



fronquêtes

ENQUÊTES SUR L'ÉDUCATION EN MILIEU MINORITAIRE FRANCOPHONE

Our teenagers: Who are they?

by Michèle Matteau

Minority Francophone communities, like many other communities, are increasingly receptive to international exchanges, whether economic, political or cultural. It is impossible for them to become isolated from the globalization typified by American culture and the pervasiveness of English. But they must also remain aware of the possible consequences that this openness can lead to in a vulnerable linguistic context, particularly for those who are at a crossroads: our teenagers.

In the 2004-2005 academic year, 85,350 students were enrolled in primary school and 40,099 in high school. The transition from primary to high school in the French-language education system does not appear to be a natural one for Francophone adolescents in minority settings. Part of the equation is no doubt the fragile sense of belonging and the difficulty of building an identity and attachment to Francophone culture, not only on the part of teenagers, but their parents before them.

The survey is therefore interested in these teenagers: What are they looking for? What are their dreams? What family, educational and community relationships do we maintain with them? They represent the future of the Francophonie and in barely 15 years, they will be the parents of the primary school students. A better understanding of the path they are following and the reality of their lives, combined with greater openness on our part, are needed to inform educational approaches in minority settings.

The role of the family

It is through the unconscious and apparently insignificant and inconsequential gestures, words and decisions that are laid, day after day, year after year, the foundations of the identity-building process that will guide major decisions in the life of a teenager.

For example, what is the impact on young people in an exogamous family of deciding to speak English only among

family members rather than the mother tongue of each parent? What is the long-term influence on children when they hear the Francophone parent speaking in English all the time to neighbours or even other Francophone parents? How will a teenager react to the Francophone culture when all he or she has ever heard or viewed at home are Anglophone media? That is what we call a mixed message. People call themselves Francophones, and they enrol their children in French-language schools, but English dominates everyday life, not only socially and at work, as might be expected, but also at home. We need to ask what real message is being sent daily to teenagers over a 15-year period through these various forms of mixed messages and how their sense of belonging and their identity can become confused.

There is also a significant gap, as mentioned earlier, between enrolment numbers at the primary and secondary levels. When parents decide to send their children to an English- or French-language school, they do not always seem to consider the long term. For example, some families decide that their children will go to a French school at the primary level and to an English high school, and do not really think much about what impact this change might have on their teenager's sense of identity and belonging.

The survey shows that our teenagers are not really aware of the consequences of the choices they make now. When they say that they want to go to an English-language school, or when they get involved in an "exogamous" love relationship, they are not really aware of the consequences that these choices will have in the short, medium and longer term.

Teaching adolescents

Teachers also need to feel that they are using tried and true methods and that they are not on the wrong track. They need to know how to go about transmitting the sense of belonging and engagement. Young people today are perhaps not as

receptive to the pep talks that might have been effective with teenagers a decade ago.

Seeing adults working in the community may have more of an impact on them than appointing young ambassadors for the Francophone flag in their province who are responsible for promoting French in school and in the city.

It is also a good idea to look into whether strict language rules, not only in the classroom but outside the classroom (halls, cafeteria and schoolyard), are really conducive to promoting the use of French. It is important to make sure that a “language police” approach does not further alienate teenagers and lead them towards delinquency rather than conformity.

Teachers need to be made aware of every facet of the minority situation. This particular way of living one’s identity requires considerable thought, guidance and structure if these teachers are to be able to reach out to adolescents. But to be successful at connecting with them and influencing them in the long term, it is important to understand them.

Teenagers and THEIR community

We need to ask whether the Francophone community is flying its colours enough to promote a genuine Francophone identity among its teenagers. The survey casts doubt on whether the mere presence of services in French, Francophone recreation, associations, institutions and media (newspapers, radio, television), and gathering places for Francophones are enough to lead our adolescents to make Francophone life choices. According to the survey, this presence also needs to be highly visible and to be expressed with unequivocal vitality.

This is also the case for culture within the community, which must not only focus its activities on the interests of adults and the elderly, but also make a place for adolescents.

In short, a community needs to take an interest in its adolescents, whether they come from the historical Francophone community or the broader community of French speakers. It is not difficult to guess what will happen to Francophone organizations if

they do not ensure their continuity. But, they must know how to do so, and alter their approaches to keep pace with societal changes.

The next generation...

Consciousness, conviction and consistency in action: three C’s that can show the way to the future. But we adults need to practise these C’s in order to identify priority approaches to be used with those who will build this future: the teenagers of today.

In this spirit of consciousness, conviction and consistency in action, we will then have to monitor changes across cohorts, because change accelerates and the lives of young people differ completely from one five-year period to the next. By getting to know them better, we will be able to make them conscious of the consequences of their choices, of the decisions they are making now, not on the basis of what we are or were when we were 16 years old, but on the basis of what they are, and to take into account their view of the world, their own strengths, and their desire for change which is proper to their age.

We need to open the doors of our institutions and organizations to them, and gradually make it possible for them to develop their own criteria for action and their own goals. Otherwise, there will be no real next generation, and we will not be preparing young people who are ready to take the reins with a clear consciousness of the issues, a deep conviction and the consistent perseverance that is needed for action to succeed.

In the end, we need to convince our adolescents of the richness of their Francophone heritage, not only in traditional events, but through a contemporary, bold, structured process in which cooperation, mobilization and action play a significant role for them. We need to give them pride in being part of a minority by giving them a taste for being different, not only in the sense of having something less, but of having something more, unusual, valuable, useful, significant and lasting. We need to ensure that they, like US, feel that they are winners rather than victims of history.

Michèle Matteau is thoroughly familiar with the Francophonie. She has studied psychology and education in her native city of Montréal, as well as in Strasbourg and Halifax. She is currently living in Ontario, after spending time in British Columbia and Nova Scotia. She is a woman of firm convictions who has a great deal of experience in the psychology of education and in teaching, which is what led her towards her work as a researcher, screenwriter and writer of documentary and educational works. As a writer, she was awarded the Ottawa Book Award (Quatuor pour cordes sensibles, 2000), the Trillium Book Award (Cognac et Porto, 2002) and the Prix Christine-Dumitriu-van-Saenen at the Toronto French Book Fair (2005). In this article, this committed citizen, mother and experienced teacher shares her thoughts on adolescence in our Francophone minority communities.

To read the complete survey, go to: www.ctf-fce.ca/frenquetes



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