



Learning French in the Townships

April 6, 1981. Over one hundred parents and others are gathered in the gymnasium of the Lennoxville Elementary School. They have come to find out more about the program of instruction in French as a Second Language which the Lennoxville District School Board has been running since September 1979. The children of some of them are already in the program, while others will expect to enter it at the beginning of the next school year.

The evening begins with a brief introduction by Hugh Auger, the Board's Director General, and by Marguerite Knapp, its chairperson. A slide-tape presentation follows, explaining the main elements of the program and illustrating in a graphic way how the program actually works in the classroom. The tone of the presentation is understandably upbeat and positive. Next, two professors from McGill University tell the audience how the research they have conducted has helped to monitor the progress of the program and, in general, to show that it has been successful. The evening finishes with a panel discussion in which questions from the audience are addressed.

The questions which the parents ask are of themselves instructive, since they illustrate the concerns which some of the parents feel:

Did the intensity of instruction in French in the Lennoxville program mean that other aspects of the curriculum were shortchanged?

The level of French of the children shown in the slide-tape presentation seemed very high. For how long had they been in the program?

Did the obvious enthusiasm for French which the children in kindergarten exhibit persist into grades 1 and 2?

More important, what will happen later? Will the children really be able to function bilingually? Will they perhaps lose

their French in high school if no comparable program exists there?

The answers to these and to other questions will become apparent. At this stage it is the questions themselves that are of interest. A program such as that being run by the Lennoxville School Board can only be completely successful if it has full parental support. The program came into being in the first place because it seemed to meet a need which parents had themselves expressed. They wanted their children to "be English, but **speak** French." It is clearly important that they should feel at all times that the program is continuing to achieve that objective.

The event described above touches on the dynamics of curriculum innovation. As a system is changed in order to achieve a particular set of goals, new problems are created. The overall success of a curriculum innovation such as the one described here depends on the degree to which such problems can be resolved so as to satisfy the community which the school serves. Parents are noticeably sensitive about the success of experiments on their own children; their questions indicate those areas where they are most in need of reassurance.

The Eastern Townships in change

The Eastern Townships is one of the few rural areas of Quebec in which English people have traditionally been a numerical majority. It is only within fairly recent memory that the Eastern Townships have lost their predominantly "English" character, as French-speaking people have become more numerous and have spread across the social and economic spectrum. Increasingly the English language community has come to feel the need to bolster a culture which it believes is beleaguered.

The English-language educational system of the Eastern Townships exists in a context of declining enrolments and of competition in some cases from its French-language counterpart. The educational component of the Official Language Act (Bill 101) has effectively barred French-speaking children and the children of many immigrants from attending English-language schools, while demographic changes have reduced the total numbers of potential pupils. The problems of English language educational institutions are compounded by the fact that many parents decided during the 1970's that their children were more likely to become bilingual by attending French-language schools.

The Lennoxville District School Board came into being in 1972 with the union of four smaller school boards, those of Lennoxville, Sherbrooke, Stanstead, and Compton. It now administers nine elementary schools in Sherbrooke, Lennoxville, North Hatley, Ayer's Cliff, Magog, Rock Island, Cookshire, Sawyerville, and Bury. Each of these schools had espoused different approaches towards French as a Second Language. On

the one hand, North Hatley Elementary School provided an acceptable bilingual program in which one-half of the total instruction was in French and one-half in English. On the other hand, the Rock Island school provided very little French instruction. The norm for the other schools was 30 or fewer minutes of instruction per day, and in all cases except Lennoxville this was provided by non-specialist teachers who set up their own program of studies. It was apparent that some form of coordination would be necessary, and in 1975 a committee composed of teachers, parents, and administrators was struck to evaluate existing programs and to make recommendations for change.

From the outset, the committee recognized growing pressure from parents to improve the quality of French instruction, for they realized that if their children wished to stay in the region and to obtain jobs there, they would have to be competent in the French language. The call for some kind of action was spearheaded by a few articulate parents in the Lennoxville area, many of whom were themselves teachers in the Alexander Galt Regional High School, Champlain Regional College, or Bishop's University. These were parents who knew of change elsewhere in the province and in particular of the well-publicised full immersion programs of the Montreal metropolitan area. In their own local school, the Lennoxville Elementary School, they had supported the establishment of a "Six Plus" program in which pupils remained in elementary school for one further year before high school in order to participate in a partial immersion experience.

Parental opinions are well illustrated by a questionnaire which the Board administered in 1975. Of respondents, 58 percent felt it was "very important" for their children to learn French, and 88 percent would encourage their children to participate in activities that would improve their use of French in the home and the community. However, 70 percent were opposed to **all** subjects being taught in French in some grades, and 66 percent did not even want **some** subjects taught in French if this implied any deterioration of the English curriculum. This would seem to indicate that there was not at that time a strong area of support for true immersion programs, which would among other things have required costly and time-consuming bussing of children to those schools offering the immersion option.

The committee was also concerned about the relationship between the Board and its existing teachers. A position paper from the Director General which had formed part of the committee's mandate (Auger, 1975) had clearly indicated the need for at least one fluently French-speaking teacher in each of the Board's schools, and that, moreover, this teacher might have responsibility for teaching in subject areas other than French as a Second Language. The fact that English-speaking teachers felt their positions threatened by the expansion of French instruction had already been demonstrated dramatically

in a teachers' walkout at the Lennoxville Elementary School in May 1974. Teachers wanted reassurance that new programs would not place their positions in jeopardy.

In general, the view of ETAT (Eastern Townships Association of Teachers) as expressed by its president was that, while its members recognized that some change was in order, they felt that it should be evolutionary. Above all, teachers should be involved in consultation, and should not have imposed upon them programs which would either require a complete change in their day-to-day professional activities or put their jobs at risk. It was the task of the committee, then, to steer a course between extreme positions, and to produce recommendations which would satisfy both parents and teachers.

In its final submission, the committee recommended that in addition to the existing thirty minutes each day of French as a second language, a minimum of a further thirty minutes of instruction be provided in French each day in not more than two subject areas. In the program that was eventually implemented, the fundamental change was made that this minimum of sixty minutes each day be devoted **exclusively** to teaching French as a Second Language.

It is worth considering why this change was made, since it has strong implications for the implementation of the program and indeed can be seen as its dominant characteristic. Primarily, it was argued by the Director-General and accepted by others that materials structured according to the logic of instruction in the second language rather than to that of some other subject were likely to have a much stronger impact. Also, separating instruction in French as a Second Language from instruction in other subjects should both be less threatening to non-bilingual teachers already employed by the Board, and would avoid the necessity of engaging French specialists with competence in other subject areas. Thus, this one element resulted in the programs meeting the objectives of both parents and teachers.

The program in a nutshell: implementing it

The objectives of the program are concrete. They are that, at the end of elementary school, each child should understand spoken and written French; speak French fluently and colloquially; and write French at a basic level. The means by which these objectives are to be achieved are uncommon in Quebec, and consist of two major elements. First, a full-time bilingual kindergarten is available, which all pupils in the system attend. Second, during each year of the elementary school in grades 1 through 6, pupils spend a full sixty minutes each day, or a total of five hours each week, in an intensive French program.

The question of the implementation of any curriculum innovation is invariably of most interest. In the case of the

Lennoxville Board's French as a Second Language program, three elements were involved in implementation, namely (i) staffing and financial arrangements, (ii) the provision of instructional materials and facilities and of appropriate changes of scheduling, and (iii) testing and evaluation.

Staffing problems had two major dimensions. In the first place, there was an insufficient number of suitably qualified people on the existing staffs to mount the program. It would, therefore, be necessary to provide opportunities for staff to be trained, and for new staff to be engaged. Recognizing that the final success of the program would depend upon the quality of its instructors, the Board decreed in May 1979 that all teachers of French in the kindergarten, and of French as a Second Language at all grades of the elementary school, must have a specialist diploma in Teaching French as a Second Language. In order to upgrade the competence of existing teachers, an arrangement was made by which the Ministry of Education of Quebec (MEQ) reimbursed the Board for the salaries of teachers released for further training. A number of teachers were given leaves under this arrangement and, in addition, McGill University mounted appropriate courses in Lennoxville. As a consequence, 21 teachers obtained their specialist diplomas between 1975 and 1981, 14 of them in May 1981. In addition, new staff were needed in order to provide sufficient teachers both for the full day kindergarten and for the more intensive approach, and lower pupil-teacher ratios, of the other grades.

Clearly, these problems could not have been solved without unusual support from the Ministry of Education in Quebec. The MEQ provides funds to each school board on the basis of a ratio common to all schools in Quebec. Additional funding would evidently be required to provide for pupil-teacher ratios below this provincial norm in the elementary grades, and to provide also for teachers for the full-time kindergarten. In addition, since the board saw the desirability of monitoring the program, funds were requested for ongoing research and for the preparation of instructional materials. It was seen as being especially important that this research be done by an impartial outside agency rather than by the Board's own officers.

Preparation of instructional materials required additional expenditures. For the kindergarten the program was in the past based upon materials produced by the Ottawa Separate School Board, but considerable adaptation was required to meet local circumstance. For Cycle I, new materials were specifically designed for the Lennoxville program. For Cycle II, which also moved to a sixty-minute-per-day program, materials were acquired from the Lauroval School Board to be used until new original materials should be prepared. Photocopying and the preparation of overhead transparencies and 35 mm slides demanded an expenditure both on materials and on additional support staff.

According to the program plan it was recommended that each school set aside a separate classroom for the teaching of

French as a Second Language. Since most of the schools at one time contained a higher school population, there was no lack of space to provide a separate classroom. The expense of furnishings and equipment have restricted some kindergarten classes to one room for both English and French instruction. However, all schools have separate French classrooms for all French instruction for grades 1 through 6.

Most schools have now implemented the one-half day French Kindergarten and the 60 minutes per day in the other grades. Two exceptions to this are to be found in North Hatley and Rock Island. North Hatley uses the basic program, but has retained from its bilingual program an additional 30 minutes per day of French instruction in a specific subject area. Rock Island, on the other hand, has reduced the 60 minutes per week to 40 minutes per week for their regular grades 1 through 6 students, in order to provide some French instruction to the Special Education classes in the school.

An important part of the program has been the schedule of tests administered under contract by McGill University's Office of Research on Educational Policy. The objectives of the testing program have been to measure the progress made by pupils in their acquisition of the French language and to measure also their general linguistic and cognitive development. Since details of the testing program are published elsewhere (OREP, Nov. 1980), it would be inappropriate to recapitulate them here. However, the general conclusions are worth repeating. First, as might be expected, the children showed considerable gains in their knowledge and use of French; secondly, they also showed an improvement in skills and competences not explicitly included in the program.

Is this an Educational Project?

It remains to be seen whether Lennoxville's new French as a Second Language program may correctly be described as an "Educational Project" in the way that this term has been defined by the MEQ.

Clearly, the program which this article has described contains an important element which may distinguish it from other Educational Projects, namely, that it has been implemented in a number of schools rather than in one single school. If the *sine qua non* of the Educational Project is that it be the means by which a **single** school moves towards establishing its own distinctive ethos, then the Lennoxville program is not one. An important result of the program, indeed, was that it should produce a greater degree of uniformity among the Board's different schools than existed before.

However, this may be a mere point of semantics. The Lennoxville Board administers nine schools, it is true, but it could be argued that these nine schools constitute a unit for

educational purposes and that geographical separation is irrelevant. For the Lennoxville Board, the major aim has been to "situate in its milieu" this entire unit, making it increasingly responsive to the use of the French language in the Eastern Townships, to new patterns of social interaction and of vocational opportunity which these had brought about, and to the expressed desire of its own clientele to accommodate more effectively to these changes.

Initiated from within

No curriculum innovation stands completely alone.

Lennoxville's French as a Second Language program draws out of the professional experiences of its major promoters as well as from models provided from elsewhere. With this caveat, however, it has to be recognized that the essential nature of the program grew out of needs perceived within the area and interpreted and translated into specific instructional strategies by the Board's own personnel. As far as individual schools are concerned, they were, of course, required to accept a program indeed "imposed from above".

Reflecting consensus

The imposition, if such it was, seems on the whole to have been received willingly. Complete consensus is a rare commodity, but within reasonable limits of tolerance Lennoxville's program seems to have been accommodated to meet most potential sources of conflict, at least for the time being. Grants above the staffing norms have calmed the fears of English-speaking teachers that the program would put their jobs at risk, although the fact that these grants have to be applied for on a year-to-year basis is a source of continuing concern. So far, however, the quality of instruction in regular classes has, if anything, been improved by the generally lower pupil-teacher ratios. These grants have made smaller classes possible, and teachers have all benefited by gaining more time for preparation and remediation. Correspondingly, the conflicting desires of parents that their children become both fluently bilingual and at the same time lose nothing from their existing curriculum seem on the whole to have been resolved.

Facilitating the development of participants

The Lennoxville program contributes to the development of its participants at a number of levels. Parents would certainly appear to feel more directly involved in a process which has implications beyond the school. They hope not only that the program will prepare their children more adequately for social and vocational involvement in Quebec society, but that by extension they themselves may perhaps be less confined to their own linguistic community. According to those involved in the program, the attitudes of many parents towards their French-speaking neighbours have been changed simply by virtue of their own children speaking and understanding French - and,

perhaps for the first time, having a French-speaking teacher.

For teachers also the program has provided the opportunity for development, in both a formal and an informal sense. In-service training has provided the opportunity to obtain a French specialist diploma: at the same time the influx of French-speaking teachers has increased other teachers' awareness of French language and culture. In all the schools they visited the authors noted the frequency with which French was used in staffrooms, although they also noted that this could produce feelings of isolation among the incorrigibly unilingual.

Evolving through adaptation

It is, of course, too early to say with confidence whether the Lennoxville program will be truly adaptive to changing circumstances, or to predict the kind of circumstances which would make such adaptation necessary. One of the problems of basing curriculum development and dissemination upon instructional packages is that the investment of time, effort, and money which has been put into their preparation discourages change and individual initiative. There is always the danger of placing the emphasis on "product" rather than "process". So far, however, frequent workshops have maintained a high degree of involvement from teachers, and the program has been found to be sufficiently flexible that individual teachers may place their stamp on materials produced at Board level.

Known about and understood

A program of parent sensitization operated with the assistance of McGill University staff, the preparation of the slide-tape presentation referred to earlier, and good publicity both in the local and in the Montreal press have helped to assure that the program will be as well known as possible. The dispersed nature of the region's population presents problems, however, and it is inevitable that the more peripheral communities will feel a less direct involvement in the program and will know less about it than those at the centre. This problem is exacerbated by the fact that the Lennoxville town community, with its higher proportion of professional people, has a higher intrinsic level of interest in the educational enterprise than the other outlying rural communities. An important task for those involved in the program may well be that of maintaining the level of interest and involvement of parents as well in these communities as in Lennoxville itself.

In summary, the Lennoxville experiment contains two elements which are of general interest. First, it provides a potential alternative model to full immersion programs and, if it were to be found to result in a comparable level of second-language competence, might indeed be considered in some ways superior to full immersion. Secondly, from the theoretical point of view it lends a new dimension to the definition of the Educational Project. The most interesting aspect of the

Lennoxville program is that it is applied across all the schools of a particular board rather than to a single school.

Education in the Province of Quebec is delivered by "systems": in common parlance, the term is used to refer to the entire educational enterprise or to a particular administrative unit. In fact, the educational enterprise comprises a single system consisting of a number of sub-systems, some overlapping and most occupying a niche in a rather complex hierarchy. Where the limits of a system and of a sub-system are drawn is always, let it be remembered, a matter of methodological convenience, since "systems", like beauty, exist largely in the eye of the beholder. With regard to the Educational Project, the sub-system in question may be defined as that part of the total educational system which is open to those influences from the milieu which call the project into being.

For many Educational Projects, the appropriate sub-system may indeed be the individual school as suggested by the MEQ. For others, however, it may consist of groups of linked schools - the "consortia" which exist for some British School Council projects. For yet others, as for the program described in this article, the most appropriate sub-system might be a school board.

