Military Brats and Oil Patch Kids

Mobile Families and the School Environment

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By Gabriel Asselin

Abstract:

Since the 1950s the town of Cold Lake, Alberta, in Canada has had its social makeup influenced by various population movements. One ongoing influence is the presence of Canadian Force Base Cold Lake, a military aviation base established near Cold Lake in 1954. Due to the proximity of the base there has been constant shifting within an important segment of the population ever since. However, Cold Lake is also part of the oil-producing territories of Northern Alberta, and has therefore also been influenced by a large influx of oil industry workers and their families. Military members and oil industry workers are both mobile populations whose priorities regarding their community may differ than that of the ‘locals’. Parents’ relations with the local schools are one area where involvement and priorities in the community can be observed. Based on fieldwork in Cold Lake which centered on a French-speaking school, I compare the effects of mobility of oil industry and military families. From the parents, educators, and most importantly from the children’s perspective, I ask how mobile families relate to the many communities to which they belong. Do they see themselves as transient? How do they articulate their sense of belonging?
Introduction

In this presentation, I will provide a brief overview of the current research project from which my observations are drawn, along with a short description of the field site. I will tell you about the history of the school where my research is focused in relation with the nearby military base. I will then compare two patterns of mobility amongst the research population, focusing on how this impacts the children attending the school in question.

Overview of project

In my current research, I am looking at how children of military families experience their community, with a focus on a French-speaking minority in an English-speaking part of Canada. This project is in part building on previous work on spouses of military members in CFB Esquimalt, near Victoria, B.C. (Asselin 2007).

Current research is taking place in Cold Lake, Alberta, where a Canadian Air Force Base, CFB Cold Lake or 4 Wing Cold Lake, is located. As part of this research, I am looking into elements of discourse, belonging, community building, and mobility.

First, let me tell you a little bit about Cold Lake itself. It is a relatively young town; the area was first settled by euro-Canadians only starting in 1905. At its beginning, the local economy was based on farming, ranching, and logging, but this changed rapidly in the last half of the 20th century as the town’s economy, and identity, became very closely linked with two major components: the air force base which was created in 1954, and the growing importance of the oil-extraction industry in northern Alberta (City of Cold Lake 2010).

Cold Lake itself was not historically centered around a French-speaking community. However, in the region, other towns do have a heritage of French-Canadian pioneers. As a consequence, Cold Lake’s French community differs from that of the rest of the region in that it is less historically grounded. It is mostly made up of either military families, or oil-industry worker families. In either case, they often came in from outside, often from other provinces.
Progressively, starting from the 1950s, the Canadian Forces started to recognize its responsibilities towards the families of enlisted members. The families, most importantly the spouse of officers, had for a long time played an important role in the community. However, spouses of enlisted members were generally not recognized. Schooling for the children of families living near the bases became an important issue, as not all bases were close enough to civilian centers already providing services. After the creation of the Official Languages Act in 1969, the issue was further complicated by a necessity to provide education in both of Canada’s official languages, English and French. In consequence, the bilingualism programs of the Canadian Forces brought French-speakers, and their families in Canadian Bases all over Canada, including regions where French-speaking services were not available. So it became the Canadian Forces’ responsibility to make sure children of French-speaking military families had the opportunity to go to school in the official language of their choice (Bernier and Pariseau 1987; 1991).

It took some time, more or less in different localities. In CFB Cold Lake (4 Wing Cold Lake), the first French program started at the very end of the 1970s, although it really only got going at the beginning of the 80s. In a trailer behind another school, dedicated individuals started to adapt and develop programs. At the beginning, the program was only for children of military families (and of civilian employees on the base, such as the teachers). The original programs where issued from the Canadian government, and were not thought to be well adapted to local realities, as such there was a lot of local adaptation and research for appropriate material. Eventually, at the beginning of the 1990s, the Department of National Defence decided to pass the responsibilities of the schools to local school boards (1991). For the Cold Lake French school, this meant merging with the growing regional French-school board. The schools were now open to the general public, but were still located on the base. Some parents living as far as 40-50 km away, sent their children to 4 Wing because there was no strictly French school elsewhere at the time.

Indeed, by the time the French school was created at 4 Wing, the surrounding communities where there was a historical presence of French-speakers, no longer had official French-only schools. Those schools, even though they often held French names, were English
speaking schools with French immersion programs. At their origin, many of these were French
schools, not by official designation but as a result of local demographics. These were the schools
were children of the community went, and a large proportion of the population was French-
Canadian. Over the years, the linguistic composition of the community changed, up to the point
where the local schools became English-speaking. This is why, when the 4 Wing French school
became public, many parents came to send their kids to Cold Lake for their elementary education.

Another change occurred a few years ago, when the Cold Lake school re-localized off-
base with the intent of gaining new infrastructure. As the old infrastructure was not going to be
repaired sufficiently, and as to the move closer to the civilian communities would attract more
local, non-military, French-speaking families, the of base move seemed a good solution.

Patterns of Mobility and community experience

The name of the school, Ecole Voyageur, or Traveler School, is a very apt name. In
relation to the wider school district, it is of course a reference to the historical figures of pioneers
traveling western Canada’s waterways to establish trade routes, as well as settlers of
homesteading programs. However, it also has a very modern resonance. In any given class, when
I asked who had parents in the military, the majority of students would raise their hands. And
when I started talking with parents, it quickly became apparent that among those who were not
military, a large proportion was not local either, but had come in from other parts of Canada to
benefit from the economic advantage of the oil industry. That is how I started to think of the
school as being made up mostly of Military Brats and Oil-patch Kids. This is of course
recognized by the school. They show it quite clearly through symbols such as the logo it uses
their mini-van, which includes both the fighter jet and oil well as symbols.

Military Brats, Oil-Patch kids, and their families, face a number of challenges as a result
of the mobility involved in their lifestyle. Some of these they share, others are specific to one of
the two groups.
Sense of belonging

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. Asking them where they are from elicits different answers. The question is often harder to answer for military brats. Of course, every family’s history of moves varies and this creates quite a diversity of answers. Nevertheless, 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 lives has been, is more relevant than any single location to which they may have an attachment. This however, does not mean that they lack any symbolical attachment to place. Many children of Quebec families, for example, still claim a Quebecois identity, even though they have never lived there. It is just not “where they are from”.

Oil-patch kids, on the other hand, usually have a much simpler 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, be it New Brunswick or Quebec. 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.

Challenges

Military Brats make-up most of the population in the school I am studying. The high mobility that is part of their lifestyle has a profound impact on the school. Most military families change postings every 3 to 5 years and therefore, not many children do the entire K-12 program at the École Voyageur. Teachers at the school are constantly readjusting in order to provide support to children who, coming from other Canadian provinces, are either behind or ahead on some parts of the curriculum in comparison to their classmates of the same age. Teachers and parents confirm that this creates self-esteem issues for some students, especially those who may have been top students in their previous school and find themselves struggling catching up in the Albertan curriculum. Of course, some students find themselves ahead of their peers, but this is
not always a good scenario either, as they can become bored without the challenge. Adding to this, many children, especially those of young families for who this may be a first posting, arrive in Cold Lake with a very limited knowledge of English. Often these families come from the province of Quebec, where French is the majority language. Many have never spoken English, or been in any real contact with the English language, prior to their move. And it turns out that a large proportion of the French-speaking military families do come from Quebec, mostly because of the demographic weight of Quebec amongst Canadian French-speakers.

Oil-patch families, on the other hand, are less predominantly from Quebec. Because of the difficult economic situation on the east coast, among others, the collapse of the fishing industry, Eastern Canada’s Maritime Provinces have been source of a large part of the worker migration inside Canada. Many of the oil-patch families are therefore from the province of New-Brunswick, where a sizeable French-speaking population exists. Unlike Quebec, however, New-Brunswick’s French-community lives in a minority context and most French-speakers are bilingual to some extent. Children coming from that part of the country have therefore fewer difficulties in adapting to life in Cold Lake, since they are already familiar with the language. Also, oil-patch kids are more likely to stay a long time. Their parents have come looking for economic opportunities, and many plan to stay for an extended time as they do not think they would be able to maintain the same lifestyle back East. They may plan to stay for a while, perhaps until retirement, and some plan to establish themselves permanently. This has impacts on how people establish social networks. Members of oil-patch families see the military ones coming and going, and can become wary of establishing strong friendship ties with them.

However, they remain outsiders as far as the ‘locals’ are concerned. This is especially true in relation to the surrounding ‘traditional’ centers since in Cold Lake, being from the outside is the norm more than otherwise. Talking with a variety of people in the Cold Lake area, there seems to be a sort of hierarchy of belonging amongst various segments of the population. The “true locals” are the ones who belong the most, followed by the newcomers who have come to establish themselves permanently, attracted by the oil industry economic advantage. Afterwards are the workers who came to Alberta with the obvious intent to return home after a while. Finally, you have the military families, who for the most part did not have a choice in coming to Cold Lake, and who are expected to be leaving it within 3 to 5 years.
Some parents do express worries about their children creating friendships with children of families who are bound to be leaving Cold Lake before them. They very rarely openly discourage them, but they often try to encourage their kids’ relationships with more stable families, particularly with young children, when parents have more influence in the matter. With older children, teenagers in particular, this is not really possible. Adolescents befriend whom they will, and they live with the consequences. In any given grade at Ecole Voyageur, in any given year, there are usually a few children who leave and a few new ones who arrive. In a school of less than 200 students, divided over 13 grades, the changes are very noticeable.

These are just some of the challenges that result of the mobile lifestyle of the families of Ecole Voyageur. Almost all the families of the school are travelers of a sort, and this has impacts for all the individuals involved in the community built around them. The ways in which these families, and their children, experience their journey across Canada, and sometimes abroad, shape the character of the local French-speaking community, the perception that other groups have of them, and influence the way all experience their social environment.

**Conclusion**

Every experience is unique, especially when dealing with mobile populations, since every family follows its own unique path. However, it remains that these families share something in their mobility, and that this is reflected in their children’s’ lives and perceptions. However, different patterns of mobility have shown to have different impacts on how individuals relate to communities and define their concepts of belonging and identity.

**Bibliography**

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