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## **What's Wrong with Bilingualism and Becoming Multilingual? An Analysis of Discourses in Alberta's Updated *French Policy***

Steven Gillis  
University of Alberta

### **Abstract**

This paper employs the 'What's the problem represented to be?' (WPR) method to explore language learning and language planning policy in Alberta, Canada through the provincial government's newly published update of a document titled '*French Policy*'. Through an analysis of its discourse, along with the political and pedagogical contexts in which the *French Policy* finds itself, the underlying belief emerges that learning in languages other than English in Alberta should only be reserved to the few who qualify for official minority education obligated by the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*. The argument is made in this paper that the province would actually benefit from the opposite: that an educational turn towards promoting the learning of multiple languages would better achieve the goals of inclusion and social and economic progress for which the government is claiming to be endeavouring in the *French Policy* and elsewhere.

### **Résumé**

En se servant de la méthode WPR (« Quel est le problème représenté ? » - « *What's the problem represented to be?* »), employée sur le document « *French Policy* » (traduite, « Politique française »), dont une mise à jour a été récemment publiée par le gouvernement provincial albertain, cette étude explore la politique d'aménagement linguistique et pédagogique en Alberta au Canada. À travers d'une analyse de discours et des contextes politiques et pédagogiques autour du document, une conviction sous-jacente ressort : en Alberta, l'apprentissage de langues autres que l'anglais doit être uniquement réservé pour le petit groupe y ayant le droit, comme l'exige la *Charte canadienne des droits et libertés*. Cet article présente l'argument que la province bénéficierait en fait d'une approche inverse : que la promotion de l'apprentissage de plusieurs langues à l'école atteindrait mieux les buts inclusifs, sociaux et économiques auxquels le gouvernement prétend viser dans le document « *French Policy* » et ailleurs.

## **What's Wrong with Bilingualism and Becoming Multilingual? An Analysis of Discourses in Alberta's Updated *French Policy***

This paper stems from a recent publication from the Government of Alberta of an updated policy related to the French language, French speakers, and the importance of the French language in the province of Alberta. The document, whose implementation is the responsibility of the provincial government's Francophone Secretariat, carries the somewhat odd title of "French Policy" (Government of Alberta, 2023b, p. 1). Rather than referring to some sort of international relationship, the *French Policy* presents the province's "commitment to enhance the development and delivery of services in French in ways that are practical and meaningful for Albertans" (Government of Alberta, 2023b, p. 5), with its first listed aim being that "Albertans can learn, speak, live and thrive in French through the vitality of their communities" (Government of Alberta, 2023b, p. 6).

In the document there is only one reference made to Albertans learning this language that is described as being of historical and modern importance for the province – and this one reference is made for contextual purposes in the beginning of the introductory section. Near the end of the same introduction is the plainly stated sentence "This is not about making the province bilingual" (Government of Alberta, 2023b, p. 5). In this, it seems that, despite the "spirit of making the lives of French-speaking Albertans better" (Government of Alberta, 2023b, p. 4), promoting an increase in Albertans learning French is not seen as desirable, even though this would increase, at the very minimum, the number of French-English bilingual Albertans in the province's future talent pool, which would ultimately result in more opportunities to offer better services through both languages.

In a province boasting resources that make it possible to study in both official languages from kindergarten through to the university level (see Government of Alberta, n.d.c); and in a province that "welcomes a larger proportion of French-speaking immigrants than the national average", with a "[f]rancophone population growth [...] projected to be the highest [in Canada, along with] the Territories" over the next decades (Government of Alberta, 2023b, p. 4); and in a province where "First Nations peoples, with their diverse languages and cultures, were present for thousands of years before any European languages were spoken" (Government of Alberta, 2023b, p. 4); what is inherently wrong about the province becoming more multilingual? With this question in mind, this current paper looks to explore how the newly updated *French Policy* and its ideas about language fit within language learning policy in Alberta and how the learning of languages in Alberta is represented through those policies.

### **Literature Review**

Language planning has often been described based on varying degrees of three orientations: language-as-problem, language-as-right, and language-as-resource (Ruíz, 1984). Language planners' beliefs of any given language as a problem, as a right, or as a resource, shape, and thus can be seen in, language policy discourse (see Macías, 2016). This orientations-minded view is helpful in understanding how policy actors conceptualize language(s) in society. There is, however, a more recent call to shift the focus away from these more static and pre-defined orientations about language toward a praxis that incorporates more humanizing orientations, where a language user's historically contextualized position in time and place gains relevancy (Kaveh, 2022). For the purposes

of this current paper, however, both of these viewpoints will be helpful in looking at the newly updated *French Policy* document and its place in language education policy in Alberta. The policy makers' conceptualizations, seen in the policy itself, reflect their own beliefs on language and on the impact of the historical and situational contexts around French-speaking communities in the province.

At the national level, Canada has two official languages, English and French. Although only the province of New Brunswick and all three territories have taken up official bilingualism, there are several linguistic rights afforded to communities of official language speakers who find themselves in minority situations, regardless of where they are in Canada (see Government of Canada, 1981). This official bilingualism does not at all mean, though, that Canada's linguistic landscape only involves two languages. The importance, and prevalence, of languages other than English and French in Canada has led to many critiques around the notion and implementation of official bilingualism. Whereas official bilingualism was intended to unite French and English and multiculturalism was intended to leave room for 'the rest' at the national level, the lack of official bilingualism at the provincial level was intended to allow linguistic assimilation to progress to a point where demands for services in the official minority language could increasingly be forgotten (Edwards, 1994). It has also been argued that the value(s) and knowledge that languages other than the two official languages carry need to be both recognized and protected from language assimilation (Schreyer, 2008) and language shift. Interestingly, recent evidence has shown that the omnipresent focus on Canada's official bilingualism is actually having negative impacts on the teaching and learning of French as a second language in anglophone parts of Canada, as it is creating obstacles for French language teachers who are also fluent in languages other than the two official languages, as well as for students with similarly multilingual backgrounds, because both groups are unable to find a place for their linguistic identities in the French language classroom (Wernicke, 2022).

It is quite clear that language policy and education are a closely-knit team. Schools play an important role as the space and the method through which linguistic, and thus cultural, norms are instilled, enforced, and reproduced, more often than not, as a tool to establish and protect a certain definition of a nation-state (see Heller & McElhinny, 2017; Moïse, 2007). As such, it becomes important to investigate and understand not only which group(s) benefit(s) from a given language policy, but also, perhaps more importantly, which group(s) suffer(s) due to that same language policy (see Heller & Duchêne, 2007). In Canada, the interplay between language policy and education is evident whether at the adult or youth level in Canada (see, e.g., Ellyson et al., 2016; Kircher, 2022). Education has been, without fail, used as a tool to spread and ingrain language planning policy, for better or, often, for worse. Canada has no need to look far and wide for examples. Language planning policies played a major role in the federally-run system of residential schools (Meighan, 2023). While the two official, and colonially dominant, English and French have competed for power throughout Canada's history, systems of education have been used to invariably assimilate, suppress, and group all other languages, particularly Canada's Indigenous languages, together onto an inferior rung in the language hierarchy, despite the critical role that the speakers of these languages played and continue to play in the development of the country (see Patrick, 2007).

At the same time, though, education can also act as a tool of resistance to past and current societal wrongs (see Dormer & Woelk, 2018), where the introduction and

celebration of minority languages can work towards greater levels of inclusion and shared learning (Sterzuk & Fayant, 2016). Education can also serve as a means to reverse language assimilation, fostering language revitalization efforts (see, e.g., McCarty et al., 2021; McIvor & Ball, 2019). In this, the potential for language-encouraging education policy to empower historically marginalized groups becomes evident. This has been reflected in past calls from many for institutional support for Canada's Indigenous languages (see Patrick, 2007). The analysis of the conceptualizations on which current education policies are based also becomes an essential part of the process.

### Methodology

For this paper, which aims to critically explore Alberta's language learning policy, the 'What's the problem represented to be?' (WPR) method was chosen. This approach, developed by Carol Bacchi, focuses on the concepts around problematizations (Bacchi, 2012). According to this method, all policy texts are prescriptive and, as such, act as tools for their writers to respond to aspects in a community or society that they perceive as problematic and needing correction (Bacchi, 2023). In analyzing the discourse found in policy texts with this mindset, it becomes possible to determine the 'problem' that policy makers have identified and are subsequently attempting to address. The WPR method also considers ignored issues and taken-for-granted understandings that exist around this 'problem', as well as the potential effects that the conceptualizations and representations found in a policy may have (Bacchi, 2018). The WPR method employs a list of six questions to guide the critical analysis of a given policy or policies, along with a seventh, reflexive step (Table 1):

**Table 1**

*WPR's Six Questions and Seventh Step (from Bacchi & Goodwin, 2016)*

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Question 1: What's the problem represented to be in a specific policy or policies?

Question 2: What deep-seated presuppositions or assumptions underlie this representation of the 'problem'?

Question 3: How has this representation of the 'problem' come about?

Question 4: What is left unproblematic in this problem representation? Where are the silences? Can the 'problem' be conceptualized differently?

Question 5: What effects are produced by this representation of the 'problem'?

Question 6: How and where has this representation of the 'problem' been produced, disseminated and defended? How has it been and/or how can it be disrupted and replaced?

Step 7: Apply this list of questions to your own problem representations.

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This six-question-plus-seventh-step framework provides a procedure that supports rigorous analysis through a clear and transparent methodological approach (something often critiqued of discourse analysis, see Riemann, 2023), opening the opportunity for an analysis of discourses (where the focus placed on particular meanings within specific contexts becomes the object of study, see Bacchi, 2005).

The policy documents used for this study come from the Government of Alberta, its Ministry of Education and its Francophone Secretariat, which itself runs under the Ministry of Arts, Culture and Status of Women (Government of Alberta, n.d.a), a Ministry that, just by its name, clearly holds many varied files. These documents included the province's newly updated *French Policy*, in both its anglophone and francophone versions, the province's *Languages Act*, its *Education Act*, as well as Government of Alberta web pages pertaining to various aspects of language learning. As each province is responsible for its own education system in Canada, these documents make up the majority of the object of study. Nevertheless, attempting to analyze these policy documents without consideration of their national context would produce an incomplete picture, so the larger Canadian context was considered when pertinent. In particular, the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms* is oft-cited in the *French Policy* and was thus included in this study's analysis. Alberta's education system and its language policies were developed, and continue to develop, within Canada's officially bilingual context, as well as in its multilingual context.

### Analysis

To analyze these policy documents, each one of the WPR method's six questions were considered, both separately and collectively. During initial readings of the *French Policy* document, sections were coded according to which WPR method question they appeared to be related to. These initial readings were especially useful for questions 1 through 5, which aim to identify and explore the problematizations that are represented within a policy document. Similarly, during these initial readings, sections were coded to help identify who was mentioned in the *French Policy* to develop on, in particular, questions 1 through 4's focuses on provided representations and missing voices. As the problematization in this document began to emerge during these initial readings, particular focus was also given to any mentions of education or language learning.

After this initial coding, other related policy documents produced by the Albertan and Canadian governments were consulted. This was done both to contextualize the problematization that was emerging in the initial readings of the *French Policy* and due to their references in the *French Policy* document itself. Documents from French language-focused groups in Alberta were included along with Government of Alberta information on their francophone-focused departments for the same reasons and to explore question 6, in particular. The ways in which these other documents supplemented, corresponded or contrasted with the problematization in the *French Policy* were analyzed through each of the WPR questions separately, as well as in this paper's subsequent discussion section, where these similarities and differences were considered collectively alongside the implications of the *French Policy* document's problematization and, ultimately, the implications around a possible alternative problematization. The following is organized into responses to each individual WPR question:

#### **Question 1: What's the Problem Represented to be in a Specific Policy or Policies?**

Alberta's *French Policy* initially appears to be an answer to the rising number and proportion of francophone speakers in the province. Immigration and interprovincial migration at levels 'above national averages' are both cited as causes. With more Albertans using French, particularly as their first language, there's a need to make sure that they can

thrive and be a part of the community. This too, of course, adds pressure onto Alberta to ensure that this growing official language minority group's rights are being met under the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*, particularly under section 23 concerning minority language education rights (see Government of Canada, 1981).

These rights are presented in the *French Policy* through the less-than-affirmatory word 'obligations'. A long footnote in the introduction explains that "[a]lthough the Government of Alberta is not subject to the federal Official Languages Act, it does have constitutional obligations respecting French under the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms" (Government of Alberta, 2023b, p. 5). The province's *Education Act* also makes a reference to this federal charter, but in a different fashion, with the statement that

[i]f an individual has rights under section 23 of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms to have the individual's children receive school instruction in French, the individual's children are entitled to receive that instruction in accordance with those rights wherever in Alberta those rights apply. (Government of Alberta, 2012, p. 29)

The Government of Alberta's overview web page of French language education offered in the province begins by a similar statement centred on rights: "Canadian citizens belonging to the Francophone minority in Alberta have the right to have their children educated in Francophone schools according to section 23 of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms" (Government of Alberta, n.d.b). Unlike in the *French Policy*, the focus in the *Education Act* and this government web page is on the individual having rights, rather than the province having obligations. This slight change in focus in the *French Policy* highlights the belief that action in the province is obligated from outside the province.

The word 'obligations' continues to be a focus later in the *French Policy* – interestingly, in another clarifying footnote – when the policy's guiding principles are listed. The time is taken to add that "[t]hese guiding principles do not intend to create new obligations, nor do they limit or undermine any of Alberta's constitutional or statutory obligations" (Government of Alberta, 2023b, p. 7). While staying inside the lines of what the Canadian government guarantees for minority language education rights, the province does not wish to expand those rights. These 'obligations' will eventually fall to the hands of the Francophone Secretariat. This government body operates under the Ministry of Arts, Culture and Status of Women (see Government of Alberta, n.d.a), which has previously published a 3-year action plan and accompanying annual reports, listing various sections of priority, as well as interested key stakeholders, but without offering any measurable outcomes (see Government of Alberta, 2020, n.d.f).

This said, the *French Policy* document itself appears to ultimately find its own origins in the recognized need for more and better government services for francophones. Despite the fact that "Alberta's 1988 Languages Act does not specifically speak to services" (Government of Alberta, 2023b, p. 5), the increasing number of French-speakers in Alberta is seen to have implications for the government's future services, with "more requests for services in French in Alberta[, leading to] an opportunity to better serve a significant portion of Albertans" (Government of Alberta, 2023b, p. 6). There are no direct references in the document to francophones in Alberta struggling or not receiving (quality) service in the past, nor are there any explanations of why these improved services are now understood as needed, outside of this predicted rising demand in the future. Nevertheless, the policy

does state the importance and need that "[w]hen government [sic] provides services in French, those services are of comparable quality and accessibility to the equivalent services provided in English" (Government of Alberta, 2023b, p. 6). This need for quality services in both languages has acted as a catalyst in the past. On the Francophone Secretariat's website, there is a quick explanation about the first version of the *French Policy* being published in 2017 "following a period of consultations with both internal and community stakeholders" (Government of Alberta, n.d.a). Similarly, the newly updated version refers to the creation of the Francophone Secretariat in 1999 as part of an intention to improve the lives of French-speaking Albertans (Government of Alberta, 2023b). It does seem, then, that past issues in the quality of government services are at the heart of this document.

The *French Policy* does recognize that education plays an important role in the improvement of government services with the statement that "the continued growth and vitality of the Francophonie can be supported by continuing to foster early childhood supports, primary and secondary education, and post-secondary programming in French" (Government of Alberta, 2023b, p. 7). However, while later talking about communication, a different section concerning education states that

[t]o support Alberta in fulfilling its constitutional obligations to provide equivalent Francophone education under the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms and the School Act, Government of Alberta ministries will consult with Alberta Education when developing and distributing any print or digital materials intended for school-aged children and youth (Kindergarten to Grade 12) and their parents/guardians to ensure simultaneous provision in English and French. (Government of Alberta, 2023b, p. 9)

Note, again, the concentration on 'obligations', and the fact that the *School Act* had already been replaced by the *Education Act* several years before this updated version of the *French Policy* (Government of Alberta, 2012). It is also important to highlight the focus in these quotations on learning in French, rather than the learning of French.

## **Question 2: What Deep-Seated Presuppositions or Assumptions Underlie This Representation of the 'Problem'?**

To begin, the policy's title, and its francophone variant, are of interest. In just using the title of 'French Policy', there is an assumption that, in Alberta, at least, the word 'French', with no given context, can only refer to language. The francophone version of this policy, on the other hand, carries a more precise title that can be translated to 'Policy regarding the francophonie' (see Gouvernement de l'Alberta, 2023), which clearly refers to a community of French-language speakers. The anglophone version employs no such precision in its main title, nor in a later main heading of "Alberta's French Policy" (Government of Alberta, 2023b, p. 6). This is not due to the English lexicon's lack of the word 'francophonie', as a footnote halfway through the English-language document offers the Government of Alberta's own definition of the term (Government of Alberta, 2023b, p. 6), rather, it appears to show a deep-seated association with the word 'French' and language.

It is also of note that the anglophone version of the *French Policy* uses the word 'francophonie' with an uppercase 'F' throughout the document when referring to French-speakers. It is unclear if these French-speakers are in Alberta only, or elsewhere. In both

English and French, the uppcased 'Francophonie' is traditionally only used to refer to the international organization of that name. This is at its strangest in the *French Policy's* footnote elucidating that "[t]he Government of Alberta uses the term 'Francophonie' as an inclusive term to describe French-speaking individuals and communities, and also to represent the organizations that support its vitality" (Government of Alberta, 2023b, p. 6). The lowercase 'f' version, however, is the form that is historically used to refer to all French-speaking people and their communities. Those involved in the French-language version of the *French Policy* were clearly aware of this distinction, where the lowercase 'f' is used throughout, unlike their anglophone counterparts.

Another assumption seen in this document, which brings this discussion closer to the world of education, is that a bilingual Alberta should not be the goal. Although the *French Policy* begins with introductory references to the French language's historical role in Alberta as "the first European language spoken in Alberta" (Government of Alberta, 2023b, p. 4), the policy, in truth, "is not about making the province bilingual" (Government of Alberta, 2023b, p. 5). Instead, the historical reality of there being first language speakers of French in Alberta, combined with the 'obligations' from the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*, requires some concessions in terms of governmental services and education offered in French for those who qualify. There appears to be no need to promote the use or learning of French in the province otherwise. The sole reference to Albertans learning French is a statistical mention that many are learning it, found within the document's introductory contextualization of the French language's existence in the province (Government of Alberta, 2023b, p. 4), and which will be further explored elsewhere in this paper.

The *French Policy* also exemplifies an issue of tunnel vision that often occurs within Canada's officially bilingual context. Despite the policy's opening sentence referring to the languages and cultures of First Nations peoples – which is the only reference of the kind in the document – this policy reflects a widespread assumption that only the two federally official languages require (or merit?) special attention. In other Alberta policy documents, such as the *Education Act*, there are several sections referring to minute details on education for those who have French as a first language, while ignoring or placing all other language learning as a quick side-note (see Government of Alberta, 2012). In other cases, French and 'other languages' are grouped together. For example, when stipulating languages of instruction, the *Education Act* states that

[n]otwithstanding subsection (1)[, that every student is entitled to receive instruction in English], a board may authorize the use of French or any other language as a language of instruction. [...] The Minister may make regulations governing the provision of instruction in any language authorized. (Government of Alberta, 2012, p. 31)

In this example, the offloading of responsibility clearly falls onto individual school boards who, on their own volition, can choose to endeavour to develop their own system using another language of instruction, but on which the Ministry of Education ultimately has the final say. For the province's *Languages Act*, there is no mention of languages other than English and French (see Government of Alberta, 2000). Similarly, the national *Francophone Immigration Strategy* begins its introduction with the words "linguistic duality", followed by a discussion on how "[o]fficial languages enhance diversity and

inclusion" in the nation (Government of Canada, 2019a, p. 2). The historical and current significance of languages other than the two nationally official languages, be they First Nations, or any other heritage languages, is forgotten, further perpetuating a three-tiered English-French-Other linguistic hierarchy in a country with a multilingual history and an ever-increasing multilingualism while boasting the values of multiculturalism (see Government of Alberta, 2023a; Government of Canada, 2023).

### **Question 3: How Has This Representation of the 'Problem' Come About?**

The 'problem' of increased demand for (quality) governmental services has arisen from trends of domestic migration and international immigration of French speakers into Alberta, as well as from increased activism and advocacy by francophone-supporting associations. The *French Policy* describes predicted increases in the province's French-speaking population and was developed within the recent context of increasing attention on issues of integration of French-speaking immigrants in Alberta (see, e.g., Madibbo, 2016, 2019; Dion et al., 2021), as well as in the context of Canada's *Francophone Immigration Strategy*, which has "[s]upport[ing] the successful integration and retention of French-speaking newcomers" as one of its three objectives (Government of Canada, 2019a, p. 3).

The influx and growing numbers of French speakers is frequently referenced in the *French Policy* document, including a reference to recent census data on the "more than 261,000 Albertans [who] speak French" (Government of Alberta, 2023b, p. 4). There is only one direct reference to the concept of integration in the *French Policy*, and this reference focuses on economic factors, stating that "fostering Francophone economic development plays an essential role in integrating and retaining French-speaking Albertans in the province once their education in French is complete" (Government of Alberta, 2023b, p. 7). With the ending of this statement, the *French Policy*, again, appears to be focusing itself towards those who qualify for education in the French language under the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*, rather than other groups that speak or are learning the language.

### **Question 4: What Is Left Unproblematic in This Problem Representation? Where Are the Silences? Can the 'Problem' Be Conceptualized Differently?**

The *French Policy*, although referencing the importance of education, does not address the learning of French in its problematization. Instead, the focus is on learning *in* French, as obligated by section 23 of the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*, and on the Government of Alberta offering services to these speakers of French. This is unsurprising, however, given the introductory statement that "[t]his is not about making the province bilingual" (Government of Alberta, 2023b, p. 5).

Albertans who belong to groups outside of already French-speaking communities are missing in the *French Policy*. Without encouraging interactions between communities, the opportunity to create a more inclusive Alberta is missed and, instead, the idea of isolated linguistic communities is left unchallenged. The closest mention in the *French Policy* to such an idea is the goal of achieving "[s]ervices targeted to be provided in French [that] strengthen the sense of belonging to the province among French-speaking individuals" (Government of Alberta, 2023b, p. 6), but there is no mention of other forms of integration into society, nor of non-French-speaking groups. Speakers of the English

language are only mentioned to explain that they are the majority – which, in itself is an interesting allusion to the realities of a three-tiered English-French-Other hierarchy – and First Nations peoples only get their customary introductory sentence. Oddly too, the Métis people, whose histories are typically associated with the histories of French-speakers (see Lemaire, 2020), are only mentioned once in the *French Policy*. Its quick introductory recapitulation of Alberta's linguistic history explains that "[a]t the time [until about 1870], many Métis people spoke the language of their French ancestors" (Government of Alberta, 2023b, p. 4). The involvement of groups outside of those who legally qualify for education in French should be considered as a part of the process, if the goal is social inclusion and integration.

The situation referred to in the *French Policy* could alternatively be problematized as 'not enough Albertans are learning French'. Higher rates of English-French bilingualism in the general population would offer the Government of Alberta a local talent pool to select from that could provide more and better services in French to those who need it. There is no mention in the *French Policy* to the benefits of multilingualism, be they individual or societal, and the institutional benefits appear to only be associated to responding to the 'problem' that the policy is attempting to address, that of higher demand for services. There is also no such mention in the *Languages Act*.

It would be ignorant here to not further explore the one mention of French language learning in Alberta found in the *French Policy* document, which boasts that "approximately one in three Alberta students is enrolled in a French-language program (Kindergarten to Grade 12)" (Government of Alberta, 2023b, p. 4). This fact should, however, not be taken at face-value as proof of high levels of support for language learning, nor even, also importantly, as proof of high levels of French-language program completion. Past research looking at student participation in Alberta's French as a Second Language courses has found that enrolment rates experience huge drops once students reach the secondary school level (Gillis & Takam, 2020). Very few students are taking these language programs at the highest grades, meaning very few are developing their learned language to its highest potentials within the province's school system. In other Canadian provinces seeing similar trends in French language learning, the decision has been made to develop frameworks that include the goal of increasing participation rates through to graduation (see, e.g., Takam & Gillis, 2021, 2022).

At the same time, Alberta, like many other parts of the country, is struggling to find and keep teachers who fit the bill for French language classes (see, e.g., Lapkin et al., 2006; Jack & Nyman, 2019; Wernicke et al., 2022). Teachers are leaving the profession at worrying rates, and questions of teaching quality are coming to a fore. Interestingly, Alberta's *Education Act* has a section on teacher employment qualifications that stipulates that "[a school] board may employ a competent individual to teach a language or culture under the supervision of a teacher who holds a [teaching] certificate" (Government of Alberta, 2012, p. 151). Such a situation would admittedly result in employing two teachers for one class, but it may be an option to explore as it offers some flexibility in finding language teachers, while also, admittedly, leading to important questions related to knowing a language versus knowing a language and how to teach it.

**Question 5: What Effects Are Produced by This Representation of the 'Problem'?**

The 'problem' appears to be framed as one that is being produced by changes in Alberta's demographics, rather than one that is connected to the province's language and/or language learning policies. This allows for reduced internalized reflections on what is currently being done in terms of languages in the province by shifting the focus onto minority linguistic groups and their growing influence on Albertan society. It allows for more status quo in the province to remain and for more nation-wide forces, especially in terms of immigration and domestic migration, to develop into the main talking points of the discussion, rather than important notions such as integration. In the same vein, the stated rate of student participation in French language courses, with no further context (or reflection) accorded to it, avoids the full picture, which includes low participation rates in secondary schools.

As this 'problem' is shown as a rather gradual and largely future issue, the answer to the need for government services is not aimed at offering large swaths of provincial services in French in a timely manner. The communications guiding principle in the *French Policy* is supported by approaches aiming to increase services in the French language such as: "[t]he Government of Alberta commits to gradually improve the level and breadth of content available in French on the Alberta.ca website" (Government of Alberta, 2023b, p. 9). Such approaches are, however, further limited by the earlier 'policy statement' section that ends with the caveat "as resources allow" (Government of Alberta, 2023b, p. 6). Furthermore, the *French Policy* contains the summative enunciation that "Ministries must inform the minister responsible for the Francophone Secretariat before discontinuing or otherwise significantly changing a service in French" (Government of Alberta, 2023b, p. 10). The specifics and/or consequences of such a situation are not made clear in the document. The true scale of these 'gradual improvements' will become much clearer at a later date.

Even as the *French Policy* states that "[t]he provision of select government services in French and other supports to the community is not an obligation, but a decision that the Government of Alberta, through its ministries and agencies, has made" (Government of Alberta, 2023b, p. 5), the ubiquitous attention given to the idea of 'obligations' is clearly present. Ignoring the 'selectivity' of government services to be offered in French, this concept of 'obligations' weakens the attempt to show that these changes to services are an act of goodwill. A mere reordering of the clauses in this quoted statement could have better presented the desire to serve French-speakers in the province. By the same token, discussions on official language minority rights that French-speaking Canadians have in terms of education could have been reworded to focus on the more affirmational concept of rights, particularly in a long-winded footnote that, instead, is used to define "Alberta's constitutional and statutory obligations" (Government of Alberta, 2023b, p. 5). The repetitive focus in the *French Policy* on 'obligations', rather than 'rights', particularly around education, moves the focus closer to the idea that the rights of francophones in Alberta are being primarily upheld due to this being stipulated by a national government policy, rather than coming from the province itself.

**Question 6: How and Where Has This Representation of the 'Problem' Been Produced, Disseminated and Defended? How Has It Been and/or How Can It Be Disrupted and Replaced?**

The Government of Alberta's Francophone Secretariat was created for the purpose of, among other related responsibilities, "serv[ing] as the liaison between the provincial government and the Alberta Francophonie [... and] clarif[ying] and represent[ing] the needs of the French-speaking Albertans within government, with various ministries and agencies" (Government of Alberta, n.d.a). Its key role as a producer and potential disruptor of this 'problem' representation is also clear in the *French Policy*, as it is the part of government that "is mandated to guide and monitor the implementation of this policy across government [... and that] will coordinate an annual report with other ministries" (Government of Alberta, 2023b, p. 11). The Francophone Secretariat will need to do so while operating under the umbrella of the Ministry of Arts, Culture and Status of Women. It is, unfortunately, unclear who exactly works in the Francophone Secretariat. There does exist, however, an Alberta Advisory Council on the Francophonie within the Government of Alberta, whose members are listed and appointed by ministerial order, of which one member carries the title of co-president and the 'name' of "Francophone Secretariat, Alberta Culture, Executive Director" (Government of Alberta, n.d.d), with the additional information of "Biography not available" (Government of Alberta, n.d.e). It will be important to continue to investigate the Francophone Secretariat's roles in and contributions to policies revolving around language in Alberta, as well as its transparency.

There are several non-governmental associations that are focused on French-speaking communities in Alberta and that are involved in both the representation and disruption of the 'problem' represented in the *French Policy*. One example of how these groups continue and interrupt this representation can be clearly seen in a web page with a translated title of 'Myths and Realities', where statistics on the rising number of francophones in Alberta are followed by arguments against various stereotypes and prejudices around topics such as racism and reminders of the contributions of immigrants to their new communities (Réseau en immigration francophone de l'Alberta, n.d.). The trends of francophone national immigration and domestic migration are frequently discussed and promoted by these groups, along with some issues that stem from these trends, especially those around integration and inclusion. These organizations aim to support and promote participation in Alberta's French-speaking communities and are increasingly being included as stakeholders in policies related to the French language, such as in the action plan that correlates with the *French Policy* being discussed here (see Association canadienne-française de l'Alberta, n.d.; Government of Alberta, 2020). As such, these associations play an important role in the way in which this 'problem' is, and will be, represented at all levels. It is important to note, also, that the mission statements for these associations contain references to 'rights', rather than 'obligations' (see, e.g., Association canadienne-française de l'Alberta, n.d.).

Another important area where this problematization is maintained and/or resisted is in education. The way in which French learning is defined, offered, supported and shaped is and will have a major impact on how trends in Alberta's French-speaking communities develop. Conceptualizations about the French language and its role in Alberta will be transmitted via government policies, through accompanying education policies, and onto

the next generations of Albertans. This is true for both learning in French and learning of French.

### Discussion

The three orientations typical of language planning literature – language-as-problem, language-as-right, and language-as-resource (see Ruíz, 1984) – play an obvious role in Alberta's updated *French Policy*, where the divisive problem-versus-right duality is overshadowing the more important concept of language as a resource. As seen in question 1, the problematization of anticipated higher demand for better governmental services has been framed around 'obligations' accorded to the province by national-level language policy. While it's important to recognize and reflect on the need for more and better governmental services in languages outside of the dominant English, it's also important to discern and reflect on the beliefs that are feeding policy that does so. There are many points where the *French Policy* shows oversight concerning important aspects around the topic, such as the terms 'French' in its title and 'F/francophonie', and the Alberta government's prior replacement of the *School Act*, seen in questions 1 and 2. This hardly communicates a thoughtful consideration or interest in the issue at hand.

Through its current representation, this anticipated higher demand for services begins to sound more like an annoyance that the government is obligated to handle because of the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*, rather than one that Albertans rightfully deserve. Failing to recognize what languages contribute to a society, whether they are official or otherwise, is a failure to move that society forward and past a language-as-problem versus language-as-right dichotomy. This recognition of the historical and contemporary resource that are minority and non-official language groups is an important step in changing and better understanding ingrained conceptualizations of hierarchies within a society (see Kaveh, 2022). Previously assumed structures of oppression can be challenged and changed to allow more individuals and groups who find themselves outside of the power-majority to enjoy their rights and actively participate in the development of a better society.

With an alternative problematization of the current situation, such as the one discussed in question 4, in which the lack of genuine support and encouragement for the growth of the French language through Alberta's education system becomes the 'problem', the aim pivots to empowering education and multilingual Albertans who, in turn, can help develop the province and offer more and better governmental services to French-speakers in the province, which is presented as a major goal of the *French Policy*. This type of conceptualization was previously stated by Alberta Education, itself a part within the Government of Alberta, back in 2004. It argued in its rationale for their nine-year programming for French as a Second Language courses, which is still the current programming in 2025, that

Albertans who are linguistically and culturally competent in French can work toward the promotion of cultural understanding and respect for diversity by breaking down cultural barriers and fostering good will and mutual respect. With increasing access to global markets and an expanding tourism industry, employees need to understand and relate to customers and business people from a variety of linguistic and cultural backgrounds, thus

enhancing our province's influence and competitiveness here and abroad. A population that is linguistically and culturally competent in French cannot help but provide a multitude of services in the public and private sector, including volunteer services. (Government of Alberta, 2004, p. 3)

This is a great illustration from the Government of Alberta itself of some of the numerous benefits that can be attributed to language learning, regardless of the language learned.

In the same section for the nine-year program of French as a Second Language, however, the pitfalls of placing too much focus on Canadian bilingualism are also clear. The rationale begins with the explanation that the program's "courses provide Alberta students, and Canadian society in general, with definite benefits. By learning French, students gain both personally and academically. Society, in turn, profits from the contribution of citizens who are both bilingual and bicultural" (Government of Alberta, 2004, p. 3). Where do the many Albertans who speak a language other than English and French fit into this described educational view? For policies aimed at the French language in Alberta, such as the *French Policy*, whose only discussion of language education is in the context of obligations due to official bilingualism, thoughtful reflection is needed in order to ensure that speakers of languages outside of English and French are not marginalized, ignored and/or forgotten in the process.

With this in mind, the alternative problematization proposed in question 4 of this paper should be expanded to 'not enough Albertans are learning languages other than English'. The history of language planning throughout Canada has led to countless calls for better policies around language learning outside of the two official languages. At the national level, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission has called for the acknowledgement that "Aboriginal rights include Aboriginal language rights" (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015, p. 2). Calls have been made for institutional support for Indigenous languages, as well as for the inclusion of Indigenous languages in any practices that are a part of the decolonizing process (see Patrick, 2007). These calls led to the creation of the *Indigenous Languages Act*, with its first stated purpose as "support[ing] and promot[ing] the use of Indigenous languages", later followed by the goal of "support[ing] Indigenous language learning and cultural activities [...] to increase the number of new speakers of Indigenous languages" (Government of Canada, 2019b, pp. 4–5). Education, at all levels, has a role to play in the learning of Indigenous and other heritage languages. It remains to be seen how, over time, these developments in the discussion around linguistic rights will be integrated into Alberta's education policy. The policy document at hand, and any other policy referring to languages, needs to take Indigenous and other heritage languages into account. The *French Policy* – as well as the province's *Languages Act* and *Education Act* – fails to mention Indigenous languages, outside of the *French Policy*'s single token introductory sentence. As seen in question 4, this fails to challenge the perpetuation of a three-tiered English-French-Other hierarchy.

Alberta's current language-related course programming carries a stated understanding and belief in the potential benefits of language learning. The province does offer some language programming for languages other than the two official languages. On the province's web page presenting its current programs of study, the official languages of English and French can be found in their own separate sections, while 'International Languages' and 'First Nations, Métis, and Inuit Language and Culture' can be found grouped into their own separate sections (Government of Alberta, 2025), further

perpetuating an English-French-Other hierarchy. It's also important to remember, from question 2, that these language programs are offered, through the *Education Act*, in such a way that the impetus is offloaded onto school boards, who are likely wary of potential hurdles coming from the province as they work to develop any such program. Future research into how Alberta's language policies bode for languages outside Canada's official languages should aim to better understand these policies' relationships with the multilingual realities of Albertan society.

This is not to say that the learning of French in Alberta should not be an important piece in the puzzle, however. Past research into the potentials of language education in Canada have found that children, whose spoken home language was neither of the official languages and who were taking French minority language education, i.e. immersion or francophone schooling in anglophone-majority communities, were more likely to acquire and/or maintain this home language, while also learning French and fully functioning in anglo-Canada (Slavkov, 2017). Those who took majority language schooling, i.e. instruction in English in those same communities, were more likely to see their home language abilities disappear, while also, of course, not learning any French (Slavkov, 2017). This has important implications for Canada's and Alberta's many inhabitants who do not speak English or French at home. This, too, reiterates past arguments for the implementation and promotion of a trilingual type of schooling across Canada, whereby students learn both of the country's official languages along with a heritage language (see Cummins & Danesi, 1990). The feasibility of the widespread use of this type of schooling is still up for debate, but the current climate of language learning policy is certainly not conducive. With a change in conceptualization towards the need for Albertans to learn more languages than just English, education can lead the way for a more inclusive and multilingual future. This would also be a future that sees more government official positions being filled by qualified candidates who already have had opportunities to learn more than just one of the languages spoken inside and outside the province, thus further improving the types of communication and services that could be offered.

### Conclusion

There is a need for a modern framework in education aimed at promoting language learning and teaching in Alberta, similar to those developed in other Canadian provinces. This needs to be a language learning framework that challenges ingrained ideologies that privilege the English language and official bilingualism – in that order – over the learning of other languages. As the Francophone Secretariat works with ministries across the Government of Alberta in the role of ultimate caretaker for policies such as the *French Policy*, the opportunity to influence a more multilingual-orientated policy and education shows itself. For Alberta's future, it should not be problematized in such a way that it is seen as just a question of offering governmental services in French in order to fulfill obligations that exist due to out-of-province constraints. It should, instead, be seen as a question of responding to and fostering Alberta's multilingual realities and developing greater inclusion in the province. Why should a province full of capable multilinguals, fluent in both of the country's official languages, and potentially fluent in even more languages, not be the goal? This would be a large education-led step towards the *French Policy's* recognized overarching opportunity "to serve a significant portion of Albertans, while enhancing [Alberta's] competitive advantage and strengthening [Alberta's]

relationship with the Francophonie [sic] across Canada and the world" (Government of Alberta, 2023b, p. 6).

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