

Inclusive practice in French immersion

The following article was first published in the fall 2009 edition of the Canadian Parents for French, Alberta Branch newsletter. It was contributed by Martine Pellerin, PhD.

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French immersion programs were introduced into Canadian schools beginning in the late 1960s to encourage bilingualism across the country. The immersion approach is internationally renowned for being the most effective form of second language education. However, even though the French immersion program is considered very successful, some argue that its philosophy and application need to be revisited and be more aligned with the 21st century global education. “French immersion needs redefinition in our public consciousness as a universal, non-elitist program,” declared CPF Executive Director James Shea (2009). Cummins (1998) also suggests that immersion educators must align their pedagogy and educational vision with the philosophy of global education.

These changes are crucial to alleviate the often damaging public perception that immersion programs are elitist and exclusive. These negative perceptions can be found in media items such as: “Parents are fighting to secure French immersion spots for their kids. Is this a new form of patriotism or a need to find elite schooling within the public system?” (*Global and Mail*, 2009).

The cancellation of the early French immersion program in New Brunswick has been used as a response to poor academic achievement of children in their English elementary schools. Immersion has also been accused of contributing to the development of a two-tier education system in that province. Former N.B. Education Minister Kelly Lamrock condemned the inequality between the French immersion and English stream classrooms: “Every kid who struggles winds up in core French. Too many kids with difficulties

wind up in one class, none of them get the attention they deserve and, as a result, they fall through the cracks and we remain last in literacy ... immersion is skimming off the best students, leaving non-immersion classes with a disproportionate number of students with learning and behavioural problems” (CBCNews.ca, 2008).

French immersion programs can no longer support any form of exclusivity and elitism. They must be accessible to all students, no matter their cognitive and physical abilities, socio-economic status, or linguistic and cultural background.

The heterogeneous classroom is the reality of the 21st century!

Alberta Education states, “French immersion is a program open to all students. Therefore, as students in the regular English program, French immersion students display a wide range of abilities and needs. French immersion students may be gifted or have behavioural, emotional, physical or learning challenges. ... Students with special needs are entitled to appropriate quality education that will allow them to develop to their full potential ... The French immersion program can provide this quality education to special needs students when instruction is tailored to meet individual needs.” (Government of Alberta, 2004)

This article will address the main issues related to inclusive practice in French immersion and the crucial changes that are needed for the reality of tomorrow’s classroom—and, ultimately, for the very survival of these programs.

Definitions

Special needs students are those identified with mild, moderate or severe learning disabilities and those who are gifted and talented (Government of Alberta, 2004). The term also includes allophone students (those whose mother tongue is neither English nor French).

Alberta Education has embraced an inclusive educational system that recognizes that all children come to school with potential but also with challenges. “Inclusive setting/inclusion” means specially designed instruction and support for students with special needs in the immersion classroom (Government of Alberta, 2009).

Access to French immersion denied

Students “at risk” (used generically to refer to all kinds of students with language, literacy, and academic difficulties or who are likely to experience such difficulties (Genesee, 2007) are the main population who are denied access to French immersion. Students with attention and behavioural problems such as Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) also are discouraged from enrolling in French immersion or strongly encouraged to transfer from it. Gifted and talented students often

must leave the program because schools cannot meet their specific needs.

Sometimes it is a lack of funding that limits access by special needs students to a specific immersion program. However, misconceptions, personal beliefs and non-inclusive pedagogical practice are often at the root of recommendations made to parents of special needs students to either not enrol in immersion or to transfer from it.

As an example, parents of allophone children are often advised to enrol them in English-only programs in order to

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first master the English language instead of enrolling them in French immersion, where they could learn both English and French. In some interviews done with principals and teaching staff by Roy and Galiev (2009), there is evidence that early French immersion is not recommended to parents of allophone students. Most of the time, these recommendations are not being based on sound research and an understanding of second and third language acquisition (see Genesee, 1994), but rather on misconceptions and personal beliefs.

Who decides that a student should be moved to an English only program?

The Alberta Education document “What School Administrators Need to Know about the Inclusion of Students with Diverse Needs in French Immersion Schools” suggests that the school principal, parents or guardians and other school jurisdiction staff, as well as psychologists and other specialists, should be involved in the decision about moving a child from an immersion program. I agree that “all members of the learning team” should be involved in this process; however, “all professional members” don’t always have the same and necessary knowledge and understanding in the field of second language acquisition research and the immersion approach. Unfortunately, some decisions are made based on misconceptions or lack of knowledge about learning a second language, the cognitive process in bilingualism, learning disabilities in the first and second language, and literacy development in a second or third language.

Parents do rely on the expertise of the professionals to guide their decisions. A good example of this could be found in the article which appeared in *Calgary Herald* on August 14, 2008 titled “Learning detective touts testing.” In this case, the removal of the student from immersion could have been avoided by adopting similar interventions to those proposed in his Individualized Program Plan for the English-only program. Similar strategies could have been provided to the student within the French immersion program in order to improve his reading skills and fine motor skills in both French and English. There is enough evidence that interventions that are effective for first language readers are also effective for second language learners (see Genesee, 2007; Bournot-Trites, 2008). Too often, the removal of a student from the French immersion program is used as a “quick” and “magical” solution for students experiencing difficulties.

Bournot-Trites (2005) found that immersion students considered to be at risk based on their performance on a set of English tests (including knowledge of letter names, phonological awareness, and word and non-word repetition) were also identified as being at risk based on their performance on a similar battery of French-language predictors. There is enough evidence provided by the research (see in particular the research review by Genesee, 2007;

Bruck, 1985; Bournot-Trites, 2005, 2008) that learning disabilities don’t go away because you remove a student from the French immersion program. The learning disabilities persist no matter the language of instruction and classroom context. The removal of these students from the program will not solve the problem: “Since learning disabilities are intrinsic to the individual, the French immersion program does not cause them, nor can they be solved by simply changing the language of instruction.” (Government of Alberta, 2004). Learning disabilities are permanent and learning difficulties can be addressed with similar interventions in both the first and second language.

Finally, not all immersion educators share the same beliefs and knowledge about the benefits of the French immersion program for students with disabilities. Many professionals justify the transfer of a student out of immer-

sion by saying that it will contribute to the improvement of the student’s academic success and his/her behaviour. However, research (Government of Alberta, 2004) has demonstrated that in most cases transfer does not automatically result in improve-

ments. There is no research to date that could provide evidence (see *French Immersion in Manitoba: A Handbook for School Leaders*) that students who experienced learning difficulties in French immersion and were moved to an English-only program improved more than those who remained in the immersion program.

Research also suggests that the loss of self-esteem, the change in peer grouping, and sibling rivalry and other family issues as well as a sense of failure may be caused by the transfer, and may even cause the learning or behaviour problem to get worse (*French Immersion in Manitoba: A Handbook for School Leaders*). One of my student-teachers at the University of Calgary shared with her class the story about her young sister being diagnosed with learning disabilities and the recommendations by the school administrator and the teacher to transfer her out of the immersion program. The impact of the transfer affected not only her academic progress, but also contributed to a sense of failure, a negative impact on sibling relationships and a poor sense of accomplishment. The student-teacher explained that her sister loved learning French and could not understand why she would not have the same opportunity as her older sibling to become bilingual. Unfortunately, this story is not unique, but most of them are not shared because of the embarrassment and sense of failure on the part of such students and their parents.

Last, but far from least, transferring a learning disabled student out of French immersion could in fact be taking away that individual’s opportunity to become bilingual.

Therefore, when children struggle with learning difficulties, immersion parents need to inquire about special educational support within the immersion program instead of opting to transfer them out. An Individualized Program Plan with interventions similar to those used in their first lan-

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guage could be developed to support and respond to the needs of the student.

What needs to be done?

Culture and beliefs: The culture of a school board and school and the attitudes of staff determine the policies and practices that will be put in place. Beliefs about inclusive practice need to be shared by French immersion school administrators and staff. Jordan and Stanovich (2004) suggested that beliefs may contribute differentially to teachers' instructional practices, such that differences in beliefs may be indicative of more and less effective teaching practices. Values and beliefs that promote diversity will result in practices that minimize the barriers to French immersion for all students.

Collaboration and consultation: A process of networking (school boards, school administrators, teachers, parents, students) and forming effective partnerships with all concerned is essential for inclusion.

Inclusive practices: Teaching, learning and assessment approaches need to be modified to meet the diverse needs of all students. "The aim is to fit the learning program to the student rather than fit the students to the program" (Menti, Quinn & Ryba, 2005). We need to link inclusive policies with effective teaching practices.

Other vital factors such as teacher training, professional development and learning resources also need to be addressed by our schools, school districts, universities and Alberta Education.

Conclusion

The rate of attrition from French immersion in Alberta is slowly but steadily declining, in large part due to an increasing recognition among both educators and parents of these issues. Many of our schools and districts are working to make their immersion programs more inclusive. However, far too many of our students are still being denied access to this opportunity.

"Recognizing that inclusion in education is one aspect of inclusion in society" (Booth & Ainscow, 2002), we must also recognize that inclusion in French immersion education is one aspect of inclusion in our bilingual country (Pellerin, 2008, 2009). Every child in Canada is entitled to the best education possible, and every child should have the right to a bilingual education which will allow him to participate fully in his country's economy, governance and society.

French immersion can no longer afford to support elitism and exclusive approaches. If we want French immersion to survive in the 21st century Canadian school system, we need to adapt to the reality of our world. Inclusive practice needs to be the norm, not the exception, in French immersion (Pellerin, 2009).

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