



## Cultural integration may be a better way

### Immigrant kids in Grade 1 take easily to French culture

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Just when you want to give up on mankind, along comes a work of art in the shape of a book, a song, a play or a film, so full of hope that it washes away the black clouds of despair and makes you want to believe in the world again.

*La classe de Madame Lise (Madame Lise's Classroom)*, a film directed by Sylvie Groulx and winner of the best documentary at the Jutra Film Awards in Montreal, did exactly that for me. Better still, it did it on the very day 17 presumed terrorists were arrested in the Toronto area, sending the whole country, including Quebec, into a paranoid swirl.

Mind you, Groulx's documentary, shot in the Grade 1 class of a school in a heavily multicultural neighbourhood in Montreal, had come out way before anybody had heard of people wanting to blow up the CN Tower or behead Stephen Harper. But this is the sort of film that you want to see over and over again and that takes on a new meaning each time a "multicultural" drama breaks out in the news.

What's so special about this film? Nothing much, except that it follows an exceptional teacher — Lise Coupal — and her Grade 1 students over the course of a year in a multi-ethnic school.

Their names are not Jack and Jill, but Rafik, Solace, Rahat and Adonay. They come in on the first day of school speaking Urdu, Tamil, Hindi, Thai and every possible language of the rainbow except French, of course. Most of them have just arrived with their parents from India, Africa, Pakistan or Somalia, and a few are only stopping over in Montreal for the year before heading to Toronto to reunite with the rest of the family. In the meantime, they have to go school. And since they are living in Quebec, they have to abide by the language laws and go to a French-language school.

You would think that learning French would be the hardest thing on Earth for these 6-year-olds who have been living in the tight-knit bubble of their parents' world. Quite the contrary. Thanks to Madame Lise, as they call her, thanks to her patience, warmth, humour and dedication, they learn French at the speed of light with good-natured zeal and a great dose of pride. And they learn French naturally, with an open mind, devoid of fear or prejudice.

As they evolve over the months, you get the impression that these kids are perfectly thrilled to be engaged in a process of integration, and that not one of them feels the least bit threatened in their identity.

Seeing them, I couldn't help thinking of the 17 arrested in Toronto, especially the younger ones, perhaps brainwashed by some twisted teacher. Perhaps they, too, at some point had been happy, curious, fast-learning first graders like the kids in Madame Lise's classroom. They, too, had wanted to fit in, if not to melt in with the rest of little Canadians. So, what happened? Some say multiculturalism, the policy of multiculturalism, is the problem.

In Quebec, since Neil Bissoondath's essay *Selling Illusions: The Cult of Multiculturalism in Canada* came out in 1995, some of us have become weary with multiculturalism. It's as if Bissoondath had helped us see the light and understand that multiculturalism was another federal policy invented to curb Quebec's *nationalisme* and to prevent its culture from growing.

Whatever the reasons for multiculturalism, I for one, the daughter of two immigrants, themselves the children of immigrants, can't see the point of living in your own portable ghetto and having the least possible contact with the pervading culture. Even more so than the kids in Madame Lise's classroom, the first day I set foot in this country at the tender age of 5, I bypassed integration and headed straight for assimilation. And I am still happy I did.

That's probably why I took such pleasure following the evolution of the kids in Madame Lise's classroom and why I find the underlying message of the film so important. This film is not about multiculturalism — it's about integration, if not soft assimilation. It's about learning to be part of the society and the culture you have landed in, be it by choice or by accident.

In a very touching scene, Madame Lise takes all the kids to a park outside the city to frolic in the snow. We see them, unsteady on their feet but happy grins on their faces, walking around in snowshoes as if they were walking on the moon. And in a way they *are* walking on the moon, but instead of freaking out or wanting to run back to the security of the culture, the codes and the weather they left behind, they're enjoying every second on the moon.

If all immigrants to this country could have as much fun integrating as those first graders, we would all be much better off.

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**Nathalie Petrowski** is a columnist with *La Presse*.

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