

# Language Immersion Education as a Solution to Language Policy Dilemmas: Lessons from Canada's experience with French Immersion

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## 1 Introduction

Discussions of education reform in Japan tend to focus on the challenges of globalization and internationalization, and these are connected to the question of what can be done to make Japanese people more proficient in English, the contemporary world's *lingua franca*. It is seldom recognized that the chronic dissatisfaction with the results of English education may go hand in hand with Japan's success in preserving its culture and language. There is ambivalence about raising the status of English because of the implied threat to the status of Japanese. Those countries in Asia that have "succeeded" in English education have done so by devaluing their native languages in education. Japan always chose to avoid this process of linguistic colonization, yet it now finds itself wanting to raise a generation of young Japanese people who can participate in a globalized culture, yet this would require a high level of functional bilingualism throughout society that is, at present, far from being realized.

One proposed solution to this dilemma is the creation of fully bilingual schools or English language immersion schools. Canada's French Immersion (FI) programs

are often held up as a model to follow, as there is a great deal of academic literature that hails their achievements over the past forty years. This paper surveys some of the research and public discourse that have taken a contrary view of FI programs.

FI programs appeared on the scene in the 1970s when two unrelated social trends emerged to influence public education in Canada. One was the need to solve the tensions between anglophone and francophone cultures within Canada. The other was the rise of neo-liberal ideology that clamored for privatization and greater “consumer satisfaction” in public institutions. FI programs were conceived to solve the first problem, but ended up being co-opted for the other. FI gradually evolved into functioning as a publicly funded program that increased socioeconomic segregation. This paper describes how this situation arose and what the present circumstances say about public attitudes toward public education. It is hoped that it will serve as a cautionary lesson for Japan and other nations that might look to immersion programs as ways to solve language policy dilemmas.

## **2 History and Context of French Immersion Programs in Canada**

Approximately 300,000 students are presently enrolled in FI in Canadian schools.<sup>1)</sup> Canada’s FI programs were the first large-scale language immersion programs in the world, and they have been researched thoroughly, evaluated positively and emulated internationally. They were originally viewed by planners as part of the solution for the historical tensions between Canada’s two founding cultures. They were also seen as a rational solution for the poor outcomes of traditional foreign language teaching. In spite of the stellar reputation of FI, it has not escaped controversy. No one anticipated that the public would perceive it as, and then make it function as, an elite-track enrichment program. FI has also been criticized for high attrition rates, low achievement in French proficiency, problems in recruiting and training teachers, lack of support for special needs students, and lack of accountability for subsidies provided by the federal government.

This outcome has perhaps been an embarrassment to planners and academics who started out with admirable goals. They at first denied that the programs were

“elitist,” then admitted that the issue was controversial. As the controversy has been contemplated with furrowed brows for over three decades, the programs have stayed in place. Bonan noted this aspect of FI studies by writing, “Report after report is commissioned and report after report seems to point to the exact same issues and problems. The problems of French Immersion in 2000 eerily resemble those of the 1970s.”<sup>2)</sup>

Little has changed, in spite of the problems with FI, because it would be hard to imagine that the provinces would curtail French education while there is funding for it from the federal government. In addition, there is the fact that any meddling with language education policy ignites controversy about the status of the French language in Canada. Furthermore, reform stalls because there is bureaucratic inertia, an entrenched corps of French Immersion teachers, and passionate support from aspiring parents who want FI kept in place for reasons that often have little to do with a passion for French or foreign language learning. FI has been a convenient instrument for various school boards that are responding to the demand for greater choice within public education.

Canada's French Immersion programs were born out of a specific political and social context. On the one hand, expanded international communication and transportation had enlarged the field of foreign language education to the point where it was influential enough, and confident enough, to propose a national experiment in immersion education. During the 1960s, an experimental immersion program in Montreal was deemed a tremendous success, and within ten years it was scaled up to a point where it had spread across the country.

The backdrop to this development was the threat of Quebec separatism in the 1960s, which had launched a national unity crisis. The response of the Pierre Trudeau-led Liberal government in the 1970s was an ambitious new vision of a multicultural country with two official languages that had equal status throughout the land. This required an active effort to create a bilingual civil service from coast to coast, and a guarantee of mother tongue education for francophone and anglophone minorities in all parts of the country. While education in Canada is strictly a provincial responsibility, these programs were all heavily subsidized by the federal government, a fact that has done much to make them permanent fixtures in all

provinces.<sup>3)</sup> The loss of federal funding for FI would have to be replaced with provincial revenue.

This broad remaking of Canadian society has had a lasting, controversial impact that is debated to this day. Some believe that reforms prevented Quebec separatism and gave other cultures and immigrants a more just standing in Canada. However, detractors have always claimed that the appeasement of Quebec was a mistake because Quebec didn't reciprocate in the protection of English minority language rights, and it failed ultimately to erase Quebec's status as a nation within a nation, with unique advantages and autonomy that other provinces lacked. Language requirements in the civil service led to many anglophones feeling that they were shut out of employment opportunities. In September, 2010, the national media marked the tenth anniversary of Trudeau's death by remarking on the fading appeal of his vision of Canada. In the *Toronto Star*, Chantal Hébert noted that multiculturalism is "increasingly viewed as a fracture-inducing stress point" and "no national party boasts a strong Quebec presence within its caucus."<sup>4)</sup> The *National Post* editorialized that national bilingual policies "failed to placate the Quebecois, while managing to alienate millions of anglophones" and that multiculturalism led to "divisive ethnopolitics and political correctness dictating national immigration and refugee policy." The Charter of Rights and Freedoms "...authorized judges to 'read in' new rights. Special interest groups, backed by funding that Mr. Trudeau put in place for court challenges, quickly learned they could use Charter-empowered judges to force changes in Canadian society that they never could have won through free elections."<sup>5)</sup>

### **3 The Controversy over French Immersion**

Although such views are not unanimous across English speaking Canada, this degree of disillusionment and anger is a significant factor in attitudes toward French language education. A large element of the population remains positive about the benefits of bilingualism and its essential role in national life, but it is not large enough to explain the degree of enthusiasm for FI programs in parts of the country where few people have a pressing need to speak French. In fact, FI is very popular

in provinces where there has traditionally been a negative attitude toward Quebec and its influence on national politics. The wide popularity and the size of FI programs can be explained by concluding that they have come to fulfill a role quite different from their original intent. The Canadian families who take advantage of them have become quite adept at talking up the benefits of national unity and maintaining bilingual heritage, but critics have claimed that most of them want FI for the benefit of having a “private education” within the free public education system. In 2008, a newspaper editorial in the *Ottawa Citizen* broke the polite silence on this question with this blunt opening:

Keep out the slow kids. Keep out the troubled kids. Keep out the poor and the crippled. Only admit the bright, well-behaved, hard-working kids from prosperous homes. That's the ideal classroom. That's the one we want our kids in. And thanks to French immersion, we've figured out how to get it. Oh, we'll never say so out loud. We may not even admit it to ourselves. But let's be frank. Everyone knows why French immersion is so popular among the ambitious parents who drive high-end SUVs, serve on school committees and draft detailed plans for getting their children into Harvard. It's because immersion is the elite stream.<sup>6)</sup>

This editorial came at a time when the province of New Brunswick was attempting the first serious reappraisal of FI in its three decades of perceived success. However, this move was viewed as perilous by educators and governments in other provinces who watched this development closely. It was implicit that questioning FI would rekindle a debate over national bilingualism and inflame Quebec sensitivities at a time when federal parties were all trying to win the support in Quebec that is considered to be up for grabs now that the federal Liberals no longer dominate in that province. Provincial governments don't want to end FI because of the federal funding they have for it, and also because FI appeases an important segment of the population that would clamor for enrichment programs and threaten to support independent schools, either by enrolling in them or by voting for parties that support tax credits or vouchers for tuition.

Gardner's editorial in the *Ottawa Citizen* was not the first to bring this issue to public attention. The controversy had been well known since the inception of FI.

Research looking into questions of elitism in FI began to appear shortly after the programs became well established in the 1980s. Studies by Olson and Burns<sup>7)8)</sup> were the first to identify the problem, and Lamarre's study in the late 1990s showed that elitist trends continued to exist in many contexts throughout Canada.<sup>9)</sup>

José Makropoulos, doing research funded by the federal government, found no serious problems related to accessibility in FI programs. While conceding the controversy, he states, "Notwithstanding some debate about the accessibility of French immersion for students from working-class backgrounds, studies have generally portrayed the program in a relatively positive light of the past four decades."<sup>10)</sup> His study noted the different rates of participation in FI between "working class" and "middle class" families. The former tend to focus on immediate concerns, while the latter tend to focus on delayed gratification or investing in "educational capital." That is, they see the long-term reward of a bilingual education. Makropoulos goes on to downplay concerns about this difference by noting that children from working class backgrounds joined FI when educators intervened to counsel them on the benefits of doing so. Thus the problem is solved as long as one has faith that schools will stay actively engaged in a campaign to recruit students from lower socioeconomic status to join FI.

The findings of this study are made less relevant by the fact that they focused only on the city of Ottawa, the federal capital, one of the few functionally bilingual cities in the country where working class families can possibly conceive of a future career that might involve the use of both languages. One has to look at such research conclusions with a certain skepticism. There is a tendency for government-funded studies to make sure that they confirm the imperatives of entrenched programs.

When it is a matter of research done by someone outside the language teaching field, different conclusions are made. Christopher Worswick, an economist, studied FI in Ottawa several years earlier in 2003 and concluded:

"The results indicate that streaming of students by academic ability and socioeconomic status has occurred with respect to Canada's French Immersion program. This lends support to the argument that school program choice within the public school system may create privileged enclaves within

the public school system leading to different types of education with differing levels of quality.”<sup>11)</sup>

J. Douglas Willms, a social policy critic working outside the field of language education, came to similar conclusions in 2008. Willms went further by citing data on learner achievement in FI and French as a Second Language programs (FSL), and noted that implementation of an effective FSL program (not immersion) in higher grades would eliminate the harmful streaming caused by early FI, yet it would produce the same or better outcomes in French proficiency.<sup>12)</sup>

While American linguist Steven Krashen described Canada's FI education as “the most successful program ever recorded in the professional language teaching literature,”<sup>13)</sup> Hector Hammerly, who did research on FI in Vancouver, describes Krashen and other “researchers” (Hammerly's use of scare quotes) as biased advocates of their pet projects. He reports that in 1985, a group of FI secondary school graduates had errors in 58% of their written sentences, and tests of grammatical accuracy were no better in a group studied in 1995. Hammerly concluded that there was no way that such limited proficiency prepared them for careers that required French. It is worthwhile to quote him at length on his contrary views:

FI fails for many reasons, most of them related to “progressive” (really regressive) educational views. Among the progressive trends that have affected FI are the beliefs that everything should be as easy as possible for the students (not much effort, no drills or systematic practice); that the correction of errors shouldn't be stressed because it hurts self-esteem; that creativity (even with what one doesn't control) is central to learning; and that communication, however defective, is more important than accuracy and mastery. Under such conditions, excellence is impossible, dysfunctionality inevitable.<sup>14)</sup>

Hammerly is also one of the few researchers who considered FI from the perspective of a six-year-old. He noted that a child enters the first grade and immediately is immersed in a language that she has never known, and she begins to learn reading and writing for the first time in her life in an utterly foreign language, for reasons she could not possibly comprehend. This is bound to have psychological

effects for many children, especially when they react negatively to the immersion but are pressured to continue by their parents.

In other cases, the voices less supportive of FI came from teachers working outside of academia. An FI teacher in British Columbia, Jeanne-Marie Mannavarayan, felt compelled to write a book about her concerns because “this research field did not provide any information or explanation that would have permitted me to give meaning to my personal classroom observations.”<sup>15)</sup> She was particularly concerned about the emotional distress that many children experienced because they felt pressured by their parents to stay in FI. She noted, “Indeed, it is my experience that the children’s perception of failure is commensurate to the disappointment they perceive in their parents.” Students’ common complaints were that there was limited and irrelevant content, and conflict with frustrated teachers. They felt they had to work harder for lower grades than they could get in the regular program, and their parents couldn’t help with homework if they didn’t speak French themselves.

Mannavarayan’s book is valuable because it is a qualitative research project that records the voices of people who often go unheard in educational studies, such as classroom teachers like herself. She noted that many teachers bristled at the advice coming from above in the profession to not teach through traditional methods that seemed to them to be practical and intuitively reasonable. One veteran teacher felt, “There are many problems in FI which cause children to feel like failures... These problems stem from... a lack of systematic grammatical instruction.”<sup>16)</sup>

In every informal conversation I have ever had with parents of children in FI, I have heard nothing but frank admission that they wanted FI for the more “challenging environment” and various other coded phrases that really mean they want their children to be in groups of children that are above normal in intelligence and pro-social behavior. The benefits of knowing another language were a secondary consideration. There is also a striking irony in the fact that while FI came out of the new national vision of multiculturalism and bilingualism, FI came to be viewed in large urban areas as a refuge from the waves of new immigrants’ children. A dirty secret of Canadian education is that school reputations go down as the number of English learners in their enrollment goes up.

Since the 1980s, Canada has been accepting about 250,000 refugees and immigrants annually. Every four years this adds one million people to a population of 30,000,000, and most of them come to a few urban areas, referred to as the MTV (Montreal, Toronto and Vancouver) preference. Thus, FI came to fill an unusual and unexpected role. Even if there are not concerns about educational quality, many families self-select FI schools for reasons they don't articulate even to themselves. They find there people like themselves who share a common language, culture, experiences and concerns. Thus FI provided, in a quiet manner that no one had to acknowledge, an outlet for citizens who might have otherwise mobilized political opposition to the adjustments necessitated by the accommodation of immigrants.

Another aspect of the changes brought by immigration was a pattern of internal migration that would be familiar to any American who lived through the "white flight" phenomenon of U.S. cities in the 1960s and 70s. In Toronto, for example, there has been a steady flow of established Canadians moving out to the exurbs that ring the city's aging suburbs, which, in less than 50 years, have come to have all the problems formerly associated with inner city decay. While many mature neighborhoods in central Toronto retain their prestige, immigrants settle in the suburbs built in the 1960s and 70s in the places fled by those who moved farther out.

Many Canadian parents view themselves as supportive and proud of immigration policy. They believe, erroneously, that without immigration, the birthrate would have some dire implications for the economy and the viability of social programs. The government's own reports have stated that even massive immigration of people only under the age of 20 would not be sufficient to solve the problem of the inverted demographic pyramid.<sup>17)</sup> Over time, immigrants and their children also tend to have the same low birth rates as native-born Canadians.

The same person who supports the acceptance of immigrants may also choose to live far away from areas where they live in large numbers, or he may wish to have his own children schooled separately from immigrants. Ironically, this is done by having one's children join a homogeneous group of Canadian-born anglophones in an FI school. New arrivals to Canada are not banned from entering FI programs, but the fact is that most of them choose not to, or are advised not to.

I wrote above that some of the views I have recorded were obtained in informal

conversation and observation, and even though this is anecdotal reporting, the anecdotes are valuable because they reveal what people are reluctant to say in formal questionnaires. I doubt that a large scale “objective” collection of data would detect any problems with FI, at least not anything beyond the conclusion that “charges of elitism remain controversial” or “more research is needed.” These findings would occur because it is hard to define what constitutes “streaming,” or what is meant by a word such as “elitism,” which is usually a vaguely defined epithet.

Another reason inconclusive findings occur is because parents who want FI for their children are very aware of how to respond when researchers come around with their questionnaires. Finally, these findings arise because the research is usually conducted by those who have interests in FI. Some of them are employed in it. Some of them built their academic careers on it. Others believe with pure heart that learning both official languages is a wonderful thing in its own right. Others were involved in the founding of FI and they had a similar good faith in the advantages of bilingualism. They got into it with a commitment to humanitarian educational goals and were caught by surprise by the suggestion that it increased inequality.

#### **4 The Fight for Inclusion**

A separate category of FI defender is the type who is a devoted supporter of FI but is displeased by its exclusionary tendencies. These critics argue for more support for those who struggle in FI. They note the absence of support for immigrants and those with learning disabilities and behavior problems, and resent the subtle discouragements they receive from school officials to transfer their children out of FI. These critics are the easiest to sympathize with, as their demand for the same extra assistance available in the regular program is legitimate, but as is argued below, their proposed solutions would demolish the *de facto* reason for the existence of FI programs. They are often told by administrators that FI is an enrichment program when in fact this is only what it became in practice. FI was never conceived of as an enrichment course. Bilingualism was supposed to be a goal attainable by any child, but experience has shown that it is not.

One of the most stubborn issues in FI is this question of what to do with

children with behavioral problems or learning disabilities. One view is that these children are better off in a program devoted to acquiring literacy in only their native language, while the other view is that they could thrive in an immersion program if given the same assistance they would get in the regular program. Many children in early FI are identified as dyslexic<sup>18)</sup> or afflicted with a central auditory processing disability. Others are deemed not suitable for FI because of various behavioral or emotional problems. For the purposes of simplifying discussion of these learners, I refer to them all as “struggling” students. In most cases, they are advised to transfer to an English-only program, either for their own benefit or because FI includes no funding for special assistance for such students. Many parents agree with this advice, but some reject the recommendation and insist that their children will not suffer in FI if they are given the extra help that they claim a right to.

This fundamental problem of language immersion programs suggests possible solutions. If resources for extra help are available, and if struggling students are not put at a disadvantage by being kept in an immersion program, then the policies of FI should be adapted to accommodate struggling students. However, if any of these conditions are not possible, we have a decision to make. We accept the existence of a two-tiered education system, or we abolish FI. I believe the long tolerance of this unresolved problem indicates that most people involved in FI and the public in general have accepted the resulting two-tiered education system.

Callie Mady is one academic who has written that struggling students should and can be accommodated in FI. I examine her arguments here to illustrate that her principled stance is admirable but misguided in practical terms.

In two papers, Mady defends the rights of allophones (i.e. immigrants whose mother tongue is neither French or English) and children with learning disabilities to stay in FI. She claims that research debunks the myth that learning one or more additional languages imposes burdens on learners that outweigh the advantages of bilingualism.<sup>19) 20)</sup> This optimistic view of language learning emphasizes the additive benefits of multilingualism and denies that there is any subtractive effect that results in learners being semi-literate or less than fluent in both languages, and this includes people who have learning disabilities. In addition, this view denies that there is an opportunity cost paid by the child whose time in French lessons could be devoted to

remedial teaching or therapy, or to the learning of something that the child actually enjoys.

Although Mady has the backing of research done by top people in applied linguistics to support her views, her blank-slate view of the language learning faculty has less than unanimous support. The problem is that proponents do not acknowledge that benefits are defined subjectively and cannot be confirmed by research results. When deciding what is best for children with learning difficulties, most parents, teachers, psychologists and administrators accept the view that the extra learning challenge imposed by foreign language learning is not negligible.

There are some troublesome contradictions in the arguments that underlie the optimistic view of the benefits of multilingual education. Depending to the situation, time on task is either important or unimportant. Supporters of bilingual education were successful for a long time in implementing bilingual education for Spanish speaking children in California. When they began their education, it was believed that these children needed native language immersion for 2-3 years so that they could gain literacy in their own language before being burdened with learning English. However, when it came to Canadian anglophone children beginning FI, the view was that there would be no disadvantage in attainment of native language literacy, even though they began to learn to read only in a foreign language from Grade 1 to 3. This flexible view of time on task and early literacy education revealed an interesting contradiction that advocates were surely aware of. The Canadian anglophones in FI are a self-selected, culled group of more competent learners from a high socioeconomic status, whereas Spanish speaking immigrants in California have much less social and cultural capital when they begin life in the U.S.

Thus it was that these contextual factors were ignored while general conclusions were made about the benefits of second language education. In considerations of the Canadian context, studies took little account of the selection forces on research subjects. Much of the research played up the additive benefits of learning extra languages, which are indeed substantial for the select group of learners who were studied. The benefits are less evident for struggling learners who could arguably benefit from more time spent doing something else.

Ellen Bialystock's study of bilingualism found that the advantages were not as

abundant as many believe. She concluded in her study, "Memory tasks based primarily on verbal recall are performed more poorly by bilinguals but memory tasks based primarily on executive control are performed better by bilinguals."<sup>21)</sup> The deficit in word recall was an average score, and she noted that if she considered only the highest 20% of the bilingual subjects, they had no disadvantages in word recall compared with monolingual subjects. This result explains why so much research on FI has emphasized the benefits of bilingualism. The students who benefit from a bilingual education are likely to be a self-selected, culled group, corresponding to these high performing bilinguals described by Bialystock.

Bialystock's finding suggests that it is wrong to say that bilingual education confers only benefits. Those who argue in favor of the additive benefits of multilingualism fail to acknowledge that there are any costs involved to the learner. Most people would intuitively agree that there would be something ill-advised about implementing a quadrilingual immersion program at an elementary school. In this case, the concern about time on task and information overload would be obvious. No one would expect children to achieve meaningful proficiency in any of the four languages taught. So then how about three? If not three, then why is two the magic number that imposes no extra burdens but only advantages?

Experts in bilingual education such as Fred Genesee say there is good evidence of benefits to struggling learners in FI, while there is no substantial evidence that FI imposes a cost on the struggling learner.<sup>22)</sup> Yet, there are other studies that show there is no clear consensus on this question. And we must keep in mind that Genesee was one of the founders of the original FI program in Montreal in the 1960s. Like many of the other researchers who have framed the issues in FI, he has a dog in the race.

A study by the Ottawa School Board Research Centre found a 90% positive reaction and improved school performance in students who transferred out of FI and into the regular program.<sup>23)</sup> These contradictory findings occur because of the subjective nature of the problem. Assessment of the costs involves value judgments and counter-factual guesses about opportunities forsaken. If low achievers do poorly even after they transfer out of FI, is it better for them to stay in FI and be bilingual low achievers? Who can say? Genesee is wise to note that considerations

beyond educational attainment should be the deciding factors. He concluded that sociocultural and family circumstances might make FI more or less essential for a child, and many children in FI have a poor motivation and lack a sense of well-being, even though they don't experience learning difficulties in FI.<sup>24)</sup>

The optimistic view of multilingualism contains another contradiction. It does not recognize the inherent conflicts between bilingual rights and monolingual rights. We defend native language rights precisely because new languages are not easily learned after childhood, and native languages are not easily retained, either under coercive pressure to abandon them, or with incentive to use another language that will confer advantages. There are no examples in the world of a country that has successfully made all of its citizens equally bilingual and bi-literate in two specified languages. Many have tried, but the usual result, and usually intended result, is a bilingual elite that speaks English, or another privileged language of wider communication, along with their native language. The majority of the population speaks the traditional languages of the country and lacks access to the privileged language.

Alternatively, there is often a language shift, as there was in Ireland from Gaelic to English, as everyone is pressured to use the language that confers advantages. It gradually becomes redundant to expend the effort of learning two languages. Some people claim that Sweden has successfully proven itself the exception to this rule, having become a country where the national language is maintained while most people speak English at a high proficiency level. However, amid this apparent achievement, one study concluded that because English has become an essential language needed for participation in elite society, Sweden could experience a language shift over the next century and see the decline of its national language.<sup>25)</sup>

The only alternative for avoiding language shift is to erect barriers to preserve the national language. Japan, for example, has a famously ambivalent attitude toward English language education, and its low achievement in English education (relative to resources applied to it) is well known by English teachers who toil there. What is often overlooked is that Japan is unique in Asia in its historical determination to become an economic powerhouse without resorting to colonial economic or language

policies, and thus its problem with English may be the price paid for this success.

Of course, one can see in Japanese education policy fine words about the importance of English education in secondary and post-secondary tiers, but the government line has to be looked on skeptically. Unlike Singapore and the Philippines, and many other countries in the region, Japan does not have a language education policy aimed at functional bilingualism or privilege for Japanese people who have learned English. Aside from jobs that require English specialists, no one in Japan is set back by lack of English ability, although this may be changing as many employers and universities set up requirements to achieve certain scores on standardized tests of English. (This emphasis on standardized test achievement cannot, in any case, be confused with a language shift. The tests don't measure speaking proficiency, and many people get the required scores but have no significant communicative ability in English. The focus on test scores may in fact function as a barrier to language shift.) Even though there are large numbers of the intelligentsia who have been educated in the U.S. and the U.K. (including two recent prime ministers), Japanese academics, journalists and officials are famous in international forums for their isolation, reliance on interpreters, and general inability to casually interact with their counterparts from other countries. Japanese language policy is best understood as being specifically designed to keep English at arm's length.

In this sense, language policy is successful in that it has preserved the Japanese language. It's a matter of speculation to wonder what would happen to the Japanese language if Japan adopted a policy like that of Singapore and gave prestige to English. If advantages were given to the English educated, the writing system based on *kanji* (Chinese characters) might start to seem too time-consuming to learn. After all, Western civilization gave up on Sumerian cuneiform (also a kind of *kanji*) when alphabets proved easier to use and there was no political structure in place to maintain the old writing system. It is conceivable that the Japanese language would disappear within a century if policy were different.

Another flaw in the reasoning of the optimistic view of multilingualism is that it does not take into account the depth and complexity of native-speaker knowledge and it overestimates, and oversimplifies, what can actually be achieved in formal

second language learning. Many people can learn a foreign language to a degree that allows them to function in many domains. They can go shopping, book a flight, explain a medical problem, but they can quickly get into situations beyond their depth, and they stay in shallow waters because it is extremely difficult to learn the language fully and make intimate connections with speakers of the language, and this remains true even for children who have been educated in immersion programs for many years.

Most high school graduates in English speaking countries have a vocabulary that is estimated to be 50,000 words. For many of these words there are various meanings, nuances and rules of usage and collocation. Just to learn the word *take*, one has to know its meaning and all the rules for using it. These include knowing that it almost always requires a direct object but not necessarily an indirect object, that it can be used literally and figuratively, that it appears in dozens of idioms and phrasal verbs (*on the take, take a hike, take off, take away, take up*; one has to also know that the second and third items in the list have alternative uses as ways to impolitely ask someone to leave). Because new languages are difficult to learn after childhood, we end up living in closed communities of people who share the same language, and from this isolation we develop shared knowledge of culture that we easily refer to. This knowledge is difficult for the outsider to learn, and few even try. Most foreign language learners prefer and remain tied to their original language group for intimate social and family life, and thanks to satellite dishes and the Internet, there is less pressure than ever to do otherwise. Most people function in their foreign language at a more superficial level, as long as they have social networks in their native language to fall back on. Quite often these subtleties and complexities are forgotten in national language policies that promise to make the next generation “fluent” in a second language.

This is why FI failed to produce a generation of “fluent” French speakers who were truly interested in cultural exchange and socializing with speakers of French. One teacher related to me an anecdote of a student who was so sick of FI by the time he got to high school that he was proud of *not* speaking French to the Quebecois tourists who came to the restaurant where he worked. Many studies have noted that even though FI programs tend to self-select the most competent language

learners, their achievement has been much less than what planners had originally expected. Research has consistently found that even students who follow FI until high school graduation rate their own French abilities unfavorably. Webster's research noted that over half of them scored 2 or 2+ on Foreign Service Tests that had a scale of 0 to 5. Receptive reading and listening skills were not native-like, sociolinguistic competence was lacking, and they expressed themselves with little grammatical accuracy. In short, he concluded, they "speak immersion."<sup>26)</sup> In another paper, Hammerly wrote, "... after 12 or 13 years of Immersion, young people do not speak French but Frenglish, a very incorrect classroom pidgin..."<sup>27)</sup> While these results refer to students who stick with FI from Grade 1 to 12, achievement is lower than it appears to be because so many students transfer out of FI before secondary school. This low achievement underscores the important influence of the language of the family and community in all that a child learns.

It has been particularly difficult to retain students in FI during the final two years of high school when the most ambitious students want to concentrate on getting the best scores for acceptance to preferred universities that offer instruction in English. If it were true that bilingual education imposes no learning deficit in the first language, these students would not worry about their ability to take math, chemistry, biology, or history exams in either French or English. They would effortlessly master the terminology of these advanced subjects and be fluent in all of them in both languages. But in fact FI students do feel they are at a distinct disadvantage compared with students in an English-only program. A further consideration, one that I have not seen mentioned in any of the research on FI attrition rates and the debate over accessibility, is that this transfer out of FI occurs precisely at the stage when secondary students in the regular program are streamed into either academic or career tracks. In this sense, FI has fulfilled its function. Students can safely enter the academic track of secondary school with no risk of having to study alongside an undesirable element.

As the controversy over accessibility has existed without resolution ever since the inception of FI, it is reasonable to assume that the issue will never be resolved with empirical studies. The studies seem designed to ensure that issue stays shelved as a perpetual "controversy" that will do no more than cause hands to be wrung

occasionally. In this situation, it seems reasonable to place some value in the repeating themes I have noticed in informal talk and anecdotes of persons involved with FI.

When I met parents who had children in FI, or were hoping to place them in FI, there was usually a frank admission that it was a “private school experience in the public system.” I think most of them would have admitted that there is something fundamentally unjust about this arrangement, but they shrug it off as an inescapable reality that they can only exploit or lose out on. They would love to have a more responsive and better funded public school system. They would like to live in a more just society that made sure all children came to school prepared to learn, but that isn’t going to happen during the time span of their child’s education. They tend to feel that it is not so unreasonable to have the public education system operate an elite track for those students who can thrive in it.

Then again, there are those who disagree. FI has done much to inflame class tensions. A blogger in Guelph, a small city one hour west of Toronto, had this to say about the FI parents who didn’t like the city’s plan to move an FI program into a school in a low socioeconomic area:

It seems the real reason that this mystery group doesn’t like this particular reconfiguration of FI is that they don’t want their kids going to school on the wrong side of the tracks... In my view, and I don’t believe I’m alone on this one, this is the FI and gifted program’s dark secret: it is a quasi-private school sub-system set up within a public one.<sup>28)</sup>

In Oakville, another small city in the Toronto region, similar sentiment was expressed by a group of parents who didn’t want FI for their children. The *Toronto Star* reported that a “...handful of Oakville schools that only offer French immersion are driving students out of their neighborhood in search of an English program and are also leading to ‘segregation’ based on gender and ability.”<sup>29)</sup>

When it comes to assessing FI programs for the level of sincere interest in learning French, much of what I have heard makes me doubt that language learning was the main concern for most parents. Of course, they will all say that learning another language is a great thing, but if another enrichment program not based on a foreign language were opened up, FI might suffer a serious decline in popularity.

Another reason to suspect that learning French is not the priority in FI is that achievement and expectations seem to be so low, and it doesn't seem to matter. One parent told me that his daughter struggled with a university French course after having graduated from FI at the secondary level. She had never studied French grammar before. FI was implemented during a time when there was great faith that whole language, communicative language teaching, cooperative learning and inductive methods would be more effective than traditional methods that are teacher-centered, analytic and deductive.

For francophones who are serious about having a French education, in Canada there is a separate system of schools for "French language rights holders," which in Ontario is the Conseil Scolaire Viamonde that governs 39 schools and 8,500 students. It is possible for non-native speakers of French to enter these schools, but the standards of admission for them are high. One might think that the best way to stay true to the spirit of the nation's bilingualism policy would be to put the francophones and the anglophone FI students in the same schools, but francophones reject this because they know the language of social interaction would be separated into two playground tribes. They know that the pace of learning would be slowed down by the anglophones. Anglophones would reject it too because they would fear being at a disadvantage as non-native speakers of French. The result is that FI, a supposed instrument of national unity, still leaves francophones and anglophones living as two solitudes. The need for this separate system demonstrates that French speakers regard FI programs as second rate, and that FI's true function is something other than what one would expect.

A secondary school teacher in Belleville, a small city of 50,000, 150 kilometers east of Toronto, described the elitist attitude toward the FI program as explicit and blatant, and demoralizing to those who were not in it. It is one thing to write in an academic journal or a policy directive that FI is an elective program that must be open to all, but quite another to expect this intent to be realized in the hinterland. The teacher, who worked in Belleville from 2003 to 2009, reported that staff and parents gave constant reminders to students in FI that "they were the cream" (*crème de la crème*) and there was a natural expectation that they would all go to university and enter professions. The highest socioeconomic bracket in the city was able to get

their children into the FI program at an early age and keep them there at least until the middle of high school when they could enter the academic track, safely sheltered from students who were on the “career track,” which is the modern euphemism for “vocational,” which was the previous euphemism for “blue collar.”

FI students were also favored with the greater fundraising capabilities of their parents. While other students got a year-end field trip to a local attraction, the kids in FI went to France, with a teacher traveling free for each group of ten paying students. (It is notable that in a program designed to promote national unity, they go to Paris rather than Quebec City or Montreal.) The price structure of the deal with the travel agency meant, of course, that parents were well aware that they were giving a fairly extravagant gift to a civil servant. As much as the trip does involve chaperoning and being on duty, it is nonetheless a privately funded trip to Paris for teachers. After having been away from my country for so long, I was surprised to find that this and other forms of extravagant gifts to teachers (at Christmas and year end) are perceived by no one in Ontario as possibly having a corrupting influence on teachers who are, after all, public servants. The trip to Paris may seem inconsequential, but it becomes a significant barrier to accessibility for all socioeconomic groups. No parent wants her child to be the only one who can't go on the year-end trip, so those who can't afford it are left with a subtle message that FI is not for people like themselves. The constant reminders to FI students that “they are the cream” is of course audible to the students who are not in FI, and the teacher in Belleville reported that they set their goals exactly as one would expect when such blatant distinctions are implicitly understood by all.

When I interviewed the principal of an elementary school in Toronto, who was in charge of an FI program and a regular program within the same building, she was frank about the difficulties that FI makes for the school. FI has a draining effect on the regular program so that the number of students in each grade gets so small that split level classes become necessary, and these increase teacher workload and involve disadvantages for students. The catchment zone of her school covers two disparate socioeconomic groups: one upper middle class, the other made up of first generation immigrants and low income residents. Occasionally, there is a parent from the latter group who, like everyone else, is aware of the prestige and

advantages of the FI program. Such parents want their children in FI to give them a chance to “make it” in Canada, but if the child can't keep up with the demands of the program, the discussion with the parent can become strained by accusations of elitism and racism.

Speaking as an official in charge of the program, the principal was careful not to disparage it, but she spoke of it in a way that suggested she felt her job would be easier if the FI program didn't exist. She knew about the research that showed the advantages of bilingualism and the higher achievement of students in FI, but she was skeptical. Overall, she was not impressed with the achievements of her FI students relative to students in the regular program. She thought much of the good reputation of FI was built on ungrounded cocktail party gossip. I believe this observation connects with the research on other gifted programs. When students are labeled as gifted at an early age, they often make less effort because of the positive self-esteem this instills in them. They begin to coast, and years later their achievement isn't noticeably different from that of children in non-gifted programs.<sup>30)</sup> This principal observed high attrition rates after Grade 8, and expressed a personal opinion that the English speaking and writing skills of the Grade 8 FI students were noticeably inferior to those of students in the regular program. As a mother of two sons, she had a personal interest in the falling achievement of boys in modern education, and in the fate of boys who have to choose between the two programs in her school. She did not want her sons in the FI program, yet she did not think it was a good thing that the FI classrooms were predominantly female.

The discussion of accessibility in FI has raised serious questions about the actual function of FI in Canada. If bilingualism really were attainable by all, it would not have been possible for FI to have evolved its prestigious reputation. The arguments of the optimists falter in the way that they underestimate the difficulties faced by learners who struggle, and they overestimate the present capacity of education systems to help them.

Children with CAPD (central auditory processing disorders) have difficulty perceiving phonemes (the inventory of discrete sound units unique to each language) and learning the phonology of their native language. They struggle with their native language the way an adult struggles with a foreign language. There are also innate

deficits in grammar and comprehension that are known to be caused by mutations in the FOXP2 gene. Initial evidence of the effects of this mutation was weak at first, and many language specialists working outside the “hard” sciences initially scoffed at the notion of a “grammar gene.” However, in the decade since its discovery, the effects of the mutation have been much more clearly demonstrated and understood. There is now little doubt that the “grammar gene” is real.<sup>31)</sup> For children with such difficulties, reading, writing and studying foreign languages are painful ordeals. It would be considered abuse to force a tone deaf person to undergo years of musical training, and in the same way it is pointless and cruel to force a person with a language disability to learn a foreign language that is not essential for social survival. We do require such children to acquire literacy in their native language, but that is only because it can be morally justified as giving them an essential occupational skill.

Genesee asserts that research finds struggling students taken out of FI receive no benefit from the extra time devoted to English, while if they stay in FI they gain the advantage of being low achievers in two languages. However, this outcome may occur because the student who went back to the regular program had to join fellow low achievers there, while the low achievers who stayed in FI benefited from the influence of more competent peers. It is a peer group effect rather than an effect of a bilingual education, and the peer group effect wouldn't exist if the exclusive nature of FI were changed.

The finding referred to by Genesee also suggests that the extra time devoted to English in the regular program, as well as the availability of special assistance there, have no effect, and this is probably true for most children. Yet it means only that the help in the regular school was useless, not that it was unwise to transfer out of FI. It is a mistake to believe what school board websites and other sources claim about the quality and availability of support for learning disabilities because what they are able to deliver is severely restricted by budget constraints.

There is a curious disparity between the views of educators in the public system, who believe that their special interventions are sufficient, and the views of parents and private sector therapists who find there is a serious lack of funding for learning disabilities and a lack of attention paid to methods that work. Most of the help given

in public education consists of compensatory help, which denies that there is neuroplasticity or the possibility of “fixing” brains that don't function normally. The consensus in the treatment of learning disabilities is that they are lifelong conditions that can only be treated by teaching people how to compensate for their weaknesses or cope emotionally with disappointments.

The typical supports that are in place in many school boards consist of long waits for psychometric assessment and formulation of a treatment plan. Next, an individual education plan is put in place that instructs teachers on how the student is to be given special considerations in class. These are such provisions as extra time to complete tests, permission to use text-to-speech and speech-to-text software, and evaluation referenced to the individual's progress rather than to his peers. The student might be pulled out for a couple of hours a week for individualized instruction with a specialist. There is no talk of a cure. Much of the help is mitigation of disaster and attending to the emotional well-being of the learner who is at a higher risk of dropping out of school. In spite of the fine promises to be found on school board websites, it is obvious to all involved that funding for these supports is usually inadequate.

The number of children who have learning disabilities is not a negligible 1% or 2%. Specialists who treat learning disabilities put the number at 5% to 10%, but this figure could be higher, depending on how we define disability. Disabilities come in varying intensity and are usually referred to as spectrum disorders. Common disabilities also have a tendency to overlap, which causes much confusion in diagnosis and treatment.<sup>32)</sup> There is no agreement on where cutoff lines exit. Many parents might feel that a child who scores in reading and writing below the 40th percentile also has a disability that needs to be attended to, but others would say such a child is below average but within the normal range of abilities. Sometimes low achievement is just a symptom of a student of normal potential having experienced ineffective teaching methods and other demotivating factors.

Public opinion and the common sense judgment of educators have so far not suggested that struggling children should be submitted to bilingual education. The promoters of bilingual education are a minority of academics and activists, usually with monetary or career interests in foreign language education, who have accepted

the notion that learning two languages is natural and possible for everyone, and that there are no costs or trade-offs involved. This is an idea that is a matter of faith, or a value judgment, that should not be confused with a scientific finding. They persist in this faith with the belief that they are defending a child's "right" to a bilingual education. As they do this, they ignore the alternative view that sometimes the right thing to do is to advise a young immigrant or a child with a language learning disability to concentrate on the study of one language. It's also the right thing to let him choose freely whether to follow this advice, a choice that, in fact, should be given to all children who are forced to study foreign languages, including those who are pressured to be in FI by their parents. Many of them are there only because it is the sole option for people who want enrichment programs, and these students represent a different sort of problem that has existed in FI programs: students without learning difficulties who are nonetheless miserable in FI simply because they don't want to be there.

Unlike other schools in the public system, FI schools have had the luxury of being selective and they use it without hesitation. It is one thing for a professor in an education faculty to talk about accessibility and the right to learning aids and remediation, but for the Grade 2 FI teacher with a difficult child to handle, it is another matter. The FI teacher must maintain an immersion environment, which means not resorting to the use of English. FI teachers are also under intense pressure to prove to a skeptical public and anxious parents that learners can achieve proficiency in French without any setback in English proficiency. Children have to learn quickly to follow instructions in French and make quick progress in acquiring the spoken language, and they must quickly gain literacy in this language that they have never heard spoken in their homes. Struggling children are not rare, and they are difficult to accommodate in FI classrooms. Teachers, parents and administrators must decide quickly what to do for them and with them.

The child's inability to understand French makes him (it is usually a boy) difficult to manage, and this fact alone strengthens the argument for sending him back to a monolingual program. It will be in the child's interest to be able to communicate with his teacher and classmates in his native language. Teachers can argue that their effectiveness would be too impaired if they had to devote attention

to disruptive students who don't understand the medium of instruction. Teachers in the regular schools are also distracted by such students, but they can't argue that the student does not comprehend spoken instructions, and when it comes down to it, they don't send the low achievers elsewhere because there is simply nowhere else to send them. Most people who complain about the quality of public education fail to take account of the fact that it is the choice of last resort from which students cannot be sent elsewhere.

Administrators and teachers in FI have always found it reasonable to recommend some students go back to regular English language instruction, as do most parents and psychologists. Provincial policy guidelines on the question of accessibility stipulate equality of access must be upheld according to what is demanded by the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, provincial human rights codes and education acts, but these all stipulate that exceptions can be made when there is demonstrably undue cost, hardship, risk or impact on others,<sup>33)</sup> and school boards can always make persuasive arguments in this regard because there really are so many competing demands on their limited budgets. When challenged, school boards could easily find experts to testify that learning two languages imposes a harmful burden on a child with a learning disability. Some parents and academics will protest the apparent injustice, but few persist in keeping a child in FI when the teacher and administrator have made it clear he will most likely continue to receive unsatisfactory evaluations. Schools make it clear that it is the parents' choice so that they can say that there are no barriers to FI programs, but in practice FI is a selective enrichment program.

The problem here may be that, concurrent with the existence of FI, the school choice movement has proceeded for 30 years now and the courts have not stepped in to answer whether equality of opportunity in education must be upheld. Progressive academics and activists have the opinion that there is a legal guarantee of equality in education, but the courts have taken little action on this matter and the public is not concerned enough to make it an issue. Genesee is surprised that no parents have sued for equal access to FI because, like many educators, he points to the legal guaranty of equality, that any sort of streaming or enrichment program is illegal.<sup>34)</sup> If this were the case, all unique programs, not only FI, would be banned, local

volunteer fundraising would be banned, and socioeconomic desegregation would have to be enforced by busing students across catchment zones. Taken to the extreme, independent schools would have to be nationalized. The legal challenge would be difficult for another reason: public opinion and established practice would be hard to overcome. It is doubtful that even the progressive left would want to mount a legal challenge on these issues because it would only provoke the opposition into a fight that it would be likely to win in the arena of public opinion.

When it comes to dealing with a parent who insists on keeping her child in FI, the dilemma is further complicated by the fact that all parties to the dispute know that FI has prestige value but that it is bad form to say so. They have to do an elaborate performance around certain truths that cannot be stated explicitly. The administrators say the child would be better off focusing on one language, while the parent says that national heritage and bilingualism are vitally important to her child's future. The parent may talk this talk, but the true motive may be no different than that of other parents in FI; that is, to get a child into a class with high achieving students. Parents of struggling learners know that their children may have a fighting chance if some of the pixie dust of a prestige program falls on them, whereas they fear all hope will be lost if their child has to study alongside children like himself.

The perplexing thing about Mady's papers on accessibility is that there is a naïveté, perhaps disingenuousness, in the way the author questions why there are so few immigrants and children with behavior and learning problems in FI. This is like the moment in a comedy when the aware say to the naïve, "Duh?!" Everyone knows the *de facto raison d'être* of FI is to function as a system that struggling children and first generation immigrants are kept out of.

## **5 Conclusions: Lessons Learned from an Attempt to Reform French Immersion**

Those who disagree with this view will cite surveys that show parents in FI have much more sincere interest in raising bilingual children, but believing the surveys also requires a belief that people don't deceive and self-deceive in providing data to researchers. Parents who are savvy enough to get their children into FI

programs know what to say when researchers come around asking questions about accessibility and equity with regard to FI. They know that it would be against their interests if the opinions and anxieties expressed in private talk appeared in the research data. Even when parents sincerely believe that being educated in the nation's two official languages is a wonderful thing, these positive attitudes must in many cases be influenced by the awareness that something really special happens in FI mostly because of all the wonderful classmates their children find there. They know that FI students are a select group that have many favorable attributes. Some parents, as well as much of the founding research in FI, misinterpret the causal relation and conclude that these positive learning abilities, attitudes and behaviors arise not from the self-selection but precisely as an effect of bilingual education.

The discouraging thing about this controversy over access to FI is that it has existed for over 30 years, emerging and submerging repeatedly with little change in policy or practices. Early opposition to FI was politically motivated, coming from the element of English Canada that thought Quebec had too much influence in federal politics. However, concerns about this opposition quickly faded when FI programs became immensely popular and many school boards could not satisfy the demand for them. It was difficult to find qualified bilingual teachers, and of course collective agreements with teachers precluded a large-scale reform that would see monolingual teachers replaced with bilingual ones. Furthermore, FI could never be made universal because doing so would trample on the language rights of those who didn't want it. FI had to be established as an alternative that would be available only to a minority of students. Thus it quickly became a matter of deciding where the FI programs would be located and whom they were suitable for. Within a few years, it became apparent that FI schools tended to be located in higher socioeconomic neighborhoods, and busing from other neighborhoods was not made available in many cases. All of this happened as political trends were moving in a direction that saw more affluent citizens voicing dissatisfaction with the egalitarian public system and clamoring for "school choice."

Olson and Burns were the first to publish research in 1983 on the socioeconomic divide between FI and regular programs. They concluded FI is better understood "functionally as a process of class identification... the effect, if not the

intent, has been to create an elite cohort.”<sup>35)</sup> Trites and Price,<sup>36)</sup> in 1978, were the first to examine the question of whether FI would not be a good choice for some children who had specific disabilities. In this past era when academics were less concerned with politically correct terminology, they described low performers, in FI as impulsive, unenthusiastic, activity-oriented, unsociable, inattentive, restless and difficult to manage. They suspected that they had a specific deficit in learning a second language because the children they studied performed normally when placed back in a class conducted in their native language. They noted the high ratio of males who experienced problems. Drop-outs from FI performed worse on reading nonsense syllables (a common test of phonemic awareness), and drop-outs advanced faster in English writing and reading than other struggling students who stayed in FI.

This directly contradicts Genesee’s conclusion that no differences can be detected in the struggling students who stayed in FI and those who returned to the regular program.<sup>37)</sup> The results of all the research on this question suggest that researchers in social sciences tend to employ methodology that yields the results they expect. Unsurprisingly, it is the research done by those who work in French education that finds benefits in bilingualism, and they favor the expansion of French education. Critics inside French education find either that accessibility is not a problem, or if it is, it should be fixed by expanding FI programs and providing support for those with special needs. Critics outside of French education find that accessibility is a problem, socioeconomic divides are serious and intrinsically a part of FI, and thus FI should be abolished or delayed until an age when streaming does less harm.

The national organization Canadian Parents for French (CPF) is an active lobbying group that promotes French education in the English speaking provinces. Lamarre’s study found that they were instrumental in establishing FI programs widely in British Columbia at a time when the provincial government had little interest in them. CPF has dozens of advocacy positions on various issues, one of which is to “advocate for equitable access to FSL programs”<sup>38)</sup> They advocate that special services should be provided for gifted, special needs and allophone students, and that all students should have appropriate counseling about decisions to continue to learn French at the secondary and post-secondary level.<sup>39)</sup>

It is impossible to know how sincere this advocacy is or how seriously it is pursued, or whether this group could have a great deal of influence over policy, but it is noticeable that it is not a predominant issue as one browses the organization's website. The vague wording in "should have appropriate counseling" implies nothing about a guaranty of treatment and remediation within FI, and there is no mention of methods of verifying that these goals have been met. "Appropriate counselling" could amount to the more common suggestion that a struggling student leave FI. It is likely that the position was adopted because of pressure to do so, and because there was only a benefit in deflecting criticism away from the public perception that parents who are enthusiastic about FI are elitist.

In any case, access is not really a problem because there is no strict screening test for entry. What is lacking from this advocacy is a loud and clear statement that school boards should stop effectively forcing students to transfer out of FI when they begin to fall behind. It is to be expected that leaders of this group, as well as leaders in academia and school administration, would make the appropriate public statements with regard to equal access, but parents typically show little attachment to high ideals in their private decisions. If put to a vote, it is doubtful that the membership of CPF, or non-members with children in FI, would insist very strongly that children with behavior and learning disabilities be kept in FI. Such children are not popular additions to any classroom.

The attitudes that prevail about this issue of access to FI are evident in the list (**Table 1**) that I have found posted on the websites of several school boards in Canada, with the original author not attributed.<sup>40)</sup>

The attributes in the list are less about the qualities of a good language learner and more of a description of the dream student every teacher wants in her classes. Part of the list is a description of cognitive ability, while the rest of it is a description of preferred personality traits that make people easy to teach and get along with. Teachers advise parents to "consider not only their child's intellectual and academic development but their social and emotional development." There might be some small encouragement in the fact that the web page has not been updated since 2003, but it is still there (2013/09) on the Halifax Regional School Board website, and it has been copied onto many other school board sites where

Table 1

<p><b>Is My Child a Candidate for French Immersion?</b></p> <p>In the spring of each school year, parents wonder if their child should enroll in immersion. Invariably, parents present their predicament to immersion teachers in the hope of making the best decision either for, or with their child.</p> <p>When parents ask, “Should I put my child in immersion?” most teachers respond with a series of questions that cause parents to consider not only their child’s intellectual and academic development but their social and emotional development as well.</p> <p>Based on conversations with other French immersion teachers, and my personal experience, a combination of several characteristics contribute to the development of a successful immersion student.</p> <p>A successful French immersion student:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Is well versed, competent and confident when speaking, writing and reading his/her own first language.</li><li>• Has a “good ear,” is able to distinguish between different sounds, voice inflection, tone and intonation.</li><li>• Is a good mimic.</li><li>• Enjoys word play, rhymes and tongue twisters.</li><li>• Does not become easily frustrated by setbacks or mistakes.</li><li>• Enjoys challenges and seeks more than one strategy to problem solve.</li><li>• Stays focused and remains on-task.</li><li>• Is a risk-taker.</li><li>• Is adaptable.</li><li>• Is able to work as part of a team.</li><li>• Has good work and study habits.</li><li>• Has interested and supportive parent(s).</li></ul> <p>If most, or all, of these characteristics aptly describe your son or daughter, there is a strong possibility he/she will be a successful immersion student.</p>
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teachers and administrators apparently thought it was excellent advice.<sup>41)</sup>

Parents, and the electorate in general, aren’t known for getting behind “progressive” reforms that conflict with their interests and come down to them through policy research and government initiatives. The province of New Brunswick abolished early FI in 2008 because of the evidence in a study by Willms<sup>42)</sup> that showed that early FI effectively excluded lower socioeconomic groups and children with learning and behavior problems. Immediately, parents who wanted early FI to be continued mounted a very effective and vocal campaign to have it reinstated. They received sympathetic media coverage, while the government and the policy researchers who backed the change were portrayed as heavy-handed ideologues and labeled as “anti-French.”

It didn't matter that the evidence about the exclusivity of FI was solid, evidence that only confirmed the "dirty secret" about FI that the media and the public had recently begun to acknowledge. An article in *The Gazette* (Montreal) opined that the policy would rekindle ethnic tensions, and it cited both the Consortium of Universities Advising the Canadian Association of Immersion Teachers and The Canadian Association of Second Language Teachers as groups of professional experts who think "... the decision is sending the message that New Brunswick's model of bilingualism is slipping away."<sup>43</sup>)

Such groups of professional educators are normally concerned with social justice and being on the right side of progressive issues, but on this controversy they did not acknowledge the glaring inequalities that are well known, and instead they attempted to frame the policy as a regressive one that would increase "ethnic tension." More glaring is their failure to acknowledge their own interests in maintaining employment in French education or reputations built upon the perceived success of FI. This exemplifies a point often lost on advocacy groups in education. Governments are justified in ignoring some of the policy proposals made by self-interested professional organizations. Educators are often slow to understand that they are not the only ones who should have a voice in decisions about education.

As these professional organizations of educators were so opposed to the policy's concern with equality of educational opportunity, it would be naïve to think that parents of children in FI would react differently. It was significant that the article in *The Gazette* cited four doctors who wanted FI maintained for their children and threatened to leave the province over the issue. Regions like New Brunswick have difficulty retaining medical professionals, and these doctors were willing to use this fact as leverage, with apparent disregard for the impact on their patients, as if the doctors' children, or anyone else, couldn't find a way to learn French by other means if it were such a necessity.

For other parents in favor of FI, it was irrelevant that Willms' paper pointed out that achievement in early FI wasn't significantly different than what could be gained by introducing a better French program (not an immersion program) in late elementary school, after students gain literacy in their native language. In fact, many school districts have recognized these problems with FI and have quietly introduced

a new program called “Extended French,” exactly as Willms proposed.

An interesting sidebar to the controversy over bilingual education is in the issue of how Quebec’s language laws, structured to preserve French, have cut off access to English education for lower socioeconomic groups there while higher socioeconomic groups have found ways to access English education. Wherever it happens, bilingual education is inherently tied up with questions of privilege. Families in Quebec are not allowed to choose English immersion education because of the province’s policy of preserving French. The Quebec government restricts English education to only children of anglophone heritage and children who have already received much of their education in English outside of Quebec. However, this has not changed the motivations of Quebecois to learn the global language, so those who can pay for after-hours English lessons or summers in Vancouver are the ones who gain career opportunities. These rules also set up perverse incentives. For example, a fiancé who can be classified as being of English extraction will be a spouse with educational benefits for future children. A member of parliament from Quebec was criticized by his compatriots for settling his children in Ottawa (province of Ontario) after his election and putting them in English schools. As Ottawa sits on the border between Ontario and Quebec, he could have established a residence across the river in Hull, Quebec, and done a short commute to work in Ottawa. The report on this controversy mentioned the “dirty secret” of Quebec’s language laws.<sup>44)</sup> Everyone knows that higher socioeconomic groups have found ways to get access to English education.

New Brunswick’s decision to take on FI in a frontal attack led to public meetings in which officials had to make desperate appeals to the ideal of equality. Parents were deaf to these concerns. Education minister Kelly Lamrock was booed “... every time he mentioned cutting early French immersion” according to a CBC report. Lamrock asked parents in the audience “...to start worrying about the other 80 per cent of children who are struggling in the classroom.” He went on to say, “I know it’s tough for the 20 per cent [parents with children in FI] who have something that’s working well to accept change. But I believe that we can change and let the other 80 per cent in.”<sup>45)</sup>

The provincial Liberal party lost power in the election of 2010, and its early FI

policy was cited as one of the reasons for public dissatisfaction.<sup>46)</sup> None of the reports cited what is evidently lacking in the reaction to New Brunswick's new policy on early FI: there were no parents or advocates speaking up for the 80% of students who were being badly served in the regular program. A timeless question in social reform movements is whether this silent majority should be ignored simply because it cannot or will not organize and speak up for itself. Should self-anointed sympathizers in government and academia be the ones to speak for them? These self-appointed progressive voices are often dismissed by a public that deems them out of touch with what "real people" want. However, these "real people," in the case of FI in New Brunswick, are an example of a common phenomenon. It is in fact an effective, organized and loud minority, not a vaguely defined "real people" majority that frames the issues and makes itself heard.

Some of the supporters of the continuation of early FI are sincerely concerned about the inequality in FI programs, but their argument is that FI should be expanded and that supports should be made available to struggling learners. The New Brunswick government was no doubt aware of this argument, but it deemed such solutions unfeasible. It would not be practically or ethically possible to make FI universal because there are not enough qualified bilingual teachers, and many people don't want their children in FI. Bilingual rights inevitably conflict with monolingual rights. Even if there were enough teachers, there would be strong opposition to a policy that suddenly made bilingualism a requirement of being a teacher and student.

Supporters of FI tend to forget that there are competing demands on resources, and the more they emphasize special consideration for French education, the more the public will question what is so special about it. Immigrants and aboriginals could demand immersion programs in their languages, while others could begin to question what is so special about second language study itself. Enrichment programs in math, music and various other fields make just as much sense. In fact, many school boards in Canada are creating more of such alternative programs. These school boards have been inspired by the success of FI, but they have also recognized that there is something troubling about the role FI has played in being the only outlet for those who want school choice. Some school boards have adopted the race-to-the-top mentality common in the U.S. Rather than trying to foster equality, they have

conceded that this demand for excellence is the contemporary reality that cannot be escaped. It is viewed as a legitimate and necessary way to improve educational outcomes.

The decision of the New Brunswick government of 2008 to abolish early FI was reasonable and admirable on many grounds. They based their decision on research that showed that early FI had long-term learning outcomes that could be achieved just as well or better through French instruction given at later grades. The research also noted that early FI amounted to streaming out children with behavior and learning difficulties and/or children from lower socioeconomic status. They were wise enough to see that while parents of children in FI, French teachers and other interested parties in French education deserve to have a say in the matter, theirs should not be the only voices in policy formation. Someone should speak up for the majority who were being served badly.

Realizing that expanding early FI or providing support for struggling students was not possible, they chose to abolish early FI. They recognized that there is a peculiar sociopolitical phenomenon behind Canadian FI programs that sees them used and abused to satisfy a demand for a perceived higher-quality stream of education. As such, FI programs could never be restructured toward inclusiveness without their losing the crucial appeal of being exclusive. The government of New Brunswick acknowledged what may be a universal truth about bilingual education programs that cannot be altered by greater accessibility or support for struggling learners: bilingual education is an ideal filter for selecting students who have the best social and natural advantages for learning.

This is an intrinsic part of bilingual education throughout the world, and throughout history. In Canada, FI programs were originally created to increase the number of people who speak both official languages, but they were exploited and supported by sociopolitical forces that seek a prestigious education. There really is no controversy about this. The controversy is whether this has a place in the public education system, and these supporters show by their actions that they are certain it does.

Regardless of the wisdom of the decision to abolish early FI in New Brunswick, the story of the government's attempt to implement it carries some valuable

lessons for future governments and policy planners in other contexts. Although the government made a noble attempt to defend the rights of the silent majority who were put at a disadvantage, they were overruled by a loud minority that managed to frame its story favorably in public discourse. The majority that the government was trying to help was indifferent or voiceless. The New Brunswick Liberal party lost power in the 2010 election mostly because of public dissatisfaction with other issues, but the foes of its education policy were considered to be one of the influential forces in their defeat. For those who would govern in other jurisdictions, the lesson from this experiment is that French language education in Canada is still too sensitive to be touched. Furthermore, appeasement of what, for lack of a better word, can be called “the aspiring class” has come to be the crucial element of school reform. Lower socioeconomic groups can be ignored because they lack influence over public opinion and social policy. A government will lose if it tries to protect their interests when they conflict with the interests of the aspiring class. Unless there is a radical change in public attitudes, it is likely that future attempts of this nature will fail.

In Japan, public attitudes about education equality are probably no different. If anything, the unspoken assumptions about the issue have been more deeply entrenched for a longer time. There is a high level of private spending on education, relative to other OECD countries,<sup>47)</sup> and public education is mandatory only up to grade nine (age 15). The government operates secondary schools, but they required tuition fees as recently as 2010. Entry is competitive and the number of spaces available are far below demand. Most people want to go to secondary school, which means a large number of students (23% of secondary schools are private, but they can be considered quasi-public because they receive government subsidies<sup>48)</sup>) must pay for independent schools. Thus Japan has a unique set of problems concerning equal access to educational opportunities, but these do not arise from language education policy.

There have been a few experimental English immersion and bilingual programs, but no wide-scale adoption of them. English language education has no streaming effect on Japanese students, and there are no advantaged pathways to educational and career success based on English speaking ability. Requirements to pass certain

standardized tests of English (TOEIC, TOEFL, IELTS, STEP) are somewhat of a barrier, but these pose no serious threat that the people who take them will begin to use English to entertain themselves, to socialize, or to pursue educational and career goals. There is no threat to the status of Japanese as the language of higher education, publishing, and government and private sector leadership. Israel resurrected Hebrew as a national language within a generation, so it would be theoretically possible to raise the status of the English language in Japan, but if policy ever began to succeed in a way that threatened the status of Japanese, it is likely that society would quickly become more conscious of the seldom-discussed cultural and political dimensions of the English problem. Viewed from this perspective, one could say that English education policy has been designed to ensure that it fails, or that it never succeeds to the point that it threatens the status of Japanese.

Nonetheless, Japanese education planners are under pressure to help solve the country's deepening economic stagnation and isolation. It is often referred to as suffering from a Galapagos syndrome: its culture and technology are highly developed, but the nation has fallen behind in recent years in global markets because of a tendency to turn inward.<sup>49)</sup> Language policy is a factor in this problem, and Japan may turn to appealing proposals that seem to offer a solution to the English problem. Being familiar with only the positive reviews of Canada's experience with FI, and succumbing to the intuitive appeal of language immersion, Japanese planners might be tempted to establish immersion or bilingual programs. This paper has suggested the many ways this solution could present new problems related to social equality and the maintenance of Japanese traditions and language.

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