

Just who do you think I am? The name-calling and name-claiming of newcomer youth

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For immigrant-receiving societies that also claim to embrace diversity, there is a constant tension between constraining individual agency (the ability to have and act on choices) and recognizing individual rights. In a previous article, the author highlighted the ways in which newcomer youth are constrained by school discourses (e.g. programs, curricula, codes of conduct, evaluation criteria, ways of speaking, valuing, thinking) that emphasize those students' linguistic deficiencies. This article explores the students' agency despite the constraints of those discourses. The article begins with a focus on some of the reasons for the tension between individual agency and the discourses of the integration programs of Montreal secondary schools. Next, the article briefly presents a theoretical frame (connecting identity and agency), which is then used to interpret the integration experiences of four newcomer adolescents in a francophone secondary school in Montreal. The author concludes that French is too often experienced as a barrier to rather than a source of agency and proposes that French be learned through more inclusive practices right from the beginning of newcomers' experience in Quebec.

Dans les sociétés d'immigration qui affirment également favoriser la diversité, il existe une constante tension entre la limitation de la liberté d'action individuelle (la possibilité d'avoir et de faire des choix) et la reconnaissance des droits individuels. Dans un article précédent, l'auteure mettait en relief les contraintes imposées aux jeunes nouveaux arrivants par les discours scolaires (p.ex. les programmes, les cursus, les codes de conduite, les critères d'évaluation, les manières de parler, de valoriser et de penser) qui accentuent les déficiences linguistiques de ces élèves. Le présent article explore la liberté d'action de ces élèves malgré les contraintes de ces discours. Dans un premier temps, l'article discute de certaines des raisons à la base de la tension entre la liberté d'action individuelle et les discours des programmes d'intégration des écoles secondaires de Montréal. L'article présente ensuite brièvement un cadre théorique (reliant identité et liberté d'action) qui est utilisé pour interpréter les expériences d'intégration de quatre adolescents nouveaux arrivants au sein d'une école secondaire francophone de Montréal. L'auteure conclut que la langue française est trop souvent vécue comme un obstacle à la liberté

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d'action plutôt qu'un facilitateur et propose que le français soit appris dans le cadre de pratiques plus inclusives dès l'arrivée au Québec des nouveaux arrivants.

Introduction

A couple of months ago I received one of those emails that get circulated on the Internet. It was entitled “Ten ways to destroy America” and the content apparently comes from an impromptu speech made by former governor of Colorado, Richard Lamm, at a conference in Washington, DC on “Immigration overpopulation”. Lamm’s speech focuses on linguistic and cultural diversity as a recipe for the destruction of the United States. What follows is a description of just his first three points because they are so closely connected to the topic and location of this special issue of CJAL.

Lamm’s first recommendation for the destruction of America is to “turn America into a bilingual or multilingual and bicultural country”. He argues that, whereas bilingualism is a good individual quality, it is a “curse” for a society and he supports his claim by naming bilingual and bicultural societies in crisis. These include but are not limited to Canada, Belgium, Malaysia and France, which “faces difficulties with Basques, Bretons and Corsicans”. Lamm’s second recommendation is to “invent ‘multiculturalism’ and encourage immigrants to maintain their culture” and suggests that such policies encourage a view of “Black and Hispanic dropout rates [as] due to prejudice and discrimination by the majority”. The former governor’s third thinly veiled fear is that “we could make the United States a ‘Hispanic Quebec’ without much effort” by celebrating “diversity rather than unity” (Lamm, 2006).

Lamm’s statements are an example of what I refer to as a type of “name-calling”: the labelling or positioning of people in relationship to a particular social norm. Lamm’s statements highlight the business of “agency-constraining” that all societies engage in — that is, limiting the actions of individuals to protect and promote beliefs and practices which those in power see as representing that society as a whole. For immigrant-receiving societies that also claim to embrace diversity, there is a constant tension between constraining individual agency (choices and actions) and recognizing individual rights. In a previous article (Allen, 2006) I highlighted the ways in which newcomer youth are constrained by school discourses (e.g. programs, curricula, codes of conduct, evaluation criteria, ways of speaking, valuing, thinking) that emphasize those students’ linguistic deficiencies. In this article I explore the students’ agency despite the constraints of those discourses. This article begins with a focus on some of the reasons for the tension between individual agency and the discourses of the integration programs of Montreal secondary schools. The article next briefly presents a theoretical frame (connecting identity and agency),

which I then use to interpret the integration experiences of four newcomer adolescents in a francophone secondary school in Montreal.

Quebec: Distinct and diverse

Quebec is an interesting context in which to explore the question of individual agency in pluralistic societies because Quebec is committed to identifying itself as very different from the rest of Canada. Quebec is a distinct society, unified through its distinct language and culture. But Quebec also depends on immigration and promotes tolerance of difference. As a result, there are two potentially contradictory discourses in Quebec: one of controlling diversity and the other of embracing it.

Quebec controls diversity in two key ways. First, it identifies itself as a distinct society and has engaged in a long, persistent, political struggle to have itself recognized within the Canadian constitution as having history, laws, institutions and language which are unique to Quebec, distinct from the rest of Canada. Second, Quebec identifies French as the *only* official language of the province, the only language of the civil administration, the language of education for all immigrants and French Canadians, the language to be promoted in commerce.

Mandatory schooling in the French language for new immigrants (since 1977) is arguably the most important way that Quebec has succeeded in securing French as not just the official language but the politically, economically and socially dominant language of Quebec. Through school policies, programs and practices as well as laws about language use in the larger community, new-immigrant youth are strongly encouraged to take up a particular State-supported identity, one which adopts French as the common language and which participates in Quebec's distinct society through that language. The success of the French Language Charter is of particular interest and importance in light of Quebec's pluralist stance toward immigration and the diversity its immigrants bring.

Some of the ways in which Quebec appears to embrace linguistic and cultural diversity include courting potential immigrants (especially but not only those who speak French); officially embracing pluralism in government policies on integration; subsidizing hospitals and schools in both English and French despite having French as the only official language; and allowing students to choose their language of education once they have completed secondary school. Together, these potentially contradictory discourses of controlling and embracing diversity help Quebec navigate its need for new immigrants and its need for those new immigrants to recognize Quebec as a culturally distinct and French-speaking society.

Name-calling at school: Integrating adolescent newcomers into French

Because of Quebec's identification of French as the central element of its distinct-society agenda, newcomer integration programs focus first and foremost on the learning of French. For adolescent newcomers in Quebec, these language-focused integration programs are called *accueil* 'welcome' classes. Begun in the late 1960s and early 1970s, *accueil* classes are intensive French-language classes that are located in francophone schools but function in isolation from the mainstream program. Newcomers are identified as in need of linguistic support upon arrival at the school. In groups of 20 they remain in the same classroom with the same French-language teacher for approximately two-thirds of each day. The other third of their day is divided among the math, art and physical education classes for which the students remain together. Originally designed to provide new immigrants with a "linguistic bath" in French over a ten-month period, over the years, increasing numbers of newcomer adolescents are kept in the *accueil* class for two and sometimes three years (MEQ, 1996). The decision of when and where to place *accueil* students into the mainstream program is made by the *accueil* teacher (and approved by the school administration) based on the students' performance on a provincial exam of written French (designed for the mainstream), students' oral productivity and fluency in class, and students' age and level of education upon arrival in Quebec. Once in the mainstream, students take all of the same core courses as their mainstream peers and receive little or no extra linguistic or academic support except what they seek from individual teachers.

By placing newcomer students in this special intensive language program in isolation from the mainstream education, the school literally and figuratively locates these students as language challenged—that is, as students operating at a deficit. The assumptions and implications of this name-calling are that linguistic inadequacy necessarily means academic and social inability and the need for isolation or exclusion from the mainstream until adequate linguistic proficiency is achieved. Once students are deemed French proficient, they are expected to be academically, linguistically and socially autonomous. Because the *accueil* class is the whole of the secondary school's integration program, once a student has been called "French-proficient", that student, according to the system, has achieved integration or inclusion. The study I conducted with a group of secondary school newcomers (Allen, 2004) focused in part on understanding how those students made sense of themselves in an integration program which measured and positioned them against a native-speaker norm of French proficiency. For this article, I focus on what identity options students felt they did or did not have within such a system and how they acted on those options, thus exercising agency.

From identity to agency

I have looked to the work of Stuart Hall as a starting point for understanding the relationship between agency and identity. For Hall, identity formation is a two-way process. He explains that “identities are . . . points of temporary attachment [‘suturing’] to the subject positions which discursive practices construct for us”. He further explains that “an effective suturing of the subject to a subject-position requires, not only that the subject is ‘hailed’ [called], but that the subject invests in the position” (Hall, 1996, p. 6).

Central to Hall’s definition of identity are two key ideas. First, subject positions (or what I would call identity possibilities) are made available through discursive practices (what Hall refers to as “hailing” and I refer to as “name-calling”). Second, identities are formed only when an individual takes up or invests in those positions. Hall’s use of the terms “invest” and “suture” suggests that an identity, no matter how temporary, requires some action or agency on the part of the individual subject. This investment or agency is what I refer to as “name-claiming”.

Holland, Lachiotte, Skinner and Cain (1998, p. 42) draw on the work of Hall to describe individual agency as

the realized capacity of people to act upon their world and not only know about or give intersubjective significance to it. That capacity is the power of people to act purposively and reflectively . . . with one another . . . to remake the world in which they live, in circumstances where they may consider different courses of action possible and desirable . . .

The authors draw attention to two key components of agency: (a) to be able to act (not just interpret) and (b) to have desirable choices for one’s actions. Working within the same understanding of identity as that of Hall and Holland *et al.*, Grossberg (1996) draws attention to agency as participation and empowerment. He states, “agency involves relations of participation and access, the possibilities of moving into particular sites of activity and power, and of belonging to them in such a way as to be able to enact their powers” (p. 99).

Using these understandings of agency, I examined the data for examples of students’ sense of choice, their will to act on those choices, and their sense of belonging to and participation in a site of power, particularly as these beliefs and actions somehow shaped the students’ academic paths.

The study: Newcomer integration and identity construction at École Secondaire de Montréal (ESM)

The school in which I conducted my study, École Secondaire de Montréal (ESM), had a linguistically and culturally diverse student body in which 85 different countries of origin and 50 different languages were represented. A

recent student-conducted survey of the school also found that 30% of ESM students spoke more than one language at home. This diversity was reflected in the *accueil* class in which my study took place. Among my study's 18 student-participants, they spoke a total of 23 languages¹ and half of the students spoke three or more languages other than French upon arrival in Quebec. Together they came from 15 different countries² and practiced a total of at least five different religions.³ While three of them had been in Quebec for just over a year when the study began, on average the 18 participants had lived in Montreal for about 10 months when I met them. Most of them were coming to the end of their first year in a Montreal school and what was supposed to be (according to the students' expectations and the program design) the end of their stint in *accueil*. As a group, they ranged in age from 13 to 18 with almost half being 17 years or older and more than two-thirds of them being 16 years old or older. While age did not seem to dictate how this group of students interacted with each other either in or outside of the classroom, it was a very important category for the students when they discussed their educational path and progress on that path.

What follows is a discussion of the relationships between students' agency and school discourses for four of the study's 18 participants. I selected these participants for two reasons: (a) they are the most exemplary of the participants in terms of agency and (b) in terms of age, academic standing, country of origin and linguistic background, they best represent the diversity of the participant group as a whole. As I discuss the integration experiences of these four participants, I draw attention not only to the students' agency but to several tensions: (a) name-calling and name-claiming, (b) French proficiency and deficiency and (c) inclusion and exclusion.

Gil

Gil was a multilingual (Portuguese, English, Spanish, French) refugee from Angola who fled conscription and who had quite a few options available to him at the end of his first year in the *accueil* class. Because of his age (18–19) and his proficiency in both English and French, he had three choices for the completion of his secondary education: adult school⁴ in English, adult school in French and a final year at ESM. Despite receiving the award for best *accueil* class student at ESM, Gil claimed French-language adult school as his best option. He explained:

[À EMS] j'étais considéré [par le gouvernement] comme un enfant. En fait c'est une affaire très compliquée parce que je sais pas, mais pour enfants, tu devrais recevoir un peu plus mais je recevais comme 150\$. Donc j'ai décidé d'aller à l'école des adultes et je commençais à recevoir à peu près 500\$. (juin 2002)

[[While enrolled at ESM] I was considered [by the government] to be a child. In fact, it's complicated, because as a child you're supposed to get a little more money, but I got like \$150 [per month]. So I decided to go to adult school and I started getting about \$500. (June 2002; my translation)]

In Gil's case the most powerful name-calling comes from the constraining discourses of government policies, which identify him as a child refugee as long as he is enrolled in a secondary school such as ESM. Gil's response is to claim adult refugee status by completing his secondary school education in an adult school, thereby receiving the extra financial support he needs. Also important to note is that although Gil claimed English as the stronger of his additional languages, he chose to complete his studies in a French-language adult school because the water treatment program he anticipated doing in college was only offered in French. Gil's name-claiming (agency) is shaped by the complex relationships between his refugee status, financial situation, linguistic abilities and vocational interests.

Roger

Roger came from Mexico with his parents and sister having very little proficiency in English and none in French. Within a year of *accueil* class, however, he was competing with Gil for the award as best *accueil* student. Because of his age (15–16), adult school was not an option for Roger. So, aside from simply dropping out, Roger had really no choice but to complete his secondary education at ESM. But, as is evident in the following excerpt, Roger doesn't seem to be looking for other options.

Je suis venu ici et ça s'ouvre Maintenant j'apprends le français et ça me permet de m'ouvrir dans une autre langue, dans deux autres langues [anglais et japonais] Mais je ne peux pas rester au Québec. Je suis nomade J'aimerais m'en aller [au Japon]. Mais en premier j'aimerais aller dans une ville anglaise, après avoir appris bien le français, pour apprendre vraiment bien l'anglais. (novembre 2001).

[I came here and everything opened up Now I'm learning French and that has helped me to open up in another language, in two other languages (English and Japanese) But I can't stay in Quebec. I'm a nomad I'd like to go (to Japan). But first, I'd like to go to an English city, after having learned French well, so that I can really learn English well. (November 2001)]

For Roger, French was an opening on to the world of multilingualism, and within less than a year in Montreal he was teaching himself both English and Japanese. This linguistic opening fit well with his very positive feelings about

having left Mexico where he felt he was dwindling academically and socially. At ESM he became an academic star who excelled in all subjects and was viewed as fully integrated both socially and academically. But Roger's inclusion in the mainstream came as a result of some serious investment on his part.

À la maison j'arrive, je mange, puis je vois la télévision pendant que je mange, puis à 5h sinon avant je commence à faire mes devoirs jusqu'à je finis Parfois ça devient 10 heures ou plus j'ai même pas le temps de me reposer. (novembre 2001)

[*At home I arrive, I eat, and then I watch some television while I eat, then at 5:00 if not before, I start to do my homework until I finish Sometimes it's 10pm or later I don't even have time to relax.* (November 2001)]

While Roger didn't seem to have many academic options outside of ESM, he didn't seem to need any since he felt empowered by his family's move to Quebec and the many positive changes he felt that move had created in his life. Rather than feeling constrained by school and government policies, Roger seemed to feel his agency had greatly improved as a new immigrant. He believed that Quebec awakened him and opened up his world linguistically, socially and academically. Perhaps as a result of that awakening, he was fully invested in his education and motivated by a fairly specific vision of his future.

Luis

Luis and his brother lived with their mother in Montreal, having left the poor economic conditions of Peru. At the end of his first year in *accueil* class, Luis was considered to be borderline in his French proficiency, but in need of being mainstreamed because of his age. Had Luis been kept in *accueil* class for a second year in the interest of improving his French, he would not have had any hope of graduating from ESM prior to turning 19 (the cut-off age for enrolment in secondary school). Perhaps because of his limited fluency in both French and English at the end of his year in *accueil* class, Luis didn't consider the option of the independent study program of adult school. However, by the end of his rather unsuccessful year in the mainstream (his second year at ESM), Luis did have choices.

Cette année, c'était parce que c'était difficile. Je pensais, essayer, (étant donné) je pensais de réussir presque tous mes cours et aller à, école d'été, faire des cours d'été et après aller au Cégep. Mais je pense que le meilleur c'est si je vais, à l'école des adultes.

Et toi tu disais ... que tu allais faire tes études à l'école des adultes, en anglais?

En anglais, oui. Ah, c'est parce que je pense que je parle plus anglais que français, parce que tous mes amis sont anglophones. Après ça, ça sera une autre façon d'améliorer mon anglais, parce que l'anglais que j'utilise ici c'est un anglais, (rouillé) *you know*, et dans les écoles des adultes en anglais, ça va être plus avancé, je vais améliorer mon anglais. (juin 2002)

[I'm trying to improve, especially in math first, and in economics because ... This year was difficult. I thought I would pass most of my classes, go to summer school and then go to college. But I think the best thing would be to go to adult school.

And you said you're planning to go to adult school in English?

Yes because I think I speak more English than French, because all my friends are anglophone. Also, it will be another way to improve my English because the English I use is (rough, informal), you know, and in English adult school the English will be more advanced. (June 2002)]

I found several aspects of Luis' name-claiming to be particularly interesting: (a) his identification of English as his preferred language of education, (b) his insistence on doing our final interview in French (we had done others in English) and (c) his strategy of focusing on just certain courses at ESM when he realized he could not pass them all. I also find it interesting that, whereas Luis had been officially "integrated" or "included" in the ESM mainstream, he was unable or unwilling to claim that subject position academically and linguistically.

Elena

Elena came to Montreal from India with her parents and two sisters in order for the girls to have access to a quality North American education. While both of her sisters excelled in their learning of French, Elena struggled and was placed for a second year in the *accueil* class program. Elena was devastated by being identified as French-deficient and excluded from the mainstream, especially since she had already graduated from secondary school in India. Part way through her second year of *accueil* class, she explained her feelings about her struggle to invest in French and the academic options she was considering.

The first year, I said, "yes I'm going to put full efforts to my French." I did. I did go through it; but the second year ... I expect to do French but with my regular studies ... It isn't make me possible to do my main education in French. ... I didn't even do it in my language in my country; I did it in English. So I want to continue in English. You can't change the language totally 'cause it doesn't help me ... If I don't get into Cégep [college], ... I would prefer quitting the school. ... I would prefer working more because I would take a break for some time. (November, 2001)

Elena ended up getting her graduation papers from India and was able to enroll in an English-language college for the second term of that academic year. At the end of that year, Elena was still struggling with her sense of failure in French and her desire to be in India, but she tried hard to be positive about her academic path.

I'm really, really thinking of . . . having a bright future, because the studies are definitely better. Now, if I go to India, I definitely get a job easily because I have a degree, a Canadian degree. . . . Even though we're here, the education is really, really good. (June, 2002)

What I find most interesting about Elena's name-claiming was how much it was a response to feeling excluded from participating in the mainstream. Elena's need to combat that sense of exclusion was so strong that she was willing to drop out of school entirely. Because Elena had graduated from secondary school in India, she had the option of attending an English college upon arrival. However she wanted to learn French and so initially chose to attend ESM and graduate from a French-language secondary school. But when ESM called Elena "French-deficient" and returned her to the *accueil* program, French became a barrier to rather than a tool for her participation in the North American education that was her goal.

Conclusions

With regard to individual agency, the data point to several insights. First, the same academic and linguistic choices are not available to all students. The kinds of options available to students depend on a variety of factors largely beyond the student's control, factors such as age, linguistic ability, the linguistic distance between their first language and French, their academic ability and prior education, and their socio-economic needs and support network. Second, just as all choices are not available to all students, what is a site of power for one student may be a prison for another. For example, Roger's participation in the mainstream program was liberating and exciting for him. But for Luis, the demands of the mainstream program were overwhelming. Likewise, for both Roger and Gil, French was an opening on to the world linguistically, socially and academically; but for Luis and Elena, French represented a barrier to academic success and social networks. Third, despite numerous constraints, the students found creative ways to have agency. Gil used adult school to respond to his financial concerns. Luis strategically focused on passing certain courses at ESM in order to reduce his course load in adult school. And Elena ordered her graduation papers from India and enrolled in college. Fourth, while I believe that the term "name calling" better captures the ways in which subject positions are made available to our students in schools, Stuart Hall's term

“hailing” suggests the kind of invitation that I think is ideal if students are to really invest in the linguistic, academic and social positioning promoted in the integration discourse.

The goal of the *accueil* program is to ensure that newcomers become French-speaking members of the Quebec society, that is, that newcomers claim French as their primary language of participation in this society. Ironically, this program calls some students “French-deficient” with the aim of getting them to identify as “French-proficient.” While all of the students became more proficient in French by the end of the study, some of them experienced this target language as hindering rather than facilitating their participation in mainstream education. French is not always, but too often experienced as excluding rather than including, as being a barrier to rather than a source of agency. A possible solution to this problem is for our schools to engage in more “hailing” and less “name-calling” by placing more emphasis on learning French through inclusion in school activities and the mainstream community right from the beginning of their experience in Quebec.

Notes

- ¹ Spanish, Tamil, Sinhala, Punjabi, Hindi, Korean, Farsi, Russian, Hebrew, Cantonese, Mandarin, Hungarian, Bulgarian, German, Arabic, Lingala, Luba-Kasaï, Swahili, English Creole, Portuguese, Romanian, English, French.
- ² Mexico, Sri Lanka, South Korea, India, Russia, China, Hungary, Bulgaria, Lebanon, Peru, the Congo, St. Lucia, Angola, Romania, Cuba.
- ³ Christian (including Jehovah’s Witness), Jewish, Hindu, Muslim, Buddhist.
- ⁴ Vocational and/or secondary completion programs

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