

Leading official-linguistic minority schools: the case of English-language schools in the province of Québec

Purpose

To describe the experience of English-language school principals in the province of Québec

Theoretical Framework

In many parts of the world, schools' mandate has been enlarged in order to provide official-language minority students with the sociolinguistic and cultural support needed for educational success (Foucher, 2002). Such is the case in Canada for native schools, English-language schools in the province of Québec, and French-Language schools in other provinces and territories. These schools' mandate differs basically from that of mainstream schools in that, «besides being required to deliver regular educational services, they must also provide an environment which insures the quality of linguistic and cultural socialization in the mother tongue. In a similar manner, the role of school administrators who manage and give direction to these schools must be enacted in a very special wayⁱ» (Lapointe, 2002). After studying the experience of school leaders in French-language minority settings and in an Inuit school district, we looked at Quebec's English-language schools.

Research method and data sources

Open-ended interviews were conducted with 7 school principals in the Montreal metro area, where English is spoken by 30% to 90% of the population, and with 6 principals living in parts of the province where less than 5% of the population is English speaking. The instrument used is Lapointe *et al*'s interview guide which investigates principals' vision of educational leadership as well as the main aspects of their professional praxis. The interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed in their entirety. A thematic analysis was conducted using pre-identified themes as well as making sure to allow for new themes to emerge.

Results

Two solitudes within the same province

Results highlight a strong distinction between the experience of school leaders who work in the Montreal region and the experience of those who lead schools in predominantly French-speaking regions. In the Montreal metro area, the English language is so present that there is no need to implement any special program or activity to insure its future (Davies, 1999) and to enable students to succeed (Landry & Allard, 1993). On the contrary, French immersion programs are very popular. Just like many other schools in Canada, the challenge lies more in managing cultural diversity and the impact poverty has on students' perseverance.

On the other hand, school leaders who work in predominantly French-language regions describe a reality very similar to what we found when investigating leaders in minority French-language settings (authors, 2002, 2004, 2007). Principals explain how most students, who are *entitled* according to Section 23 of the Canadian Charter of Human Rights and Freedom, do not speak English at home and must learn it upon starting school. Teachers often need the support of the 2 or 3 children who do speak English in order to help others. Although challenging, these situations do not create important moral dilemmas for these principals, contrary to minority French-language school leaders whom we had interviewed during the first phase of our research program.

References:

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ⁱ Translated from the original French version.