

“Reasonable Accommodation” Brief: An Allo-Gaspesian Family’s Perspective

Background

My name is Howard Miller. I was born in Montreal, 1954, oldest of three children. Both my parents were second generation Quebec Canadians. My grandparents, on both sides of the family, were born in Russia and Poland. I received my undergraduate degree from McGill University in 1976. I received my teaching diploma, also from McGill in 1977. From 1978 to 1981, while studying part-time, I obtained additional licensed certificates in Special Education and Reading. I am currently completing, through distance education, my Masters in Educational Leadership at Memorial University in Newfoundland.

I have worked for one employer over the past thirty years. It has undergone several name changes from the Regional School Board of Gaspesia, to the Gaspesia-Islands School Board to Eastern Shores School Board. I have worked as a teacher at Elementary, High School and Adult Education. I served for 16 years as local union president of the Gaspesia Teachers’ Association. I also served for 6 years as Chairperson and Executive member of the Provincial Association of Protestant Teachers (PAPT) currently renamed the QPAT or Quebec Provincial Association of Teachers. For the last seven years of my professional career, I have been principal of Gaspé Polyvalent (100 students, Anglophone youth sector). It is part of a shared facility which includes 600 Francophone youth sector students, 600 Francophone adult sector students, and another 10 Anglophone adult sector students. We get along marvelously. I could not ask for better professional partners.

I am happily married to a beautiful person, Sheryl. She was born in Hamilton, Ontario, received her Teaching Degree from McGill University, and has been teaching Elementary School in Gaspé since 1978. With the birth of my children, Josh (1986), Lori (1989) and Tiffany (1991) I have decreased my level of “political activity” commensurate to their needs. I will list the highlights of my “extra-curricular” involvement in Quebec language issues, although my dates may be somewhat imprecise.

The politics of language

In 1983, I made my first public presentation before the Superior Council of Education. It was also my first year as President of the local teachers association. I spoke of the difficulty our tiny school board had in providing immersion programming for a rural and isolated minority English-speaking population. Today, almost twenty-five years later, we STILL suffer from the same difficulty.

In 1986, I submitted a special project to then Education Minister, Claude Ryan. It was entitled Neighborhood Twinning. The logic was straightforward. . If we could twin Quebec schools with Alberta, at great cost, why could we not twin two schools, less than a kilometer apart, at almost no cost. We, therefore, wished to take advantage of a local neighborhood school, St. Rosaire, and twin it with Gaspé Elementary School, involving a limited number of students who would trade classrooms on a short-term basis. Although we had the Minister’s consent, it came with one condition. We were required to establish

unanimity among all the key stakeholders. We did not receive it. Sad to say, but not all parties were interested back then. Who was interested? The French School Board, French parents, the English Teacher Union and English parents were in favour. Who was not interested? The English School Board and the French Teacher Union were opposed. The English School Board at the time did not wish to appear to ruffle political feathers. The French Teacher Union was staunchly in favour of admission standards on Law 101 and would brook no exceptions, even under the guise of a temporary project. The Neighborhood Twinning proposal seemed to have even English Language advocacy groups like CASA (Committee for Anglophone Action) running for the hills. The Neighborhood Twinning proposal never took root in Gaspé although it was resurrected several times by interested individuals and received Quebec Ministerial approval each time it was resubmitted.

The Sign Law debate of the late 1980's got me most involved in politics. I became a member of the Board of Directors of Alliance Quebec, briefly served as President of CASA where I made a presentation to the Belanger-Campeau Commission. Around the time of the Stephen Knowles and like-minded Town Hall "angryphones," I gave a rousing speech at Gaspé Elementary School (still have the audio tape) wherein I called the English leadership of Quebec a gang of "wimps and cowards." My speech made the news and I was covered within the first three pages of every major newspaper in Quebec. It was I who labeled Alliance Quebec, "Compliance Quebec." I was invited by the Unity Party, which then later merged with Libman's Equality Party, to run as a candidate in the Provincial Election. It was a fun experience; language debates were hot and heavy back then. Those were exciting, tumultuous times.

The Lessons of Family

But, as my children grew, so too did my more important responsibilities as a parent. My first real accommodation occurred when my son was in Pre-kindergarten. **(I do not like the legal term, "reasonable accommodation." First, accommodation is reciprocal and not one-directional. When seen in that light, all accommodation is reasonable, for both parties partake in the agreement. Second, there is no such thing as unreasonable accommodation for there is nothing accommodating about that. But I digress).** We received a phone call from the Elementary teacher who asked us what we would do about Josh once the kids started celebrating Christmas and the coming of Santa Claus. My wife and I, after some thought, decided we would join right in. This did not mean dispensing with our Jewish heritage. Christmas became not unlike Halloween, filled with merriment and wonder and celebration. We still honored all the Jewish high holidays, and paralleled Christmas with Channukah and Easter with Passover. Santa came down our chimney. We had presents under a lighted tree while the Channukah light were shining on the kitchen table. So too did the Easter Bunny litter our house with tiny chocolate Easter eggs, while we sang the Four Questions from the Passover Haggadah and ate matzo. We were never a religious family but we were always Jewish. Some of our most favorite moments come from those times when we accommodated but never forgot who we were.

When Josh was six years old, we attempted to enroll him in the local French School, St. Rosaire. We wanted him to fit right into the Gaspé community. It was tough taking him swimming and skating when all around him were speaking a language he could not understand. The principal of St. Rosaire was very accommodating and encouraging but our son resisted. He was scared and wanted to remain with his friends. He was our first born and we did not wish to push him into something we wanted, but he did not. That would not be accommodating.

Throughout the years, our school board has lost many students to local French schools because of our inability to offer an immersion program. It was not easy back then enrolling a child in the French school. Locals would complain that parents who did that were not supporting the English school system. We were, in theory, betraying our own (sound familiar?) But a small minority of parents was more than prepared to place the long term interests of their children's linguistic needs over the interests of the English-speaking community. Accommodation, therefore, came at a price. You did not win any friends when making this kind of a decision. Today, such decisions are much more accepted, within the current linguistic context.

Josh eventually became very bilingual, although his French was street French, learned in the pool, on the soccer field, and most especially in the hockey rink. Even though he struggled, almost all the volunteers, broken-English or not, always accommodated him and tried to make him feel "chez nous". Our francophone neighbors were wonderful. We could not ask for better. They never, ever left him with the feeling he was an outsider. He speaks much better French than I could ever hope to. Today, Josh is well known even in the Francophone community. He is the first Gaspesian to have ever been accepted to Harvard as an undergraduate. Josh is currently in his third year.

The girls were another matter. First, Lori, then Tiffany, went to French school at St. Rosaire. Both were top students in their respective classes. Initially, our plan was to send Lori only for the first three years and then return her to English school. But a very wise teacher, Ms. Cecilia Huard, in Lori's first grade, told us that it would be better if Lori completed all six years at St. Rosaire, that is, if she were to achieve a proper "formation de base." We listened and did the same for Tiffany. St. Rosaire, its administration and teachers, were always accommodating. We never heard from the girls that they were considered "anglaise." But the teachers and parents got a kick out of it as the Anglophone Millers rose to the top of their classes. Tiffany had an even more interesting and profitable experience. Unlike Lori, who joined in at Grade One, after attending English schools in Pre-K and Kindergarten, Tiffany began at Maternelle. At three turning four, Tiffany, received a derogation and was enrolled at Sacred Heart School, then part of the French Catholic Commission Grande Hermine. But her education was in English. At four turning five, Tiffany was enrolled in Kindergarten at Gaspé Elementary School, also with derogation. But at five turning six, we had a choice, Grade One at St. Rosaire or Maternelle. We still tease Tiffany that she did a "doublee" of her Maternelle, but in truth, we solidified her French even better than we had done with Lori. We are convinced Tiffany represents the new Quebecoise, perfectly at ease in either culture or language, both written and spoken.

When the girls entered Secondary, we chose to return them to English school, to assure their long term writing skills. However, we could not put them into langue seconde classes (too boring), so we turned to the French section of the school, and asked if they could take them into Langue Maternelle classes. Once again, we were accommodated. But the girls had to also do their own form of accommodation. Each class they missed on the English side while attending classes on the French side had to be made up. And therein is yet another lesson; accommodation isn't easy and sometimes requires much sacrifice. But the prizes attached are worth the effort expended.

I forget the precise date that the Law 101 Commission, led by Gerald Larose, did their tournee of la belle province. But when they came to Gaspé, the Miller family made a presentation. Both girls, Lori and Tiffany, speaking in impeccable French, represented their francophone neighbors and pleaded for some formula, any formula, that would allow their friends to have the opportunity to become as bilingual as they. Only their dad spoke in English. Gerald Larose was friendly, but clearly uncomfortable at the “products” of an Anglophone family who had “profited” from Law 101, perhaps in ways that were not envisaged. Our message was clear. Thank you for accommodating us, but we have also done our part in the accommodation process. And now we are returning the favour even if the most political among you do not like the message. Had we done our presentation in Montreal where it would have been covered extensively, the girls would have been a media sensation. Luckily for Gerald, almost no one covered Gaspé back then. The commission was on its last legs and media interest had waned. No matter; we, the Miller family, had done our small part and made our point.

Larger Lessons Learned

Had I the time, I would have returned to essays I have read during my research and given you precise names. I recall the great thinkers of the 18th and 19th century, who, when helping to formulate compulsory education for the masses, looked to Europe and how nations build common values to promote unity and pride in their country. They used the school system. They would have concluded that the weakness of the Canadian constitution is that it cedes jurisdiction of education to the provinces. That would be fine, if each province were then to act as its own country. But we are, at least on paper, a federation. Yet portability in education does not exist, neither among students nor teachers. Each education act and the rules differ from province to province, as do the curriculums and exit requirements. And then we wonder about our Canadian identity?

So we cannot turn back the clock of time and correct the Canadian Constitution. What do we then do in the meantime? Some would suggest that we separate from the rest of Canada. That some is no longer restricted to Quebec. They say it in Alberta (for obvious reasons as Fort McMurray has turned into the third largest city of expatriates from Newfoundland and other parts of the Maritimes). They say it in British Columbia, as they look West across the Pacific and South across the US border for trading interests. I don't agree. I think we have a great province, arguably the most interesting in Canada, and maybe even the world. Quebecers – Francophones, Anglophones, and Allophones

are peoples like no other – and vive la difference. Appreciation of our distinctiveness is also accommodation.

I am by nature a romantic. I believe that school systems are meant to be the great equalizer, dispensing as much equity of opportunity as we can afford. Our schools are not, nor ever will be perfect. And I am not here to apologize for their imperfections. But I believe we can make them better by recognizing that schools should unify our society. We have moved away from confessional school boards to linguistic ones. We have changed the names of the tribes but we still support all the old rituals. And so we are still tribes that keep changing names, but not identities. Our schools and school systems remain islands (separate from each other) instead of archipelagoes (inextricably linked together).

If we are all Quebecers and wish to understand one another, it begins when we are youngest and most impressionable; when our minds and hearts are most open and generous; when we have not yet learned life's hardest lesson which accentuate difference rather than commonality. If I were a person of influence, I would call for only one school system, not many. It would be a public school system, free of all incidental charges, paid for by our collective tax dollars. In the morning, all would learn French. In the shorter afternoon, all would learn English. All the religions of the earth would be taught, as part of the curriculum, so that we could understand and celebrate difference. And whatever religion people wish to follow can be done on their own time. Private schools can continue to exist, but should be wholly funded by those who insist upon them, through private tuition and corporate sponsorship. Within a one school French-English system, everyone emerges bilingual, and then, who among us would not wish to put our best French face forward on everything public? Why wouldn't we? It is fun to be unique (dare I say distinct?) within the North American context. We all strive to be special. Herein, we could have our cake and eat it too, and be a beacon of accommodation to everyone. For me, my evolution on language and religion and accommodation of difference began with the cumulative lessons learned from my children. It may be too late for some of us, but maybe our children or their children can carry the dream of unity without tribalism. Maybe they can live on archipelagoes instead of islands, or even build a whole continent of kindred spirits. That is, after all, the fundamental goal of our educational system – creating responsible, productive, and caring citizens who look out for one another. Accommodation would not be a necessary word in that future society's vocabulary. It would be understood by all and taken for granted as a *modus operandi*. Romantic, huh?

Howard Miller
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