



# fronquêtes

ENQUÊTES SUR L'ÉDUCATION EN MILIEU MINORITAIRE FRANCOPHONE

## **Living together in French-language schools**

### Welcoming young immigrants to Canadian Francophone schools

by Geneviève Emond

Because of immigration, we are seeing demographic growth within the Canadian Francophonie. Several mostly homogenous communities are now being called upon to develop their welcoming skills, including Francophones in minority settings.

Welcoming and integrating new immigrants into the minority Francophone educational environment presents specific problems. The main challenge faced by French-language schools is that of immigrant student success, including the achievement of their full potential and well-being within the host community.

The survey raises a number of aspects of this issue, while looking closely at possible avenues and ultimately at solutions for learning to live better together in French-language schools.

#### **Youth needs**

From the moment they arrive, young immigrants need help in developing their sense of belonging to the Francophone community, as well as support in writing a new chapter in their history and identity. From that standpoint, it is essential not only that young people be personally welcomed and provided with services appropriate to their needs, but also that they embark on a journey that will enable them to integrate linguistically as well as academically, culturally and psychosocially into Francophone school and community settings.

#### **Friendship, the ultimate welcome**

It is in the forging of friendships with their peers that young people develop best. It is important for them to learn where they can meet young people of their age, such as sports and

recreational facilities after classroom hours, as well as youth centres and community groups.

Spending time with young people from their home community is a good thing, but spending time with young people from the Francophone community is also important. Little by little, not only students develop in such relationships an understanding of the operation of the school system and the transition to post-secondary studies, but they also learn new codes governing relations among individuals in Canadian society and how that society functions as a whole, particularly in terms of how people cohabit in both official languages.

#### **School success**

In addition to the question of identity and the cultural shock that occurs upon arrival in the French-language school, the communication skills of newcomers may constitute a challenge. Language and academic upgrading is often required, based on the students' personal experience and maturity. This enables the school to learn about the students' previous history, mother tongue and other languages, how they relate to the French language and how well they can speak and write it, together with their educational level and background, the subjects they have studied, the working methods they have learned, their learning style, how they relate to authority and the family, etc. These young people need more flexibility than others in their learning for varying periods of time.

Not only that, but immigrant parents come to a new country with a challenge of their own – how to integrate themselves. They need time to settle down and to ensure that the basic needs of their family are met. These parents therefore generally have very little time to help their children with their school tasks.

They often do not immediately understand how the educational system works and expect teachers to be responsible for their children's academic journey.

Schools are therefore a key component in welcoming and integrating young new Canadians.

### **The school at the core of the welcoming mission**

Properly welcoming young new arrivals at a school means first of all that quality services need to be provided to them. Such services may take the form of support groups for newcomers, places where they can obtain information and support, diagnostic tools suited to their background and their age, additional support for academic upgrading through peers or professional services and psychological and social assistance.

The programs, policies and administrative guidelines for welcoming and integrating students may provide concrete answers to the needs of young immigrants and facilitate the teachers' role. But still very few Francophone school boards have developed such guidelines, except in urban areas, and even there, only at schools which have large numbers of immigrant students.

### **The challenge for teaching staff**

Teachers in French-language schools are often trained to work with relatively homogenous groups of students who speak French at home. In reality, however, many students come from exogamous homes where one of the parents is Anglophone and often cannot speak French. But what do these teachers know about the complex linguistic, cultural and social situations of the newly arrived students?

Most teachers feel the need to develop new skills — including the knowledge, the know-how, the know-how-to-be and the know-how-to-live-together — to help them deal with students from elsewhere. Adults always intervene on the basis of who

they are and what they know. It is therefore important for teachers to engage in a reflection on their own approaches to dealing with newcomers and to further develop their experience and skills.

Some schools have representatives to support teachers and other staff members, in addition to cultural and community mediators. Adults from ethnocultural communities perform a very important function as role models for young newcomers. They reassure them, speak their language and understand their culture.

### **The importance of sustained reflection**

The young immigrants who are in our schools today will be part of our labour force tomorrow. They will be making decisions to ensure the smooth running and the development of our country. But it is at school that they will learn to become Canadian citizens.

It is important to continue to think and ask questions about how to fully integrate these young immigrants into our minority communities with all of the challenges involved in doing so: Do we need a common welcoming model for all schools of the Canadian Francophonie that will take into account all of the local realities, or should we hope that each administrative unit will develop its own model? How should the school programs be adapted to better reflect the realities of newcomers? Can we look elsewhere for models to build upon?

Knowing how to properly welcome others or contribute to welcoming groups are crucial skills for the future of our societies. Succeeding in welcoming diversity is closely related to the renewal capacity and vitality of the Canadian French-language schools of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the Francophonie and societies around the world.

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To read the complete survey, go to: [www.ctf-fce.ca/frenquetes](http://www.ctf-fce.ca/frenquetes)

