Introduction

- Globally, there has been an increased recognition that being bilingual or multilingual is more common than being monolingual, and that monolingualism should be considered an exception rather than a norm (Baker 2011; Crystal 1987; Dewaele et al. 2003; Romaine 1995).

- Current research (De Houwer 2009, 2011; Meisel 2011) distinguishes between two types of childhood bilingualism: Bilingual First Language Acquisition (BFLA) and Early Second Language Acquisition (ESLA). BFLA children are exposed to the two languages from birth, while ESLA children are usually monolinguals who become exposed to a second language after the age of 6, and thus have the potential of becoming bilingual.

- The traditional concept of a single first or native language has been challenged by research on BFLA. That is, children who grow up acquiring more than one language from birth may have a stronger and a weaker language, but it is theoretically and empirically inaccurate to identify only one language as native in such cases.

- The distinction between BFLA and ESLA is particularly applicable to a Canadian context where exposure to the two official languages or a combination of official and heritage languages may occur from birth or during early childhood.

Objectives

- This project examines to what extent public school boards in Ontario differentiate between ESLA and BFLA, whether they recognize the concept of having more than one native language, or whether they subscribe to the more traditional view of a single native language.

- The project also investigates how much variation exists in the linguistic profiling of students across Ontario.

Methods & Materials

- 64 English school boards, public and Catholic, across the province of Ontario were contacted in order to collect a sample of student registration forms.

- All questions about students’ language background, or other language-related questions, were extracted from the forms.

- The data was analyzed with regards to the notions of first language used, and the number and type of language-related questions asked.

- Each question was coded and grouped into one of thirteen categories, based on the similarities of the questions’ wording and purpose.

- Comparisons of the number of questions asked by each school board were also drawn.

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