



READINESS TO LEARN IN MINORITY FRANCOPHONE COMMUNITIES

PROGRAM EFFECTS ON THE COMMUNITIES



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The logo for the Government of Canada, featuring the word "Canada" in a serif font with a small Canadian flag icon above the letter 'a'.

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Introduction

This executive summary reports on **project outcomes as viewed by communities** participating in the *Readiness to Learn in Minority Francophone Communities project*¹ (*Readiness to Learn project*). This demonstration project was part of the Government of Canada's 2003–2008 Action Plan for Official Languages and was continued under the 2008–2013 Roadmap for Canada's Linguistic Duality. Funded by Employment and Social Development Canada (ESDC), the Social Research and Demonstration Corporation (SRDC) was hired to implement, manage, collect and analyze the project data.

The project tested a preschool program that combined a child care component (daycare component) developed specifically to meet the needs of Francophone children in minority settings, with a family literacy component (family workshops component) targeting the parents of these children. The program aims to develop children's French language skills, their knowledge of the Francophone culture and their identification with the Francophone community. Globally, the program aims to foster school readiness and children's overall development.

Note: The content of this executive summary originates from two reports:

- *Readiness to Learn in Minority Francophone Communities: Reference Report* (2014)
- *Readiness to Learn in Minority Francophone Communities: Project Implementation Report* (2014)

Visit www.srdc.org to obtain a copy of these reports.

How were the project outcomes studied?

The project included two cohorts of children and their family – the first recruited in 2007, the second in 2008. Children were followed from age three to seven, when they enter grade two. The study of the project outcomes as perceived by participating communities was based on:

- Community representatives' interviews;
- Parents' baseline survey; and
- An environmental scan of early childhood French resources and services using community mapping.



The remainder of the executive summary examines the following topics:

- A portrait of the six communities in 2007–08;
- Access to services and resources in French around the start of the tested preschool program;
- Perceived project outcomes two years later; and
- Communities' vision of the future.

¹ Formerly known as the Child Care Pilot Project.



The six participating communities

The *Readiness to Learn project* took place in six communities, spread across three Canadian provinces (Saint John and Edmundston, New Brunswick; Orléans, Cornwall and Durham, Ontario; and Edmonton, Alberta). Communities submitted a response to ESDC's request for proposals.² Interested communities were then visited and chosen in 2007 according to several criteria, including:

1. the size of the pool of Francophone preschoolers;
2. the characteristics of the daycare welcoming children in the program group;
3. the presence of French alternative daycare services; and
4. the community's capacity to mobilize early childhood stakeholders.

ESDC's call for proposals also required the identification of a champion — a person or an organization — whose role was to mobilize the community around the project. It was important to choose a good communicator and someone whom the parents trusted. The champion's support of the *Readiness to Learn project* helped establish its credibility and contributed to the project being seen as important and beneficial for the community. In fact, the continuous and active presence of the champion was essential to the successful implementation of the project. In the end, the six communities retained for the project

represent the range of minority Francophone communities:

- Some of the communities, like Durham and Edmonton, are in a highly minority context (< 5% of Francophones). At the other end of the spectrum, Edmundston is in a majority context (> 90% of Francophones) within the community, though it is considered a minority at the provincial level.
- Durham and Edmonton are experiencing new realities associated with the welcoming and the integration of Francophone newcomers.
- The six communities are located in three provinces, and in cities or suburbs that are very diverse in terms of geography and economy.

Project goals at the community level

The *Roadmap for Canada's Linguistic Duality* aimed to strengthen the ability of communities to foster the development of young children growing up in official language minority communities. It intended to:

- ensure multi-year funding to help official language minority communities better understand early childhood development;
- foster collaboration and the establishment of networks to share best practices; and
- ensure that early childhood development tools and resources are adapted for these communities and made available to them.

² Aside from Orléans, selected in the summer of 2007. It became clear early in the project that the number of children required to conduct

the evaluation would not be reached without adding a sixth community.

The Government of Canada (and particularly ESDC) has deemed that funding of the *Readiness to Learn project* would assist in promoting these objectives.



In the beginning

What did community representatives report?

From December 2007 to February 2008, shortly after the start of program delivery, a first set of interviews took place. In total, 23 interviews were conducted with three to six participants per community. Seven representatives from five communities were engaged in delivering child care services for Francophone children in their community. Six representatives came from the education sector, five were involved in family resource centres, two were from the health sector and three came from organizations offering multiple services (e.g., district health boards, family activities, etc.).

Community representatives were chosen for their knowledge of or expertise in the targeted Francophone sectors — early childhood, child care services, family services, and education.

The interview questions sought to establish a profile of participating communities. They also aimed to identify the resources and services available in French only, the barriers to accessing these resources, and the challenges faced by the communities regarding early childhood resources and services.

The main themes raised by interviewees were:

- The **lack of services or programs** targeting young Francophone children. In several cases, respondents mentioned resources and services for older children, but not for early childhood.
- **The language used** for services and programs targeting young children. Respondents perceived that, overall, services and programs were provided in English only, or in both languages, but **never in French only**.
- The **main barriers** to accessing services were a lack of awareness or absence of services available in French, followed closely by a lack of qualified French professionals. Respondents also noted that distance played an important role in their ability to access community resources.
- A concern that **Francophone parents were being assimilated by the Anglophone majority**. Respondents stated that parents tended to gravitate towards English, because it was easier to access community resources or because one member of the couple was an Anglophone.
- The significant number of **Francophone newcomers** in certain communities. Some of these new arrivals settled in the community only to return to their place of origin after a short period. Respondents thought the degree of stability in a community's population could explain differences in investments made in the community's well-being and, by extension, in

the availability of resources for young children and families.

What did parents say?

In the summer and fall of 2007, parents of the first cohort completed a baseline survey. Parents of the second cohort completed the baseline survey in early fall 2008. This survey was designed to establish families' socio-demographic and linguistic profile, and to measure factors associated with children's readiness for school. As primary users of services, parents were also asked about the level of difficulty in accessing services and resources in French. Among the main findings, we note:

- **31% of parents reported that access to French services ranged from difficult to impossible**, 23% were indifferent (access was neither difficult nor easy), and 46% felt access to services was easy to very easy.
- **Level of difficulty was closely tied to the concentration of Francophones.** Parents residing in a highly minority context ($\leq 5\%$ of Francophones) reported greater difficulty in accessing services in French compared to parents from a moderate minority context (about 30%). Conversely, participants residing in a community characterized by a Francophone majority ($\geq 90\%$), reported an ease of access to services in French.
- **Program group parents reported significantly more difficulty accessing French services** compared to parents of the two comparison groups.
- The **greatest difficulties** in accessing French services were tied to the lack of Francophone professionals, an absence of services, and a lack of awareness that services were available.

- **Distance and transportation** were also mentioned by parents as barriers to accessing services in French.



Community mapping

A series of maps created in 2007–2008 made it possible to link the locations of French resources and services with the Francophones living in various neighbourhoods of each community. Only those resources provided in French alone were considered in this analysis. This choice was based on empirical studies showing that access to French-only resources helps to offset the strong influence of the demographic and social weight of English on the daily lives of members of the Francophone community.³

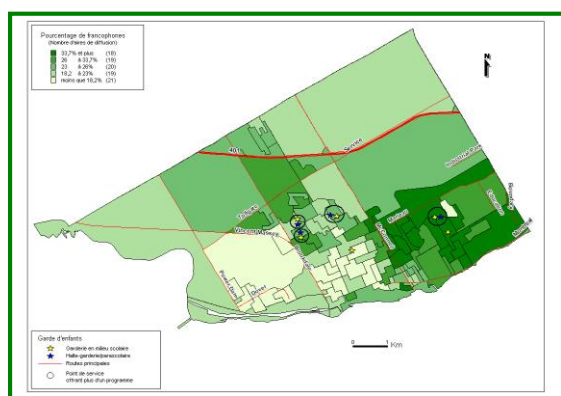
Findings from community mappings showed:

- **A large proportion of full-time daycare services, junior kindergarten and drop-in daycare services** (between 79% and 100%) were provided in French only. One community stood apart from the others with 69% of services in this category provided in French only.

³ Landry, R., Allard, R., & Deveau, K. (2007). A macroscopic intergroup approach to the study of ethno-linguistic development. *International Journal of the Sociology of Language*, 185(1), 225–253.

- The majority or all **literacy activities** were available in French only in five of the six communities. The smallest percentage was observed in one of the communities with 50% of these activities available in French only.
- A wide range in the provision of **educational resources** in French only across communities. Only two communities provided all of these resources in French only. In the remaining communities, the availability of these resources in French only varied between 40% and 82%.
- A **large percentage of sports, cultural and recreational activities were offered in both official languages**. In one community, all sports and leisure activities were offered in French only. In another community only one activity was offered in French only. In the remaining communities, between one-quarter and two-thirds of activities were offered in French only.

An example of a community map appears below. A more complete discussion on community mapping findings is found in Chapter 7 of the *Readiness to Learn Project: Reference Report*.



What does this all mean?

Interesting trends stem from comparisons between the environmental scan findings and perceptions of community representatives and of parents. Based on the environmental scan, access to French-only daycares and literacy activities was very good.

Conversely, there were large differences between communities in the provision of French-only educational resources as well as access to sports, cultural and recreational activities.

The perceptions of community representatives and parents help qualify the environmental scan findings. A quarter of parents report difficulties accessing French services while community representatives state a lack of services or programs targeting young Francophone children. Not surprisingly, the level of difficulty in accessing French-only services increases as the proportion of Francophones in the population decreases. According to community representatives, the language used for delivering services and programs targeting young children is overall English or both English and French, never in French only. Both community representatives and parents agree that the **main barriers** to accessing services were the absence of services available in French, a shortage of qualified French professionals, a lack of awareness of which services are available in French only, and transportation issues.

In sum, few services and programs target preschool children and their families. When offered, these services and programs are not necessarily available in French only and may be difficult to access in part because of a shortage of qualified French professional and transportation barriers.

Two years later

In 2009, 18 community representatives took part in a second set of interviews designed to evaluate the *Readiness to Learn project* outcomes in participating communities. For this second interview, the choice of community representatives depended on the central role they played in the field of Francophone services or on their involvement in early childhood. Although they report on changes that have been observed since

the program's introduction, these changes are not necessarily the result of the program delivery.

Nine community representatives from four different communities were engaged in delivering child care services for Francophone children in their community. Four representatives were involved in family resource centres, three were from an organization supporting the Francophone community in their area and three others provided special services related to early childhood development (prenatal and postnatal health services, language development, and early intervention programs). Most representatives surveyed had lived in their community for more than 10 years. Three had settled there less than five years earlier. Almost all respondents (16 out of 18) answered the first community representative survey of 2007–2008.



Respondents reported:

- an **increased offer of child care services** in all communities either through the opening of new daycares or an increased number of spaces made available in existing daycares;
- an **increased number of students enrolled in Francophone schools** in many communities, and in some areas, new schools were opened to meet the demand;

- **improved relations** between elementary schools, preschools and parents; and
- **new literacy projects in a number of communities** in the form of activities such as adding story time to children's programs in some organizations, creating a children's corner in the municipal library, or opening resource centres where parents could borrow books for their children.

Despite these improvements, there remains some instability in services offered. Programs such as play groups or parent workshops still experience high staff turnover.

In terms of health and social services, the situation has remained stable since 2007. In one community, a French-language health centre opened in the same building as the daycare, thereby facilitating access to French resources through the grouping of the two.

What were the benefits of the project?

According to community representatives, the project helped to:

- **establish new partnerships** between organizations working in early childhood. These partnerships increased daycares' involvement and affirmed the importance of these centres in the development of young children growing up in a minority context; and
- **raise awareness** among Francophone parents of services offered in their community.

In general, communities took the opportunity provided by the *Readiness to Learn project* to demonstrate that early childhood services contributed to child development and were an asset to the development of the Francophone minority community.

Successful practices

We asked representatives to name their community's greatest successes in terms of services and resources targeting young Francophone children and their families. Among the successes mentioned, three were of the utmost importance:

- The **presence of a service hub** specifically designed for Francophone families (mentioned by four of the six communities);
- **Building partnerships** between various organizations. Indeed, some of the activities could not be maintained in the community without various partners collaborating and the families' involvement (in order to develop services that are truly in line with their needs); and
- The **presence of Francophone daycares**. This was one way to bring together a large number of young Francophone children and expose them to the French language at an early age. More and more schools wanted to work with daycares as this collaboration often resulted in enrolment of young Francophones in the French school system.

A community's success story

Francophones in the community of Saint John in New Brunswick are strongly in minority ($\leq 5\%$) and about 50% of the children of this community come from an exogamous family. At the beginning of the project, parents reported facing greater difficulties in accessing services in French compared to four other communities associated with the project, characterized by a concentration of Francophones from moderate to high. According to one of the community representatives, the implementation of the *Readiness to Learn project* acted as a catalyst to the provision of early childhood services. There are three reasons that could explain this phenomenon:

- **Length of program delivery:** The preschool program was delivered over a two-year period which gave the opportunity to educators to get basic and follow-up training. Educators' training and their knowledge of the program were strengthened in the second year. Access to a needs-based continuous training and to new resources made a difference in the quality of the services provided in daycare to children.
- **Participation to family workshops:** Participation was enthusiastic in Saint John with an average participation rate of 68%. This has contributed to the emergence of connections between parents and between parents and community partners dedicated to provide services and resources in French.
- **Joint effects of the program:** The combined effects of the daycare component and of the family literacy component appear to have created a synergy that favours the development of services for young Francophones.

Lastly, the project may have prompted the realization in this community of the importance to "frenchify" children *before they start school*. Discussions around this effort increased within community organizations and the school board since the implementation of the project.



What if communities had more resources?

Despite the numerous achievements of the *Readiness to Learn project*, each community continues to experience a lack of resources available for very young Francophones, as well as difficulties in linking families with existing resources.

The comments gathered over the course of interviews highlighted several projects that representatives would like to establish to continue meeting their community's needs.

Several representatives spoke of the importance of investing more in early childhood services. They also spoke of the need to offer parents good quality child care in French. In some communities, this would mean opening up new spaces to reach more families. In other communities, they would like to provide affordable services to all families in the community. Finally, a number of representatives indicated that educators' working conditions should be improved and that they ought to have access to better training.

Another dream shared by some communities related to the importance of having strong partnerships and providing centralized services to parents. Underlying this type of partnership is the importance of having a common vision of a community's needs.

Some representatives saw a need for more specialized services in French, particularly with respect to health-related services. Access to these services was seen as fundamental, especially during the early years, when children are growing so quickly.

Beyond these dreams of better services, representatives spoke to the specific needs of their community. One wanted to start a family literacy

centre, another indicated a need for transportation arrangements to facilitate access to various activities, whereas a third hoped for greater involvement of Francophone parents. In many cases, the project provided a model for solving future problems.



Closing thoughts

Several goals of the *Roadmap for Canada's Linguistic Duality* were achieved in the *Readiness to Learn project*. Interviews conducted with community representatives suggest the communities' strengthened ability to foster the development of young children growing up in French minority communities. Communities came away from the project with the resources – both material and human – to continue their work in early childhood. The project also helped communities better understand early childhood development, particularly the importance of exposing young children to French before they start school. Finally, collaborations and new partnerships were fostered amongst organizations and service providers catering to preschoolers and their family.

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