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LINGUISTIC IDENTITY COMPLEXITIES IN ENGLISH-SPEAKING QUEBEC

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The prevailing frameworks for categorizing Quebec's linguistic communities—namely, the **Anglophone/Francophone binary** and the **Anglophone/Francophone/Allophone** distinctions—oversimplify the realities many individuals experience. This brief explores some of the complex linguistic identities of English-speaking Quebecers highlighted in the research.⁴

Defining Identity

Identities are fluid, with boundaries shaped by culture and social interaction. The term "identity" refers to how people or groups define themselves "based on the expression of a real or assumed shared culture and common descent" through "the objectification of cultural, linguistic, religious, historical and/or physical characteristics." People construct identities in relation to these internal characteristics but also through external social interactions with others.

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- ⁴ This paper focuses mainly on the linguistic aspect of identities. This focus does not exclude the existence of other identity markers related to race, class, gender, sexual orientation, age, ethnicity, religion, or disability, among others. For many people, language is not necessarily the most important identity marker. Kimberlé Crenshaw's framework of intersectionality highlights how the interplay and overlap of these identity markers can contribute to both discrimination and privilege. See: Kimberlé Crenshaw, *On Intersectionality: Essential Writings* (New York: New Press, 2022).
- ⁵ Sian Jones, *The Archaeology of Ethnicity: Constructing Identities in the Past and Present* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 84.

The interactions lead to "boundaries" that reinforce bonds within a group and separate it from others. Most studies recognize that identities are not fixed; they are dynamic and fluid, evolving over individual lifetimes and generations. To capture this ongoing change, some scholars prefer the term "identification," which emphasizes an active conscious process, rather than the static connotation of "identity."

Linguistic Identity Shifts among English-Speaking Quebecers

For English-speaking Quebecers, language has not always been a major identity marker. From Britain's conquest of New France in 1759 to the 1960s, religion and ethnic origin played a more significant role. This could lead to sharp boundaries among English speakers, like those dividing British Protestants from Irish Catholics, for example. Many nevertheless identified in varying degrees with the notion of being British subjects with a shared British heritage. 10

In the decades after WWII, Canadian English speakers tended to move away from this British conception, as Britain's global influence waned and the decolonization movement gained momentum. Canada adopted a flag without any British and French symbols, symbolizing a shift towards a distinct national civic identity in an increasingly ethnically diverse country.¹¹

- ⁶ For more information about boundaries, a key notion in the sociology of ethnicity, see Fredrik Barth, "Ethnic Groups and Boundaries," in *Theories of Ethnicity: A Classical Reader*, Werner Sollors, ed. (New York: New York UP, 1996), 300-301; and Danielle Juteau, *L'ethnicité et ses frontières* (Montreal: Presses de l'Université de Montréal, 1999). The former argues that it is the "boundary that defines the group, not the cultural stuff it encloses," whereas the latter argues that this "cultural stuff" plays a role in defining the boundary.
- Diane Gérin-Lajoie suggests that majorities are more likely than minorities to see identity in an essentialist light, as a fixed trait inherited at birth and unchanging over time. Diane Gérin-Lajoie, Le rapport à l'identité des jeunes des écoles de langue anglaise au Québec (Quebec: Presses de l'Université Laval, 2019), 122.
- See Rogers Brubaker and Frederick Cooper, "Beyond 'Identity," *Theory and Society* 29, no. 1 (February 2000): 1-47, https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1007068717850.
- Marie-Odile Magnan-Mackay, "Éducation et frontières linguistiques au Québec : Les parcours identitaires d'étudiants universitaires issus de l'école de langue anglaise" (PhD thesis, Université Laval, 2011), 68. For a look at how these boundaries shifted in the 18th and 19th centuries, see Patrick Donovan, "The Boundaries of Charity: The Impact of Ethnic Relations on Private Charitable Services for Quebec City's English-Speakers, 1759-1900" (PhD thesis, Université Laval, 2019), https://hdl.handle.net/20.500.11794/33774.
- Gillian Leitch, "The Importance of Being English? Identity and Social Organisation in British Montreal, 1800-1850" (PhD thesis, Université de Montréal, 2007).
- ¹¹ José E. Igartua, "L'autre révolution tranquille : Le Canada anglais," *Possibles* 23, no. 2 (Spring 1999): 45-52.

During the Quiet Revolution (1959-1983),¹² many people in Quebec began to identify more with the province than with Canada. Francophone political and economic power grew in the 1960s. The term "Québécois" replaced "French Canadian" as an identity marker; initially referring only to the Francophone majority, it gradually took on a more inclusive civic meaning,¹³ despite some lingering ambiguity and disagreement about the term's use.¹⁴

English speakers had to reassess their identity and adapt to this new context. Bilingualism rates grew, as more English speakers learned French. Michael Stein describes a **shift among English speakers from majority to minority consciousness**, moving from identifying as a self-confident part of the Canadian majority to "minority group positive self-awareness and action" since 1977.¹⁵

New identity markers emerged. These include "Anglo-Quebecer/Anglo-Québécois," "Anglophone Quebecer," or "English-speaking Quebecer" for individuals; and "English Quebec," "English-speaking community" (or communities), "Is and "English-speaking Quebec" for the collectivity, though not all adhere to such identities. Government-imposed terms like the federal "official language minority community" and the provincial "historic anglophone" exist, though they too don't always resonate as identity markers, particularly the latter. "On the collection of t

- ¹² Martin Pâquet and Stéphane Savard propose this temporal framework in their book *Brève Histoire de la Révolution Tranquille* (Montreal: Les Éditions du Boréal, 2021). They argue that the Quiet Revolution began with the death of Maurice Duplessis in 1959 and ended in 1983 when the Parti Québécois adopted a neoliberal stance with Bill 111, which forced striking teachers to return to work.
- ¹³ Pâquet and Savard, 92-94.
- Opinions differ regarding the extent to which minorities in Quebec must align with and integrate into the Francophone majority to be considered part of the Québécois "nous." See, for instance: Jacques Beauchemin, "Le droit de dire 'nous," La Presse, June 3, 2022, https://www.lapresse.ca/debats/opinions/2022-06-03/replique/le-droit-de-dire-nous.php; Jocelyn Maclure, "Les tournants nationalistes," La Presse, June 10, 2022, https://www.lapresse.ca/debats/opinions/2022-06-10/replique/les-tournants-nationalistes.php. Moreover, linguistic and ethnocultural minorities in Quebec often perceive the term 'Québécois' as being limited to francophones of French-Canadian descent. See: Andy Catalano, "What Does It Mean to Be a Montrealer? Multiculturalism, Cosmopolitanism and Exclusion Identity from the Perspective of Montreal's Ethnocultural and Linguistic Minorities" (Master's thesis, University of Ottawa, 2016), 113, http://www.collectionscanada.gc.ca/obj/thesescanada/vol2/OOU/TC-OOU-34493.pdf.
- ¹⁵ Michael Stein. "Changing Anglo-Quebecer Self Consciousness." In *The English of Québec: From Majority to Minority Status*, Gary Caldwell and Éric Waddell, eds. (Quebec: Institut québécois de recherche sur la culture, 1982), 109.
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- ¹⁷ Sheila McLeod Arnopoulos and Dominique Clift, *The English Fact in Quebec* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1983).
- ¹⁸ Leigh Oakes and Jane Warren, *Language, Citizenship and Identity in Quebec* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007) identify this term as prevalent at the time of publication of their book, 2007, p. 153.
- ¹⁹ See: Quebec Community Groups Network (QCGN), "Who We Are," https://qcgn.ca/us/; Ronald Rudin, *The Forgotten Quebecers: A History of English-Speaking Quebec*, 1759-1980 (Montreal: Institut Québécois de Recherche sur la Culture, 1984).
- ²⁰ With regard to "historic anglophones," see: Quebec Anglophone Heritage Network (QAHN), "QAHN Policy on 'Identity' in English-speaking Quebec," December 7, 2020, https://qahn.org/news/qahn-policy-identity-english-speaking-quebec; Quebec Community Groups Network (QCGN), "Opposition Grows to Restrictive Definition of English-Speaking Community," December 16, 2021, https://ckol.quescren.ca/en/lib/ZQ65FLA2.

"Francophone Anglophone" Youth, or the "Historic Anglophone" Paradox

The Quebec government uses the term "historic anglophones" to describe a specific subgroup of the population. It applies to individuals who have the right to attend English-language public schools in Quebec, typically those whose direct relatives attended these schools in Canada before access restrictions were implemented in the 1970s.²¹ In 2021, **58% of Quebecers aged 18 and under who spoke English at home held these rights, while 42% did not.**²²

There is a notable paradox: statistical data show that many of these "historic anglophones" do not meet most accepted definitions of anglophones, as they lack English as a mother tongue or home language. In the province, the majority (52%) of rights-holders aged 18 and under did not have English as a mother tongue, and 37% did not speak it at home in 2021. The situation is similar in the Montreal region, where English is only slightly more prevalent among rights-holders (Figure 1).²³ Provincial data, which use different metrics,²⁴ show that 36.1% of certificate holders outside the island of Montreal had French as their mother tongue in 2021. Moreover, this proportion has been growing since 2000.²⁵

²¹ There are exceptions, but the vast majority of eligibility certificates are granted for this reason. For details, see Office québécois de la langue française, *Langue et éducation au Québec en 2021-2022: Éducation préscolaire, enseignement primaire et secondaire et formation professionnelle* (Quebec: Office québécois de la langue française, 2023), 21.

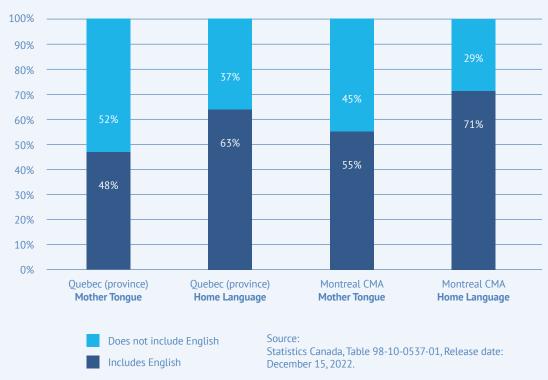
This includes everyone eligible to receive a certificate, not everyone who actually has a certificate to access English-language education. This inclusive statistic includes multilinguals who spoke English among other languages at home. Statistics Canada, "Table 98-10-0537-01: Eligibility for Instruction in the Minority Official Language by Detailed Eligibility Criteria and Linguistic Characteristics: Canada, Provinces and Territories, Census Metropolitan Areas and Census Agglomerations with Parts," Release date: December 15, 2022, https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/t1/tbl1/en/tv.action?pid=9810053701.

²³ Ibid

²⁴ The federal data cited here measures the entire population eligible for English-language education, whereas the provincial data focuses solely on individuals who applied for and obtained an eligibility certificate. It also does not account for the reality of multiple mother tongues. Additionally, provincial data uses the island of Montreal as a reference point when considering the region outside Montreal, rather than the larger census metropolitan area.

²⁵ Office québécois de la langue française, 20.

Figure 1: Mother Tongue and Home Language Among Individuals 18 and Under Eligible for English-Language Instruction in Quebec ("Historic Anglophones"), 2021



That being said, while quantitative data indicate that a large portion of the English-language school population does not fit the typical definition of an "Anglophone," qualitative research reveals that identity does not necessarily align with mother tongue or home language, as shown below.

The Role of English-Language Schools in Linguistic Identity Formation

French-language minority schools outside Quebec have an explicit mandate to transmit the minority's culture and heritage; English-language schools in Quebec do not.²⁶ Research shows that many teachers show little interest in acting as agents of linguistic minority culture transmission,²⁷ partly due to the diverse backgrounds of their students. There is also a belief, particularly in Montreal, that there is not one heritage to transmit; there are multiple, distinct English-speaking communities.²⁸

²⁶ Gérin-Lajoie, 170. See, for example: Association des conseils scolaires des écoles publiques de l'Ontario (ACÉPO), "Les différences entre l'éducation de langue française et l'immersion," https://www.acepo.org/differences-avec-immersion/; France Levasseur-Ouimet and François McMahon, "French-language Education in Alberta," in *Encyclopedia of French Cultural Heritage in North America*, http://www.ameriquefrancaise.org/en/article-%20603/French-language_Education_in_Alberta.htm%60; New Brunswick, Ministère de l'Éducation et du Développement de la petite enfance, *La politique d'aménagement linguistique et culturel: Un projet de société pour l'éducation en langue française* (2014, 2017), https://www2.qnb.ca/content/dam/qnb/Departments/ed/pdf/K12/comm/LaPolitiqueDamenagementLinguistiqueEtculturel.pdf.

²⁷ Gérin-Lajoie, 161-162, 170-171; Annie Pilote, "Group Behaviour: Exploring the Role of Schools in Shaping English Quebecers' Identity," *Quebec Heritage News*, September-October 2008, 22, cited in Magnan-Mackay, 38-39.

²⁸ Gérin-Lajoie, 131.

Nevertheless, studies show that simply attending an English-language primary or secondary school fosters and strengthens a sense of identification with the English-speaking community, and this regardless of a student's mother tongue. This is partly due to the boundaries created during interactions with peers in the French-language system. Marie-Odile Magnan studied this phenomenon in Quebec City, where over half the students in the English-language system speak French as their first language.²⁹ One study participant noted, "I've always been 'l'anglophone', which is strange because I am just as French as everyone else," while another, who grew up in a unilingual Francophone household, said "j'ai des amis qui m'appellent le 'bloke'" ("I have friends who call me the 'bloke'").³⁰ Many students internalize this "othering," and come to identify as English speakers, regardless of their mother tongue.³¹ Diane Gérin-Lajoie's research suggests that this may be more common outside Montreal.³²

A different reality exists at the post-secondary level. Quantitative studies show that Francophones at English-language CEGEPs used more English in their daily lives during their studies.³³ However, qualitative research based on interviews with Francophones who had attended English-language CEGEPs shows that they continue to speak French and do not experience a linguistic identity shift after graduation.³⁴

Plural, Cumulative, Bilingual, Trilingual, Bicultural, 35 Hybrid, and Multiple Identities

Magnan outlines two main ways people think about identity. A dichotomous perspective views identities as distinct and opposing: Francophone versus Anglophone, Québécois versus Canadian. A plural or hybrid perspective sees identities as overlapping and coexisting, leading to a mixed or fluid sense of self. For example, someone might identify as both Anglophone and Francophone, or as bilingual.³⁶

- ²⁹ Magnan-Mackay, 5.
- ³⁰ "Bloke" is often used in a condescending way to refer to English-speakers in Quebec.
- Magnan-Mackay, 175-179. See also: Karine Vieux-Fort, Représentations de la communauté anglophone et positionnements identitaires de jeunes scolarisés en anglais à Québec (M.A. thesis, Université Laval, 2009).
- ³² Gérin-Lajoie, 136-137, 141.
- ³³ Patrick Sabourin, Mathieu Dupont, and Alain Bélanger, "Le choix anglicisant: une analyse des comportements linguistiques des étudiants du collégial sur l'île de Montréal" (Institut de recherche sur le français en Amérique, 2010), http://lanquedutravail.org/sites/default/files/analyse irfa SEPTEMBRE2010A 5.pdf.
- ³⁴ Karine Vieux-Fort, "Les parcours de jeunes francophones qui choisissent d'étudier dans un cégep anglophone: une étude rétrospective" (PhD thesis, Université Laval, 2019), 60-61, 207-211, 256-257; Karine Vieux-Fort, Annie Pilote, and Marie-Odile Magnan, "Choisir un cégep anglophone au Québec: l'expérience de jeunes francophones," Éducation et francophonie 48, no. 1 (spring 2020): 136, https://doi.org/10.7202/1070103ar.
- 35 The usage of the word bicultural in the sociological research on identity cited in this paper refers to a dual cultural identification with both French and English cultures. This differs from the federal government's concept of "biculturalism," which refers to the recognition and support of the dual cultural heritage of French and English in Canada through institutional and policy frameworks, rather than the individual experience of biculturalism. See: https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/biculturalism.
- ³⁶ Magnan-Mackay, 228-231. Note that the term "hybrid identity" is drawn from the pioneering work of Christine Dallaire, who found that most Francophones outside Quebec had hybrid identities: Christine Dallaire, "Not Just Francophone: The Hybridity of Minority Francophone Youths in Canada," *International Journal of Canadian Studies* 28 (2003): 163-199, https://ruor.uottawa.ca/items/9d782911-bddd-4d86-9e7b-41518e04c918.

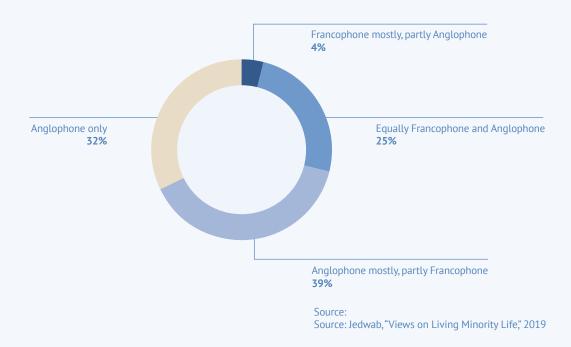
In some cases, identity shifts according to context. As one participant in the aforementioned Gérin-Lajoie study noted, "I feel like an Anglophone in the Francophone community, but if I were in an Anglophone community, I would feel more Francophone." This is sometimes called an alternating identity. However, it can also fit within the plural or hybrid perspective, reflecting a similar fluidity in self-perception.

These types coexist in English-speaking Quebec, and qualitative studies offer various perspectives on which one predominates and under what circumstances. In her research on English-language schools across various regions of Quebec, including Montreal, Gérin-Lajoie found that the vast majority of participants (70%) identified as bilingual or trilingual.³⁹ Conversely, other studies indicate that "most bilingual youth retain a sense of belonging to either the French- or English-speaking communities of Ouebec, regardless of high-level competence in both languages."40 Magnan's research in Quebec City suggests that a dichotomous view is more prevalent among adolescents, but many shift toward hybrid identities as adults.41 Other research points to a generational gap; individuals born after 1970 are more likely to have hybrid identities. 42 which may relate to rising bilingualism rates since the 1970s. 43 In fact, self-perceptions of language competency also influence identity formation.44 Furthermore, regional variations exist. In a cosmopolitan city like Montreal with its diverse cultural influences, individuals are more likely to question binaries like English/French and adopt more flexible, multifaceted identities. 45

- ³⁷ Gérin-Lajoie, 126.
- ³⁸ Gafaranga, 2005, quoted in Benoît Côté, Patricia Lamarre, and Andry Nirina Razakamanana, "Option-études Châteauguay: Bilan de l'impact à moyen terme d'un programme de scolarisation commune d'élèves du secteur francophone et du secteur anglophone, sur les rapports intercommunautaires et l'identité," *Minorités Linguistiques et Société* 7 (2016): 177.
- 39 The latter was more prevalent in the case of a school within an Italian neighbourhood of Montreal. Gérin-Lajoie, 124.
- ⁴⁰ Benoît Côté, Patricia Lamarre, and Julie Lavoie, 2020, and Benoît Côté, Patricia Lamarre, and Andry Nirina Razakamanana, 2016, cited in Nadine Ciamarra and Patricia Lamarre, with Patrick Donovan and Lorraine O'Donnell, "The Demography of Quebec's English-Language Schools: Complexity, Changes, and Community Issues," *Research Brief* no. 5 (Quebec English-Speaking Communities Research Network [QUESCREN], 2021; revised 2023), https://www.concordia.ca/content/dam/artsci/scpa/quescren/docs/Brief_5.pdf.
- ⁴¹ Magnan-Mackay, 267-269.
- ⁴² Marie-Odile Magnan, "Facteurs de rétention des Anglo-Québécois: Étude de deux générations de la région de Québec" (M.A. thesis, Université Laval, 2005), 82-84.
- ⁴³ Lorraine O'Donnell and Patrick Donovan, Vers une politique linguistique inclusive: Les Québécois d'expression anglaise et l'avenir de la langue française, Brief from QUESCREN to the Minister of the French Language, Mr. Jean-François Roberge, as part of the consultation to inform the discussion on the future of the French language, QUESCREN, April 2023, 4, Table 1.
- ⁴⁴ Marie-Odile Magnan, Catherine Levasseur, Véronique Grenier, and Fahimeh Darchinian, eds., Educational Issues and Identity Positioning Among Students Enrolled in an English School Board in Québec: A Case Study of Three Regions (Montréal: Université de Montréal, 2018), 113.
- ⁴⁵ Magnan-Mackay, 272-273.

Quantitative surveys also reveal the hybrid identities of many English speakers. A 2006 survey found that 46% of English-speaking adults identified equally with both French and English language groups (39%) or primarily with the Francophone group (7%). A 2019 poll showed that 68% of English-speaking Quebecers identified, to some extent, as Francophones (Figure 2). Are hybrid identities becoming more common among English-speaking Quebecers?

Figure 2: Linguistic Identification of English First Official Language Speakers in Quebec, 2019



⁴⁶ Based on Statistics Canada's definition for Quebec's Official Language Minority. Jean-Pierre Corbeil, Claude Grenier, and Sylvie Lafrenière, Les minorités prennent la parole: résultats de l'Enquête sur la vitalité des minorités de langue officielle, no. 91-548-XIF (Ottawa: Statistique Canada, 2007), 104, Table 2.4.

⁴⁷ Jack Jedwab, "Views on Living Minority Life: Francophones Outside of Quebec and Anglophones Within," presentation at the Officially 50! Conference Marking Fifty Years of Linguistic Duality and Education in Canada, organized by the Association for Canadian Studies, the Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages, and Canadian Parents for French, November 21-23, 2019, Gatineau, QC.

Local Belonging, Global Alignment

Research shows that English-speaking Quebecers identify more with their local surroundings than with Quebec as a whole. In his study of "Montreal identity," Andy Catalano notes that "a sentiment of exclusion from a narrowly defined Québec nation formed the basis of a shared narrative that allowed Montreal to emerge as an important reference point of identity." Research in Quebec City reveals a strong local identification among English speakers, especially youth. In coastal regions such as Gaspé and the Côte-Nord, young English speakers feel a stronger connection to their immediate areas, the Maritime provinces, and fishing culture, than to Quebec. 100

Alongside this local identification, many English-speaking youth also identify with the pan-Canadian and global spheres, where English predominates, effectively bypassing the province. Research conducted in Quebec City reveals that this broader identification is sometimes accompanied by a sense of superiority, with unilingual Francophones viewed as "provincial" (culturally and geographically).⁵¹ Nevertheless, recent consultations with English-speaking community leaders across the province suggest that this weak sense of belonging to Quebec as a province creates problems around youth retention.⁵²

Conclusion

The linguistic identities of English-speaking Quebecers are complex, changing, and shaped by multiple ethnocultural and regional influences. Many English speakers have hybrid identities, identify as Francophone to varying degrees, and feel a strong connection to their local communities while also embracing the fact that English is the global lingua franca. This leads to challenges around identifying with Quebec as a whole, or even to identifying with "English-speaking Quebec."

Researchers cited in this study propose solutions related to minority linguistic identity formation that could foster mutual understanding and enhance social cohesion in Quebec. More intercultural twinning activities and school exchanges between the English- and French sectors would increase meaningful intergroup contact and reduce Francophone-Anglophone boundaries.⁵³ The government can lead by example through a public discourse that avoids dichotomizing communities.⁵⁴ A "critical pedagogy" approach would "lead students to challenge power relations and intergroup categorization between anglophones and francophones in Quebec," including how "stereotypes between the groups are constructed," thus "planting the seeds for change."⁵⁵

- ⁴⁸ Catalano, "What Does It Mean to Be a Montrealer?" 113. See also: Martha Radice, *Feeling Comfortable? The Urban Experience of Anglo-Montrealers* (Sainte-Foy, QC: Presses de l'Université Laval, 2000).
- ⁴⁹ Magnan, 83.
- ⁵⁰ Marie-Odile Magnan, Catherine Levasseur, and Véronique Grenier, "I'm Almost Bilingual': Sentiment de Minorisation d'Élèves d'une École de Langue Anglaise en Région Éloignée au Québec," *The Canadian Modern Language Review/La Revue canadienne des langues vivantes* 77, no. 1 (February 2021), 78.
- ⁵¹ Cynthia Groff, Annie Pilote, and Karine Vieux-Fort, "I Am Not a Francophone: Identity Choices and Discourses of Youth Associating with a Powerful Minority," *Journal of Language, Identity and Education* 15, no. 2 (2016): 83–99, https://doi.org/10.1080/15348458.2015.1137476.
- ⁵² Frances Ravensbergen, "Rapport de la tournée de consultation 2019 : Construire des ponts" (Secrétariat aux relations avec les Québécois d'expression anglaise, December 10, 2020), 10–11, https://ckol.quescren.ca/en/lib/RD8KIB8A/download/39QIG33Z/ravensbergen-2019-building-bridges-final-report-on-consultations-fr.pdf.
- 53 See Magnan-Mackay, 296-297; Côté, Lamarre, and Razakamanana.
- ⁵⁴ Lorraine O'Donnell and Patrick Donovan, 3-5.
- ⁵⁵ Annie Pilote, Marie-Odile Magnan, and Cynthia Groff, "Education and Linguistic Boundaries in Quebec: Student Representations and Pedagogical Reflections from a Critical Perspective," *Bellaterra Journal of Teaching & Learning Language & Literature* 4, no. 3 (October 2011):17-20, https://doi.org/10.5565/rev/jtl3.419.

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