

Book Review

Fragile Majorities and Education: Belgium, Catalonia, Northern Ireland, and Quebec

Marie McAndrew

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The shifting structures of majority and minority groups and the manner in which they interact is a challenging topic of study. When one considers the complexities that may be associated with the discussion of majority and minority relations, such as immigration and educational policies, it becomes clear that analyses of ethnic relations are by no means simple. With *Fragile Majorities and Education: Belgium, Catalonia, Northern Ireland, and Quebec*, Marie McAndrew seeks to address oversimplified views of ethnic dominance present in current studies of ethnic relations in which researchers view ethnic dominance as clearly defined dualistic case studies.

Fragile Majorities and Education offers a valuable contribution to the field of ethnic studies by examining the complex cultural realities of Quebec, Catalonia, Northern Ireland, and Belgium within the scope of education. McAndrew recognizes the necessity of discussing the ambiguous nature of majority and minority groups within these unique societies. Although many analyses of ethnic relations treat dominance as a clearly defined relationship between a majority and minority, she emphasizes that examples of clear ethnic dominance are rare. She admits that her interest in Quebec ethnic relations motivated her investigations into other similarly complex examples and this is evident considering the attention given to Quebec in the text.

The structure of the book allows readers to follow an orderly and coherent study of education's role in ethnic relations. This organized approach allows McAndrew to examine the rather convoluted topic of majority-minority relations, which refers not only to the cultural interactions between two groups but also to how these groups relate along political and educational lines. Specifically, she analyzes *fragile majorities*, which she defines as dominant groups that exist alongside politically powerful minority groups. Much of the text is devoted to how fragile majorities interact with the majority *Other* along institutional, especially educational, boundaries in Quebec, Catalonia, Northern Ireland, and Belgium.

Chapter 1 examines the various educational systems available in these societies, and how these affect relations between groups. In Chapter 2, the reasons that parents choose to enroll their children across cultural school boundaries, and their impact on students, is discussed. Chapter 3 investigates how divergent histories are incorporated into each society's curriculum and how successful these strategies are at presenting history in an inclusive and pluralist manner. The significant remaining proportion of the text discusses how the examined

communities, aside from Northern Ireland, adapt to the diversity created by immigration through integration policies. McAndrew's discussion of how these communities respond to immigration provides illuminating insight and is organized in a straightforward manner. She finds that conditions that facilitate cultural integration through school systems include an existing tradition of diversity integral to group identity, the presence of a clearly dominant group that was formerly a fragile majority, and a dependence on immigrants to ensure the society's survival.

Chapter 4 explores the inherent opportunities and challenges associated with linguistic integration, while Chapter 5 weighs the relevance and challenges of adapting schools to diversity and identifies the conditions necessary for this to occur. Much of McAndrew's research is based on recent comparative studies from researchers and policy makers focusing on Quebec, Catalonia, Northern Ireland, and Belgium, stemming from the Réseau sur l'éducation dans les sociétés divisées (Network on Education in Divided Societies) at the University of Montreal in Montreal, Quebec. This provides the basis for a comprehensive overview of a rather complicated subject.

Instead of using the standard comparisons with England, France, or the United States, McAndrew notes the importance of comparing Quebec with similar societies that allow for a more intricate investigation into the ambiguous educational issues associated with ethnic relations. Both the francophones of Quebec and Catalan-speakers of Catalonia are local majorities that within their respective states are minorities. In both Belgium and Northern Ireland, two groups of comparatively equal power differ respectively along linguistic and religious boundaries. The reasoning behind McAndrew's choice of these particular case studies is clear. She emphasises the comparability of these studies by noting that they "all form regions within a larger state," that most of these regions house minority communities or historical minorities, and that in each, "ethnic dominance is ambiguous" (p. 7). Her utilization of these particular fragile minorities, which plainly illustrate the ambiguity of majority-minority relations, is certainly a valid approach to the topic. Despite the similarities of the communities featured, the ways in which interactions occur between groups, how immigrants are linguistically integrated, and the response of educational policy, differ greatly. Using four comparable yet unique examples of these interactions is beneficial when attempting to illustrate the elusory nature of ethnic relations. Her selection of case studies examining fragile majorities gives the study an exclusive position within the existing body of research.

Despite the evident comparable value of focusing on the four fragile majorities featured in the book, questions arise regarding McAndrew's omission of other groups. Clearly, an exhaustive overview of similar groups from around the world is not warranted but the discussion of non-western or non-northern examples would have helped to create a more complete picture of the instability of ethnic relations. By focusing on only four examples, the author is able to provide thorough insight into the ambiguous realities of each case study. However, there is no explanation given for why examples of relatively similar societies from outside of Europe and North America are absent. McAndrew's writing would benefit by addressing more geographically distinct examples of fragile majorities, if only briefly, to provide more of a context for readers. The capacity to include several examples in such a detailed text is not an easy task given McAndrew's reasoning for including the four case studies. Still, some attention to other similarly ambiguous examples of fragile majorities would provide readers with a more global understanding of the issues. By limiting her focus only on these European and North American case studies, readers are left with only a partial understanding of a complex

topic.

Considering the comprehensive treatment of Quebec, Catalonia, and Belgium, the treatment of the Northern Ireland case study is noticeably lacking. McAndrew does not examine immigration in Northern Ireland, stating that issues regarding diversity and racism “have hardly affected most Northern Irish schools” (p. 151). Given McAndrew’s acknowledgement of the Northern Irish government’s commitment to “ethnocultural diversity and the fight against racism” (p. 151), the omission of exploring the impact of immigration in Northern Ireland seems unwarranted. She notes that her reasoning for excluding Northern Ireland from her discussion on immigration pertains to the importance of language in the other three case studies. The importance that McAndrew places on language, which is “central to the definition of inter-group boundaries” (p. 113), results in the Northern Ireland case study being discussed only in the first half of the book. The lack of attention given to the Northern Irish example for the remainder of the text raises the question of why the case study of Northern Ireland is included, aside from the obvious importance of exploring religious boundaries. Although language is an important consideration when discussing immigration, it is by no means the only lens through which immigration should be studied in such a text.

Despite the detail incorporated into most aspects of her case study discussions and her goal to address overly dualistic perspectives in the study of ethnic relations, McAndrew’s treatment of the relationships between majority and minority groups seems, at times, oversimplified. Indeed, it is the treatment of the fragile majority’s relationship with the *Other* as static and binary, which presents a major problem in the text. While McAndrew acknowledges the prevalence of research that treats ethnic relations as a straightforward interaction between clearly defined majorities and minorities, she seems to fall prey to a similar approach. Although it can be difficult to illustrate the ambiguity of ethnic relations, the author seems to view group membership as having very little overlap. However, not all case studies in the text are treated in such a way. Of all the societies that she examines, McAndrew’s comprehensive consideration of majority-minority relations in Quebec is the most extensive and this analysis escapes oversimplification found elsewhere in the book. The attention given to the importance of socioeconomic status in Quebec society highlights the deep-rooted links between education, language, economic power, and political power. It is here that *Fragile Majorities and Education* delivers a meaningful contribution to the field by examining ethnic power struggles in an educational context.

McAndrew’s book manages to clarify many of the complexities inherent in defining ethnic boundaries through four case studies. While a discussion of more diverse examples of fragile majorities would have provided for a more comprehensive examination of the topic, her book offers a well-organized and thoroughly researched summary of ethnic dominance in Europe and North America. As a comparative study of majority-minority relations, *Fragile Majorities and Education* offers an overview of how these particular groups interact and assert themselves.

The text would be particularly useful for students of ethnic studies, especially those focusing on the communities that McAndrew chooses to examine, specifically Quebec. In addition, it would serve as a stimulating course text that would encourage discussion in graduate-level education and ethnic studies courses. Policy makers may find the author’s insights to be of use when considering how ethnic groups cross school boundaries. Similarly, educators may also find the book to be a useful tool for considering the policies and practices that shape how their students interact with others.

While many teachers may be aware of their students’ membership in various cultural

groups, exploring the potential for education to bridge ethnic divisions can be a valuable exercise for educators, especially when reflecting about their beliefs early in their careers. Although at times McAndrew resorts to examining minority and majority groups as rigid and static entities, the book provides a unique perspective on the role that education plays in maintaining or erasing ethnic boundaries. By attempting to illuminate the ambiguity of majority-minority relations in four unique societies, McAndrew's book, *Fragile Majorities and Education: Belgium, Catalonia, Northern Ireland, and Quebec*, offers a valuable contribution to the study of ethnic relations within an educational framework and provides a foundation for further research into how education affects the crossing of cultural boundaries.

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