



# fronquêtes

ENQUÊTES SUR L'ÉDUCATION EN MILIEU MINORITAIRE FRANCOPHONE

## **Schools and the Connection to Identity among Official Language Minority Youths**

by Diane Gérin-Lajoie

### **THE CONNECTION TO IDENTITY**

A number of studies show that identity is neither linear nor static. Rather it is a dynamic process from which multiple identities emerge. The connection to identity is complex and identity itself is not monolithic. How individuals position themselves on the identity continuum can vary over the course of their lives; a host of competing social, historical, economic and political factors, as well as social practices, are at play. Belonging to a certain group at birth is no guarantee of continued allegiance to its history and values throughout life.

The connection to identity is often examined in the school context because minority schools are important agents of linguistic, cultural and social reproduction. Not only do they educate, they also transmit the language and culture of the minority, a role that often schools alone can fulfill since families are not always able to do so. Two social trends account for this situation: the bilingualization of families where both parents are Francophone, and the growing number of exogamous households where the language spoken is English.

### **YOUTHS AND THEIR CONNECTION TO IDENTITY**

Two studies involved 16 minority youths and their immediate circle (family, friends, teachers): 8 students in Francophone secondary schools in Toronto and Ottawa, and 8 in two Anglophone schools in the Montréal area. This qualitative analysis comprised observation, interviews and a literature review. In addition, a survey of several hundred youths focused on their language habits at home, at school and in their social life.

The purpose of the study was three-fold: to understand how these youths perceive themselves in relation to the language minority; to deconstruct the concept of a bilingual identity in order to grasp its significance and determine whether this type of identity is really stable or is a precursor to assimilation into the language majority; and to compare views held in the two provinces.

### **THE BILINGUAL IDENTITY**

In Ontario, 67.9 % of the youths claimed to have a bilingual identity, and 18.6 % spoke of a trilingual identity. In the case of the Montréal youths, 44.3 % described themselves as bilingual, and 54.7 %, as trilingual. However, despite their stated bilingual or trilingual identity, some of the Montréal area youths favour the language of the English-speaking minority because of its perceived power; some respondents claimed to have two mother tongues; certain Ontario youths declared belonging to the Francophonie out of conviction. Therefore, a bilingual identity does not entail inevitable assimilation into the majority group of the province of residence.

### **DIFFERING VIEWS**

Views on language differ from one province to the other. In Ontario, the young participants recognize the importance of speaking French because of their sentimental attachment to the language and also due to the fact that it is a right. They wish to preserve the French language as part of their cultural heritage. On the other hand, the French language and culture are often associated with folklore given their limited use in the public space, few opportunities being afforded to actually live in French. In contrast, the Montréal area youths fare better. In fact, they do not consider English as a minority language that needs to be saved from oblivion. They are aware that the English language and culture are dominant in the world and powerful in this globalization era.

### **THE MANDATE OF THE MINORITY SCHOOL**

It follows that views regarding the school's role differ widely between the two provinces. In Quebec, preserving the minority language and culture is not included in the mission of English-language schools, while in Ontario it is clearly part of the official discourse and constitutes a moral responsibility of the French-language minority school.

The Quebec ministère de l'Éducation, du Loisir et du Sport makes no reference to the protection of a language and culture in its documents, whereas Ontario's Aménagement Linguistique Policy states:

*The uniqueness of French-language schools lies in the fact that their mission is not only to educate their students but also to protect, enhance, and transmit the language and culture of the community they serve. Protecting, enhancing, and transmitting the language and culture are an explicit part of their mandate.<sup>1</sup>*

## AGENTS OF LANGUAGE REGULATION

Study results also reveal a difference between the official positions of Ontario and Quebec concerning the use of languages in schools. In Ontario's Francophone schools, the staff must constantly remind students to speak French. In some cases, systems of rewards and punishments are in place. Students find it challenging to confine themselves to French when English dominates their environment. In these circumstances, Francophone schools in Ontario act as agents of language regulation, without always taking into account the social context in which the students live and the strong influence of the majority. Such a stance on language is as prescriptive as that held in majority settings where little recognition is given to students' linguistic capital.

In one of the two Montréal area Anglophone schools participating in one of the studies, staff members do not at all see themselves as agents of language regulation and do not forbid the use of the majority language (French) nor of students' heritage languages. The obligation to speak English is restricted to the classroom. This refers to Anglophone schools in the Montréal area, a public space where English is more visible than elsewhere in Quebec. In fact, the situation elsewhere in the province bears more resemblance to that of Francophones outside Quebec.

## CONCLUSION

Let us keep in mind that a bilingual identity reaches far beyond simple bilingualism and in no way inhibits the development of a sense of belonging to the minority language and culture. Nonetheless, the exposure to the minority language and culture in the public space significantly influences one's connection to identity. Limited access to services and resources in the minority language reinforces the image of a language that is more folkloric than living, and often leads to disengagement.

The comments heard highlight the importance of the competing forces with which the official language minorities have had to contend over the decades. It would therefore be useful to examine, from a historical perspective, youths' connection to identity within the very context of these competing forces.

Finally, the fundamental difference in the official discourse of the Ontario and Quebec schools is obvious. In the Montréal area, attention is paid to the students' language skills, but the idea of the minority language being threatened is not a concern. The opposite is true in Ontario, and probably in the other Francophone minority settings, where schools are assigned the moral responsibility of maintaining the minority language and culture in order to ensure their survival.

The connection to identity is complex and difficult to define. We need to engage in a collective reflection on this issue, especially with regard to Francophone schools outside Quebec. How can we balance the social realities in which young people live with the upholding of the Francophone school's mandate? How is "identity building" understood in the French-language education milieu?

Answering such questions is no easy task. It requires an arduous process that will no doubt lead to a model of the Francophone school that would be more inclusive, yet deeply rooted in its mandate as guardian of the minority language and culture.

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<sup>1</sup> Ontario Ministry of Education, 2004, p. 7.

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to read the full survey (in French) : [www.ctf-fce.ca/frenquetes](http://www.ctf-fce.ca/frenquetes)

