You Can't Order People To "Be Francophone"

by Marianne Cormier

How to establish a pedagogy for the minority?

Daniel Pennac, in his remarkable book *Better Than Life*, issues a strong caution: "You can't make people read. Any more than you can make them love, or dream."

Now let's try Pennac's exercise in connection with identity-building:

"Be Francophone! Speak French! Listen to French music! Be proud of who you are!"

Forget it! You can't *make* people adopt a Francophone identity or be proud of being Francophone!

People's expectations of a school in a minority Francophone setting are nevertheless enormous. The school is expected to create an ideal environment where language and culture have a place of honour. It is expected to succeed in instilling in students a strong feeling of pride in their cultural identity and thus to combat assimilation. Not easy!

We are in an era of globalization, in a postmodern society in which the English language is gaining strength. With this growing influence on minority communities, the job that schools are expected to do, as a counterbalance to these pressures, is steadily becoming more difficult.

Section 23 of the *Charter of Rights and Freedoms* gives parents who meet certain criteria access to a French-language school for their children. Teaching and governance at the school are carried out in French. Is this enough to build a Francophone identity? No, obviously, because the school's mission in a minority setting goes well beyond language (Laplante, 2001).

What to do? What pedagogy to adopt?

Beyond offering instruction in French, what is needed is a pedagogy that can act on identity pressures, respond to societal inequities, develop a feeling of community belonging and build a positive relationship with the language. How? First of all, the emphasis needs to be on developing the full potential of the students – intrapersonal, interpersonal and social – by means of an actualizing pedagogy (Faculté des sciences de l'éducation, Université de Moncton, 2001). Actualizing pedagogy works for all students, no matter where the school is located. We then need to add a differentiated pedagogy (Tomlinson, 2003) to meet the specific needs of each student, and to deal with the fact that classrooms in our communities are becoming increasingly heterogeneous from a cultural standpoint, filled with students whose degree of familiarity with the French language and culture varies considerably (Gilbert, LeTouzé, Thériault & Landry, 2004). Furthermore, it would be important to promote the development of a feeling of belonging to the community through a community-building pedagogy (Landry, 2003) that maximizes the community's involvement in the school as well as the students' involvement in the community. Finally, we should introduce a transformative pedagogy (Cummins, 2000) that seeks to combat and modify the implicit

ideology of assimilation and the coercive power of the majority towards the minority. In this transformative pedagogy, students would be involved in collaborative critical inquiries based on principles of social justice. An understanding of social realities such as assimilation, individual rights and community rights is essential.

How then do we introduce a pedagogy that is actualizing, community-building, differentiated and transformative?

Let's examine the six interdependent and complementary components of this pedagogy.

1. Development of a positive relationship with the language, which optimizes the use of and receptiveness to French

First of all, let's work to establish a positive relationship with the language. The current message to young people living in minority settings is that French is not cool. The status and prestige of English nourish this perception. The social environment also gives few opportunities to listen to, speak, read or write French. In addition to the impact on the prestige of the language, there are also impacts on language skills. So the second message that emerges is that French is difficult to learn.

It is up to us, the teachers, to change these perceptions. Let's start by demystifying French. We need to provide as many opportunities as possible, both informal and formal, to play in, listen to, speak and write French. Let's watch French television programs and movies, get involved in cultural activities, listen to music, and read, read, read. Above all, let's avoid continually correcting our students!

We need to give our students empowering experiences in French, positive experiences that will develop a feeling of belonging to the community and of competence in their language. The context should be motivating and not threatening.

Schools focus on language that might be described as "academic", decontextualized and formal. Unlike informal language used in the context of a typical conversation, which allows for the negotiation of meaning and provides various situational clues, decontextualized language depends almost exclusively on the knowledge of the language itself. When dealing with this decontextualized language, students quickly feel linguistically insecure and think that they are unable to understand or use it. The typical reaction of a teacher would be to simplify (summarize the text to be read for the students, provide simpler notes, offer many analogies and explanations, and avoid technical vocabulary). Although such simplification is a relief for the students for a short while, it does not provide any long-term benefits (Gibbons, 1998).

We can facilitate student access to this decontextualized language in the following ways:

- Move gradually towards decontextualized language by progressively doing away with contextual supports during the learning process;
- Provide many opportunities for genuine discussion, because one needs to practice a language to learn it;
- Acknowledge the students' spoken language and build on this basis;
- Incorporate reading comprehension strategies, oral discussions and writing opportunities in all of the school subjects;
- Maximize literacy opportunities: Reading can considerably help language skills and be the best source for decontextualized formal language; writing enables self-expression and the appropriation of language forms;
- Use a communicative approach: Language becomes real and can be used for genuine communication.

2. Active enculturation

Together with developing a positive relationship with the language, students should actively discover and embrace their culture. However, it is not easily accessible and is often eclipsed by the majority culture. Coming to know it is a challenge in itself. On the other hand, already through the activities suggested in the previous section, enculturation does occur. The community-building component could be added by inviting the community into the school, studying its history, and reading local works. The culture should be studied by taking a critical approach. Let's ask the question, "*Does the community take the place it deserves?*"

Ideally, these activities will be suggested and planned by the students themselves. This will make the enculturation process *active* and give the students a feeling of power and autonomy.

3. Optimal actualization of learning potential

Optimal actualization of learning potential requires measures that will enable as many students as possible to acquire a sound command of their learning. Therefore, the evaluation should be criteria-based and formative. With a better knowledge of student skills and weaknesses, teachers will be able to take appropriate pedagogical action. This would constitute differentiated pedagogy.

4. Development of self-determination and identity choices

In minority-setting schools, students often speak to one another in English and teachers tell them to speak French. These students often speak English as a result of the social forces at work in their environment. Begging them to "*speak French*" sometimes becomes an extrinsic source of motivation, or an opportunity to fight authority and rebel by continuing to speak English. The same is true of music or TV or even reading and writing... in French.

We need to recognize that adopting an identity, along with the accompanying behaviours, needs to occur freely. However, should the choice result uniquely from the attraction of social forces? What would happen if the students were able to recognize these forces and experience educational activities that lead them to discover Francophone culture and the identity choices available to them?

Students will develop intrinsic motivation when three basic needs are met: autonomy, competence, and a sense of belonging. Pedagogical activities that offer choices, making it possible to be successful and building a feeling of belonging, will contribute to self-determination. When this happens, the students will feel capable of counteracting, if they choose to do so, the social forces around them. Students will then most likely be motivated to opt for a Francophone identity and live it through their language choices. Incentives to "*speak French*" could then become a reminder of the intrinsic identity choices rather than an extrinsic source of motivation.

5. Awareness and commitment

Awareness and commitment are certainly central to this pedagogy. Students need to be aware of the forces that tend to assimilate them. This awareness can then foster their commitment to improve the situation. We can ask ourselves whether individuals are truly capable of reaching their potential if they are not prepared to value their group and affirm their heritage. Let's hope that minority groups, through education, succeed in doing so, and recognize and exercise their collective rights. This means adopting a critical stance, something that is not innate; rather it develops with systematic training in questioning ideas, opposing them and confronting them. Ideally, being able to question critically will elicit the desire to make a difference.

6. Partnerships

Be Francophone... Schools should become the focal point of the minority community

and contribute to its vitality. No mean task! Schools cannot do it without support. We need a collective community-empowerment effort. The community will not survive without the school and the school will not survive without the community.

Conclusion

In his book, Pennac advocates the pleasures of reading. The pedagogy described here also seeks a pleasant discovery. What is involved is therefore not imposing more work. Some of the components recommended have already been put into practice by many teachers. What we are advocating here is the systematic adoption of transformative and awareness-enhancing approaches that focus on the individual *and* the community — in other words, a pedagogy closely linked to the particular features of the Francophone context. It is more than a linguistic project; awareness, commitment and affirmation will facilitate the achievement of the desired identity without attempting to impose it.

Teachers are the key players in this discovery of identity because of their everyday contacts with young people. However, they cannot be the only ones to engage in the process on a day-to-day basis. The development of our Francophone children and communities requires a collective vision that affects the whole community, from early childhood services to postsecondary and continuing education.

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