

DIANE GÉRIN LAJOIE. *Youth, language and identity portraits of students from English-language High schools in the Montreal area.* Toronto, ON: Canadian Scholars Press. (2011). 215 pp. \$34.95 (ISBN 978-1-55130395-6)

Lerona Dana Lewis

Volume 46, Number 3, Fall 2011

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1009178ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1009178ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Faculty of Education, McGill University

ISSN

0024-9033 (print)

1916-0666 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Lewis, L. D. (2011). Review of [DIANE GÉRIN LAJOIE. *Youth, language and identity portraits of students from English-language High schools in the Montreal area.* Toronto, ON: Canadian Scholars Press. (2011). 215 pp. \$34.95 (ISBN 978-1-55130395-6)]. *McGill Journal of Education / Revue des sciences de l'éducation de McGill*, 46(3), 473–475. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1009178ar>

BOOK REVIEW/CRITIQUE DE LIVRE

DIANE GÉRIN LAJOIE. *Youth, language and identity portraits of students from English-language High schools in the Montreal area*. Toronto, ON: Canadian Scholars Press. (2011). 215pp. \$34.95 (ISBN 978-1-55130395-6).

Contesting identity within the context of language is the focus of Gérin Lajoie's new book. Her main argument, grounded in postmodernism, is that identity construction is complex and in a constant state of flux for youth attending English minority schools in Montreal and increasing numbers of exogamous households – households where one parent may be Anglophone and the other Francophone. Through the use of vignettes of interview data, which tell of the lived experiences of the participants, the author allows the reader to understand that identity formation often depends on social interactions within the family, school, cultural and recreational activities and social networks. In the author's study, students tended to define themselves in terms of language, mainly as bilingual, suggesting a claim to both their Anglophone and Francophone heritage. Yet for some of these students, later, more in-depth interviews pointed to the unsettled nature of their identity construction, as well as feelings of shame and rejection resulting from speaking French with a non-Quebec accent; all associated with how they eventually define themselves.

Although the participants were growing up as language minority students within a Francophone society in Quebec, interestingly the Anglophone identity emerged as being primarily important. Gérin Lajoie writes that in Quebec the way many participants who claimed either a bilingual or trilingual identity positioned themselves points to a strong attachment to the English minority language and to their culture (p. 169). She explains that there is no official policy in Quebec English language schools to protect the English language heritage by comparison to French minority students in Ontario, yet the Anglophone identity is less threatened and able to flourish. She argues that the strengths of the Anglophone institutions such as schools, churches and hospitals may offer some insight into why this occurred. She further challenges those who argue that when students define themselves as bilingual this signals the road

to assimilation into the majority language. Gérin-Lajoie's book shows clearly that this is not the case.

Noteworthy in the text is the fact that the author manages to offer a window into the nuances of identity construction not only for the youth but for their parents as well, some of whom struggle to define themselves and find acceptance within Quebec's Francophone society. For example, Joe is the father of one of her participants. He is of Italian descent, born and raised in Quebec, and a fluent French speaker. His Italian family name and the fact that French is not his first language betray him and he remains an outsider, even if he feels he can best define himself as a Quebecois. Additionally, while Gérin-Lajoie does not directly connect the perspective of language politics held by the children to that of their parents, the reader is able to make the connections between the two. Citing another example from the interviews, Ashley's feeling of victimization and "minoritization" could well be related to her mother's experience of losing her job at a Montreal bank because she did not speak French well enough.

The book concludes with a question to the reader on the relative power of the English language in Quebec compared to French outside of Quebec. This may be in response to the comments of the students and parents interviewed who suggest that while French is important in Quebec it may not be as important outside of Quebec. However, those following Canadian socio-political affairs or who may have read Graham Fraser's (2006) *Sorry I Don't Speak French: Confronting the Canadian Crisis that Won't Go Away* will know that knowledge of French has traditionally carried significant currency in Canada in several important domains such as sports, law and politics. Without a doubt, Gérin-Lajoie's cautionary stance on taking a reductionist view of the power dynamics of English language relative to French language is well in order.

The strengths of the text lie in its relative absence of academic jargon, making it easily accessible to multiple audiences, especially to youth who may be confronting similar identity issues to those covered in the text: growing up in bilingual households in Montreal and influenced by two or more language cultures. However, the research is somewhat limited in its ability to offer insight into the complexities of identity formation for youth whose lived experiences included single parent homes influenced by multiple languages and those for whom race as social construct adds another layer to their attempts to define their identity in Montreal.

This book is highly recommended for students, researchers, and the general public interested in multi-lingual identities, language politics in Quebec, sociolinguistics, and second language learning in immersion schools. Although Gérin-Lajoie's area of study is primarily minority French language education, by joining the discussions pertinent to English minority learners' identity formation, she has provided those interested in this area of research with a

strong methodological approach. She succinctly guides the reader through the historical and political language context of Quebec to set the backdrop for its importance in the identity construction of her participants. Combining this with her short quantitative survey and subsequent in-depth interviews of students, their family members and friends, she draws our attention to the multiple layers and nuanced ways that her participants define their identity within the context of language.

LERONA DANA LEWIS, *McGill University*

REFERENCES

Fraser, G. (2006). *Sorry I don't speak French: Confronting the Canadian crisis that won't go away*. Toronto, ON: McClelland & Stewart.