

# Bilingualism and National Unity: A Canadian Study

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## 1. Introduction

Has Canada's bilingualism policies as applied to education been beneficial or detrimental to national unity? More specifically, if applied to students enrolled in Ontario's French language schools, has this policy been beneficial or detrimental to national unity in a province like Ontario where English is the majority language?

The aim of this research paper is to determine whether Canada's bilingualism policy has been beneficial or detrimental to national unity. It will do so by examining primarily the identity and language behaviour of students enrolled in minority French language schools.

French language education has existed in Ontario, Canada, even before Confederation (1867) and while there have been provincial government efforts to assimilate the population (Haché, 1995) through such measures as Bill 17, it has always been an ongoing struggle to preserve French language education in Ontario. The problem exists even today at a time when Canada recognizes through the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms the right of French-speaking parents to send their children to French language schools, French language education and the rights of parents to educate their children in their mother tongue. French language schools may have existed for a long time, these rights been officially recognized as such since the 1970's when school control was officially granted to them. French-speaking Ontarians gained full control of their school boards only in January 1998.

The fear has been that monolingual minority language schools and individual bilingualism helps to ferment competing nationalism sentiments and ethnocentrism among minority language populations which can ultimately threaten national unity.

The hypothesis of this paper is that the opposite is true: Individual bilingualism opens doors and builds bridges (Baker, 2000) by encouraging human contact and cross-cultural understanding while the mastery of only one language limits human contact and cross-cultural understanding. Unless it is tempered by other compensating human experiences, is more likely to lead to a narrow defensive type of nationalism and linguistic ethnocentrism, segregation and some forms of discrimination based on language. We find many French-speaking nationalists living in Québec who communicate exclusively in French and we also find many English-speaking nationalists living in Ontario and Western Canada, for example, who live exclusively in English. Understandably, for many of them, they recognize only the norms established along the lines of their own linguistic experiences. Research in second language education has shown that bilingualism opens new horizons and new opportunities (Baker, 1997, Cummins, 2000). It allows young people to maintain their family heritage, integrate fully into mainstream society, and contribute further in building a society that fosters unity through diversity. It helps people realize that majority language norms, while essential to ensure a functioning and unified society, does not mean that everyone should always speak the same language, live in the same culture, and think the same way.

However, bilingual schooling is a whole other question. In Ontario we have learned that while bilingual institutions offer a preferable alternative to a majority language only education it is not the ideal in a majority English speaking society. In a bilingual school, the dominant language, culture, values, and way of life take over and seek to replace the minority language heritage in the same way that a majority language only education tries to do. By limiting the educational opportunities in one language and depriving individuals of an education in their mother tongue, the individual student is deprived of an education which could propel him or her at the forefront of multilingual and talented leaders in the new global economy (Duquette, 1999, 2001).

Given the true character of French language schools and school boards in Ontario, this paper

examines the relationship between national unity and Canada's bilingualism policies which have given rise to French language schools and school boards. It will do so by examining how students enrolled in French language schools identify themselves, perceive the level of their language competence, situate themselves at the socio-economic level, do their social networking, prioritize their values, establish contact with the French and English media, and behave generally along linguistic lines? At the end, this paper should answer the question whether or not Canada's bilingualism policies in English Canada have been beneficial or detrimental to national unity.

## **2. Methodology**

This paper will provide some of the results of a province-wide study of the views of students aged 16 years and above who were enrolled in Ontario's French language high schools. The study was carried out between October, 2001 and February, 2002.

A 20 page questionnaire was developed and it focused on demographics, social identity, social values and perception of skill level in different languages, language vitality, behaviour and media contact). The questionnaire included the following three (3) categories and twelve (12) sub-categories.

First category: Demographic statistics:

General information

Mother tongue, second and third languages

Education and socio-economic level

Place of origin

Second category: Perception of identity, values, competence and group affiliation:

Identity

Importance of language and culture

Language competence

Contact with francophone groups and institutions

Third category: language experience:

The use (in degrees) of French, English, and another language

Schooling in French and English

Social network with persons from different linguistic groups

Contact with the media

All of Ontario's 12 French language school boards were asked to participate in the study. 11 boards accepted. Out of the 72 regular French language high schools in Ontario, 41 accepted the invitation to participate in the study. 25,090 students were enrolled in Ontario's regular French language secondary schools in the 2001-2002 academic year, 6,472 in public schools and 18,618 in Catholic schools (Ontario Ministry of Education and Training Management Group, November, 2002). From these students, 14,866 were 16 years of age or more.

In the 41 secondary schools which participated in the study, a total of 12,623 students were enrolled, 2,623 students in public schools and 10,158 students in Catholic schools. From these, 6,998 students were 16 years of age or more (Ontario Ministry of Education and Training Management Group, November, 2002).

Table 1  
Population distribution

|  | Public Sector | Catholic Sector | Total    |
|--|---------------|-----------------|----------|
| <b>French language school boards</b> in Ontario  | 4             | 8               | 12       |
| French language school boards in Ontario which participated in the study                                       | 4             | 7               | 11       |
| <b>French language secondary schools</b> in Ontario  | 30            | 42              | 72       |
| French language secondary schools in Ontario which participated in the study                                   | 17            | 24              | 41       |
| <b>Students registered</b> in French language secondary schools in Ontario                                     | 6,472         | 18,618          | 25,090 * |
| Students registered in French language secondary schools in Ontario and whose school participated in the study | 2,465         | 10,158          | 12,623   |
| <b>Eligible students</b> (16 years and over) in the participating secondary schools                            | 1 363         | 5,453           | 6,998    |
| Eligible students who returned a valid questionnaire   | 695           | 2,193           | 2 888    |

\* 14,866 students among those registered were 16 years old and over

Copies of the questionnaire were sent out to the participating secondary schools. A normalized procedure had to be followed for the administration of the questionnaire. Student participation was voluntary and they had to fill out and sign an authorization sheet to participate, but in the end 2,888 valid questionnaires were returned.

Certain limitations to this study apply. It is not possible to generalize because one school board and specific secondary schools decided not to participate in the study. Also, the length of the questionnaire seemed to have discouraged a number of students from participating in the study. The study, therefore, represents the views of those 2,888 students who decided to participate.

### 3. Results

67.1% of respondents had French as a first language.

98.7% of all participating students indicated that they possessed a second language and 30.3% of them indicated speaking a third language.

79.14% of the children's fathers given (2,752) and even more of their mothers had a completed high school education and 86.03% of their families earn more than \$40,000 a year.

Respondents identify themselves first as Canadians (8.6 on 9), then as Ontarians (8.2 on 9), then as bilingual (7.8 on 9), then as French-Canadians (7.3 on 9), then as Franco-Ontarians (7.0 on 9), then as Francophones (6.7 on 9) (Table 2).

#### 3.1 Social identity

In this section, we ask that you describe yourself in relation to social identity. To do it, make an X between the two poles (ex. francophone and non-francophone). Place an X where, according to you, it best describes who you are for each aspect considered.

Example

|             |   |                 |
|-------------|---|-----------------|
| Francophone | ____ : ____ : ____ : ____ : ____ : ____ : ____ : ____ | Non-Francophone |
|-------------|---|-----------------|

Table 2  
The average of social identity obtained on a scale of 1 to 9 (for ex. 1=non-francophone, 9=francophone) with respect to the mother tongue of students in Ontario

|                  | Mother tongue |         |       | Total |
|------------------|---------------|---------|-------|-------|
|                  | French        | English | other |       |
| Francophone      | 7.4           | 5.2     | 6.2   | 6.7   |
| Anglophone       | 5.6           | 7.6     | 5.8   | 6.1   |
| Bilingual        | 7.9           | 7.6     | 7.9   | 7.8   |
| Bicultural       | 4.2           | 4.8     | 6.2   | 4.5   |
| Multilingual     | 3.4           | 3.8     | 7.6   | 3.8   |
| Multicultural    | 3.2           | 3.8     | 6.7   | 3.6   |
| French-Canadian  | 8.0           | 6.0     | 4.5   | 7.3   |
| English-Canadian | 4.8           | 7.6     | 4.2   | 5.6   |
| Franco-ontarian  | 7.6           | 6.1     | 5.2   | 7.0   |
| Québécois        | 2.3           | 1.5     | 1.8   | 2.1   |
| Ontarian         | 8.2           | 8.6     | 6.1   | 8.2   |
| Canadian         | 8.7           | 8.8     | 6.3   | 8.6   |
| Aboriginal       | 1.6           | 1.6     | 1.3   | 1.6   |
| American         | 1.4           | 1.4     | 1.7   | 1.4   |
| European         | 1.6           | 2.1     | 3.2   | 1.8   |
| African          | 1.3           | 1.2     | 3.8   | 1.4   |
| Asian            | 1.2           | 1.3     | 3.0   | 1.3   |

Respondents with French as a first language identify themselves as Canadians (8.7 on 9); respondents with English as a first language identify themselves as Canadians (8.8 on 9).

Student respondents with a mother tongue other than French and English identify themselves first as bilingual (7.9 on 9), then as multilingual (7.6 on 9), then as multicultural (6.7 on 9), and then as Canadian (6.3 on 9) (table 2).

Respondents consider their future (8.3 on 9), the members of their family (8.2 on 9), their education (8.1 on 9), their friends (8.1 on 9), and their personal beliefs (7.6 on 9) as most important. They consider their first language (7.4 on 9), their culture (7.3 on 9), and their second language (6.9 on 9) as relatively important. They consider the schools they have attended (6.2 on 9), the history of their ancestors (6.0 on 9), and their ethnic group (5.9 on 9) as last in importance among those values.

Respondents expressed a desire for more French media and material resources, but also said that they wish to maintain and increase English language resources as well.

Respondents consider themselves equally competent in French as in English (table 3). They indicated using the French language more frequently with family, relatives, and other students at school, but using it less with friends and the rest of the outside world (table 4).

### 3.2 Language competence

In this section, we are asking you to estimate your competence to understand, speak, read and write in French, English and one other language. Circle the number which corresponds to the competence level shown on the following scale:

Example

None                      weak                      moderate                      Strong                      very strong  
 1                      2                      3                      4                      5                      6                      7                      8                      9

Table 3  
 The average of language competence on a scale 1 to 9 (1=none, 9=very strong)  
 with respect to the mother tongue of students in Ontario

|                             | Mother tongue |         |       | Total |
|-----------------------------|---------------|---------|-------|-------|
|                             | French        | English | other |       |
| Understand French           | 8.0           | 7.3     | 8.0   | 7.8   |
| Understand English          | 7.8           | 8.6     | 7.7   | 8.0   |
| Understand another language | 2.8           | 3.0     | 7.7   | 3.2   |
| speak French                | 8.0           | 6.6     | 7.8   | 7.6   |
| speak English               | 7.8           | 8.6     | 7.5   | 8.0   |
| speak another language      | 2.6           | 2.6     | 7.7   | 2.9   |
| read French                 | 8.2           | 7.4     | 8.2   | 8.0   |
| read English                | 8.0           | 8.6     | 7.8   | 8.1   |
| read another language       | 2.5           | 2.6     | 5.9   | 2.8   |
| write French                | 7.5           | 6.5     | 7.7   | 7.2   |
| write English               | 7.5           | 8.2     | 7.4   | 7.7   |
| write another language      | 2.2           | 2.2     | 5.2   | 2.4   |

### 3.3 Degree of use of French

In this section, we seek to measure the degree of the use of French that you actually do in your every day life. For the following situations, encircle the number (1 to 9) which best represents the degree of use in each language.

Example

With my father (or tutor), I speak:

French

1                      2                      3                      4                      5                      6                      7                      8                      9  
 Never                      rarely                      from time to time                      Often                      Always

Table 4  
Average use of French on a scale 1 to 9 (1=never, 9=always) with respect  
to the mother tongue of students in Ontario

|                             | French | Mother tongue |       | Total |
|-----------------------------|--------|---------------|-------|-------|
|                             |        | English       | other |       |
| French with father          | 6.9    | 2.8           | 3.6   | 5.6   |
| French with mother          | 7.4    | 3.2           | 3.8   | 6.1   |
| French with brother/sisters | 6.5    | 3.3           | 4.8   | 5.5   |
| French with relatives       | 7.4    | 4.4           | 3.6   | 6.4   |
| French with pupils          | 5.9    | 3.9           | 5.7   | 5.3   |
| French with friends         | 5.4    | 2.9           | 4.2   | 4.6   |
| French with neighbours      | 4.5    | 2.1           | 2.5   | 3.8   |
| French with local services  | 4.7    | 2.5           | 2.7   | 4.0   |
| French in social groups     | 5.5    | 2.8           | 3.5   | 4.7   |
| French in social meetings   | 5.3    | 3.1           | 4.3   | 4.7   |
| French at play              | 3.8    | 2.4           | 3.1   | 3.4   |
| French for television       | 3.7    | 2.2           | 3.7   | 3.3   |
| French for radio            | 3.5    | 2.0           | 2.6   | 3.0   |
| French for reading at home  | 5.0    | 3.4           | 5.3   | 4.6   |

Respondents with French as a first language started their elementary education early, but other students tended to start later. Respondents overall indicate greater exposure to the Anglophone media: music (7.8 on 9), movie theatre (7.7 on 9), radio (7.3 on 9), newspapers (7.2 on 9), television (7.1 on 9).

In resume, given the education of their parents and their family income, the respondents' socio-economic level is mostly middle-class and above.

Respondents identify themselves first and foremost as Canadians, when they have French as a first language (8.7 on 9) or English as a first language 8.8 on 9).

Regardless of their mother tongue, respondents overall place a high priority on their bilingual and multilingual identity, and this bilingualism or multilingualism is reflected in their social network, their contact with the media, and their language behavior.

While respondents on another question also expressed a desire for additional resources in the French language, they also indicated a need to maintain or increase the existing level of resources in the English language. This indicates that they do not see the presence of one language as a threat to the other except through the absence of resources in either language.

## 5. Conclusion

The results of this study indicate that the students enrolled in French language secondary schools in Ontario that participated in this study integrate quite well into the majority language society while at the same time developing their first language skills and maintaining strong ties to their family and to their home language.

On the basis of the evidence provided, one can conclude that Canada's bilingualism policies in this minority language province has been beneficial to national unity to the students who participated in this study.

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