

The Fransaskois' Journey from Survival to Empowerment through Governance

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Abstract: This study uses empowerment theory to draw attention to the transformative and constitutive power of governance in shaping relationships between Francophone communities and the Canadian state. Through two case studies that examine the quest for governance of French-language education and the democratization of community governance, the study shows how the Fransaskois claim power from above and build power from below through governance. In so doing, it posits governance as a tool for the collective empowerment of Francophone minority communities in their quest to *faire communauté*.

Keywords: Francophone minorities, Governance, Language rights, Fransaskois, Education, Empowerment theory

Résumé: Cette étude utilise la théorie de l'*empowerment* pour illustrer le pouvoir transformateur et constitutif de la gouvernance dans la formation des relations entre les communautés francophones et l'État canadien. À travers deux études de cas qui examinent les revendications pour la gestion scolaire et la démocratisation de la gouvernance communautaire, l'étude démontre comment la gouvernance permet aux Fransaskois d'exercer le pouvoir par le haut et par le bas. La gouvernance est ainsi présentée comme un outil qui contribue à rehausser le pouvoir collectif des communautés francophones en situation minoritaire dans leur quête de « faire communauté ».

Mots-clés: Minorités francophones, gouvernance, droits linguistiques, Fransaskois, éducation, théorie de l'*empowerment*

In an editorial published in Saskatchewan's French-language newspaper in 1911, Father Auclair called on Francophones to unite in a common political struggle against assimilation (Huel, 1986: 6). In response to this call, more than 450 Francophones gathered in Duck Lake to create a provincial organization tasked with ensuring the survival of the French-language and Catholic faith in the prairies. As Joseph Yvon Thériault has argued, Francophone minorities not only seek to survive but are driven to action by what he describes as *le désir de faire société*, the desire to assert themselves as a distinct community with common objectives (2007: 11). This argument resonates amongst Francophones in Saskatchewan, the Fransaskois, who aspire to control their destiny and exercise power vis-à-vis the state. This quest for empowerment is embodied in what the Fransaskois describe as *faire communauté* – to live a full and good life as a distinct French-speaking community amongst Anglophone and allophone neighbours.¹ This objective, which was first collectively expressed in 1912, continues to inform political life amongst the Fransaskois.

Today, the Fransaskois community includes individuals who identify with and contribute to the vitality of the French language in Saskatchewan (ACF, 2008: 11). It is made up of mother tongue French speakers that represent less than two percent of the provincial population as well as those who speak French (approximately five percent of the provincial population) and who wish to identify with the community (Canada, 2011). The majority of its members live in urban centres, but there is a strong Francophone presence in certain rural sectors notably around Bellevue, Bellegarde and Gravelbourg (FCFA, 2009: 2). While the Fransaskois community has changed with the onset of urbanization and has become increasingly diverse with the recent rise in immigration from new origins, the Fransaskois remain committed to a common political project to govern various aspects of their lives (Dubois, 2014). Since 1912, they have pursued this objective through demands for institutional completeness, initiatives to foster the development of the community and the democratisation of their governance structures (Dubois, forthcoming). Confronted with an Anglo-dominant provincial government and a distant federal government, the Fransaskois have consistently strived to exercise control over their destiny.

This article considers how the Fransaskois have sought to transform their relationship of power with provincial and federal governments through governance. The relationship between governance and empowerment is examined through two case studies. The first involves the Fransaskois' quest to claim power from above in order to govern French-language schools. The second examines the Fransaskois' efforts to constitute power from below via the various organizations through which they govern their cultural, political and economic affairs. Through an analysis of these case studies, this article argues that

¹ The author would like to thank Linda Cardinal and Johanne Poirier for their thoughtful comments and suggestions. The expression *faire communauté* is used in a report produced by a commission that sought to define the Fransaskois community (ACF, 2008: 6).

governance plays a transformative and constitutive role which contributes to the Fransaskois' quest to *faire communauté*.

This study fills two important gaps. First, researchers have only recently begun to examine the strategic use of governance by Francophone communities as a mechanism to negotiate or transform their relationship with the state (Cardinal and Forgues, 2015; Cardinal and Hudon, 2001; Cardinal and Juillet, 2005; Cardinal et al., 2010; Forgues, 2007; Léger, 2013, 2015). In an edited volume that examines case studies in Ontario and New-Brunswick, Linda Cardinal and Éric Forgues (2015: 277) observe that governance can provide Francophone communities with power and influence in a variety of sectors. In contrast with existing scholarship, which generally examines governance as a dependent variable largely conditioned by the state, this study approaches governance as an independent variable that is constrained by the institutional context within which it operates. For the purposes of this study, governance is defined broadly as the processes and mechanisms through which a community exercises power over its affairs.² Shifting the analysis away from the ways in which state recognition (through law and policy) affects the governance of Francophone minorities, this study examines the transformative and constitutive power of governance in shaping relationships between Francophone communities and the state.

Second, this study examines an underexplored community, the Fransaskois, and focuses on the seldom-told story of Fransaskois governance. The few scholars who have discussed the Fransaskois in scholarly literature have focused primarily on education, with notable contributions from Fransaskois sociologist Wilfrid Denis (for example, Denis, 1994, 1998, 2006, and Li 1988, see also Bilodeau, 1996; Rainey, 1988). By applying analytical tools from political science and expanding the analysis beyond education, this study positions the Fransaskois as political actors and draws attention to the power they exercise within the Canadian state system.

Methodology and Theoretical Framework

Given the scarcity of scholarship on the Fransaskois, this study relies on a number of primary and secondary non-peer reviewed documents, including biographical and historical writings about the Fransaskois, articles published in the community newspaper, as well as letters, policy-briefs and meeting

² This definition draws on Léger's (2015) discussion of governance in the context of Francophone minorities, which acknowledges that Francophone communities exercise and redistribute power through various organizations in relationship with the state. However, unlike Léger, this study does not view power as delegated by the state but as constitutive of the state and of Francophone minorities. As such, it draws attention to the transformative potential of governance (see on this point Cardinal et al., 2010).

minutes found in public and private archives.³ In addition, semi-structured interviews with past and present community leaders were conducted to provide a contextualized understanding of the ways in which governance shapes the power dynamics between the Fransaskois and the state. The marrying of narrative accounts with archival research provides a discursive map through which to trace the relationship between governance and empowerment.

The analysis of this relationship is conducted using empowerment theory. Used in various fields including philosophy, gender studies and psychology, empowerment theory has analytical purchase in illuminating the political struggles of groups that are in a minority situation and have a limited ability to transform the structure within which they exist.⁴ Empowerment, according to Jo Rowlands, “is about the individuals being able to maximize utility and use the opportunities available to them without or despite constraints of structure and state” (1997: 49). In practice, the degree of empowerment of a marginalized group like the Fransaskois is affected by the agency it exercises (i.e. the ability to control its destiny) and the available opportunity structure (i.e. the institutional context that influences a group’s ability to transform agency into action).⁵ While empowerment can occur at the individual and collective level, and manifests itself in social, economic and political spheres, this study focuses on collective empowerment in the political sphere. Specifically, it examines the way in which governance impacts the collective empowerment of the Fransaskois within the context of the Canadian state.

In their examination of the impact of governance on language policy and group politics, Cardinal and Denault (2007: 453) remind us that empowerment reflects not only the capacity of Francophone communities to engage with existing opportunity structures, but to use them in a transformative way. The notion of empowerment is periodically evoked in scholarly discussions of Francophone communities in Canada (e.g. Behiels, 2004; Cardinal and Denault, 2007; Léger, 2014). However, as Yann Le Bossé (2013) points out, the difficulty of translating this concept into French has led scholars to the use terms such as agency and action without a clear theoretical grounding. Responding to this concern, Rémi Léger (2014) argues that the notion of empowerment can deepen our understanding of the demands of Francophone minority communities and invites scholars to take up empowerment theory in the study of Francophone minorities. One of the attractions of empowerment theory is its emphasis on the empirical

³ Semi-structured interviews were conducted with ten past and present community leaders in 2011 and 2012. The archives of the Fransaskois’ governance body, the *Assemblée communautaire fransaskoise* and its antecedent bodies located at the Saskatchewan Archives Board were consulted in addition to personal archives of key individuals involved in the struggle for French-language education.

⁴ This study’s approach to empowerment theory is largely inspired by the literature on feminism and development (e.g. Sharma, 2008; Parpart and Staudt, 2002; Afshar and Alikhan, 1997) as well as the work of Deepa Narayan, project director at the World Bank (e.g. Narayan 2010, 2005). See Weissberg (1999) for an overview of the use of empowerment in the general scholarly literature and Léger (2014: 24-26) in the political science literature.

⁵ For a discussion of measuring empowerment, see Aslop and Heinsohn, (2005: 6-15) and Aslop et al. (2006).

context within which political struggles of marginalized groups unfold (e.g. Andersen and Birte, 2004). The discussion of the two case studies examined in this article highlights the dynamics that shape the lived experience of the Fransaskois within the context of the Canadian state, with attention paid to developments at the provincial and federal level. Using empowerment theory, this study is grounded in empirical evidence to explain continuity and change in the relations of power between the Fransaskois and the Canadian state.

Governing Schools: Claiming Power from Above

Education has long been associated with the goal of liberating oppressed groups.⁶ Given the crucial role of schools as instruments to preserve and enhance cultural traditions, it is not surprising that the Fransaskois, like other Francophone communities outside Quebec, made education a priority in their quest to *faire communauté*. For the Fransaskois, the struggle for French-language education is part of the larger objective to resist assimilation and ensure the respect of their rights (Denis, 2006). Since the early nineteenth century, the struggle to govern education has been the cornerstone of a common political project amongst Francophones in Saskatchewan (Dubois, 2014).

The desire to take control of French-language education as a means of survival was evident at the 1912 assembly in Duck Lake that followed Father Auclair's call to action. As delegates discussed strategies of resistance against oppression and assimilation, education was at the top of the agenda. Central to these strategies was the creation of a province-wide governance body to protect French-language Catholic education, the *Association catholique franco-canadienne de la Saskatchewan* (ACFC).⁷ The ACFC began lobbying the provincial government, which holds jurisdictional authority over education, for French-language protections in schools. However, the capacity of Fransaskois leaders to achieve the goals collectively agreed to in 1912 was significantly constrained by the Anglo-dominant linguistic regime imposed by the provincial government (Denis, 2006: 356).

Faced with a provincial government hostile to its objectives, the ACFC opted to take matters into its own hands and began governing various aspects of education such as recruiting

⁶ The origins of empowerment theory can be traced to Brazilian humanitarian and educator, Paulo Freire (1973), who sought to enable the transformative potential of individuals through education. Securing French-language education was a goal across French-speaking communities across Canada (Landry, 2009; Thériault, 2007).

⁷ See ACFC (1962: 32). The body was originally named the *Société du bon parler français de la Saskatchewan* and was later renamed the *Association culturelle franco-canadienne de la Saskatchewan* (keeping the same acronym, ACFC) in 1964 to emphasize its secular and cultural dimension.

French instructors, distributing books and administering exams. As Alain Landry and R  al Allard argue (1996), the survival of Francophone minorities as distinct communities is intrinsically linked to the degree of control exercised over their destiny via institutions.⁸ For Fransaskois leaders, governing education became a mechanism to ensure the survival of the community. This goal was notably pursued through the creation of an elected association of school commissioners that had the democratic legitimacy to act alongside provincially funded school boards while working hand in hand with the ACFC (Leclerc, 2001: 120). Despite initiatives by the ACFC and school commissioners, community-controlled institutions that functioned at the margins of the state system did little to empower the Fransaskois in the absence of an opportunity structure to enable change.

As Denis argues, the legislative regime in Saskatchewan in the first half of the twentieth century made it difficult for non-Anglophone groups to develop institutional structures that favoured their language (1998: 429). In addition to declaring English the only language of instruction in 1931, the provincial government adopted measures – including controls on the qualification of teachers, textbooks and programmes, and dress codes, which largely persisted until the 1960s – that served to maintain Anglo-hegemony (Denis, 2006: 89-90). In the absence of a shift in the distribution of power, Anglo-dominant institutions in Saskatchewan remained largely unchanged.

Signs that a crisis was brewing in the 1960s became increasingly evident as Francophone parents across the province openly contested the education regime through legal action, protest and political confrontation (Denis and Li, 1988: 358). Hostilities came to a head when a group of Francophone parents in Saskatoon withdrew their children from a Catholic school in 1965 to protest the Catholic School Board’s refusal to grant minor concessions with regards to French-language instruction (for a full discussion, see Denis and Li, 1988: 358-59). Rising tensions between parents and the school board led the provincial government to set up the Tait Commission to investigate the question of language in education.

Francophones were by far the most vocal interveners, submitting two thirds of the briefs received by the Tait Commission (Denis and Li, 1988: 359). They advocated for significant changes to the provincial legislation concerning schools and demanded the power to

⁸ For a discussion of the role of institutional development in the retention and growth of Francophone minorities, see Breton (1994).

autonomously govern French education in the province. In a jointly submitted brief, the ACFC and the Association of school commissioners admitted that community efforts had led to few results in the absence of state recognition of their right to govern their own schools (ACFC and ACEFC, 1966). The explicit goal of governance set Francophones apart from other intervenors, including British, German and Ukrainian groups that primarily sought to acquire tools to integrate the dominant society. For their part, Francophones advocated for the power to govern their own schools according to the political objectives of the community (Denis and Li, 1988: 359).

The school crisis of 1965 did not transform agency into action as parents had hoped. While the provincial government made minor legislative adjustments in response to this crisis that allowed for limited French-language instruction, the confrontations of the 1960s did little to redistribute power from the provincial government to the Fransaskois.⁹ Community leaders contended that the provincial government's changes did not go far enough. Denis argues that “[w]ithout adequate funding and resources, and especially without direct control over the education of their children, Francophone parents often had to engage in endless lobbying, even resorting to court actions to force recalcitrant school boards to comply with the law” (1999: 190). Fransaskois parents especially objected to the fact that the provincial government, which had accepted – in principle – to teach both languages in schools, did not ensure that this was being done in practice. Ultimately, minor legislative changes did little to empower the Fransaskois since they had no means to enforce French-language instruction.

Changes in the federal political and legislative context provided the Fransaskois with a new opportunity to advance their pursuit of governance over French-language education. The decline of the Catholic Church, the rise of neo-nationalism in Quebec, the breakdown of the Estates General of French Canada, the Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism, the election of Prime Minister Pierre Elliot Trudeau, and the subsequent adoption of the Official Languages Act contributed to disrupt the political balance in Canada. The academic literature on minority language communities in Canada has discussed at length the institutional shifts brought about by the adoption of a new bilingual language regime and the protection of language rights

⁹ Specifically, the provincial government made minor amendments to provincial legislation to allow one hour of French-language instruction where school boards agreed. Provisions for French-language instruction were subsequently broadened in the 1970s to allow for the creation of designated French immersion schools. Provincial support for French education eventually led to the establishment of Type “A” schools that could teach as much as 80 percent in French, and Type “B” schools that offered approximately 50 percent teaching time in French.

in the Constitution Act 1982 that arose out of this context. While legal rulings and the language regime are often presented as exogenous “creators” of rights (e.g. Bastarache, 2004), little attention is paid to the way in which these developments manifest at the provincial level or to the role communities play in bringing about their implementation. Denis (2006) observes that positive changes with respect to French-language protections in Saskatchewan since the 1960s can be largely attributed to the rise in political activism within the community.

Like in other provinces, Francophones in Saskatchewan turned to the courts to demand self-government in education (Denis, 1998; Foucher, 1991; Martel, 2001; Behiels, 2004). This demand gained traction with the constitutional entrenchment of section 23 in the Charter of Rights and Freedoms, which recognizes education rights for Canada’s official language minorities. In *Mahé v. Alberta*, the Supreme Court of Canada ruled that section 23 not only recognizes the right to education in both official languages, but also acknowledges the right of Francophones living in a minority situation to govern their own schools.¹⁰ As Michael Behiels argues, the achievement of school governance was a “truly extraordinary achievement” given the primacy of provincial autonomy over minority linguistic rights (2004: xxiii).

However, for the Fransaskois, the Supreme Court of Canada’s recognition of Francophone minorities’ right to govern schools in the 1990 *Mahé* decision did not significantly alter their powerlessness vis-à-vis the provincial education regime. In fact, a 1988 ruling by the Saskatchewan Court of Queen’s Bench had already confirmed that the Fransaskois had the right to control their own schools.¹¹ The Government of Saskatchewan nevertheless refused to amend provincial legislation to allow the establishment of a self-governed Fransaskois school board (Denis, 2006: 95-99). In a systematic study of political actions that led to advances in French education in Saskatchewan, Denis and Li show that, “the evolution of the last 20 years did not occur purely out of the good will of the governments in place. In fact, these are two decades of political and legal confrontations by the Francophone minority” (1988: 358). A closer examination of the experience of the Fransaskois suggests that state recognition did little to advance rights without the activism and vigilance of community members.

Many leaders viewed political action as a vehicle to empower the community against the vagaries of state inaction and therefore became involved in politics to bring about change after

¹⁰ *Mahé v. Alberta*, [1990] 1 S.C.R. 342.

¹¹ *Commission des Écoles fransaskoises Inc. v. Saskatchewan*, [1988] 3 W.W.R. 354, 48 D.L.R.(4th) 315.

the *Mahé* ruling (interviews with G. Leblanc and R. Gauthier). This mobilization led the New Democratic Party to make a campaign promise that – if they formed government in the 1991 provincial election – the Party would amend provincial legislation to allow the Fransaskois to govern their own schools during the first legislative session. In return, several Fransaskois campaigned for the New Democrats and worked to mobilize votes in their favour (interview with G. Leblanc). When the New Democratic Party took office under the leadership of Premier Roy Romanow in 1991, the newly elected government followed through on its campaign promise by tabling a bill recognizing self-government in French education that subsequently passed first and second reading. Even though the New Democrats held a majority and had several opportunities to pass this bill into law, the bill died on the order paper in August 1992.

In the face of this defeat, Fransaskois leaders shifted their strategy to leverage allies in their struggle. Having learned from the unfulfilled promises of the New Democratic Party, Fransaskois parents – through their provincial governing body, the *Association provinciale des parents fransaskois* – sought to use the political and social context to their advantage. To this end, Fransaskois parents mounted a public campaign to show the dissonance in the Romanow government's actions outside and within the province. This strategy was *à propos* since Premier Romanow was championing linguistic protections at the federal level as negotiator of the Charlottetown Accord. Fransaskois leaders travelled to Quebec where Romanow was canvassing for support for the Accord to spread the word about Romanow's failure to respect linguistic rights in his own province. Further challenging Romanow's integrity amongst voters in Saskatchewan, the parents' association published a third, a half and a full page advertisement declaring "Romanow is Irresponsible" in the province's principal newspapers in the three days leading up to the referendum on the Charlottetown Accord. Fransaskois leaders' strategy was to shame the Romanow government into recognizing their rights by leveraging their political alliances in Quebec and relying on allies within the province.

To effect change, Fransaskois leaders did not solely rely on the legal and political recognition of their right to govern French-language education, but also used the tools available to them to ensure the implementation of this right. As one Fransaskois leader remembers, "when you have access to the media, to the cameras, to the microphone, it gives you the possibility to start to mobilize and take control and that's exactly what we did" (interview with G. Leblanc, author's translation). Aware of the political context in which they found themselves, Fransaskois

leaders sought to work within the structures of power by supporting the NDP to achieve school governance. At the same time, they sought to use the leverage provided for by the adoption of official bilingualism and the Supreme Court of Canada's *Mahé* decision to garner public support. Ultimately, Fransaskois leaders used the available opportunity structure to increase their ability to control their destiny.

The political strategy devised by Fransaskois leaders had some success. Significantly, the Premier's office convened a meeting with the Fransaskois parents association the day immediately following the defeat of the Charlottetown referendum. Acknowledging the political force of the Fransaskois, the Premier promised to adopt a bill that responded to the demands of the Fransaskois in the following parliamentary session (interview with G. Leblanc). This commitment was honoured and the Fransaskois' right to govern their own schools was recognized by the Saskatchewan Legislature in June 1993. Through this political struggle, the Fransaskois not only ensured their right to govern their schools in provincial legislation, but also succeeded in obtaining the power to govern French-language education by establishing their own school board, the *Conseil des écoles francophones*, which came into force in 1995.¹²

Placing leaders of the Fransaskois community at the centre of the analysis, it becomes apparent that the political organization of parents and other community leaders were key endogenous factors that led to Francophone school governance in Saskatchewan. The political action of community leaders contributed to legislative change at the provincial level within a political context sensitive to Francophone minority rights at the federal level. While the balance of power between the Fransaskois and the province remained largely unchanged by the recognition of language protections in court rulings and legislative amendments alone, the actions of parents and the political mobilization of members of the community generated a shift in power that enabled the Fransaskois to take greater control of their destiny through the governance of French education in Saskatchewan.

¹² The school board was originally called the *Division scolaire francophone no 310*.

THE DEMOCRATIZATION OF COMMUNITY GOVERNANCE: CONSTITUTING POWER FROM BELOW

The actions undertaken to govern French-language education are part of the Fransaskois' larger struggle to exercise greater control over their destiny. This struggle initially aimed to reverse assimilation policies and ensure French-language protections as a means for survival. However, community leaders soon recognized that survival could not be achieved through the legal or legislative recognition of their rights. Rather, it required the power to effect change through control over the governance of their affairs. Like other Francophone minority communities, the Fransaskois characterise the sum of their struggles not simply as guards against assimilation, but as tools to write their own history (FFHQ, 1982: 30). Ultimately, the Fransaskois sought not only to survive, but to *faire communauté* (ACF, 2008: 6). Key in this quest has been the establishment of organizations through which the community governs its affairs. By examining the way in which the Fransaskois pursue the goal to *faire communauté* through these various organizations, the discussion below moves beyond education and draws attention to the constitutive power of governance, that is to say the power to institute or enact change through the processes and mechanisms by means of which a community exercises power over its affairs.

Over the last hundred years, the Fransaskois have developed several local, regional and provincial organizations that contribute to the collective aspiration to *faire communauté*. Today, these organizations operate as affiliates of the *Assemblée communautaire fransaskoise* (ACF), which is the latest incarnation of the organization originally created in 1912. The *Assemblée's* current governance structure seeks to enable the Fransaskois to democratically exercise control over all aspects of the community's development (ACF, 2017). In the late 1980s, community members worried that the federal government, through funding, had come to exercise too much power in the affairs of the community. A province-wide consultation revealed that members of the community wanted a "Fransaskois government" with the authority to make decisions and distribute funding according to priorities established by the community rather than by the state (ACFC, 1997). Community members agreed that their aspirations not only involved access to services, but also aimed to allow the community to govern itself (ACFC, 1998). To this end, the Fransaskois' governance body was restructured as a province-wide government in 1999.

Today, the Fransaskois are governed by a body composed of sixteen representatives, called *députés*, elected by the Fransaskois for a three-year term. *Députés* sit as equal members in the *Assemblée des députés*, the central body that determines the community's priorities and policies, under the guidance of a president elected province-wide (ACF, 2017). Each *député* is responsible for a sector, such as immigration, the economy or education, and liaises with organizations related to his or her assigned sector (ACF, 2017: Art. 23). Over thirty organizations, many of which are umbrella organizations composed of several groups, currently partner directly with the *Assemblée communautaire fransaskoise*. Altogether, a network of over eighty organizations works collaboratively with the *Assemblée* to empower the Fransaskois at two levels: internally, the governance body allows the community to set common objectives and voice collective demands; externally, it acts as a political body through which the Fransaskois can interact with provincial and federal governments as well as other partners.

A central motivation in the restructuring process was to give members of the community control over the distribution of funding, which had long been a tool through which the state asserted power over the community. Francophone organizations across Canada became increasingly dependent on state funding in the wake of the 1969 Official Languages Act (Denis, 1994; Forgues, 2010). This dependency became especially evident in Saskatchewan after the signing of the first Canada-community agreement in 1988, which provided Fransaskois organizations with \$17 million dollars over five years (Denis, 1994: 140). In order to receive these funds, newly formed organizations were required to meet state requirements (Dubois, forthcoming; Cardinal, 2007; Cardinal and Juillet, 2005; Thériault, 2007).

To regain control over the community's development, the *Assemblée* established a Committee for Budgetary Evaluation (*Comité d'évaluation et de recommandation sur le financement*) to review all funding applications from Fransaskois organizations destined for the Ministry of Canadian Heritage. The intention was for the *Assemblée*, as a democratic and representative governance body, to decide how to distribute funding by subjecting applications to a rigorous community-led budgetary evaluation process. Generally composed of three to four elected *députés* as well as the Executive Director and Community Development Agent, the committee reviews funding applications from organizations throughout the province. Its main role is to assess whether projects meet the objectives determined by the community in addition to the criteria set out by the federal government's funding requirements (interviews with D.

Desgagné and P. Héppelle).

After an initial evaluation that identifies projects eligible for funding, organizations are invited to respond to the first round of recommendations at a public meeting. These deliberations inform the second round of evaluation after which the committee's final recommendations are made public to the community and forwarded to the Minister of Canadian Heritage. Attesting to the *Assemblée*'s leadership in this area, former President, Michel Dubé, explains, "[w]e are the only French-Canadian community outside Quebec to have a governance structure that allows us to do this kind of work, as the governing entity" (cited in Hansard, 2010). This claim is largely based on the fact that the *Assemblée* is the only provincially-based Francophone governance entity in Canada that has adopted a democratic governance model.¹³

In addition to empowering the community to collectively make decisions, this unique process reinforces the *Assemblée*'s role as a governance body with respect to the state. However, for groups like the Fransaskois that lack the capacity to change the rules established by the state, the agency they exercise is limited in two significant ways. First, the final decision regarding the distribution of funds remains in the hands of the Canadian Heritage Minister. In an interview, Dubé noted that the level of consultation, evaluation and diligence of the process makes it difficult for the ministry to ignore the committee's recommendations on moral grounds, but politics can always affect the final outcome (interview with M. Dubé).¹⁴ The second limit lies in the fact that the committee only administers funds provided by the Ministry of Canadian Heritage. With the Fransaskois' insertion into various sectors such as health and immigration, this ministry provides less than half of the funding to Fransaskois organizations in the province, meaning that state money flows to Fransaskois organizations through channels outside this budgetary process. Despite these limitations, community leaders maintain that they exercise more control over the community's development through this governance process (interviews with D. Desgagné, P. Héppelle, M. Dubé).

In addition to making recommendations on the distribution of funding, the *Assemblée* has lobbied for a greater role of accountability in the community's financial relationship with the state. Under the current funding structure, each of the approximately eighty organizations

¹³ The *Assemblée* is the only provincial organization to have abandoned the affiliate-centred governance model. Some provincial organizations like the *Société de l'Acadie du Nouveau-Brunswick* moved towards democratizing its structure but is currently reviewing its governance structure.

¹⁴ While the Minister has generally accepted their recommendations, the decision to reject two of the recommendations in 2011 confirms the political precariousness of this trend.

affiliated with the *Assemblée* is responsible for applying, administrating and evaluating the programs that receive government funding. A number of community leaders remarked that the administrative burden of this arrangement is significant for many organizations, many of which do not have full time staff (interviews with P. Héppelle, J. Perreault, É. Lefol). To lessen the administrative burden on individual organizations and increase its autonomy, Dubé notes that the *Assemblée* has repeatedly proposed that a single cheque be distributed through the Committee on Budgetary Evaluation (interview with M. Dubé). When asked about the ACF's proposal, a former Minister for Canadian Heritage replied that “[w]e have to comply with certain requirements and regulations set by Treasury Board regarding the way we provide funding to each organization” (Hansard, 2010). This ambiguous message has remained constant for more than a decade as Canadian Heritage and other ministries rebuff proposals to have the community administer the allocation of funding.

Until the community can secure alternative sources of funding to lessen its dependency on the state – a goal towards which it is currently working – the *Assemblée* is pushing to increase its role in the community's financial management. Although this initiative is unlikely to produce large scale changes in the short term, the *Assemblée's* strategy aims to prepare the terrain for such changes. This micro-level approach, described by Charles Lindblom as “political change by small steps” (1979: 517), can be effective in preparing policy makers to bring about change that addresses concrete problems rather than pursuing abstract ideals through wholesale transformations.

Efforts to exercise greater agency over their affairs through the democratization of governance extends beyond the Fransaskois' fiscal relationship with the federal government. As a former ACF Director General remarked, as a more democratic body, the ACF can more effectively intervene in various sectors (interview with D. Desgagné). For example, the ACF played a leadership role in addressing internal questions about diversity and inclusion with the creation of a Commission on Inclusion (ACF, 2008). After extensive consultations across the province, the Commission proposed a definition of “Fransaskois,” which was adopted by the community, and also outlined a vision for the growth of an increasingly diverse Fransaskois community (ACF, 2008).

The democratization of the ACF's governance structure has also allowed Fransaskois leaders to decide and act upon collective objectives. Former ACF President, Paul Héppelle,

describes how the *députés* from each of the regions met to discuss the community's priorities prior to engaging with provincial election candidates (interview with P. Héppelle). As the democratically representative body of the Fransaskois community, the ACF has also entered into relationships with various partners. In 2014, it signed a protocol on post-secondary education with a number of partners including the University of Saskatchewan, the University of Regina and the Government of Saskatchewan. The ACF has also solidified its partnerships with other political actors such as the Métis Nation-Saskatchewan with which it signed a Pact of Solidarity in 2012 that affirmed the willingness of the Métis and the Fransaskois community to work more closely together in the pursuit of common goals.

By taking a democratic approach to governance, the Fransaskois have asserted power over their affairs. The community chose to adopt a democratic and representative governance body and to work through this body to *faire communauté*. Despite the limits the Fransaskois community continues to face, the democratic governance processes put in place through the *Assemblée* have generated gradual changes that empower the Fransaskois to exercise greater control over their affairs. Initiatives to govern funding amongst community organizations, efforts to collectively voice their goals, and the conclusions of partnerships with various actors illustrate how the Fransaskois assert power from the bottom up. While state actors still hold the power to determine the rules of the game, the *Assemblée* has sought to redefine these rules through democratic processes that put into question the federal government's legitimacy in making unilateral decisions that are central to Fransaskois governance. Dubé argues that the transparency of the Fransaskois' budgetary process and the clarity of its mandate have contributed to increase the legitimacy of the *Assemblée* as the governance entity for the Fransaskois within as well as outside the community (interview with M. Dubé). While the power it exercises continues to be constrained by provincial and federal governments, the Fransaskois community is constituting new forms of power through democratic governance.

Lessons Learned from the Fransaskois Experience

The struggle to control French-language education, like efforts to democratize the community's governance, demonstrate the transformative and constitutive role of governance in empowering the Fransaskois. While the Fransaskois remain a marginalized group with limited

power, community members have taken action to mobilize power – from above and below – through governance. The experience of the Fransaskois challenges the assumption that the state shapes governance through the top-down exercise of power. Contrary to their lived experience, state-centric assessments of governance fail to capture the Fransaskois as political actors in their own right and often overlook their role in generating change.

The emphasis on the political agency of members of the Fransaskois community sets this study apart from those that present socio-historical portraits of Francophones as objects of study. It also differs from existing scholarship that examines the relationship between Francophone minorities and the state through an institutionalist lens by drawing attention to the agency of Francophone communities as political actors. Taking up Léger's (2014) call to use empowerment theory to deepen our understanding of the struggles of Francophone minority communities, this study gives voice to members of the Fransaskois community as agents of change and grounds analysis in their lived experience.

What does the lived experience of the Fransaskois community tell us about the situation of other Francophone communities and other minorities in Canada? While the reality of each community is unique, three related observations emerge from the particular experience of the Fransaskois. The first is that the governance of education is fundamental to the struggle for empowerment. The Fransaskois have long seen control over education as a vehicle not only for the survival of the French-language, but for the flourishing of the community as a whole. The second is that democracy acts as a safeguard against the precariousness of living in a minority situation and the vagaries of state actions. While they remain constrained by the state, the Fransaskois have become political agents in their own right with greater control over their affairs through the democratization of their governance processes. The third observation is that political action is a multifaceted and ongoing feature of empowerment. In the case of the Fransaskois, political mobilization was strategically aimed not only at state actors, but sought to engage members of the communities and allies. This multifaceted approach contributed to a shift in power that allowed the Fransaskois to govern their own schools. At the same time, the former president of the parents association explains that they are continuously called upon to affirm and justify their right to govern French-language schooling in the face of recalcitrant governments who know little of their reality (interview with Y. Lebel). The continued resort to litigation across the country with recent cases in British Columbia and the Yukon suggests that state

governments and courts continue to view the right of Francophones to govern French-language schooling in a restrictive rather than expansive sense. For this reason, taking political action to engage with a variety of actors – governments, courts, members of the community and allies – is a persistent feature in the Fransaskois’ struggle for empowerment.

Shifting the lens of analysis towards the community reveals that Fransaskois leaders use governance as a tool to claim power from above and build power from below to exercise greater control over their affairs. While the Fransaskois remain a minority within an Anglo-dominant province, they have furthered their quest to *faire communauté* through governance.

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