School Registration Forms:
A Modern Day Mediation Tool?

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Mediation

- Ancient times: commercial transactions, form social bonds, resolve conflict (Meditarannean, African, Asian, South American cultures).

- Sociocultural perspective: texts as a form of social action that involves distributed, mediated, and dialogic processes of invention (Rish et al., 2015; Vygotsky 1978, 1986).

- Intertextuality (Bakhtin, 1981, Kristeva, 1980): lending and borrowing ideas, linguistic structures and lexical material to and from complex networks with other writers, texts, and discourses.

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Mediation

- Tools**:** technical and psychological means taken up from the sociocultural environment that mediate social action (Wertsch, 1998; Rish et al. 2015).
  - technical tools include material objects, such as pencils, paper, keyboards, and screens, etc.;
  - psychological tools include means such as language, genre, conventions, etc.
- School entry registration forms as a mediation tool.

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Country of Birth:	Canada	Canadian Province of Birth:
Country Of Citizenship:		Arrival Date:
Status In Canada:	Canadian Citizen	First Language:
Main Language at Home:		

Previous School Attended:		
Address:		
Previous Board Attended:		
Language of Instruction:	English	Departure Date:
Last Grade Attended:	2	Reason for Transfer:

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NS:

First Language: English, Bulgarian

Main Language at Home: English, Bulgarian

School:

First Language: ~~English,~~ Bulgarian

Main Language at Home: ~~English,~~ Bulgarian

NS:

First Language: English, Bulgarian

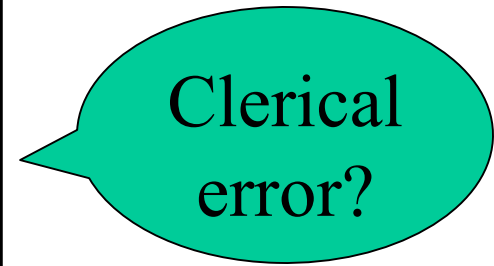Main Language at Home: English, Bulgarian

School:

First Language: Bulgarian, English

Main Language at Home: ~~English,~~ Bulgarian

NS:

First Language: English, Bulgarian

Main Language at Home: English, Bulgarian

Clerical error?
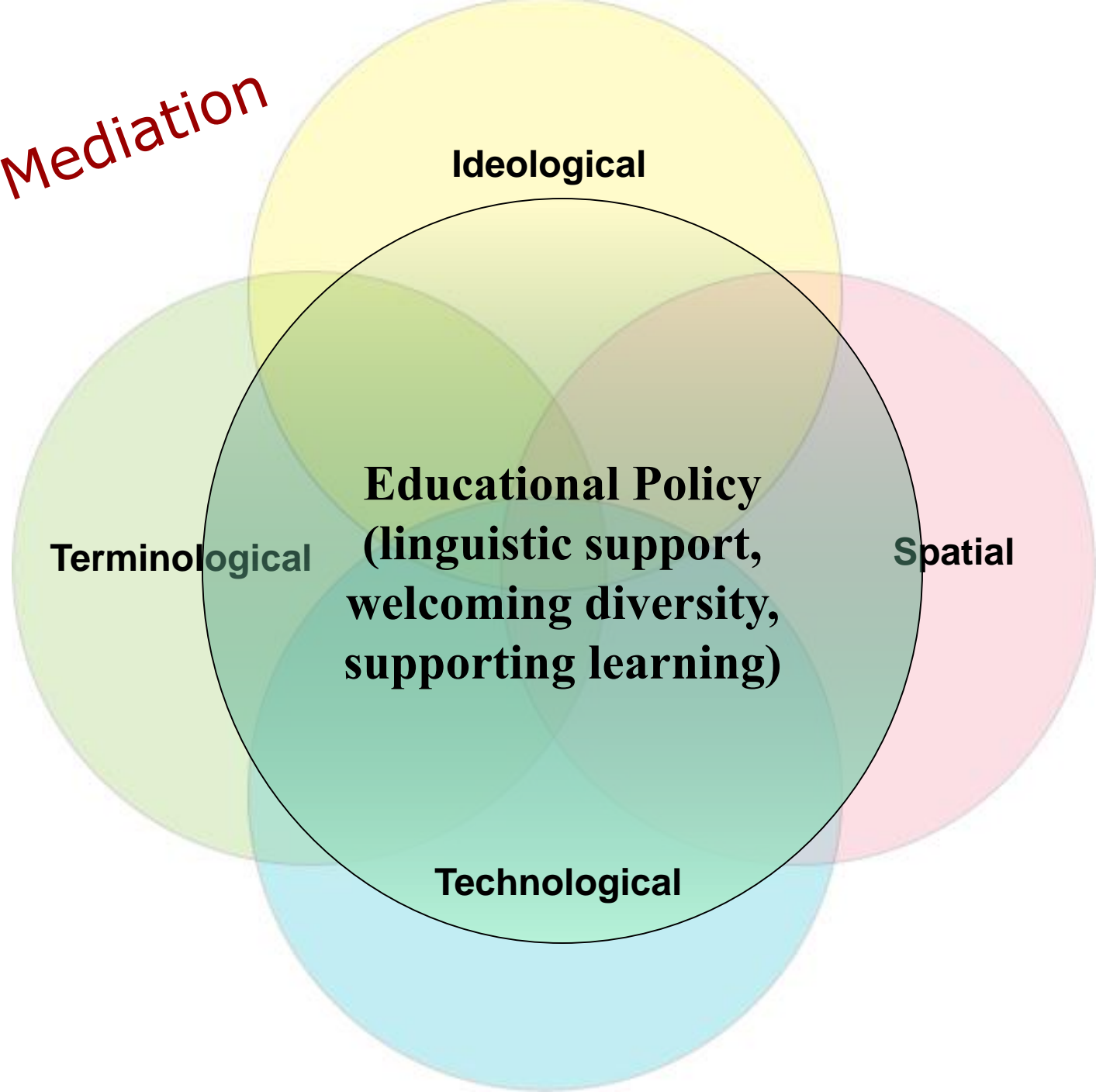
Mediation Process

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Series of clerical errors or something else?

- Apparent denial of the child's legitimacy as an English speaker (deletion of English from the form or placing it in second position)? Perhaps she was not seen as a "pure" native speaker of English?
- Limited ability to recognize the complexity of more than one language in the child's repertoire (monolingual norm).

Reimagining Language Background Profiling at Canadian Elementary Schools

Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada

Conseil de recherches en sciences humaines du Canada

Canada

- Language background profiling study across Canada focusing on ideological, policy and practical dimensions.

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Backdrop

- Two official languages: French and English
- Long-standing history of attracting immigrants
- Aboriginal communities
- 17.9% of the population is able to conduct a conversation in both official languages English and French (Census 2016)
- over 20% of the population speaks a non-official language at home, either alone or combined with English and/or French (Census 2016)

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Language Background Profiling at Publicly-Funded Elementary Schools

- How is it done?
  - Registration forms (other methods also used).
  - Local level (schoolboards or individual schools)
  - Provincial databases
- What purposes does it serve?
  - Getting to know the students
  - Publicity & official documents (brochures, school websites, provincial reports and curricula)
  - English Language Learner (ELL) identification
- Why is it of interest?
  - Data validity and reliability issues
  - High impact (5 million children over 12 years)
  - Practical implications: language support
  - Indicates societal understanding of issues related to bilingualism and multilingualism; social inclusion.

Conceptual Juxtapositions: Theoretical Linguistics

- Classical definition: *"The first language a human being learns to speak is his native language; he is a native speaker of this language." Bloomfield (1933: 43)*

- *Chomskyan linguistics (1957 and subsequent work):* idealized/abstract notion of a native speaker; perfect competence and infallible intuitions about the system of their native language.

- Also: Current work in psycholinguistics, second language acquisition, child language development, psychology often relies on the classical definition of a native speaker as a reference norm.

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Conceptual Juxtapositions: Applied Linguistics, Sociolinguistics

- bio-developmental definition is an oversimplification, native speaker=ambiguous and multi-faceted, not a biological given but a social or cultural norm (Davies 1991, 2004)

- multicompetence (Cook 1991, 1999 and subsequent work)

- Bilingualism and multilingualism are common around the world → norm rather than exception (Baker, 2011; Crystal, 1987, 2003; Ferguson 1983; Dewaele et al., 2003; Romaine, 1995; a.o.)

- World / New Englishes: challenge the traditional concept of a monolingual native speaker (Kachru, 1983; Mesthrie, 2010).

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Examples

- a child who is born in a bilingual family (e.g. where the two parents have different first languages) and is exposed to regular input in two languages from birth, is deemed to have two 'first' languages (De Houwer 1990, 2009, 2011).

- a child who is adopted internationally may become a 'native' speaker of the new language (Isurin 2000; Nicoladis and Grabois 2002).

- an immigrant child may transition to new language through schooling and social exposure='native' speaker of a second language (Lambert 1974, 2008; Landry et al. 1991; Hakuta and D'Andrea 1992; Garcia 2009, among others).

- heritage language speakers as a "special" kind of native speakers (Montrul 2008, 1016).

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Mediation

- School registration form as a mediation tool among:
  - Parents
  - Educators (school administrators, educational policy makers)
  - Researchers (nativist vs. non-nativist approaches to language)

  → **Tool of social mediation**

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Language Background Profiling: Orientations

Chronological-Nativist Orientation:

"What is your first language (native language/mother tongue)?"

→ traditional, monolingually-centered, homogeneous society of native speakers, nation-state ideologies

Vs.

Synchronic-Functional Orientation:

"What language(s) do you speak (and in what contexts)? What language(s) do you speak best? What language(s) do you use most frequently?"

→ bi-/multilingually-centered, heterogeneous, sociolinguistically relevant, foregrounds an individual's current language abilities and potential to use multiple languages (plurilingualism)

→ runs the risk of loosing fundamental insights about L1

Vs.

Mixed Orientation: a combination of the above two orientations.

Methodology

- Registration form samples collected from 5 provinces across Canada.
- All language background questions extracted from the forms.
- The data were coded and analyzed in terms of:
  - number and type of questions,
  - combination patterns,
  - content/orientation.
- (Qualitative interviews with parents, information gathering from educational policy makers or administrators)
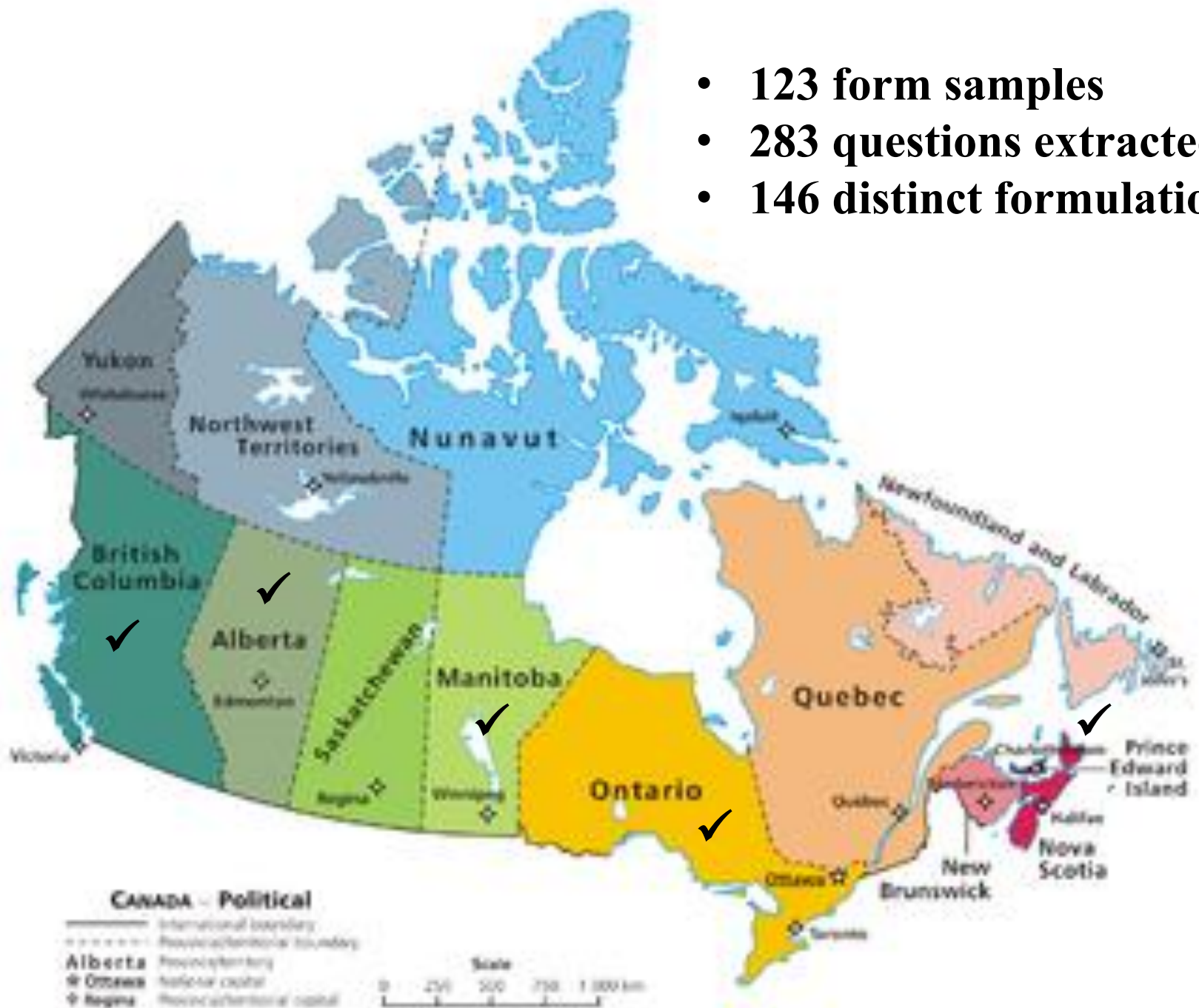
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Focus Questions

- **R1.** How much variation is there in the number, type, combination patterns and level of detail of language profiling across different school districts and across provincial boundaries?

- **R2.** Do language profiling questions asked on school registration forms reflect a chronological-nativist orientation (i.e. focus on first language), a synchronic-functional orientation (i.e. focus on current language(s) spoken), or a mixture of both?

- **R3.** What underlying ideologies can be found in the language background profiling practices at Canadian elementary public schools (as illustrated by school registration forms).

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- **123 form samples**
- **283 questions extracted**
- **146 distinct formulations**

Results: descriptive summary

- A total of 123 forms → 246 questions extracted and coded;
- 53 distinct codes (formulations) for Ontario
- 44 distinct codes (formulations) for Alberta
- 27 distinct codes (formulations) for British Columbia
- 20 distinct codes (formulations) for Manitoba
- 2 distinct codes (formulations) for Prince Edward Island
- Average: 2-3 questions per form.
- Range (all 5 provinces): 0-8.
- → Lower number of codes / formulations in smaller provinces
- → Overall very large degree in variation of number of questions, types of questions and question formulation within provinces and across provinces

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Table 1: General categories & Sample Questions

Category	Sample Questions
1. First language	*first language, first language spoken, my child's first language learned (specify), birth language, etc.*
2. Home language	*home language(s), language spoken at home, language at home, language student speaks at home, etc.*
3. Primary language at home	*main language spoken by the student at home, primary language spoken most often at home, what language is mainly spoken at home?, etc.*
4. Language spoken most often/fluently	*language spoken most often, primary language in which student is most fluent, language most used, etc.*
5. Other languages	*other language(s) spoken, 2nd language spoken, etc.*

Category	Sample Questions
6. Previous language of instruction	*previous school language, language of instruction at previous school, previous instruction language: English or French, instructional language at previous school, etc.*
7. Previous ESL assistance	*has the student been receiving English as a second language (ESL) assistance: Yes/No?*
8. Language/speech/hearing impairment	*severe delay involving language, past assistance: speech/language, student health information: speech/language problems? student uses ASL, etc.*
9. Parents' ability to speak English	*parent/guardian information: speaks school language yes/no?, interpreter required: yes/no?, etc.*
10. Francophone education eligibility	*are you eligible to have your child receive a French first language education?*
11. ESL eligibility	*A Canadian student is eligible for ESL support when the primary language spoken at home is a language other than English and the student meets eligibility requirements after assessment. Is your child within this category?*

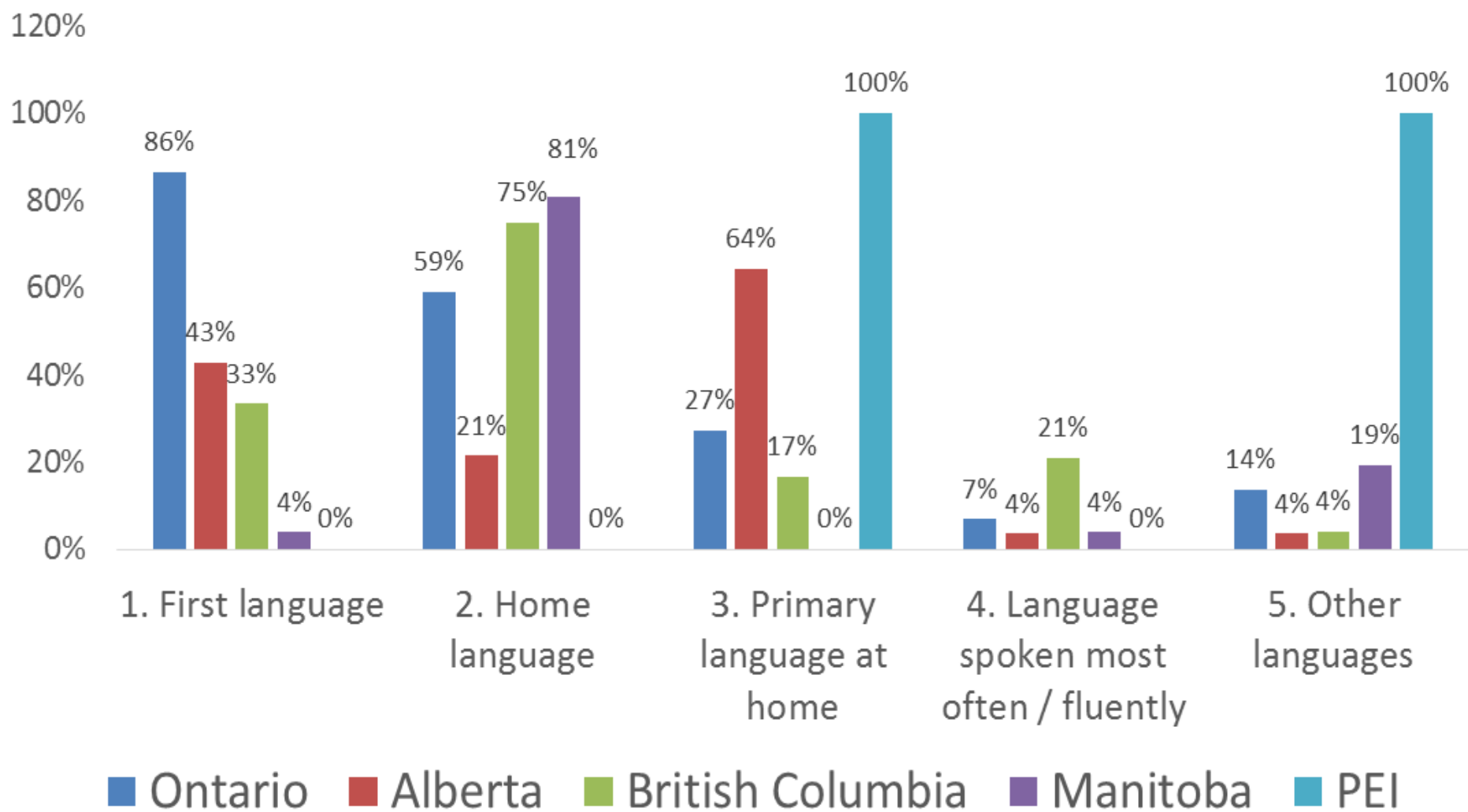Figure 1: Question Categories for the Five Provinces

Table 2. Orientations to Language Background Profiling

Pattern #	# of boards	1. First language	2. Home language(s)	3. Primary language at home	4. Language spoken most often / fluently	5. Other language(s)
Pattern 1: Simple	ON=2, AB=5, BC=7, Total=14			√ **Synchronic-Functional Orientation**		
Pattern 2: Simple	ON=2, AB=5, BC=6, Total=13		√			
Pattern 3: Simple	ON=8, AB=1, BC=0, Total=9	√ **Chronological-Nativist Orientation**				

Pattern #	# of boards	1. First language	2. Home language(s)	3. Primary language at home	4. Language spoken most often / fluently	5. Other language(s)
Pattern 4: Complex	ON=15, AB=1, BC=4, Total=20	√	√	**Mixed Orientation**		
Pattern 5: Complex	ON=3, AB=9, BC=0, Total=12	√		√		
Pattern 6: Complex	ON=3, AB=0, BC=2, Total=5	√	√			√
Pattern 7: Complex	ON=1, AB=0, BC=4, Total=5	√	√		√	
Pattern 8: Complex	ON=2, AB=1, BC=0, Total=3	√	√	√		

Orientations to Language Background Profiling: Summary

Overall, in the total sample from the five provinces:

- 9% of the forms had a *chronological-nativist orientation*,
- 47% had a *synchronic-functional orientation*,
- 45% had a mixed orientation.

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Singular vs Plural Use of the word 'Language'

Question category	Province	Singular		Plural	
First Language(s)	Ontario	36	95%	2	5%
	Alberta	12	100%	0	0%
	British Columbia	8	100%	0	0%
	Manitoba	1	100%	0	0%
	Prince Edward Island	0	0%	0	0%
	Total	57	97%	2	3%
Home Language(s)	Ontario	11	42%	15	58%
	Alberta	3	50%	3	50%
	British Columbia	18	100%	0	0%
	Manitoba	11	52%	10	48%
	Prince Edward Island	0	0%	0	0%
	Total	43	61%	28	39%
Other Language(s)	Ontario	2	33%	4	67%
	Alberta	1	100%	0	0%
	British Columbia	1	100%	0	0%
	Manitoba	1	20%	4	80%
	Prince Edward Island	1	100%	0	0%
	Total	6	43%	8	57%

Discussion:
Back to the focus questions

- **R1.** How much variation is there in the number, type, combination patterns and level of detail of language profiling across different school districts and across provincial boundaries?

  - Very high!!!

  - Significance of this finding: questionable validity and reliability of the data collected and reported on the local, regional and provincial level.

  - If these are forms used to identify student needs for language support (ELL) there is a lot more to be desired.

  - If the data from these forms informs curricula and educational policies, there is a lot more to be desired.

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Discussion:
Back to the focus questions

- **R2.** Do language profiling questions asked on school registration forms reflect a chronological-nativist orientation (i.e. focus on first language), a synchronic-functional orientation (i.e. focus on current language(s) spoken), or a mixture of both?
  - 9% vs. 47% vs. 45%.

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Discussion: Back to the focus questions

- **R3.** What underlying ideologies can be found in the language background profiling practices at Canadian elementary public schools (as illustrated by school registration forms).
  - Parents are allowed to list more than one language as the first language of their child in only 3% of the forms across five provinces
    - →Monolingual ideology (in a country that officially projects an image of bilingualism and multiculturalism)
    - →Two separate monolingualisms / Two solitudes
  - Home language question also often monolingually centred.
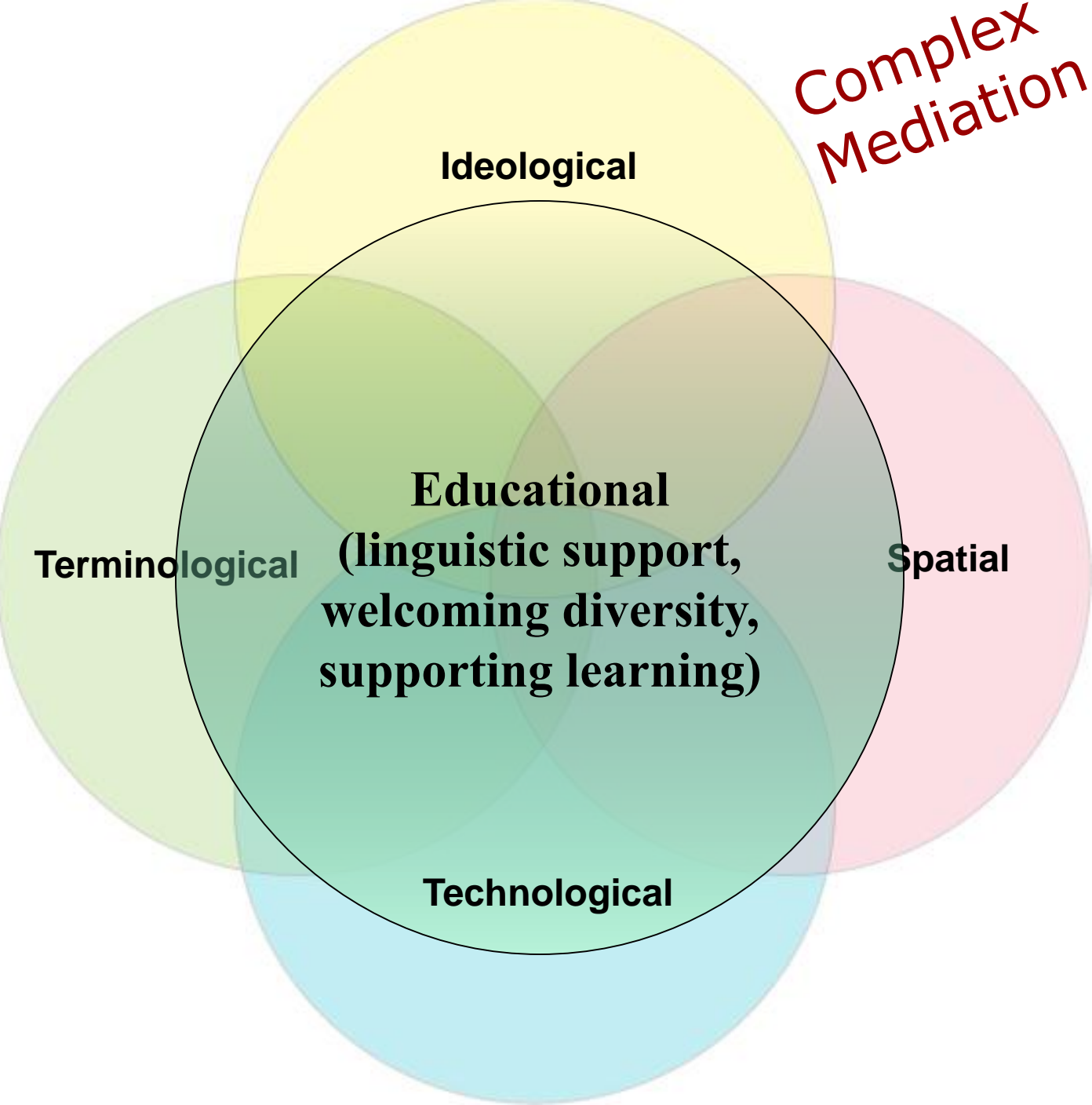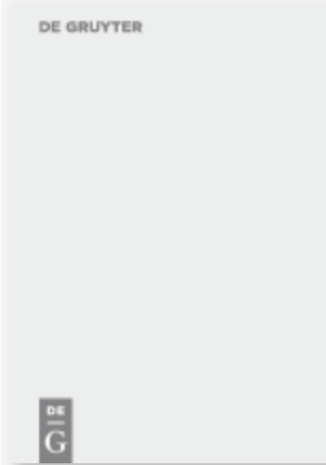
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Summary

- School registration forms as a mediation tool between parents, educational authorities and conflicting conceptual/theoretical paradigms → **Societal Mediation**.

- School boards are aware of the linguistic and cultural diversity of incoming students; policies and practices are generally well-intentioned.

- However, school boards are overall not conceptually and methodologically equipped to institute language background profiling practices that are meaningful and truly multilingually-oriented.

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Future directions

The Changing Face of the "Native Speaker"
Perspectives from Multilingualism and Globalization

Ed. by Slavkov, Nikolay / Melo-Pfeifer, Sílvia Maria / Kerschhofer-Puhalo, Nadja

Series: Trends in Applied Linguistics [TAL] 31

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FEEDBACK

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