



## Teachers' Identity in English-Speaking Schools in Quebec

Diane Gérin-Lajoie, Amanda Gebhard, Robin Hopson and Mark Sinke

University of Toronto (Canada)

[diane.gerin.lajoie@utoronto.ca](mailto:diane.gerin.lajoie@utoronto.ca)

### 1. Introduction

Our contribution is a sociological analysis of teachers' work in Anglophone minority school settings in Quebec and how they make sense of their role as teachers working with a school population who is recognized legally as an official linguistic minority in Canada and in Quebec.

Generally speaking, the school has always played an essential role in the linguistic and cultural reproduction of social groups in our societies. This is even more so for the official linguistic minorities in Canada, which consist of the Francophones outside of Quebec and the Anglophones in Quebec, who have the legal right to receive instruction in their minority language. In those schools, public expectations are often high in regards to the reproduction of the minority language and culture and in regards, also, to the development of a sense of belonging to the linguistic minority group. Furthermore, in this school context, the responsibility to meet these expectations falls mostly on the teachers. How do teachers make sense of this dimension of their work in linguistic minority settings? How do teachers act as agents of linguistic and cultural reproduction, in addition to their role as agents of knowledge transmission? Our discussion will be based on the stories of a group of eight teachers.

To help understand the Anglophone teaching context in Quebec, it is worth mentioning that the 2006 Canadian Census indicated 606,165 individuals living in Quebec who claimed English as their mother tongue, representing around 13% of the population in the province. Around 80% of them live in Montreal [1]. Finally, there are nine anglophone schoolboards in Quebec, representing 115,000 students, with five of those school boards located in Montreal and its metropolitan area.

### 2. The Study

#### 2.1 Objectives of the study

The 3-year program of research, titled *Rapport to Identity Among Teachers Working in Anglophone Schools in Quebec* examines how teachers experience teaching on a daily basis, through the lenses of their own identity trajectory, at the personal and professional level. Starting from the point of view that the "personal" influences the "professional", the study seeks to critically examine the articulation of these two forms of identity pertaining to teachers and more specifically, the way that this articulation translates itself in the social practices taking place in the school. Based on the participating teachers' identity paths, the analysis attempts to shed light on the way that teachers working in linguistic minority schools make sense of their work with students, in a context where accountability for student academic standards and performance has risen, in recent years, to the forefront. How, within a school infrastructure increasingly prescriptive and narrowly focused on academic outcomes, can teachers act as agents of minority linguistic and cultural reproduction?

#### 2.2 Theoretical Framework

At the theoretical level, our analysis draws from the area of critical sociology of education, where identity is conceived as a social construct [2]. This construct is examined in the context of teachers' identity in linguistic minority schools. Recently, several contributions have been made on teachers' identity [3]. Others have emphasized the importance of personal trajectories in our understanding of teachers' professional path [4]. My own studies of teachers in Francophone minority school settings point to the conclusion that teachers tend to see themselves as agents of knowledge transmission only [5]. Teachers' work in Anglophone schools in Quebec has not been a focus of much scholarly research to date [6]. Hopefully, the present study will add to the comparative literature on teacher identity and contribute to a better understanding of the teachers' working reality in these schools.

#### 2.3 Methodology

The methodology used to examine teachers' stories on their work is qualitative analysis. In contrast to positivist research that favours experimentation and large-scale studies, qualitative research, from an epistemological perspective, focuses on the way that research participants make sense of their reality. We have selected the life history approach to conduct the study because it gives a voice to the participants.

In order to select our participants, a brief survey was administered to teachers from two Anglophone teachers' associations in Québec, in order to gather information on teachers' daily linguistic practices and professional life. The survey was useful in presenting a demographic profile of the teachers. We used this information to select 10



participants who would share their life stories, as teachers in a linguistic minority context. The number of teachers who completed the study is eight. During the course of the 3-year study, the selected teachers participated in two in-depth interviews every year on topics such as personal identity, professional identity, teaching practices, the role of the school in a linguistic minority environment, etc. A series of identity portraits (*portraits identitaires*) will result from these conversations with the participants.

### 3. Presentation of the findings

Due to the limited space, we will not focus on particular participants in our brief analysis, but will rather talk about the general results, addressing one issue in particular. This issue concerns the complex role these teachers play on a daily basis. We were expecting that they would acknowledge, among other things, their role as agents of linguistic and cultural reproduction because of the background of their students. However, our results show that the complexity of being a teacher translates itself in the area of knowledge transmission for its most part. Teachers want to offer the best opportunity for the students to learn and succeed. Notions such as role models, guide, facilitator, student-oriented, helping students to succeed with an emphasis on academic success were descriptions the most often heard from the eight participants. As an example, here what Shirley had to say about her philosophy of teaching:

*A teacher is a model, a facilitator, you have to know how to, how to inspire and to get things rolling, and you have to know how to withdraw, and you have to know how to reinsert yourself at the right time, you have to, for some kids you have to be, you have to be everything that anybody needs. So a listener, you have to be able to talk as well and inspire, you have to know a lot, you have to provide links to the future and you know future learning, and get the sense of where it is all supposed to be going, you have to have a sense of child development, you have to recognize warning signals for kids who are in trouble, and you have to have a bag of tricks, and you have to think on your feet. (Shirley, fourth interview, 2011)*

Other teachers talked about their philosophy of teaching very similarly. It seems that they did not see themselves as agents of linguistic and cultural reproduction as not part of their responsibilities as teachers working in a linguistic minority setting. It should be noted, however, that this responsibility does not appear in the official mandate of the Anglophone schools in Quebec. This is different from Ontario where the French language schools have the clear mandate to maintain the minority French language and culture [8]. In Ontario, English majority language is perceived as threatening to the Francophone community. In our study in Quebec, and especially outside the Montreal area, our participants did not see the presence and influence of French as being threatening, despite its status as the official majority language in the province. As one administrator told us in a previous study [7] "we have a mandate from the Ministry of Education which is to socialize, to instruct and to qualify, not to protect the culture". As it was also pointed out by another administrator in the same study, "there is not the same fear of loss (in Quebec). I think you see it by people in schools who do not think that if you don't speak English and if you happen to speak French that somehow your culture and your language are threatened."

However, in many Anglophone schools in Quebec, particularly for those outside of Montreal, students come from a very Francophone background and the influence of the French minority language and culture is everywhere. Those students use French regularly in the school and are rarely reminded that they are expected to use always English in school. Only one teacher participant, Melanie, who is Franco-Ontarian and who has also worked in French language schools in Ontario, raised the issue of the use of the French majority language in her school, in Quebec City, which is predominantly Francophone and where only a few Anglophones live. Melanie mentioned that she was surprised when she came to work to her school that the issue of language use was never raised by her principal or her colleagues. Not only students speak to each other in French, but the same situation applies to teachers.

*There's no message about that at all, which, again in Ontario when I was teaching in the French school it was the opposite. If my principal had overheard us speaking English to one another in the staffroom, repeatedly, he probably would have said something, you know. And here, the administrator would speak in French, you know, and there's no, there's no perception of that at all, there's no concept, they don't get it. And I, you know, when I get passionate about something like this letter from the ministry, people look at me funny, it's like okay, well I'll just keep that to myself then I guess. (Melanie, fourth interview, 2011)*

### 4. Conclusion

The English minority language and culture in Quebec do not seem to be perceived as minoritized by students and teachers, even in areas where French is at the core of the linguistic and cultural practices, such as in Quebec City for example. One could expect this situation in Montreal and its areas where Anglophones are found in great number, but not in more remote regions of the province, where Anglophones constitute such a small portion of the population.



Could it be partly due to the position of economic and political power Anglophones have held historically in Quebec? as well as in the globalized world of today? Previous results showed that the English language is not, indeed, perceived as a minority language by the participants, contrary to the perception of the French language and culture in Ontario (Gérin-Lajoie, 2011). The discourse of the eight teachers in the present study on the language issue in Quebec is very similar to the results from previous study conducted in the Montreal area. Most certainly, teachers define their professional identity much more as knowledge transmitters than reproducers of the minority language and culture.

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