with the dynamic of the 1980s, the hidjab crisis of 1995 also revealed a much more complex debate. Indeed, while the arguments of the opponents of the teaching of Arabic in 1988 could easily be denounced as a stereotypical discourse, it was clearly not the case when one analyzes the concerns of people opposed to the wearing of the hidjab in public schools (Geadah 1996; Mc Andrew and Pagé 1996; Cicéri 1999). Muslims were represented in both camps (partisan versus opponents), which testified that the overall question lent itself to a legitimate debate that was carried out respecting democratic parameters. One of the questions raised was the degree to which schools must reflect the religious prescriptions of their students or on the contrary, ask them to perform them only within the private sphere. A second question concerned the legitimacy for an

institution with an intensive socializing mandate, such as schools, to limit the expression of cultural or religious convictions when they appear to conflict with fundamental democratic principles, for example, gender equality. The position paper developed by the Quebec *Commission des Droits de la Personne* et de la jeunesse (Quebec Human Rights Commission) put an end to this controversy by responding to these two questions using liberal guidelines that were widely accepted. One could, thus, wonder why one should pay such attention to this event.

The answer is that even if the institutional response was rather adequate, the conflict gave rise to many stereotypical and racialized representations of the Muslim community, especially in discourses emanating from civil society, less regulated by the apparatuses of political correctness, such as open letters and phone calls or the opinions of grassroots groups of teachers, feminists, or nationalists. Within this discourse, there is an implicit and sometimes explicit, assumption that Islam and often, even the Muslim community in Quebec, is a threat to democracy and to gender equality. There is also a tendency to associate Islam with fundamentalism and terrorism. This is a difficult discourse to deconstruct—and the significance of this statement has increased since September 11, 2001—because it utilizes genuine realities of the political or ethnic cultures of different Arab and Muslim nations or groups.[5] However, these problems are unduly generalized (and their magnitude amplified) to the point that they turn into colossal and largely phantasmagoric anxieties.

Another specificity of the 1995 controversy is the extent to which it might have had an impact on Muslim students. Indeed, the conflict itself was born out of the exclusion of one student, which certainly enhanced the interest of and identification with other students. The debate also benefited from a considerable space in the electronic media, which are accessed more by students than newspapers. Thus, in many secondary schools, tensions between students surrounding the legitimacy of allowing religious symbols have been reported. In the best cases, the issue was debated at the level of the governing body of the school where there is representation from high school students or used for pedagogical ends (in citizenship education or moral and religious education). In the worst cases, teachers ignored these tensions, feeling under-equipped to open up this can of worms. While ethical, pedagogical, and legal aspects of the conflict, as well as the attitudes of decision makers, teachers, and pressure groups have been well documented, we know very little about students. How did they understand the debate? What were the consequences on the self-image of young Muslims as well as on the attitudes and behaviors of students from other communities toward Muslim students? Some recent studies seem to indicate a rather mixed picture in this regard. Many students, whether religious or not, recall living through this period with some unease, while others saw it as an opportunity to fight stereotypes among their schoolmates regarding the Muslim community and especially Muslim women (Triki-Yamani and Mc Andrew 2009). But, it is clear that the events surrounding 911 had a more significant impact on students of all origins.

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[5] These are often denounced in the media or elsewhere by opponents of those current regimes who have sought refuge in Quebec or Canada.

However, in the short term, one did not witness any major controversies regarding the integration of the Muslim community or the schooling of Muslim students following this tragic event. There was even a positive tendency on the part of the media and of many citizens, such as school principals and teachers, to develop a better understanding of Islam and of Muslim culture and to discuss many related topics in classrooms. Although many factual errors were noticed by Muslim students, these efforts were generally appreciated and interpreted as a demonstration of openness (Triki-Yamani and Mc Andrew 2009). Moreover, in many instances, they provided for a rather complex discussion of socio-political issues, which could contribute to the deconstruction of some stereotypes. This was especially true after the invasion of Iraq, which raised an important movement of opposition in Quebec including from teachers' unions.

The Reasonable Accommodation Controversy

The rather high sensitivity to international issues one finds in Quebec does not render it immune to concerns and resistance regarding its growing internal pluralism. As immigrant integration into the French milieu and the following pressure upon French institutions to adapt to diversity are relatively recent phenomena in Quebec (they are direct consequences of the adoption of Bill 101 in 1977), this issue did not emerge in Montreal before the beginning of the 1990s and in the rest of the province, before the mid-2000s (Mc Andrew 2001, 2006).

The *reasonable accommodation*[6] *controversy*, which ranged from May 2006 to May 2008, can thus be understood as a Quebec rite of passage within a postmodern multicultural world. However, it was also strongly influenced by the fact that Quebec society had just completed the process of secularization of its educational institutions,[7] when it started being confronted with claims for a better recognition of religious rights from minority groups. On the one hand, many Quebecers still resent the religious dominance of the Catholic Church, which lasted until the 1960s, and they often have a negative relationship with the presence of religion in the public sphere. On the other hand, minority claims have awoken nostalgia among some segments of the Quebec population, longing for the strong essentialist identity of the pre-1960s area, which closely linked language, culture, and religious beliefs. The *reasonable accommodation controversy* in Quebec must also be situated in the wider international and national context, where the balancing of religious freedom with other important rights in a democratic and pluralist society, such as gender equity or the protection of freedom of thought, is on the agenda (Lefebvre 2008; MaClure 2008; Milot 2008).

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[6] Reasonable accommodation is actually a legal concept put forward by the Supreme Court of Canada to describe the limited obligation that public and private institutions have to adapt to the diversity of their workforce or clientele, specifically through the granting of exemptions to common rules and norms that may have a discriminatory effect on some individuals for one of the motives prohibited by the Canadian Charter (e.g., most cases do not actually concern religion, but handicap). But this rather precise and well-defined concept had been hijacked by the media and public discourses in Quebec, where it is now used to report and most of the time, criticize any adaptation to diversity made by public and private institutions and even private citizens (Bosset 2007; Potvin 2008).

[7] See note 2.

The main trigger was a non-Muslim issue: the Supreme Court ruling in May 2006 which allowed the wearing of a kirpan,[8] under strict guidelines and regulation, by a Sikh student of the Marguerite-Bourgeoys School Board, one of the main immigrant-receiving educational jurisdictions in Quebec. This conflict had been lingering since 2003, when a compromise between the board, the student's parents, and the Sikh community, in direct line with the solution which was imposed later by the court, was overthrown by the governing body of the school. The francophone parents, mostly underprivileged, were in the majority and many resented the presence of wealthier Sikhs in the area. From the start, the ruling elicited many negative reactions, although the press treatment was rather balanced. The open line and the readers' letters revealed, on the one hand, an enormous level of dissatisfaction that was just waiting to be exploited by either politicians or the media and on the other hand, an element which is in a direct line with the topic of this article, some confusion between Sikhism and Islam among many Quebecers. Comments such as "If Sikh's are not happy, they should go back to the Sikh country" or "If I was living in their country I would have to wear a veil," showed that many people did not know that Sikhism is a minority religion within the largest multicultural secular democracy in the World, India, nor that women's status in that religion is somewhat distinct from the popular stereotypes of the situation prevailing in Islam (Potvin et al. 2008).

From the fall of 2007 onward, two phases can be distinguished. The first one, which lasted until March 2008, was characterized by a witch hunt by the media which brought to the forefront, in a highly distorted manner, at least 35 "unreasonable" cases of adaptation to diversity and the politicization of the issue by a third party, the *Action démocratique du Québec*, which gained momentum through that process (it actually became the opposition party in the coming election in March 2008). Most of the cases debated in newspaper headlines and one would dare to say in the living rooms of many Quebec households, dealt with the Jewish or Muslim communities. The most notable example targeting Muslims was the reported scandal of a *cabane à sucre*[9] which had agreed to serve a menu without pork at the request of a party of about 200 North African Montrealers and above all, had closed the dancing floor for about half an hour in order to allow some 30 guests to pray. During that controversy, as in many others, many elements of the Muslim stereotype that had emerged in the 1990s were recreated and even intensified in the public discourse. Concerns were focused mainly on the oppression of women and the nondemocratic character of Muslim institutions, although, security issues were also evoked (Mc Andrew 2007b; Bouchard and Taylor 2008).

Educational issues were much less often at the forefront of the debate. Many newspapers even reported that a rather smooth adaptation was happening in many Montreal schools, and the only controversial issue that they could identify was the case of a Muslim student who had been exempted to learn to play the flute, a case that actually dated back to 2001. The adaptation of francophone universities received more attention with issues such as allowing rooms for Muslims to pray or places for

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[8] A dagger worn for religious reason by Orthodox Sikhs.

[9] Going to the *cabane à sucre*, a strong traditional practice of French-Canadians, now shared by Quebecers of all origins, consist of a visit to a farm or a country-side restaurant in the spring, during the harvest time of maple syrup and associated products, to eat a traditional Quebec's meal and indulge in sounds and dances, usually inspired by francophone folklore.

where they could wash their feet, probably because the impact of diversity in these institutions of higher education is a more recent phenomenon (the *children of Bill 101* are now coming of age).

The second phase of the controversy started with the creation in March 2008 of the Consultation Commission on Accommodation Practises Related to Cultural Differences, established by the Prime Minister, just before the Quebec elections in an attempt to put the issue on the backburner during the campaign (as most media analysts argue). The interest raised by the commission was overwhelming; it received 900 briefs, the testimony of 240 ordinary citizens, and held 31 days of public hearings. Moreover, it received primetime daily coverage (Bouchard and Taylor 2008).

During the public hearing, many educational issues that could have an impact on the Muslim community were debated, such as the wearing of the hidjab and in some instances, the niqab, various exemptions from the curriculum, especially in physical education, as well as leaves of absence for religious reasons. Although cases regarding students were discussed, the main issue concerned the accommodation of religious needs of Muslim teachers, a trend which paradoxically shows a positive evolution in the adaptation to pluralism. Indeed, on the one hand, concerns of minority students are relatively well managed, as we will see in the next section, and on the other hand, the teaching force of Quebec that used to be and is still largely homogenous, is slowly transforming, especially with the arrival of many well-educated francophone immigrants from North Africa. There was, as in 1995, a rather clear division between the partisans of tolerance and pluralism, who advocated that adaptation was contributing to the integration of students and families and its opponents who either opposed religious recognition on philosophical grounds or considered it susceptible to jeopardize the democratic achievements of Quebec society in the area of equal rights for all citizens.

In its final report, published in May 2008, the commissioners took a clear stance in favor of the pluralist position both in society and in schools and acknowledged the extent to which the Muslim community had been unduly negatively portrayed in many of the controversies. They also reiterated the *laïcité ouverte* (open secularism) model, which recognizes the legitimacy of religious accommodation, but put a stronger stress than the classical multicultural model on the role of public common values in the resolution of conflicts, especially with regards to equality between men and women. On issues linked directly to education, their assessments and recommendations were highly influenced by the November 2007 report of the *Advisory Committee on Integration and Reasonable Accommodation in the Schools*. Their only specific contribution concerned the religious freedom of teachers, especially that of expressing it through clothes or symbols. Although the commissioners acknowledged the legitimacy to limit religious expression among some categories of civil servants,[10] they did not consider that it was the case for teachers. The commissioners argued that the neutrality of teachers when interacting with students on religious or contentious issues was crucial, but considered that this was a universal challenge for all teachers, whether or not they manifested their

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[10] Those whose position is either highly symbolic or directly linked to the monopoly of violence in society, such as the President of the National Assembly, policemen, or judges.

religious beliefs or atheism in a visible manner, for example through clothing (MELS 2007d; Bouchard and Taylor 2008).

Toward Mutual Adaptation

If one was to limit oneself to controversies, one would believe that the presence of Muslims in Quebec schools should be an issue of public concern. Nevertheless, many documents, as well as an acquaintance with the reality of grass-root schools testify to the mutual adaptation that is discreetly and slowly happening between public institutions and Muslim parents or students, while the battle is raging outside. Examples in this regard can be found in the well-developed and well-articulated briefs presented by the Commission scolaire de Montréal (2007) and by the Commission scolaire Marguerite-Bourgeoys (2007) at the reasonable accommodation consultation hearings, as well as in the proceedings of three study days, organized by the Canada Research Chair on Education and Ethnic Relations (2007), in which more than 230 stakeholders from government, school boards, and NGOs participated. This know-how in public schools regarding intercultural relations, even if it is not without challenges, has also been documented in academic researches (Lefebvre and Barré, forthcoming; Oueslati, forthcoming; Triki-Yamani et al., forthcoming)

To focus here on the most extensive of these documents, the report of the *Advisory Committee on Integration and Reasonable Accommodation in the Schools* has revealed a situation that is far from dramatic, even though some problems remain. This committee was created in the winter of 2007, following a persistent rumor in the education milieu that requests for linguistic, religious, and cultural adaptation were growing and that managing challenges in this regard, both for school principals and teachers, was getting out of hand. The mandate of the committee, comprising 26 stakeholders representing various organizations such as the federations of school boards of Quebec, private schools, main principals and teachers unions, and the Quebec central committee of parents, was to debate the issue and propose guidelines that would support decision making in this matter. Because representation was widespread, consensus building on various positions was ongoing during all the committee's work, which culminated in the publication of its final report in November 2007 (MELS 2007d).

The Committee's main research contribution was the conduct of a major survey of 1,511 school principals (representing two thirds of Quebec schools), both francophone and anglophone, and from the public and private sectors. It showed that only 25% had received some requests for religious, linguistic, and cultural adaptations from minority parents and that numbers of these requests had been stable for the last 3 years. Thus, the public perception of a growing phenomenon was not confirmed. Moreover, two thirds of school principals who responded did not consider the issue as a major or somewhat important management challenge, and many (20%) had taken initiatives to adapt their schools to the diversity of its clientele without having received any formal requests. Religious accommodation seemed more frequent in private schools, Anglophone schools, and particularly, Montreal schools. In that region where most immigrants live, 54.3% of school

principals had received requests to adapt their norms and practices and 59.3% considered that it was a major or somewhat important challenge. The survey did confirm, in line with the public debate, that the most problematic issues were linked to religious diversity, while culture and language appeared less challenging. But in opposition to the dominant stereotype of Muslim students and parents as the problematic "Others" in Quebec's schools, it showed that the majority of requests were addressed by Christians of various denominations (349), especially Jehovah's Witnesses (152). Nevertheless, requests from Muslims were significant (153) and especially frequent in private mainstream schools, either nondenominational or officially catholic, which as seen above, are popular among Muslim families.

The survey also showed that school principals did not accept any demands unquestioningly. Principals reported that they accepted a little over half of the requests (51%), refused 22% of them, and that in 26% of cases, alternative solutions through negotiations with the parents and the students were found. To reach reasonable solutions, two main guidelines were used: the respect for both democratic values and the rights of students and parents on the one hand, and the importance of fostering the academic success of the students and their completion of the school program on the other hand (MELS 2007d).

More than 1, 000 instances of what the respondents considered best practices in matters of linguistic, religious, or cultural adaptation were also reported. Cases involving Muslim students or parents included such examples as providing meals with no pork in the cafeteria, adapting the school curriculum to the fact that students follow Ramadan, not planning exams or important topics on major Muslim holidays, as well as organizing intercultural weeks or activities in which various religions, including Islam, are presented to students in a nonstereotypical way.

Nevertheless, the report did document that many school principals felt ill-prepared to answer some of the pressure generated by the growing religious diversity of their school's clientele and especially when requests seemed to be contradicting the mission of the school, gender equity, security, or school attendance. There was also a wide consensus on middle-of-the-road strategies where a lot of leeway would be left to the local schools and communities to reach their own solutions, while clearer, more general guidelines from the Ministry of Education and the school boards were desired.

In response to this need, the report proposed both reference points for reasonable accommodation and a structured process to be carried out by schools in order to reach negotiated settlements in this regard. Influenced by training activities carried out by the MELS since the mid-1990s (Mc Andrew 2008; MELS 2008), legal guidelines included the compatibility of accommodation with a variety of laws that guarantee the rights and freedoms of students as well as the avoidance of causing any undue hardship to the school, in terms of financial cost or common well being. But the reference points also put forward many psychosocial and educational objectives. For example, reasonable accommodation was presented as part of a strategy that prepares all students to exercise their citizenship and integrate into a civic culture, as well as a tool to foster active participation by both the students and the parents in the schools. It was also expected that by drawing schools and the

family closer together, student identity and overall development can be enhanced. The major stakeholders of the education milieu who signed the document also reiterated that the recognition of diversity was to be understood within the framework of the threefold mission of the school, to transmit knowledge, to socialize students in common pluralistic values, and to ensure equal opportunity in education and qualification in employment.

Even if there was no official representation of minority groups at the committee, except through the channel of the central parents committee of Quebec and the presence of some minority individuals representing their respective mainstream instances, these guidelines were the object of a rather extensive consultation, in particular, during the three study days (mentioned above) where many Muslim organizations expressed their support (Chaire de Recherche du Canada sur l'Éducation et les rapports ethniques 2007). Since the publication of the report and also during the hearings of the *Consultation Commission on Accommodation Practices Related to Cultural Differences*, it also became evident that a majority of Muslim families are well prepared to live in a pluralist society and actively participate to educational institutions where various rights and diversities of different natures are balanced through the lens of democratic values and civic participation (Kanouté and Vatz Laaroussi 2008; Kanouté and Calvet 2008). Even among the more pious or orthodox sectors of the community, this commitment is also largely shared as exemplified by the practices of various private Muslim schools (Sawaf and Abu Hijleh 2008).

Conclusion

Muslims have been the target of public concern for many reasons. Some of them are related to the specificity of Quebec, such as the negative memory of a Church-dominated society that their presence elicits or the paradoxical success of Quebec's priority in terms of the selection of francophone immigration, which has meant that the growing presence of well educated and articulate North African immigrants has shaped francophone public institutions as never before. Other sources of conflict can be traced to an international context where, on the one hand, islamophobia is thriving, and on the other hand, fundamental orthodoxy and in some cases, fundamentalism, is becoming an important part of identity politics within Muslim diaspora communities.

Nevertheless, even if controversies, stereotypes, and prejudices surrounding the Muslim community are extremely visible in Quebec society, many elements indicate that a reasonable consensus on religious adaptation is slowly emerging in Quebec schools, at least in Montreal where contact and changes are happening on a daily basis. This process was certainly enhanced by the strong normative commitment many public institutions in Quebec have expressed these last 20 years in favor of a strong recognition of diversity, as well as through their involvement in developing practical instruments that can support decision makers, professionals and parents in reaching reasonable compromises. Nevertheless, part of it can also be linked to the controversies described above, especially, as they permitted an enhanced civic participation among Muslim parents or students as individual or through their

organization. For example, if one focuses here on the more recent events in the history of immigration and integration in Quebec, never had such a newly arrived community as the North African, emerged so quickly as a major player in societal, mediatic, governmental, or institutional network. This advantage was regrettably achieved through an intensive process of resistance to a painful scapegoating, but in the long run, it will certainly reap rewards in schools and in society.

Nevertheless, the integration and the transformation of both the host society and the Muslim community is certainly far from achieved in Quebec schools, not to mention here in Quebec society as a whole. There will certainly be steps backward in the progress forward still needed in this regard. One of the main area of preoccupation should be the fate of the South Asian groups, whose linguistic isolation and overall more negative socio-economic position put more at risk of being ignored or even excluded. More research on the educational situation of youth from these groups, as well as on the adaptation of their families to the requirements of a new society is, indeed, greatly needed if Quebec is to achieve its long-term goal of becoming an inclusive society for all its citizens. Another area of concern is the very limited impact that positive results from the field reported both in academic research and by the stakeholders involved, seem to have on public opinion and public debate. In the longer run, this could jeopardize whatever progress have been made as it is well known that when populist rhetoric is mistaken for reality, it becomes very difficult, even for politicians or ordinary citizens committed to more nuanced positions, to hold their ground.

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Marie Mc Andrew is a full professor at the Faculty of Education at the University of Montreal as well as the holder of the Canada Research Chair on Education and Ethnic Relations since 2006. From 1996 to 2002, she was the Director of *Immigration and Metropolis of Montreal*. She has published more than a hundred and fifty books, articles, or chapters on the education of minorities and on intercultural education, among which her book, *Immigration and diversity in school: the Quebec case in a comparative perspective* (Montreal: Presses de l'Université de Montréal) for which she won the Donner prize 2001 attributed to the best book on Canadian public policy. Her recent publications include: 2008, (Mc Andrew, M., Milot., Imbeault, S. and Eid, P. (dir.)), *L'accommodement raisonnable et la diversité religieuse à l'école publique : normes et pratiques*. (Montréal: Fides).