

FRANCOPHONE PARENTS

WILL MY CHILD BE BILINGUAL?

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THE ROLE OF SCHOOLS IN THE QUEST FOR BILINGUALISM IS OFTEN MISUNDERSTOOD.

In an article published in the « Montreal Gazette », Stephanie Whittaker tells of Michel and Marcella, two Francophones born in the Gaspé Region in Quebec, who had moved six years earlier to Kirkland, in a section of the Island of Montreal known as the West Island. They thought they had found a community where their children could learn to speak English and attend a French school at the same time. They soon found that their children's preference for English made it difficult to maintain the use of French at home and they considered moving to a Francophone neighbourhood. Children in predominantly Anglophone Montreal communities speak English on the playgrounds of many French schools.

If children are becoming anglicized in this area of Metropolitan Montreal, where French receives significant institutional support, what is happening to young people outside Quebec, who have at least one Francophone parent and are educated in an English school and whose parents are unaware of the full impact of English?

WHAT ARE THE OPTIONS?

Outside Quebec, five types of schools exist in which Francophone parents may have their children educated:

- *In a homogeneous French school*, the language of instruction, except in English class, is French. The pupils' first language is usually French, and they study in their own linguistic and cultural environment.
- *In a bilingual school*, the students' native language is usually French and the languages of instruction are both French and English, in more or less equal proportions.
- *In a mixed school*, the student body consists of young Francophones and Anglophones who study in their respective languages under a single administration. The language of communication in the school and on the playground is English and the same holds true for the prevailing culture.
- Francophone parents may enrol their children *in an immersion program* designed for young Anglophones seeking to learn French as a second language, where the amount of French-language instruction decreases year by year until by the beginning of high school it is usually used no more than 30% of the time.
- *In a homogeneous English school* for Anglophone children where instruction is in English except during French class.

Of course, not all Francophone parents outside Quebec have access to this full range of choices. Let us examine the criteria which influence their decisions when they are able to choose any of the five options described above.

VARIOUS CRITERIA

Let us assume that the parents who belong to the minority group consider it vital for their children to master the language of the majority. In their opinion, their children absolutely must be bilingual because their survival depends on it.

This is especially true for unilingual French Canadians who moved to Northern Ontario or the West. Given the difficulties they encountered as a result of their own unilingualism it is hardly surprising that they were determined to have their children master English. Even today this generation impresses on their grandchildren the importance of fluency in English.

In such a situation Francophone educators and leaders often found themselves obliged –especially in the absence of French schools- to press immersion on their fellow Francophones. However, despite the fact that immersion was recently (and in some locations still is) presented as a means of enabling Francophone children to maintain their language in an Anglophone environment, the focus has now shifted toward the French school. The question then becomes one of determining which type of school is most likely to make children bilingual.

AN ILLUSION

Regardless of the country the more one language is a minority language the easier it becomes to learn the language of the majority. In such a situation the majority language is learned almost effortlessly and only minimal formal instruction (spelling and grammar) is required for the second-language proficiency of minority youngsters to equal, if not surpass, their first-language proficiency.

In other words, whatever the language, minority language instruction in schools intended exclusively for young minority pupils is practically **the only way for them to preserve the use of their first language.**

However, the spontaneous choice of many parents is not based on such an analysis. The more a community is dominated by the majority language the more members of the minority group consider it essential to learn that language and therefore (herein lies the paradox) the more they also tend to believe that majority language schools are the ideal solution for their children.

Francophone parents, particularly outside Quebec, often perceive English-language schools as the solution. In other words, the less Francophone parents have to rely on schools to teach their children English (the community being able to meet this need) the more they consider it important, even vital, to enrol their children in English-language schools, **a route which is almost guaranteed to produce unilingual Anglophones.**

This is also why, even in the absence of a real choice, Francophone parents often refrain from demanding the type of school best suited to the needs of their children – schools which would almost certainly make their bilingualism dreams come true. Thus, in immersion schools, even those boasting a solid French program, Francophone children seem to encounter difficulties early on. Their language development is usually slow because they are also learning mistakes of the Anglophones.

EVIDENCE

The research of Profesor Stacy Churchill of the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto has also brought to light the disastrous failures of bilingual and mixed schools, evidence in the clearly inferior mastery of young Franco-Ontarians of French and English and the low regard they have for their own language and culture.

Profesor Rodrigue Landry, Dean of the Faculty of Education at the University of Moncton, reminds us that many parents who consider a knowledge of English essential to social mobility mistakenly believe that their children will be better educated if they study entirely, or at least half the time in English. In his opinion, “that is a myth.”

Children of any minority group who study in their native language are better able to preserve it and can master a second language as well as minority children educated entirely in that second language.

RESULTS AT FRENCH SCHOOLS

The success of French schools is a little known fact. As proof, students attending the Maurice-Lavallée school in Edmonton scored significantly higher than average on provincial examinations just one year after the school opened.

The Centre de recherche du Collège de Saint-Boniface in Manitoba has already published the very interesting results of a five-year study on what French-school students in the province do after graduation. The study reveals that their unemployment rate is significantly lower than average.

Language of work data indicate the importance of bilingualism and of French, particularly in getting a job. It is also interesting to note that 46.7% of respondents work in both official languages, while 14% work primarily in French.

Despite this, as Profesor Landry notes, “Because of the low numbers and sparse population density among Francophone and Acadian communities, and especially because of the numbers clause in the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, many Francophone parents are reluctant to demand their constitutional rights in education. The legitimacy of this constitutional right is not always accepted wholeheartedly, particularly when the community is uncertain of itself. In the eyes of some Francophone parents the demands of other Francophone parents seem unjustified or exaggerated.”

A NECESSARY CHOICE

It is true that Francophone parents are reluctant to demand the type of schools which could make their children genuinely bilingual, skilled and well equipped to compete with the best in the work world.

If Anglicization threatens even a few young Francophones in French-language schools in the western part of the Island of Montreal can the parents of Francophone children outside Quebec afford not to demand quality French-language schools to educate their children? If they want their children to be bilingual, the evidence shows that they have no alternative.

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IF YOU WISH TO OBTAIN INFORMATION ON SCHOOL MANAGEMENT OR EDUCATION IN FRENCH IN GENERAL, PLEASE CONTACT THE FÉDÉRATION DES PARENTS ACADIENS DE LA NOUVELLE-ÉCOSSE (FPANE) IN DARMOUTH AT (902) 435-2060.