

Débat / Discussion

Beyond the Multicultural Mystique: The Politics and Promise of Educational Participation Data by Ethnicity and Language Use

Jerry Paquette

university of western ontario

Canada is officially a "multicultural country within a bilingual framework" (Trudeau, 1975, p. 8545). Federal and provincial governments have, in the name of social justice, endorsed, mandated, and funded policies and programs intended to equalize citizens' access to social and political benefits. The quest for a just Canada has led to multicultural social policy—yet to date no policies have required incorporation of minority languages and cultures into the fabric of public education.

The experience of minority persons in Canadian educational institutions remains an enigma. In particular, rich qualitative descriptions of the schooling of Canada's minorities are extremely rare (one suggestive example is Young, 1984). Statistics on educational participation and performance tabulated by race, ethnicity and language background are almost totally lacking. One encouraging exception is the Quebec education ministry's commissioned study of performance on annual secondary comprehensive examinations, tabulating data both by maternal language and by language of instruction (Proulx, 1989). Census data on adult educational attainment provides no useful *direct* information about minority students in Canadian schools and universities. Of all areas of Canadian educational policy, minority education remains among the most inscrutable.

Multicultural education policies (for a summary of these in Canada, see Canada, Council of Ministers of Education, 1986) have failed to resolve conflict over how best to eliminate racism, promote equality of educational opportunity and results, and maintain and develop minority languages and cultures (Kehoe, 1987; Lupul, 1987; Mazurek, 1987). Schools remain "arenas in which the deepest conflicts within the societies

they are meant both to reproduce and change are played out" (Farrell, 1987). Resolution of conflict will depend on detailed social knowledge. Do some Canadian minorities participate proportionally less than mainstream Canadians in educational programs leading to high income and social status? Which ethnic, racial and linguistic minorities, if any, rely on courses and programs altered or specially created to serve them, and why? Are minorities disproportionately represented in special education programs? Do some minority groups systematically receive less or more education than mainstream Canadians? More fundamentally, if participation does vary markedly among groups, why is this the case?

These questions strike at the heart of our view of a just society and of excellence in education. Schools, colleges and universities that differentially provide educational services to different groups undergird patterns of injustice. The question remains how minorities are over- or under-represented in various programs and to what extent their attrition in these programs differs from rates for the population as a whole.

The absence of an adequate statistical base allows both minority spokespersons and educational personnel to draw conclusions based on their own assumptions about the participation of ethnic, racial and linguistic minorities (these are not synonymous). The creation of a data base requires that we meet four well-entrenched objections.

OBJECTIONS

First, section 15(1) of the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms* provides for equality before and under the law without "discrimination based on race, national or ethnic origin, colour, religion, sex, age or mental or physical disability." Despite uncertainty about the *Charter's* precise application, education policy makers will likely see the *Charter* as a barrier to data collection on these *or other* potentially controversial group characteristics.¹

Provincial human rights legislation creates a second perceived deterrent to such data collection. Political sensitivity constitutes a third impediment. Data of this kind, after all, entail the risk of exposing inequitable participation patterns. As minorities have become politically stronger, they have been able to demand public disclosure of data in the name of educational accountability. Thus an increasing number of American states have begun to collect participation data by ethnicity and language use (Astin, 1983; Fetler, 1986; Guichard & Cepeda, 1986; Klein, 1986). California's complex quality evaluation scheme, for example, collects basic achievement and participation data by race and language background (Fetler, 1986).

Finally, legislators, education officials and minority persons alike fear return to the type of analysis Jensen (1969) and his successors applied to achievement data by race. Gerald Lesser and his associates were thus reluctant to publish a replication of their own extensive and rigidly controlled study of educational achievement by racial background (Ornstein, 1982), afraid of fuelling racist interpretations of their earlier work. Indeed, recent indignation over Jensen-like research and interpretation by Philippe Rushton and over the televised debate between Rushton and David Suzuki at the University of Western Ontario (1989 January 18) demonstrates that unabashedly racist interpretations of "intelligence" scores (among other things) are not entirely passé.

Are these four objections sufficiently compelling to outweigh the public's right to know how Canadian universities, colleges and schools serve minorities?

THE CHARTER OBJECTION

Does section 15(1) prevent collecting and analyzing educational performance or participation data by race and ethnicity? No more than it prevents collecting and analyzing data by gender. No court, in my view, would likely construe collection and analysis of such data as acts of discriminatory treatment before or under the law, discriminatory treatment being the only activity specifically forbidden in subsection 1.

Subsection 2, moreover, provides that "Subsection (1) does not preclude any law, program or activity that has as its object the amelioration of conditions of disadvantaged individuals or groups, including those that are disadvantaged because of racial, national or ethnic origin, colour, religion, sex, age or mental or physical disability."² Amelioration of the conditions of disadvantaged individuals, or acquiring a reasonable basis for rejecting such amelioration, indeed justifies data collection. Responsible collection implies no intent to penalize members of a minority, and no penalizing effect. On the contrary, if equitable extension of education benefits helps preserve and enhance "the multicultural heritage of Canadians," section 27 would discourage *Charter* interpretations that limit activities aimed at clarifying and improving educational equity.

Nor could a case easily be made that collection of educational participation data would interfere with "security of the person" under section 7. Since information about *individual* performance would in no way be disclosed, security of the person would not be infringed. Furthermore, any attempt to construe such data collection as contrary to section 7 would be contrary to the obvious meaning of section 27.³

PROVINCIAL HUMAN RIGHTS LEGISLATION

Like the *Charter*, Canadian provincial human rights legislation emphasizes positive acts of discrimination and neither directly nor implicitly envisages data collection by race and ethnicity. Although our human rights codes do not encourage the collection of educational participation or performance data by such variables, they in no way prevent or obstruct it.

POLITICAL SENSITIVITY

The question is not whether statistics on educational participation tabulated by specific language, ethnic and racial groups are sensitive, but whether their absence is intolerably provocative. In the absence of data about how Canadian schools and universities serve minority persons, everyone's opinion is equally valid. Canadian minorities' coalescence into politically potent interest groups and minorities' growing power to influence social policy making mean that provincial governments will likely find themselves compelled to follow the American precedent. Minorities and provincial governments share a common interest in the development of such data. *The most meaningful analyses of participation data are longitudinal and therefore entail a considerable time delay between the decision to collect data and meaningful assessments of those data.*⁴ This time-lag and rapid growth in the proportion of minorities in the Canadian population argues urgently for collection of such data.

RACIST INTERPRETATION

Of all objections to collecting educational performance and participation data by race and language background, the most substantive is the wish to avoid fuelling simplistic interpretations grounded in racist beliefs and attitudes. In the end, there is no way to restrain racist individuals from using such data for their own purposes.

Nonetheless, naïve attribution of observed differences to race can be minimized. Moreover, the results of such data collection themselves may disincline racist groups from such attribution. In California, for instance, one minority group participates more than the majority; this does not argue the intellectual superiority of the historically dominant group (Guichard & Cepeda, 1986). A small-scale preliminary study conducted by the Toronto Board of Education between 1980 and 1985 reported findings not unlike those of the California post-secondary study (Wright, 1985).

Whatever the risk such data might be turned against minorities, that risk should be weighed against the potential benefit of data-based assessments of Canadian minorities' benefits from Canadian education. As minorities grow in number and political power in Canada, they will be less inclined to accept on faith the opinions of education officials about how well Canada's schools serve minorities. In such a political arena, a data vacuum on minority participation is unlikely to serve the interests of education officials seeking to justify existing programs and resource consumption.

WHAT KIND OF DATA?

Research reconciles the art and politics of the possible with a view of reality, with beliefs about how knowledge can be constructed, and with the perceived social utility of competing demands for resources. In few domains of inquiry do political considerations have the potential to shape and to limit research more than in minority education policy. We should vigorously resist an educational "political economy" that would discourage such inquiry.

The data that would give us the best picture of Canadian minorities' educational benefits are the same as those we use to assess the benefits all Canadians get—but collected and tabulated by race, ethnicity, maternal language, home language and, perhaps, time in Canada for recent immigrants. (Religion and disability are other potentially important minority group dimensions policy makers might wish to track.)

One of the most difficult problems is to decide who's in and who's out. In the case of Canada's English and French linguistic minority groups, the issue proved contentious enough to elicit a special section in the *Charter of Rights and Freedoms* (section 23). In the end, self-attribution appears the only reasonable and practical basis for imputing race or ethnicity. If minority students are candidly to inform school authorities of their ethnicity and language background, they and their parents should know to what uses such information will *and will not* be put.

Five types of data are widely used to assess educational quality: achievement (grades, teacher evaluation), standardized tests (normed and criterion-referenced), participation (course and program enrolment), persistence (retention and attrition), and aspiration. (For a survey of the quality-in-education question, see Paquette, 1989.) Each type could contribute to an understanding of minority students' educational experience. Two of these types pose serious practical and political problems: evaluation by teachers is *and is widely perceived to be* inherently

subjective, and inevitably incorporates the cultural bias of teachers; and standardized tests are notorious for cultural bias, criterion-referenced tests being only marginally better. Both are nonetheless here to stay. Analyses of test or achievement data by race, ethnicity or language use in any event risk becoming mired in endless debate about bias. Quebec decided to accept this risk in its 1987 round of examinations.

Participation and persistence, however, are less politically volatile even though they embody the subjectivity of teacher evaluation and test-item selection. It is politically much less problematic to say a group is over- or under-represented in certain courses or programs than to say its members achieve poorly. Governments do not want to be caught funding or sponsoring victim-blaming—or the appearance of it. Participation and persistence data offer a readily understood measure of the “holding power” (Howe, 1984) of schools for different types of students. As a beginning, at least, they are likely to prove both politically supportable and technically feasible at reasonable cost.

We must also hope that a body of rich qualitative research will soon chronicle interesting and evocative cases of minority experience in Canadian schools. Such descriptive research, although expensive and difficult, will uniquely reveal the specific and human aspects of educational experience, moving us closer to the “why” of things. Resources permitting, a multitude of detailed ethnographic studies could be aggregated to form a rich, “thick” (Ryle, 1971) description of particular minorities’ experience in our schools.⁵ If, as in Ontario, an education ministry can find millions of dollars for qualitative descriptions of student interaction with computers, funds can be found for descriptions of the lived experience of minority students in Canadian schools, colleges and universities.

CONCLUSION

Participation data by ethnicity and language background would offer minorities information on their track record in existing educational arrangements and at the same time provide provincial governments with a report card on the holding power of educational programs for minority persons. Such data may, of course, expose unequal opportunity and results in Canadian education. By themselves, the data can tell us nothing about how to reduce inequalities. Provincial governments’ responses to any such inequities must ultimately be grounded in beliefs about social justice and in a vision of the kind of society we wish to become (Young, 1979). Whatever those beliefs and that vision may be, we require knowledge of the present situation.

Given current growth in both the social and political presence of minorities in all aspects of Canadian life and politics, provincial governments have only a short time before electorates demand evidence of the degree to which their educational institutions provide equal benefits to persons of all ethnicities, languages, and cultural backgrounds. The little evidence-gathering of this sort in Canada before the late 1960s disappeared in the aftermath of Jensen's (1969) and his followers' work.⁶ It is time to renew those efforts.⁷

The most salient quantitative data on minority participation are longitudinal. These data take time to collect and to assess. Even if a provincial government could and did act immediately to begin collecting and tabulating such data, really useful data sets will take half a decade to accumulate. The problems and conflicts emerging in Canadian minority education can scarcely wait a decade or more for accurate description and analysis.

NOTES

¹ *Andrews v. The Law Society of British Columbia* (1989), 91 N.R. 255 (SCC) confirms most explicitly that section 15(1) must be considered to refer not only to the enumerated classifications but also to "analogous" grounds of distinction.

² Section 13(1) of the *Ontario Human Rights Code* echoes this encouragement of affirmative action policies and programs.

³ The intent of recent Ontario legislation bearing on privacy of information is clearly to allow reasonable access to information for research on important public policy issues. Although the regulation under *Bill 34* does not extend to educational records, the intent of 21(1e) is to encourage responsible research use of personal information when personal identification with such information is removed (*An Act to Provide for Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy*, S.O. 1987, c.25). The Ontario government perceives no conflict between this Act and section 7 of the *Charter*.

⁴ Cross-sectional and longitudinal analyses should provide evidence of both current and cumulative performance. St-Germain (1984) provides an unusually good resumé of the relative strengths and potential complementarity of cross-sectional and longitudinal analyses of background data and educational completion.

⁵ Such aggregation rests on human judgment, that is, on assumptions about social reality. My point is not to imply that meta-analyses of quantitative or qualitative studies—or both—lead to consensus and certainty. In the last analysis, policy makers construct a vision of reality from the composite of all data to which they attend (Dunn, 1981).

⁶ The only exception I know is some limited research on educational aspirations of college students in Toronto and Montreal (Denis, 1978) and the recent work of the Quebec Ministry (Proulx, 1989). No other Canadian work of the last two decades breaks out data by language and ethnicity. Some time ago,

the Quebec Conseil supérieur commissioned analysis of educational participation by three language categories (Francophone, Anglophone and Allophone) (St-Germain, 1984) and hinted at the need to analyze data about students' "cultural difference" in its 1987–1988 annual report (Conseil supérieur, 1988, p. 43). Census data, of course, have revealed that a larger portion of immigrants to Quebec adopt English as their home language than adopt French, but such data in no way touches directly on the experience of students in schools.

- ⁷ The decision to evaluate examination results by maternal language has much to do with Quebec's anxieties about the quality of Francophone education in that province and the success of the francization of new immigrants whose maternal language is neither French nor English.

REFERENCES

- An Act to Provide for Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy*, S.O. 1987, c.25.
- Astin, A.W. (1983). A national study of minorities: Some implications for undergraduate education. *Forum for Liberal Education*, 5 (3), 2–3.
- Conseil supérieur de l'éducation. (1988). *Rapport annuel 1987–1988 sur l'état et les besoins d'éducation: Le rapport Parent, vingt-cinq ans après*. Québec: Les Publications du Québec.
- Canada, Council of Ministers of Education. (1986). *Multicultural education policies in Canada*. Toronto: Canada, Council of Ministers of Education.
- Denis, A. (1978). The relationship between ethnicity and educational aspirations of post-secondary students in Toronto and Montreal. In M. Kovacs (Ed.), *Ethnic Canadians: Culture and education* (pp. 231–242). Regina: University of Regina, Research Centre.
- Dunn, W. (1981). *Public policy analysis*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.
- Farrell, J. (1987). Cultural differences and curriculum inquiry. *Curriculum Inquiry*, 17, 1–7.
- Fetler, M. (1986). Accountability in California public schools. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 8, 31–44.
- Guichard, G., & Cepeda, R. (1986). *Plan for improving the enrollment, retention and transfer of minority students*. Riverside: California Community Colleges.
- Howe, H., II. (1984). Giving equity a chance in the excellence game. *NASSP Bulletin*, 68 (473), 75–90.
- Human Rights Code, 1981*, S.O. 1981, c.53, as amended by S.O. 1984, c.58, s.39.
- Jensen, A. (1969). *Environment, heredity and intelligence* (Harvard Educational Review Reprint Serial 2). Boston: Harvard Educational Review.
- Kehoe, J. (1987). Equality now! The report and the response. In K. McLeod (Ed.), *Multicultural education: A partnership* (pp. 163–169). Toronto: Canadian Council for Multicultural and Intercultural Education.
- Klein, S. (1986). Identifying elements of equity in federal, state and local educational standard. *Equity and Excellence*, 22, 132–138.
- Lupul, M. (1987). The contribution of language policies and programs to multicultural education. In K. McLeod (Ed.), *Multicultural education: A partnership* (pp. 83–90). Toronto: Canadian Council for Multicultural and Intercultural Education.

- Mazurek, K. (1987). Multiculturalism, education and the ideology of the meritocracy. In T. Wotherspoon (Ed.), *The political economy of Canadian schooling* (pp. 141–163). Toronto: Methuen.
- Ornstein, A.C. (1982). The education of the disadvantaged: A 20-year review. *Educational Research*, 24 (3), 197–211.
- Paquette, J. (1989). The quality conundrum: Assessing what we cannot agree on. In S. Lawton & R. Wignall (Eds.), *Scrimping or Squandering: Financing Canada's schools* (pp. 11–28). Toronto: OISE Press.
- Proulx, J.P. (1989, May 29). Les francophones bons derniers aux examens du MÉQ. *Le Devoir*, pp. 1, 14.
- Ryle, G. (1971). Collected Papers, 2. In *Collected essays, 1929–1968* (p. 474). London: Hutchinson.
- St-Germain, C. (1984). *La progression des élèves au secondaire et au collégial selon la langue maternelle: Évolution de 1976 à 1982*. Québec: Gouvernement du Québec, Ministère de l'éducation.
- Trudeau, P.E. (1975). Statement of the Prime Minister of Canada to the House of Commons, 1971 October 8. *House of Commons Debates, Ottawa*, p. 8545.
- Wright, E. (1985). *The retention and credit accumulation of students in secondary school*. Toronto: Toronto Board of Education.
- Young, J. (1979). Education in a multicultural society: What sort of education? What sort of society? *Canadian Journal of Education*, 4 (1), 5–21.
- Young, J. (1984). *Multicultural education: Dilemmas and contradictions in an elementary school setting*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Toronto.