FRENCH, AN INTEGRATION ASSET FOR YOUNG FRENCH-SPEAKING IMMIGRANTS IN THE UNITED STATES? YES, IT IS, BUT UNDER CERTAIN CONDITIONS

Agnès Ndiaye Tounkara was born and raised in Senegal before leaving for university in France. For over 15 years, she has been involved in French language teaching, first at the Alliance Française de Boston, then at an international bilingual school in New York. Today, she is in charge of the French Heritage Language Program (FHLP), a program of the Cultural Services of the French Embassy. The FHLP helps French-speaking immigrants and young Americans of French origin preserve their linguistic and cultural heritage and build on their language skills, by offering free educational and cultural courses and workshops in public schools and community centers across the United States. Agnès is one of the authors of the book "French all around us" on the Francophonie in the U.S. and is the French language representative for the Coalition of Community-Based Heritage Language Schools. She is also a member of the advisory board of CALEC (Center for the Advancement of Languages, Education and Communities) and Francophonia.

During the 2019–2020 school year, a dozen New York highschoolers, who had recently arrived from French-speaking Africa or Haiti and who were participating in our program, travelled to Easton, Pennsylvania, an hour and a half from New York City. This was part of an exchange program with French students at Lafayette College, a prestigious private college. The Lafayette students demonstrated authentic French in their exchanges with young people of various backgrounds. For their part, the highschoolers learned about the American university system through regular meetings with their American peers, who additionally provided them with academic support in French. For most of our students, this was their first trip outside New York, their first visit to a college, and their first time in a private university.

On the way home, while listening to the students talking about the trip, I realized the full extent of its impact. Being on campus, participating in a university-level French class, meeting with other students (sometimes from non-English speaking countries), hearing from an admissions office representative, and finding out that universities are looking for more diversity, all helped them realize that a university like Lafayette College was not entirely out of reach. Furthermore, they realized they had something unique to contribute, and that this was partly because of their identities.

It was French that formed the common thread between these groups of young people who otherwise seemed to be pulled apart, especially in an American context, where race, socioeconomic status, personal and academic background, and culture made a connection unlikely to happen.

Our students live in the most deprived areas of New York City and are among the 4,000 students identified as speaking French in New York City public schools. We know that this number is an underestimated figure because it is not reflective of the multilingualism of the students, as it only counts those who report French as their language spoken at home and ignores the majority of those who chose to list English or Wolof, Fulani, or Haitian Creole (as one of their native languages) on a questionnaire allowing only one response.

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and therefore, eligible for free school meals. In the U.S., all of these labels point to deficiencies. Yet, these students have a rich cultural heritage, and their experiences and multilingualism have given them skills currently in high demand, such as being good communicators and listeners, being able to work with people with different values and viewpoints, having empathy, having critical thinking skills and the ability to connect complex ideas, as well as a resilience they have developed in dealing with various daily obstacles.

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They have set foot in New York from French-speaking Africa or Haiti and have attended public high schools that do not offer language courses, and where the emphasis has been placed on learning the English language. After meeting some of these students who complained about losing their French, Jane Ross, a former French teacher and founder of the program, approached the cultural services of the French Embassy and, through a partnership with the FACE Foundation (French American Cultural Exchange), the FHLP (French Heritage Language Program) was established about 17 years ago.

Our mission is to make French an asset that can help these French-speaking students integrate into American society. To achieve this objective, our program has adopted the unique approach of teaching heritage languages, a multilingual and multicultural approach that requires teachers to adopt a critical and caring mindset. It is based on the premise that heritage language speakers have not only specific linguistic needs but also particular psychological and emotional needs.

So, the heritage approach is, first and foremost, a critical approach that implies that teachers are aware of the fictitious hierarchy of languages, notably influenced by power dynamics and imbalances between different nations. The approach entails teachers questioning these power relations that are obviously present in the classroom.

It is a multicultural approach that recognizes students' cultural and linguistic capital as valuable resources that ensure their involvement in their learning process. When the teacher adopts a co-learning stance and encourages students to assume their identities, it sends a strong message to students that their cultural identities are valued and welcomed in the classroom.

Likewise, it is a multilingual approach. Bilingual students should not be viewed as two monolingual persons existing side by side. Therefore, it is vital for the teacher to create a classroom environment that encourages students' language practices and provides them with authentic opportunities to use their full repertoire.[1] Some authors go further: when heritage language speakers do not see their identities reflected in the classroom, their learning process may suffer. Similarly, if they cannot relate to the content of the lessons, they may become discouraged and lose their motivation in the classroom.[2]

On top of that, a socio-emotional approach considers these students' specific psychological and emotional needs. Indeed, the hierarchy created between the different language variations and accents creates linguistic insecurity in heritage speakers, sometimes making them reluctant to use the language, especially when they are criticized for their accent or the variations of the language they use, considered "incorrect".

In fact, for these students, French is not the mother tongue; it is a heritage language, that is, a language spoken at home in a context where another majority language is spoken outside their home. In the American context, French is both a colonial heritage language and a migrant heritage language, spoken by sons and daughters of immigrants from French-speaking countries who also speak other languages at home. With English schooling and over time, they often tend to speak the majority language more fluently than their heritage language.

They speak their native languages and French, the language they often discovered at school as they were dreaming, imagining and thinking in their native languages, which were often banned from the classrooms. Now that they are far from home, their parents or family members who are hosting them speak to them in Fulani, Wolof, Malinke or Ewe, either out of a reflex of cultural preservation or because it is the only language they speak.

Nowhere or very rarely in their plans is the French given a place. On the contrary, it is often seen as an obstacle to integration in a country where English seems to be the pass toward this dream of success and where multilingualism is

1 Menken, K. and Ofelia García (eds.). 2010. *Negotiating Language Policies in Schools: Educators as Policymakers*. New York: Routledge.

2 Corinne A. Seals & Joy Kreeft Peyton (2016). *Heritage language education: valuing the languages, literacies, and cultural competencies of immigrant youth, Current Issues in Language Planning.*

often presented as a deficiency, a barrier to academic success. Moreover, they do not speak standard French, the Parisian French, with a proper accent; they make syntactic and grammatical mistakes, and the language teaching has so far focused on these shortcomings.

The work we do is not only about teaching French; it is also about reappropriating the language by adapting the content to the everyday life of our students and by making French cohabit with their national languages. It is about deconstructing the linguistic insecurity acquired after years of traditional teaching. The objective behind this is the acquisition of a "certain French". Above all, it is about adopting a pragmatic American-style vision to make French an academic and professional asset.

The FHLP also celebrates the broad diversity of French and allows students to embrace it through educational content directly linked to their cultural heritage in literature, media, cinema, and theatre from their countries of origin. They all have their rightful place in our classrooms, as do their national languages. Because they have very different levels of French, the students also use their mother tongues when they work in groups to complete their projects or to understand a concept.

Thus, our mission goes beyond language preservation. As Maya Smith perfectly puts it in an article published in the *Critical Multilingualism Studies Journal* in 2017,[3] "FHLP does not only offer free French classes, but it also creates a space where these students can craft their identities as multilingual individuals and appreciate the value of their different cultural heritage."

Students join the school with a linguistic and cultural identity; if they see it in the curriculum and if it is celebrated in the classroom, they can take ownership of the language and fully participate in their learning. From my perspective, this ownership is fundamental to our programs' success in New York.

The other decisive factor is influenced by the way we teach. It is about the ability of our program to maintain a desire to learn French. Indeed, for our students, the practice of French is the result of a permanent negotiation between learning English and the place given to other languages. The place given to French will be proportional to the desire to maintain one's connection to one's country of origin, the desire to belong to the francophone community, and the feeling that its use can bring tangible benefits, such as academic and professional opportunities.

In the United States, this desire for the French is a reality. It is a preservationist reaction in the context of a culture absorbing everything in its path. It is also a bond, a linguistic buoy. Nonetheless, more pragmatically, it is a strategy, an investment, a bet on bilingualism and its capacity to let them differentiate themselves in the job market. I also hear this from students who often find themselves among Francophones in their schools, who all have an anecdote about the Francophone comrade they met on the first day of school and who helped them steer their first few months in the United States. A survey conducted a few years ago among our students shows that 50% believe that French will help them speak English better or differentiate themselves in the job market.

I have also heard it from representatives of francophone communities who have contacted us from Maine, Wisconsin, Michigan or Georgia and who all sought programs for their children born here, who do not speak French, or those who arrived a few years ago and are losing their French.

Therefore, French becomes the minority language, a heritage language to be preserved. It allows young francophones to build bridges to their countries of origin and cultures, other francophones worldwide, and their professional future in an increasingly globalized world. In our classrooms, French becomes a part of their identity, the anchor that binds them to their cultures, a link with their fellow francophones in the school and more broadly with the francophone world, as well as a path towards integration into this society so different from those from which they came from.

3 Maya Angela Smith (University of Washington): "French Heritage Language Learning A Site of Multilingual Identity Formation, Cultural Exploration, and Creative Expression in New York City" in *Critical Multilingualism Studies Journal*, Vol. 5 No. 2 (2017): Legitimate Speakers in Contested Spaces.