

# *Lire au suivant*

## Connecting Communities Through Reading Practice and Engagement

Isabelle Lépine and Margaret Wells



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Each year, teachers from the Collège militaire royal de Saint-Jean (CMR Saint-Jean) organize educational activities in the community to build bridges, deconstruct prejudices toward the military and connect their students, also known as officer cadets, with members of the larger community they will one day serve. In the fall of 2022, 35 Francophone officer cadets from the CMR Saint-Jean participated in the project *Lire au suivant*, which consisted in reading stories about inclusion and diversity in their second language—English—to students at St. John's Elementary School in Saint-Jean-sur-Richelieu. In this article, we present the successes, challenges, and surprises the project brought for both students and staff.

As educators at the CMR Saint-Jean, we are continually looking for opportunities to connect our students with members of the larger community. Our students will eventually become future military leaders of Canada, and at this crucial stage of their academic and military training, we prioritize including the values and ethics of inclusion and diversity within our curriculum. *Lire au suivant* is a project with a simple goal: building bridges between two different communities— young Francophone cadets from the CMR Saint-Jean and the students from a local English elementary school—through reading practice and engagement.

## About Collège militaire royal de Saint-Jean

- Location: Saint-Jean-sur-Richelieu, Québec
- Establishment date: 1952
- Number of students enrolled: 350
- Programs offered: college and university level

The CMR Saint-Jean is one of two military colleges in Canada. Founded to provide French-language training to young Francophone Quebecers wishing to join the ranks of Canadian officers, the CMR Saint-Jean has evolved to now offer college and

university education to students from across Canada wishing to join the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) as commissioned officers. This blending of education at both the provincial and federal levels is only one of many reasons why the CMR Saint-Jean is a unique institution. Students who have been accepted to the college come from all over the country, from the Maritimes to the western provinces, and live, study, and eat together over the course of the academic year. The experience is unique, in that Naval/Officer Cadets develop interpersonal and professional skills simultaneously, all within a bilingual environment. Because the college prioritizes bilingualism within the institution, teachers and students also work to develop meaningful opportunities for interaction and rich exchange outside of campus life.

The city of Saint-Jean-sur-Richelieu, located 40 km south of Montreal, has a population of approximately 100 000, mostly French-speaking. This city has a long military tradition: it has been home to the Saint-Jean Garrison since 1979 and the CMR Saint-Jean since 1952. Unfortunately, even though Saint-Jean-sur-Richelieu has built a reputation as a solid military town over the years, prejudices toward the military community remain. Many civilians are unaware of the military activities and training happening in their own backyard, or the acts of service that military staff and students often engage in. From our perspective, as civilians who teach future military leaders, it felt important to build a project that pulls back the veil and allows for authentic discourse and meaningful exchange within the community.



## Authentic connections through bilingualism

When the college refers to bilingualism, it does so in the context of Canada's two official languages. It's important to make this distinction because, while we recognize that many of our students speak languages other than English and French (including as a first language), being a member of the CAF requires a linguistic profile in both official languages. Some of our students have never studied in, or even learned, the second official language.

In terms of second language studies, first-year students, called juniors or preps, follow the provincial college curriculum, and are evaluated and placed in small groups based on their language evaluation. The French program has six levels of classes, and the English program has four. Class sizes are kept small to encourage meaningful exchange and learning gains. One key component the language department has often put forward is project-based learning, such as encouraging students to practise their second language in real contexts: ordering food in restaurants, volunteering at community organizations, or going to the theatre. We work within all four competencies—reading, listening, writing and speaking—with integrated skills being a considerable focus. It is understood, however, that learning a language and practising it are two different feats, and while students quickly get comfortable speaking their second language in the classroom, it's important that the limits of their comfort zone be pushed. After all, these students will one day be stationed in different regions of Canada and the world.

While Anglophone students have benefited from special projects that allow them to practise speaking French in authentic situations, equivalent projects in English have proven more challenging for our Francophone students in Quebec rural or smaller city centers. A collaboration between an English as a Second Language (ESL) teacher and a French as a Second Language (FSL) teacher was established to encourage Francophone students to practise their English off campus by communicating in an authentic, real-life context, and interacting with members of the community to build bridges.

## Creating opportunity in situational contexts

The original idea of the project came from a member of the military teaching staff whose child attended St. Johns Elementary school. This school is home to more than 540 students and is part of the Riverside school board, one of nine English school boards throughout the province that offer a fully bilingual learning experience. Because of the school's location, some of the students have military parents who are currently working at the base or the college.

After a preliminary meeting between Isabelle Lépine, an FSL teacher at the CMR Saint-Jean and Valerie Caya, St. Johns Elementary school's vice-principal, to discuss logistics and time frame, the project was presented to the CMR Saint-Jean ESL teachers. Margaret Wells, the Language department director, saw an opportunity for her three groups of upper intermediate students to participate.

Initially, the project was quite simple: students from the CMR Saint-Jean would read stories about respect, diversity, and inclusion to St. Johns Elementary school students. The reading sessions would take place in small groups, from kindergarten to grade 6, followed by a discussion. The teachers at St. Johns were already involved in teaching a unit on inclusion and diversity and asked that the CMR Saint-Jean officer cadets read books on the subject to their students. It became obvious quickly that the exchange had great potential to be meaningful for both parties involved, and so more elaborate planning began. The basis of language interaction was one of respect and mutual understanding for everyone involved. We understood, as did our students, that learning a language offers a window into understanding culture, history, and current challenges. Language is really about connection. This is how the activity *Lire au suivant* was born: a project where, through reading and meaningful exchange, our students could connect with young people from another school, but also build bridges with their community and experience the meaning of an inclusive, non-judgmental approach—all this in their second language. We implemented an activity that achieved the previously determined objectives, using reading and active listening as the starting point.

*"One of the ways we celebrate and learn more about diversity and inclusion is through children's literature. It provides a voice to important stories and helps create a sense of belonging when the stories are shared as a group."*

– Valérie Caya, St. Johns Elementary school vice-principal

The officer cadets were excited to get involved with the activity *Lire au suivant*. Conversations, training, and work around diversity and inclusion are an integral part of campus life, and a priority for the students and staff at the CMR Saint-Jean. As part of our course curriculum, reading strategies are implicitly and explicitly taught throughout the semester. Students learn to scan for essential information, use prior knowledge to make predictions, and summarize main points of information in think-pair-share exercises. Through the reading exchange project, the officer cadets used their reading strategies to develop questions and make predictions that guided their presentations to the classes.

A few weeks before the exchange, the teachers at St. Johns sent over books for the CMR Saint-Jean officer cadets to practise with before they read them to the classes. At first, the task seemed straightforward enough—read books aloud to the kindergarten and elementary students and engage in questions and answers—but when the subject of reading was discussed in class, the officer cadets had many ideas about how to make the project bigger. They wanted to wear different uniforms so that the children could see what was worn for combat, parade, or in class. They also wanted to bring props: their backpack, water bottle, and helmet. As the officer cadets were building momentum and excitement, so too were the teachers at St. Johns. It was suggested that after the reading, one of the groups from CMR Saint-Jean could do a small physical drill with the children in the gym.

### **Preparing, anticipating, and making space for the unexpected**

Anytime a teacher introduces a project that the students not only get excited about but begin planning beyond its initial parameters, we can consider it a success—and the actual exchange hadn't even happened yet. Our students started by reviewing different reading strategies during class. They were encouraged to make inferences and pull out themes that we were actively discussing. Prior to receiving the books from St. Johns, the officer cadets participated in meaningful activities and discourse around diversity and inclusion. Activities that were useful in preparation for the reading exchange included discussions on biases and on concerns about answering difficult or uncomfortable questions, and looking at the profiles of the different age groups our students would be reading to.

Once the books were received, the CMR Saint-Jean students formed their own groups of two to three officer cadets and perused the book selection until they found a book that felt personal to them. They read it silently together, pointing out interesting links between the text and the illustrations. Then, they took turns reading aloud to each other, and deciding who would read which pages. At this point they also looked at how to interject questions they could ask while they were reading. Finally, they presented the result of their preparatory work to the teacher and at least one other group and took notes on any pronunciation errors. This exercise allowed them to explore the nuances in public speaking, presenting, voice and tone, and speaking to different group sizes. We practised projection and eye contact with the audience while reading. Each group prepared a few questions to ask the class about the book for the end of the exercise. For many students

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in the class, this would be the first time reading out loud in their second language to any kind of audience.

The *Lire au suivant* activity was carried out over a three-day period. The CMR Saint-Jean students were divided into groups of three, and each group member wore a different uniform. At the beginning of each day, the officer cadets were greeted warmly by the administrative staff of St. Johns and told how much their contribution was appreciated. The smaller groups were directed to different classes, where they introduced themselves, read the story, and answered the children's questions. While some questions were about the books, many children had questions about the officer cadets

themselves. They wanted to know about military life, college life, and even, in the case of the younger grades, burning questions like, "Do you have a favorite colour?" In the debrief after the activity, all of the CMR Saint-Jean students were surprised to see how bilingual the St. Johns students were, and how many of them had military family members.

When asked if they would recommend doing the project again, the CMR Saint-Jean students were unanimous in the answer: yes, they absolutely would. They enjoyed the challenge of practising reading in their second language in an authentic context. They thought reading a children's book in English would be easy, but in

fact, because they would be reading aloud, they felt additional pressure to make sure they knew all the words and their correct pronunciation. Furthermore, one book in particular took on a different challenge. The book was about the beauty of names from all over the world and included about thirty different names from every part of the world, which needed to be read aloud. The glossary at the end laid out the phonetic pronunciation of each name, but it was clear that the group of students who had been assigned the book were worried. This wasn't about English anymore, but about pronouncing names with sounds and letter combinations they had never heard or spoken before. After voicing their concern, the team were given two options;

choosing a different book or taking the book home and practising until they felt comfortable—the latter option being encouraged by Margaret Wells, their teacher. After a short deliberation, the officer cadets chose to borrow the book and practise. When the time came to read it to the class, they did it with little hesitation, and great pride. Taking on that challenge was a great example of tenacity and commitment to following through on the work. The challenge of the text would have been daunting for anyone, anywhere, and yet, from a pedagogical standpoint, because the officer cadets had resources and support, and appropriate time, they felt confident that they could successfully complete the project.

Their preconceived ideas about reading for students at an English schoolboard were quickly put to rest because they felt welcome right away, and many of the St. Johns students switched naturally between French and English during the question period. The CMR Saint-Jean students learned that there are learning environments in Quebec similar to theirs, embracing and valuing both official languages, and other languages as well. Furthermore, through the exchange, the officer cadets were happily surprised at how supportive and grateful the children were for their service in the CAF. They had not anticipated that reaction.

Strong leadership is an essential skill in the military. If some officer cadets were shy or anxious at first, they soon became more comfortable being in front of so many curious eyes. As with many projects, some of the most rewarding learning outcomes are the ones we don't plan for. One particular group finished their

reading and question period early. Rather than wait for directions, they took the lead and organized a short arts and crafts activity where the children got to draw poppies and learn about their symbolism. The St. Johns students were able to try on the military hats and try to lift the full backpack the officer cadets wear in the field.

Because of the work done on revision strategies in class, the CMR Saint-Jean students' level of English proficiency reflected a capacity to comprehend, adapt, and analyze important concepts within the books and their own life experiences. While it should have perhaps felt jarring to move from the books to questions and discussions around various subjects, in fact the students noted that the transitions felt natural. It was as though the intimacy of reading together opened channels for more meaningful discussions.

## Conclusion

Coordinating an event like this takes time, planning, and strong communication. First, you need to find interested partners in both environments who are willing to invest in such a project. Next, you need to identify the pedagogical objectives of the activity, write an outline and have it approved at a Governing Board meeting or a meeting of the school administration (depending on the institution). Once this is done, it is time to go back to the table to arrange schedules, request permission to go out, book transportation and select the novels to be read. However, the benefits of such an activity are well worth the hours invested in preparing it.

As educators, we work toward designing and executing projects that are meaningful to our students. Offering language practice in authentic, real-life situations where students can exchange naturally takes time, organization, and planning. What's more, there needs to be space for adapting the plan to fit the reality of the project, and a willingness to share every aspect of the planning with the students so that, in many respects, it becomes their own. The emotional connections throughout the project, from reading to drawing and the spontaneous sharing of experiences, were truly what enriched the project for our students as well as the students at St. Johns. Learning languages is ultimately about connecting with others, be it our peers, colleagues, or members of the community at large. The *Lire au suivant* project gave our students the opportunity to develop their leadership and communication skills while connecting with a community that is different from their own, which is a strong foundation for the diversity and inclusion we aspire to. —



After teaching French in several countries and working with immigrants in the greater Montreal area for eight years, **Isabelle Lépine** settled down in 2015 at the Collège militaire royal de Saint-Jean, where she now enjoys juggling military vocabulary and discussing tactical operations.

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**Margaret Wells** has 23 years of experience in education as both a director and an English Second Language teacher. She taught at the Canadian Forces Language School as well as in the CEGEP system before finding roots at the Collège militaire royal de Saint-Jean.

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