



LESSONS IN LEARNING

Minority Francophone Education in Canada

Aug. 20, 2009

“Language is more than a mere means of communication; it is part and parcel of the identity and culture of the people speaking it.”

—Chief Justice Brian Dickson¹

Access to French-language education has been a hard-won right for francophones outside of Quebec. While this is now a right enshrined in the Charter of Rights and Freedoms and in the Official Languages Act, minority francophone education continues to face important challenges, including the persistent finding that francophones in minority-language contexts are falling behind their majority-language counterparts in literacy proficiency.

Official language minority communities in Canada

The year 1982 marked a historic moment in the decades-long struggle to prevent the steady erosion of language, culture and heritage among Canada’s francophone communities. With the signing into law of Section 23 of the Charter of Rights and Freedoms, official bilingualism was recognized and francophone communities acquired the right to educate their children in their own language.² While official language minority education rights are protected by the Charter and the Official Languages Act, the provision of quality education for minority francophones remains a challenge.

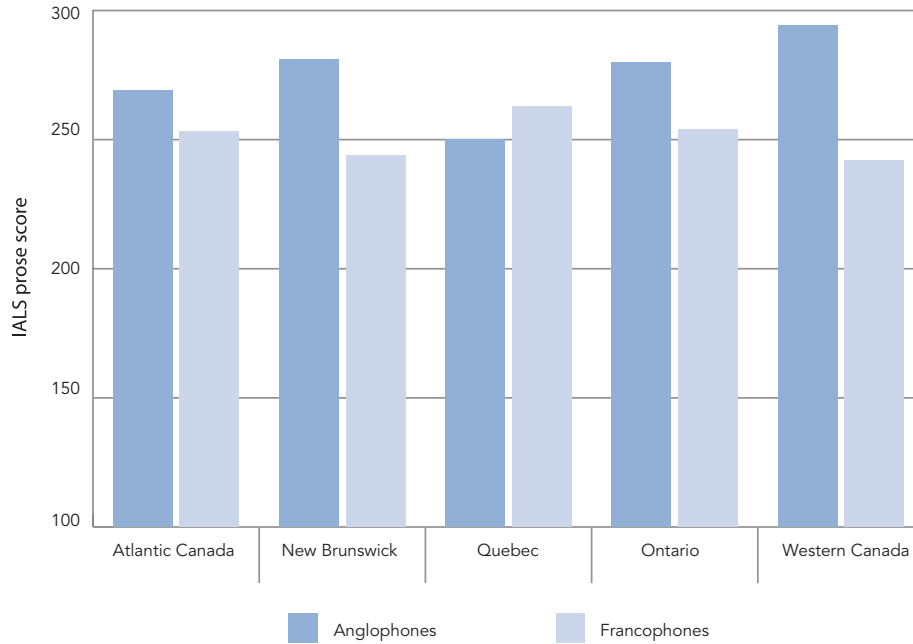
In Canada, there are two groups of official language minority communities: anglophones in Quebec and francophones outside of Quebec. While both groups face a number of challenges, minority francophones face particularly difficult issues associated with: a shrinking demographic profile and an aging population;³ below-average employment rates and above-average unemployment rates;⁴ limited access to cultural representations and artefacts;⁵ and unfavourable educational opportunities and outcomes.⁶

Literacy is another important challenge for minority francophones and is tied in many ways to employment, culture and education. Stronger literacy skills are precursors to and outcomes of successful education, reliable employment and fulfilling cultural experiences. Yet, many minority francophones struggle with literacy.

Literacy skills among minority francophones

Adult literacy assessments indicate that francophone adults in minority-language contexts have weaker literacy skills than their majority-language counterparts. In the 1994 International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS), Canada’s majority francophones (i.e., those in Quebec) achieved higher literacy scores than minority francophones (i.e. those living outside of Quebec). (See *Figure 1*).^{7,8} A similar trend can also be found in the Canadian results of the 2003 Adult Literacy and Life Skills Survey (ALL).

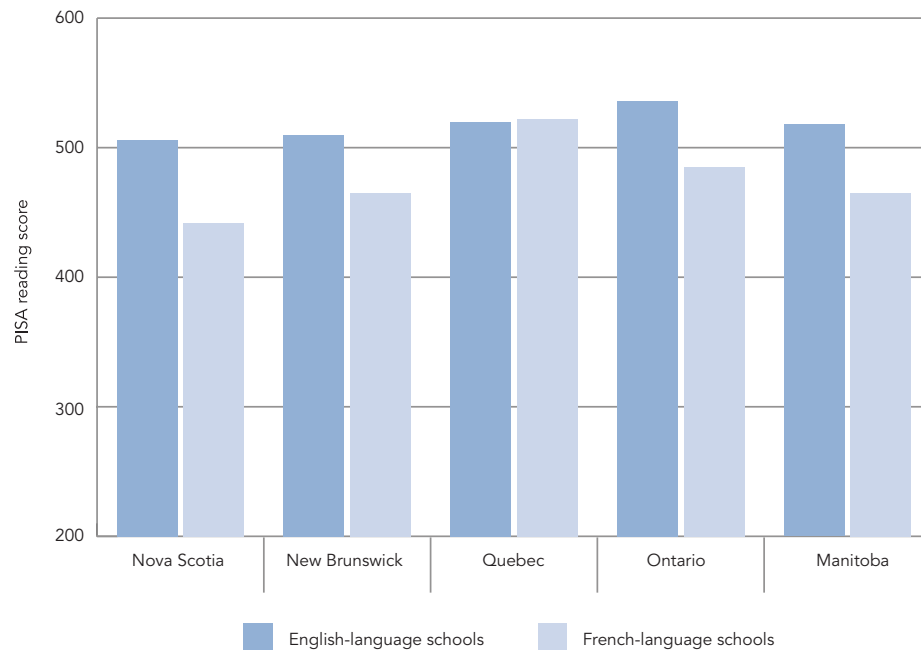
Figure 1:
Prose literacy scores for anglophone and francophone adults in Canada, 1994



Source: Statistics Canada, International Adult Literacy Survey ,1994.

The 2006 Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) results indicate that minority francophone high-school students have weaker literacy skills than their majority-language counterparts. Reading scores for students enrolled in French-language schools in Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, Ontario and Manitoba were lower than students in English-language schools in the same provinces. In Quebec, student performance did not differ significantly between the English-language and French-language school systems (see Figure 2).⁹ Similarly, the 2007 Pan-Canadian Assessment Program results suggest that francophone students in Quebec have stronger literacy skills than their minority-language counterparts outside of Quebec.¹⁰

Figure 2:
PISA reading scores for students in English-language and French-language schools



Source: Statistics Canada and Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, Programme for International Student Assessment, 2006.

Reasons for lower literacy among minority francophones

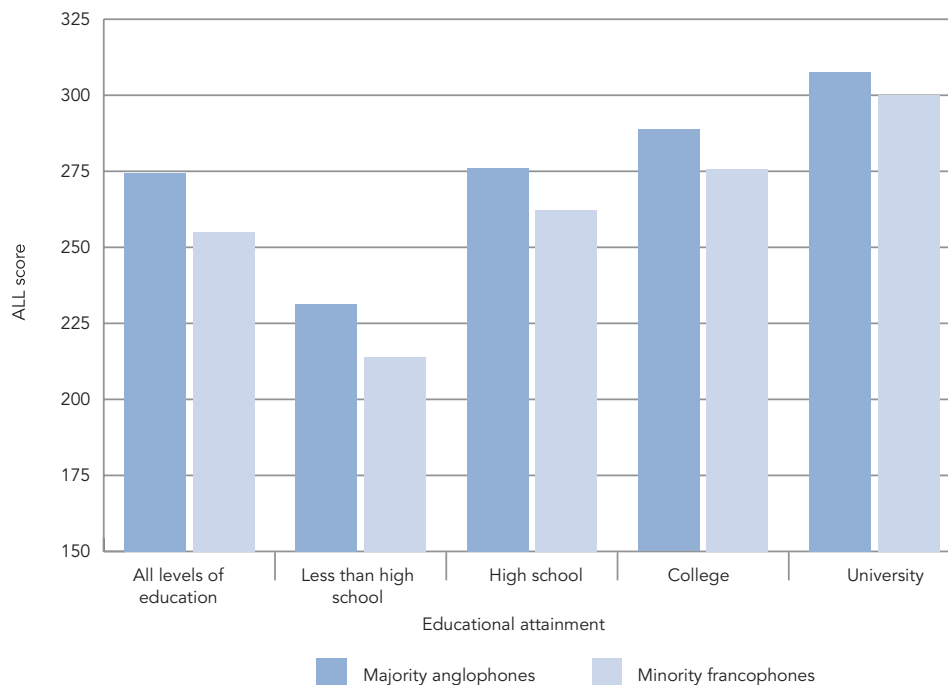
Several different factors contribute to poorer performance on literacy assessments among minority francophones compared with their majority-language counterparts. These factors include educational attainment, bilingualism, the reading readiness of students entering Grade 1 in minority French-language schools and the specific challenges faced by schools operating in minority-language contexts.

Educational attainment

Educational attainment is tightly linked to literacy proficiency. For example, in Canada, scores on the Adult Literacy and Life Skills Survey (ALL) are 77 points (1.3 standard deviations) higher for university graduates than for those who never completed high school.¹¹ Minority francophones have, on average, lower levels of educational attainment than their majority anglophone counterparts. According to Census 2006, 22% of majority anglophones had left high school without a diploma, compared to 28% of minority francophones. And 40% of

majority anglophones had a college or university credential, compared to 38% of minority francophones. When differences in educational attainment are accounted for, the literacy gap between minority francophones and majority anglophones decreases. For example, the overall ALL score gap between these two groups is 19 points, but, when comparing adults at the same level of educational attainment, that gap shrinks to 17 points at the lowest level of attainment and to 7 points at the highest level of attainment (see Figure 3).

Figure 3:
ALL scores for minority francophones and majority anglophones, by level of educational attainment, 2003



Source: Statistics Canada, Adult Literacy and Life Skills Survey, 2003.

Bilingualism

Bilingualism per se almost certainly does not contribute to lower levels of literacy proficiency, but the difficulties of properly assessing literacy among bilinguals may contribute to lower scores on literacy assessment among bilinguals. Most minority francophone students are bilingual (outside of Quebec, 84% of francophones also speak English)¹² and for bilingual students it is important to consider literacy skills in both languages. In some cases, minority francophone students have stronger literacy skills in English than in French.¹³ Thus, weak French-language literacy skills among minority francophone students may reflect only a portion of their overall literacy skill, which sometimes include stronger English-language literacy skills.

Reading Readiness

Students who begin Grade 1 with strong pre-literacy skills are better prepared to learn how to read and are more likely to develop strong reading skills than students who begin with weaker pre-literacy skills.¹⁴ Principals at French schools in minority-language contexts report that many students entering Grade 1 have low levels of important pre-literacy skills, such as the ability to recognize and write most letters of the alphabet, to read some words and sentences, and to write some words.¹⁵

One of the reasons that a large number of minority francophone children enter Grade 1 with weak pre-literacy skills is that for many of these “francophone” students French is not their primary language. Outside of Quebec, only 37% of francophone children are in families where both parents speak French.¹⁶ Among families where only one parent speaks French, fewer than 15% report that French is the main language used at home.¹⁷ A second reason is that access to French-language early childhood education is quite limited for minority francophones. Outside of Ontario (where kindergarten is integrated with the French-language school system and four- and five-year-olds attend full-day programs), minority francophone children often do not have the opportunity to acquire pre-literacy skills in French before they start school.

Challenges faced by schools

French-language schools in minority settings have been described as “a tool of survival, identity-building and reproduction of social models in francophone minority communities,”¹⁸ but these schools also face a number of challenges specific to the minority-language context. Minority French-language schools and school boards are generally small and cannot benefit from economies of scale in the same way as larger English-language schools and boards.¹⁹ As well, French-language educational resources, such as teaching materials, educational software and library resources, are often scarce.²⁰ French-language schools in minority settings constantly face the challenges of attracting and retaining qualified staff and teachers find few opportunities for French-language professional development.

Lessons in learning: Building stronger literacy skills among minority francophones

Fostering stronger literacy development in minority-language contexts requires efforts on several fronts, including at home, at school and within the wider community.

Home

Supporting minority francophone parents in their efforts to contribute to their children's early literacy development can be an effective way of addressing some of the barriers to successful literacy acquisition encountered by minority francophone students. Family literacy programs can help parents by providing resources (e.g., French-language books) and strategies for fostering literacy development in the home. For example, researchers in Ontario found that parents who participated in family literacy programs were more likely to engage in a wide variety of activities in French with their children at home, including watching French-language television and movies, listening to the radio, reading the newspaper, helping with homework, and discussing topics of interest to the children.²¹

School

Some of the challenges faced by minority French schools are a necessary feature of schools in minority-language contexts. For example, if French schools are to maintain their important contribution to francophone community and linguistic revitalization, then they will have to continue to include a substantial proportion of students whose primary home language is not French. Supporting the development of stronger French-language skills among those students is crucial. French-language early childhood education services can compensate, to some extent, for lack of exposure to French in the home and in the community and can help young francophones acquire pre-literacy skills before they start school. The Ontario experience suggests that incorporating early childhood learning into the French-language school system can ensure stable funding for and wider access to these services.

The Council of Ministers of Education, Canada argues that "a pedagogical approach specific to a minority setting could prove to be a long-term solution to problems of student performance in minority francophone schools in Canada."²² Such an approach must include French-language acculturation and efforts to help students understand the fragility of their ethnolinguistic identity and to become self-motivated to preserve that identity (see *Table 1 on page 8*).

Table 1: Principles of an educational approach designed for minority settings

Active acculturation: Ensure that students are exposed to elements of francophone culture by integrating the community into school activities and by engaging students in community life, or in other words by making the family, school and community partners in student learning.

Developing self-determination: Help students to recognize their linguistic and socio-cultural situation and to become self-motivated to maintain their language and culture, meet their need for autonomy by giving them the opportunity to make choices, their need for competence by allowing them to succeed at relevant tasks, and their need for belonging by offering them a warm and fulfilling environment.

Maximum actualization of learning potential: Because the minority context requires optimization of human capital, it is necessary to cultivate the pleasure and satisfaction of mastering lessons, meeting high expectations with many opportunities to do so, and giving students constant evaluative feedback.

Awareness and commitment: Cultivate student awareness of the challenges of living in minority situations and the related sense of personal and community responsibility.

Entrepreneurship and community: Foster creative thinking, confidence and leadership among students by giving them opportunities to rub shoulders with model leaders and to initiate community actions

Source: Adapted from: Council of Ministers of Education, Canada (CMEC), *Pan-Canadian results of francophone students in a minority-language setting in the School Achievement Indicators Program (SAIP)*, pp. 37-40 (online: <http://204.225.6.243/else/francophone/analysis.en.pdf>).

Community

Maintaining and enhancing a community's linguistic vitality has a positive impact on students' literacy levels. Francophones who live in communities with high ethnolinguistic vitality (i.e., where the density of French speakers is high and French is used in a variety of community contexts) report stronger language skills and score higher on literacy assessments than individuals in communities with low ethnolinguistic vitality.²³ Schools represent important sites for fostering and maintaining ethnolinguistic vitality in minority francophone communities. Using schools as hubs for the delivery of cultural, religious and community services can be a successful strategy for ensuring that French-language services are available.²⁴ This approach also transforms the school into a space where francophones can meet and interact in French and can be effective in fostering the identity of minority francophone students as members of the francophone community.²⁵

As a guide for establishing linkages between schools and community the Alberta Federation of Francophone Parents has designed a booklet outlining strategies to help teachers, stakeholders and families create school-based activities designed to reinforce student ties to their language, culture and community. The Francophone Best Start program located at the École catholique Franco-Supérieur provides linguistic and cultural support to the francophone community. The centre has French-language literacy, cultural and health-related programs as well as preschool services and support to families.

Literacy is crucial to the social and economic well-being of all Canadians. In minority-language contexts, it is also a crucial aspect of community vitality and long-term survival.

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