The Quebec Education System: Experiences and Discontents as a Teacher and Student

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Abstract in English

This paper examines the challenges faced by new teachers entering the Quebec education system. At this time there are numerous obstacles faced by neophyte teachers, affecting the quality of their work, their mental health, as well as their interactions with students, parents, and colleagues. This work looks to examine some of these struggles by using the qualitative methodology of autoethnography, specifically first person "snapshots" documenting seminal moments throughout my 10-year teaching career.

Analyzing these "snapshots" revealed deeper issues within the Quebec education system, namely, the lack of support for special needs students, the inherent inequity in the two-tiered public vs. private system, and the flawed ideological tenets underlying our education philosophy in Quebec. This paper argues for modernization in our approach, stimulated by a centralized national education policy modelled on the Finnish system.

Abstract in French

Ce travail analyse les difficultés et adversités des nouveaux professeurs entrant le milieu de l'éducation au Québec. À ce jour, ces nouveaux professeurs font face à de nombreux obstacles affectants entre autres leur qualité de travail, santé mentale ainsi que relations interpersonnelles avec les étudiants, parents ainsi que collègues.

Cette étude analyse en profondeur ces obstacles en utilisant la méthodologie qualitative d'auto-ethnographie, plus précisément d'expériences vécu via d'importants moments à travers mes 10 ans de carrière.L'analyse de ces expériences révèles de profonds troubles au sein du système éducatif du Québec, principalement le manque de soutiens et support pour les enfants à besoins éducatifs spécifiques, l'iniquité flagrante du système publique et privée ainsi que les principes idéologiques biaisés et imparfaits du système éducatif du Québec.

Ce travail argumente pour la modernisation de notre approche, stimulé par un système d'éducation centralisé, modelé sur le système éducatif finlandais.

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Contribution of Authors

The author confirms sole responsibility for the research conception and design, data collection, analysis and interpretation of findings, and manuscript preparation.

Anybody, providing he knows how to be amusing, has the right to talk about himself.
- Charles Baudelaire.

Introduction

This thesis is an autoethnographic investigation of my experiences as both a student and teacher within the Quebec education system. It looks to discuss and reflect upon the following questions, among others: What experiences have impacted me most? Why were they so resonant to me? What were the glaring problems I encountered in the system? What are some sensible solutions to addressing these problems? To answer these questions, I draw upon my memories of being a high school student in Montreal, working as an elementary public-school teacher in rural Quebec for five years and working as a high school teacher in an elite private Montreal high school for another five years. As I portray my teaching-learning experiences as textual "snapshots", I find that I have been shaped through the resilience and beauty of students but discontented by the philosophies informing policy and the second rate, neglectful nature by which the Quebec government treats education. This investigation leads me to call for drastic structural changes in the way schools are managed and funded in Quebec. The autoethnographic form appealed to me largely due to the rigidity I felt using traditional forms of research, which did not permit me to explore this topic with the creativity and depth I desired. This sentiment is shared by many contributors to this field, as expressed by Ellis et al., 2011, who explain that in its origins, autoethnography arose out of a desire to escape research forms that were "were narrow, limiting, and parochial" (p. 1).

In an educational landscape that is so tumultuous, any form that doesn't permit the reflexivity and personal impact afforded by autoethnography, shortchanges the experiences and breadth of emotion felt by anyone writing about being a teacher. It'd be analogous to a computer program such as Chat GPT, dissecting a poem, in that it may glean surface insights, but the true

meaning is in the feelings, suffering, and profound understanding. Traditional forms were simply too vapid for what I hoped to achieve in this work. I figured there would be threefold benefits to using autoethnography, in that it would benefit a) me as a cathartic/therapeutic exercise b) my college of Quebec teachers, many of whom have shared my reality and c) the students who have very little voice in dictating how their own education is organized. As Ellis et al., 2011 note, "…autoethnography is one of the approaches that acknowledges and accommodates subjectivity, emotionality, and the researcher's influence on research, rather than hiding from these matters or assuming they don't exist" (p. 1). Why hide from this data when it is so integral to analysing institutional issues and portraying an honest representation of the realities faced by teachers?

You'll find below the snapshots featured are all examples of the most poignant of the experiences I've had in my career. My selection process for which ones I included was simply to brainstorm the 20 most seminal moments I've had in the school system and then rate them on their impact on me as an individual and professional. The rubric I created for judging an experience as "seminal" was a) did it alter my perspective, b) reveal some form of truth previously unknown to me, or to be blunt, c) traumatize me to the point that I would have to wrestle with the experience to reconcile why it happened and what meaning it had. The process of doing this was healing in and of itself, as it helped me envision the trajectory through which I have developed as a person and teacher (they are linked). It felt somewhat like taking an ancestry test and unearthing cultural heritage and family trees that offer insights into your character, beliefs, and morals. The knowledge exists but it is the process of engagement and analysis that truly allow the more interesting revelations to be unearthed.

To continue the process of examining memories, Mitchell & Weber (2014) explain the necessity for careful deconstruction and analysis. Among their recommendations that I found

pertinent was the need to discuss how memories run against the grain of the expected and moreover, how they can connect concretely to the auto ethnographer's current state (Mitchell & Weber, 2014, p. 63). The most rattling aspect of my snapshots is certainly the extreme nature of the experiences and how far from the norm they might seem to people who do not work in education. I make this assumption based on reactions to the handful of people who've read my stories and the flabbergasted way they respond to the work. I tried to write these stories in direct a way as possible, and to have the dialogue maintain faithful to the actual events. This style, I believe, lends authenticity of the work and is in line aesthetically with a style of storytelling I've always connected with, which is kitchen sink realism. The genre was popular in the 1950-1970's England when class divide and inequality were at its heights, and the style of art was made to allow people to see the unvarnished realities of working-class life at the time (*kitchen sink realism*, n.d.). This art was provocative enough to be labelled a social movement that showed "realistic characters who express anger, disdain and frustration towards the failure of the social and political systems" (Altaef et al., 2023, p. 1). My goal was to showcase the direst circumstances I've seen in schools, and hope that it resonates enough to spur a change of philosophy about how our political systems deal with the problems presented.

What's missing from these accounts then is perhaps the quotidian experiences that fly under the radar when you are recounting over 10 years of teaching stories. They surely are important also, but are simply less compelling to discuss, and therefore were mostly not recorded. This omission may have the effect of only leaving the more dramatic and compelling moments of my school life and give the impression to the reader that my day to day was simply chaotic and non-stop action driven. The reality is that like life, a lot of school days are unremarkable and so are not discussed in a paper such as this. I'm not sure of the deleterious effects of this exclusion but

do worry that it may affect the way some readers interpret the veracity of the work. Because of my kitchen sink realism lens, and perhaps my rubric's focus on including "traumatic" experiences, the intensity of the snapshots may paint the teaching profession as a horrible and dangerous job, to be avoided at all costs. This too would not be accurate as it is overall, an incredible profession where I work with mostly peaceful people and curious students. With that in mind, this work should make clear that there are structural problems that must be addressed as the school system is a living organism with the possibility for growth and improvement.

Returning to the benefits of the autoethnographic model, traditional forms of academic analyses are what have rendered us in the undesirable position we currently find ourselves. The overemphasis on "grades", "rankings", "performance" seem to be fixations of the Quebec government and the plethora of research simply documenting these statistics was suffocating. Using traditional methods to combat an oppressive and anachronistic system is simply ineffective and reminiscent of the saying "doing the same thing over and over and expecting different results is the definition of insanity." This more modern approach, centered on teachers' eureka moments could hopefully spur a more imaginative policy approach, instead of the bland and anemic suggestions of the past. My process for this work was to recount "epiphany" moments I'd experienced and relate them to thematical ideology that permeates the study of teaching, through comparative research and in-depth analysis. It's imperative in this type of work to use "…methodological tools and research literature to analyze experience, but also…. consider ways others may experience similar epiphanies; they must use personal experience to illustrate facets of cultural experience, and, in so doing, make characteristics of a culture familiar for insiders and outsiders" (Ellis et al., 2011, p. 2). This is what distinguishes autoethnographic storytelling from an anecdote shared at a party or a daytime television segment and qualifies it

more officially as a *reflexive ethnography* (Ellis et al., 2011*).* This approach gives our epiphanies more meaning than say, a segment you may see on daytime television.

Although I understand the point and recognize the need to maintain rigour in this approach, I found many of the academics discussing the topic overlooked the possible crossover appeal of using flare and engagement to have our works connect with non-academics (those who are most impacted by the education system today). If we expect our findings to have lasting impact and affect cultural shifts, like I would hope my stories would, it will serve us to have the work be both academically rigorous and captivating. I don't think they are mutually exclusive and to dismiss the merits of an appealing story is short-sighted and a missed opportunity. This sentiment seemed to be echoed by the more articulate members of the autoethnographic class, namely hooks (2003) and Goodall (2001), who strove to have revolutionary change manifest from their works. I strove to write within the same intellectual strain as these writers, as lofty a feat as that may be.

If we want to have meaningful change there must be meaningful content, and an autoethnography at its core is meant to do just that, by offering a vibrant and soulful insight into the studied area. I would hope any policy wonk discussing change would read an array of autoethnographic accounts and reflect on what can be done to improve school conditions. Students rarely, if ever, will be heard in this debate, their voice reduced to their performance on standardized tests. In this sense, educators are the conduit between them and the government, and our role in "witnessing" what we see has become ever more urgent. An autoethnographic approach can reveal silent endemics, looked over by anyone note engulfed in a community. An apt comparison is made regarding Betty Friedan, noted feminist writer from the 1960's who seemed able to capture the sentiments of millions of oppressed American homemakers,

struggling with the existential dread caused by their positionality. Their plight was largely unnoticed by society, and she was only able to elucidate the experience due to her role herself as an oppressed homemaker. As Wood (2009) notes, her works did motivate political change and instigated women's rights to address this societal inequality, but it never would have happened has she not shared her intimate experiences in an autoethnographic manner.

Now in Quebec many of the issues discussed in my text remain scarcely discussed by mainstream media (many issues I've never even heard mentioned) and so we must continue to build the autoethnographic canon. Perhaps if the public were more exposed to these tales, they would feel compelled to act politically to improve the system. From an anecdotal standpoint, whenever I share stories from the industry, non-education folk are shocked and appalled by what I've experienced. I've often been accused of fabrication and hyperbole, but the sad case is I'm usually downplaying the extent of what I've seen. I've literally witnessed a student strip down naked every day of the school year and scream at the principal while being escorted out of the classroom. I saw this every day for months, but I can understand that to anyone removed from the rural public school system, this incident sounds like nothing more than bizarre blarney. While writing I kept in mind the important tenet of "reliability", which is essentially whether a reader believes what the narrator is describing. As Ellis et al. (2011) describe, verisimilitude and the idea that what the writer is saying is "lifelike, believable, and possible" (section 4.4) are necessary for a work to be successful. Different conceptions of "truth" have been advanced, such as Fine (1993) who argues that ethnographic writing is typically "accepted on faith" (p. 269), and that we make small adjustments to this truth to protect certain people or relationships. Bochner (2002) expands on this idea of truth, writing that "it is not the 'facts' themselves that one tries to redeem through narrative tellings….but rather an articulation of the significance and

meaning of one's experiences" (p. 86). It was important for me to keep this advice in mind and maintain reliability while also not allowing it to diminish my artistic license, and pathos infused storytelling.

Autoethnography can serve as antidote to the poisonous narratives fed to us by political regimes and news media. In the last two years the dominant educational conundrums I've seen presented to the general public have been centered around identity politics, i.e. whether Muslim teachers should be able to wear headscarves while teaching or whether English students should be granted an equal amount of seats in CEGEP. These racist smokescreens serve as nothing more than distractions from the real core issues which would be much harder to solve and much more disruptive to those in power. In my ten years teaching I've never heard anyone complain or even discuss Muslim teachers wearing headscarves or CEGEP being too English. In fact, I'd venture to say that almost no teacher would even put these "issues" in their top fifty of problems within the system. It becomes obvious that we need to combat the pirouetting of a Machiavellian Quebec government, intent on winning votes while making no significant changes to the system (if anything making things worse by flaming tensions). Autoethnography is beautiful in that it is a platform through which we can demonstrate in an engaging manner the true and nuanced issues within our system and can advocate for the restructuring needed to see progress. Teachers and academics can work in glorious concert with their students, to share their voice, highlight their problems, and improve education in Quebec.

Snapshot 1: Losing My Religion

My first day in Ethics class as a student in secondary 3 was interesting, and is likely the reason I chose to pursue a career in education. I attended an all-boys Catholic school in Montreal. The curriculum and culture were dominated by anachronistic ideas about faith, religion as well as gender roles, as you might imagine. I had an inkling this environment was problematic, even as a youth, but hardly had the spine and or evidence to truly condemn the institution, it was after all, the only secondary school I'd ever attended.

On this day, the teacher/priest began by opening the class up for any question we'd like to ask, as in his mind he was the purveyor of knowledge of all things ecclesiastical. The questions were mundane, "Where do you go when you die?", "Do you believe Jesus ever walked the earth?" "Does God watch all of us constantly?" This was until a young boy who we'll call Cole, who by most people's accounts was a somewhat troubled yet insightful student (and who would eventually be expelled from my school), asked what was a very astute question. He asked the father, "Why does the church continue to preach against same sex unions?" The mood of the class shifted as we all could tell the collegial, "silly question time" had ended abruptly, and our jovial priest was being faced with a serious question, catching him in a deer in the headlights like moment. His response was not only lacklustre, but somewhat hateful. "We stand against same sex unions because according to our sacred text, marriage is between a man and a woman", he replied confidently.

The class was aghast, and tension palatable. Cole, iconoclastic as he was, could not muster the strength to challenge our beloved priest, as we could all tell by his suddenly stentorian tone that any naysayers could expect harsh retribution. These were the conditions we were educated in, where a top down, "children should be seen not heard" approach was

adopted by almost every teacher employed by my high school. Do I wish I had stood up on that day? Yes. Was it fair to expect me to? No, not at all. No one did, and I'd suspect many of my classmates had no problem with what this very well-meaning priest was teaching us. To this day I work in the same community, and I've heard rumours they maintain a tacitly anti LGBQT+ stance and are actively teaching about purgatory. Their detentions are called JUGs, an acronym for Judgement Under God.

Analysis

This snapshot makes me think more than anything about Freire's *Teacher's as Cultural Workers (1998)*, in that it surely was a moment that impacted many different students in what I'm sure are extremely varied ways. For instance, if one was prone to Catholicism and the teachings of the church than this would only embolden their adolescent understanding of the issue, re-enforcing the notion that homosexuals were to be deprived of basic human rights. Whereas, on the converse, the closeted (as many students are) or perhaps discovery stage students could easily feel shamed and rejected. Freire writes:

> Being tolerant does not mean acquiescing to the intolerable; it does not mean covering up disrespect; it does not mean coddling the aggressor or disguising aggression. Tolerance is the virtue that teaches us to live with the different. It teaches us to learn from and respect the different.... Tolerance requires respect, discipline, and ethics." (Freire, 1998, p. 42)

This priest could not be farther from Freire's vision of tolerance, openly veering into intolerance, and in retrospect almost the entire school staff seemed to be trying their hardest to

push back against “imagination for life” and “love” which Freire (1998) surmises is at the core of being a true teacher, dedicated to freedom. As Dr. Callaghan identifies in her narrative form research documenting homophobia perpetrated by Catholic school teachers and administrators across Canada, many students in her study had the “disastrous experience of their school administrators outing them to their parents” (2012, p. 149) thus ensuring bullying would become a staple of their secondary school life. There seemed to be a medieval understanding at my high school that no one would challenge this doctrine, lest they be deemed heretics, or little Galileo’s, outcast by the normative society. Again, Callaghan elucidates this point beautifully in her work *That’s So Gay: Homophobia in Catholic* Schools where she explains the means of which tradition is wielded as a shield of sorts:

> Giving voice and power to tradition, as outlined in the Catholic interpretation of the Bible, tidily removes Catholic clergy and school board administrators from being held accountable for homophobic beliefs, statements, and actions. Tradition gives homophobia unchecked power to wreak havoc on people’s lives. Tradition deserves to be respected only to the point that it is respectable – that is, insofar as it is itself respectful of fundamental human rights (2007, p. 63).

Furthermore, an industry as vital to a province’s cultural identity such as education ought to remain completely secular, so that religious organizations cannot pervert education in this manner. The incident above occurred almost fifteen years ago at this point, however, current legal developments do shed new light on the issue. With laicity policies being advanced by the provincial government, the Coalition Avenir Quebec, we do see some of my complaints being

dealt with head on, although in a rather deranged and harmful manner. Religious schools are still permitted to advance their ideology; however, the controversial Bill-21 most noted impact is the banning of all religious symbols, including the headscarves worn by Muslim teachers. This bill, which has over 75 percent support in Quebec (*Quebec Laicity Law 'Favours Atheism,'* n.d.) showcases perfectly how "laws with seemingly good intentions can have negative effects in practice" (Ibrahim, 2021, p.48). This paper and my experiences support laicity efforts to an extent, if done properly, but once again we see that these theoretically substantiative policy changes appear to be reduced to nothing more than xenophobic political process. For instance, after outcry about the discriminative tone of this law, it's been well documented that it in fact leaves Muslim women in particular feeling "uncomfortable and distressed" (Syed, 2013, p. 435), ostracized from society and surely "limits their ability to be employed, or receive important/essential services in each space" (Ibrahim, 2021, p. 55). There is no way of knowing the exact intention of the bill but what we can be sure of is this attempt at secularization has the real-world impact of causing discrimination against Muslim women.

This paper encourages a more proactive approach by the federal government to enhance standards across our nation and diminish rogue provincial legislation as it pertains to education. It's been noted that due to the Notwithstanding Clause of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, bills such as this are "difficult to challenge" (Ibrahim, 2021, p. 53), and it seems the federal government is sidestepping the issue, choosing to not to "trigger a jurisdictional spat" (Zimonjic, 2021). Is discrimination against a minority group and corruption of the educational system not enough to flirt with the idea of a "spat"? Surely there should be intervention from a higher body, and this paper recommends it come from the federal level.

Snapshot 2: First Job

My first experience working in a school came at a small elementary school in a working-class suburb of Montreal. My first course in university was called "Multicultural Education" and one of the readings looked to "deconstruct whiteness" through anti-racism education, in which the author argued in effect that there was white education and black education, and they were at odds with each other. This was interesting to me, as my own school experience was in a private school where almost all the attendees were white, upper-middle class boys (it was an all-boys school) with a homogenous religious affiliation (it was a Catholic school) and an openly antagonistic philosophy on anything that strayed from the ideologies that accompany these norms. The school was enjoyable in the same way any high school experience can be, but working in the public setting highlighted the somewhat obvious racial and economic divisions being fostered in Quebec, and re-enforced the content learned in class.

Amplifying these feelings was the nature of the classroom where I found myself substituting. I was working in an alternative program, which targeted at-risk elementary students, brought them into a smaller classroom setting with two integration aids, and one teacher for about 8-10 students, depending on the week. The program which was "well-intentioned" looked to get these students back on track through harsh discipline and focused learning. My reality as a newbie teacher was that I was a white university student, teaching 8 members of visible minority groups, and using a form of punishment which saw the students put into a small room "on timeout" until they calmed down. The experience would often involve them screaming and pounding on the door, while I would push the door closed, as it was illegal to have padlocks installed on a classroom (or so I was told).

The obvious comparisons to jail were not lost on me, and I experienced what could only be described as cognitive dissonance, in that what I was learning was in direct conflict with what I was doing on my biweekly trips to "teach." I remember reading bell hooks (2003) and feeling like she would probably be horrified to know that anything close to this practice was occurring, and recall thinking if we ever discussed our experiences in class, I could certainly never reveal that only a few weeks into my career I had become what I'm sure a lot of my more progressive classmates would label "part of the problem."

Analysis

This reality was troubling for a few reasons, and as mentioned above, hooks has thoughts on this issue that I think are germane to the topic:

> Dominator culture has tried to keep us all afraid, to make us choose safety instead of risk, sameness instead of diversity. Moving through that fear, finding out what connects us, revelling in our differences; this is the process that brings us closer, that gives us a world of shared values, of meaningful community" (hooks, 2003, p. 197)

How could we talk about a "community" when the reality is there are two distinct societies, separated by what is tantamount to class, color and status? Diversity as an idea is almost unassailable, but it seems these ideas of "fear and dominance" percolate and lead us to use the same old methods of separating society, just through more socially acceptable means, such as having "private" schools that silently stratify from a young age. You'd be hard pressed to find anyone in Montreal who supported segregation to this day, but was this just Jim Crowe Laws, dressed up in different clothes? Despite my observations and reflections on my clear experience of systemic racism in action, I also needed to turn to statistics, to see if what I saw in my

snapshot was accurate or not, and if this division I was noticing was simply coincidental or backed by measurable data.

While investigating I was astonished to discover that it is common knowledge in academic circles that African-Canadian children in Quebec and Ontario graduate high school at a lower rate than any other ethnic group, and that researchers have found "it is likely that the effects of racism in high schools are manifest in intermediate outcomes of high school performance, and in the mobility of black students after high school" (Livingstone & Weinfeld, 2017, p. 194). Interestingly though, when variables such "as income, family structure, gender" are accounted for "…the [African-Canadian]/white gap disappears", indicating that these students are certainly capable but due to systemic issues of racism, students of this ethnic background are placed at a disadvantage compared to their peers (Livingstone & Weinfeld, 2017, p. 193)

In research from Caldas et al. (2008, p. 211) it can be observed that African-Canadian students are less likely to attend private schools due to the income gap seen in Canada and are therefore less likely to benefit from the higher success rate experienced by private school attendees, which is essentially a large part of what can be defined as the "private school advantage." These two studies reflect my experience in my snapshot, wherein it was impossible to not notice the hundred percent racialized classroom, as well as the puzzling punitive tactic of literally locking the students in a small room, which I had never seen done to anyone in my mostly white private school. Davis (2018) sums my point up well, in taking what I observed a step further and crystallizing the relationship between educational experience and prison preparedness that I was teaching these youths. As Angela Davis explains "…if we want to break the school-to-prison pipeline, if we want to abolish the prison-industrial complex, if we want to

create schools that nourish the intellectual imagination of younger generations, then we have to dismantle the structures and ideologies of racism" (Davis, 2018, as cited in Robinson, 2018)

Moreover, there is much research being conducted about "life course perspective" which argues that severe punishments in school can dramatically alter the trajectory of a youth's life, perhaps even more so than ever expected (Hemez et al., 2020). The impacts among other things were, higher rate of drop out, higher likelihood of incarceration, recidivism, high stress in the student, and even increased turmoil at home (Hemez et al., 2020). I believe it would be safe to say that what I experienced in this vignette almost certainly could be viewed through the lens of the life course perspective as it has been noted that locking a child in a room is not only poor parenting but also a traumatic experience (Utley, 2022). Punishment styles such as this are in a sense re-enforcing the school to prison pipeline, and conditioning students to act as prisoners rather than students (Skiba et al., 2008). The connection to racism, is the fact that it's been documented that the schools using these severe disciplinary methods tend to be schools with high percentages of students with African ethnicity. Even in low-income neighbourhoods, studies have shown "that schools with high concentrations of Black students implement more punitive approaches to discipline" (Morgan, 2021). The reasons for this are thought to be due to the racial bias of school personnel combined with the fact that these schools tend to employ under prepared teachers who might not have necessary experience (Chin et al., 2020). When I locked the student in the room, I was in fact exactly this, an under experienced teacher with perhaps little to no understanding of the larger system I was operating within. I'll never admit to harbouring racist motives, but I think it's fair to say I was ignorant to research on systemic racism and even the idea of the "school to prison pipeline." If I were asked to do such a thing now, I would certainly

refuse, but at the time I did not have the wherewithal or confidence to do such a thing. This paper's final section will discuss ways to strengthen the public school system, so that outlier practices such as this do not exist, and a uniform approach exists across all Canadian schools.

Snapshot 3: Staying Resourceful

Finding myself in a rural Quebec town at the age of 24, having my first part-time replacement job was a great experience but to say I was prepared would be quite an overstatement. What I discovered quickly is that within the unionized, public school system, new teachers with little to no experience are routinely given the most challenging jobs, as they are less desirable for older teachers, given the emotional difficulty of dealing with many of the students in these classrooms. My first class had 23 students in a grade 1/ 2 split with 9 Individualized Education plans, ranging from children with autism spectrum disorder, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, oppositional defiance disorder, and other learning difficulties. Up until this point I had taken a very interesting class called "Instruction/Curriculum Adaptation", with an inspiring professor, which lead me to believe I was more than equipped to differentiate learning and accommodate for these types of learners. This class, however, required me to make what were essentially 10 different lesson plans and somehow find a way to sit with every student in a one-hour English session, while also ensuring the classroom environment would stay under control. This was paired with the fact that I had a student with autism spectrum disorder who would at times not even have a learning specialist to aid him with his work.

After a few weeks trying to figure out my new job (it was more than a little stressful) and figuring out that my predecessor had herself burned out from this position, I decided to

investigate to see why this student did not have adequate support in the classroom. My very gracious principal explained to me calmly that there was a shortage of psychoeducators in Quebec, especially in rural towns, leading some families to wait up until three years to even have an appointment to be seen by one. This was shocking news and an issue I simply never heard of. I felt sad for the families but also disheartened, as I realized in a sense I would have to serve as the psychoeducator, which would be hard to do with my one class in educational psychology under my belt. I couldn't shirk from this responsibility if I wanted to, as parents, not having any professional support, naturally turned to me to offer them tips, aid and sometimes even just an ear to vent to.

Over the 5 years working in this school system, I would see how these students would essentially fall behind, unable to really do anything about the fact that they needed psychiatric intervention to be productive in a school environment. This school had the unfortunate geographical backdrop of being next to a prison. Likely some sort of nit witted cost saving decision, made by a faceless bureaucrat. After all, there's nothing more inspiring than looking out your English class window and seeing a federal penitentiary. On the grimmer days, the prison lurked in the background, bringing down everyone's mood subconsciously, kind of like how the smoke emitting industrial buildings served as characters in a Dickens novel. As one colleague crudely put it once, "you can't do anything, just focus on the ones you can actually help, and the others will end up next door."

Analysis

This situation is common and in fact recently was documented at length by the Quebec education minister's ombudsman, who noted that although it is their legal right, Quebec students requiring help of a psychological nature face many obstacles in receiving this service:

> There is a disconnect between real needs and the resources for meeting them, as well as significant risk of failure to respect the rights of students to the special services that are necessary for them. These services, notably, remedial education, psychoeducation, speech therapy, specialized education, and psychology services, make it possible to integrate students with special learning or adjustment needs into mainstream classes (*PUTTING STUDENTS FIRST For Adapted Educational Services for Students with Special Learning and Adjustment Needs*, 2022)

The report explains how Quebec can remedy this situation and documents 11 recommendations, such as to 1) train teachers more thoroughly on how to deal with these issues in the classroom, and 2) to establish baseline provincial services, which are available to anyone in need. (*PUTTING STUDENTS FIRST*, 2022).

These would seem like common sense solutions to a problem as egregious as this, considering that most of these students will invariably fall behind, as noted by my sardonic colleague as well as by research. Not only does this have the obvious impact of preventing students from pursuing successful careers and post-secondary degrees but has the deleterious effect of reducing capacity to improve literacy at a crucial age. It has been noted that "…violent, property or drug" (Garcia et. al, 2019, p. 4). type crimes and below average literacy scores at a young age is correlated with higher rates of incarceration (Garcia et. al, 2019). This issue then can be seen not only as a failing of our students, but also as public health issue, wherein our

disregard for the need for proper medical interventions in the present can cost society gravely in the future. These statistics align with my experiences, as I saw many students leave the school and end up in prison not long after. From what I've gleaned, it is also preventable with a proper plan and adequate educational investment to help the countless schools in Quebec like the one described in my snapshot.

The overarching theme that we can see repeated from the previous snapshot regarding the mistreatment of racialized groups is the underfunding and low prioritizing of certain types of students in Quebec. As I'll explain in upcoming snapshots, private schools see students flooded with resources whereas the public functions more as a depository of castaways, not properly dealt with by the system. Our philosophy on education might be at the root of this issue, where it would seem the lion's share of attention, time and resources are rained on the students who are largely privileged enough to require this help the least. Students experiencing mental disorders, learning disabilities, poverty and racism should theoretically be re-positioned to the top of the hierarchy of needs, and *should* have access to a private, well-funded environment as logic would dictate, they have the most hurdles to overcome. Equity based education is listed as a promise on the Quebec government's web site (*Equity, Diversity and Inclusion Strategy - Fonds De Recherche Du Québec - FRQ*, 2021) but these promises have seemed to be nothing more than performative talking points, not based on anything resembling political action. Research indicates that Quebec spends the least on funding for special needs education compared to any province in Canada (The Fraser Institute, 2022) and close to 40 percent of these special needs students do not even graduate from high school (Leclair, 2018).

Snapshot 4: Somehow I Manage

My second job was also at a school in rural Quebec, and my issues with classroom management persisted. The location was a small town about two hours east of Montreal and when I went for my interview the principal spoke to me about the socioeconomic situation, which was dire as it was one of the most disadvantaged in Quebec. She also explained to me the issues with parental abandonment (mainly fatherlessness), food insecurity, drug addiction and mental illness. Having worked in low-income communities as an integration aid, I felt somewhat confident in myself, but again; was sorely mistaken.

My first day was after December holidays and I met the grade 3 class of 23 students, weighted at 33 due to learning disabilities and Individualized Education Plans. Students who are "coded" with a disability in an elementary and high school are weighted more heavily than a student with no diagnoses, meaning you could have a class of 15 students weighted at 23. This process helps determine the staffing required for each class as well as the pay grade teachers can expect, as union rules dictate pay increases as class size grows past a certain point. I began by teaching an English class and found the students to be genial on first impression. There was an integration aid who I'll call Kate, who stayed in the class permanently. She was a severe woman with a no-nonsense attitude, and proudly informed me that her three children had graduated from this school. She also informed me that the class was unruly and that there should realistically be "3 aids in the class." On day 2, I would see firsthand what she meant. A little girl I'll call Jess, was known to be erratic emotionally and could swing into violent rage, over any perceived slight or inconvenience. After lunch she did not want to put her lunch away and continued to eat. When Kate asked her, she stated in a friendly manner "I'm not done yet." After

3 or 4 of these exchanges Jess became enraged and began screaming at the top of her lungs "I'M NOT DONE YET, FUCK YOU BITCH."

She repeated this over ten times until Kate picked her up and brought her to the office. We could hardly continue the lesson as the screams from the office went on non-stop and were literally too loud to allow me to speak with the class. When the lesson was over, I went to the office where Katy was in a closet, completely naked, muttering "FUCK YOU BITCH" over and over, almost in a hypnotic fashion. My principal informed me that this happened about twice a week, and although mental illness and or trauma was suspected, there was no way to have her properly coded as it was not policy to code students until they turned 8 years old.

Analysis

This snapshot reiterates the very fickle nature of classroom management and how without either proper teacher training and/or proper funding, holding together a productive educational environment as a new teacher is basically impossible to do in any class with coded students. This is not to put any blame on the students, as they are entitled by the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms as well as the Quebec Human Rights Act among many other legal codes to have the proper support in the classroom. Again, I feel as if it is dangerous to simply have me, a second-year teacher, responsible for dealing with issues of this magnitude. The research in Quebec indicates that disorders of this kind are more frequent than might be officially recognized, with one across the province study conducted by Déry et al. (2004) stating that they were "…surprised by the very high rates of [undiagnosed] attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (74%)" in Quebec students described as having disruptive in-class behavior (p. 771). They also discovered that the attention deficit disorder was comorbid with another disorder (Dery et.al,

2004, p.771) much of the time, such as oppositional defiance disorder or communication disability making it even more difficult for teacher to deal with their behaviors on their own (Dery et.al, 2004, p.771). Teachers are not experts in these disorders, and to ask us to try and help without training is simply negligent. As Dery (2004) notes "in practice and despite the MEQ's definition of behavioural difficulties, children with internalized disorders rarely receive special educational services in elementary schools" (p.775). Upsetting as this is, it seems to be the norm around the world, such as in Europe, with teachers there describing their sentiments as being "not really happy about the future of education… fewer teachers are getting special education training, research is not drawn on in practice" (Biamba, 2016, p. 122). Furthermore, they worried about the international trend that saw "these teachers predict less money for education; higher expectations of teachers [and] scarcer funding" (Biamba, 2016, p. 122).

The solution as I see it is to A) secure more funding directed to special needs education and B) provide teachers with more training on disorders frequently seen in schools. When reviewing my degree transcript, I can see I took two courses that touched on this topic, Instructing in Inclusive Schools and Educational Psychology, both interesting as I remember them, however, severely lacking in terms of boots on the ground practical skills that could be used to work with students' day to day who have these conditions. If we are expected to act as psychological support, we must be trained to deal properly in psychology. I believe this is fair for both student and teacher.

Snapshot 5: Troubling Information

In my third year in a rural public school, I met a student who I'll refer to here as Olivia. Olivia was a kind girl who was curious, caring, if not a bit shy. In our first school meeting of the

year, we discussed at-risk students and interventions we might make to accommodate their situations. Olivia came up and my fellow teachers informed me of suspicious bruises seen on her, and had also reported disturbing drawings done in class, indicating at least ostensibly, that she was suffering from abuse. This was always disturbing, although had become a commonplace occurrence for me. It's always sad to see, and unsettling how desensitized you become to it in this field. I heard the information, but it hardly registered emotionally, as I'd already dealt with maybe 15 similar cases, in just a few years. The advice was the same as it always was, be aware, listen if she wants to speak to you, but do not signal Youth Protection too early as it was well known that they don't have the resources to investigate cases where there is not insurmountable evidence.

My year went on and I came to have a nice relationship with Olivia, as she was always very pleasant, but had a detached, cold ere about her, that I chalked up again to childish nervousness. About two weeks after December holidays though, she sheepishly came to my desk with a request. "Can I speak to you at recess today?" she said, eyes watering. "Of course" I responded, "…and go get some water if you're not feeling okay"

This was bizarre behavior, and I suspected the worst, which was confirmed 30 minutes later during lunch. The content of our discussion was disturbing, the gist of which involved Olivia suffering extreme abuse at the hands of her father. The most frightening aspect involved a kitchen knife that was placed on a nearby table, as a sort of deranged psychological torture method. Obviously, I signalled Youth Protection immediately, and she was promptly removed from the home. We didn't see her for a few days, as she was relocating to a family member's home, and when she did return, she thanked me and was very gracious for my help.

What ended up shocking me was what happened not two weeks after, as I was driving through the neighbourhood. I came to a stop sign and was surprised to see my student, not far from the school, walking hand in hand with her father, who from what I had been told was legally barred from interacting with her. When I went back to work on Monday, I sought an explanation from colleagues. They all explained how despite it not being their protocol, Youth Protection had become so inundated with requests, with so few resources, that it was not uncommon for them to return children to parents that would otherwise not be deemed suitable. The rationale being that it is better than having them become a ward of the state, and so they were given back to their family, but with more supervision from the agency.

Analysis

This situation came to a head a few years ago, after a story broke that reached national headlines, shocking the province and nation, and occurred near where I was teaching when my snapshot took place. A Granby girl had died after being forcibly confined and beaten in 2019 and it was determined she had been in the Youth Protection docket for years with them not providing adequate follow up to her case, ultimately leading to her death (The Canadian Press, 2022). After this incident, the premiere of Quebec ordered an inquiry into the youth protection services and as you can imagine, the conclusions were troubling. The Laurent Report (2021) as it would be called investigated this matter and found that the organization is severely underfunded, unsurprisingly, stating "to be clear, the situation of children and families is deteriorating because of the lack of appropriate funding" (Instaurer une Societe Bienveillante Pour Nos Enfants et Nos Jeunes, p. 320). The connection to my situation is the section explaining exactly what my colleague shared with me in hearsay like fashion, which was the idea that "Youth protection

services have never been funded at the level needed to meet demand" (Instaurer une Societe Bienveillante Pour Nos Enfants et Nos Jeunes, p. 320), thus effectively guaranteeing that a certain number of children will fall through the cracks and be returned to abusive situations. This is a sad finding and even a sadder story, and again, reiterates the notion that proper funding and political energy should be directed to the youth sector in general and Youth Protection specifically. There are currently almost 2 million youths in Quebec and the need for protection services has risen 20 percent in the last decade (Instaurer une Societe Bienveillante Pour Nos Enfants et Nos Jeunes, p. 397). Our society can only be judged on how we treat the most vulnerable, and there is no one more at risk than abused children. We have a moral imperative to protect them.

Snapshot 6: Parental Guidance is Advised

This snapshot came in about the fifth year teaching in a rural public school and was by far my worst interaction with a parent. I was teaching grade 4 at this point and had what seemed like a fine relationship with a young student we'll call Janet. Janet was a well-adjusted student with a stable home life and a pleasant attitude. She seemed interested in sports and was mostly engaged in class, despite struggling a bit with subject matter. Her mother was a fellow educator and seemed generally supportive of my style/classroom management. One day I had a complaint from another student that Janet had been bullying her. After some investigation it became clear that there was light bullying happening, and I addressed it, asking Janet to leave this other student alone. A few days later another incident happened, with teasing in the playground. After addressing this I believed it was fair to keep Janet in at recess as a deterrent.

I received a phone call later in the day from Janet's mother, which consisted of what could only be described as verbal abuse. She described me as dictatorial, power obsessed and accused me of creating a hostile learning environment for her daughter. She immediately demanded that the principal remove Janet from all my classes and even threatened leaving the school. Her response was absurd, and when I tried to explain my side, she simply cut me off and continued her tirade. A few days later, a colleague showed me a string of libellous posts she had put on her Facebook about me. There are no good feelings when this kind of thing happens, and even if you have a strong case, the adage of the "customer's always right" applies to some extent int these types of scenarios. The principal, as sympathetic as she was to my plight, essentially gave the parent everything she asked for, switching her out of my class, casting me as the villain. I remember returning to my apartment, eating dinner, and thinking that this might be the lowest I'd ever felt as an educator, self-loathing at its height I thought, "why on earth do I do this job?"

Working with parents is something we discussed briefly in my teacher training, however, much like teaching there is really no practice that can prepare you for the realities of these interactions. I recall doing role playing in seminars, where we'd be given different roles as "difficult parent", "concerned parent", "angry parent", "uninterested parent". The sessions took about one hour and that was the extent to which we practiced this invaluable skill. Basically, what I've realized is that having parents on board is almost as important as having the student buying in. Student and parent baseline support must be achieved to be consequential as a teacher.

Analysis

This type of interaction is all too common amongst new teachers who are frequently at the wrong end of abuse not only from parents but from students, and even colleagues. Many

studies rank teaching as one of the most stressful jobs (Hensley, 2019), with an alarming rate of "burnout" (Wengel-Woźny et al., 2015) and so therefore there should be more emphasis by unions and the government on protecting teachers, not unlike campaigns seen in the health sector to educate the public against verbal abuse directed at nurses and other medical practitioners. Violence is an issue in Quebec schools and as QPAT (the union under which I laboured) research indicates 76 percent of teachers reported they'd been psychologically harmed by a parent in their careers, while 6 percent report physical attacks (QPAT, 2018, p. 13)! Moreover, the assaults are not just directed by parents but also by students, which is a given, but oddly enough, also by colleagues, with an astonishing 61 percent reporting psychological violence coming from fellow workers (QPAT, 2018, p. 14). It seems from this report as well, that self-reporting of these incidents is almost non-existent, as the assumption seems to be that it is "part of the job", and so would fall on deaf ears.

This is scary information, and as Marko (2015) found in her study of Canadian teachers, "almost 73% of the teachers/education professionals surveyed reported to have experienced some form of mental health distress since becoming a teacher" (p.45) and that most teachers are "experiencing some strong feelings of burnout" (Marko, 2015, p. 48).

How could you not? With aggression being directed towards you from the triumvirate of administration, students, and parents, one would have to be defective emotionally to not feel the negative effects and stress of such an environment. This is amplified in the first few years of teaching when you really have no frame of reference or experience and is surely one of the factors as to why 46 percent of Canadian teachers leave the profession within the first 5 years (Karsenti & Collin, 2013, p.146)!

Snapshot 7: All Inclusive

All throughout my schooling and career I was sold the benefits of inclusive education. It was treated as an exalted, third rail like term, untouchable in terms of criticism or challenge. I don't ever remember it being properly explained to me, and I distinctly remember one professor describing it as "self-evident" when someone asked him about it in class. Despite this professor's inadequate debrief on the subject I never assumed I would find myself in a position where I challenged this outwardly appealing concept, but here I was, with serious doubts as to its merits and benefits.

I had a student in my 5th year at a rural public school who we will call Chris. Chris had diagnosed Tourette's syndrome, and despite being medicated for the condition was at times, when excitable, completely unable to control it. The result was many mid class screaming sessions, wherein he would yell inappropriate sexual comments or, if provoked by another student asking him to stop, would scream at the student incessantly. I would typically have to either excuse the student, or Chris, because this could go on for an entire class, with Chris occasionally becoming physical in his anger. Naturally, certain boys in the class who were perhaps too young to afford sympathy to his condition, took his behavior simply as an affront and would provoke him, bully him, physically attack him at recess, and basically torment him endlessly. Chris had made the mistake the year previous, of smacking a girl in the face who insulted him, which made him a target and gave these students some sort of perceived moral justification for their constant haranguing of him. There were also very anti-Chris sentiments coming from the parents, who would often openly tell me that they had instructed their children to strike Chris, should he become too aggressive.

This clearly took its mental toll on Chris, and he suffered extreme anxiety as a result. The sad part was he simply could not control himself, and as a neophyte teacher, I couldn't have faced a harder challenge. I tried almost everything in my arsenal to bring cohesion to the group. I played with seating, I brought in a counselor, I organized team bonding activities. There was simply nothing I could do to quell the almost constant chaotic energy of the classroom. Finally, what I decided was to simply ask Chris to go to an empty neighbouring classroom as soon as I could see he was losing control, and to work there and come back when he was calmer. Out of everything I had done this was by far the most effective technique. It gave him a chance to relax, it let the class have a break, and it generally made the students far less hostile towards him, as they were not seeing him losing his temper as frequently. I did this for about 3 weeks and almost everyone agreed it was a good solution; except for my principal.

I was called into her office one day to talk about the "Chris situation." She invited me on one of my spares, and from the moment I walked in I could tell the tone was going to be serious, resembling more being "sent to the principal's office" when you are in primary school and have been caught misbehaving than a typical collegial meeting between supervisor and employee. I recall feeling scared - what had I done to warrant this? In my mind I'd taken a near impossible situation and handled it deftly, finding reasonable solutions. She did not see it this way. Her first question was "Have you been removing Chris from the classroom?" "Yes" I answered, "Whenever he is losing his temper or having an outburst, I ask him to go to the classroom next door to cool off." "So, you remove him?" she asked curtly. "I suppose you could put it that way" I said defensively. I had been obsessed with the A&E program The First 48, and I remember feeling like it was at this point that I should be pleading the fifth and demanding a lawyer, all for the crime of trying to bring harmony to my homeroom class.

She leaned closer to me and superciliously reminded me that this was an "inclusive school" and that if I thought the solution to dealing with students with special needs was simply removing them from the class then maybe I should find a new profession or take a class in sensitivity training. I tried to explain myself but again was cut off, it was clear I had triggered my principal and would not be convincing her of anything, other than the fact that I was an incompetent sociopath. I went home and reflected on what she said to me, and determined she was wrong about this situation. I also determined that if inclusive education meant keeping students with special needs in a classroom where they can't succeed and alienate themselves socially then the theory is problematic itself.

Analysis

The more I read about this issue, the more I saw that there was debate about this subject in academia, and others had certainly had experiences like mine. There is concern over the conflicting nature of "inclusive education" between "inclusion for some" and "inclusion for all", which is basically the dilemma I describe above. Do we keep students who need professional aid in the class at all times (inclusion for all) or do we try our best to keep all kids in the classroom but remove some who need specialized help (inclusions for some)? As expected, researchers have determined that this is hardly an isolated dilemma and that "…educational policies are inherently political, since they always involve values, interests, power games, choices, prioritization, and allocation of resources" (Barton, 1997, p. 232). This supports my point that there is certainly a degree of posturing involved in such a wide-reaching educational policy, and I've observed that the political points scored by claiming to be "inclusive", may just be to the detriment of the student experience, especially if they need more targeted help. Recent research suggests that a compromise should be reached that sees:

> "all children with special needs… fully included in regular schools in order to enable and empower them to become active and equal future citizens, but to keep special schools and special education teachers as additional resources where different students….can get different forms of supplementary support according to their needs" (Leijen et al., 2021, p. 8)"

The Quebec government is cagey with their definitions of what constitutes "inclusion", and I suspect this is intentional. They write on their government web site "Inclusive educational settings focused on success for all, supported by their community, where people learn to be civic-minded, creative, competent, responsible, open to diversity and fully engaged in social, cultural and economic life in Québec" (*Policy on Educational Success*, 2022). This leads much to interpretation and allows schools in practice to regulate the policy on their own terms. This is precisely why my principal's definition included never having the student leave the classroom, as a means of realizing this elusive goal of "inclusivity." In her vision that's what it entailed, but the issue is that's not the intention per se, just her understanding of the concept. Meirovici (2017) sums it up like so, in her analysis of the situation in Montreal, writing that "often the definition of inclusive education has been misunderstood as merely having children with disabilities in the same class as their neurotypical peers. At first glance this can seem inclusive, but simply being put in a class without the proper tools can be academically and socially isolating" (p.24). She includes recommendations on how to veer from this fallacy of "inclusion", the most prominent being "proper teacher training" as well as a redefinition of the term inclusion wherein we might acknowledge openly "that some children with mild to severe learning disabilities need more specialized educational attention" that could see them in a separate class (Meirovici, 2017, p. 12).

Snapshot 8: Private Eyes

I began teaching in a private school in September of 2017. I had spent the previous five years in some of the most impoverished schools in Quebec and so the sudden switch was both welcome and shocking. For one, I noticed immediately that students were much healthier looking. This observation may seem crude or inappropriate, however, I believe it belies my larger point that the systems sit opposed to each other in a manner not unlike McLachlan's Two Solitudes (1945). One system seemed replete with issues, starved for resources, and inundated with students who benefitted more from the services of a social worker or psychologist than a teacher (a role I learned to fill) while the private system from the outset seemed to cater exclusively to cherubic faced savants who were completely sheltered from the realities faced by their peers. My first working day entailed spending the day "bonding" with "fun" activities in the courtyard of the school, wherein we basically played games and "got to know each other" on a personal level.

Despite the cynical tone of my account, I did not dislike it at all. It was like the Platonic version of the Good Life (Plato et al., 1948, p. 241)) *with the students seemingly completely bought into the process of education and the teachers invested fully in having their students realize their full selves, on personal and academic levels. Utopia was fun to indulge in, but my brain couldn't help but level this experience against the have nots, who were likely beginning their own school years but with much less ado. The end of my day was punctuated by a "new teacher cocktail" where I was fed catered foods and elegant cocktails in a haughty colonial style school looking down upon the rest of the city. At this event I was schmoozed by the governing board which was composed mostly of the city' elites, scions, and third gen names that had dedicated their lives to this staple institution. Their sacrifice was surely commendable, but the*

harsh dichotomy was inescapable. Is this what the new segment of my career would look like? Had I "levelled up" in a sense, as many of my corporate minded friends had suggested? Or had I simply sold out to an inherently corrupt end of education, that kowtowed to the 1 percent, in exchange for these opulent evenings and less disruptive classroom settings. This question would stay in the back of my mind for the coming 5 years, at times almost paralyzing me, and at others invigorating my desire to make meaningful change.

Analysis

This snapshot illustrates to me one of the fundamental issues facing Quebec, and it is the guiding leitmotif of this autoethnography—the inherently unjust and stratified education systems in the province. Not only did my first day at one of these institutions validate my concerns, but even architecturally public schools also largely look like soviet bloc apartment complexes whereas private schools resemble palatial grounds. There is something fundamentally hypocritical about advancing this system while also claiming to being about "equity" and "equal opportunity." Most studies will support this argument. For instance, Zancajo et al., (2022) concluded in their analysis of two tiered systems that all around the world **"**it may be time for governments to rethink their public funding priorities, if educational equity and social cohesion are to be the primary goals" (p.63). They also revealed that when it comes time to challenge these institutions, it can be very difficult given the fact that:

> "…associations of private schools, like-minded private foundations and middleclass families tend to oppose, on occasions vehemently and in a well-coordinated manner, any regulatory change that is perceived as limiting the autonomy of private schools or the freedom of choice for families" (Zancajo et.al., 2019 as cited in Delvaux & Maroy , 2019, p. 63).

We've seen this play out in Quebec, as for instance when the leftist provincial politician Gabrielle Nadeau-Dubois proposed a bill challenging subsidizing private schools lost 102-2 in the Quebec National Assembly. It was learned afterwards that almost every single politician who had voted against it had either themselves attended a private school and/or had a child enrolled in one (Gutnick, 2017)

This is depressing news to me, and confirms Quebec's cultural attachment to the system, which through almost all measurable metrics creates undeniable discrepancies. The government of Quebec itself hired a think tank to analyze the situation in 2016 and the conclusions were damming, saying that in effect there is a crisis in confidence in the system and that the gap in resources is widening every year between private and public schools (Conseil superieure de l'education, 2016, p. 2). The history is tied to the bifurcation orchestrated during the Quiet Revolution to move away from a religion-based system but has sadly become the norm here. Quebec sees close to 15 percent of students attending private schools in Quebec and over 30 percent in Montreal (Béland et al., 2019, p. 74) ensuring stratification and societal replication.

Snapshot 9: Hitting the Mark

This snapshot happened very recently. I was ending my school year in a private school and had compiled my grades for one of my social sciences classes. When I submitted them to my administrator for approval I was called for a quick meeting, which is not that unusual. On arriving I was questioned as to why the average was "so low."

"The average is in the 80's, whereas in the past it has been in the 90s", my department head commented. "Well, these things change from year to year, this group is different and not particularly strong compared to previous ones" I replied. "Okay but it should be higher, it's an

options class, a chance for them to boost their average, and parents have been complaining that it is supposed to be higher" she retorted. "Perhaps you should look at how certain assignments are weighted", she ended.

As much as this sort of discussion may seem shocking to an onlooker, it's not that strange in the private school context and I've witnessed this form of mark manipulation happen countless times. Whenever these interactions do happen, I feel a lot like a senator in a mafia movie, conversing with Joe Pesci about the new "project" they want me to greenlight. "So ya gonna play ball or not? It'd be much easier if ya did." With private schools being sold on the free market, they take on the mind set found in corporations, where sales or "seats in the chairs" can muddy the line between honest marking and outright grade inflation. Having students obtain higher averages is a good selling point and is more appealing to parents looking to have their children enter competitive programs.

It's easy to see the slippery slope with which schools must consider the integrity of their school, and the extent to which they'll go to boost grades. On the one end, if you're too demanding, students may simply leave your school for one that is less stringent, whereas if you give away marks, then the school might come to be considered a joke. In a private institution I've found my administrators to be much more likely to bend to a ridiculous parent demand, as the relationships resembles more "saslesperson-customer" than "teacher-parent."

Analysis

I'd long heard about how the popular form of parenting of the day was "bulldozer parenting", changed from the "helicopter parent" that seemed to be in vogue when I was young. This form of parent simply "clears out a path" (WebMD Editorial Contributors, 2021)

for their child and sadly, if you are a teacher, you may be in their way one day. Thomson (2012) writes "the relationship between independent school parents and their children's teachers has only grown more intense… Administrators and teachers are spending more time focused on the demands and concerns of parents than they ever did in the past" (p. 1). This type of behaviour is understood to be the only way a child might not "fall behind", although statistically, it seems if you attend a private school this is unlikely to happen. A few disturbing statistics about the enrollment into top American universities recently came out, showing that despite only "2 percent" of the population being enrolled in private schools, "24 percent of Yale's class of 2024 attended a private school. At Princeton, that figure is 25 percent. At Brown and Dartmouth, it is higher still: 29 percent" (Flanagan, 2022).

We've all heard about the Lori Loughlin college admissions scandal, and almost everyone would agree it is detestable, but when you think of the structure of an independent or private school, it's surprising we don't hear about it more often. With these institutions in such tight competition for enrollment and reliance on donations, it's only logical that a big donor would be treated preferably. It's anecdotal and hard to study, but logic would dictate that this is the case, and as Flannagan explains "many private-school kids… feel that there is a separate set of rules for the children of huge donors [compared to regular students]" (Flanagan, 2022).

Discussion

Every year, a tradition in the borough of Notre-Dame-de-Grâce occurs in March, when hundreds of eager and loving parents camp (literally) outside of one of the better performing English public schools, to ensure their children are enrolled in the kindergarten class. The school, Royal Vale high School, has a high rating for a public school, at a 7/10 (*Fraser Institute - School*

Ranking, n.d.) and is costs less compared to private schools in the region, and so it has a particular appeal that would attract parents to well, sleep outside. Some people like Alyson Aylward think it's a great process, "because the parents get to know each other" (Oduro, 2020) whereas others have a more cynical outlook on the matter, like Mitch Kuvasky who feels "…this shouldn't be the case, I believe it's up to the school boards to have a long-term vision to plan" (Oduro, 2020). A lot of those interviewed seemed to think this ritual was indicative of how broken the system was, and I tend to agree. Could there be a more literal example of "first come first serve" and the underlying inequity in the school system? Why are some schools in the same system considered so much better than others, that parents will go to such extreme lengths to see their child admitted? Why aren't all schools in the same public system, equal? Why are we still using the dated and shameful method of "rating" schools instead of simply ensuring that all of them are of a suitable standard? We know there is a tiered system in Quebec and can pretty much predict yearly how each system will fare compared to the other. "The highest academic success rates are found in the private system, followed by the English public schools, and the lowest is in the French public schools which also has Canada's highest dropout rate" says Jim Wilson (2019) former head of the Lester B. Pearson School Board. The "success" of the students is pre-determined, predicated upon where you attend before you ever even submit an assignment. With that in mind, can you blame these eager parents? In the following paragraphs I will present solutions to some of the problems discussed in the paper and outline recommendations for how to improve this broken system.

Firstly, Canada should strive to make legal amendments to grant the federal government powers so that nation-wide change can be made in the education system. Currently, "Canada does not have a federal department of education and is the only industrialized federation without

means for direct federal involvement in elementary and secondary education" (Vergari, 2010, p. 536). There can be vastly different philosophies, standards, and practices from one province to the next and it is surely difficult to change as it is guaranteed in the British North America Act of 1867 (Government of Canada, Department of Justice, Electronic Communications, 2022). This dilemma has been discussed throughout the last century, with many wondering how Canada could build an effective identity and provide quality education with such disparate approaches to a pillar of society. Generally, it's been noted that no significant changes have occurred, largely due to issues of provincial autonomy as well as "…apathy by federal and provincial politicians" (MacDonald, 1977, p. 267). I can understand why this would be the case and can sympathize with the pushback, problems, and criticisms that would be hurled at any politician who attempted such a Herculean feat. This paper looks to strive for the ideal, however, which is to call for more centralized educational power, so that progressive educational change can occur nationwide.

This change isn't impossible, in fact we have a modern-day example of a country that came together to execute this type of modernization, and the results speak for themselves. As Sahlberg (2021) explains in his important work, *Finnish Lessons*, after World War II, Finland found itself far behind in terms of its ability to compete with Western, developed nations and were eager to break out from their agrarian based economy (p. 15). Government officials met to brainstorm a plan that could help them realize this dream. They created three key committees, which met hundreds of times in the following years and hashed together a plan that would dramatically shift the focus of the system, to one that built around the following three tenets:

1)The structure of education would provide access to better and more education for all

> 2) The form and content of curricula would focus on development of individual, holistic student personalities of children.
>
> 3)Teacher education would be modernized to respond to the needs arising from these developments. (Sahlberg, 2021, p. 16)

The impact of these changes made in the 1950's can be felt to this day, as Finland is routinely rated as having the finest education system in the world (Edu, 2022), and this is largely contingent on the fact that their system is almost completely at odds with Quebec's in that there is little focus on standardized tests, less time spent in class and "… in Finland it is not permitted to charge fees for mainstream education - and only 2% of its schools are run by non-governmental bodies" (Check, 2019), and of this two percent, there are "no fees for parents" (Check, 2019). Every school is mandated to provide equal services, and so shopping for schools is not necessary, as they are all deemed as providing an excellent primary and secondary education (Moore, 2015). This adjustment to our system would certainly deal with the one of the main themes found throughout this paper, namely unequal access to education and disparity in academic resources allocated between the private and public systems. I would compel Canada to confer and make necessary changes to fix the broken two-tiered education system found in Canadian provinces, and the perfect template for such change can be found in replicating how Finland modernized their system. We cannot truly claim to provide equal access to education until we make this change.

Secondly, we need to address our special needs education system and the best way is to build on the suggestion above and learn from Finland in this area as well: The Western world is infatuated with the idea of "Inclusive Education" but are rarely able to advance a system that

works. As Schuman (2011) noted in his studies of this topic across nations shifting towards this paradigm, there is surely a "gap between policy makers and their ambitions with the education system on the one hand and involving the people who will actually face and experience the outcomes of measures in their daily lives" (p.14). True inclusion has been difficult for most nations to achieve and is made even more challenging when the society at large is not invested in the notion (Schuman, 2011, p. 12). Quebec is struggling with this issue, as demonstrated by my snapshots and discussion of the horrible state of our special needs education program. As Sahlberg (2021) explains, Finland's system is rated so highly because they put emphasis on addressing special needs and have a government that is honest about ensuring the funding is there to execute inclusive education goals (p.80). This will become increasingly difficult to do without a collaborative effort between provincial education bodies and the governments of Canada and without reconsidering how education can be done. Hargreaves et al. (2008) write about how many countries have tried to learn from the Finnish example but were held back by the "distinctive social values that more individualistic and inequitable societies may find difficult to accept" (p.92). It would seem when studying the example of Finland there is not much hope for nations who are still caught in the "reductionist paradigm that is built on a classical theory of knowledge or human capital" (Sahlberg, 2021, p. 229). In Quebec and Canada, it is imperative that we change our approach, if we want to change our outcomes.

Currently, the special need student is at a disadvantage because they are not being supported properly in in the classroom, the rest of the class is disadvantaged because they are in a chaotic environment, and the teacher is expected to perform magic to make this whole situation work. Were we to be serious about this change we could have a three-pronged solution of addressing the inequality within the two-tiered system, offer inclusive education that properly

supports students with special needs, whilst buttressing teacher performance by reducing the alarmingly high rates of burnout, stress and depression found in Canadian teachers and discussed in Snapshot 4. Finnish teachers, not surprisingly, report less stress, have more free time (Walker, 2022) and burnout at a lower rate compared to the international average ("TALIS 2018 Results (Volume II)," 2020). This paper hopes that the autoethnographic storytelling as well as research-based analysis was compelling enough to move the needle towards a societal and educational shift in the direction of the Finnish model.

Conclusion

Collectively, these snapshots make up a retrospective that examines the struggles experienced by a teacher in their first years of working in education within Quebec. Personally, they function as a roadmap of my development from a student to a teacher, spanning from one snapshot that occurred when I was 15 years old, to one that happened a few months ago, at the age of 32. I'm wary of having these accounts come off as snide, but the opposite is true, as I work from the adage that "a true patriot can criticize their country", my country in this case being my province's education system. In fact, most of my experiences in this system have been wonderful and life-affirming, and I can only hope that my autoethnographic piece can facilitate meaningful change and fulfill the purpose of lending "voice to personal experience for the purpose of extending sociological understanding" (Wall, 2008, p. 38).

An important aspect of autoethnography is to engage in the reflexivity that naturally should accompany any project involving memory work. Steier (1991) explains that we are meant to discuss how our experiences allow for us to "…construct ourselves socially" (p. 245), a point I certainly identified with, as I've surely been moulded by not only what I've done, but also by delving deeper into writing this paper and analyzing its content more acutely. The act of using

the reflexive narrative model as a "journey of self-inquiry towards self-realization" (Johns, 2020, p. 19) resonates with me as I strove to "look back to see [myself] emerge" (Johns, 2020, p. 19). As a person I have certainly moved left on the political spectrum as it relates to education, as I would say I was force fed a right-wing narrative as a child, both at home and at school, and have slowly been evolving out of this worldview since I first stepped into a classroom as a substitute teacher at the age of 21. By right wing I mean a traditional, business style approach to all things education, in that the aim of school is to graduate, get a job, have a family, replicate, point finale. Through my work I've seen that the aim of education is much more complex, and should serve as a mechanism of freedom, namely intellectually, to ensure that the next generation is aware of the currents of injustice and oppression in the world, so that they can make informed and enlightened choices in their own journeys.

I see my role in the same way the liberated man imagines himself in Plato's famous "Allegory of the Cave" (Plato et al., 1948, p. 241). The liberated man can see the way his peers are tricked by the masters, who simply put on shadow shows for them all day in a darkened cave. When he escapes the cave, he is uncomfortable and the light from the outside sun is blinding, but after persevering through the pain, can see freedom is far superior to being chained to a rock, watching shadow shows all day, despite the comfort it affords. He feels compelled to share his news with his peers who are still chained, but they unsurprisingly turn on him and try to kill him for bringing them this information of a better life and mindset.

This is perhaps the perfect analogy for the life of a teacher, and one I come to understand more and more with each day in this profession. With this spirit in mind, I find myself at ease with criticism, push back, and even anger I sometimes have levied against me, because I keep steadfast to me overarching ethos of "educating" my students, in the grander sense of the word.

Leaving the assembly line teaching mindset is the most rewarding part of the growth I've had through experiences shared in these snapshots. The more I've seen the more I realize that the system is manipulated, at times by charlatans, with dubious end goals, and that the educator's moral imperative is to break free and provide your students with an honest education free from ulterior motives of the grown-up world such as profit, personal glory, or cheap political points.

My educational philosophy is completely aimed at challenging my students' preconceived notions by having them consider perspectives outside of their own, with the aim of enhancing their ability to think with empathy. This is convenient as I currently teach Ethics, Law, History and Debating to an almost unanimously upper-class clientele who will surely shape Quebec culture themselves one day. A lot of times when I discuss ideas with them, it's the first time they've ever heard of the subjects I bring up, and their initial responses can be very raw. Not long ago, we spoke about affirmative action in Ethics class. No student had ever heard the term and when I explained it's tenets, they all were shocked by such a proposition. They told me it was "unfair", "stupid", "reverse racism" and even "illegal." When I told them governments, universities and corporations all abide by affirmative action, they were even more incensed, mainly because they assumed they would lose out on possible opportunities themselves due to this practice. Afterwards we moved into a lesson on slavery and its lingering effects in society and the next day we revisited the affirmative action question, after a brief discussion on Rawls' theory on the "veil of ignorance" (1971). To my surprise most of the students had changed their minds and were now advocating *for* affirmative action, each with a very nuanced and intelligent position. This to me is the "so what" of this paper and the honesty of which I claim to strive for as a teacher. My snapshots overall, are examples of me having my eyes opened to the marginalized in our society. In snapshot 1 and 2 I spoke about students being discriminated

based on sexual orientation and race. Snapshot 3 saw me faced with special needs students who I had basically never dealt with before in my own schooling. Snapshot 5 is all about the abuse many children suffer in Quebec, and how overall, public schools are forced to deal with these issues on tightening budgets and dwindling resources. Before teaching, I had never really seen a public school, I wasn't abused, I'm not part of the lgbtqia2+ community (although I am an ally) and I'm a white male who graduated from an expensive private high school. It's safe to say I've been untouched by many of the issues ailing the students with whom I've worked.

These snapshots in effect, have educated me and left me with an understanding of the plight experienced by so many in Quebec. I would hate to of seen the affirmative action lesson I would have come up with had I been working a corporate job for the last decade. It's sad, but safe to say I might have simply not had the wherewithal or knowledge to challenge their kneejerk reactions, and educate them with the appropriate tone, focus and pedagogical end goal. I'm happy about my constructed self and endeavour to lay the foundations for the ideologies of students I work with, which would have never happened without living through these 9 snapshots. In the same way a great singer songwriter may not be able to resonate with listeners having not experienced some pain themselves, or the way a great novelist is said have more gravitas if they've felt personal sorrow, I think experience and professional suffering have allowed my teaching voice to be formed and my underpinning ambition to be aimed at fixing structural inequality in Quebec, while instilling this desire in my students.

As much as I've enjoyed my job and work environments, like any institution there are practices that must be modernized and philosophies that must be adapted. This work hopes to demonstrate through the challenges and firsthand snapshots, the emotional impact that teaching in the Quebec education system can have on an individual. Some general themes that emerged

were the public/private divide, the lack of funding for educational initiatives that support marginalized groups and the vacuity of certain broad based educational policies. I would be happy with my work if these issues were improved upon, if even slightly, due to my contributions. As Freire states, “looking at the past must only be a means of understanding more clearly what and who [we] are so that [we] can more wisely build the future” (Freire, 1998, p. 84).

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