
Next Stop, Cold Lake: Patterns of Mobility, Military Brats and Oil-Patch Kids

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Abstract: The French-speaking population of Cold Lake, Alberta, is mainly constituted by mobile individuals coming from two sectors: the oil industry and the Canadian military. Based on fieldwork in and around a French-only school in Cold Lake, this article explores the community impact of having such a mobile resident make-up. From the parents', educators' and most importantly from the children's perspective, I ask how these mobile families relate to the many communities to which they belong, how they see themselves and how they articulate their sense of belonging.

Keywords: mobility, school, military, oil industry, family, identity

Résumé : La population francophone de Cold Lake, en Alberta, est principalement constituée de personnes mobiles rattachées à deux secteurs: l'industrie pétrolière et les Forces militaires canadiennes. À partir d'une recherche de terrain effectuée dans et autour d'une école exclusivement francophone de Cold Lake, cet article étudie l'impact sur la communauté d'avoir une population caractérisée par une telle mobilité. Avec la perspective des parents, des enseignants mais surtout des enfants, je cherche à savoir comment ces familles nomades entrent en relation avec les nombreuses communautés auxquelles elles appartiennent, comment elles se perçoivent et comment elles articulent leur sentiment d'appartenance.

Mots-clés : mobilité, école, forces armées, industrie pétrolière, famille, identité

Introduction

For the first time, Canadian western provinces hold a larger part of the Canadian population than the Atlantic provinces and Quebec together (Statistics Canada 2012). One reason for this is the cross-Canada migrations that bring individuals to Alberta to benefit from work provided by the oil industry. Between 2006 and 2011, Alberta had the fastest population growth rate among provinces (10.8 per cent), almost 5 per cent above the national average (Statistics Canada 2012). Between 2008 and 2011, the Mobility, Identity and New Political Economy (MINE) research project looked into the mobility of francophone individuals moving about the country for work reasons, many of whom came from Quebec or Atlantic provinces to find employment in Western Canada. As part of this research project, I conducted fieldwork in Cold Lake, Alberta, where the oil industry is an important employer. Cold Lake offered additional incentives for mobility research, as it is home to a Canadian Air Force base.

The objective of this project was to document how children of French-speaking military families living in an English-speaking part of Canada experienced their community, with a focus on the impact of their mobile lifestyle on the children's conception of identity and belonging. In this article, I discuss the consequences of high mobility for a linguistic minority community, through research with the French-only school serving local francophones. I argue that mobility is a major factor in identity and community building within the school clientele, most of whom are from either military or oil-industry families. Referring to fieldwork completed in Cold Lake in 2009–2010, I draw a portrait of the school as perceived by students, teachers and community members and pull from these descriptions to explain how mobile lifestyles can influence notions of community and belonging. After introducing the project, I propose patterns of mobility and semiotic registers as relevant theoretical approaches for work with mobile families. I then provide

a description of the social and historical setting in which this research takes place. This provides the necessary background for a description of the patterns of mobility experienced by the two main clienteles of the school, military brats and oil-patch kids.

Project Overview

In previous research on military families in the Canadian Navy (Asselin 2007), I became aware of the connection between patterns of mobility and community. Among the families of CFB Esquimalt, two main factors had significant influence on levels of mobility: the service of the military member and, second, whether the individual is an officer or enlisted member. Officers generally have a higher level of mobility than enlisted members, and air force and naval military personnel are more likely to be re-posted in the same base, as there are only two operational bases in the Navy.

These patterns of mobility influence how they related to their community as a whole and, for francophones, to local, non-military French networks. This previous research focused on the military family unit as point of reference. In this context, the children's experiences were part of the families' network of interaction.

However, family mobility has different repercussions for parents than for their children. Laura Hammond (2003) explored these divergences in experience between parent and child in families of refugees travelling back to their country of origin. She looked at how children of refugee families go through the process of emplacement through different practices than their parents, while being themselves part of their parents' emplacement experience. In the context of this project, it is similarly important to document how children of mobile families experience their relocation, as well as the processes through which they imbue their communities with meaning.

An ethnographic approach to the community experience of children of military families is relevant as it can counter the often ill-informed mainstream perceptions that civilians have of the military lifestyle (Ender 2005). Providing original data on an often hidden group can contribute to bridging the civil-military gap. Some research has been done on the impact of the military lifestyle on spouses (Burrell et al. 2006), but their children have been less likely to come under scrutiny (Ender 2005).

Anthropology is well suited to the study of military communities, who abound with elements of interest to its practitioners, such as jargon, traditions, rituals and distinct world views. They can therefore be studied with the same approach taken to studying any cultural group. Indeed, military culture has been referenced to help

understand military and civil-military relations in particular (Académie Canadienne de la Défense 2003; English 2004; Winslow 1997). In their own publications (Académie Canadienne de la Défense 2003), the Canadian Forces talk about military ethos—represented values and world views—which can be equated with elements of an institutional culture. Others, such as Harrison and Laliberté (1994, 1997) and Winslow (1997), focus on elements of military culture that diverge from civilians' values. For example, Cockerham and Cohen (1980) express the level at which civilians and military are divided by a redefinition of what are acceptably social acts, whereby "what most distinguishes the military is that it must train and socialize its membership to norms that are non-normative in civilian society, such as kill people and obey orders implicitly" Winslow (1997:15)

The common point is an agreement that military members are subjected to a military culture which is distinct from civilian culture. However, while military organizations across national borders may share elements of this organizational culture, it remains important to consider national and local re-articulations of these characteristics in context. While what is considered Canadian military culture contains elements that are typical of military organizations, it is redefined and actualized in relation to a Canadian national reality, which allows the legitimization of the Canadian Forces. Thus, in Cold Lake the reality of military life and the influence of the military institution on the family are played out in locally unique ways.

To widen my understanding of the military community, I began work with *École Voyageur*, in Cold Lake, Alberta, a school providing services to the Cold Lake Air Force base. Cold Lake is located in north-eastern Alberta near the Royal Canadian Air Force (RCAF) base of CFB Cold Lake (known as 4 Wing). As many communities in the region have a French-Canadian heritage, Cold Lake provided a relevant context in which to observe the interactions between the mobile francophones of the Canadian Forces and the local, historical francophone community.

Theoretical Approach

Mobility, particularly with regard to voluntary moves across borders, is seldom experienced collectively. Among my research population, each family has its own history of relocations, making it difficult to generalize. This is reflected in numerous works on human mobility (e.g., Ender 2002; Goebel 2010; Westwood and Phizacklea 2000), often in a transnational perspective, works that prefer to consider sense-making as an emergent phenomenon that evolves from interpretations and percep-

tions based on frames of expectations resulting from a continuous chain of interactions. This approach to identity is relevant in this case, where individuals are exposed to a multitude of socialization contexts and where their continuous participation across geographical, linguistic, social and institutional borders challenges the possibility of associating with a single, all-encompassing, cultural identity.

Yet, despite this uniqueness, many experiences can be framed by similar influencing factors that lead to general tendencies within a group. Families who move around Canada as part of careers in the Canadian Forces share some similarities in their experience of mobility. Their moves are motivated by similar needs and expectations and supported by the same institution, and they are subjected to networks of similar nature. It is in this light that I speak of military families sharing a *pattern of mobility*. This pattern is an important element of each individual's trajectory of socialization, establishing reference points to evaluate the experience they have of Cold Lake.

Patterns of mobility are not the same as trajectories or relocation histories. Trajectories, which are often personal in nature, are a specific lived experience of mobility across various localities. Each trajectory is unique and is an account of relocations by an individual, even though he or she may share many or even all parts of it with other individuals, such as family members. The trajectory can often be related through a narrative accounting for the various locations an individual has lived in over the course of his or her life. Kevin, a sixth-grader whose father is in the Air Force, summarizes his own personal trajectory:

KEVIN: Je suis né à Moose Jaw, puis après on a déménagé à Cold Lake. On a vécu ici pour cinq ans.

ASSELIN: Okay

K: Puis après on a re-déménagé à Moose Jaw pour environ 5 ans, parce que mon père était pilote là-bas. Et puis maintenant on est ici à Cold Lake encore.

A: Ça fait combien de temps que vous êtes revenue à Cold Lake?

K: Juste depuis le mois de juin.

This trajectory, though shared with family members, would likely not be expressed the same way by his parents, who were not born in Moose Jaw, Saskatchewan, and whose relocation history started before he was born. The trajectory of each military brat can vary greatly. The child of another RCAF military member may never have lived in different towns or regions. However, while their trajectories may differ, their relocations are nevertheless framed by similar characteristics, which may provide orientation to how they are interpreted. It is not suggested that two such individuals share similar

experiences but, rather, that their interpretive framework of mobility is influenced by certain shared characteristics. In the following sections, I provide examples of elements that constitute patterns of mobility for these families, such as the motivations for moving, the institutional support and the public opinions surrounding professional occupations. Because patterns of mobility are tied to framing characteristics, they can be shared by groups who participate within the same framework and are not uniquely personal, as are individual trajectories. A pattern of mobility also differs from a trajectory in that while the latter can be summarized as a described list of moves, the former is seldom articulated so concisely.

The same observations can be made in relation to other patterns of mobility, such as transnational families (Le Gall 2005; Tsang et al. 2003; Tsong and Liu 2009) and Third-Culture Kids (Ender 2002; Pollock and Van Reken 2001). The characteristics shared within these groups are because of similar elements in how the relocations and connections between different parts of the world are experienced and understood.

Oil-industry families also have a distinct trajectory of socialization. Some of them come from the same region of origin and share the same environment today; but the motivations, social networks and institutions framing their mobility vary to such a degree that they provide different points of reference toward their experience of northern Alberta. These same motivations, social networks and backgrounds are something that they share, making their own experience representative of another pattern of mobility.

To understand how mobility can be a factor in the building of identities and sense of belonging, I focused on how individuals in Cold Lake talked about and represented this part of their life. Goebel looks at identity as "fluid and something that constantly emerges within a chain of communicative events involving discourse on sameness and difference" (2010:2). He uses the concept of semiotic register, borrowed from Agha (2007), to explore identity. Semiotic registers represent a cultural model for action constituted of a "repertoire of performable signs linked to stereotypic pragmatic effects by a sociohistorical process of enregisterment" (Agha 2007:80). Goebel shows how multiple semiotic registers can coexist within a given group, allowing individuals to make sense of complex situations. This approach proved useful in understanding the mixed feelings revolving around the issues of mobility and about École Voyageur in general.

Cold Lake

Northern Alberta is home to a community of francophones who have achieved ethno-linguistic maintenance (Asselin and Daveluy 2011). Cold Lake is a relatively

young town, settled by Euro-Canadians in 1905. The local economy, based around agriculture and logging, was profoundly changed by the discovery of oil deposits at Leduc in 1946–47, which kick-started a wave of oil and gas exploration in Alberta (Kerr 1991). French-speakers have been part of the regional make-up for over a hundred years, settling nearby villages, such as Bonnyville, Saint-Paul, Plamondon and Lac La Biche. Another wave of oil industry expansion was spurred when technological advances and rising oil prices made the exploitation of the Fort McMurray¹ tar sands, one of the largest oil deposits in the world, profitable. The Cold Lake region proved to be a productive source of gas and oil and started attracting new workers. During the 1990s and 2000s, the oil industry boom changed the local economy and demography as workers coming from other parts of Canada moved to the region to benefit from the Alberta Advantage.²

A second event that shaped Cold Lake was the establishment of a nearby Air Force base in 1954. This started a continuous flow of military members coming from all parts of Canada into the Cold Lake area. Along with military members came their families, who were mostly housed in permanent married quarters (PMQs) around the base. This added francophones in the region, as a proportion of military members were French-speaking. The proportion of French-speakers in the Canadian Forces progressively increased to be representative of Canadian demographics after the adoption of the Official Languages Act in 1969. While other towns in the region do have a heritage of French-Canadian pioneers, historically Cold Lake itself was not a French-speaking community before military presence.

Today, a considerable part of Cold Lake's economy and identity is related to these two industries. Accordingly, Cold Lake's francophone community is mostly constituted of military members, oil workers and their respective families. For these families, the main nexus of interaction is the local French public school, l'École Voyageur, whose origin is tied to Canadian Forces' history.

The main component of fieldwork for this research focused on École Voyageur (K–12 French school). While École Voyageur provides services to military families, it is no longer a military school and is open to all children having a right of access to French education, referred to as *ayant-droits*, and is not in direct relation with the Canadian Forces. Cold Lake's population is 13,924 people, with 41 per cent of the population between 18 and 40 years old. Twenty-two per cent of the population work for the federal government (mostly through the

military base) and 17 per cent work for the oil and gas industry (City of Cold Lake 2010).

Schools and the Canadian Forces

There are very few recorded concerns for the families of military members before World War I (Morin 1986). While the families of officers played an important role in the community, the families of enlisted members were generally not recognized. Furthermore, between the two World Wars, the minister of defence recognized no obligation toward their children's education. Families of military members were often caught in a difficult situation as the municipal school boards would require them to pay non-resident tuition fees because they lived on crown land and therefore did not pay school taxes. However, starting from the end of the 1940s, the Canadian Forces progressively began recognizing its responsibilities toward the families of enlisted members. After the creation of the Official Languages Act in 1969, the issue was complicated by a necessity to provide education in both of Canada's official languages. The bilingualism programs of the Canadian Forces brought French-speakers to regions where French-speaking services were not necessarily available (Bernier and Pariseau 1991). This influx of francophone families created or reinforced local French-speaking communities, which then warranted the provision of schools in that language. On many bases, as education was provided by the Department of National Defence (DND), providing space to establish French programs became one of DND's responsibilities.

In CFB Cold Lake (4 Wing Cold Lake), the first French program was created in 1974 and began complete operation at the beginning of the 1980s (Morin 1986). Because French services were provided where demand warranted, the initiation of the process fell to members of the community. At 4 Wing Cold Lake, dedicated individuals started to adapt and develop programs in a trailer behind another school for children of military families and civilian employees on the base. These programs were not thought to be well adapted to local realities; subsequently, Cold Lake teachers worked toward local adaptation. To reduce expenses, in the early 1990s, the DND decided to pass responsibilities for the schools to local school boards. For the French school, this meant joining the emerging regional school board and offering the provincial curriculum. The schools were now open to the general public but still located on the base, with some children coming from as far as 40–50 kilometres away.

Indeed, by the time the French school was created at 4 Wing, linguistic composition in the surrounding

communities had changed to the point where there was no longer an official French school in many surrounding communities. This is how, when the 4 Wing French school became public, many parents came to send their kids to Cold Lake for their elementary education. Since then, new French schools have been created in Bonnyville, Saint-Paul and Plamondon, as part of a French school board. Nowadays, the children attending *École Voyageur* all reside in the Cold Lake area. Finally, in 2004, the school relocated off-base. This move was motivated by a need for new infrastructure and also to move closer to the civilian communities, in the hope of attracting more local, non-military, French-speaking families.

Patterns of Mobility

Military Brats

In considering trajectories within the military community, it is important to distinguish between officers and enlisted members. While an officer's career generally requires some level of post-secondary education, this is not the reality for enlisted members, who can join the military as unskilled labourers. This means that officers, enlisted members and their respective families often come from and belong to different socio-economic groups and may have different perspectives on the value of education and mobility. Furthermore, while all military members have to change posting every 3–5 years, not all postings are accompanied by relocation. To decrease cost, the current trend is to minimize the number of long-distance moves, at least for enlisted members. Avoiding moves is more difficult for officers, whose careers rely on showing adaptability and command capacity in various environments. Within the military institution, it is deemed preferable that an individual does not become too comfortable in a certain commanding position, and leaders are therefore moved. Second, the trade of an enlisted member also impacts trajectories. For example, some of the military members I met were Air Force technicians who specialize in the CF-18 and could be posted only where those planes are based or wherever the aircraft were currently deployed.³ Furthermore, not all military members posted at 4 Wing Cold Lake belong to the Royal Canadian Air Force. Some of them belong to the Army and even the Navy, and were posted in Cold Lake for several reasons. It was explained to me by a military member that some types of occupations, such as medical support, are transferable from one service to the next and are only nominally associated with a specific one. Among the military families at *École Voyageur*, the level of mobility and specific trajectories therefore varied according to occupation.

These individuals' patterns of mobility influence how they relate to their community as a whole and, for francophones, to the local, non-military, French-speaking networks. For instance, in Esquimalt, BC, some military families who had experienced living as a linguistic minority did not have the same type of integration as those coming directly from Quebec, where they had always lived as part of the linguistic minority. In Cold Lake, I was told by school staff that some parents coming from Quebec, who expected to return to Quebec after their stay in Cold Lake, were more likely to enrol their children in the English schools than other francophones, because they were not as concerned about language maintenance.

The Canadian Forces assigns a linguistic designation to each unit or base, and units can therefore be labelled as French Language Units (FLU), English Language Units (ELU) or Bilingual Units (BU)⁴ (Asselin 2006, 2007; Commissariat aux langues officielles 2004:23). Bagotville, a French language Air Force base located in Quebec, is often avoided by unilingual English speakers, if they can help it, often for the sake of their spouse. While military members do not have the final say in their postings, they still express preferences that can be taken into account. Spouses of military members often mentioned to me having put pressure on their husbands to try to influence the process.

Age can also influence the likeliness to move. Members with young families, who are at the beginning of their career, are likely to accept being moved to aid in their advancement. However, those with older children, in particular those nearing the end of high school, are more likely to seek ways to stay in one location until their children have graduated.

A distinctive aspect of military family mobility is that their relocation, indeed, their entire lives, is framed by their relationship with the Canadian Forces. In a way, their moves are not voluntary. While the military members enlisted of their own free will, once they are part of the Canadian Forces, they are not in control over where they will be posted. There are provisions for special circumstances and ways to influence the posting process. Having children, in particular high school children, can be taken into consideration when postings are assigned. In this light, children can be anchors for military members, providing them with reasons to reduce their movements and grow roots in a given community.

However, children have very different perspectives on their family's mobility than their parents. Unless they themselves are from military families, mobility is a recent life choice for the parents, while for many children it is the only lifestyle they have ever experienced.

A child could have been born in Trenton, Ontario, moved to Goose Bay, Labrador, when he was two, then back to Bagotville, Quebec, at six and end up in Cold Lake, Alberta, at age ten. When the time comes for the next posting, the family might decide to try to stay in Cold Lake to allow their 14-year-old the opportunity to stay in the same high school until graduation.

Oil-Patch Kids

For oil-industry families, mobility is primarily motivated by economic opportunity. While individual families have different trajectories, the typical scenario is one where workers sought relocation in Alberta to benefit from better employment opportunities. As such, a sizeable proportion of this group comes from regions of Canada suffering from ongoing economic difficulties, such as New Brunswick (as far as French-speakers go), or from other parts of Canada where industry has been struggling. This characteristic further differentiates military and oil-industry families. Within the population I studied, French-speaking military families are more predominantly from Quebec, as Quebecers have a larger demographic weight compared to other French-Canadians, while French-speaking oil-industry families in Cold Lake are often from New Brunswick or Ontario.

Oil-patch kids usually have a more linear relocation history. Even if coming to Cold Lake was not their first move, they can easily trace their own origin and identity back to their parent's province of origin. The path that led them to Cold Lake clearly came from there, and they often see that that is where it will lead them again.

Many oil-patch kids were born in New Brunswick or were born in Cold Lake but have parents who recently migrated from the east. While their stay in Cold Lake might be temporary, as their parents are often planning to eventually move back east, their living situation is more stable than that of military brats. As for the move to Cold Lake, the family's decision for returning to their region of origin or moving to a new location is left to individual families. This is in contrast with military families, whose movements can be dictated by an outside institution. In interviewing parents of oil-industry families, there is a sense that the move to Cold Lake was always accompanied with a willingness to make a home there. Thus, there is a sense of stability and permanency, even if living in Cold Lake is seen as temporary.

In comparison with military families, oil-industry families, as civilians, tend to fit in better with the wider community. This is largely because their occupation does not add an additional barrier to social integration. They also take part in the local economy, and their prosperity is more closely related to local reality. Further-

more, they are also "not quebecois," and often have an easier time adapting to the local francophone community, already being accustomed to being a minority in their home towns and often having a better grasp of the English language.

The Students of *École Voyageur*

From the outside, *École Voyageur* looks like any other school. Upon approach, its identity as French-speaking school quickly becomes apparent: the billboard near the parking lot relates news in French and there is a Franco-Albertan flag on a pole beside the Albertan and Canadian ones. Inside the school, the French language dominates, even with a few bilingual or English-only notices, mostly relating to local events. Like any other school, students go to their classes, talk in the hallways or other common areas and play in the schoolyard. One giveaway that the school is a little different can be seen in the number of men and women wearing military uniforms dropping off and picking up their children. When asking community members if *École Voyageur* is unique, two main discourses seem to emerge. One is of normality. In this discourse, according to participants, *École Voyageur* is a regular school, where the students are first and foremost children with children's concerns. They want to have fun, they wish they could skip some classes, they have fights, they fall in love, they goof around, they hang out.

However, this discourse is mixed within another semiotic register, seemingly without contradiction, which claims that *École Voyageur* is a very unique school. At the forefront of this portrayal of the school is that the people of *École Voyageur* are mobile. What makes *Voyageur* particular in this regard is the extent of this characteristic within its population. Around school, in any given class, when asking students with military parents to raise their hands, the majority of them will do so. The main clientele of the school are clearly military families. However, what completes the mobile characteristic is that a large majority of the non-military families have also come from other parts of Canada, mostly to work in oil and gas extraction and related industries. Although there are some locals in the school, they remain a very small minority, even including those coming from other parts of Alberta. *École Voyageur* is a very apt name for the school, even if it officially refers to the original pioneers who explored Western Canada's waterways.

Among the school staff, the semiotic register surrounding mobility often frames it as an obstacle; the mobility that is omnipresent at *École Voyageur* presents challenges. One of the simplest is technical: when new

students arrive at *École Voyageur*, teachers need to assess their level in comparison with the Albertan school program, so they rely on forwarded academic files. However, delays or oversights are frequent. Teachers spoke of frustrations when lacking important information regarding students to provide them with the appropriate level of instruction. One teacher told me it had taken her many months to assess where a new student was in relation to the Alberta science curriculum, having recently moved from Quebec. Her opinion was that a better communication between the schools who dealt with mobile families could help the situation.

Furthermore, some teachers felt that many students had self-esteem issues as a result of a difficult adaptation to the Alberta school curriculum, partly due to the fact that students coming from other provinces were often stronger in some disciplines and weaker in others. While being ahead of their classmates may provide a boost in self-confidence, it rarely makes up for the feeling of inadequacy resulting from having to struggle to keep up in another subject, particularly if students' performances were considered good in their previous school. This is accentuated by the fact that the readjustment to the curriculum occurs at the same time that the student is learning the norms of the new environment. This is exacerbated when students struggle to communicate in the wider community, such as when they do not yet speak English with confidence. For example, one difficulty for older students who were not very comfortable with their English skills was in finding part-time jobs.

A less tangible but nevertheless profound impact of mobility on the students of *École Voyageur* is in their attachment to localities. Observation and interviews lead me to think that the patterns of mobility of military brats and oil patch kids also have an impact on their concepts of identity and belonging. For instance, asking where they are from elicits different answers. The question is often harder to answer for military brats.

A good proportion of them struggle to answer this question, feeling it does not reflect their own conception of belonging. Although they can name where they were born, their answer generally comes as a list of the various locations where they lived, without classifying one as more important than the others. For them, the journey that their life has been is more relevant than any single location to which they may have an attachment. This does not mean that they lack any symbolical attachment to place. The specifics of various trajectories create situations where some children claim a specific regional identity. Many children of Quebec families, for example, still claimed a Quebecois identity, even though they had no recollection of living there. It is just not "where they

are from." This can at least, in part, be attributed to their socialization within a discourse, from their parents but possibly also from other mobile individuals, in which their Quebecois heritage is promoted. Julie, a high school student who had no recollection of living in Quebec, still considered herself Quebecoise.

ASSELIN: Quand on te demande tu viens d'où, qu'est-ce que tu dis?

JULIE: Québec ... Bien je suis née là, puis, je suis québécoise, donc je dis Québec.

Furthermore, while a lack of attachment to place is seen in how they look at their past trajectory as well as their relationship with Cold Lake, it is also reflected in how they see themselves in the future. Unless they have lived in Cold Lake for most of their lives and have established deep networks or roots within the community, most students expect to leave Cold Lake one day, and do so without regret. They plan to go where life takes them, often with an eye for employment opportunities.

Even though adapting to a new social environment is often brought up as one of the main difficulties for students changing schools, *École Voyageur* is particular because it is almost entirely made up of relocated individuals. Almost everyone has known what it is like to be the new kid or is used to welcoming new classmates, so there is no stigma surrounding new arrivals. And because the school is small, it lacks the complex social stratification which can make school life, maybe particularly high school life, so difficult for outsiders. The experiences of *École Voyageur's* students clearly reflect this.

In fact, as far as putting stress on social life, what is difficult is not being the new student at the school and making new friends, but rather having to leave friends, either in the previous school or in Cold Lake, when someone moves away. Jean, a military member, and Lucy had two boys at *École Voyageur* and explained some of the challenges for their children in making friends.

JEAN: Tu vas remarquer que la plupart des enfants ne se font pas des bons amis. Ils vont être chums, mais de là à devenir meilleurs chums... La plupart le savent pas mal d'avance, habituellement les parents vont le savoir au mois de novembre, qu'ils sont transférés l'été. Ils savent peut-être pas où, mais ils savent qu'ils sont [transférés]. Fait que déjà là, les enfants vont le savoir. Fait que tu sais, ils savent que lui, il part, fait que ça sert à rien de se mettre bien chum avec lui. Il va partir dans, dans 3 ou 4 mois, fait que tu sais...

LUCY: Mais en même temps il vient un âge où ça vient difficile de partir parce qu'ils se sont fait des amis. Puis, nous autres aussi.

J: Mais c'est plus les blondes puis les chums.⁵

In this regard, while this research did not produce conclusive evidence, it is possible that mobility may have a different impact according to the gender of children. Many boys who were interviewed belonged to secondary groups, which facilitated their involvement in the local social network, primarily by being members of sports team. Indeed, some children and parents told me that organized sports had contributed to establishing ties after their relocation. However, among my sample, the children involved in such sports, usually hockey, were mostly from oil-industry families, who relocate less often than the military families.

Another secondary group which is likely to be available to military children are the various cadet groups which are often found in communities where there are military bases. Indeed, these can and do offer some amount of continuity to children of military families who are involved in such groups, as these units are structured similarly across Canada. While it can be expected that the cadet organization, like the military institution upon which it is structured, is gendered in ideology and practice, among the children I interviewed during my stay in Cold Lake, members of the local cadet group were equally male and female.

Finally, once again within the group I studied in Cold Lake, a similar proportion of male and female children expressed distress in severing important primary friendships. Similarly, the parents of both boys and girls expressed concern or related difficulties for their children when they lost close friends because of relocations. Therefore, it is not possible to establish a strong gendered perspective on mobility of children based on this research.

As a result of the mobility of its clientele, *École Voyageur* is also quite different from other schools of the regional French school district. The *Conseil scolaire Centre-Est* (Centre-East School Board) is composed of four schools: *École Beauséjour* in Saint-Paul, *École des Beaux-Lacs* in Bonnyville, *École du Sommet* in Plamondon and *École Voyageur* in Cold Lake. While each school and community has their specificities, there seems to be an agreement that *École Voyageur* is distinct from the other three. All three other schools are in communities sporting local, historically grounded, French-speaking populations. While the regional expansion of the oil and gas industry has also brought some outside workers to these towns, perhaps most importantly in Bonnyville, it remains that the students attending these schools are mostly coming from a local Franco-Albertan community. In relation to the other three schools, *École Voyageur* has often been labelled the Quebecer school, because of the large proportion of students having come from that

province because of their parent's military career. The difference between *Voyageur* and the three other schools becomes apparent during the regular activities that they jointly hold, called the BBSV (Beauséjour, Beaux-Lacs, Sommet and *Voyageur*). One thing that clearly differentiates the students of *École Voyageur* is the quality and extent of their use of French. According to many accounts, students of other schools have a lower level of French fluency and are more likely to use English in social encounters than those students from *École Voyageur*. Robert, a teacher at *École Voyageur*, describing differences between *École Voyageur* and the Bonnyville French school, noted the following:

ROBERT: Ah oui, à Bonnyville, les élèves parlent plus anglais.

ASSELIN: Dans l'école?

R: Dans l'école, à la maison, même pour les familles francophones. Ici [*École Voyageur*] il y a beaucoup de français, ici tu marches dans les corridors puis si ça parle anglais, c'est étrange. À Bonnyville, si tu entends du français c'est étrange!

A: Ah c'est quelque chose à quoi j'avais pas pensé ça. Comme avec les enfants de familles militaires, puis les enfants de familles pas militaires: est-ce que les enfants de familles pas militaires parlent plus en anglais?

R: Oui, ceux qui sont de racines albertaines. Ça c'est une autre grosse différence que j'ai remarqué. Ça c'est, je pense, parce qu'il y a beaucoup de jeunes qui viennent du Québec. Et c'est bon pour une école, parce que là (au Québec), c'est francophone, évidemment. Mais un autre problème c'est qu'on a besoin d'enseigner l'anglais, pour graduer dans la province.

Beyond a difference in linguistic use patterns, there are claims that *École Voyageur* students differ in character from those of the other schools. They have different tastes, might dress differently and may have a different sense of humour. The exact nature of this difference is unclear, but the suggestion is that *École Voyageur* is home to individuals of different backgrounds and cultural influences. Among other things, perhaps more at the parent committee level, is that although *École Voyageur* is a Catholic school like the other three, religious elements are much less present in the Cold Lake school. According to the school administration, this is once again attributed to the predominance of families from Quebec in the community, who are much less likely to be practising Catholics compared with local Franco-Albertan families.

Some teachers have expressed the opinion that as a result of their mobility, students of *École Voyageur* seem worldlier than those of other surrounding schools. In particular, children from military families who have

lived in multiple towns and provinces show a greater awareness of Canadian and even global diversity. Another teacher explained having been impressed by her students' breadth of experience:

Puis souvent ils nous parlent. Tu sais, ils sont au courant des provinces, puis quand j'avais les 4ièmes je le voyais encore plus: "Ah oui moi je suis née ici, ou en nouvelle écosse, puis je suis allé au Québec, puis je suis allé en Ontario, puis je suis allé ici, puis je suis déjà allé là puis là ..." Ils ont voyagé, puis ils [les familles militaires] prennent le temps de voyager ... Ils voyagent beaucoup ces enfants-là. Ils en connaissent des gens, puis ils sont au courant.

They have experienced multiple environments and seem open to a wide range of options and realities. As a whole, the student body of *École Voyageur* has extensive connections throughout Canada. In today's age of electronic communications and digital social networking, keeping in contact with individuals over long distances is easier than ever, and the students of *École Voyageur* do so. The constant coming and going of students at the school creates a wide-ranging network of connections between individuals who, at some point, shared a school environment but were separated because of their families' relocation. High school students in particular maintain connections with friends across Canada and sometimes overseas. Furthermore, because they have personal connections with the military, they are more likely to be aware of and seek out information regarding international affairs, especially if they are relevant to national defence or the Canadian Forces' operations abroad.

It could be expected to find some variations in regard to worldliness and to propensities for higher education among children of military families, in particular because of the variations in regard to different socio-economic levels between officers and enlisted members mentioned earlier. However, the sample that was under scrutiny in Cold Lake did not display a meaningful variation in this regard. It could be that the studied sample was not representatively distributed between families of officers and enlisted members, but it could also be attributed to the general economic context of northern Alberta. The economic boom, which was ongoing in the area, provided individuals with many opportunities to bring in large salaries without having to become professionals through post-secondary education, and unemployment did not seem a concern within the population. Some of the children interviewed aspired to pursuing their education in universities after high school, but several of them thought they might complete training in various trades, without obvious distinctions between those from families of officers or enlisted members.

Discussion

An institution catering to a mobile population can find itself at the middle of ideological conflicts. In the collection edited by Olwig and Gullov (2003) entitled *Children's Places*, many of the authors share the idea that the choices that parents make in relation to how and where to raise their children are highly ideological and reflect a stance toward concepts of identity and belonging. However, after observing how children create and maintain ties to communities, a common realization is that children develop their own sense of place locally, through experience, perhaps more than through ideological ties. To a certain extent, this situation is reflected in Cold Lake. For French-speaking parents living in linguistic minority settings, the choice to send their children to *École Voyageur* is most often ideological. Parents prioritize their children learning and maintaining their use of French language, and providing an environment outside the home where French is the exclusive legitimate language of expression is an important tool to this effect. Given the correlation of language and culture, in the Canadian context the transmission of French is also a means for parents to transmit their own sense of cultural belonging to their children. Research such as that presented in Dalley and Roy (2008) has shown the complexity of issues surrounding language use in the context of education in francophone minorities. The discourse on francophone identity can be understood as constitutive of semiotic registers in the same way that the discourse on mobility can be seen as a contributing factor to the experience of community.

In this regard, *École Voyageur* finds itself in the middle of a conflict among multiple French-Canadian identities. On one hand, the school belongs to an Albertan school district, promoting a Franco-Albertan identity and offering locally and provincially developed programs and services. Many teachers are themselves from Alberta, and the school is involved in regional and provincial activities strengthening ties within the Franco-Albertan community. However, school administrators and teachers often find that their attempts at fostering a sense of community in Cold Lake are undermined by the parents' lack of involvement because of their mobile lifestyle. Parents who came to Cold Lake for work reasons are less likely to put efforts into community life than locals. This is particularly the case with military families, whose pattern of mobility is one of a sequence of moves in which Cold Lake is likely not the final destination. Fieldwork suggests that oil-patch families, who are likely to be established in the region for a longer time frame, if not permanently, express more frequently an interest in community involvement. However, for many oil-patch

families, the northern Alberta adventure is primarily an economic endeavour and they still have limited interest in adopting a Franco-Albertan identity. There are some exceptions, and individuals who invested themselves in the community are remembered; but these contributions are usually temporary, and the constant turnover of those who volunteer is a challenge to any attempts at continuity.

While *École Voyageur* is officially part of the Franco-Albertan network, the predominance of Quebecois military families within its population causes a shift in organizational identity. From the perspective of the French-military family, *École Voyageur* is more of an essential service provided on the periphery of the base than it is a connection with the Franco-Albertan community. As they move from posting to posting, French schools are part of the way they seek to maintain their own language and identity and not necessarily to participate in locally defined ones. Many school staff members are spouses of military members, and while they may not be promoting Quebecois political or cultural references in their classrooms, they are likely less equipped to be fostering Franco-Albertan identity. One more palpable contentious issue has recently been about religious activities at the school. *École Voyageur* is officially a Catholic school, a choice that had been debated when the school was created. In Alberta, the French-speaking minority was, in great part, able to develop its school system by relying on constitutional rights based on religion, rather than language. This resulted in a network where the Catholic identity of the schools was usually accepted as a default status. This strategy was different than that of some communities in other provinces, such as in Ontario, where language was the determining factor (Couture 2005).

In Cold Lake, the creation of the school went through a slightly different process as many of the individuals involved were not Franco-Albertans but Quebecois and Franco-Ontarians. While some individuals, presumably some from Quebec military families, would have preferred a laic designation, the decision was eventually made based on an assumption that recognizing ties with Catholic heritage would make it easier to strengthen bonds with traditional French-Canadian representations. That being said, at the time of my fieldwork, I was being told that Catholic practices were less prominent at *École Voyageur* than in the other schools of the district. This was cause for some tensions as during the second year of my fieldwork, the school district decided to re-establish the Catholic nature of the school.

What is suggested in *Children's Places* (Olgiv and Gullov 2003) is that while parents make ideological

choices in regard to their children's education, the children's own sense of identity and belonging is more often based on their own experiences. Therefore, while mobile parents may not have much investment in local identities, children of such families do not seem to suffer from such limitation. Even while aware of being temporary residents and of not being native to a locality, children do seem to moderate the extent to which they participate in local life the same way their parents sometimes do.

As many teachers mentioned during fieldwork, children are children, and the activities that are important to them are not greatly influenced by the time frame they have available. It is through this engagement with their social world that they become enculturated and build their sense of self. In doing so, they internalize several semiotic registers which form the basis of how they understand their lives. While their parent's ideology may be consistent across the various moves that make up their pattern of mobility, their experience of socialization occurs locally at every point of this trajectory. At each location, while still being subjected to their parent's discourse, they become acquainted with new semiotic registers regarding identity, community and belonging.

Among the children of mobile families who contributed to this project, there is a tendency toward broad perspectives insofar as where they intend to live and work as adults. I believe this to be a product of their patterns of mobility that subjected them to a variety of cultural environments. Theorists such as James, Jenks and Prout (1998) have suggested that growing up can be understood as an increased access to space and that childhood must therefore be understood in light of children's relationship with social and physical environments. In other words, as children age, they gain access to new spaces and the potentiality of their environments increases. If this is the case, patterns of mobility are of great consequence in childhood, as they shape the possible experience of localities and the localities themselves. For instance, teachers in Cold Lake talk about the worldliness of their student population, which they attribute to their high level of mobility.

Children with high mobility, such as those of military families, have had exposure to a variety of social and physical environments over the course of their trajectory. If their process of growing up is to be understood in relation to an increase in legitimate access to space, their own socialization is particular in that this increase occurs in a sequence of localities instead of in one context. The high school they will get access to is often not the same one that was barred from them when they

were elementary school children. The mall that they will eventually get the right to go to on their own may not be the one they know today or even the one they will get to know in a future posting. However, wherever they go, one of the constants is that these spaces do exist, and that their relation to these spaces is evaluated according to the same criteria. Their experiences in different localities help them build prototypical understandings of these spaces, which further facilitate mobility. Wherever they will go, they expect similar places will be there. This transposition of relation to place can also occur with individuals and institutions. Experience teaches children of mobile families that wherever they go, they will re-create similar social relations with new individuals, whether they be other children, adults, such as teachers, or institutions, such as their new school. These characteristics are similar to those found on another scale, in the children of foreign diplomats, missionaries or corporate workers, who are raised outside of their parent's country of origin, sometimes labelled Third Culture Kids (TCKs), a term coined by Ruth Hill Useem in her work with Americans working in India (Pollock and Van Reken 2001). In fact, a 2002 collection edited by Morton Ender (2002) explicitly portrays military brats as a typical form of TCKs.

Therefore, many of the children of highly mobile families with whom I spoke did not express much distress about the prospect of moving to a new town. In general, the difficulties around moving were generally tied more to leaving good friends behind than to a worry about the new environment. A result of this is that as they near graduation, most children of mobile families in my project do not hesitate to consider leaving their current social network behind to seek further education or work. They see themselves going "where the work is," and do not limit their career choices to those sustainable in the Cold Lake area. In fact, the few exceptions I encountered are quite telling in this matter. The individuals who were planning to stay in the area after graduation either were from families working in the oil industry who intended to follow their parents' steps or had been living in the area for a long time after their parents had decided to refuse further posting to allow their children some stability.

Theorists (e.g., Appadurai 1996) have identified the family as a unit of interest to see how small groups deal with changing realities to fulfil their functions of reproducing themselves and cultural forms along the way. In a context of heightened interconnectedness and mobility, it is easily possible to focus on a study of flows and ideologies, but it is important to remember that movements, even those that are part of a larger social phenomenon,

are always experienced at the level of the individual. Mobility is an activity that can involve the solitary worker but also families who come to experience new and old environments both simultaneously and from different perspectives.

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Notes

- 1 Following a municipal restructuring in 1995, the City of Fort McMurray was merged with the neighbouring district to create the Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo. However, it is still most commonly referred to as Fort McMurray.
- 2 The Alberta Advantage was an official slogan used by the province of Alberta from 1994 to 2009. Used to attract workers and investors, the slogan focused on the low taxation rates, the debt-free status of the province and other fiscal advantages of the province, going through an economic boom because of the expansion of the oil industry (*Edmonton Journal* 2009).
- 3 During my 2009 fieldwork, a number of pilots and technicians were waiting to be temporarily posted near Vancouver for a period of time surrounding the Vancouver 2010 Winter Olympics.
- 4 Some units, such as some overseas bases, lack an official designation.
- 5 *Blonde* and *chum* are Quebec French colloquialisms meaning respectively girlfriend and boyfriend.

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