MINORITY FRANCOPHONE YOUTH AND THE FUTURE

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ABSTRACT

The central issue of francophone community vitality is whether the current generation of francophone youth will transmit a sense of identity to their children. During the last four decades, significant changes in opportunities for schooling, social advancement and legal recognition of minority rights have helped smooth the way for minority youth. At the same time, demographic decline and a host of other factors pose extraordinary challenges, not the least of which is the fact that progressively larger numbers of francophone children are born in families with one francophone and one non-francophone parent. The essay examines the challenges and forecasts an optimistic outcome where today's youth will transmit to their children an evolved, dynamic culture that is adapted to new social realities.

Francophone minorities outside Quebec, particularly children and youth, have been a constant part of my career as a university researcher for a period stretching back to the late 1960s. This special issue on youth and minorities allows us to reflect upon the accomplishments in official language policies and upon their impact on the prospects for survival of minority communities. Several of the questions proposed for discussion centre around one main issue: the relationship between minority youth, the vitality of their communities and what this means for public policy.

When we speak of community vitality, it is hard to escape the standard measures of academic sociologists, sociolinguists and demographers: the usual mix of statistics such as mother tongue, language most spoken in various settings, participation in minority institutions, and transmission of language from one generation to the next. Use of such indicators is appropriate for a country that is officially bilingual and desires to ensure the equitable development of two great language communities. I support the use of such of indicators and have worked to help put in place public policies that promote vitality in the dimensions they measure.

But community vitality is more than the sum of abstract indicators. Community vitality is an ideal construct that is hypothesized to be at the root of community survival. For me, community vitality consists of two components: first, the ability of a group of people to transmit from generation to generation a sense of identity; second, the ability of the community to adapt and change the way identity is expressed, in order to meet new circumstances without losing a sense of continuity. Depending upon the circumstances, human communities have had to rely upon very diverse indicators. For long periods of time, the Jewish Diaspora was not defined in terms of use of the Hebrew language. But for recent generations of Jewish children born in Israel to families originating in the Diaspora, the Hebrew language is a fundamental identity trait. New circumstances create new identifiers of community belonging.

For our Francophone minorities, the transformations of the last forty years have created a new set of circumstances in nearly every dimension of life – political, social, economic, religious, ideological and demographic. Francophone children and youth are at the juncture or *la charnière* of the past, present and future of community vitality. If young people are in a position to create identities based upon continuity with the communities of their parents **and** to shape their own lives to face current and future changes of circumstances, then their communities will survive and we will be able to look back in a generation and speak of their "community vitality."

In short, the only true measure of community vitality is in how children and youth live out their lives and what identities they adopt. Can we say that youth in official language minorities will find it easier than did their parents to live as a minority and to transmit their languages and culture to the next generation? In the absence of a reliable

crystal ball, we can only point to the impact of changing circumstances upon their prospects. Let us begin with areas of major positive change, then confront them with the challenges presented by societal evolution.

PUBLIC SCHOOLING, ECONOMIC ADVANCEMENT, RECOGNITION

Public education is the most important area of positive change for minority survival. Until about the age of 20, the experience of formal education is the main ingredient of the lives of children and youth outside the family. For minority francophone children, educational improvements since the mid-1960s have been decisive. The deplorable conditions of public schooling for minority francophones outlined in the report of the Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism – in most provinces, a denial of opportunity to study in their own language and, in places where French was not completely forbidden as a language of instruction, substandard schooling – have now changed for the better. A network of elementary and secondary schools, where French is the language of instruction and where control is vested in the minority communities, exists in all the provinces and territories, guaranteed by Article 23 of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms.[1]

Even though access is not protected under the constitution, a growing number of post-secondary institutions provide academic programs in a variety of disciplines, making it possible for some francophones to continue on to higher education without requiring them to study in English. The consequences of better primary and secondary education together with better access to post-secondary learning are enormous. Educational attainment of younger francophones, as measured by years of formal education, has risen to levels comparable to the average of the non-francophone population. In turn, earnings differentials have been reduced or eliminated, depending in large measure upon factors such as geographical location (urban/rural, region of country) rather than language choices.

These positive changes in the field of education are a by-product of a process of gradually increasing levels of recognition of the official linguistic minorities in Canadian law and society. Recognition has often been accompanied by legislation or policies to improve availability of provincial and municipal governmental services in French, paralleling the vast improvements in federal service levels. New Brunswick, as an officially bilingual province, has moved the farthest in formal recognition and related institutional changes to enhance the strength of official linguistic minorities. But every province except British Columbia and Newfoundland and Labrador has implemented measures to recognize the official languages or the provision of French-language services. Beginning in the mid-1990s, the federal government signed cooperative agreements to facilitate these changes.[2] A further step in this direction has been the gradually increasing enforcement of provisions of Part VII of the Official Languages Act, obligating federal institutions and agencies to develop programs that "[enhance] the vitality of the English and French linguistic minority communities in Canada and [support] and [assist] their development".

One cannot predict the long-term effects of better schooling, improved life chances, public recognition, better public services and actions in economic and other fields to "enhance the vitality" of communities. In the short term, however, a few conclusions are possible. First, without the massive development of schooling and higher education in French, it is certain that much larger proportions of children born to francophone parents would have completely abandoned their use of French and replaced it by English. The benefits of improved instruction are obvious and extremely positive for minority community survival. Secondly, we are certain that the growing recognition of official linguistic minorities in laws and public institutions has a dramatic effect in developing a sense of "permanence" for minority francophone communities, whose very existence was officially ignored for generations. We cannot deny that without the many measures taken by public authorities in the last four decades, the chances of survival of most communities and the prospects for today's minority youth would have been severely diminished.

DEMOGRAPHY, SOCIAL EVOLUTION AND IDENTITY CHALLENGES

To answer succinctly one of the questions proposed for authors in this special issue, looking ahead to 2020, I am optimistic about the situation of French-speaking linguistic minorities in Canada. But not complacent. The present situation is similar to that of building a house where the foundations, the walls and the rafters have been put in place, but the roof and windows are still missing. Without the latter, the inhabitants are partially sheltered but not fully protected. I do not propose, however, to address the areas where public policy and law might be called upon to further the cause of community vitality: the list is potentially very long and, above all, its content should be defined through the political process where the minorities themselves set the agendas. Instead, let me mention a few challenges and their implications for youth as they seek to find their way.

Some of the most impressive improvements for minority francophone communities have come at a certain cost. The costs, I hasten to add, have been freely assumed to acquire the benefits they bring. Thus, if we think of the improvements in schooling – necessary, vital, absolutely

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fundamental to personal well-being and community survival – the benefits brought changes that challenge community integrity. Two generations ago, minority francophone adults had extremely low average levels of schooling, a situation that condemned many of them to remain in their home communities in survival-level jobs. In the 1970 census, in many areas of Ontario, for example, approximately forty per cent of francophone adults had schooling levels considered to be equivalent to functional illiteracy. Economic hardship and the difficulty of finding good jobs in the larger, English-dominated economic community may have helped, in some situations, to ensure community cohesion. Today, minority francophones (except in a few parts of New Brunswick) are overwhelmingly bilingual and better educated, meaning that it is easy to leave behind family and community ties for economic advancement, reducing the chances of community survival. In other words, the advent of schooling in French has been a major advantage, but it creates challenges that the new generation will confront in making their life choices.

Let us now list a few of the key changes affecting the current generation of francophone youth. The first change is that birth rates in most of Canada have generally dropped to below the replacement level. This slow demographic erosion has hardly been touched by immigration of francophones from abroad, except perhaps in one or two major metropolitan areas. Demographic decline and assimilation (or identity loss and change) are the two long-term menaces to survival, against which all other prospects must be gauged.

The second is that almost all minority youth are bilingual in English and French and, outside certain parts of New Brunswick, many may enter their adult years with greater facility in English than French. Often viewed as a negative, this bilingualism demonstrates, in my view, the great success of minority francophone schooling. Many of these bilingual children are the product of so-called "mixed" marriages, having one Anglophone and one Francophone parent. Researchers such as Rodrigue Landry, at the University of Moncton, have clearly shown that minority francophone schools, in combination with a supportive French-language parent, develop youth who are successful studying in French and who have strong identity attachments to the Francophone minority community.[3] Without this contribution, most of our communities would be much smaller than they are today.

The much higher levels of educational attainment also present the opportunity for francophone youth to have careers in areas of business and public life where English is the dominant, if not the sole, language of communication. In the early 1970s, the pioneering sociolinguistic work of Pr. Raymond Mougeon, now at York University, showed a tendency of francophone professionals such as doctors and lawyers to make infrequent use of French when they practiced in mainly English-speaking communities. It is only through fierce political struggle that certain French-language institutions, such as the Hôpital Montfort in Ottawa, have remained in existence. Short of an unlikely reversal of current trends, most business and institutional settings outside Quebec, New Brunswick and, perhaps, the National Capital Region are going to remain almost exclusive preserves of the English language.

Since marriages are based upon meeting partners through social contacts, often through the place of work, the greater participation of francophones in all types of economic life is going to reinforce the present tendency to ever-higher levels of exogamy. In most provinces, the result of such marriage patterns will be to produce a generation of francophone minority members whose children are going to be raised with one non-francophone parent. In other words, the future generation of minority francophone children outside core areas of denser settlement will be bilinguals with allegiances through family to both the francophone and non-francophone communities.

I submit that we should be optimistic about this new generation. The odd factor about exogamy – a francophone marrying outside the same language group – is that it provides a means to "beat" the laws of demography. When two francophones marry, the average number of children in Canada is *always* below the replacement level (about 2.1 children per couple), given the trends of assimilation that affect some children. But *IF* the francophone parent cooperates with the non-francophone and makes use of the availability of French schooling to provide the children with a countervailing force to resist assimilation, the result is to bring the ratio of children to adults up above the replacement level. All depends upon the willingness of the

community, starting with the immediate members of the francophone's family, to reach out and integrate "outsiders."

The family structure just described is not some outlandish scenario. It is the demographic reality of thousands of francophone families today. While some may find this reality disconcerting, I think the time has come to describe clearly the challenge of identity and its evolution. Minority schools, our beloved and hard-won *écoles de langue française,* have an even greater role to play in the future, requiring a single-minded devotion from their communities. With the parents of children in school and the surrounding society, the schools are faced with a major task of helping to create and integrate an evolved sense of minority identity that maintains continuity with generations past. The francophone youth of today will be the real deciders, through their life choices, about how that identity will evolve. Having worked with a few generations of francophones to help build vibrant communities, I remain very positive about their future – to 2020 and far beyond.

REFERENCES

[1] The shortcomings of minority control and of the delivery systems for minority education are well-documented, and francophones continue to take political and legal action to give more effective meaning to the guarantees of Article 23. Such shortcomings do not contradict my thesis that significant improvements have occurred.

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[3] Landry, R. & Allard, R. (1997). L'exogamie et le maintien de deux langues et de deux cultures : le rôle de la francité familioscolaire. *Revue des sciences de l'éducation,* 23 (3), 561-592.