

Bicultural Belonging among English-Speaking High School Youth in Québec



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Date published

February 2025

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CONTEXT: BILINGUALISM AND BICULTURALISM

Bilingualism can be defined as the ability to speak two languages with equal ease (Cambridge Dictionary). According to Québec’s Advisory Board on English Education (ABEE), however, we might alternatively consider bilingualism to mean being able to function adequately in a second language (ABEE, 2016). Someone may gauge their level of French-English bilingualism by the extent to which they can comfortably communicate in bilingual social, academic, or workplace settings.

If someone were to consume both French and English-language media, engage in French and English-speaking activities, and work comfortably in a bilingual context, we could even call them *bicultural* (ABEE, 2016). This is because they are engaging with both French and English *culture*, which acts as an extension of the language itself.

Being part of Québec’s official language minority community, English-speaking youth may define their sense of belonging in Québec with the language(s) they speak on a daily basis, and the contexts in which they speak it.

WHY ADDRESS IT NOW?

During our November-December 2024 workshops with fourteen to fifteen year-old English-speaking high school students, Y4Y Québec learned about various barriers holding many youth back from speaking French confidently and feeling a sense of belonging within either a French-speaking, or bilingual, context. We discovered the extent to which many students find it challenging when speaking French in work, social and/or cultural settings. Many others mentioned how they found it difficult to follow informal, fast-paced conversations in social situations. Insecurity about their ability to speak French had important implications when it came to choosing whether to live and work in Québec in the future (ABEE, 2016).

Learning French at a basic level to gain “functional” skills in the language (ABEE, 2016) allows for fewer chances to explore the benefits and cultural significance of French outside of the classroom. While students who studied in the enriched program were being exposed to a broader range of cultural and literary resources, many of those same students expressed limited bicultural relations with French-speaking Québécois outside of school.

There has been a growing trend of parents sending their children to French sector schools to gain “bicultural skills” and fluency in French (ABEE, 2016; QUESCREN, 2024). It is clear that English-sector schools also need support from the provincial government and community organisations in order to foster these same bicultural skills (ABEE 2016, QUESCREN, 2024).

RECOMMENDATIONS

Y4Y Québec urges the provincial government to fund and support initiatives that promote French

cultural immersion, as well as bicultural exchange between English and French sector high schools, in order to foster greater bicultural belonging.

Recently, pedagogical consultants working alongside ABEE have recommended that teachers and parents should push students to “take it out of the classroom and to take part in student exchanges or activities” (ABEE, 2016, p.11). We encourage English sector schools to facilitate the enrichment of their students’ French-language learning with cultural outings that demonstrate the benefits of French language education for their futures. We hope that this enriches young peoples’ French language learning and development outside of the classroom experience.

Y4Y Québec urges community organisations to seek funding that provides students with opportunities to practice their French language skills through sports, artistic, and cultural activities, and forge meaningful links with French-speaking youth. Patricia Lamarre, who has written extensively on language issues in Québec, published a study on English language education, noting that English and French sector schools “co-exist with very few points of contact” (2012, p.175). Initiatives such as the Projet d’échanges linguistiques intra-Québec (PÉLIQ-AN) have been launched to foster bicultural relationships between English and French-speaking youth (ABEE, 2018). However, it is evident that more has to be done to support, sustain, and expand similar programs for Québec’s youth.

Y4Y Québec also recommends that the provincial government continues to support initiatives that encourage English-speaking youth to gain bilingual professional skills. In their 2016 report to the Minister of Education, the ABEE recognised the need to offer summer jobs to English-speaking students so as to practice their French (2016). An organisation named Réseau réussite Montréal (RRM), for example, is providing this opportunity through their project entitled *Le Français au Présent et au Futur*. Y4Y Québec encourages more community and non-profit organisations to help expand these initiatives across the province, to support the efforts of English-speaking youth who recognise the need to become fluent in the language of the majority. In 2025, Y4Y Québec will partner with Réseau Dialogue to promote a pan-Canadian microgrant program for youth who wish to create community initiatives to promote the use of French among their peers.

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