Presentation to the Standing Committee on Official Languages

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The Commission scolaire de langue française (CSLF)

The CSLF was established in July 1990 when francophones in the province were granted the right to oversee their own education. At that time, there were two francophone schools in Prince Edward Island. Between 2000 and 2003, four new schools were established, serving six regions in the province.

This year, the CSLF will have just over 930 students in its schools. Enrolment has been increasing over the last few years.

The importance of bilingualism and promoting it

The CSLF provides its services in a minority context. Therefore, the importance of bilingualism is critical in a number of ways. For the francophone population in the province, the ability to be able to interact in both languages is very important: francophones need to be able to speak with each other in French, and they also need to be able to communicate in English with anglophones, either here in P.E.I. or elsewhere. In addition, parents who enrol their children with the CSLF want them to be able to pursue post-secondary education or job opportunities in either French or English. Bilingualism is therefore a significant asset in their eyes, and for good reason. Lastly, even after pursuing their secondary and post-secondary education, being bilingual is a key advantage in everyday life.

As regards promoting bilingualism, being in a minority context makes it much easier to use the language of the majority. Therefore, in P.E.I. it is quite easy to learn English. Our challenge is more to promote the use of French to ensure that young people become bilingual citizens. In our opinion, promoting bilingualism often means highlighting its advantages not only within the province, but also in all of Canada and around the world.

Promoting bilingualism is definitely easier when people live in minority communities. It is far easier to convince a francophone in P.E.I. of the advantages of bilingualism than it is to convince an anglophone of those advantages. This is equally true for francophones in majority communities. The need to learn English is less pressing in a place where French is the language people use every day.
Identifying with both official languages

We want to implement an additive bilingualism approach to the relationship between our two official languages. We try to promote both languages in a bilingual context, showcasing the advantages of using two languages. That said, in a minority community, the CSLF must promote French more to balance people’s perception of language learning. This must be done respectfully, without denigrating the language of the majority, given that many of our students are from exogamous families. Students living in families where one parent is anglophone and one parent is francophone should not be put in a position where they have to choose one over the other. This approach cannot work because language is closely associated with culture, emotions and family ties. As a result, the additive bilingualism approach often focuses more on learning the minority language, which is French in the case of P.E.I.

Motivation to learn the other language

As I mentioned earlier, in a minority community, the motivation to learn the majority language, or English, in this case, is very strong. This is particularly true for exogamous families, or for families with rights-holders who have lost their mother tongue. Even in francophone families, the motivation to learn English is very strong, to the point that sometimes vigilance is required to ensure that French is not neglected. However, it seems to be easier for students from francophone or exogamous families who speak French at home and attend school in French to become bilingual. Rodrigue Landry mentioned this fact in his research on bilingualism.

Future prospects and jobs

We often talk about future prospects and jobs when we are promoting school in French in P.E.I. We point out that many of our former students have interesting jobs, and that being bilingual gave them an advantage. Once again, our starting point is that fluency in two languages is an asset, since Canada recognizes its two official languages. It is important to francophone minority communities in Canada that our country remain officially bilingual and that both languages be promoted. The CSLF has a strong desire for parents to continue to see the advantages of bilingualism and to enrol their children in a French-language school.