

## French Immersion: Are We Getting our Just Desserts?

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Résumé de l'article

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FRENCH IMMERSION:  
ARE WE GETTING OUR JUST DESSERTS?

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**Abstract**

In this paper, I will not focus my comments on the relative merit of the various potential entry points into French Immersion. Rather, I will discuss some of the benefits of bilingualism and explain my thinking about matters I believe to be equity issues in French Immersion. My perspective is that of a mother attempting to make informed decisions about her children's schooling options. While I raise some pointed questions, I do so with humility as I am only beginning to familiarize myself with the related literature.

**Résumé**

Dans cet article, plutôt que de me pencher sur les mérites respectifs des différents niveaux d'entrée possibles dans les programmes d'immersion française, je vais discuter des points forts du bilinguisme et expliquer mon point de vue sur ce qui m'apparaît être une question d'équité dans ces programmes. J'adopte la perspective d'une mère qui tente de prendre des décisions éclairées touchant les options éducatives qui s'offrent à ses enfants. Bien que les questions soulevées soient très pointues, je les aborde avec l'humilité qui sied à une personne qui en est à la phase de familiarisation avec les travaux disponibles.

**1. Background and introduction**

For nearly forty years now, French Immersion has been a program option for Canadian children. Despite the length of time this program has been in existence, only nine percent of the Anglophone/Allophone population outside the province of Quebec are English-French bilingual. Recently, the federal government developed Plan 2013, which sets a goal

of doubling the number of bilingual high school graduates by the year 2013. In an effort to explore possible explanations for the still relatively low number of bilingual Canadians outside Quebec, this discussion paper explores equity issues in French Immersion and outlines research findings on the benefits of bilingualism which may be unknown to parents making Kindergarten enrolment and other educational decisions for their children.

The overwhelming benefits of bilingualism have been presented repeatedly in the literature since the beginning of French Immersion in Canada. These benefits are what the author considers to be the potential “desserts” offered to children *and society* by French Immersion. Thus, in the title of my presentation, “French Immersion, are we getting our just desserts?”, “desserts” refers to the benefits of bilingualism. Next, “just” is a reference to what I call justice or equity issues in French Immersion. The expression “getting one’s just desserts” means that a person will get what is coming to them based on their efforts and actions. Thus, I pose the question, given how we have gone about “doing French Immersion” in Canada, what benefits or consequences are we experiencing?

## **2. Benefits of bilingualism**

In my opinion, the outcome for high school graduates of an optimally functioning French Immersion program would be functional bilingualism. The benefits of bilingualism include *enhanced cognitive development, cross-cultural skills and awareness, and economic benefits.*

### *2.1. Enhanced cognitive development*

Numerous researchers have described the cognitive benefits of bilingualism (Baker, 1993; Baker and Prys-Jones, 1998; Bialystok, 1991; Lambert and Peal, 1962). Rebuffot (1993) summarized the four cognitive advantages of being bilingual as greater mental flexibility, increased capacity for abstract thinking, intellectual benefits of access to a rich bicultural environment, and the capacity for positive transfer between languages which benefits verbal intelligence. Sabino (2004) reported that bilingualism fosters classification skills, concept formation, analogical reasoning, visual-spatial skills, creativity, and control of inhibitions. Bilingualism is said to provide a diverse and flexible foundation for thinking, an enhanced ability to deal with distractions, more creative

thinking, better memory, and superior performance in their first language (Sabino, 2004) and enhanced problem-solving abilities (Bialystok and Martin, 2004).

In my discussions with other parents about which program to enrol our children in, it is the potential enhancement of thinking skills that prevails as the most important benefit of bilingualism. As parents, we cannot know for certain what languages and skills our children may need in the future but enhanced problem-solving skills will undoubtedly help them face life's challenges and changes.

## 2.2. *Cross-cultural skills and awareness*

Many have acknowledged the virtual impossibility of separating language and culture. Each language enables a unique manner of perceiving the world. Being able to function in more than one language, then, not only facilitates divergent problem-solving that can come of an awareness of different ways of seeing and naming one's reality but it can also foster cross-cultural skills and awareness that can be of benefit to both the individual and society. Since "innovativeness and creative expression of a plural society demand cultivated use of more than one language," Skutnabb-Kangas (2000: 568) recommends that national educational policies be built on a *multilingual* strategy.

Skutnabb-Kangas (2000) presents the argument that linguistic diversity is as necessary as biodiversity. Each language is a different way of naming and understanding things. Each language can contribute ways of thinking, knowing, and solving problems. As languages die, these ways of knowing are also lost. Knowing a second language provides the opportunity to engage an emerging intercultural dialogue in a world of diversity (Adam, 2005; Tillman, 2005; Genesee and Cloud, 1998).

## 2.3. *Economic benefits*

From an economic standpoint, bilingualism can benefit both the individual and the national economy. I choose to name economic benefits last since they are perhaps already well known and, in my opinion, the least important of the benefits. This seems to me a more self-serving reason to enrol although it must be said that it is possible that the benefits of a multilingual Canadian workforce would financially benefit Canada by

enabling Canadian companies to be more competitive globally. Bilingualism, indeed multilingualism, is increasingly important for participation in the global economy (Alberta Learning, 2003). “Proficiency in multiple languages permits people to take full advantage of technological advances. Multilingual people can benefit most from the Information Age.” (Genesee and Cloud, 1998: 62) The greater the number of Canadians who choose to educate their children in two or more languages, the greater Canada’s economic advantage. From an equity standpoint, the question could be raised as to whether French Immersion is a means by which a relatively small group of non-francophone Canadians are becoming a bilingual elite. Indeed, according to Cummins (2000: 23), “These programs serve the interests of dominant middle-class majority language children.”

### **3. Equity Issues in French Immersion**

Earlier, I mentioned development of cross-cultural skills and awareness as a potential benefit of French Immersion. Nonetheless, I am keenly aware that while second language learning can teach our children to understand various ways of naming things and being in the world and that bilingualism will enable them to embrace diversity, I do not believe that we are consistently modeling an “embracing of diversity” in French Immersion. I often wonder what our children are learning when they see peers facing difficulties leave French Immersion. This leads me then to the second part of my presentation: Just(ice): Is there equity (of access and services) in French Immersion?

#### *3.1. Equity of access*

It seems to me that there are two main issues in terms of equity of access. The first is equity of access at enrolment and the other is equity of continued access to French Immersion by a diverse group of learners. The two are not wholly unrelated. Both relate to what kind of learner is welcome to enrol or remain in French Immersion.

Cummins (1983: 125) reported that the “initial tendency among many educators was to exclude from immersion programs students who were characterized by learning disabilities, ‘third’ language backgrounds or low academic ability.” Consistent with Cummins’ statement, anecdotal

information shared with me by parents, teachers, and school administrators from different parts of Canada reveals that when there is concern about school adjustment or achievement, often parents are discouraged from enrolling their child in French Immersion Kindergarten.

I see a number of problems with this informal, and perhaps even haphazard, practice of screening students entering French Immersion Kindergarten programs. First of all, children develop at different rates and a pre-Kindergarten child may not have developed aptitudes that those screening children might consider important for success in French Immersion. Second, and more importantly, what has led us to even contemplate screening in the first place? Candelaria-Greene's research about Kenyan students with cognitive challenges demonstrates that "students can and do manage second languages as well as they handle their first language, regardless of handicapping condition" (1996: 560) within the context of an environment that expects and needs multilingualism. Is our Canadian context one where multilingualism, or indeed even bilingualism, is not perceived as necessary? Thirdly, except in school districts offering Late Immersion, parents choosing not to enrol their children in French Immersion at Kindergarten entry are indeed choosing that their children will not have the possibility of participating in such a program for the duration of their elementary and high school education. There is no going back once this crucial decision is made.

Once children are enrolled in French Immersion, they may not remain in the program. Children who experience difficulties in learning are often transferred out of French Immersion, depriving the student of the opportunity to become bilingual and experience bilingualism's inherent advantages, and risking damage to their self-esteem. In addition, a backlash against French Immersion is potentially being created by sending children with challenges to the regular English program. I often wonder if parents are given adequate information about the relative merits and potential risks of transfer to the English program. French Immersion has been criticized as being an elitist program. By discouraging a heterogeneous group of students from continuing in French Immersion, perhaps only the academic elite continue in French Immersion. However, French Immersion need not by definition be elitist.

“A further complication in comparing the progress of LD children in French Immersion and English classes is the lack of available remediation in many French Immersion settings.” (Bernhard, 1993: 6) If French Immersion is believed to be an elitist program meant only for academically gifted children, why would there be a need for support services for students experiencing learning difficulties? On the contrary, it could be argued that French Immersion is an underprivileged program since necessary support services are by and large unavailable (Bernhard, 1993).

From the literature I have read to date, it would seem that there are few students who, given the necessary support services, would not do as well in French Immersion as they would in the English program. Teachers working with children with learning disabilities often focus on developing strengths as well as particular skills to compensate for areas of relative challenge. Research has not shown that being in a second-language learning environment has detrimental effects on children with learning disabilities. Rather, social and economic factors discussed above seem to indicate that a second language is a significant skill to have. Should students with learning disabilities not have access to a program that would permit them to develop this skill?

Canadian Parents for French (CPF, 2004) has recently launched the Peer Tutoring Literacy program for French Immersion. This is good news when one considers how reading difficulties can seriously hinder an individual's ability to learn and adjust positively in society. However, the program stipulates that it is not for students with learning disabilities. Are students with learning disabilities in French Immersion being given the necessary academic support or are they simply being transferred to the English program?

As part of a two-year research study on the effectiveness of a French Immersion Learning Disabilities Program, Aubin (2000) examined differences in performance between students staying in French Immersion in a learning disabilities program, students transferring from French Immersion into an English learning disabilities program, and students who had never been in French Immersion who were in a learning disabilities program. The students' performance on standardized tests of reading and writing revealed that students who remained in French Immersion and

were given learning support in French, their second language, performed better than students who transferred to English and were given learning support in English. Why were the outcomes different? With a lack of information on the characteristics of the students in the English learning disabilities program, it is difficult to say. It remains unclear whether the students in each group had similar characteristics. Nonetheless, this study demonstrated that non-Francophone students having difficulty in French Immersion can make improvements when given assistance in French. This shows that it is not necessarily the language of instruction which is of issue when students experience difficulty learning. Cummins (1983: 130) posits that “academic proficiencies (and difficulties) are cross-lingual, i.e. similar in nature whether they occur in an immersion or regular English program.”

Might there have been a negative impact on students’ self-esteem when they transferred to the English program believing that transfer would solve their learning difficulties only to find that their learning challenges persisted? Aubin (2000: 231) described how proponents of students with learning difficulties remaining in French Immersion believe that “Removing children from French Immersion because they have learning difficulties is damaging to their self-esteem because they perceive that they are not ‘smart enough’ to learn French.” Bruck (1979, as cited in Rousseau, 1999) speculated that transferring the child from French Immersion may negatively impact the child’s self-esteem and give the impression of failure which in turn could aggravate any learning difficulties. Rousseau’s qualitative research (1999: 20) on the same French Immersion learning disabilities program as Aubin (2000) found that students reported “feeling clever” and “feeling less scared and afraid,” following participation in the one-year program. They also reported a “good understanding of what a learning disability is and having a sense of control.” Bruck’s study (1985) showed that the amount of academic improvement was the same for students remaining in French Immersion as those transferring out. However, the behaviour of students who transferred to English was more deviant and evidenced poor attitude and motivation. Bruck also found that parents of children who transferred out of French Immersion devalued the importance of a second language.



### 3.2. *Equity in terms of resources*

Teaching in general is a profession with a high rate of burnout (Huberman and Vandenberghe, 1999). Nearly forty years into French Immersion, there is still an urgent need for resources (Edmonton Public Schools, 2002) and many teachers still need to make their basic teaching materials themselves. Canadian Parents for French (CPF) is concerned about the dearth of qualified Bachelor of Education graduates to teach French as a second language in Canada. The added workload of French Immersion teachers does not help in presenting it as an attractive career option.

### 3.3. *Equity in terms of staffing and school procedures*

I have heard concerns from French Immersion teachers, indeed I remember similar conversations when I was a French Immersion teacher, about the possibility that important messages might not be understood by students if they were not spoken in English. Later, I realized that by not engaging in such teacher-student interactions in French, the students were being deprived of the opportunity to figure out such a message. Since such messages often involved field trips or special programming, these communicative situations would likely have been highly motivating for the students to understand in their second language. Teachers daily have the opportunity to “communicate strong affirmative messages to students about the value of knowing additional languages” (Cummins, 2000: 13). It is important that teachers realize the messages they may inadvertently be sending about the relative importance and status of each of Canada’s official languages.

Another related observation I have made, while visiting numerous schools as both a school-based psychologist and a supervisor of student teachers, is that many French Immersion schools have a principal who does not speak any French. Since there is a paucity of available French Immersion teachers, perhaps there is the same challenge in terms of availability of administrators. That said, I also know of French-speaking principals who work at English schools. Even schools which are French Immersion centres, where only French Immersion is available, sometimes have a principal who does not speak French. At such schools, as well as at dual track schools where there are classes at every grade level in both

English and French Immersion, staff meetings are conducted in English. Regardless of the possible causes of the three above-mentioned phenomena, the net effect on students may be a perception that English is used for important messages and meetings and that people in a position of power speak English. This serves to underscore the dominance of English in Canadian communities and these actions may contradict spoken messages that French is important for students to master for their future. Cummins (2000: 10) affirms:

When two languages are used in the school to affirm the experiences and cultures of the students and communities who speak those languages, this in itself challenges the discourse of superiority and devaluation that characterizes social relations between these communities in the wider society.

Another equity issue related to unilingual Anglophone principals supervising French Immersion programs is that non-French speaking administrators are not in a position to respond to French Immersion teachers' needs in the area of curriculum leadership. According to Safty (1992: 403), "immersion teachers are deprived of adequate supervisory help because their unilingual principals are simply unable to judge and evaluate the content of what is being taught."

#### **4. Are we getting our just desserts?**

Within Canada, the increase in Allophones (individuals whose mother tongue is neither English nor French) is three times the growth rate for the Canadian population as a whole (Statistics Canada, 2002). Diversity and multilingualism are becoming the norm worldwide and Canada needs to keep pace. So with "diversity being the norm," French Immersion does not seem to be faring too well in terms of enabling or indeed embracing diversity. So, after nearly forty years of French Immersion in Canada, are we getting our just desserts?

First, let me say that one cannot speak of F-E bilingualism or French Immersion and ignore the socio-political context. French Immersion was created for socio-political reasons. It is a strategy for social change. Trudeau (1977) described official bilingualism as a way of easing inequalities, prejudice, and tensions between groups. In Canada, as in

many other countries, bilingual programs represent concrete attempts to link pedagogical and socio-political objectives (Olson, 1983). Nearly thirty years ago, after a backlash against bilingualism in the federal civil service following the enactment of the Official Languages Act in 1969, the federal government turned the focus of its bilingual policy to Canada's youth (Speech from the Throne, 1976). Today we must ask, if only 7.9% of eligible students are enrolled in French Immersion, has French Immersion been at all successful in easing inequalities? There has been debate about whether there is a division along socio-economic lines in terms of those who do and those who do not enrol their children in French Immersion. I would like to think that this is not the case. I would not like to see French Immersion as a way that relatively privileged Canadians are setting themselves apart and making themselves more competitive than less privileged Canadians.

English is the majority language in Canada. Even though French Immersion programs started nearly 40 years ago, only 24% of high school graduates in Canada are bilingual, with most bilingual people being Francophones in Quebec. Only 9% of non-francophone Canadians is bilingual (compared to 43.4% Francophones). Bilingualism is increasing in every province but Manitoba and Saskatchewan. In terms of FLS education in general, the number of students remaining in Core French is decreasing in every province but PEI. (Statistics Canada, 2002)

My second point in terms of the relative success of French Immersion relates to attitudes towards French Immersion. Parents seem to be asking the same questions they were asking back in the 1960s. For example, 1) Will their children's level of English be adequately maintained and developed? 2) Will curriculum content be adequately learned when taught in a second language? and 3) Will an acceptable level of French proficiency be achieved? Research has consistently shown that these parental concerns are unfounded (Cummins and Swain, 1986; Tardif and Weber, 1987). For example, French Immersion students demonstrate better mastery of their mother tongue than their counterparts in the regular English stream (Swain and Lapkin, 1981).

Nonetheless, the questions and fears persist with the biggest concern still regarding the impact of French Immersion on proficiency levels in the student's mother tongue/English. Candelaria-Greene (1996) posits that

“few persons in the United States are likely to be familiar with (school) systems that *do* address the needs of both special education and (second language learners). In the experience of many, the reality of a balanced bilingual child... (who has acquired) full communicative and academic competence in several languages – probably does not exist, even for non-disabled populations.” Before learning about the challenges that pro-bilingual education groups in the United States have had communicating the benefits of bilingualism to parents, I believed that if parents could receive accurate and adequate information on bilingualism, their fears would dissipate. Exploration is needed of the beliefs of parents of pre-schoolers making school enrolment decisions.

From the outset of French Immersion in the 1960s to the present, study upon study has shown that not only do French Immersion students demonstrate as high a proficiency in English as their peers receiving English instruction only, the French Immersion students’ proficiency is often higher. French Immersion program evaluations have consistently found that students acquire “high degrees of second language proficiency” (Bernhard, 1993: 2) AND progress linguistically and academically at a rate comparable to children educated in the regular English program (see reviews by Genesee, 1983, 1987; Swain and Lapkin, 1981). Research has shown that graduates of early French Immersion have the best developed L2 skills but Late Immersion graduates are not far behind. However, the later one starts French Immersion, the more socio-political factors may come into play. In the words of Baker and Prys Jones (1998: 498):

Indeed, when differences in English language achievement between Immersion and mainstream children have been located by research, it is often in favour of Immersion students (Swain and Lapkin, 1982; Swain and Lapkin, 1991a)... If bilingualism permits increased linguistic awareness, more flexibility in thought, more internal inspection of language, such cognitive advantages may help to explain the favourable English progress of early Immersion students.

Not only do parents seem to be asking the same questions, school administrators may be inadvertently spreading myths and misinformation

about French Immersion to parents at either time of enrolment or when individual students encounter learning difficulties; we need to do some education and even marketing, not only to the public at large but with school administrators at every level.

I am glad that Plan 2013 stipulates that extended French become the standard second language program. I hope that Immersion French will not suffer given the potential competition for qualified teachers. Plan 2013 focuses on Core French since 1.6-million Canadian pupils study French as a subject, yet only 324,000 are enrolled in French Immersion. Nonetheless, to say that because the majority of those who study French are in Core French programs, we should target our energies there is missing a key issue of why so many parents are failing to choose immersion, given the research demonstrating the benefits of bilingualism and ample evidence that first language skills are maintained. I hope that Intensive French helps de-mystify second-language learning and educate English-Canadian communities about the benefits of bilingualism. The key is always how to go about introducing Intensive French in a way that does not weaken French Immersion. Recently, I was visiting the website of a local school and I read the following description of Intensive French (contents of square brackets are my added comments):

The program is very different in approach and in curriculum from the Immersion Program in that it is almost totally literacy based [and French Immersion is not?]. Students spend their entire morning for one-half of their school year in a supportive French language learning environment [how is this different from French Immersion?].

French Immersion still faces challenges related to staffing, availability of teaching materials in French, and support for learners experiencing challenges (Edmonton Public Schools, 2002). Parents have been described as integral to the success of French Immersion. Before further marketing of the benefits of bilingualism, perhaps more attention needs to be given to exploring parental beliefs about second-language learning in general and the French Immersion program in particular. It is hoped that this paper will foster discussion and debate that will de-mystify second language education and enrich French Immersion.

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<sup>1</sup> I am honoured to participate in this panel with Joan Netten, a renowned researcher in French Second Language education, and David McFarlane from the New Brunswick ministry of education.