Chapter 77

French Immersion "So Why Would You Do Something Like That to a Child?":
Issues of Advocacy, Accessibility, and Inclusion

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ABSTRACT

French Immersion (FI) continues to grow in popularity and diversity across Canada. However, the suitability of immersion for academically challenged students has often been questioned. This study explored English teachers' beliefs and practices, particularly as they relate to the suitability of French immersion for various learners. It also explored ways by which English teachers frame issues of accessibility to FI for students at risk for academic difficulties. Data revealed that myths about second language education still permeate the system in ways that potentially impact who as access to the FI program. Findings also highlight that the sociocultural and sociopolitical context of this study influences and is being influenced by beliefs about and attitudes toward second language learning. The widespread existence of beliefs and practices grounded in myths or traditional views about second language acquisition points to a need for greater education about issues that potentially limit access to FI.

INTRODUCTION

For many students around the world, language immersion programs have become a viable and popular schooling option. In Finland, Hungary and Australia for example, language immersion programs provide an opportunity for students to 'immerse' themselves in the learning of a minority language such as Swedish and French. In Spain, Wales and New Zealand, immersion programs are offered in an attempt to revitalize the threatened Catalan, Welsh and Maori languages respectively while in Hong Kong and Singapore, English immersion enables students to learn English (Johnson & Swain, 1997). In Canada, the

early French immersion (FI) program was first developed to provide Anglophone students with a chance to become bilingual by learning subjects such as sciences, language arts, and mathematics in French (Lambert & Tucker, 1972). It has continued to grow in popularity and diversity across Canada since its inception in the 1960s. Known as an effective and successful approach to second language education (Genesee, 1994; Krashen, 1984; Swain & Lapkin, 1982), FI has become an integral part of Canada's educational landscape. According to the most recent data available at the time of writing this article, approximately 350,000 Canadian students were enrolled in FI (Canadian Parents for French, 2010-2011).

Although numbers are increasing, issues related to accessibility to the FI program persist because students who face academic challenges in school often refrain from enrolling in FI. It has been suggested that this phenomenon is, in part, due to such students being discouraged from registering in the program (Genesee, 2007a). Similarly, it has also been reported that, when difficulties arise, school personnel counsel students out of FI and are encouraged to return to the mainstream English program (Genesee, 1992; 2007a; Mady & Arnett, 2009). This counseling occurs despite studies consistently finding that students with learning difficulties in FI perform similarly to students not enrolled in FI, and that this applies to both English language development and overall academic achievement (for review see Genesee, 2007a).

According to Arnett and Turnbull (2007) and Arnett, Mady, and Muilenburg (2014), school-level decisions regarding second language program options are often based on individual beliefs or personal experiences rather than sound second language theory and empirical research. Moreover, denying certain students access to FI, a publically funded program, raises practical, ethical, and moral questions. It also raises issues related to social justice and equity. As Genesee and Jared (2008) explained, "discouraging such students from immersion in the absence of empirical support for such a policy is questionable on ethical grounds, because it denies subgroups of learners access to employment-related skills that are important in a bilingual country" (p. 141).

When students at risk for learning difficulties refrain from enrolling in or withdraw from FI, inequalities between immersion and English classes are often created, a phenomenon often referred to as 'the streaming effect'. This has led to the FI program being labeled as elitist and to calls for its elimination or curtailment (Genesee, 1992). There have also been claims that the inequality between FI and English classes "segregates children in terms of their social class background and ability, and this has a detrimental effect on children's learning" (Willms, 2008, p. 1).

CONTEXT OF THE PRESENT STUDY AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

In Canada, education falls under provincial and territorial jurisdiction. Although curriculum and educational policies are overseen by individual provinces and territories, all offer an early FI program that begins in Kindergarten or Grade 1. In 2008, however, the province of New Brunswick made significant changes to its official policy on French second language programs by pushing back the Grade 1 FI entry-point to Grade 3, mainly to address concerns over 'the streaming effect'. The New Brunswick government argued that classroom composition of English-only classes in the current system was such that it needed to adopt a universal English program from Kindergarten through Grade 2 aimed at grouping children of varying academic abilities levels during their foundational years. The later entry point was also intended to promote strong English literacy skills and provide early interventions to those in need. The government also felt that a delayed entry point would allow parents to make a more informed program decision (New Brunswick Department of Education, 2008).

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