WHEN VITALITY GOES HAND IN HAND WITH YOUTH AND INSTITUTIONAL SUPPORT QUAND VITALITÉ RIME AVEC JEUNESSE ET RÉSEAU INSTITUTIONNEL

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ABSTRACT / RÉSUMÉ

In addition to the fundamental recognition of language rights, Ontario's francophone community needs institutions to foster its vitality and development. Most researchers in the field of community vitality generally acknowledge that there are a few critical factors, such as the number of Francophones and the language they speak at home, at school, at play and at work. Two other elements are also essential according to the experts: public recognition of the language and institutional support for the community[1] and its members.

Au-delà de la reconnaissance capitale des droits linguistiques, la communauté francophone de l'Ontario doit pouvoir aussi compter sur la présence d'institutions pour se développer et s'épanouir. Il est généralement admis par la plupart des auteurs traitant de la vitalité des communautés qu'il existe quelques incontournables, comme le nombre de francophones, la langue parlée à la maison, à l'école, dans les loisirs et au travail. Les experts soulignent que deux autres facteurs sont aussi essentiels : la reconnaissance publique de la langue, ainsi que le soutien institutionnel accordé à la communauté[1] et ceux qui la composent.

First, congratulations to *Canadian Issues* for choosing youth and official language minorities as the subject of this edition, following the conference of the same name in February 2008. The Office of the French Language Services Commissioner of Ontario is very grateful for the opportunity to contribute to this publication.

Some researchers describe the identity of young Franco-Ontarians as dual, hybrid or novel. Beyond the descriptive aspect of this terminological definition characterizing attachment to a particular language group, young people are searching for their identity and can easily see themselves as belonging to two or even three communities.



For a minority community to be strong, vibrant and full of life, it must give all of its members their rightful place. Young people should be more involved in making decisions, especially decisions that affect them directly. They have to be provided with all the resources and the reasons they need to develop. Those resources and reasons come from institutional, social and community networks that are well established and interconnected.

The Ontario government's conception of the policies and programs required to fulfil the expectations of these young Francophones should be the standard for all government ministries, departments and agencies launching new projects and programs. Ontario's Francophone community has specific individual needs that are not always comparable with the needs of the rest of the population.

For those expectations to be understood, the community's opinions must be sought out and listened to. Offering services that address its stated needs contributes to its development and enhances its vitality. Of note in this regard are some reforms and measures implemented at the governmental and community levels to promote the development of Francophones in Ontario. In recent years, there have been many exemplary initiatives to provide solutions that address the needs of the province's Francophone community.

In Ontario, French-language school is more than just a social elevator preparing students for life in the workforce. Ontario's 12 French-language school boards have a twofold objective: to transmit knowledge while protecting, promoting and transmitting the language and culture of the community they serve. It is a clear mandate supported by the introduction of the *Aménagement Linguistique Policy.*

Launched in 2004, the *Aménagement Linguistique Policy* (ALP) is the product of a collective effort. It was conceived by Ontario's 12 French-language school boards in conjunction with parents of students and community organizations.[2] The first of its kind in Canada, the policy is designed to help Ontario's Francophone students preserve their culture, boost their pride and improve their academic achievement through a first-rate French-language education system that meets the community's specific needs.

In addition, implementation of the ALP is supported by the province-wide *Project: Pédagogie culturelle.* Established in 2003 by the *Association des enseignantes et des enseignants franco-ontariens* (AEFO) in partnership with the *Fédération de la jeunesse franco-ontarienne* (FESFO) and the *Centre de leadership en éducation* (CLÉ), *Project: Pédagogie culturelle* is funded by the Ministry of Education of Ontario. The unique feature of this approach is that it involves not only educators but also everyone else who plays a direct or indirect role in educating students in a concerted effort to guide students in building their identity.[3]

In January 2005, the Minister of Training, Colleges and Universities of Ontario announced the establishment of an advisory committee on French-language postsecondary programs. The committee's goal is to improve access to French-language postsecondary programs for Francophone students, who often have few programs to choose from.[4] While school is the best environment for transmitting knowledge, language and culture, there are other places that also foster identity-building.

At the February 2008 conference entitled "Youth and Official Language Minorities in Canada",[5] many young people spoke about the importance of making a difference by getting involved in one's community. A number of them recounted their own experience and how they became aware of their Francophone identity. For them, community involvement was the trigger, the "aha!" moment in their discovery or rediscovery of their identity. The need to break out of their geographic isolation, to contact and socialize with others using every available means, including the latest resources such as Facebook, was a message repeated many times by the young people who attended the conference.

In Ontario, the Fédération de la jeunesse franco-ontarienne (FESFO) makes an outstanding contribution to identity-building. Every year, it organizes activities such as leadership courses, regional forums ("OrganiZZaction!") and the Franco-Ontarian Games. These activities have two main goals: promote Franco-Ontarian identity and combat assimilation.[6]

Similarly, the *Association des juristes d'expression française de l'Ontario de l'Ontario* (AJEFO) has launched a project to develop new vocations that will help enhance the community's vitality. *Carrières en justice* (careers in law) is an exemplary initiative piloted by a community organization and supported by other organizations and the federal and provincial governments. The project is intended to introduce bilingual young people to careers, jobs and professions in the legal arena to remedy the shortage of skilled workers.

Although these initiatives are encouraging and innovative, they by no means eliminate the difficulties confronting Ontario's Francophone population. The Francophone community's vitality depends on its ability to overcome the challenges it faces. Like other Francophones outside Quebec, Ontario's French speakers have to cope with some unique problems.

One of those problems is exogamous families. The majority of Ontario's francophone families are exogamous.[7] Even if such families do not speak French at home, their mother tongue, or one of them, is French. The children in those families regard themselves primarily as "bilingual".[8]

Exogamous families make up the majority of the target audience of the province's new Office of the Commissioner of French Language Services. In Ontario, it is easy for Francophones to switch to English, especially in exogamous settings. The parents in exogamous homes are at the crossroads of two cultures, and of the two official languages, and their children are living proof of that. Those children are also the future of French Ontario and, consequently, the Commissioner's primary clientele.

One of the Commissioner's mandates is to support exogamous families who choose to live partly or completely in French in Ontario. They must be encouraged to become part of the Francophone community and to enrol their children in French-language educational institutions (ideally from daycare to the postsecondary level). Speaking French is an advantage of which they can be proud, which contributes to the promotion and preservation of their children's francophone heritage.

The services provided to a community ensure its development. A community will be much more likely to develop and grow if it has access to services that meet its needs. That often depends on the institutions that the community creates. That is how a community's survival is assured and its cultural contribution is preserved, as is the case for Ontario's Francophone population.

Of course, both young and not so young Francophones have to make an effort to demand service in French. But that is not a one-way street. On the contrary. In certain circumstances, which occur all too frequently, it is understandable that a French speaker would decide to use English. This is explained in a passage from a document by the late Franco-Ontarian sociologist Roger Bernard:

"The Franco-Ontarian will feel that it is normal and logical to use English if the circumstances of the conversation so require. In specific situations, he may demand to be spoken to in French, but in general, he will feel an urgency or an incentive to use English. Practice and habit will teach him that he cannot go wrong by using English. Everyone understands…".[9] [Translation]

In other words, when you want to be served quickly or the situation seems complicated, if you are bilingual, you will tend to speak English. For example, a young person might want to get his driver's licence as quickly as possible and go to his next class without taking the time to debate the provisions of the *French Language Services Act*[10] with a clerk.

Young people also are entitled to receive high-quality French-language services. Insisting on that right should no longer be considered something one does simply to make a point. In fact, the Francophone community should stop fretting, individually and collectively, about something to which they are entitled, certainly, but which they should receive as a matter of course, if only because Francophones too are citizens and taxpayers.

The Commissioner firmly believes that all of the province's Francophones, young and not so young, whether they are from here or from somewhere else, have a right to the same level of service, in their own language, as the rest of the population. He therefore views an institutional network as an important component to the development of Francophone communities across the province.

Of course, that recognition of the status of French in Ontario is extremely useful on a symbolic level. Communities feel appreciated when their language is formally recognized. That language has to be used in contacts between members of the public and the government, first for ourselves, and also for our children and our community.

With regard to the future, the Commissioner has always said that people took the gamble of establishing common institutions 50 years ago in Ontario. As a result, he cannot predict what Ontario's Francophone community will be like 50 years from now. But he believes that this quotation speaks for itself: "Since 1760, many prophets have forecast the inevitable and imminent demise of French Canada. Yet two centuries later, the descendants of those French Canadians of 1760 number in the millions. Who has the knowledge to predict the disappearance of French Ontario?"[11] [Translation]

REFERENCES

[1] Johnson, M. L., & Doucet, P. (2006). *A sharper view: Evaluating the vitality of official language communities.* Ottawa: Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages of Canada.

[2] Ministry of Education of Ontario. (2004). *Ontario's Aménagement Linguistique Policy for French-Language Education.* Toronto. Available on-line: http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/document/policy/linguistique/linguistique.pdf.

[3] For project leader Lise Paiement, academic achievement and success in identity-building go hand in hand. Otherwise, she says, if students receive all their education in French but do not understand the importance of sending their children to French-language school, then identity-building efforts will have failed. (2004, April 22). Comment enseigner la pédagogie culturelle. *L'Express.*

[4] Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities. (2006, January 26). News Release. Toronto. Available on-line: http://ogov.newswire.ca/ontario/GPOE/2006/01/26/c0830.html?lmatch=&lang=_e.html.

[5] Organized by the Association for Canadian Studies, the conference was held in Montreal on February 28 and 29, 2008.

[6] For more information about FESFO, visit http://fesfo.ca/index.html.

[7] According to the Office of Francophone Affairs, the proportion of endogamous francophone families declined from 39.3% in 1996 to 35.2% in 2001. The proportion of exogamous families increased from 60.7% to 64.8%.

[8] Dallaire, C. (2006). 'I am English too': Francophone youth hybridities in Canada. In P. Nilan and C. Feixa, *Global youth? Hybrid identities, plural worlds* (pp. 32-52). London and New York: Routledge.

[9] Affidavit by Roger Bernard in *Lalonde* v. *Ontario (Health Services Restructuring Commission)* (2001) 56 O.R. (3d) 577.

[10] Adopted in 1986, The *French Language Services Act* guarantees members of the public the right to receive services in French from the Government of Ontario, notably in the 25 designated areas.

[11] Gervais, G. (1999). L'histoire de l'Ontario français (1610-1997). In J. Y. Thériault (Ed.), *Francophonies minoritaires au Canada – L'état des lieux* (pp. 161). Moncton : Éditions d'Acadie.

Certains chercheurs définissent l'identité des jeunes Franco-Ontariens comme étant double, de nouvel état identitaire ou encore d'hybride. Au-delà du choix qualificatif de cette définition terminologique qui caractérise l'appartenance à tel ou tel groupe linguistique, les jeunes sont dans une quête identitaire et peuvent s'identifier plus facilement à deux, voire trois communautés.

Pour qu'une communauté en situation minoritaire soit forte, vivante et vibrante, elle doit reconnaitre et donner à chacun(e) toute la place qui lui revient de droit. Les jeunes devraient être davantage associés aux prises de décisions, surtout celles qui les touchent de près. Il faut leur offrir tous les moyens et donner les raisons nécessaires dont ils ont besoin pour se développer. Ces raisons et moyens passent par des réseaux institutionnels, sociaux et communautaires bien implantés et imbriqués les uns aux autres.

La conception par le gouvernement de l'Ontario des politiques et des programmes adaptés aux attentes de cette jeunesse francophone devrait être une règle commune à tous les ministères et agences publiques amenés à lancer de nouveaux projets et programmes. En Ontario, la communauté francophone a des besoins propres et spécifiques qui ne sont pas toujours comparables avec ceux du reste de la population.

Elle doit être écoutée et sondée pour connaitre ces attentes. Lui proposer un service adapté à ses besoins exprimés contribue à son développement et au renforcement de sa vitalité. À ce propos, il existe des réformes et actions gouvernementales, mais aussi communautaires promouvant le développement des francophones en Ontario qui méritent d'être soulignées. En effet, ces dernières années, les initiatives exemplaires se sont multipliées afin d'apporter des solutions adaptées aux besoins de la communauté francophone de la province.