



## Cultural diversity in French-language schools

by Michèle Matteau and Ronald Boudreau

Canada has always been and remains a welcoming country: more than one fifth of its current population is foreign-born. The rate of immigrant landings has accelerated and the diversity among newcomers has expanded in recent years, which creates additional and multidimensional challenges for Francophone communities in minority settings that welcome them.

Each Francophone community has its own history, traditions and conditions relating to dispersion or cohesion. In Ontario, the province that welcomes the largest number of Francophone immigrants after Quebec, the share of foreign-born individuals increased from 4.8% to 16.6% between 1996 and 2006. In Alberta, Francophone immigrants account for approximately 16% of the provincial Francophone population, but five times more would be needed to maintain the demographic weight of this community.

For socio-economic reasons, new immigrants often settle in urban areas where French-language schools are often less known. Nevertheless, French-language schools in Prince Edward Island welcome students from 50 countries. In 2011, French-language schools in New Brunswick welcomed students speaking 27 different languages from 55 countries. A similar situation exists in Nova Scotia as well as in Newfoundland and Labrador, but on a reduced scale.

### SUITABLE STRATEGIES

It is difficult to imagine implementing everywhere the same welcoming and integration strategies because linguistic, socio-cultural and economic environments vary across the country.

Depending on the region, there may be welcoming strategies supported by Catholic and other religious groups, or

immigrant recruitment programs directed by Francophone organizations and municipal economic development councils. As it is important for newcomers to quickly access welcoming services in French, some Francophone associations support their integration by proposing gradual and targeted recruitment (of Francophone immigrants). The concept of cultural and linguistic development policies is gaining ground since the identity itself of the Francophone community is being redefined.

Resources are available and focus on the following complementary objectives: capitalize on the richness of diversity, attempt to root out prejudice and encourage recruitment in French-language schools. Supportive programs are set up to meet the adjustment needs of students whose schooling was different or interrupted. In many educational institutions, an orientation and intervention framework has been established to help students develop a sense of ownership of the Francophone culture, succeed in school and build their identity. Consultations on the needs of young immigrants in French-language schools are held to inform welcoming policies.

The welcoming of families is often ensured by local schools and communities that offer reception, settlement and integration services. In addition, workshops are developed for teachers, immigrant students and their families to promote knowledge and understanding of each other's realities. Welcome kits are distributed and organizations dedicated to the welcoming of immigrants increasingly share information, initiatives and resources. The language skills of immigrant students are assessed upon their enrolment in French-language schools. Based on the profile thus determined, individualized support is provided with variations that are tailored to suit local conditions and community needs.

In short, concrete strategies that take into account the needs, conditions and requirements of Francophone communities and of those who come to participate in their future exist across the Francophonie.

## **SPECIFIC CHALLENGES IN FRENCH-LANGUAGE SCHOOLS**

The French-language school is a key partner for the Francophone community, both urban and rural. To enhance the use of French in school and in the community, French-language minority communities must address specific challenges.

Recruitment is a major challenge across the country. Newly arrived families do not always know that French-language schools exist in their adopted communities. Human and financial resources are required to adequately inform them, but these are not always available.

It is important for school staff to become aware of the dynamics at play in intercultural relationships, to cooperate in welcoming immigrant families, to become familiar with services being offered, and to help parents deal with the cultural shock and engage in their children's schooling. It should be noted however that a certain number of immigrants become teachers and they must overcome numerous challenges, namely: get to know their new school environment and its educational rules, use different teaching methods, understand the Francophone minority setting and master the English language in order to be able to communicate with certain parents.

Instructional tools adapted for newcomers are scarce in French-language schools. Therefore, teachers are forced to cater for their students' specific needs by adapting or developing basic materials. This lack of resources makes it difficult in certain regions to implement integration programs for immigrant students.

At the same time, French-language school teachers must foster their students' Francophone identity building and sense of belonging. They must consider each student's individual reality and make learning in French an experience in cultural heritage discovery and a long-term investment. Immigrant students obviously do not view this heritage the same way as their Canadian Francophone classmates. Their sense of belonging does not have the same roots. The identity-building discourse therefore needs to be qualified and adapted, while staff still attempt to understand how to integrate this component of the school's mission into their regular teaching.

In order to grow and prosper, Canada must welcome immigrants and integrate them into its society. The geographical, socio-economic, cultural and linguistic environments vary considerably on this vast territory. If the challenges that Francophone communities have to meet are similar, the solutions, on the other hand, must be fully tailored to each environment in a climate of harmony and openness.

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The CTF Annual Francophone Symposium brings together liaison officers from all Member organizations and gives them the opportunity to discuss their local realities and emerging issues. This article is a summary of the report prepared by the members of this network who reviewed advances and challenges in welcoming newcomers in French-language schools.

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



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