Principals and Identity Construction in French as a First Language Schools in Canada: Zones of Practice.

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Abstract: **This paper presents a preliminary analysis of practices reported by principals and assistant principals from across Canada. All work in French as a first language schools situated in high language contact areas. In most instances, Francophones are a demographic minority in their region. In all, they are a minority in their province. We suggest that school principals' work within "zones of practice". Different types of identity constructions or French language promotion practices are undertaken in each zones. Across zones, these practices can either forefront language or position French as a tool in the realisation of another project.**

I. INTRODUCTION

Giddens (1984, 1990) suggested that preoccupations with identity are characteristic of late modern societies. This preoccupation is *nowhere* more evident than in minority societies such as French Canada. Indeed, Canada's *Franophonie* is today in the throws of redefining itself as urban communities receive a greater number of new immigrants and as rural regions, where francophone demographic concentration is the greatest, struggle with the emptying of their communities in favour of urban ones.

Traditionally, French as a first language schools (henceforth "schools") have played an important role in the reproduction and maintenance of these communities. They have been seen as islands of French language and culture in a sea of English. There, students learned a shared history which included fights for survival and the making of an officially bilingual Canada respectful of its "founding peoples", the French and the English. Schools, then, have been an important tool in the creation of an imagined French community, to borrow Anderson's

(1983) term. Indeed, in areas where the number of Anglophones far outweighed the number of Francophones, schools became the "territory" of the Francophone nation in its many representations (Canadian, French Canadian, Franco-(province), cf. Heller and Labrie).

Today, this francophone nation no longer corresponds to the aspirations of a multicultural and multiracial constituency. Yet, the school's mission remains the same: ensure the maintenance and development of the French community – how ever it might be imagined. School principals and teachers responsible for the realisation the school's mission.

This paper will look at the zones of practice invested by school principals and assistant principals in their realisation of the French school's mission. The data set used in this discussion is drawn from a larger one which will allow for a comparison of principal perceptions according to geographic region (rural or urban) and demographic density (percentage of Francophones in the total population). Since analysis is still in its infancy, these comparisons will not be the focus here. Rather, we will concentrate solely on the practices reported by principals as contributing to the development of their French communities. The analysis of these will allow us to identify what we will call "zones of practice". Since Canada's *Franophonie* is, with the exception of Québec, little known by the international community, the following paragraph will give a brief presentation of this *Franophonie*. After which we present our methodology and analysis of the data.

II. LA FRANOPHONIE CANADIENNE

Since the signing of the treaty of Paris in 1763 Francophones have been a demographic minority in what is known today as Canada. All provinces, except Québec where Francophones represent a majority, have at one time in their history banned French from their classrooms. Where numbers were greatest, such bans were met with great resistance, both explicit and subversive. Where Francophones were less numerous, the resistance was limited to subversion (from East to West, francophone teachers taught in French and used English only when the school inspector made his rounds).

Although the New Brunswick government created a parallel Acadian system of education from the ministry level to the school level in 1963, it is only with the passing of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms that other provinces began to move in this direction and none have as yet gone as far as New Brunswick. Indeed, it took a 1992 decision of the supreme court of Canada (Mahé vs Alberta) for most provinces to recognise the full extent of their responsibility where French education is concerned. Still today, Francophone parents are turning to the courts to force the opening of Francophone schools for their children. Throughout these developments, Francophones did not have one unified voice – although francophone leaders presented themselves as that voice. Some spoke in favour of assimilation into the English mainstream or of maintaining bilingual programs which saw Francophones and Anglophones learning in French in the same classroom. In short, there has always been an anti "separation" or "parallelism" voice, although it was marginalised and silenced by the dominant one nation, one history, and one voice discourse. Today, another discourse vies for dominance.

Impacted by neo-liberal ideology, many Francophones no longer adhere to the principle of interdependency so important to the construction of the francophone community (nation). With the growing importance of Canada's multicultural and immigration policies as well as the rising political power of Canada's first nations people (Aboriginals) the notion of "two founding peoples" is seen as obsolete if not racist. The very foundation of Francophone identity in Canada is disintegrating and being reframed within "*La Franophonie Canadienne*". Individuals are seen to have their own *Franophonie* which needs to be nurtured, developed and respected.

Recent debate about the name of Alberta's French umbrella association is telling in this matter. In 1926 French Canadians[1] settled in Alberta created the "Association canadienne française de l'Alberta" (French Canadian Association of Alberta or ACFA) both as a cultural and as a political institution at the provincial level. As the francophone population of that province diversifies through immigration and migration from other provinces, there is a push to adopt a more "inclusive" name and "Association des Communautés Francophones de l'Alberta" (Association of the Francophone communities of Alberta, again ACFA) is favoured by those demanding the change.

The challenge then is to imagine an entity to which all Francophones, from diverse communities, can adhere. It is not sufficient however to have a sense of belonging: it must be expressed as identity. Government and school policies reflect this change through the use of the term "identity construction" (Ontario, 2005) which is at times seen as a personal affaire and at others the responsibility of francophone schools and communities. Identity construction has thus become the locus of attention within these schools.

In this context, teachers and school principles are expected to adapt their practices to construct positive francophone identities with/for their students. At times, identity construction is used as a reason to increase language and at others, to request additional funding for cultural activities. Many schools have hired "*animateurs culturels*" whose responsibility it is to make French "fun", to introduce students to francophone culture, to inspire students to be francophone. This is purported to be done through the organisation of cultural activities (which each *animateur culturel* defines according to his or her competencies). Often, these *animateurs* are transplanted from Québec, Canada's only officially francophone province, to provinces in which the Francophones account for 2 to 3% of the total population. A clash between the majority culture of Québec and the minority culture of the receiving schools is inevitable. Also, many students do not wish to politicise their francophone identity or wear it on their sleeves.

Given this "identity crisis" and the concomitant desire to develop identity construction practices in schools, we, a group of researchers working in francophone communities in three provinces (Alberta, Ontario, New Brunswick), are in the process of collecting a national data base on the questions of identity construction and of French language promotion. A parallel interest of this project is the impact of technology on francophone culture and on the use of technology in identity construction practices in schools. As a first phase of data collection, school principals from across the country are being asked to fill out questionnaires. It is from this data set that we draw identity

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[1] This group included Francophones from eastern provinces, mainly Québec, from the United States and from France. It does not seem that this diversity was problematic in the way the "new" diversity is today.

construction and French language promotion[2] practices reported by principals. Before we turn to an examination of these practices however, we will discuss the notions of "Identity construction" and of "French language promotion"

III. IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION AND LANGUAGE PROMOTION

As a term, *Identity construction* hails from constructionist theory. In short, this theory posits that all reality is a social construction. *Francophone or Anglophone* (or mother, teacher, student…*)* are neither natural nor universal identity constructs. What it means to be Francophone or Anglophone – and how to perform the roles associated with each – is learned, defined and modified through social interaction. Identity construction is a dynamic social process.

Taken up by Ministries of Education and by schools across Canada, identity construction has become a "Learning Outcome" to be evaluated through observation of the student's attitude towards French books, authors and artists. Students' identity construction is also evaluated on the basis of observable demonstrations of pride in their French heritage and culture. Most often, this entails using (standard) French in all their interactions at the school. Indeed, speaking French and having French identity are clearly linked in curriculum documents and school discourse. As we shall see, these are also strongly linked in the practices identified by school administrators.

Defined as a learning outcome, it becomes possible to succeed or to fail one's identity construction. It also becomes possible to plan bounded activities in which the objective is to "construct identity". As such, it can be seen as an "add-on" to the standard curriculum rather than an integral part of the social process we call schooling. Furthermore, as a learning outcome, teachers have the responsibility to teach identity: they are accountable for the success of their students. It is in this context that we, as researchers, can study school administrators' "identity construction practices" with regards to student identity.

In this paper, we will identify practices as either punctual (bounded) or ongoing. However, the limited scope of data presented here, it is important to note from the outset that we can not purport to comment on how principals and assistant principals define "identity construction".

IV. METHODOLOGY

As mentioned previously, questionnaires were sent out to all principals and assistant principals working in schools within Canada's *Franophonie* (with the exception of Québec). These were sent out in late March with a reminder 15 days later. Participants could choose to respond either on a paper copy of the questionnaire or on a web based version found on the project's official site. To date, we have received a total of 225 responses. These questionnaires included both closed questions and open ended questions requiring a longer response. This paper deals with responses to one open ended question.

We asked school principals and assistant principals to name the identity construction or language promotion practice/action they consider to be the best of their career. Preliminary results show that of the 225 participants, 173 gave a response to this question. Of these, six responses clearly refer to classroom practice or to curriculum advisor practice rather than participants' practices as school leaders. These responses have been omitted for the analysis presented here.

The remaining 167 responses were analysed and a first categorisation of practices emerged. These categories were: pedagogy, school/community, motivational programs, punctual activities, ongoing activities, media based and use of technology. Each practice was placed into one category only. After which categories were analysed separately and then in parallel. From this analysis "zones of practice" emerged each including one or more category of practices. The zones are fields (whole school activities, school organisation, pedagogical culture and communities) in which actions take place. Practices are the actions named by respondents. Finally, a last analysis produced an understanding of the place of language within practices, either at the forefront or in the background. This last analysis is reflected throughout our presentation of the zones and associated practices.

V. ZONES AND PRACTICES

The only zone in which school principals do not intervene directly is the classroom. This is not to say that they shun the role of pedagogical leader. They attempt to impact what happens in the classroom through the inclusion of identity construction and/or the promotion of language in the school's vision or mission statement. Normally, such mission statements serve as an impetus to develop an "action plan". Such action plans include activities or practices to adopt both in class and in the whole school. One principal noted that her[3] best practice was the development of a vision/mission focused on the arts as a form of expression. Another mentioned cultivating collaboration as a

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[2] « La promotion de la langue française ».

[3] The gender of respondents is unknown. We will therefore alternate between the feminine and the masculine.

pedagogical orientation in the school. Still others organised professional development sessions for teachers. Other types of initiatives that would impact teacher practice directly are the organisation of clubs (reading, science) and the development of plans for the improvement of language competencies (reading, writing, and speaking). Principals also impact school and pedagogical culture by their actions as role models: choosing to complete all their studies in French, speaking and living in French in and outside the school. Since school leaders have noted this as a conscious practice, it can be assumed that "modeling" is a way of communicating their expectations to teachers and students.

At the organisational level, the opening of full time pre-kindergarten and kindergarten classes is seen as an important practice for the construction of identity and for language promotion. This new addition will also have an impact on the classroom practices of primary school teachers. One principal also reported the creation of a course focused on la *Franophonie*. School leaders also act at the level of language policy: French is the sole language of communication with students, teachers and parents. Parents of one school are invited to communicate with the principal should a translation be necessary[4]. In many schools this is a contentious issue: the importance of school-home communication comes into conflict with the vision of a unilingual school. In some instances, correspondence is sent in both French and English and principals who refuse to do so are stereotyped as close-minded. Although it is often argued that the practice of translating to English is important for both the child's and the parent's sense of belonging, it was not mentioned as a "best practice".

Communication with parents is seen as an important component of the principal's role. We include parents in the principal's community zone of practice. Recognising the importance of this section of the community, principals organise meetings with francophone parents or parents of French heritage to incite them to send their children to their school. This is identified as an important practice since schooling in French is considered necessary for the construction of a Francophone identity and the mastery of the French language. Principals are also involved, as partners, in parent association meetings.

With regards to the larger French community, practices can be divided into two types. Firstly, students share in activities organised by community based clubs or organisations. These include events such as cultural manifestations, competitive and non-competitive sports, and celebrations of flags, histories and francophone pride. These are organised by

umbrella associations – the *Association canadienne française de l'Alberta* (ACFA) for example –, francophone youth or church groups, and sport or festival organisations. Principals also take part in community based activities as individuals: two have a radio show for their community radio station another was an organiser for his parish's 100th anniversary and another played an active part in the creation of the French branch of the teacher's union. The community can also be invited into the school to partake in activities organised by the principal – community supper, meetings or fair to introduce francophone merchants and business people, opening up the school for community activities – or by the students. One school leader relates his school's "Josephville" project. Kindergarten to grade eight students worked together to build a fictive city in the school. All members of the community were invited to visit the city. Even their Mayor joined them.

The largest category of practices reported by principals and assistants took place in the whole school zone. Students and school personnel are the sole participants in this zone. A great number of punctual activities take place in these schools. French language and/or culture take centre stage here. Activities are generally organised for the students and include a poetry week, concerts, leadership camps, student exchange trips within Canada or between Canada and European schools, games, competitions, and Franco Olympics. Competitions are used to promote the use of the French language and to create a sense of belonging to the school as well as to instil a spirit of collaboration between students and school personnel. Trips to other regions of the country or to Europe are expected to show students that French is spoken at all times in some areas of the world (students in Canada's French schools often use English as a language of socialisation).

Many of these punctual activities are organised as part of the provincial or national French pride week. All, except one, are intended to associate speaking French with having fun, as opposed to doing school work. Ironically perhaps, some activities borrow from popular American television shows: Survivors (Survivants) or Fear Factor (Facteur Fureur). One practice seems to deviate from others in that it tackles an important issue for the school head on, which is the linguistic transfer from French to English, or assimilation. Rather than motivate students indirectly to maintain their French language skills and identity through recreational activities, one principal organised a Forum on assimilation for his high-school students. Unfortunately, the role of the students in this activity is not explained (participants or spectators).

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[4] Many parents who choose the French school cannot speak French. Most often, they are the spouse of a francophone or are themselves of French heritage.

Ongoing activities (clubs and school leader's insistence on the use of French) are a part of everyday happenings at the school or are recurring activities throughout the year. Clubs mentioned by participants are language based but do not foreground language. Rather, language is at the service of improvisation clubs, school or student newspapers, and school radios. As a part of daily life in their school, principals often remind students to speak in French. Strategies include sharing MY pride and passion for the language and culture with the students, speaking in French with students, even when they use English, insist on the use of French in all areas of the school. One principal recounts how she tries to make this insistence on French a game: "I don't make the students speak French, EXCEPT that they can't stay in the school if they want to speak English. It's funny, because they don't want to leave! I explain to them that I feel disrespected and that my ears curl." (Je n'exige pas aux élèves de parler français SAUF qu'ils ne peuvent pas rester dans l'école s'ils veulent parler anglais. C'est drôle parce qu'ils ne veulent pas sortir ! Je leur explique que je me sens non-respectée et que les oreilles me frisent.) In short, regular activities communicate the expectation that students will respect the school as a monolingual space. Punctual activities are more motivational or inspirational.

Another type of all school practice principals report is the implementation of a motivational system. As one principal puts it "Before we promote, we have to regulate. I am very proud of our 101 language policy and our levels of intervention" (Avant de promouvoir, il faut réglementer. Je suis très fier de notre politique 101 sur la langue et des étapes d'interventions.) This policy refers to Québec's law 101 which limits the use of languages other than French in signage and in certain work places. Most participants however did not use such language or legal references. Rather, they spoke of systems used to motivate students to speak French at school. Each time a student was "caught" speaking French, he or she receives a token (franco-dollars, franco-pride tickets, franco-pride pins, franco-manie points) to be used in exchange for either an individual or a class reward. This conversion of language choice into "cash" is the practice most often mentioned by principals.

Finally, we explore to the use of information technology as an identity construction or promotional practice. As mentioned previously, many schools have a school newspaper and student radio. In this section we deal more specifically with the information highway, or Web. Although this is conceivably a category to be included in the all school zone of practice, by its very nature it "leaves" the school as it enters virtual reality. In fact, two Web based practices are not intended for school only access and the objective is not clear for a third.

Although only four practices are included in this category, they can be subdivided into two sub-categories: those which are managed by the school leader and those spaces shared with students and/or others. Individual school web sites fall within the first category. Little detail is given on the use principals make of these sites or whether people other than themselves manage some space on the site.

On the other hand, interactive sites clearly include some input from others, although our data does not allow for an evaluation of the extent of that participation. We know of schools, for example, where each teacher has a Web site housed in the schools site. These teacher sites are used to communicate with parents and students. An interactive site might also include a blog, forum or journal entries. More details will need to be gathered during the next phase of data collection.

Finally, two practices begin at school, but move into virtual reality. These are clearly shared spaces. In the first instance, a school based club has developed a Web site open to others. The purpose of this site is to promote identity construction. The second practice is that of a paper based and a virtual French publishing house developed for (with?) high school students. This publishing house's objective needs to be clarified: the publication of student authors only or of others as well?

Although web related practices take place in French, language seems to take a backstage to other activities. French is the language of communication on all school web sites –except perhaps when a page is dedicated to English-speaking parents – but communication is the main goal. Since language choice in interaction is normally negotiated by participants, interactive sites would need to be analysed individually to see if practices used to regulate language in other categories of practice are reproduced in this medium of communication. That the publishing house is French suggests that, at least in this case, French may be a tool, but it is the only acceptable linguistic tool.

VI. CONCLUSION

School leaders have a working knowledge of identity construction and of language promotion. Practices in these two domains are closely tied to one another and can be associated with zones of practice. These can be bounded or ongoing in nature. They can also be seen as embedded in daily life at the school.

Depending on the practice, language can be placed at center stage or as part of the set, but generally that language is always French. Although one might

assume that it is standard French which is expected, this was not specifically mentioned in the data analysed. This question will be pursued in interviews planned for the next phase of the research.

The emergence of zones of practice in the analysis attests to the principal as social actor's varied possibilities of action. This in and of itself is an important, although preliminary, finding. Indeed, should further data collection and analysis support this finding, it would be possible to develop a template to facilitate the planning of practices in a more coherent and efficient manner across zones. Such a template could incorporate punctual, ongoing an embedded practices.

VII. ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

VII. REFERENCES

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