

## Chapeau à vous: French-minority Language Teachers' Pandemic Pedagogies

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### Article abstract

The purpose of this paper was to unpack French-minority language teachers' perspectives on the impact of the pandemic on their teaching. In fall 2021, semi-structured interviews were conducted virtually with 40 K-12 teachers of French as a minority language in Manitoba and Nova Scotia. While the pandemic has undoubtedly been challenging for language and literacy teachers, many have also developed adaptations and strategies. This paper focuses on those pedagogical accomplishments and teachers' self-reported moments of success. Three main themes explored were the integration of technology into language teaching, language teacher collaboration and linguistic community building with students.



# *Chapeau à vous<sup>1</sup>: French-minority Language Teachers' Pandemic Pedagogies*

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## *Abstract*

The purpose of this paper was to unpack French-minority language teachers' perspectives on the impact of the pandemic on their teaching. In fall 2021, semi-structured interviews were conducted virtually with 40 K-12 teachers of French as a minority language in Manitoba and Nova Scotia. While the pandemic has undoubtedly been challenging for language and literacy teachers, many have also developed adaptations and strategies. This paper focuses on those pedagogical accomplishments and teachers' self-reported moments of success. Three main themes explored were the integration of technology into language teaching, language teacher collaboration and linguistic community building with students.

*Key words:* minority language education; pandemic; online learning; literacy in a minority language setting; integration of technology, teacher perspectives

## *Introduction*

In Spring 2020, schools around the world closed for an unprecedented amount of time due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Early projections of the impact on literacy learning due to these school closures were as daunting and unknown as the virus itself (Kuhfeld et al., 2020). However, many teachers developed online pedagogies virtually overnight in an attempt to reduce the learning losses projected (Bonk, 2020). While the pandemic affected teachers worldwide, at the time of designing our project, preliminary studies on education and the pandemic focused on majority populations in countries such as the UK (Jones, 2020), USA (Kuhfeld et al., 2020), France (Guironnet, 2020), and Canada (Doreleyers, 2020). Recent studies have remarked that visible minorities in the USA (Maleku et al., 2021), UK (Blundell et al., 2020), and Canada (Dusseault, 2020) experienced different or more profound negative effects due to the pandemic than majority populations. Since we, the authors, both taught in French-minority contexts in our respective Canadian universities, it was our belief that linguistic minorities might also be experiencing similar or different difficulties than the portion of the population that primarily speaks the language of the majority. This led us to develop a study aimed at exploring French-minority teachers' lived moments of hardship but also of successes achieved during the pandemic. Our main

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<sup>1</sup> Equivalent English expression: Hats off to you

research goal was to honour teacher voices and particularly the voices of French-minority language teachers in Canada.

Firstly, this article will describe minority language education in general and then will contextualize both research sites in Manitoba and Nova Scotia. This will be followed by a description of the theoretical framework and the methods. Next, the results will be presented under three themes: integration of technology into language teaching, language teacher collaboration and linguistic community building with students. The text will conclude with a section on virtually mediated research accomplishments and general closing remarks.

### *Minority Language Education*

In Canada, outside of the province of Québec, French is an official minority language. Due to Article 23 of *The Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*, official linguistic minorities (Anglophones in Québec and Francophones outside of Québec) have the right to education in their official minority language. Since the signing of the charter in 1982, every province and territory now has at least one school division responsible for French-minority education<sup>2</sup> (Landry et al., 2007). The policies rendering French-language education a right were meant to protect the language and ensure its survival. Minority language education programs are different from majority language educational programs in that language, identity, and culture are crucial components of programming. This distinction has a direct influence on schools, notably on the rapport with the language and how the language is taught (Cortier, 2009). In minority language educational contexts around the world, language revitalisation is a key objective and literacy is generally placed at the forefront of this initiative. The role of language and literacy teachers in French-minority schools is “central” because the medium through which they teach all subjects is the French language (Bullock, 2020, p. 59). Through teaching they show students how to use the language and encourage them to use it in different ways to communicate, explore the world and participate actively in it. In the same way that Moore and MacDonald (2013) noted that “language learning is a form of language maintenance” in First Nation communities, French language and literacy learning is also a form of language maintenance, and is undeniably one of the primary goals of minority language educational programs (p. 703).

The plural concept of multimodal literacies (emphasis on the plural to indicate various forms and modes of literacy in more than one language or dialect), is currently being promoted in curricular documents or didactical material focused on French-minority education in Canada (Dagenais, 2020; Gouvernement du Manitoba, 2017). This is because “many empirical studies suggest multimodal learning enhances literacy” (Holloway & Qaisi, 2022, p. 87). For example, technological tools can lead to development in literacy skills such as speaking or writing (Dagenais, 2020), and multimodal texts can be very

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<sup>2</sup> French-minority education will be used in this text to generally describe the schools designated for official Francophone minorities in Canada and to differentiate them from French immersion schools. We acknowledge that many different terms are used to designate these schools in both French and English and within different Canadian provinces.

engaging for the students (Lenters, 2018). Optimal literacy levels and student interest in using the language are exactly what French-minority education schools strive for.

French-minority schools are also expected to, through learning experiences, provide students with opportunities to construct their academic competencies and their identity as members of *la Francophonie* and speakers of the French language (Gérin-Lajoie, 2002; Landry, et al. 2010). In schools, learners experience most of their significant language socialization experiences that contribute to their identity construction. Landry et al. (2005) hypothesized that there were connections between those experiences and a person's language behaviours: enculturation experiences; personal autonomization experiences; and conscientization experiences. To explain personal autonomization experiences, Landry et al., (2005) use Deci and Ryan's (1985) Self-determination Theory. According to this theory, a person's level of self-determination is impacted by the support of three particular "senses" or "feelings" – sense of autonomy, sense of belonging, and sense of competency – and that the fulfillment of these feelings is part of a learners' psychological needs. Reeve (2006) explains that learners look for the satisfaction of their needs in the contexts of their daily life, including at school. This places the school as an important space for not only language learning but also for identity formation, and the development of future French speakers. While each province develops their own curriculum followed in French-minority schools, there are strong contextual commonalities between programming and objectives among all these programs in Canada.

### *Manitoban Context*

While both English and French are Canada's official languages, only 3.4% of Manitobans speak French as a first language (Statistics Canada, 2019). Despite the existence of Article 23, education is provincially run, and Franco-Manitobans were required to submit a claim to the Supreme Court of Canada before the right to education and to run their own schools in French was granted (Laplante, 2001). Following this landmark decision, in 1994, the *Division scolaire franco-manitobaine* (DSFM) was established with the mandate of running all the French-minority schools within the province. Prior to the creation of this division, French-minority schools existed but were all run by different school divisions within the province. In the DSFM's mission statement, it is clear that language maintenance is a primary goal, since the division strives to ensure the fulfilment of each student who will be able to contribute now and in the future to the Franco-Manitoban community<sup>3</sup> (*Division scolaire franco-manitobaine*, 2022). Within the province, the DSFM or French-minority schools teach all subject matters in French. While French immersion schools and English schools within the province are grouped together in school divisions (6 for the city of Winnipeg and 31 for rural Manitoba), French-minority schools, no matter their location, belong to and are run by the DSFM. Today, the DSFM has 24 schools within the province and recruitment for this study was open to teachers from all those 24 schools.

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<sup>3</sup> Full Mission Statement in French: « Assurer l'épanouissement de chaque apprenante et apprenant dans une perspective d'inclusion et de respect au profit de la communauté franco-manitobaine d'aujourd'hui et de demain ». (*Division scolaire franco-manitobaine*, 2022)

### *Nova Scotian Context*

While Nova Scotia's official language is English, like Manitoba, 3.4% of its population indicate that they regularly speak French at home (Statistics Canada, 2019). The Acadian and Francophone families living throughout the province, primarily located in areas strongly linked to the history of the Acadian community and to Francophone immigration to the province, have had varying access to French-language education throughout the province's history. Prior to 1981, there were "écoles bilingues"<sup>4</sup> or "écoles acadiennes"<sup>5</sup> located through the province's Acadian and Francophone communities. In 1981, the Province of Nova Scotia adopted Bill 64, an amendment to the *Education Act of Nova Scotia*. This amendment conferred legal status to the "écoles acadiennes" where Acadian and Francophone families and their children would have access to an education offered entirely in French from grades kindergarten through six as well as a specific number of courses for grades seven through twelve. These schools remained primarily under the jurisdiction of local school boards until the creation of the *Conseil Scolaire Acadien Provincial* (CSAP) in 1996 with the adoption of Bill 39. This amendment groups the province's "écoles acadiennes" under the umbrella of a single organizational body responsible for providing educational programming and administration for the province's French-minority schools.

Since it has been established, the CSAP has grown to serve 6 417 students in twenty-two schools dispersed throughout the school board's three regions (northeast, central, and southwest). As can be seen in the CSAP's mission statement, language and cultural identity are major objectives that are brought to the forefront: "the Conseil Scolaire Acadien Provincial offers first-class education in French, taking into account its cultural mandate" (*Conseil Scolaire Acadien Provincial*, 2022). The similarities between the Francophone populations, the mission statements of both the DSFM and the CSAP as well as our similar research interests were commonalities that strengthened this research study.

Considering the language, literacy and cultural priorities of each division, our main research objective was to better understand the lived experience of teachers who worked in a minority-language context during the pandemic in Manitoba and Nova Scotia. Implicit to understanding the lived experiences of these teachers is an understanding of the specific context in which they teach, and the need for a focus on language and literacy. During the Covid-19 pandemic and the resulting periods of online learning, how did French-minority teachers teach language and literacy? How did they respond to their divisional mission statements through online learning? This article will focus on the pedagogical adaptations and success stories linked to the divisional mandates in Nova Scotia and Manitoba that focus on language, literacy and culture.

### *Theoretical Framework*

A sociolinguistic framework was chosen for this study since it puts emphasis on communication in context (Marshall et Rossman, 2011). Sociolinguists essentially seek to

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<sup>4</sup>Bilingual schools

<sup>5</sup> Acadian schools

understand the relation between language and society “including the impact of social context on the way language is used” (Tarone, 2007, p. 837). Macro sociolinguistics are especially suitable for studies on linguistic minorities since common topics such as “language maintenance, language choice and standardization” are generally of concern to them as well (Pan et al., 2020, p. 5). Language is then socially situated, language use is impacted by its social context and language can be used in research to create knowledge. Gee (2004) agrees stating, “we use language to make things significant (to give them meaning or value) in certain ways, to build significance” (p. 98). In addition to sociolinguistics, Bakhtin’s theory of dialogism, wherein language and speech acts are living phenomena that develop and change through social interaction, was also drawn upon in this study (St John, 2014). Dialogism also encourages the co-construction of knowledge particularly through dialogue and collaboration (Aggarwal, 2015). The teachers who participated in this study co-constructed knowledge with us through dialogue which occurred mainly in French (Heron et al., 2018). Among bilinguals and multilinguals, translanguaging, or the use of more than one shared linguistic and cultural repertoire in natural communication, is likely to occur (Velasco & García, 2014). When conducting research in a linguistic minority setting, it is important to recognize the bilingual or plurilingual competencies of the participants and to be aware that translanguaging may occur during interviews due to researcher positionalities and accents which can impact data collection (Cormier, 2018). In reporting on the data, we strive to highlight participants’ views and experiences told in their own words by respecting the social context through our sociolinguistic design.

### *Methods*

Considering the sociolinguistic framework, a multiple case study design (Halkias et al., 2022) using semi-structured interviews to collect data was an appropriate choice because they “can enable the researchers to be open to relevant unanticipated lines of conversation generated through the discussion whilst also being guided by research themes and indicative questions formulated in advance” (Abedin et al., 2021, p. 203). While the same interview questions were used in both sites, we made sure to design several open-ended questions to allow the participants to choose the direction of their interview and to encourage natural conversation. Our own insider positionalities as former teachers and members of our respective French-minority language communities helped to create rapport, credibility and hopefully promoted “an equalized relationship between the researcher and participants”, which are some of the known benefits of insider researchers (Berkovic et al., 2020, p. 1).

In favour of collecting enough data to understand teachers’ challenges and successes, we decided to interview 20 teachers in each province for a total of 40 participants. Ideally, we wanted to interview participants from both rural and urban regions in the two provinces. “Stratified purposeful” sampling was used to recruit teacher participants who fit specific criteria : they had to have been teaching in their school division since March 2020 and had to have experienced the various school closures due to the pandemic (Marshall & Rossman, 2011, p. 111). In both provinces, the interest in participating in the study was high and we were both able to recruit all the participants through the initial recruitment letter sent via email to the participants after having obtained



divisional permission. Before obtaining divisional permission, the project received Ethics Board Approval from each of our universities. Table 1 describes the participants' regions as well as the subject and grade levels they taught at the time of data collection. Generalist teachers are responsible for teaching all subject matters in French, whereas specialist teachers, more common at the high school level, have a particular specialization but still teach in French. It is important to note that of the forty participants with whom interviews were completed, thirty identified themselves as language or literacy teachers. Therefore, a substantial percentage (75%) of the participants' responses reflected teaching language and literacy skills during the pandemic.

Table 1

*Manitoban and Nova Scotian participants identified by pseudonym, region, subject matter(s) and grade level(s) (n = 40)*

Pseudonym	Region (rural/urban)	Generalist or Specialist	Grade level(s)
<b>Manitoban Participants</b>			
Alex	Urban	Generalist	2
Ariel	Urban	French and Psychology Specialist	Secondary
Bobby	Urban	Math Specialist	Secondary
Catherine	Urban	Generalist	7
Charlotte	Urban	Music Specialist	Elementary
Élise	Rural	Generalist	6 and 7
Émile	Urban	French and Social Studies' Specialist	Secondary
Emma	Urban	Generalist	6
Emmanuelle	Urban	Generalist	6
Faiza	Urban	Physical Education Specialist	Elementary
Georges	Rural	French and Visual Arts Specialist	Secondary
Lucie	Urban	Generalist	3
Martin	Urban	Generalist	4
Mathilde	Urban	Generalist	5
Max	Urban	Physical Education Specialist	Elementary
Mme Sourire	Urban	Generalist	Kindergarten
Natalie	Rural	Generalist	5
Rolo	Urban	Generalist	6
Victoria	Urban	English Specialist	Secondary
Zack	Rural	Generalist	6 – 8
<b>Nova Scotian Participants</b>			
Adèle	Rural	French and Social Studies' Specialist	8 – 12

Camille	Rural	French, English and Literacy Mentor	8 – 12
Carly	Urban	English Specialist	10 – 12
Claire	Urban	Oral Communications Mentor	6 and K – 6
Clara	Urban	Reading Recovery and Literacy Mentor	2 and K – 6
David	Urban	French and Social Studies' Specialist	10 – 12
Donna	Rural	Generalist	2 and 6
Emma	Rural	Generalist	2
Gertrude	Rural	Numeracy Specialist	7
Hélène	Rural	Resource Specialist	7 – 12
Josephine	Rural	Math Specialist	2 – 3
Julie	Urban	Generalist	5 – 6
Juliette	Rural	Literacy Mentor	7 - 12
Kira	Urban	Generalist	Kindergarten
Laura	Urban	French Specialist	10 – 12
Mélanie	Rural	Numeracy Specialist	7 – 8
Michel	Rural	Literacy Specialist	9
Rita	Rural	Reading Recovery and Literacy Mentor	5 and K – 6
Sarah	Rural	French and Visual Arts Specialist	8 – 12
Tessa	Rural	Resource Specialist and Literacy and Oral Communications Mentor	K – 6

Each interview was conducted by the researcher responsible for data collection in her province. The interviews were then transcribed by bilingual (French/English) research assistants, familiar with the local French accents. NVivo's digital transcribing software was used to create transcription drafts. These drafts were then read and corrected while the research assistant listened to the transcript. Data analysis started during data collection with researcher formulated notes (Galletta & Cross, 2013) and continued during virtual meetings after the data collection between both researchers to define emergent themes present across the data sets. The transcripts were then reread by the researchers and quotations were extracted "under thematic content", in this case, the successes related to language, literacy and culture identified by French-minority language teachers (Kelly et al., 2020, p. 3). Hence, three themes determined through this process were the integration of technology into language teaching, language teacher collaboration and linguistic community building with students.

To recognize and honour the teachers' voices, we chose to integrate original quotations in French with some cases of translanguaging followed by the participant's pseudonym and geographical location (MB for Manitoba and NS for Nova Scotia). Translation to English will be offered as a footnote and was done by the researchers who



are both bilingual but not official translators. This choice was intentional as it encourages readers to read the quotations in French first, recognizing the French-language skills of many readers while at the same time offering a translation that can help to confirm the reading predictions and to assist those who are unfamiliar with the language.

### *Findings: Language teaching during the pandemic*

From the interviews that were conducted, we learned, qualitatively, that many teachers observed a noticeable regression vis-à-vis academic and social skills including competencies related to language and literacy. This phenomenon was observed most often by teachers with several years experience in a specific grade level who noted a difference between current students and those of the past. In terms of challenges teachers were still facing and will continue to face, many mentioned the regression in literacy skills, especially oral language production and fluency. This phenomenon is akin to summer language loss, which is essentially the impact of the two summer months without exposure to the French language identified in Canada among French immersion students (Bardovi-Harlig & Stringer, 2010; Mougeon & Rehner, 2015) and in other countries where children are less exposed to the language of instruction in everyday society (Fälth et al., 2019; Lawrence, 2012). Teachers reported more English use than normal and regression in reading and writing skills upon the return to in-class learning. While summer language loss is especially pertinent to language teachers, other difficulties identified aligned with teachers' experiences worldwide, such as stress (Descamps et al., 2020; Doreleyers, 2020), fatigue due to too much screen time (Boudokhane-Lima et al., 2021), lack of motivation (Dietrich et al., 2020), lack of social interaction during periods of isolation (Lassoued et al., 2020) and an increased workload (Issaieva et al., 2020) which will all likely have a continued impact on teaching moving forward.

Considering the degree and sheer amount of the difficulties identified, it could be hypothesized that the pandemic only had a negative impact on teachers and teaching. At least according to the 40 teachers who participated in this study, this does not seem to be the case. Most participants were able to identify at least one positive outcome or personal accomplishment directly related to their experience of teaching during the pandemic. In other studies, focused on teachers worldwide, certain benefits resulting from teaching during the pandemic had already been identified. For example, the natural integration of technology in teaching offers pedagogical variety while at the same time visual conferencing software allows teachers to maintain relationships with students during periods of school closures and helps to reduce the academic impact of missed schooling (Bonk, 2020; Kuhfeld et al., 2020). As well, examples of creativity and pedagogical innovation (Issaieva et al., 2020; Wagnon, 2020), the practise of "pivot pedagogy" (Schwartzman, 2020, p. 512) as a way of being ready for future possible school closures and a newfound solidarity among teachers aided by social media (Descamps et al., 2020; Dietrich et al., 2020), were other positive outcomes related to teaching during the pandemic. Our participants mentioned many of these positive outcomes as well as others that we believe are more specific to the French-minority teaching context.

The following sections will describe the themes that emerged through the analysis of teachers' self-reported moments of success and positive outcomes. The three main themes identified are integration of technology into language teaching, language teacher

collaboration and linguistic community building with students. Each theme will also be likened to a French expression about hats. This imagery was inspired by one of the Manitoban participants, Bobby, who, to motivate his students to participate in his online sessions during the first school closures in March 2020, wore a different hat everyday. The students in one class responded in kind by also wearing hats which resulted in the creation of a friendly hat competition that was memorable enough for the students to speak about it when they saw each other again the following year at school in person.

*Avoir plusieurs chapeaux<sup>6</sup>: Integration of technology into language teaching*

In April 2020, the provincial governments closed schools and promoted online learning during the first lockdown. Teachers, students, and parents had a limited amount of time to prepare for the virtual or distance classrooms in which they would spend the remainder of the year. Teachers were required to make an extreme shift, at the drop of a hat, from their original vision and philosophy of teaching which in some cases included the periodic use of technological tools to, in some cases, being required to teach exclusively online (Youmans, 2020). One participant described this shift by comparing teaching to hairdressing: while you may still have the scissors to cut hair, you no longer have any of the other tools that you are used to working with, you do not have your chair, you can no longer add colour, so ultimately “*ça affecte comment tu fais ton travail*” (Lucie, MB). Other participants explained how they were required to not only learn how to use specific virtual classroom platforms (Boudokhane-Lima et al., 2021) but also how to integrate them efficiently and effectively in order to teach language and literacy competencies.

While this rapid shift was identified as a challenge experienced by most teachers, they also admitted that it forced them to explore new resources, new ways of presenting ideas and in some cases, these discoveries will have a lasting impact on the way they teach in the future. In terms of teaching reading, students no longer had access to classroom, school or municipal libraries which forced teachers to explore online resources that could be easily accessed by their students. A fundamental component of language and literacy instruction is providing learners with experiences that correspond to their existing knowledge and abilities in reading, writing, speaking and listening (Giasson, 2011; Tompkins et al., 2018). In terms of teaching literacy skills normally taught in-class, many teachers explained how they used specific applications or platform options to support the learning of reading and writing skills while respecting students’ learning styles and needs. The breakout room option on Google Meet, Teams or Zoom was often used to replace in-class group work and cooperative learning. For example, Julie (NS) explains how she grouped students online based on their specific literacy needs while ensuring a rotation of time spent on different language skills:

*Je faisais comme des petits groupes de lecture de compréhension. D’autres c’était pour l’écriture, d’autres c’était pour les mathématiques. Alors je choisissais, puis ça changeait comme lundi c’était lecture-écriture, mardi*

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<sup>6</sup> To have several hats

<sup>7</sup> It affects how you do your work (Lucie, MB).

*mathématiques, mercredi, puis je faisais des petits groupes comme, tous les deux jours c'était mathématiques ou français (Julie, NS)*<sup>8</sup>.

Another example of the integration of technology to highlight the multimodal nature of literacy was Adèle (NS) who learned about and integrated interactive notebooks using *Google Slides* and recordings of herself reading different texts to provide students an audio version. By using these instructional materials and tools, Adèle (NS) explained that she was able to provide students with what they needed academically to be successful in their virtual language classroom. To support the development of oral communication skills and provide students with the opportunity to hear, see and explore French language varieties and Francophone cultures, Adèle (NS) also included in her virtual classroom links to free, online resources of different media formats: television, film, radio, and podcasts.

The urgent beginning of the first lockdown and its required learning and integration of technology prepared teachers and learners for the provinces' second lockdown. Participants explained that while the stress of the first lockdown was overwhelming and rife with a significant level of uncertainty, their competencies and confidence in their use of technology increased and they were significantly more comfortable when schools transitioned to online learning again in May 2021. At the time of the interviews, teachers were back to in-class learning. However, in many cases, the positive learning outcomes experienced during online distance learning were now being integrated into their in-person teaching strategies. For example, Bobby (MB) indicates how he currently encourages students who are in class to use the online resources and videos he developed that are available on his website. He explains that it is especially useful for students to review the material taught in class when they are absent but also in addition to their in-class learning to ensure oral comprehension, he says: "*tu peux faire pause, rewind, pause, rewind, autant que tu veux*"<sup>9</sup>, which is not a comprehension strategy you would normally have access to in class (Bobby, MB).

Charlotte (MB) adds that integrating technology, when pertinent, into her everyday literacy teaching is a useful multimodal resource because "*c'est très visuel, c'est, des fois très interactif*"<sup>10</sup> which she notes has a positive impact on student engagement in her lessons. In another example that highlights the benefits of technology for encouraging multimodal literacy teaching and learning strategies, Kira (NS) talked about her strategy of preparing everyday videos when teaching online. Her videos showed her doing different activities in and around her home such as discovering the different parts of her backyard. When she prepared these videos (with her children as her camera crew), she was mindful to use specific vocabulary and sentence structures with the goal of modelling their usage for her students. She uploaded her videos to *Class Dojo* and would also send a typed

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<sup>8</sup> I created small reading comprehension groups. For others, it was for writing, for others it was for math. So, I would pick, and it would change Monday it was reading-writing, Tuesday math, Wednesday, and I would make the small groups every second day, it would be math or French (Julie, NS).

<sup>9</sup> You can press pause, rewind, pause, rewind as much as you want (Bobby, MB).

<sup>10</sup> It is visual and sometimes it is interactive (Charlotte, MB).

document with the targeted vocabulary and sentence structures so students could both hear and read them. She then invited her students to explore their own backyards and to describe what they saw and what they did. Parents expressed to Kira (NS) that these videos significantly helped them in assisting their children with at-home learning. Upon returning to school, Kira (NS) continued to use the outdoors as a primary context for both her literacy and numeracy teaching.

In French, the expression “*avoir plusieurs chapeaux*”<sup>11</sup> means that you have many professional responsibilities; that was likely always the case with teaching. While the pandemic certainly added its fair share of responsibilities to teachers, it also gave them a new hat, new strategies and tools, with which most identify a newfound ease and are likely to integrate into their language teaching moving forward. The next section will look at how language teachers supported each other and collaborated with one another to ease the burden of these newfound responsibilities.

### *Sortir quelque chose de son chapeau*<sup>12</sup>: Language teacher collaboration

Even before the pandemic, many teachers in French-minority settings, including French immersion settings, reported how difficult it was to find appropriate learning resources for their students (Norquay, 2017). In many cases, they are required to create resources that are at the appropriate level for their students and that are culturally specific. While it is important to be exposed to a variety of cultural artefacts from other majority and minority Francophone populations, it is also important for the students to see themselves represented in their own learning material (Richard, 2018). The only way to do that in many cases is for teachers to create material. This constant creation of materials is felt to be one of the big differences between them and teachers who teach in a majority setting. In many ways, French-minority language teachers are required to regularly “*sortir quelque chose de leur chapeau*”<sup>13</sup>, simply to produce the materials that pedagogically and culturally match their students’ needs. The pandemic merely heightened this lack of resources, especially since many online resources exist only in English, many platforms come out first in English and students tend to choose an English interface for their technological tools because it is what is most widely used and accepted in the majority English environment in which they live.

Nevertheless, this need to search for resources is something that can bring teachers together. Max (MB) actually describes how the minority setting encourages collaboration in order to find appropriate resources:

*“Je trouve qu’il y a plus un esprit d’équipe, peut-être, pour réussir dans un milieu minoritaire. Parce que sinon, on ne va pas trouver ce qu’on a besoin ou bien les élèves ne vont pas avoir l’appui qu’ils ont besoin. Alors, je pense*

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<sup>11</sup> To have several hats

<sup>12</sup> Pull something out of one’s hat/equivalent English expression: pulling a rabbit out of one’s hat.

<sup>13</sup> Pull something out of one’s hat/equivalent English expression: pulling a rabbit out of one’s hat.

*à cause qu'on est en milieu minoritaire, on travaille peut-être plus proche ensemble pour réussir<sup>14</sup>*” (Max, MB).

As well, the pandemic also encouraged a stronger sense of collaboration among teachers within the same school who shared resources, online tools and teaching strategies as well as the weight and mental burden of the pandemic. As Alex (MB) puts it, *“un gros succès c’était la collaboration. Mes collègues m’ont comme sauvé la vie<sup>15</sup>”*. The efficacy and success of collaboration was also expressed by the Nova Scotian participants. Camille (NS), a secondary French teacher who is also an oral communication mentor signaled the important collaboration shared with her school’s resource teachers and teacher assistants: *“puis, il faut que je dise que ces enseignantes et aide-enseignantes ont brillé. Elles ont aidé énormément...Elles ont travaillé avec des petits groupes d’élèves. Comme d’une façon les élèves n’avions jamais eu autant d’attention un sur un<sup>16</sup>”*. The context imposed, but also facilitated by the virtual classroom, one-on-one support that they may not have been able to experience pre-pandemic.

Social media also enabled collaboration between teachers outside of their specific school contexts. Due to the minority context that they live in, French-minority language teachers are also French/English bilinguals and in some cases multilinguals. Their language abilities are an advantage and render their participation in different circles a possibility. For example, Charlotte (MB) mentioned collaborating with other Manitoban and Québec teachers via social media as well as reinforcing an existing relationship with a colleague who teaches in the French immersion program in Alberta. For her, these online relationships, which resulted in the open sharing of strategies, are a positive outcome of the pandemic because *“c’est quelque chose que je peux continuer à ajouter à mon enseignement, alors ce n’est pas quelque chose que j’ai juste eu à utiliser l’année passée, mais qui peut continuer à améliorer mon programme<sup>17</sup>”* (Charlotte, MB). Moreover, Julie (NS), a grade six teacher in an urban Nova Scotian school, described how collaborating with teachers from a different school to create resources and activities helped to alleviate feelings of both stress and isolation:

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<sup>14</sup> I find that there is more of a sense of team spirit, maybe, to succeed in a minority environment. Because, without that, we would not be able to find what we need, or the students would not receive the support they need. So, I think that because we are in a minority environment, we work maybe closer together to succeed (Max, MB).

<sup>15</sup> A big success was collaboration. My colleagues, like, saved my life (Alex, MB).

<sup>16</sup> And, I have to say that these teachers and teachers’ aids shone. They helped enormously...They worked with students in small groups. In a way, the students never had such one-on-one attention before (Camille, NS).

<sup>17</sup> It is something that I can continue to add to my teaching, so it’s not just something that I used last year, but something that can continue to improve my program (Charlotte, MB).

*“Puis on s’est mis les quatre de nous autres ensemble, puis on a fait des PowerPoints, puis on a fait toutes des leçons en ligne, mais on s’est divisé la tâche, puis ça vraiment, vraiment aidé parce que je me sentais moins seule...ça nous a sauvé du temps, sauvé du stress<sup>18</sup>”.*

Creating resources has the benefit and reward of meeting students’ specific needs. When teachers share their creativity with others, they are essentially opening up the possibilities for improved teaching and learning outside the walls of their own classroom. Now, with online collaboration made easier due to technological tools used more frequently, teachers can share their success stories worldwide. The following theme will explore how language and literacy teachers continued to build community with their students through online learning.

*Le tour du chapeau<sup>19</sup>: Linguistic community building with students*

We have already identified two positive outcomes resulting from the pandemic: the personal gains in technological integration and the strengthened sense of collaboration among teachers. This third and final positive outcome is more related to students and completes our pandemic teaching hat trick. The origin of the expression “hat trick” or “*le tour du chapeau*” is Canadian and came about when hat shop owners in Montreal and Toronto would give a hat to players who scored three goals in one hockey match played at home (Kreiser, 2017). In modern-day hockey, fans throw hats onto the ice to celebrate the achievement of a player who scores three goals in one home game. Many teachers described the palatable happiness among the students when they returned to school and were able to see their friends again. One teacher equated this return to “*le réveillon sur des stéroïdes*<sup>20</sup>”, a traditional Francophone family gathering (Georges, MB).

Identity formation and positive experiences with the French language are important factors in the maintenance of the French language, as shown by many researchers specialized in French-minority education (Bourgeois et al., 2009; Landry et al., 2010; Pilote & Magnan, 2012). The creation of a learning environment in which language learners feel accepted and a sense of belonging is particularly important in a minority language because, as research confirms, it is with teachers where students live the most contacts and experiences with the French language (Landry et al., 2010; Boudreau, Deveau & Dallaire, 2009). However, it must be noted that it is not the quantity of these language experiences that is important but more so their quality. The third theme that emerged from participants’ descriptions – creating a learning environment in which students feel safe and accepted, corresponds directly to one of the central elements of personal autonomization experiences – a sense of belonging (Landry, et al., 2005).

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<sup>18</sup> The four of us got together and we prepared PowerPoints and online lesson plans, but we divided the tasks and it really, really helped because I felt less alone...it saved time and it saved us from feeling stressed (Julie, NS).

<sup>19</sup> Hat trick.

<sup>20</sup> The *Réveillon* (Christmas gathering) on steroids (Georges, MB).



Removing the home game advantage or in-school learning has had an impact on teachers and students and on linguistic identity so important to develop and reinforce at school. Teachers noted that community building and identity construction have been hampered by pandemic regulations such as cohorts, the cancelation of extracurricular activities, whole-school gatherings in the gym, to name only a few. One teacher even noted that Francophone family gatherings were not permitted during the pandemic and as such, students are simply less exposed to French in and outside of school. While this will remain an ongoing challenge, during online learning and afterwards, teachers developed many strategies to continue building community among and with their students and to present them with positive, meaningful experiences in French.

Teachers in both provinces underlined the priority they placed on creating a virtual classroom environment and activities through which they could facilitate the creation of connections with and between students. While teaching her kindergarten class, Kira (NS) explained that she focused primarily on creating a sense of belonging in her virtual classroom while providing her students with experiences during which they could explore and use the French language, especially during the first lockdown:

*“Mais la première fois, c’était plus pour socialiser, se voir bien-être et santé mentale. Tu faisais des petites chasses au trésor dans la maison et comme trouver quelque chose qui peut présenter leur chien, leur chat. En tout cas, ils parlaient en français, et c’était bien <sup>21</sup>”.*

Another example is Martin (MB) who presented a new French song during snack time and continued this practice when moving to online learning. Every morning, he asked the students which songs they preferred *“juste pour pouvoir parler à chaque élève<sup>22</sup>”* (Martin, MB) to encourage oral language production and engagement. Next, in adapting her reading activity where she would normally invite parents to class to read in French to her students, Mme Sourire (MB) invited parents to do so virtually and even had a grandmother from France come to read to her students. She acknowledges that the pandemic has opened up her classroom to the world because *“tous ces changements-là ont fait que maintenant, c’est une possibilité d’avoir quelqu’un de partout dans le monde qui vienne dans ma salle de classe<sup>23</sup>”* (Mme Sourire, MB). Similarly, Mme Rita (NS), described how she would share resources and activities with the students designed for them to learn and explore the French language while getting to know their teacher and classmates in the context of a virtual classroom:

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<sup>21</sup> For the first lockdown, it was more for socializing, for students’ well-being and mental health. We did little treasure hunts around their houses, and they would have to find something or who could present their dog or cat. In any case, they spoke in French and it was good (Kira, NS).

<sup>22</sup> Just to be able to speak to each student (Martin, MB).

<sup>23</sup> All those changes have made it now possible to have someone from around the world visit my class (Mme Sourire, MB).

*“Le lundi, j’avais une chanson française que je leur partageais. Le mardi, j’avais une blague. Le mercredi, je mettais un vidéoclip...Le jeudi, j’ai deux chiens – j’avais deux chiens puis je mettais toujours les aventures de mes chiens...Je leur avais fait un spa day <sup>24</sup>”.*

Mme Rita (NS) explained that her students looked forward to seeing and hearing about her dogs’ daily adventures and this helped create a sense of community and supported her students’ engagement in class.

As the previous examples highlighted, linguistic community building online was certainly possible. However, it is important to note that it does not perfectly emulate normal classroom interaction. Julie (NS) explores how online conversations can negatively impact linguistic security, rendering teaching and evaluating oral communication online a challenging task. She explains that the fear of being corrected for how they speak, whether by a friend or the teacher, can lead to feelings of shame and a lack of motivation to use the language. When students are in their physical classroom, they can speak informally, they can chat amongst themselves and may feel more comfortable. The intimidating “camera on me” context in the virtual classroom puts students on the spot when they are asked questions or when they want to speak. Julie (NS) explains: “*peut-être dans ton groupe tu ne te sens juste point à l’aise comme avec ton meilleur ami qui est dans l’autre salle de classe à pratiquer ta langue<sup>25</sup>*”. To alleviate this feeling of intimidation and to encourage participation, Julie (NS) explained that using the breakout room option in *Google classroom* or making a schedule to meet with smaller groups seemed to make students feel more open to speak, thus helping them work on their oral communication skills and creating a sense of belonging through sharing and socializing with their teacher, classmates, and friends. While it is evident that online learning cannot replace in-class learning, teachers recognize certain benefits that can be used to motivate learners to develop their language and literacy competencies. The benefits of online learning can also be transposed to research collaboration which we will describe in the next section.

#### *Virtually mediated research accomplishments*

It is important to note that the findings collected and presented in this article came about through a research partnership developed at the beginning of the pandemic between two researchers who, still to this day, have never met in person. As a result, the research design, data collection, analysis and dissemination have all taken place virtually, which in and of itself is a re-imagination of how we build working relationships and how we conduct research. Since fall 2020, we have met bi-weekly via Zoom and Teams video conferencing which have enabled us to develop a relationship. Due to these informal and formal conversations, inviting one another into our homes, we have built and strengthened our

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<sup>24</sup> Monday, I would share a French song with them. Tuesday, I would have a joke to share with them. Wednesday, I would put on a video and Thursday – I have two dogs – I would share my dogs’ adventures.... I did a spa day with them, for example (Rita, NS).

<sup>25</sup> Maybe in your group you do not feel comfortable to speak out loud like if you are with your best friend who is in the other classroom (the other breakout room) (Julie, NS).

relationship. Without these virtual tools, it would have been impossible to develop the same level of understanding and kinship, which is evident in our work together. This is something we personally never imagined as a possibility before the pandemic.

In the same way that teachers made changes to their pedagogical practices, so did we as researchers. We have both integrated each others' research themes into our respective courses at the Faculty of Education. Due to the restrictions in both our provinces, it was necessary for all the interviews to be conducted online. As a result, we now both have experience conducting research virtually and will be able to offer virtual interviews as a possible method to reduce transportation costs, including participants living in rural areas in research and simply as an option that might interest future participants. Another research accomplishment was the broadening of our research networks. In the past, collaboration was more likely with researchers who were in our own provinces or within our own Faculties and with whom we had already developed a working relationship. This research project has broadened our research networks and forced us, in a positive way, to re-imagine the possibilities for partnership and collaboration regardless of the physical space that may separate researchers. Integrating technology into our research practices, collaborating and bringing our communities together are some of the positive outcomes of this study.

#### *Chapeau à vous<sup>26</sup>: Concluding remarks*

The pandemic and its aftermath have been challenging for teachers all over the world. This paper presented a snapshot in time of 40 French-minority language teachers in Manitoba and Nova Scotia who spoke about their experience of teaching during the pandemic. It is likely that teachers and students will carry with them the baggage of pandemic teaching and learning for many years to come. However, this study was able to uncover stories of success and accomplishment that also arose from teaching during the pandemic. By being pushed to teach online, language and literacy teachers developed new strategies and a newfound confidence in integrating technology into their everyday teaching. In fact, some of those strategies, developed for teaching online during the pandemic, have now been integrated by choice into their in-class learning. Moreover, examples of teacher collaboration with teachers in and outside of their school were also evident. Some teachers even used social media to connect with other teachers to share resources and the burden of teaching online. Especially important to language maintenance, French-minority teachers also focused on the importance of community building as an integral part of language development in their online teaching.

Through these success stories, we were able to see that the pandemic did not alter the important goal of language maintenance in French-minority educational programs. Language, literacy and culture were still teachers' priorities, however, how they went about teaching those skills changed to adapt to the virtual space that became their classroom. If anything, not being allowed to go to the physical space of school reinforced the importance of the school space. A space where language and literacy learning take place formally and informally, where communities are built and strengthened, where students and teachers learn together and collaborate, where individuals get together to talk, read, write and

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<sup>26</sup> To raise your hat to someone.

communicate; a space where the French language is used. In minority language communities, if there is no space for the language to be used, the language ceases to be used. While this study confirmed that the physical school space can be maintained virtually, the virtual classroom can create new spaces for encounters and collaboration, it can maintain and strengthen a sense of community and it can even stimulate in-class learning, it cannot, however, fully simulate the rich literacy environment present in schools. Schools and contact with teachers, virtual or in-person, are “central” to language learning and maintenance (Bullock, 2020, p. 59) and teachers are essential literacy workers. So long as language and literacy learning remain the cornerstones of French-minority language education in Canada that contribute to language maintenance, schools will remain necessary spaces where language is learned, used and strengthened. Teachers in minority language educational programs know that they work towards language maintenance; it is evident in their work and in their program’s mission statement. Teachers teaching in majority language programs may not realize that they are also working towards literacy maintenance; they too are essential language and literacy workers. While many of the experiences described by the teachers will be recognizable for teachers teaching in minority or majority contexts, considering the small sample size, the results are not generalizable but indicative instead of the need to conduct ongoing research in pandemic and post-pandemic teaching, especially in terms of the impacts with regards to language and literacy development across grade levels.

To the participants of this study and teachers across the world, it is with the utmost respect and encouragement that we raise our hats to you. We are optimistic and faithful that your sense of collaboration, your creative ways for integrating technology into your teaching and your sense of community building are the factors that will bring you through to the other side of the pandemic. You are essential language and literacy workers and we are extremely grateful for all that you have done by continuing to teach and promote learning during these stressful and uncertain times.

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