

## 8

### Learning the Hard Way: Maria's Story

*Bonny Norton Peirce*

Everybody is aware of how people look at Thompson. It doesn't bother some people. Me, on the other hand, it really bugs me. I don't like to be judged because my parents are from Italy. I deserve the same respect as anybody else. I'm not saying I'm better. I want to be considered an equal.

*Maria Sabatini*

In June 1990, a board of education in a predominantly Anglo-Saxon town in the province of Ontario, Canada, closed down a secondary school in a neighborhood populated mainly by people of Italian and Portuguese heritage. For two years prior to the closing of this school, the students at the school took a range of actions in their struggle to keep the school open. Primarily through the voice of one of the senior students in the school, Maria Sabatini (a pseudonym), this chapter documents the actions by the local school board to secure powerful Anglo-Saxon interests in the town at the expense of the less powerful Italian community. This chapter explores Maria's ambivalent responses to her Italian culture and history, particularly as they relate to her experience of schooling in multicultural Canada. In giving voice to Maria's experiences, the chapter addresses the social and historical context in which Maria's narrative unfolds, the particular circumstances that led to the marginalization of Maria's school in the local community, and the extent to which Maria's school paradoxically represented a place of refuge and possibility for her. Data for this chapter were collected

from interviews with the students and parents in the town from March to May 1989.

## INTRODUCTION

It is difficult to do justice to Maria Sabatini's story. It is a narrative that links identity formation, schooling, work, language, culture, and community into a complex web that defies neat analysis. But it is a story that must be told if educators wish to understand how schools and communities impact on the social identities of students and the daily conduct of their lives. If educators believe that pedagogy should promote the enhancement of human possibility (Simon, 1992), it is important to understand why John Thompson Secondary School in Richmond, Ontario, Canada, which was closed down in June 1990, officially due to dwindling enrollment, was a contradictory place for Maria Sabatini. For Maria Sabatini, Thompson was denigrated by the wider Richmond community as a "wop" school, while at the same time offering refuge to Maria, a place where she could be whatever she wanted to be. In giving voice to Maria's story, this chapter addresses three different but related questions: First, what historical circumstances might serve to explain why a predominantly Italian school in multicultural Canada was marginalized in the Richmond community? Second, how did John Thompson Secondary School come to represent a place of possibility for Maria Sabatini? Third, how can the closing of Thompson inform our understanding of the ways in which relations of power structure and are structured by dominant and subordinate group relations in Canadian society? The three sections of this chapter address each of these questions in turn.

## THE HISTORY OF JOHN THOMPSON SECONDARY SCHOOL, 1962-90

In order to understand the marginalization of John Thompson Secondary School within the wider community, it is necessary to examine the time/space location of the school in the town of Richmond. The years 1956 and 1961 are particularly significant. In 1956 a multinational company opened a large manufacturing plant on the outskirts of the sleepy town of Richmond, Ontario. The opening of the plant had a major impact on the economy of the town, accelerating its growth and providing employment for hundreds of European immigrants entering Canada after the ravages of World War II. The character of the predominantly Anglo-Saxon town changed as immigrants arrived from different European countries, particularly Italy and Portugal. While most of the original town of Richmond was settled on the south side of town, the new immigrants settled primarily on the north side of town.

As the population of the town increased, so did the need for new schools.

## Learning the Hard Way

The majority of the elementary schools in Richmond were built between 1955 and 1962, and by 1956 there was a growing need for more secondary school accommodation. The only secondary school in Richmond was Richmond High, to the south of the town. In 1957 Northern High was opened by the Winchester School Board, which had jurisdiction over all the non-Catholic schools in the Richmond area. Northern High, however, was at some distance from the area densely populated by the Italian and Portuguese communities. By 1959 there was talk of another secondary school being built, named for a well-known local educator, John Thompson.

While members of the Winchester School Board were debating where this new school should be located, events on the other side of the Iron Curtain had overtaken them. In 1961 the Soviets sent the satellite *Sputnik* into space, and set the course of Thompson's history. According to a teacher who had taught at Thompson for twenty-five years, the launching of *Sputnik* threw federal and provincial governments into a panic over Canada's technical education capabilities. The Federal-Provincial Technical and Vocational Training agreement was struck and federal grants were suddenly available to school boards across Canada to cover 75 percent of the construction and equipment costs for composite schools. Thompson was to be Richmond's first school of this kind, embracing a complete program of academic, commercial, and technical education, and it was to be located in the heart of the town's immigrant Italian and Portuguese communities.

According to a student leader who vigorously opposed the closure of Thompson, the historical foundations of the school led to its marginalization within the Richmond community. He noted that the particular ethnic composition of the school and its technical orientation doomed it from the start. One parent indicated that a school with a technical orientation would never be highly regarded in the wider Richmond community. Another parent indicated that Thompson was a vulnerable school in Richmond because it served a community of first-generation Canadians who did not play a large role in the politics of the town. New Canadians, he said, would not tell the chairman of the board to "jump in the lake." The thinly veiled disdain for Thompson had not escaped Maria Sabatini.

Everyone I talk to, I tell them I go to Thompson High School. It's like "Oh, the wop school." It's just so annoying—"the wop school." They refer to us as "the wops"—immigrants without papers—that's what they call Italian people around here. You would not believe the remarks I get around here.

According to Maria, the marginalization of Thompson Secondary School was perpetrated by the subtle practices of people who worked in the interests of the dominant Anglo-Saxon community. She provided two examples, given below, to support her position. The first example documents how teachers in other schools in Richmond denigrated Thompson Secondary

School. For teachers in predominantly Anglo-Saxon schools in Richmond, the equation was clear: Italian = immigrant = "a bad name." The second example portrays how people with whom Maria came into contact during her part-time work at a local store in Richmond labeled and marginalized her as soon as they were aware of her background and the school she attended.

### Example 1

OK. I know a family member that supplied [substituted] at Richmond High School. All the teachers were saying, "Oh, Thompson is such an immigrant school." She went to Thompson High School—she was Italian. She couldn't say anything because she was a supply teacher. She didn't want to get herself in—in a bad name—how can you say? But she couldn't believe it that another—even teachers, not kids—but teachers themselves were saying it. And of course students are going to think that way if teachers think that way.

### Example 2

A lot of people have said it in front of my face. For example, I worked with a lady—I don't think she knew I was Italian yet—and she asked me: "So what grade are you in?" "13." I think she asked me what my background was. I said, "Italian." She said, "Oh. So what school do you go to?" I said, "Thompson High School." She said, "Oooh." Just the way she said it. "So I guess you're not going to university, right?" She said that. She's a WASP, from Middleton. I thought that was mighty rude.

Over time, the school was framed as academically inferior to other Richmond schools. As Maria said:

They think it's easier if you can get an 80 average at Thompson. I used to work with some people [who would say] like "Our classes are harder than your classes. So, if you get higher marks, that doesn't mean anything." If we all have the same course, how can our courses be easier if the Winchester Board tells us what to teach? That's what I don't understand.

Thompson was established by the Winchester Board of Education in 1962 because the dominant Anglo-Saxon community feared that it would not be able to compete technologically on the world market. Immigrant populations in Richmond worked hard to provide Canada with professionals, skilled tradespeople, and artisans. But the dominant Anglo-Saxon community chose to close the school in the interests of securing Ontario Ministry funding for schools in other parts of Richmond. As the needs of the dominant Anglo-Saxon community changed, the "wop" school became dispensable.

## JOHN THOMPSON SECONDARY SCHOOL: HOME FROM HOME

In this section I will argue that Thompson paradoxically represented a place of refuge from the fragmented discourses that faced Maria in the daily course of her life by replicating the conditions that existed within the supportive environment of her family and her Italian neighborhood. Furthermore, I will examine how the Richmond discourse on Thompson was implicated in the construction of Maria's social identity. By Maria's "social identity" I reference how Maria understood her relationship to the social world; how that relationship was socially and historically constructed across time and space; and how Maria understood what possibilities were available for her future. Drawing on Cornel West (1992), I also take the position that Maria's social identity references desire—the desire for recognition, the desire for affiliation, the desire for security and safety. As West argues, such desire cannot be separated from the distribution of material resources in a particular society: A person who has access to a wide range of resources in a society will have access to power and privilege, which will in turn influence how the person understands his or her relationship to the social world.

Maria describes her home as one that is loving and supportive and her parents as having "a good marriage." Her mother in particular "tries really hard; she tries to be friends with the neighbors, she really tries hard, and if she can do anything for them, she'll do it." Her father had worked at the manufacturing plant before undergoing eye surgery five years previously. His limited literacy skills in English had prevented him from reaching the level of foreman at the factory. Maria describes her father as a man who had many experiences in Canada of "being made fun of" because he was Italian. "He resents a lot of people. And British people he resents very much because when he came to Canada, those were the people that really hurt him."

The family has been back to Italy many times and her parents have never thought of themselves as Canadian. They might have returned to Italy, but believed it was in Maria's best interests to remain in Canada. Her father's English is good, but her mother's English is limited. She has never worked outside the home. The Sabatins participate in many activities in the Italian community: they go to the local Italian church, attend weddings and festas, and watch the multicultural channels on television. Maria has aunts, uncles, and cousins in the community. However, she tries to get involved in the wider community through a variety of volunteer organizations. In her home environment, she can be whatever she wants to be.

I'm the only child, believe it or not—in an Italian family. It's kind of hard being an only child because I'm like their one-shot deal. "If she doesn't do it no-one will." They would like me to go to postsecondary education—preferably university, but they have never pressured me. "Whatever you can handle, whatever you can do, you

can do." They give me some advice. They don't know very much about the programs here. So I've decided things mainly on my own and with the counselor at school. He was a great help too, my counselor. We have other Italian people around me, where I live, at school. When we go to church, we communicate with Italian people that go there. There are others: British, German, too, Croatian. But we really speak to Italian people more because I go to school with their sons and daughters at Thompson High School.

As I questioned Maria closely about her experiences at Thompson, I had expected to hear that the staff were unsupportive, the headmaster ambivalent, and the students divided and alienated. Such was not the case. Maria's experience at Thompson was a positive one; in fact, it seemed to replicate the lived culture of her own Italian community. It is for this reason that I believe the school represented a place of possibility for Maria. Consider the parallel imagery that Maria evokes when she describes cultural practices in the Italian community and in her school, respectively:

My dad loves Italy. He adores it. He loves it because it's so—everyone is like a family—since everyone speaks the same language and since he doesn't feel out of place, right? He thinks it's great. Like I mean, you see people in the street, "Hi, how are you?"

I think the people in Thompson get along. We're like a family. Since we're such a small school everybody knows each other. And when you see each other, it's like "Hi, how are you?"

In both her community and at Thompson, Maria's heritage and culture were validated: in both places, she felt at "home." Maria could comfortably take up a number of subject positions within the school: Italian, Canadian, student, female, friend. The cosmopolitan nature of the school, the supportive faculty, and the limited number of students served to affirm a sense of community among both faculty and students. One student told me that Thompson had not been "ghettoized" into different groups; students of all backgrounds were made to feel at home in the school, and there was a good relationship between staff and students. Yet another noted that it didn't matter whether a student in the school was Italian, black, or green. "At Thompson you are accepted for what you are. And that's what Canada is all about." One parent explained how this school culture developed by saying, "When you have a mixed community, everybody is a stranger." He indicated that there was no one dominant group that made other students feel uncomfortable; it was what he called a "humane kind of environment."

Many critical accounts of the experiences of students from minority communities tend to focus on the way schooling is implicated in the marginalization and alienation of these students. Witness Peter McLaren's account of the experiences of Italian and Portuguese students in an inner-city Catholic school in Toronto (1986, p. 220):

## Learning the Hard Way

The feelings which frequently surfaced from the students' engrossment in the structural rituals were those of hostility and indifference. After all, a major purpose of the instructional rituals was social control. Rituals shored up a wall of dense packed symbols covered with barbed wire behind which instructional alternatives were kept in check.

Maria's depiction of her experiences at John Thompson Secondary School, which was echoed by other students and parents I interviewed, presents a very different picture from that described in McLaren's study. Such an account has an important place in the literature on cultural studies because it demonstrates that progressive educators need to exercise caution when making generalizations about schooling, culture, and identity formation. This case study suggests that schools in minority communities become important sites of possibility for students, even as they struggle against their marginalization within the wider community.

However, even though Thompson was a "home from home" for Maria both the school and the home as sites of identity formation could not help Maria resolve her fundamental ambivalence toward her Italian culture and heritage. She could not escape the struggle for ownership of the "Italian label" in the Richmond community. Within Thompson Secondary School Maria was subject of the discourse on Italian: she could comfortably claim to be Italian, to have Italian friends, to live in an Italian neighborhood. Yet other sites, she became subject to the discourse on Italians. To claim ownership of the Italian label was to invite assaults to her identity, her relationship to the social world, and her desires for the future. The very source of Maria's sense of self-worth became the object of disdain. She could not find a subject position for herself as "Italian" within the dominant culture:

People don't judge you until they know what your background is, or what school you go to—my school especially. The ladies I work with are such a good example I work at the Prestige. In my department it's all mainly ladies, and they're all either from Middleton or Richmond. And just when they ask me about my background and stuff, and just the way they look at me—I don't know—it might be in my hearing.

In her attempt to deal with her identity as a site of struggle, Maria frequently attempted to reframe references to her Italian culture and heritage. The kinds of contradictions that emerged in Maria's discussion of her background, school, and culture are evidence by such comments as:

My culture has a great influence on me—a very great influence on me—the way my parents brought me up. Because of my morals and values, I find that people don't have a cultural—well not a cultural—not a European background—they think different than me. I find that people here, it's like they tend to pull back. Being raised in an European family I find that I like to hug someone and to kiss someone. People just think that's awkward.

Maria's frequent references to her culture as "European" in character was indicative of her ambivalence toward her Italian identity. Although she resisted being equated with Portuguese people ("people find that offensive"), she nonetheless wished to promote a notion of herself as "European." At other times, Maria saw herself as Canadian, sometimes as Canadian Italian, sometimes as Italian. Consider the following extracts taken from the data:

- I consider myself Canadian. I'm very proud of it too.
- I'm very proud to be Italian.
- The melting pot would be a good idea. But for some reason I want to be considered Italian—I don't know why. I think it's a good idea to have a melting pot. But my culture has had such an effect on me, I can't be considered just Canadian, I have to be considered Canadian Italian.

A fragmented and multiple sense of self was symptomatic of Maria's ambivalent social identity in the Richmond community. Within her home and within her school Maria could happily live with a multiple sense of self: the multiple discourses of Italian, Canadian, child, student, and friend were complementary. As Maria entered the wider Richmond community, she moved from the center to the margins of power and privilege. The multiple sense of self became fragmented and the contradictions frightening. And few would buy into the discourse of the European.

### THE CLOSING OF THOMPSON: A BLOW FOR MULTICULTURALISM

In this section I will examine how the closing of Thompson can help to inform our understanding of the way power relations between dominant and subordinate groups operate in Canadian society in general and in Richmond in particular. This has important implications for schooling because the Thompson community lacked the political clout to keep it open. The three overlapping themes that need examination are linguistic, political, and economic.

Command of the English language seems to be necessary (but not sufficient) requirement for entry into mainstream Canadian society. Maria was very aware that her parents' lack of proficiency in the English language had marginalized them within the wider Richmond community. As she said, "Thompson is going to close down, right? I think people took advantage of our school because our parents were immigrants. The majority of people who go to our school have parents who are immigrants—who can't speak English very well. And I think that if it was a WASP school I don't think they would have even tried to do anything like that."

One of the parents in the school commented that the parents who had taken up the fight for Thompson had been the parents who lived beyond

the borders of the Italian and Portuguese communities in the Thompson area. He said that the lack of proficiency in English among Italian and Portuguese parents had restricted their involvement in the struggle to keep Thompson open. Maria herself commented on the relationship between political activism and language proficiency: "When it comes to politics, they [my parents] haven't had that much experience with it. On the other hand, people here have always been involved. People who speak the language better have always been involved—have learned how the system goes. But my parents don't know anything about it—my father knows a bit."

John Mallea (1987, p. 48) has convincingly expressed the political role of language in the relationships between dominant and subordinate groups, particularly within the context of schooling:

The language of the dominant group is accorded the highest value and therefore it is its linguistic capital that is reproduced and legitimated in the schools. Correspondingly the linguistic capital of the minority language groups is considerably undervalued, downplayed and marginalized. Hence the language of instruction reinforces the more general role of language—one of the most effective mediators of relationships between groups—in helping reproduce dominance and subordination among Canada's racial and ethno-cultural groups.

The lack of involvement in political activity also has a sociocultural base in the Italian community, although this too can be explained in terms of historical relations of power and dominance. As Maria said, "I think my parents—European people—were brought up to believe not to fight against what the law says—you know what I mean. Just whatever they say, goes. My parents will fight for other things, for what they believe in, like family, cultural things."

E. Auerbach's (1989) research on family literacy in the United States also suggests that language-minority parents are alienated from educational structures of power in the wider society. As she argues, "The need to take on an advocacy role presents a particular challenge for low-income language-minority parents. They may, for cultural reasons, defer to the authority of the school, assume that the school is always right, or feel unable to intervene between themselves and school authorities" (p. 175).

When Maria told her parents that there were plans to close Thompson, her parents, although dismayed, had put up little resistance:

"Oh, that's too bad, dear. Is there anything anybody can do?" I said, "I think it's just political." Well, I'm very offensive when it comes to cultural things. I told my parents, "I think they're just closing us down because people won't stick up for their rights, the parents won't help, and because there's just not enough support from the public."

Maria's final coquires further analysis. First, Maria clearly thought people within their "rights" to oppose the closing of the school, but being within the community would not exercise these rights. Presumably, faith that if people exercised their rights, they would have had less in their efforts to keep the school open. Second, she had almost parents can have a powerful influence on school politics, and absence from school politics will make the community vulnerable to exploitation. ("I think people took advantage of because our parents were immigrants.") Third, she understood that community must share the interests of the Thompson community; it is to have any success on exercising its rights. However, aware that not only was the wider community not supporting the actively working against them.

The lack of public for Thompson can partially be explained by the competition for among different schools within one board of education in Canada. Characteristic of school politics and school funding is that a number of communities within a region are always in competition with one another for funding, staffing, and facilities. The people who represent the various school communities are those who "know the system" and the dominant language, and who do not accept that "what is, goes."

The attitudes of the Anglo-Saxon community in Richmond, and the practices to maintain its dominant position, fly in the face of the federal government's expressed commitment to multiculturalism, as expressed by Gét, minister of Multiculturalism and Citizenship Canada in the *Caribbean Act: A Guide for Canadians*:

When the Canadian Multiculturalism Act was passed into law in 1988, it established that our multiculturalism is a fundamental characteristic of our society. Gone are the days when multiculturalism was a side show for new Canadians and those labelled as "ethnic." Multiculturalism is about removing the barriers of discrimination and which stand in the way of acceptance and respect.

Maria was awarded a course on multiculturalism negates the lived experience of minority communities in Canada: "But a lot of the commercials you see ethnic people. They show commercials about Canada and different people. And it's like they're trying to say, 'This is an ethnic country.' But then you get the people themselves in Canada who just say 'at Canada that way.'"

While the Italianity has made economic progress in Canada, this progress has not to political clout. Maria says that her father believes the following:

Now he tells me: "The Italian people have made their stand." I think he means economically—like there are a lot of rich people here—but I don't think he means politically. There are Italian lawyers, and doctors and stuff, but there aren't as many British and—you know what I mean.

According to Maria, most Italians who have been economically successful have made their money in real estate and the construction business, "not really something you need an education to do." The only Italian people who get involved in the wider community are the wealthy ones—"maybe people respect them because they're rich Italians, they're not middle class or poor."

As suggested earlier in the chapter, the distribution of material resources in a society cannot be understood apart from the social identity of individuals. The people who have access to socially valued linguistic/political/economic resources have access to power and privilege—which intersects with their relationship to the wider society and their desires for the future. The students at John Thompson Secondary School passionately desired recognition and validation in multicultural Canada. But they lacked the linguistic, political, and economic resources to insist that what they say, goes.

## CONCLUSION

The struggle for Thompson was characterized by sets of opposition that are constituted in and by Canadian society: wop/WASP, ethnic/mainstream, subordinate/dominant. In many ways, Maria was caught in the crossfire between these oppositions. She simultaneously embraced and resisted the Italian label; she took pride in her culture but yearned for acceptance in the wider community; she saw her school as a place of refuge and familial support, but recognized its marginal position in the Richmond community. The lessons that Maria learned at John Thompson Secondary School were not part of the formal school curriculum, but they were lessons that Maria learned the hard way. Despite almost two years of resistance by students, parents, and teachers, Thompson was closed by the Winchester Board of Education. The Winchester Board did not choose any unlucky target, but a school that was indeed different from others in Richmond. It had a vision of Canada in which people from different ethnic/cultural backgrounds, with different income levels, and with different language backgrounds could nevertheless share in a project of possibility for all students. The lessons that Maria learned are captured in the words of Sheila Burney (1988:1), who argues convincingly that "official multiculturalism boils culture to curry, petroglyphs and Caravans—excluding 'others' from the mainstream of discourse where actual power resides."

## NOTE

I wish to express my gratitude to the participants in this study for their generous cooperation. In particular, I am indebted to Maria Sabatini, who spent many hours in conversation with me and offered valuable comments on an earlier draft of this chapter. I would also like to express my thanks to the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada for its financial support.

## REFERENCES

- Auerbach, E. (1989). "Towards a Social-contextual Approach to Family Literacy." *Harvard Educational Review*, 59(2): 165-181.
- Burney, S. (1988). "The Exotic and the Restless: Representation of the "Other" in Colonialist Discourse." Paper presented at ISSISS '88, University of British Columbia.
- Malta, J. (1987). "Culture, Schooling and Resistance in Plural Canada." In J. Young (ed.), *Breaking the Mosaic: Ethnic Identities in Canadian Schooling*. Toronto: Garamond Press.
- McLaren, P. (1986). *Schooling as a Ritual Performance*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Peirce, B. N. (1993). "Language Learning, Social Identity, and Immigrant Women." Unpublished PhD thesis, Ontario Institute for Studies in Education/University of Toronto.
- Simon, R. (1992). *Teaching Against the Grain: Texts for a Pedagogy of Possibility*. Westport, CT: Bergin & Garvey.
- West, C. (1992). "A Matter of Life and Death." *October*, 61 (Summer): 20-23.
- Multiculturalism and Citizenship Canada (1990). *The Canadian Multiculturalism Act: A Guide for Canadians*.