

## This End of the Rainbow - The Vanier Experience

by

Doug Miller

The Learning Centre

Vanier College

At Vanier College in St-Laurent, multiculturalism is a daily, year-long way of life. More than 70 countries of origin are entered on the student application forms and as a result, approximately 60% of our population are rooted in communities other than the French and English founding nations. This phenomenon is an indirect insight into the future of globalization and produces a special dynamic, full of challenges and rewards. Pulling this diversity into a common academic purpose, and at the same time encouraging individuals to feel valued for their contribution may seem contradictory objectives. Nevertheless, this has become Vanier's hallmark contribution: building respect for Quebec's many cultural communities while promoting the values of Quebec citizenship and our deep-rooted democratic tradition.

Celebrating the differences is the wonderful part, but bringing people together in such great diversity can create a slightly schizophrenic condition, wherein the positive forces often confront some unpleasant realities. Vanier is not immune to conflicts in parts of the world far from Canada's shores. A simple desire to commemorate national holidays can lead to charges of favouritism since one country's "freedom" day may represent the defeat of another country in a far distant war. When tensions run high between Israelis and Palestinians in the Middle East, the St-Laurent campus feels the ripple effect. Cultural misunderstanding about the treatment of women, and the nature of machismo or a man's relation to authority can lead to confrontations and discipline cases. What appears to be a simple joke by a teacher or classmate can deeply hurt people operating in a third or fourth language who cannot catch all the nuance of irony. Just because people coexist in close physical proximity, one cannot assume that they share the richness of their cultures spontaneously with each other nor that they understand another's heritage. Stereotypes and racist feelings still slip into public display.

However, this apparent minefield of daily misunderstanding is exactly where opportunities lie for building the common values of this country's democratic tradition. As an example, whenever there is tension in Palestine / Israel, we begin discussions with the representatives of the counterpart communities within the college. Whenever possible, the aim is to have them sit face to face and deal with their coexistence in peace, in Vanier, while leaving the overseas form of conflict overseas. Often the presentation they make to each other provides the first time for one side to hear the other side's interpretation of circumstances. This becomes invaluable learning for both parties.

Another criticism leveled against the college is the apparent segregation of groups which manifests itself at the "Chinese Caf", the "Italian Caf", or the "Black Mall." This visual grouping has led some students to feel excluded from areas or circles of people.

This phenomenon, nonetheless, represents many more positive elements than would first meet the eye. The so-called segregated areas are a very small component of the college population. In the cafeterias and elsewhere throughout the college, there are areas where groups of diverse ethnic composition form through common interest and mingle freely along many lines - in the classroom, the Library, The Sports Complex, The Learning Centre. This occurs as much in their free time as in the structured atmosphere of courses and group assignments.

Even within the Caf groupings, a positive dynamic must be acknowledged. As an example, the popular media and cultural stereotyping often refer to the Black community as a monolithic whole or at best bifurcated into French - Haitian and English - Jamaican. The reality is that Black Montreal is made up of many backgrounds and diverse experiences that, in many cases, rarely communicate with each other. Not at Vanier. The Black community commingles in a harmony rarely seen outside, playing dominoes, listening to rap music, participating on sports teams and just generally sharing common experiences.

The primary function of the college occurs in the classroom, where this diversity is the most evident. As the Vanier demographic has changed over the years, many teachers have developed techniques to accommodate the learning needs of the new student. Many use techniques that aim at helping the students learn from and about each other. In Geography, Sociology, Humanities and English, to name but a few, the teachers use the cultural diversity of their students as pedagogical tools. Sometimes a student must interview a classmate from a completely different background. Others must interview their parents or grandparents about the immigrant or family experience and do oral reports to the class. By working together in close circumstances on class assignments, communication is fostered that extends beyond the classroom into the larger college community. Over the past year, the teachers in a multicultural forum have been sharing and compiling ideas for dealing with this diversity and profiting pedagogically from it. This will appear in the near future as a pamphlet to be circulated to the whole teaching population.

The truly wonderful part of our cosmopolitan existence is seen in many entertaining ways as well. The football team has representatives of almost all the larger communities. They play together with a common purpose that has kept the team at or near the top of their league for many years. Our chess tournaments often pit Russians against Congolese. The English peer tutors represent a wide diversity of language and ethnic backgrounds and often form longstanding friendships with the students they tutor. The Core Connection volunteers and the Learning Centre Assistants are an amazing mix of students providing help in different forms to other students. There are weekly kiosks mounted by different clubs and groups, raising funds for disaster relief in their homeland, selling traditional foods for fund-raising, commemorating holidays or simply entertaining the community. Student Development helps the students organize the annual "Nite of Nations" which has grown larger and larger based on the enthusiasm of all the communities to present their traditions. "Expression Days" allow students to take the stage in the Mall on an impromptu basis or otherwise and sing, recite poetry, tell

stories or simply entertain each other. The Learning Centre produces one or two books each year by student authors highlighting their experiences and allowing others insights into their lives.

Multiculturalism at Vanier is a reflection of the larger Quebec society with all its inherent strengths and weaknesses. For several centuries, global circumstances have brought immigrants to Quebec's shores. Over time, the new arrivals integrate into the larger society even though the majority host cultures may feel considerable unease with the changes such arrivals may bring. The future is already alive at Vanier College and reassuring in the degree of cooperation, communication and mixing that occurs at all levels. It is complex and challenging to manage, but it is also rewarding and exciting to have a privileged window on what the world will look like as current trends continue. At Vanier, we are proud of our contribution to building a stronger and better society.