

TITLE:

Multiple minorities or plurilingual learners?:
Allophone immigrant children's language education rights in Canada

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ABSTRACT:

Four out of five immigrants to Canada speak a language other than English or French as a first language. According to the 2006 Canadian census, this allophone population reported speaking more than 200 different languages. Immigration is increasingly transforming francophone minority communities. Allophone children, in particular, acquire a double, if not triple, minority status within French-language schools where they can become both a linguistic and a cultural minority within an official francophone minority in Canada. In this paper, I examine how culturally and linguistically diverse allophone immigrants have been constructed historically through official language and multiculturalism policies in Canada and how this political framing continues to limit the language rights and provision of schooling for allophone immigrant children. By examining recent language policies addressing language education for allophone children including Ontario's Language Planning policy for french-language schools (PAL, 2004), I argue that how we as policy makers, educators and researchers conceptualize allophone immigrant children shapes their integration in Canada. As an example, I draw upon my research concerning the inclusion and exclusion of allophone learners in one french-language school in Toronto to highlight the potential of inclusive education to support allophone children's contribution to Canada's future linguistic and cultural diversity.

On June 4, 2009, the province of Ontario adopted a new inclusive definition of its francophone population: whereas franco-ontarians historically had been defined as Ontarians who had French as their mother tongue, the inclusive definition of francophone (IDF) now extends to “those whose mother tongue is neither French nor English, but who have a particular knowledge of French as an Official Language and use French at home, including many recent immigrants to Ontario” (Office of Francophone Affairs, 2009, par. 2). Four out of five immigrants to Canada speak a non-official language as a first language. At the same time, a proportion of immigrants who speak other first languages come from “francophone” countries; for example, some immigrants who speak Arabic as a first language, have some knowledge of French as an official language of schooling from their country of origin. Thus, according to (re)calculations guided by this new inclusive definition of francophone, Toronto’s francophone population increased by 42 per cent. (Office of Francophone Affairs, 2009)

Immigration is indeed transforming francophone minority communities. Consequently, French-language schools in Canada, outside of Quebec, are increasingly engaging the challenges of cultivating French language and culture in minority contexts, as well as the integration of culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) allophone students. As Canada’s most culturally and linguistically diverse urban centre, the city of Toronto provides a rich lens through which to examine the minority language rights and in particular, minority education provision for allophone immigrant children within French-language schools. Allophone learners acquire a double, if not triple, minority status within French-language schools where they can become both a linguistic and a cultural minority within an official francophone minority in Canada. In this paper, I examine how culturally and linguistically diverse allophone immigrants have been constructed historically through official language and multiculturalism policies in Canada and

how this political framing continues to limit the language rights and provision of schooling for allophone immigrant children. By examining recent language policies concerning allophone children in French-language schools, I argue that how we as policy makers, educators and researchers conceptualise allophone immigrant children shapes their integration in Canada. I draw upon my research concerning the in/ex-clusion of allophone learners in one french-language school in Toronto to highlight the potential of inclusive education policy and practice to support allophone children's contribution to Canada's future linguistic and cultural diversity.

In 1963, the Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism (RCBB) was established by the Government of Canada to examine three areas: bilingualism in federal offices, the role of organizations in facilitating English-French cultural relations, and opportunities for Canadians to become bilingual in English and French (Laing, 2008). Although the RCBB recognized the potential contribution of non-British and non-French cultural groups to Canada's linguistic and cultural identity, such groups had hitherto only been defined loosely as a tangential "third force" (1969, p. 10) within Canada and consequently, there were no statistics available upon which to make accurate estimates of their presence and contributions to Canadian social realities. In their final report on "The Other Ethnic Groups", the RCBB clearly expressed that

linguistic variety is unquestionably an advantage, and its beneficial effects on the country are priceless. We have constantly declared our desire to see all Canadians associating in a climate of equality, whether they belong to the Francophone or Anglophone cultural groups. Members of 'other ethnic groups'... must enjoy these same advantages and meet the same restrictions. Integration, with respect for both the spirit of democracy and the most deep-rooted human values, can engender healthy diversity within a harmonious and dynamic whole. (p. 14)

The RCBB sought a term to describe and measure people from other cultural backgrounds who had neither English nor French as a first language. As Prasad (2009) notes, Professor Jean Darbelnet originally proposed the term "allophone" as the umbrella category for Canadians who

spoke first languages other than Canada's two official languages. He reconstructed the term from the French *allogène* which refers to people "of an origin different from that of the indigenous population"¹ (translated from French in Robert, 1993, p. 51) and the English use of the suffix "-phone" to denote speaker (i.e., anglophone - English speaker; francophone - French speaker) In retrospect, Darbelnet's application of the French "allogène" in the Canadian context would have applied to *all* citizens who were not members of Canada's first nations peoples - English, French and other language backgrounds. Instead, the term was used to categorize people who spoke languages other than Canada's recognized official languages English and French.

From a post-colonial perspective, the term *allophone* creates a homogenizing categorization of difference for all Canadians who have a non-official language as their mother tongue. The *other*-ing, in Spivak's (1988) terms, inherent in the label *allo-(other-)phone* renders it problematic as individuals in Canada who do not speak English or French as a first language are reduced into one group that is described as "other" than official. As such, allophone Canadians become defined by deficit due to their lack of an *official* first language rather than affirmed for their contribution to Canada's cultural and linguistic diversity.

Through the work of the original RCBB, the first Official Languages Act was enacted by Canadian Parliament in 1969. This act aimed to establish institutional bilingualism and provide Canadians with official services in both French and English. Apart from the civil service, Canadians were not required to be bilingual but personal bilingualism was encouraged (Edwards, 1993). Due to opposition to the Official Languages Act from ethnic minorities, Prime Minister Trudeau subsequently established a policy of official multiculturalism in 1971 (Carey, 1997; Hayday, 2005). This policy established official multiculturalism in a framework of English-

¹ Original in French: "*d'une origine différente de celle de la population autochtone.*"

French bilingualism such that Canada would have two official languages but no official culture (Edwards, 1993). At that time, Prime Minister Trudeau made a federal commitment to “assist immigrants to acquire at least one of Canada’s official languages in order to become full participants in Canadian society” (Mady, 2007, p. 730). Therefore, even though the policy of official multiculturalism recognized the contributions of linguistically and culturally diverse allophones to Canada’s identity as a multicultural nation, the federal government only guaranteed support for allophones to acquire one of Canada’s official languages – English or French, rather than both languages. As a result, linguistically and culturally diverse allophones have had little support both to maintain their first languages, as well as to access Canada’s official linguistic duality. (Cummins & Danesi, 1990, Mady, 2007). In fact, even today, in the province of Ontario, public school instruction is only allowed in one of Canada’s official languages (Taylor, 2009).

In contrast to the lack of language rights for allophones, the enactment of Article 23 of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms guaranteed official language minority education rights to Canadian citizens (Behiels, 2004). Official minority francophones in Ontario became “rights-holders” by virtue of the Canadian constitution to have their children educated in French-language schools.² Originally, Article 23 of the Canadian Charter only guaranteed French-language education to minority francophone Canadian citizens. In 1990, the Ontario Education Act allowed the possibility for non-rights holder parents to submit an application for their child(ren) to be admitted to a French-language school by way of a majority decision of a school admissions committee.

² Canadian citizens in Ontario are recognized as “les ayants-droit” if their first language learned and still understood is French, or if they received their primary school instruction in Canada in French. Canadian citizens who have any child in a French-language school in Ontario, also have the right to have all of their children educated in French.

Today, the clientele of French-language schools, particularly in major urban centres, has diversified to include not only francophone students and rights-holders according to Article 23 of the Charter of Rights, but also anglophone students whose parents apply to have their children in the French-language school system and children whose parents have non-Canadian origins (Farmer, 2008, Gérin-Lajoie 2008, Heller, 2001). Research over the past decade highlights the complex challenges French-language schools face responding to the pluralistic reality of the milieu in which they are located. Double or triple minority allophones – linguistic, and in some cases, visible minorities, within official francophone minority communities have become the focus of closer study (Farmer & Labrie, 2008; Gérin- Lajoie, 2002, 2003, 2006; Gérin-Lajoie & Jacquet, 2008; Jacquet, Moore, & Sabatier, 2008; Makropoulos, 2004; Tanaka, 2005). Immigration to francophone minority communities and the inclusion of immigrant children have paradoxically been characterized as challenges to French-language schools, and at the same time, contributing to the growth of francophone minority communities.

In 2004, the Ontario government released its Language Planning Policy for French-language schools (PAL). While official minority language rights-holders are divided between two main categories according to their varying degrees of French spoken, immigrant and refugee children are portrayed as liminal partakers in French-language schools who only gain permission to attend by way of an admissions committee. This language planning policy describes such students as “the children of parents who have settled in Canada as immigrants or refugees and for whom French may be their first, second or even third language, yet who feel a certain attachment to French.” (PAL, 2005, p. 22). Although such students may feel an attachment to French, various scholars have noted that inclusion and social acceptance of such students and families in French-language schools and minority communities is not guaranteed (Bouchamma, 2008;

Gallant, 2007; Gallant & Belkhdja, 2005). The language planning policy emphasizes that the linguistic homogeneity of French-language school populations is

gradually *giving way* to a heterogenous population with an extremely diverse range of ability in the French language. For legal reasons (those of French language Charter rights-holders), because of immigration, or for other reasons, French-language educational institutions often come to accept students for whom English is the dominant language or for whom French is not their first language (Coghlan & Thériault, 2002, p. 10). This increasing linguistic heterogeneity poses a major challenge. (PAL, 2005, p. 23)

Throughout the policy, immigration is constructed more as a potential threat, from a minoritarian perspective, to further weaken the homogeneity of the singular franco-ontarian linguistic and cultural community rather than as a potential resource to expand it.

PAL (2004) identifies globalization, information and communication technologies and immigration as key factors leading to the “erosion of cultural boundaries and to a cultural crisis” (2005, p. 49). In the face of these (re)defining influences on franco-ontarian minority communities, PAL itself poses the question, “How can schools reproduce a cultural heritage anchored in a people’s history and at the same time acknowledge a fast-changing contemporary culture?” (p. 49). While the question demonstrates critical self-reflection for individuals and collective communities, the response of the policy serves to reinscribe the necessity of systematically integrating traditional notions and referents of franco-ontarian culture into pedagogical planning. By contrast, since the release of this language planning policy, a number of scholars have problematised the unequivocal mandate of French-language schools in the identity construction of increasingly linguistically and cultural diverse students who variously express hybridized, bilingual, fractured and multiple identities (Bryd-Clark, 2007; Caron-Réaume, 2007; Farmer, 2008a, 2008b; Gérin-Lajoie, 2008; Labrie, 2007; Makropolous, 2004). In particular, Labrie’s (2007) critical analysis of this policy underscores that

identity construction is based on a monolithic definition of a singular identity. The text is impersonal. The institution expresses itself by unquestioned statements of universal value ... the franco-ontarian community has one culture and one language, both in the singular ... The objectives of this language policy are to reproduce young francophones with a singular linguistic and cultural identity ... A person has a single identity, with a unique culture, expressed through language. (translated from French, p. 6)³

Labrie's (2007) analysis draws particular attention to the embedded conception of a singular franco-ontarian identity and highlights the need to consider other possibilities for the plurality of identities represented among members of franco-ontarian minority communities.

At their original conception, French-language schools were established in accordance to the minority language education rights of official francophone Canadians living outside of Quebec. Although neither french-language schools, or English-language schools, were created with consideration for the needs of linguistically and culturally diverse students, Ontario's *Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy* (2009) now provides the political impetus to (re)examine and consider the ways in which schools respond to the changing demography of their communities and their ethical responsibility to address social and academic needs of diverse learners and their families. *Ontario's Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy* (OEIES) (2009) outlines the need for public schools to be "realizing the promise of diversity" and in the words of Canadian educator and advocate, George Dei, "Inclusion is not bringing people into what already exists; it is making a new space, a better space for everyone." (as cited in OEIES, 2009, p. 2).

My case study of *École Cosmopolite*⁴, a French-language school in Toronto, analyzed teachers' perspectives and practices of inclusion and exclusion with culturally and linguistically

³ Original in French: la construction identitaire est basée sur un définition monolithique de l'identité, au singulier. Le texte est impersonnel. C'est ici l'institution ... s'exprime par des énoncés incontestables, de valeur universelle ... Cette communauté [franco-ontarian] dispose d'une culture et d'une langue, toutes deux au singulier... Les objectifs de la politique linguistique sont de former des jeunes francophones ayant une identité linguistique et culturelle au singulier... Une personne dispose d'une seule et unique identité, avec une culture unique, exprimée par la langue.

⁴ Pseudonym for the participating school

diverse students in their classrooms (Prasad, 2009). 58 per cent of students attending *École Cosmopolite* spoke a language other than French at home. The school had the highest percentage of culturally and linguistically diverse students within its board and more than 57 different languages were represented within their school population of 225 students. While teacher participants affirmed the richness afforded by students' diversity, over the course of the six-month study, they each wrestled with delivering curriculum and enacting language policies that did not reflect their students' cultural experience and linguistic repertoires. This inquiry demonstrated that how educators, policy makers and researchers conceptualize allophone learners directly informs our language and education policies and pedagogy. To envision equitable support for such learners in French-language schools begins with re-conceptualizing allophone learners as intelligent, linguistically-rich and creative contributors to increasingly cosmopolitan francophone culture and communities in Ontario. When we adopt an asset-oriented view of students and invite them to draw on the diversity of resources they possess through their cultural backgrounds and linguistic repertoires, we create opportunities for students not only to see themselves reflected in their learning, but also to understand themselves as valued agents within their school and communities. (Dagenais & Walsh, 2008; Dagenais, Beynon & Mathis, 2008; Denos, Toohey, Neilson, Waterstone, 2009; Scheter & Cummins, 2003, 2009)

This Toronto-based case study illustrates the complexities of and the need to develop curriculum and language education policy to support the integration of culturally and linguistically diverse immigrant learners in schools in increasingly multilingual contexts. By necessity, children's relationships extend across multiple linguistic and cultural borders as they find themselves together as members of the shared classrooms. If children today grow up in learning communities that affirm their plurilingual competencies rather than deny their

expression, might not they be better equipped to move beyond divisive categorizations and power relations invested in maintaining official and minority languages? Policy makers, researchers and educators can powerfully respond to children's need to develop strategies to learn and live together in increasingly culturally and linguistically diverse classrooms and communities by (re)evaluating, creating and implementing policy and practices that value and affirm the diverse voices of all Canadians.

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