ISLAND APPROACHES TO CULTURAL SURVIVAL

How Can a School Create Community out of Isolation?

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Introduction

This paper reflects the construction of identity of a group of stakeholders at a Francophone school on an island in the Maritimes of Canada. The history of this island is one of survival and of isolation (from the rest of its province, and its country); the island has had to deal with neglect and domination from the mainland throughout its history, and its people have learned to be self-sufficient and proud (Nova Scotia Museum, 2002). Furthermore, the Acadian or French communities within this island have faced persecution, as English forces dominated several battles and political struggles over the years and the country came to be mainly Anglophone.

Within this context has evolved the national entity of Francophone education. On a national level, the notion of reviving a Francophone education system arose after the Constitution of Canada included the Charter of Rights and Freedoms in 1982, stating that any parent of French descent and language has the right to have his/her children educated in the French language (Department of Justice, 1982). This right has taken many years to develop into practice. Individual provinces in Canada had to fight through the Supreme Court to justify their needs for separate school systems.

Another important factor to consider in the history of the school which is the subject of this paper, is that while it was being constructed, a policy of inclusion was being implemented, whereby students with special needs were to be educated in their own neighbourhood schools, with their age-level peers (Smith et al., 2001). This required that students' needs be met through careful planning by school staff and parents, to establish appropriate resource programs and other services.

This paper will focus on the cultural and linguistic aspects of the school, and how the school's creation of rules and conditions enabled it to become an island unto itself, reflecting the independence and self-sufficiency that the geographic island had developed over the years in response to its own history of domination. The freedom that this school had to create its own identity and govern itself, allowed it to create a culture that was a hybrid of English and French, and which provided to families an alternative that was superior in meeting their needs. The school was more than a school; it was a community for many and a vehicle for some to provide education, acceptance and culture that they needed for their children and themselves. For many, it revived a sense of history for their families; for others it provided for the future success of their children in the world. In both cases, it provided the best alternative at the time compared with other choices.

Methodology

This research was the basis for my doctoral thesis on the topic of inclusion of children with special needs (DiGiorgio, 2005). I set out to study the implementation of inclusion in an educational setting. I did not initially intend to study a Francophone school, but the opportunity arose and in the end it provided a much more nuanced perspective on inclusion. I wished to study one school as an ethnographic case study (Stake, 1994). This method allows the researcher to focus attention on one site, providing the opportunity for rich data collection and understanding of all of the aspects of a particular area of interest (Atkinson and Hammersley, 1994).

The research site:
In 2000, an existing French school (pseudonym Royale) was moved from its quarters in three classrooms in the basement of an English school, to a new site in the largest population centre of the island, and began to market itself to the public. Royale was now part of a new provincial Francophone school board. It had a student population of about 40 in its early days, which has since grown to almost 200, encompassing grades from Kindergarten to 12. New teachers and staff were hired for this new building, which housed the latest technology and facilities. The funding for the school came from the government, through the French school board. Yet, because of its distance from the French school board and other French schools, the school's governance and expenditures were the domain primarily of its own administration and parent advisory group. A community centre and daycare were also attached to the school.

Data collection and analysis:
To understand how all of these factors interwove to create a separate school with its own community and identity, I spent many months in the school, as a participant observer. I spoke the French language and observed everyday happenings including classes, school events and staff gatherings. I interviewed forty stakeholders, including administrators, teachers, teacher assistants, students and parents. Some interviews took place in families' homes. These interviews allowed me to see how the home and school environments overlapped for these families. Some participants were both staff and parents of students at the school, an illustration of the interweaving of home and school in this community. I also analyzed documents pertaining to the school that were derived from the provincial Francophone school board, the school itself and its representations in the media.

The theoretical framework used to analyze data was borrowed from sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1986; 1991; 1995), whose theories of social structure provided me the opportunity to look at culture and education from the point of view of the capital that the school provided its members, and the capital that members gave back to the school. The forms of capital explored in this paper include social, cultural, economic and symbolic capital. Bourdieu proposed that these forms of capital contribute to each individual's sense of self-worth, as well as his/her place in society. He also proposed that individuals try to improve their place in society by attaining higher levels of capital, and trading these for more status. This hierarchical structure of society is difficult to break, and requires a radical shift in society's value system to effect change. Poverty and lack of education are often self-fulfilling prophecies for those without wealth and access to education (Baker, 2002; Chenoweth and Stehlik, 2004). Disabilities and minority language have required a major shift in governmental support to allow them to be valued in the school system (Valentine, 2001; Gay, 2002). This study allowed for exploration of both special needs and minority language in a school that was an island-within-an-island in many ways.

The choice that allowed parents to send their children to this school came from their constitutional right to Francophone education. Thus, the rights and choices of parents and

staff to be part of this school set them apart from English parents in the wider community. The rights of Francophones to assert their culture, language and community provided the school with the opportunity to work with families to develop a community that governed itself for the most part, met the needs of its students on an individual basis, and provided a community that families did not feel elsewhere.

Findings

The findings for this paper will be organized according to the themes of physical isolation, language, response to inclusion, and safety. These relate to capital in that they provided to the staff and families of the school the opportunity to self-govern, and set them apart as being 'special'. The public came to know the school as a place where all were accepted, yet the school retained the exclusive air of a private school. The school was able to establish the difference between it and the competition, not only through academic excellence, but also through: its welcome to families that felt rejected from other schools due to their children's disabilities; its offering of two languages to students, which added to their cultural and educational capital in the present and future; and because it was a safe place, unlike the perceived overcrowding and lack of supervision offered in larger schools. All of these aspects made the school attractive to a variety of parents who were discouraged by other alternatives. They perceived an advantage in sending their children to this school, and saw it as providing what they wanted for their children in their futures: a good job as a bilingual Canadian, membership in a cultural community, and the safety to learn and be oneself regardless of ability or disability.

Physical isolation:

The physical isolation that Royale School felt was not entirely negative. The principal described how being apart from the English board and the rest of the Francophone board had its advantages:

(Being isolated from other schools) I see it as an advantage. I look at it differently. I find it is, I look at it as an advantage. Over the years, we've gained a reputation. An impression of the school in the media that it is like a private school, a good school. The fact that we're unique, that's a good thing.

The impression of being unique also has disadvantages, which the principal had to take into consideration:

Small is good but not too small, because certain grades, a certain size of school is necessary to get services. If you have less than ten on staff, it limits enormously, you can't offer a variety of activities. And not a lot of people can speak the language . . . But not too big either because it's clear, everyone agrees that in a class of 16-18 students, students get more attention. Also the mission or vision of the school can be lost if there are a lot of students. It becomes more difficult to get all of the same people seeing the same vision. The same values. So for me it's an advantage.

The overall advantage of having a small school was that it afforded the school community the opportunity to create their own identity, with its own 'vision' as the principal says. The pragmatic advantages for parents to consider regarding their children's schooling included having smaller numbers in classes and more attention given to each student. For the principal, the smallness of the school allowed for a distinctive cultural experience. The more diversity in the school population, the more difficult it would be to have a common vision.

Language:

In fact, the cultural diversity of the school community within the parameters of French qualification for entry, was quite broad. There was also linguistic diversity due to the range of French dialects and relative language abilities of staff, parents and children. Some came from Quebec; some were Acadian descendants from the Maritime provinces; and some were Anglophones married to French-speaking partners. Some spoke French at home, and some did not. Some had been educated in French and some had not. There was also a connection to France through curriculum and school materials, which provided a pedagogical and cultural model for the school to follow. Due to this range of linguistic background and ability, there was some animosity between staff and those parents who did not speak the French language as 'well' as others:

Why? Because I'm totally French. Bilingual. Ah, I'm not Acadian. I'm French. Um. I wanted her because my wife don't speak French, I wanted her to at least go to French school and that would be the first uh easier way of her learning French.

What I find is (this city) is all English. And where we're from, it's all French. We all speak French at home. I find it's difficult to incorporate the Acadian culture at this school because the students are not used to it. At (home), our customs and our culture are evident in our community. Here that isn't here.

Some of these parents and staff were more supportive of a school that required all of its families to adhere to the stricter requirements that the school had before its incorporation into a Francophone board. The school at one point required parents to be fluent French speakers and to support the Francophone education of their children at home by helping them with their homework and making their home environment as Francophone as possible. However, the number of French speaking people in the province was only 4% in the last census (2001)—not a large enough population to maintain a K–12 school (Commissioner of Official Languages, 2006).

The provincial Francophone board tried, as did others in the country, to attract families who were not necessarily French-speaking, to help build a larger, stronger Francophone community (Martel, 2001). At Royale, communication with parents was done in English if they wished, and homework information was provided in English over the phone on a daily basis to allow parents to get involved in their children's homework. In the school's earlier days, all communication had been strictly limited to French, and many parents were unable to participate in the school's events and governance. However, the present principal valued the participation of all parents, and made it possible for them to participate while keeping French as the language of operation at the school in the presence of students.

Response to inclusion:

Families responded to the school's welcome by acknowledging the advantages that this school offered them besides cultural membership:

And but the main reason was class size. Because the other schools in the area. It was all talk about class sizes and not enough attention for students, and we just felt that, he would get a better education there.

But one of the things I found with the teachers here with regard to (child), and no doubt it's the same with the other students, they almost intuitively can sense what the kids know and what they don't know. They can tell by, they get to know them so well from facial reactions and body language and stuff. Like in a class of thirty I'm sure you would have no sense if little

Johnny knows his work or not, so you just give him the test, and lo and behold he fails it. In this school, I think they can sense what you don't know so they can start preparing the kids to make sure that they do understand it, so when tests and assignments come along, they can do them and get through them . . . And that's one of the things (child) likes. That's what I like about the school. You know, they know, they really know him?

These qualities of class size and caring at the school were quite different from the qualities explicitly admired by Francophone parents, yet they represent aspects of social and cultural capital that are common to all parents' wishes. The notion of attention for students represents a caring about each individual's wellbeing that parents did not feel in other schools. The particular needs that some children had were particularly attended to in this school, as opposed to others the parents had witnessed or heard of, and this influenced their decision as well:

We were looking for another school, but they couldn't guarantee us um a teacher's assistant and they couldn't guarantee us the resources. So a friend of mine who works with children, had mentioned, why not this school? And we thought about it, and it's like, this would be the perfect school. Because there's more programs available, more funding, and (child) would be starting basically at the same level as everyone else. Not being able to speak it (French).

The needs that this child had were accepted and promised service by the French school whereas other schools were not able or willing to provide these services. As a result of being accepted and welcomed by Royale, the parents of this child were more than willing to embrace the school's other linguistic and cultural requests for participation. They responded to the availability of French lessons for parents at the school in the evenings:

This is just for the parents to learn French. 'Cause they really want it to encompass your whole life . . . It's amazing. We love the school. We're so happy. Well, I love this school. (Father): I sing its praises all the time.

The desire of the French school to make French language and culture "encompass your whole life" was respected by parents who were able and willing to devote the time to supporting their children and the school community. The reciprocity of relationship between parents and school allowed the school to succeed. This kind of relationship is said to be lacking in some schools today (Kugelmass, 2001). Its existence at this school provided parents with an anchor in their lives which made it possible for them to feel more connected to others like themselves and less isolated within this remote island:

We go in there probably maybe twice a month anyway and bring them, just walk into their class . . . and they like that? They're not like, 'where are you going' and you know, they recognize you? And it's really like, I don't know, friendly. Nice. Ya..

(Comparing to other French school in another province) I actually like this one better. I don't know. It's just the people were nice there too. They were great there. It's just I don't know. Maybe it's 'cause the both kids go there. I don't know. It's more homey? You know?

Safety:

Safety is another concern of parents and staff which allowed families to feel less vulnerable in their community. The reputation of some English schools was one of reduced discipline, larger classes, and less control over student behavior. One set of parents comments:

Mom: (speaking of English school) Uh, well, it's just kind of violent. And there's no supervision. . . . Dad: This school is leaps and bounds ahead of the other one. . . . Mom: She

wouldn't survive at (English school). She wouldn't. Dad: She's too innocent. She'd be taken advantage of. Mom: Beaten to death…I think it would be a lot more stressful at another school. I'd be terrified about lunchtime with her. I'd be terrified of school grounds. I'd be terrified about her getting a bus.

Royale, on the other hand, used its small size to advantage, creating a climate in which children of all ages could learn together without fear of violence:

Principal: We developed together a theme of values. This year we have one which is respect. We have a climate committee which tries to put in place the ways for developing respect from one person to another. We keep this in different programs which are in place. . . . It's difficult to know if it is working, but it seems to happen by osmosis from the primary to ninth grade. This is a big part of the school, to have a school with a pleasant atmosphere, a school that is safe.

The fact that this school was much smaller than others (193 students compared to 850 in a neighbouring English school), as well as its commitment to acceptance of others and respect for diversity, all contributed to its focus and success in maintaining peace. Also, the discipline policy at the school was quite strict and may not have been tolerated at a more public school where the parents were not required to 'buy in' to the school's goals from the beginning. While maintaining high expectations, the school made several concessions to meet the needs of parents and students. For example, owing to the school's small population and the wide geographic range of clientele, students were transported to school in taxis commissioned by the school.

Conclusions

In terms of construction of identity and culture, Royale had a separate identity due to its economic and cultural capital. It had the money to provide services to all students who walked through its doors. As well, its ability to provide students and families with a French education gave them an added cultural membership and access to the world at large. But most of all, Royale accepted all students into its family, and maintained a culture of safety and respect which was perceived to be a distinct departure from the English alternative. The traditional notion of culture as the sharing of a homogeneous language, identity and history was not the case in this school, yet it managed to hold on to the traditional aspects of culture, while forging a new culture of acceptance and welcome in order to survive in modern day Canada, and on an isolated island of limited opportunities.

The study found that the isolation that the French school experienced on its island provided it the opportunity to develop its own culture and community. This culture was a hybrid one by necessity, yet it was able to balance a number of values and characteristics, especially its languages and special needs of students, by being open and accepting of all potential clients. The following factors allowed the school to be an island unto itself, distinct from the mainstream culture and education system, while accepting that clientele came from this larger population:

- Multiple identities of participants (as various members of French/English, male/female, parent/staff, able/disabled)
- Multiple contributions of families (as participants, governing members, academic mentors and staff members)
- Multiple roles of school (as a site of safety, individual attention, culture and inclusion)
- Flexibility on the part of the school (including language, homework, special needs, and transportation concessions)

This diversity relates to the framework of capital established in the research because it provided new ways for people with a former 'disadvantage' in society to overcome this by creating an advantage. For example, parents of children with disabilities could get involved with the school's governance because they were willing to speak French. The Francophone school itself had new capital through the constitutional establishment of a new school board. This allowed it to exist and prosper, by building in aspects of schooling that had been lost in the mainstream system, such as respect, discipline, and academic excellence. This opportunity to create new capital allowed previously undervalued attributes such as minority language and disability to lift themselves up and gain new respect in the wider community. Although families had different reasons for choosing the school, in the end all stakeholders felt that this was the best alternative for what they needed at the time. In this way, Royale reflected and created a reality of culture and language for and by its participants. What resulted was not a single identity but a hybrid identity that reflected the multiplicity of needs and visions of culture, education, and language within today's society. The school both reflected current demands and created culture through its acceptance of members and its drive to stay separate from the English mainstream.

This study showed how schools are valuable places to study and understand the forces at play in society. As a case study, its findings are particular to one school. However, further studies of this kind may help to identify the relative advantage for a school to self-govern and connect to its local community. The opportunity to develop one's own culture and rules is more available in a smaller school within a small cultural community. In addition, the geographic and cultural isolation offered by living on an island provided people with the desire and self-sufficiency to self-govern. In this case, there was also the advantage of economic and cultural support from government and law. Royale offered the opportunity to study culture, identity and islandness as not only a literal but a symbolic phenomenon. I encourage researchers to continue to study schools as places where 'island' cultures are created and maintained.

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