

# GIFTEDNESS IN CANADA'S MINORITY FRANCOPHONE COMMUNITIES

Thora Bajard

**A**re exceptionally gifted or talented young Francophones being identified? Are they receiving appropriate services from the Francophone education system? Are the Canadian Francophonie's schools graduating leaders whose potential has been able to develop fully?

A survey of Canada's Francophone communities was conducted with key people in departments of education and Francophone school boards in every province and territory to answer these questions. There appears to have been little research carried out in minority communities on this topic. This article is therefore largely based on the data from this survey.

## Giftedness and talent

It is essential at the outset to distinguish giftedness from talent. According to Francoys Gagné, giftedness is a set of natural aptitudes that appear spontaneously in everyday activities. He identifies four types of giftedness: intellectual, creative, socio-affective and sensorimotor.

Gagné goes on to define talent as a set of aptitudes that are systematically developed in a specific field which can relate to a wide range of human activities such as the arts, crafts, social action, business and sports. A high level of talent-related performance is usually the result of considerable training and hard work on the part of the student.

## Characteristics of a gifted student

In early childhood, gifted students show a high level of curiosity that leads them to continually ask questions, a desire to dialogue with adults, an interest in complex games, a tendency to work alone, and a better than average sense of humour.

At the beginning of their education, gifted children show a strong thirst for learning. They also learn more quickly. They can shut out their surroundings when they concentrate on a task that interests them. They tend to be loners. They have strong sense of justice and like to reason. They have an impressive memory and like to dialogue with adults. They also have a good sense of humour.

Later on, other characteristics appear. Gifted children have a remarkable ability to retain information and are also a veritable fount of knowledge on certain subjects that they are passionate about. They understand abstract concepts easily.

As gifted students move forward in their education, they display a high level of intellectual curiosity combined with an often frustrated need to exercise their extraordinary abilities by attacking high-level complex tasks. They may also experience

problems in their relationships with other young people their age, which may increase their loneliness. However, some gifted students have extraordinary leadership qualities and are well liked by their peers.

As they grow older, unless these students' learning is guided by specific measures, other characteristics may lead to problems: impatience with the slow learning of others, a critical mind that becomes intolerant, excessive perfectionism, a tendency to get bored which may turn into resentment and lead them to disconnect from their studies and even experience serious behavioural problems and depression.

## Role of teaching staff

It is important for teachers to react positively and effectively when the needs associated with giftedness are expressed by their students. Discussion of such matters needs to be encouraged within the school and the school ought not to be afraid of taking a daring approach.

The survey makes it possible to draw up a profile of teachers who have gifted or highly talented students: these teachers need to be enthusiastic and show a strong desire for intellectual growth. They need to seek excellence in themselves and others. They are self-confident and not threatened by those who learn with surprising speed. They need to demonstrate flexibility and a tolerance of ambiguity. They need to take creative risks, and to maintain intuitive and emotional relationships with the students. They need to believe in the importance of individual differences and to respect them. Teachers in these circumstances need to facilitate and guide rather than direct learning. They are positive, well-organized and methodical. Above all, they must have a sense of humour.

## Definition and identification of giftedness in Francophone minority communities

The definition of giftedness varies from one province or territory to another and may even vary from school board to school board. Some define gifted students as those with a mental level that is well above average and who need more highly developed learning programs than are provided by the regular programs. Some definitions place an emphasis on the intelligence quotient, focussing more on logical-mathematical intelligence. Others concentrate on above average social and emotional maturity for the student's age.

In some minority communities, giftedness does not appear to be identified in the same proportions as among Anglophones. In the school boards and departments that have been able to provide specific figures, the percentages range from 0.06% to

1%, whereas it is generally acknowledged that approximately 5% possess sufficiently pronounced signs of giftedness to justify rapid specialist intervention. In the absence of accurate statistics on the identification of giftedness in minority communities, there is a fear that gifted students in Francophone minority communities are simply not identified because of a shortage of resources.

### **School structures and educational adjustments**

Most specialists agree that gifted students will never achieve their full potential if they are educated in the same way and at the same pace as their peers. Two approaches appear to be effective, and can support each other: the acceleration of learning and the compacting of the curriculum.

Acceleration follows the natural pace of the gifted student: it allows gifted students to go faster. There are several different ways of accelerating progress, including skipping a grade. All have a common principle, which is that no matter which form is adopted, the specific characteristics and maturity of each student should always be taken into account.

In an educational system that promotes inclusion, compacting of the curriculum may be an effective way of improving education for gifted students in a regular classroom. For example, if the teacher finds that a gifted student has already mastered something that the student's peers will still take a certain amount of time to learn in a given subject area, the teacher can exclude this part of the program from the student's curriculum. The teacher will then develop a learning plan on those areas that the student in question has not yet learned, and allow the student to work at his or her own pace. The student is free the rest of the time to either engage in activities to deepen knowledge or to work on others aspects of the program, or even to carry on activities in a completely different area that is of specific interest.

### **Leaving the French school or dropping out**

One concern is clearly that brilliant young Francophones may leave their Francophone school and enter the English system because of a shortage of resources and stimulation. The survey also showed that when gifted students leave Francophone schools to take English-language enrichment programs, this most often occurs in high school, either in Grade 9 or 10. There are also students who go to an English-language school for reasons other than giftedness, such as a wider range of courses and extracurricular activities, and it is impossible to distinguish which are which.

According to the survey, there is no doubt that a lack of academic stimulation may lead students to drop out. If gifted students do not display any behavioural problems or depression, they may tend to take the line of least resistance when the time comes to choose a career. They will too often end up working in an area that does not challenge their potential.

### **Conclusion**

Special attention needs to be paid to identifying and educating gifted and talented young people who live in minority Francophone communities, and this should be a top priority within the education system. If they are not identified, they will not receive the level of education suited to them, and many gifted and talented young Francophones in our communities are likely to experience failure or, at the very least, will not grow to their full potential. The Francophone community has everything to gain by providing these young people with the best possible education, because their leadership and accomplishments can contribute greatly to the Canadian Francophonie.

### **About the author**

Thora Bajard is enthusiastic about the Francophonie from many different standpoints: as a parent, teacher, curriculum designer, researcher and educational resource writer. She has passionately monitored the growth of the Francophonie, first in British Columbia through her work for the Ministry of Education and the Francophone school board, but mainly as a committed member of the community. Her contribution to school boards across the country has opened her eyes to the Canada-wide perspective. Not only that, but her considerable international experience provides the broader and refreshing viewpoint of the world Francophonie. She has been interested in the issue of giftedness for a long time. The survey has enabled her to learn more about it through the many people who were generous with their time in answering her questions.