Perspectives of Immigrant Muslim Parents

Advocating for Religious Diversity in Canadian Schools

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Immigration is now the primary source of population growth in Canada. For the year 2006, the Canadian Census reported that almost 20 percent of the population was born outside of Canada (Statistics Canada, 2007). Between the years 1991 and 2001 specifically, the number of non-Christians, such as Muslims, Buddhists, Sikhs, and Hindus, had more than doubled in Canada (Statistics Canada, 2003). It is estimated that by the year 2017 more than 10 percent of Canadians will be non-Christians (Statistics Canada, 2005).

These demographic changes have profound implications for Canadian public school systems. While Canada promotes many ways of recognizing diversity, it seems to demonstrate however an aversion to utilizing the word "religion." The Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, for example, enshrines the right to practice one's own religion, which can be viewed as a means of accommodating the needs of religious minorities within a multicultural society. Yet public education in Canada follows a fundamentalist Christian curriculum with its calendar specifically fitting the needs of Christians (Karmani & Pennycook, 2005; Spinner-Halev, 2000), a trend also prevalent in the neighboring United States. The Eurocentric nature of public schools in general means that religious minority parents need to constantly negotiate parameters for their children's involvement in school curricula and activities (Zine, 2001).

This negotiation is particularly challenging for Muslim immigrant parents. Islam is often portrayed as an inherently violent religion and Muslims are seen as threatening the peace and security of Western nations (McDonough & Hoodfar, 2005), particularly after the events of September 11, 2001. Yet little attention has been paid to how minority parents negotiate their religious practices within public schools.

Given these concerns, data were collected through in-depth interviews with immigrant parents who had recently arrived in Calgary, Alberta, Canada, from India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Algeria, Somalia, and Suriname. This study examines how these Muslim immigrant parents struggle within the public schools to negotiate the continuity of their Islamic practices and how they counteract their own marginality as immigrants, a marginality often connected with other sites of oppression such as race and gender.

Theoretical Frameworks and Literature Review

Critical Multiculturalism and Minority Group Rights

There are two theoretical frameworks that can be looked at in an attempt to better understand the parents' struggles that are described in the narratives that follow, critical multiculturalism and minority group rights. The term multiculturalism includes a plurality of meanings and definitions. According to Kincheloe and Steinberg (1997), there are five prevailing philosophical positions that inform multicultural policies and practices: conservative, liberal, pluralist, radical, and critical.

The conservative approach presumes the superiority of Eurocentric values and beliefs and Christianity, devalues immigrants' native cultures and religions, and places uneven expectations on immigrants to conform over time to the norms, values, and religious traditions of the receiving society (Li, 2003). The liberal position acknowledges diversity, but has a low level of tolerance of non-Christian faiths. It superficially focuses on the neutrality of secularism, a separation of church and state.

In reality such separation does not exist in Canada as we see the residual influence of Christianity in the national anthem, statutory holidays, currency, architecture, textbooks, and so on (Biles & Ibrahim, 2005). An alternative form of liberal multiculturalism is pluralist multiculturalism, which sees differences in cultures and religions. However, the cultural and religious differences are often trivialized, exoticized, and essentialized as

Five Philosophical Positions That Inform Multiculturalism

Conservative	Presumes superiority of Eurocentric values and beliefs.
Liberal	Acknowledges diversity, but with low level of tolerance.
Pluralist	Sees differences in cultures and religions, but these differences are often trivialized, exoticized, and essentialized as ends in themselves.
Radical	Stresses respect for cultural differences.
Critical	Extends further the examination of the relations between dominant power structures within the schools and the larger society.

Source: Kincheloe & Steinberg, 1997.

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ends in themselves (Kincheloe & Steinberg, 1997).

Multicultural discussions and practices often involve the othering of non-Christians, generating lists of how "they" are different from "us." Such conservative and liberal approaches to multiculturalism erase systemic racism and power inequities by perpetuating superiority and promoting the superficial rhetoric of equality, diversity, and political correctness.

Radical multiculturalism stresses respect for cultural differences in values and socio-cultural practices. Radical educators must evaluate how schools deal with differences in personal, social, and pedagogical interactions that influence the way teachers and students define themselves and each other (Ghosh, 2002; Sleeter & Grant, 1987).

Critical multiculturalism extends further the examination of the relations between dominant power structures within the school as well as throughout the larger society. Critical multiculturalism makes explicit those hidden or masked structures, discourses, and relations of inequity that discriminate against one group and enhance the privileges of another. It calls for a critical examination of liberal secular discourses and policies, often used to maintain the status quo of the dominant group and to deny minority group rights. We see most obviously in the French government's current prohibition of all expressions of religious affiliation in public schools.

Critical multiculturalism calls for the recognition of minority group rights, which can be defined as "a wide range of public policies, legal rights, and constitutional provisions sought by ethnic groups for the accommodation of their cultural differences" (Kymlicka & Norman, 2000, p. 2). Levy (1990) divides minority group rights into eight categories and his exemptions and symbolic claims are relevant to the theme of this research. Exemption rights are "individually exercised negative liberties granted to members of a religious or cultural group whose practices are such that a generally and ostensibly neutral law would be a distinctive burden on them" (Levy, 1997, p. 25). Such exemptions allow religious parents to exempt their children from certain classes in public schools.

Symbolic recognition of the worth, status, or existence of various groups within the larger state community refer to a wide variety of forms of group representation within the institutions, symbols, and political culture of a larger state. This is seen in such matters as "the name of the polity, its flag, its coat of arms, its national anthem, its public holidays, the name by which a culture group will be known, or the way a group's history is presented in schools and textbooks" (Levy, 1997, p. 46).

In this article, critical multiculturalism and minority group rights theories will be employed to analyze the narratives around how Muslim immigrant parents have struggled for religious diversity in Canadian public education.

Multiculturalism in Canada and the United States

In 1971, Canada became the first country in the world to declare multiculturalism as official state policy. Official multiculturalism was introduced largely as a political exercise for bolstering national unity. Multiculturalism arose in the aftermath of the Report of the Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism in 1969, viewed at the time as a possible means of neutralizing Canada's French-English rift (Fleras & Elliott, 2002).

Various ethnic groups, especially the Ukrainians and the Germans, had argued vigorously that their language and culture were just as vital to Canadian nation-building as those of the French in Quebec. The liberal government struck a compromise with the ethnic groups and arrived at a policy of multiculturalism within a bilingual framework. The commitment to multiculturalism was not only enshrined in legislation (the 1988 Canadian Multiculturalism Act), but in fact constitutionalized in section 27 of the Charter of Rights and Freedoms in 1982.

Over the past 40 years, Canada's multiculturalism has been praised and frequently copied internationally. At the same time, Canada's multiculturalism has been criticized because it "endorsed diversity in principle without actually changing any fundamental way how power and resources were distributed" (Fleras & Elliott, 2002, p. 56). In that sense, Canada has adopted conservative and liberal approaches to multiculturalism by endorsing consensus, conformity, and accommodation.

In the United States, multiculturalism is not so clearly established in policy at the federal level. Americans have long considered the "melting pot" approach or assimilation as the key to society building. This melting pot approach has implied that each individual immigrant, and each group of immigrants, would gradually be assimilated into American society at their own pace. Unlike Canada's official multiculturalism resulting from the accommodation between French-speaking and English speaking groups, the emergence of multiculturalism in education in the United States grew primarily out of the civil rights movement in the 1960s (Banks, 2004).

Beginning with a call for the improvement of education among African Americans, this movement sought to incorporate curriculum materials that accurately reflected the cultural backgrounds, needs, and goals of African Americans and subsequently of other ethnic groups that were underrepresented or not represented at all in the U.S. schools when those groups sought similar educational reforms.

Additional critical approaches to multicultural education evolved in the 1980s and 1990s (Giroux, 1994; McLaren, 1994; Nieto & Bode, 2008; Sleeter & Grant, 1987). The goals of critical multiculturalism are to challenge dominant power structures, resist White hegemony, and empower minorities. Unlike Canada's multiculturalism, which is state-sanctioned and aims to transform the mainstream without questioning power structures, U.S. multiculturalism operates outside of the state and aims to empower minorities by challenging the superiority and neutrality of mainstream values and thus by ultimately transforming the state (Fleras & Elliott, 2002).

Despite official rhetoric that Canada is a multicultural mosaic and the United States is a melting pot, extensive survey data shows surprisingly little difference between the basic attitudes of the White citizens of these two North American nations toward immigrants of color. A majority of both Canadians (70%) and Americans (76%) believe that new immigrants should adapt to their new country's way of life (Innovative Research Group, 2005).

In the United States and Canada one of the most influential meta-narratives in effect today is a presumed "clash" between the Western and the Islamic civilizations. Some of the recent backlash against multiculturalism in North America has been directly linked to the perceived threat of Muslim immigrants, leading to a growing intolerance for religious difference.

Within this multiculturalism debate, Muslim immigrant parents' voices are seldom heard or solicited, yet these very parents have their own concerns about the appropriateness of education in public schools in Canada. The purpose of this study was to give voice to those concerns.

Methodology

Participants

This study was conducted in Calgary, Alberta, Canada. Calgary as a city is the largest recipient of immigrants and English as a Second Language (ESL) students in Alberta, making it the fourth largest in Canada after Toronto, Vancouver, and Montreal (Statistics Canada, 2007). The Calgary Board of Education enrolls over 25,000 coded K-12 ESL students. Thirty-eight parents were recruited through the Coalition for Equal Access to Education (CEAE) to participate in this study. CEAE is a local umbrella organization of community agencies, groups, and individuals in Calgary concerned with the current state of ESL instruction in the K-12 public education system and its consequences.

This article reports the experiences of 13 Muslim parents who arrived in Calgary after immigrating from India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Algeria, Somalia, and Suriname. In their countries of origin three of these parents held master's degrees, nine had bachelor of degrees, and one had a high school diplomat. Their occupations varied from university instructors, teachers, engineers, social workers, principals, to managers.

In Calgary, by contrast, they became community liaison workers, cashiers, and production workers, or were unemployed after their arrival in Canada, demonstrating a downward mobility as a result of immigration. Some of the parents volunteered in Canadian schools, particularly on school councils, or by working as lunch supervisors or teacher assistants. Some had opportunities to observe the teachers who were working with their children.

Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with parents to gain an understanding of what the participants thought teachers should know about their children. The interviews were conducted on an individual basis. Several open-ended questions were used to elicit rich descriptive data on the different kinds of experiences the parents had with their children's teachers and schools as well as suggestions on what the parents thought teachers needed to know about their children, their community, and their culture, religion, and values, in order to be more effective in teaching their children. Great care was taken to inquire into how knowledge was acquired, constructed, and activated. Each interview lasted from 60 to 90 minutes.

Data Analysis

An inductive analysis strategy was applied to the interview data (McMillan & Schumacher, 2001) throughout the study. This was accomplished by searching for domains that emerged from the data rather than imposing such categories prior to collection. Domains are large cultural categories that contain smaller categories and subcategories and whose relationships are linked by a semantic relationship (Spradley, 1980). Demographic information such as level of education, cultural background, and religious background was used to examine the emerging categories and domains.

All findings were further analyzed in terms of the theoretical framework outlined in this article so as to generate insightful findings and develop a new research model for future application, action, and research. These findings are not intended to generalize the experience of all religious immigrant parents in Canada, since Canadian Muslims do not constitute a monolithic bloc, but rather to provide insights into the complex religious issues that were salient for these particular participants.

Findings

The participants reported that part of their reasons for immigrating to Canada were the attraction of its official policies on multiculturalism. These participants believed, as one of them stated, that "Canada has given us the right to practice our religion, which is in the Charter of Rights" (Manibha,[1] Pakistan). They therefore expected such things as recognition of religious symbols, exemptions from certain classes, and accommodation of prayer in the public schools their children would attend.

Religious Symbols

One of the issues that Muslim immigrant parents faced was the negotiation of the religious expressions of minority groups in schools. This included allowing Muslim girls to wear a headscarf. The participants explained that Muslim girls and women wearing the headscarf were merely exercising their right to practice their religion, but this practice was not widely accepted within Canadian society. Sana commented:

> I think it is a basic rule from our religion. When a woman goes out in public, she will be covering her hair. If I want to cover my head, I should be accepted. Right now I think there are about more than 60 percent people who don't accept that. *Sana, Pakistan*

Manibha, mother of a 17-year-old daughter, reflected on how her daughter was perceived by her peers when she wore a headscarf in physical activities in school:

> She (her daughter) is involved in all kinds of activities. She plays football, soccer, volleyball, mountain climbing, everything. They (her daughter's peers) comment why you wear this, you might get hurt. *Manibha, Bangladesh*

For Manibha's daughter, wearing a headscarf did not prohibit her from participating in all kinds of physical activities. But her peers perceived that wearing a headscarf would pose a risk to her safety in the sports.

Other participants stated that the belief that wearing a headscarf can be harmful was unfounded. Hassan said:

> If they have some studies to claim that this is harmful, that these girls get hurt when they play soccer because of the headscarf, it is good. They don't have a single incidence to prove that. This is more political prejudice than the fact. *Hassan, Pakistan*

Hassan is referring to a controversy about an 11-year-old girl who was banned from a soccer tournament by a Quebec referee because she wore a headscarf. The referee applied the rules of the soccer federation, insisting the headscarf ban can protect children from being strangled. Hassan argued that this ban, based on misconceptions rather than evidence, was "political prejudice."

These examples of "political prejudice" informed the way Muslim parents were perceived and treated in school. Sarita explained how some teachers initially reacted toward her:

> I wear a headscarf when I go to parent-teacher conferences. The majority of the people, I have noticed, their initial impression about me would be I am a dumb person because I wear that. *Sarita, India*

Sarita's statement reveals how she perceived the attitudes of some teachers toward her. She was considered "dumb" because of the teacher's misconception about the headscarf. In fact, Sarita received all her education in English and obtained a Master of Science in India before she immigrated to Canada. She spoke fluent English, volunteered in school activities,

and participated in the school council. Sarita responded:

> They [the teachers] thought I am oppressed. I am not oppressed at home. *Sarita, India*

As a single mother, she raised two children by herself and encouraged her daughter to pursue a law career.

Exemptions from Certain Classes

Twelve out of the 13 Muslim parents believed that Muslim girls should be segregated from the opposite sex in many school activities. Aneeka, mother of a 15-year-old daughter said:

> In our religion we believe in gender segregation. The man is not supposed to see the beauty of women. I did go and talk to the teacher at the beginning of the school year that my daughter does not swim and dance with boys. *Aneeka, Pakistan*

Aneeka thus requested that her children be exempt from swimming and dancing classes.

Sana, mother of a 12-year-old daughter, expressed her disappointment that some teachers were not sensitive to her religious needs and did not allow exemptions:

> I went to the school and told her teacher we don't allow her to participate in the swimming classes. The teacher was annoyed. She didn't understand and made a big deal: "This is physical education class. She has to be part of it." *Sana, Pakistan*

Donika went beyond exemption by suggesting that schools need to rethink the whole requirement for swimwear:

> This kid was crying because she was not allowed to wear the swimming suit. The teacher in fact forced her to wear the swimming suit. The only thing that this teacher had in her mind is that you can only swim in the swimming suit. That's not true, a real mistake. *Donika, Suriname*

Donika stressed the importance for educators to be open to different perspectives and to realize that there are many different ways of doing the same thing. She suggested that schools should allow Muslim girls to wear full body suits instead of the typical swim suits.

Not all the participants were dismayed. Some participants expressed their satisfactions that their children's schools had made accommodation to their religious practices:

> The teacher understood that they (Muslim girls) can swim, wearing full clothes, and there should be no men with them. The teacher would close the door and they have a separate swimming time for the girls. She respects our religion. I was very satisfied. *Manibha, Bangladesh*

While some parents did not permit their daughters to participate in swimming classes, Noreen, mother of 10-year-old and 16-year-old daughters had no objection to her daughters swimming with boys:

> My younger daughter is a good swimmer. She already had swimming lessons when she was back home and her instructor was a man, so I have no problem. *Noreen, India*

Noreen considered herself more liberal than other parents.

With regard to sex education, the participants expressed different views. Aneeka expressed her fear that sex education would expose her daughter to pre-marital sex, which violates her religious beliefs:

> We just take one partner and that is after marriage. It has to be spiritually blessed, legal and religious. We don't believe in sex before marriage, so they (girls) don't need to take sex education. *Aneeka, Pakistan*

Aneeka believed that sex education should be left to the parents.

Sana had a different perspective:

> Why don't they just have the girls in one room to teach them? It is good to know because my daughter is twelve and she has to know about the stuff (sex education). They can have boys in another room because most of girls do not feel comfortable in the same group with the boys. My daughter told me the boys made fun of her. *Sana, Pakistan*

Sana did not object to sex education if it could be offered to girls separate from boys.

In contrast to Aneeka, Noreen allowed her daughters to participate in sex education classes because she believed that

> in a couple of years even my younger daughter will have changes in her body. It is better that she knows this happens and what the effect will be. *Noreen, India*

Accommodation of Prayer

The Muslim parents in the study believed that Muslim students should be allowed to pray during school hours because Islam requires them to pray five times daily. Hassan proposed that

> if they (Muslim students) have to do it in school, I think they should be allowed, especially in the winter there are one or two prayers which occur during the school time. *Hassan, Pakistan*

Nim and Hassan expressed satisfaction that their children's schools have made accommodations to their religious practices:

> We have Friday prayer. The school set up a room for the Muslim kids and they pray there. I'm so happy this has been done. *Nim, Pakistan*

> For Muslim, Friday is our holy day. I wrote a letter to my son's school and asked him to take off on Friday afternoon so that he can perform his prayer in the mosque. The principal gave his permission. *Hassan, Pakistan*

On the contrary, Manibha expressed feeling frustrated by some schools' unwillingness to accommodate her religious practices:

> A friend of mine told the principal that her daughter has to pray. "Could you just give her five minutes in any corner of the room?" The principal told her, "I'm sorry. I can't do that. I don't want to make the school into a mosque." *Manibha, Bangladesh*

Discussion and Implications

Given that statistics (Statistics Canada, 2005) predict the number of Canadians belonging to minority religious communities will grow to approximately 10 percent of the population by 2017, public schools that promote multiculturalism can no longer afford to ignore questions of religious pluralism and barriers to religions freedom (Seljak et al., 2008). The Muslim parents in this study request recognition of their immigrant communities by the public schools. These requests include the acceptance of religious symbols, exemptions from certain classes, and accommodation of prayer in public schools.

These requests require going beyond conservative and liberal multiculturalism by challenging the normality of the secular Christian curricula of public schools and calling for the recognition of religious diversity (Karmani & Pennycook, 2005; Spinner-Halev, 2000). The Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms (1982) and the Canadian Multiculturalism Act (1988) recognize that all individuals have the right to freedom of religion. Thus the recognition of minority group special rights, particularly their religious-based exemption rights and accommodation needs, become crucial for a multicultural Canada (Levy, 1997).

The participants' needs and demands revealed in this study created tension due to conflicting interests. On the one

hand, educators believe that they have a responsibility to maintain safe learning environments. This may require them to impose reasonable limits on how students dress and to maintain a non-religious environment in public schools (Russo & Hee, 2008). On the other hand, for many participants, the right to wear religious attire in public schools is associated with religious freedom and thus with a fundamental right to practice and observe their religion (Russo & Hee, 2008; Syed, 2008).

Public schools are therefore obliged to accept religious symbols, such as permitting Muslim girls to wear a headscarf, given the fact that this freedom of religious expression does not constitute a real risk to personal safety or to the learning environment (Barnett, 2008; Levy, 1997). It is also important that educators challenge their own assumptions about Muslim women wearing a headscarf.

For example, a teacher perceiving a parent to be "dumb" because she is wearing a headscarf during a parent-teacher conference, as was the case with Sarita, reveals that teacher's misconceptions about the Muslim headdress. These assumptions are largely based on stereotypes "reminiscent of the long-gone colonial era" (Rezai-Rashti, 1994, p. 37). In this case, the headscarf became a marker of incompetence and Sarita was perceived as unintelligent.

On the contrary, the fact that Sarita earned a Master of Science in English in India and actively participates in her children's education in Canadian schools was overlooked. Her participation, in fact, challenges the too readily accepted global frameworks that depict Muslim women as submissive figures being in need of emancipation (Syed, 2008).

Additionally, Muslim parents in the study requested to be able to exempt their children from certain classes such as dancing and swimming. Zine (2001) explains the reason why Muslim children are not allowed to dance is that

> physical contact between males and females is allowed only among close family members…Social distance within the Islamic tradition is therefore also gendered and situations of casual physical contact between males and females violate Islamic moral codes. (p. 407)

For some Muslim parents, looking at members of the opposite sex in "immodest dress" is a violation of their beliefs (Spinner-Halev, 2000). Maintaining their religious continuity within Canadian schools was stated as something of importance for many of the Muslim parents in this study.

For teachers, however, dancing and swimming are part of the school curricula and students are required to participate in these classes for their physical and social development. Here again is a basic conflict of interests and understandings.When the rule requires that everyone in swimming class must wear swimming suits, or shorts and T-shirts in gym class, religious students should be able to be exempted by their parents from such classes, or be placed in an alternative class (Levy, 1997; Spinner-Halev, 2000). Clothing requirements should also be rethought, with alternatives made available. For example, it should be possible for these students to wear full body suits when participating in these classes.

Parents in the study held very different positions on sex education. There were some who objected to it, while others accepted it as long as it was offered separate from boys, and yet others fully supported it. According to Spinner-Halev (2000), these courses often "discuss sex graphically and teach students how to have sex without getting pregnant," and because dating and premarital sex are strictly forbidden in Islam (Zine, 2001) there seems to be little reason to insist that their children attend sex education. Parents should be allowed to exempt their children from sex education classes if they so desire. At the same time, parents should be aware that it is almost impossible to protect their children from sexual images in the media given the wide access to the internet and TV.

Several of the Muslim parents in the study insisted on accommodation of prayer in public schools. Some of the public schools in Calgary provide classrooms or gym rooms for prayer while other schools rejected such parental requests. According to the Calgary Board of Education policy, a school principal can authorize student-initiated prayer (Calgary Board of Education, n.d.), however one principal in the study clearly stated that "I don't want to make the school into a mosque." This statement reveals a principal's perceived responsibility to maintain a secular school environment.

Yet it also shows that this principal fails to recognize that religion is an essential part of education for some students and thus how the principal's attitude fails to accommodate religious difference for all students. Zine (2000) recounts a similar story of an Arab Canadian who, as a member of a Muslim students' association, tried to secure a room for prayer in his public school. The principal adamantly refused, stating "this is not a place for religion, it's a place for education" (p. 303).

In response to the recognition of religious diversity, public schools are required to inform administrators and teachers about the religious practices of their students. Religious discrimination derives in part from religious illiteracy. This illiteracy has meant that teachers (the majority of whom are at least nominally Christian) often fail to discuss or even understand the religions dimensions of policy challenges (Sumyu Neufeld, personal communication, January 6, 2010).

Recommendations

As part of the recognition of religious diversity in any society, public school systems should be required to inform their administrators and teachers about the religious practices of the students they are serving. Otherwise religious discrimination derives in part from religious illiteracy, from not knowing about and understanding the differing religious beliefs of the student population.

One way to address this religious illiteracy is to incorporate mandatory education on world religions as a subject for respectful study, not indoctrination, for all pre-service teachers as well elementary and secondary students[2] (Bramadat & Selijak, 2005; Bouchard & Taylor, 2008). An understanding of world religions is an important part of a well-rounded academic education. Learning about it can help teachers and students overcome their own fears of difference and more skillfully support social interaction between immigrant and non-immigrant students (Spinner-Halev, 2000).

It is important for educators to provide an institutionalized means for the explicit recognition and representation of oppressed groups. Part of this responsibility can include modifications of school curricula, dress codes, provision of prayer rooms for Muslim students (Kanu, 2008), and perhaps also in Canada state funding for privately established Muslim schools in the same way that Catholic schools are funded.[3] These are necessary steps to take in order to better reflect and accomodate the contemporary and religiously pluralistic realities of our world.

Notes

[1] All study participants are referred to by pseudonyms.

[2] Alberta Learning has approved three

courses about religion for teaching in any high school: Religious Ethics 20, Religious Meaning 20, and World Religions 30. These courses are designated as optional, not mandatory (see Hiemstra & Brink, 2006).

[3] Roman Catholic schools in Ontario, Saskatchewan, Alberta and the Northwest Territories along with other religiously based schools receive public funding in many Canadian provinces.

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