

Promoting Culture and Identity in the Classroom

Francis' Story

Francis Denis grew up in the small farming community of St. Denis, Saskatchewan and went to school in the neighbouring francophone community of Vonda, which is located about 35 minutes east of Saskatoon. As a student, he attended École Providence, which provides a francophone education to students PreK-12. Now, he's back in his home community teaching the next generation of francophone leaders in the province. In addition to teaching social studies, he also volunteers a lot of his personal time coaching volleyball, badminton, track and basketball. He says sports provide a great opportunity to instill cultural pride in students, while also educating others about the francophone language and identity.

[View Francis' #theteacherproject video.](#)

The following companion guide provides more insights on how Francis is promoting culture and identity with his students.

1. What role should educators play in promoting culture and identity in schools?

Teachers have a big role to play. We're role models. Kids see us in action every day. No matter if you're doing sports, theatre or art, it's about engaging the kids and finding out who they are as individuals. In society, we define ourselves by the ways we're the same and how we're different. It's important to understand both so you can know yourself, whether that be through your ethnic background, your culture, your language, the foods you eat, the sports you play or what school you attended. But we also need to be proud of our differences. It's empowering for students to see that and to understand how diverse the world is. And you don't need a French background to appreciate French culture. We have students and families in our schools who have no French background, but they value the language and are now adopting the culture. As a francophone teacher, I want my students to celebrate all cultures because if we were all the same, we'd have nothing to celebrate.

2. Is it important for students to see themselves culturally reflected in the curriculum and what they're learning, even when it comes to sports?

You're in school to learn so everything through school is structured and familiar. When it comes to sports, that's outside of the classroom so students are able to live their culture differently. It shows them that learning happens everywhere. It helps them appreciate their culture more when they can see it in a different context. As an adult, you don't have that structure and support system to guarantee you keep that culture like you do at a francophone school. When you're an adult and in a workplace or environment that doesn't share that culture, if you don't continue to practice it, you'll lose it. Exposing students to sporting opportunities, such as participating in the French-Canadian games, exposes them to other French speakers from all across Canada and allows them to practice and learn from one another. And when we play, we might speak French or English. Sports is about passion, so whatever comes out, comes out. When we do speak French, other coaches sometimes joke about us having an unfair competitive advantage. I joke back, "Not if you learn the language."

3. What are some of the biggest challenges in promoting culture, language and identity?

Saskatchewan's francophone community has been evolving over the last decade. Historically, many people who identified with the francophone culture were typically born and raised here. Now, we're seeing an influx of newcomers from France, Africa and other countries. This is helping diversify the francophone community, but it also makes it harder to pinpoint the francophone culture.

It also makes it harder to find appropriate resources. In French, you need to find curriculum-approved books students will be interested in and that use the "right kind of French for your students." Resources from Quebec or France might use a different French than students are used to. Western Canadian French evolved differently. We still use words others consider archaic. The language didn't evolve as much because we were such a small minority. But as more French speakers immigrate here, it's helping Saskatchewan students learn more conversational French.

Teaching in French is pretty much the same as teaching in English, but I do often have to re-invent the wheel every time I teach a different book or novel. For example, in social studies, there are many English resources, but I often have to translate and create my own. It's time-consuming and no one has time to translate everything. When I get resources from the Saskatchewan High School Athletics Association (SHSAA), I'll ask if they have it in French. Usually they don't, so once I

did translate a document for them. Translating has become such a habit of mine; it took me two minutes to do and now they will have that resource available for the next francophone school.

Bilingualism can be another challenge. Although students are speaking and learning French in school, many have one francophone and one anglophone parent at home; 99 percent of the time, English will win out as the spoken language at home.

4. What are some ways you promote culture and identity with your students?

If I'm showing a video or book, I might tap into French CBC. Little things like that show the kids that news is available in French in Saskatchewan. There are new technologies that can help. When we were watching a French video about medieval times, students were having difficulty understanding the language. One of the students showed me how to play French subtitles as well. At first, I wanted them to just listen to the language. Then I decided that reading it in French while being able to hear the language and see it visually helps make learning easier for some students.

Extra help is also available for students who might be struggling. If someone is struggling, we might temporarily place them in another French class so they can catch up. I also personally try to engage these kids more, in the class or in the hallway. It's like sports, the more you practice and put in the work, the better the chances of developing the skills. My job is to engage: to find something students are interested in and to get them talking in French so they can become more comfortable and confident in their learning.

5. What advice do you have for other teachers who want to incorporate more cultural diversity into their classrooms but aren't sure how to get started?

Ask students about their culture. When you show an interest, it makes them feel validated. And students definitely want to share. Saskatchewan is such a diverse community so to say you're 100 percent francophone isn't true anymore. And even though we're a francophone school, we celebrate the Ukrainian culture all the time because we've got so many families in the area with Ukrainian ties. It isn't just French. There's Polish. There's German. I may have a mainly French background, but I also have Dutch. As a teacher, it's important to teach students to appreciate all cultures, not just one.

Connect and network with other French speakers and francophone schools. See if they know of anyone who might be willing to come in and speak about their culture. And even if you are a francophone school, get out there and connect with other francophone schools. It's good for students because it allows them to meet other speakers, learn new vocabulary and to practice peer-to-peer conversational French. It shows francophone students they aren't alone in their little island of a school. There are francophone schools throughout the province.

It's also good to find ways to involve parents and the community. Kids appreciate it when they see their parents participating and attempting to learn. We, teachers, appreciate it too because we do put in a lot of extra work pulling together resources. And it means a lot when a parent approaches the school secretary and says, "Bonjour." Simple things like that show you appreciate the culture. At our last home volleyball tournament, we had two different anglophone schools leave messages on the boards in French saying "Thank you. We appreciate everything." Our kids were super pumped over that. Our students were like, "Wow!" When people reach out like that, it makes our students so proud.

And when teaching another language, don't be afraid to challenge your students. If I avoid the hard words and just use simple concepts, they'll never learn. As teachers, we need to get over this barrier and make sure we aren't holding our kids back because we don't think they're ready.

6. What keeps you going when times get tough?

I feel such a connection to this community and the kids. I give so much time because I see the results and impact I'm having. I feel valued. It's one of the many perks of teaching in a small school. You're with the same kids for years and can see them grow and develop. You get to build meaningful, lasting relationships with the students and their parents.

