

Access to special education for exceptional students in French immersion programs: An equity issue

Nancy Wise

*The Ontario Institute for Studies in Education
University of Toronto*

Author's Note

I would like to thank Sharon Lapkin for the encouragement and support she provided. Her insightful comments and invaluable suggestions were greatly appreciated. I also gratefully acknowledge the feedback I received on earlier versions of this article from Jim Cummins, Xi Chen, Callie Mady, and Katy Arnett.

Abstract

Exceptional pupils enrolled in Canadian French immersion programs rarely have access to the same range of special education programs and services that are available to students in the regular English program. More often than not, students with special needs are encouraged to transfer to English programs to access necessary support services. This counselling-out process perpetuates the elitist status commonly attributed to French immersion programs. From a critical pedagogy perspective, this inquiry examines the lack of incentive on the part of multiple French immersion stakeholders to accommodate students with special needs. It further attempts to unveil the myths created by these stakeholders to better understand this discriminatory educational practice. The impact of federal and provincial funding models on access to special education programs and services is discussed, and the application of funding allocations by English-language district school boards is explored. The inquiry concludes with recommendations to promote more inclusionary practices.

Résumé

Les élèves en difficulté inscrits dans un programme d'immersion en français ont rarement accès à l'éventail des programmes d'éducation spécialisée aux quels ont accès les enfants scolarisés en anglais. Le plus souvent, on préconise le transfert de ces élèves à un programme de langue anglaise afin de permettre l'accès aux services de soutien nécessaires. Ainsi, le statut élitiste souvent attribué au programme d'immersion en français se perpétue. Se situant dans une perspective de pédagogie critique, cette recherche s'efforce d'examiner le manque d'incitatifs de la part des multiples intervenants pour accommoder les enfants ayant des besoins particuliers. De plus, cette recherche tend à dévoiler les mythes créés par ces mêmes intervenants afin de mieux comprendre cette pratique discriminatoire. L'impact des modèles de financement fédéral et provincial sur l'accès aux programmes et services de l'éducation spécialisée est discuté. Enfin, l'application de l'allocation des fonds par les conseils scolaires de langue anglaise est explorée. En conclusion, on propose des recommandations visant la promotion de pratiques inclusives.

Access to Special Education for Exceptional Students in French Immersion Programs: An Equity Issue

French immersion (FI) programs are alternative public education programs in which many Canadian parents choose to enrol their children so that they will be afforded the advantages of bilingualism in French and English (Lambert & Tucker, 1972). In Canada, early FI programs begin in Senior Kindergarten (SK) or Grade 1, and classroom teachers who are fluent in the target language communicate with the students solely in French. English is introduced in Grade 3 or 4, starting with one period per day and increasing gradually over time. Typically, middle immersion programs start in Grade 4, and late immersion begins in Grade 6 or 7 (Halsall, 1998).

Since the inception of the FI program in Quebec in 1965 (Burns & Olson, 1981; Hart & Lapkin, 1998), enrolment has expanded beyond Quebec's borders into every province and territory. Notwithstanding its increasing popularity, the allegation that FI programs are elitist has been repeatedly made. There have been recurrent charges that FI attracts only the brightest, highest-achieving students (Mady & Arnett, 2009; Safty, 1992), often resulting in a disproportionate representation of average and below average students in the regular English stream (Rushowy, 2009; Willms, 2008). It has also been asserted that parents from predominantly middle- and upper-middle-class backgrounds tend to enrol their children in optional bilingual education programs such as FI so as to give them a competitive advantage in the labour market in future years (Olson & Burns, 1983; Rousseau, 1999). Indeed, low income families have not been as likely to enrol their children in FI programs (Hart & Lapkin, 1998), resulting in "segregation along social class lines" (Willms, 2008, p. 92). Additionally, it has been argued that immigrants to Canada have been discouraged from enrolling their children in FI programs because "learning English as a second language presents enough of a challenge" (Canadian Council on Learning, 2007, p. 9), although the available research evidence involving English language learners clearly challenges this assumption (Dagenais & Berron, 2001; Mady, 2007; Swain, Lapkin, Rowen, & Hart, 1990).

In practical terms, what effect does the characterisation of FI programs as elitist have for students enrolled in publicly funded schools? The most significant consequence is inequitable access to this innovative and remarkably effective second language (L2) education program (Genesee, 2007), initially designed to provide anglophones with the opportunity to become functionally bilingual in both of Canada's official languages (Lambert & Tucker, 1972). It could be argued that inaction on the part of multiple FI stakeholders (e.g., government officials, parents, and educators) to move toward more inclusionary practices constitutes a 'conspiracy' of silence which limits access to FI programs to the English-speaking academic elite from higher socioeconomic backgrounds. Not surprisingly, exclusionary practices that affect our struggling students, as well as children of lower socioeconomic status (SES) and immigrant families with diverse linguistic backgrounds also extend to exceptional pupils. It is access to FI programs for students with special needs, in particular, that will be the focus of the present inquiry.

In Ontario, exceptional pupils are defined as those students who have "behavioural, communicational, intellectual, physical or multiple exceptionalities" (Expert Panel on Literacy and Numeracy Instruction for Students with Special Education Needs, 2005, p.3). In accordance with Regulation 181/98, those students who have been formally identified by an Identification, Placement, and Review Committee (IPRC) are legally entitled to special

education programs and services in public schools across the province (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2001b). Since the introduction of Ontario's Education Amendment Act in 1980, commonly referred to as Bill 82 (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010b), it has been the responsibility of all publicly funded district school boards to ensure that appropriate instructional and assessment practices are in place to meet the needs of children with special education requirements in their schools.

Exceptional pupils are enrolled in both regular English and FI programs in Ontario; however, appropriate special education programs and services are rarely provided in the FI setting (Genesee, 2007; Genesee & Jared, 2008; Mady & Arnett, 2009). Instead, parents are often advised to switch their children to the regular English stream where they can access a wider array of support services (Cummins, 1984; Stern, 1991). Such advice is based on misinformation suggesting that: (a) the educational needs of exceptional students will be better met in the English program, and (b) the provincial funding model does not permit a full range of special education programs and services in the FI context. Interestingly, the first claim has never been substantiated, and the second is false. Nevertheless, powerful school authorities frequently offer this advice to vulnerable families of students with special needs.

This practice will be examined from a critical pedagogy perspective (Freire, 1992; Leistyna, Woodrum, & Sherblom, 1996; McLaren, 1993) in order to illuminate the manner in which power relations play themselves out in the FI context. Critical pedagogy is a conceptual framework which is based on the principles of critical theory as it applies to educational policies and classroom practice (Arnett & Mady, 2010). As we closely examine those power relations through a critical lens, clear evidence of discrimination against this minority student population will emerge. This framework will serve to highlight the contradiction between policy and practice as it relates to inclusion of students with exceptionalities enrolled in FI programs. The following questions will be addressed in this inquiry:

1. From a critical pedagogy perspective, whose agenda does it serve to deny exceptional students in FI programs equitable access to special education programs and services?
2. What is the impact of current French as a Second Language (FSL) and special education funding models on equitable access to special education programs and services for exceptional students in English-language public schools in Ontario?
3. What steps must be taken in order to move toward equitable access to special education programs and services for exceptional pupils who are enrolled in FI programs in Ontario's English-language district school boards?

In light of the research evidence in support of the benefits for exceptional pupils in bilingual education programs such as FI (Genesee, 2006; Lazaruk, 2007), and based on my experience as a special education teacher in the early FI setting, I posit that many students with special needs can be accommodated in the FI program. An end to inaction on the part of multiple stakeholders is needed, as well as a commitment by the Ontario government and district school boards to provide equitable funding and sufficient resources to meet their diverse learning needs within the immersion context. A more inclusionary approach would also necessitate improved access to professional learning opportunities for FSL teachers who hold teaching positions in the FI setting, as well as those enrolled in FSL teacher education programs.

Hannah: An Illustration

Consider the following illustration of Hannah, a 6-year-old native-English speaker enrolled in a public, single-track elementary FI school in Southern Ontario. The content of the following narrative is fictional and largely based upon the experiences I have had over many years in my role as a special education teacher in the early FI context. In this capacity, I have consulted with numerous classroom teachers, administrators, and parents in an attempt to meet the diverse learning needs of exceptional pupils. It has been useful to consult previous school records, as they have provided a wealth of background information pertaining to early childhood experiences and kindergarten achievements. The following description of Hannah's experiences in Grades 1 through 3 is intended to raise readers' awareness of the challenges often faced by students with special needs and their families in early FI programs in this province.

Hannah's parents decided to enrol her in the Grade 1 FI program so that she would be afforded the advantages of bilingualism. They felt that she exhibited strong literacy skills in her first language and would probably acquire an L2 with ease. They gained confidence in their placement decision when Hannah's SK teacher in the regular English program reported that she had exceeded all of the Ontario curriculum expectations for SK and was an excellent candidate for FI. After only a few short months in Grade 1 FI, Hannah began to demonstrate an understanding of the French vocabulary to which she had been introduced in her Grade 1 classroom. She was able to follow through on her teacher's verbal directions with accuracy and express simple ideas in French using appropriate sentence structure. At home, she displayed a keen interest in sharing her newfound L2 skills with family members.

In the middle of Grade 1, Hannah's classroom teacher began to notice that she had difficulties completing writing tasks independently and appeared to be limited in terms of what she was able to produce in writing. As a result, whenever she was asked to complete assigned work involving written language, it was hard for her to demonstrate her understanding of concepts that had been taught in core subject areas (e.g., language, mathematics, social studies, and science). Although Hannah could verbally explain what she had learned with clarity, she needed prompting and extra time in order to express her ideas in written form. Similarly, Hannah's parents observed that she exhibited avoidance techniques at home when faced with homework assignments that involved writing. At the start of Grade 2, significant concerns in this area were reported by the classroom teacher, and despite efforts to accommodate her particular learning needs, Hannah continued to experience difficulty meeting FI curriculum objectives for her grade level.

At the recommendation of school staff, parents decided that a psychological assessment would provide vital information regarding Hannah's learning strengths, weaknesses, and preferred learning style. However, due to the length of the school board's waiting list for psychological services, they opted for private testing. At the end of Grade 2, Hannah's parents shared the results of the assessment with their daughter's teachers and school administration. They reported that Hannah had met the criteria for the diagnosis of a moderate to severe learning disability. Computer equipment and assistive technology (e.g., specialized software) were strongly recommended in the psychologist's report, which included an extensive list of instructional and assessment accommodations considered to be essential to help her fully access the Ontario curriculum. The school principal cautioned Hannah's parents that FI schools are not staffed to provide special education services for

students with such high needs. Nevertheless, in collaboration with parents, school personnel decided upon a plan of action in an attempt to address her learning challenges in the FI program.

Hannah was identified as exceptional by an IPRC and an Individual Education Plan (IEP) was developed at the beginning of Grade 3 to help her demonstrate her knowledge more successfully. Given the classroom teacher's lack of preparedness to address the diverse learning needs of exceptional students, the special education teacher offered consultative services throughout the academic year to support the teacher in the implementation of the IEP accommodations. Since there was only one special education teacher on staff in the school of approximately 600 registered students, that support was intermittent, at best. For all intents and purposes, the provision of Hannah's IEP accommodations became the sole responsibility of the classroom teacher, as more intensive special education support was not available in the FI context. Hannah struggled throughout Grade 3 to demonstrate her understanding of concepts she had been taught in the various subject areas, and her classroom teacher worked hard to address her learning challenges.

After several meetings with school staff and administrators to discuss Hannah's continuing struggle and weak academic performance, her parents were encouraged to give serious consideration to switching her to the English stream, where she could access a full complement of special education programs and services. After considerable torment, Hannah's parents decided that a transfer to the regular English program would be in her best interests, given the challenges she faced in the written language area and the insufficient support services that were available in the FI setting. Hannah was withdrawn from immersion just prior to the end of Grade 3.

Equitable Access: The Issue at Hand

The issue at hand is not whether or not FI programs are suitable for exceptional pupils. There has been an abundance of research investigating this issue and little, if any, conclusive evidence that the academic achievements of students with special needs in FI programs compare less favourably to those in the regular English program (see Genesee, 2007 for a review). Rather, the purpose of this inquiry is to examine the inequities in access to special education programs and services for exceptional pupils in the FI program (Arnett & Mady, 2010). The discussion will focus exclusively on exceptional students who are experiencing difficulty in elementary FI programs in Ontario, in light of the research evidence which has consistently demonstrated the effectiveness of early intervention on academic achievement (O'Connor, 2000; Vaughn & Fuchs, 2003; Wanzek & Vaughn, 2007; Wise & Chen, 2010). In this province, elementary FI programs usually begin in either SK or Grade 1 and continue to the end of Grade 8 (Halsall, 1998). Access to special education programs for FI students who have been identified by their school boards as gifted will not be addressed in the article, although this issue certainly merits further investigation.

Both regular English and FI programs are publicly funded in Ontario. In most district school boards, parents have the option to enrol their children in either program when the children are ready to begin their educational careers. According to the Canadian Parents for French (2009), 6.7% of the eligible student population in English-language school boards in the province was enrolled in FI programs during 2007-2008. Currently, there are no provincial screening procedures in place for those who opt to enrol in FI, nor

have there ever been; accordingly, no child is ineligible for this bilingual education program. Nevertheless, when a child has been identified as exceptional by an IPRC and requires special education programs and services, parents are often advised that the provision of both FI programming and special education services constitutes a “duplication of program” (Stern, 1991, p.17), and that because FI is considered an enrichment program, support for students with special needs is simply unmanageable (Mady & Arnett, 2009). More often than not, parents are then advised to seek appropriate special education support services for their children in the regular English program (Keep, 1993; Mady & Arnett, 2009; Stern, 1991).

This recommendation is frequently made to parents of exceptional children by FI school authorities, despite the absence of empirical support for the claim that “the bilingual experience is likely to exacerbate their educational difficulties” (Genesee, 2006, p. 561). According to Cummins (1984), students with special needs can acquire an L2 in the immersion setting as long as there is appropriate support available to them. In many such cases, there is no apparent reason to deprive them of the benefits of a bilingual education. Furthermore, each district school board in Ontario is allocated funding for special education, and there is no provision in the provincial education funding document that stipulates that this funding cannot extend to FI programs (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010a). Therefore, it is reasonable for taxpayers to expect that the needs of exceptional students will be accommodated in the publicly funded FI programs in which their children are enrolled.

Critical pedagogy focuses on educational policies and classroom practices that perpetuate injustice. From a critical pedagogy perspective (Freire, 1992; Leistyna et al., 1996; McLaren, 1993), inequitable access to special education programs and services for exceptional students enrolled in FI programs constitutes discriminatory educational practice. Furthermore, it could be argued that current exclusionary practices serve the purposes of school authorities, who take full advantage of differences in power relations (e.g., between themselves and exceptional students) by recommending that students with special needs withdraw from the FI program. Does this constitute exploitation by a dominant group? Undoubtedly, a close examination of the current reality of exceptional pupils who have been virtually unsupported in the FI context (Willms, 2008) is required. Following a process of reflection and awakening, critical pedagogy aims to transform that reality. Beginning with a discussion of various FI stakeholders’ positions, this inquiry will attempt to unearth the roots of inequitable access. Education funding policies and school board practices that contribute to this equity issue will also be discussed.

Critical Pedagogy: A Perspective to Consider

Members of the FI community should begin to question the legitimacy of inequitable access to special education programs and services for exceptional pupils in FI elementary schools. In order to effect change, the status quo must be rejected. The status quo, in this case, amounts to “the virtual exclusion from French immersion programs of children with special needs” (Willms, 2008, p. 92). Sleeter, Torres, and Laughlin (2004) have suggested that, “critical understanding entails unveiling the myths created by the oppressors to maintain the status quo” (p. 82). This process requires that exceptional students’ educational needs in the FI context be acknowledged, and that action be taken to address this longstanding issue affecting their access to appropriate support services.

Present exclusionary practices need to be carefully examined. A dialogue should be initiated in order to seek answers to fundamental questions surrounding the equity issue. In this particular situation, a critical question would be: Why is there a ‘conspiracy’ of silence and inaction on the part of multiple FI stakeholders? In other words, what do they stand to gain by not addressing the ethical issues surrounding exclusion?

From a critical pedagogy point of view, it could be suggested that there are a several members of the FI community who benefit from this discriminatory educational practice. In fact, there appears to be a significant interest in maintaining the status quo on the part of multiple stakeholders. As we will see, a number of groups have a vested interest in minimizing the number of exceptional students in FI programs who require special education programs and services. It is conceivable that turning a blind eye serves their purposes.

First, government officials and politicians benefit from the international recognition FI receives for its effectiveness in promoting “linguistic duality and official bilingualism” (Makropoulos, 2005, p. 1446). Canada has been repeatedly acknowledged over the last 40 years “for its innovative language-education approach that has allowed hundreds of thousands of children to become functional bilinguals, with fluency in two languages for both social and academic purposes” (Porter, 1990, p. 86). Without a doubt, the federal and provincial governments take enormous pride in FI, “the Canadian jewel that has inspired so many countries” (Dion, 2003, as cited in Makropoulos, 2005, p. 1459). In fact, the remarkable success of the FI program has propelled other countries around the world to establish similar pedagogical practices based upon this “great Canadian success story” (Hayden, 1988, p. 223). Arguments for English-only immersion programs in the United States have even been formulated on the basis of empirical FI data, although such attempts have been wrought with inaccuracy (Cummins, 1996). It may not serve the purposes of any Ministry of Education to seriously address charges of elitism in FI schools, in light of the global status immersion enjoys. Making the program accessible to all learners, including those with diverse special education needs, could jeopardize its highly publicized reputation.

Second, some parents are keenly interested in maintaining the status quo. They want their sons and daughters to have “the many cognitive, academic, and socio-economic advantages that a bilingual education is known to confer” (Mannavarayan, 2002, p. 25). They also want to offer their children the sociocultural opportunities associated with learning French as an L2 in Canada (Lazaruk, 2007). Parents who choose to enrol their children in the FI program, commonly referred to in popular media sources as “a ‘poor mans’ [sic] private school” (pman, 2010), are highly unlikely to oppose the practice of counselling out exceptional students. Why would they? This group of FI stakeholders has aspirations for their offspring to reap the intellectual benefits of bilingualism (Baker, 2006). Arguably, the transfer of students with special needs to the regular English stream only adds to the overall quality of their children’s educational experiences. The soaring demand for FI programs reported by the press in recent years (Carlson, 2009) can be partially explained by the high concentrations of students with special needs in English-language classrooms (Willms, 2008). So, what parent would turn down the opportunity to place their child in a learning environment that caters to the academic elite (Hart & Lapkin, 1998)? Based upon Gardner’s article in the *Ottawa Citizen* (2008), a number of FI parents have figured out how to get the ideal classroom, although they would “never say so out loud”

(para. 3). Perhaps they choose to remain silent because there is simply too much at stake for their children.

Third, there are some FSL classroom teachers who would not be averse to limiting exceptional pupils' access to FI programs. After all, they may have the most to gain from current exclusionary practices. Enrolment patterns suggest that immersion teachers have the privilege to work with disproportionate numbers of English-speaking, highly capable, well-behaved children from high socioeconomic backgrounds in comparison to classroom teachers in the regular English program (Rushowy, 2009; Willms, 2008). Additionally, many immersion teachers adhere to the belief that FI programs are geared to the academic elite, and that only the brightest students benefit from the enrichment opportunities they provide (Arnett & Mady, 2010). Gardner (2008) highlights the perception on the part of parents that FI students with exceptional learning challenges are "the kids who could burden teachers and drag the class down We all know it. We just don't talk about it" (para. 8 & 12). It follows that some classroom teachers would have little incentive to seriously contemplate the ethical issues surrounding exclusion when they recommend that children with special needs withdraw from immersion programs.

Within the last decade, there has been an acute shortage of FI teachers reported, and teachers with both French language proficiency and special education qualifications have been in particularly short supply (Canadian Council on Learning, 2007; Collinson, 1989). Arnett and Mady (2010) underscore the current lack of preparedness of FSL teachers to meet the needs of exceptional pupils in their classrooms. The apparent discomfort on the part of teachers to provide such learners with the instructional and assessment accommodations they require is largely due to insufficient funding for professional development (Salvatori, 2008). It may also be partially due to the lack of Canadian research examining best practices for special education students in the FI context (Genesee, 2007). Without a doubt, there is an immediate need to "ensure that new teachers are equipped with the knowledge and skills that will increase their comfort in teaching diverse learner populations" (Arnett & Mady, 2010, p. 31).

As we have seen, the educational reality of exceptional children in FI is unlikely to change as a result of: (a) unwillingness on the part of various Canadian government officials and politicians to jeopardize the international status FI enjoys, (b) fear on the part of some parents that altering the idyllic classroom environment will have a detrimental effect on their children's academic achievements, and (c) lack of preparedness of immersion teachers to address exceptional students' learning challenges. Inaction will only serve to maintain the status quo; that is, the lack of appropriate support services for students with special needs in FI programs.

Without a doubt, inequitable access to special education support services perpetuates the elitist status commonly attributed to FI programs by various stakeholders (Burns & Olson, 1981; Carlson, 2009; Gardner, 2008; Hart & Lapkin, 1998). This discriminatory educational practice assures the continuing prestige of the program for the academic elite, given the promptness with which children with special needs are counselled out (Mady & Arnett, 2009). Hart and Lapkin (1998) suggest that it "reflects a perception that students in immersion classrooms are a privileged group, and as such, are unrepresentative of the broader school population" (p. 324). These authors further argue that this has important implications for equity because the characterisation of the FI student population as overrepresented by children with above average ability may ultimately weaken the regular English program.

A recent legal challenge brought by Oakville parents and community members against the Halton District School Board certainly attests to the fact that discontent exists among Ontario parents with perceived segregation on the basis of gender and ability in the English stream (Rushowy, 2009). Their claim was filed alleging discrimination against male students in FI elementary schools, as girls tend to be overrepresented in these alternative education programs. It also alleged segregation based on ability, as FI schools typically have “fewer special needs students” (Rushowy, 2009). This Halton group took legal action because their concerns regarding underrepresentation of males and pupils with exceptionalities were not suitably addressed by their local district school board.

Is this a form of streaming never seen before at the elementary level, as Hart and Lapkin (1998) have suggested, and is it possible that there are multiple FI stakeholders (e.g., government officials, politicians, parents, and teachers) who are silently and inconspicuously benefitting from current exclusionary practices affecting exceptional pupils? If so, it is reasonable to suggest that they would be unmotivated to ensure equitable access to special education programs and services for students with special needs who are enrolled in immersion schools. Nonetheless, the fact remains that there are additional factors that limit access to necessary support services for exceptional pupils in elementary FI programs. The next section of this inquiry will examine federal and provincial funding models for FSL and special education programs and services in order to better understand school board practices affecting students with special needs in the FI context.

FSL and Special Education Funding Policies

One of the aims of the federal government’s Road Map for Canada’s Linguistic Duality is to double the proportion of secondary school graduates who are functionally bilingual in English and French, the country’s two official languages, by the year 2013 (Department of Canadian Heritage, 2009). In order to achieve this objective, which is clearly stated in the Government of Canada’s Action Plan for Official Languages (Commissioner of Official Languages, 2004), the Canadian government has negotiated bilateral agreements with each province and territory. One of the purposes of the federal funding is to support multi-year provincial/territorial FSL initiatives. Accordingly, the Canadian government’s Official Languages in Education Program (OLEP) has committed to contributing \$24,090,634.00 annually for FSL programs in Ontario for a period of four years from 2009-2010 to 2012-2013 (Council of Ministers of Education, Canada, 2009). Undoubtedly, it would be less difficult for the federal government to reach its stated objective if fewer students with special needs were counselled out of FI programs and more were given the opportunity to achieve functional bilingualism.

At the provincial level, the government of Ontario provides publicly-funded district school boards with language grants to offset the costs incurred as a result of providing minority-language and second-language instruction (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010a). These grants are calculated on the basis of individual student enrolment in both FSL and English Literacy Development (ELD) instructional programs. For 2010-2011, the specific allocation for FSL programs in Ontario is projected to be \$235.6 million (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010a).

There are currently 31 English-language district school boards in Ontario (Ontario Public School Boards’ Association, 2010). Based upon student enrolment figures each year, these school boards are allocated funding by both the federal and provincial governments to

cover supplementary costs associated with FSL instructional programs (i.e., core French, extended French, and FI). Higher student enrolment in any of these FSL programs translates into additional funding that is made available to individual school boards. Conversely, when special-needs students are withdrawn from FI programs and transfer to the regular English stream, the result is a decrease in FSL funding, due to the fact that more funding is allocated for pupils enrolled in FI programs than for those enrolled in core French. More specifically, instead of receiving \$364.42 per pupil in immersion for the 2010-2011 school year, each district school board would only receive \$285.92 per pupil enrolled in core French (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010a). From a financial perspective, it appears to be more advantageous for Ontario district school boards to retain exceptional students in FI programs and provide them with the special education programs and services they require in that setting. Clearly, there would be additional costs associated with such an inclusionary approach.

Federal and provincial monies are combined and allocated to district school boards in one lump sum. According to the Executive Director of the Ontario branch of Canadian Parents for French (CPF), the provincial government contributes approximately two dollars for every dollar that is contributed by the federal government for FSL instructional programs (B. Gormley, personal communication, August 6, 2010); however, based on a recent report written by CPF (Ontario), "there is no policy requiring school boards to report publicly on spending of FSL federal and provincial funding dollars" (Canadian Parents for French, 2008, p.7). Does that imply that some of that funding is being redirected? Whether or not this funding is siphoned off to support other school board initiatives besides FSL, as suggested by Canadian Parents for French (2008), is beyond the scope of this article; however, this would be a worthwhile subject for a future inquiry.

Funding for special education programs, services and/or equipment is provided exclusively by the provincial government (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010a). The Special Education Grant (SEG) is projected to reach \$2.31 billion in 2010-2011 (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010a). The SEG has five major components to assist Ontario school boards in meeting the diverse needs of exceptional pupils. The first component is the Special Education Per-Pupil Amount (SEPPA) allocation, which is based on the assumption that all Ontario district school boards have a baseline incidence of special-needs students whose educational needs must be addressed. The additional components of the SEG support exceptional pupils with exceptionally high needs, in recognition of the fact that the incidence of high needs students who require more intensive support varies significantly from school board to school board (see Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010a, for a complete description of these components).

The first component of the SEG merits closer examination. The SEPPA funding is not tied directly to the actual number of students with special needs or pupil enrolment in any particular special education program; rather, it is based upon the total number of students who are enrolled in each school board at either the elementary or secondary level. In other words, the larger the student population enrolled in a school board, the greater the provision of SEPPA funding. It is interesting to note that although some school boards have a greater incidence of students with special needs, this does not impact current SEPPA funding allocations.

The Ministry clearly stipulates in its education funding document that special education funding is enveloped (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010a), which means that it can be used solely for its designated purpose, and that any money that is not spent must be

placed in a reserve fund. Financial reporting to both the public and the provincial government is required of every school board. It is noteworthy that school boards are highly accountable for their expenditures of provincial monies, but they have considerable flexibility with respect to how this funding is applied. The SEPPA allocation does not specify the program in which a student is enrolled; that is, the regular English or FI program. Therefore, decisions at each individual board level can be made to funnel the SEPPA allocation into the regular English program rather than providing SEPPA funds to schools that offer FI programs.

Sizable funding allocations are provided by the federal and provincial governments for FSL instruction and special education programs in Ontario. Given these substantial contributions, it is surprising that funding at the elementary level does not result in equitable access to support services for exceptional pupils enrolled in FI programs in the province's publicly funded schools. Interestingly, the FSL curriculum document (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2001a) contains a section requiring school boards to recognize the needs of exceptional students who have been formally identified by an IPRC and provide them with "appropriate programs and services" (p. 8). In other words, there is a clear expectation on the part of the provincial government that the educational needs of exceptional pupils in FSL programs will be suitably addressed. As we have seen, however, school boards are given considerable leeway when it comes to the application of SEPPA funding in the FI context.

The apparent contradiction between policy and practice has been highlighted in the literature by various scholars of language policy. Hornberger and Vaish (2009) point to "persistent and seemingly insurmountable tensions and contradictions in translating official multilingual language policy into actual classroom linguistic practice" (p. 309). Additionally, Canagarajah (2005) suggests that "we should help communities and policy makers to see the tensions, conflicts, and inconsistencies in their practice in order to formulate more coherent agendas" (p. 442). Clearly, there is a disconnect between government policy and school board practice affecting students with special needs that must be acknowledged before equitable access can be realized in Ontario.

Based upon the preceding discussion, it would appear that the discriminatory educational practice in question stems from: (a) a flawed foundation upon which provincial SEPPA funding is based, and (b) inequitable decisions made by individual school boards regarding how monies will be applied. As we have seen, efforts to avoid "duplication of program" (Stern, 1991, p.17) often result in a counselling out process that is widely practiced by publicly funded school boards in this province. This course of action certainly undermines the Ontario Ministry of Education's stated goals of "improving student retention in and access to FSL programs, as well as enhancing achievement in French" (Théberge, 2010, p. 1). If attrition is one of the natural consequences of counselling out exceptional pupils, there must be a greater effort to improve FI programs in future years so that more students are given the opportunity to become functionally bilingual. In order for FI to become more accessible to all learners, it must "challenge itself to do better" (Mady & Arnett, 2009, p. 47).

A Step Toward Equitable Access

From a critical pedagogy perspective, once a critical understanding of the current reality is achieved, transformative actions are required (Freire, 1992); that is, once the

legitimacy of inequitable educational practice has been challenged, preparation for change must take place. As we have seen, exceptional students enrolled in FI programs in English-language school boards in Ontario are essentially unsupported (Genesee & Jared, 2008; Mady & Arnett, 2009; Willms, 2008). There are very few district school boards in the province that have made a serious commitment to address their needs in the immersion context. In most cases, they are simply counselled out and encouraged to transfer to the regular English program where they can access a wider array of special education support programs and services (Cummins, 1984; Stern, 1991). It is noteworthy that the transfer of exceptional students from the FI program to the regular English program is not officially sanctioned as a special education placement option in the Ontario curriculum guidelines, but more often than not, school authorities lead parents to the conclusion that transfer is in the best interest of their children (Cummins, 1984; Mady & Arnett, 2009; Stern, 1991).

According to the Past President of CPF (York Region), parents of exceptional pupils are frequently informed that duplication of program (Stern, 1991) or ‘double dipping’ is not permitted in Ontario; that is, students are not entitled to special education services to meet their learning needs in combination with the enrichment opportunities that FI provides (J. Ryan, personal communication, July 16, 2010). Unfortunately, in situations where a transfer from FI to the regular English stream is suggested, a change of program or school is often required (Parkin, Morrison, & Watkin, 1987), a process which is both disruptive for parents and children and fraught with anxiety (Mady & Arnett, 2009).

Based upon the preceding discussion, it seems that inclusionary practices that are in the best interest of children with special needs rely on the support of multiple FI stakeholders and district school boards. The time to expose the “myths created by the oppressors” (Sleeter et al., 2004, p. 82) and reject the status quo is upon us. These myths consist of misinformation often presented to parents suggesting that: (a) their children’s educational needs will be better met in the regular English program, and (b) the current funding model does not allow for special education programs and services in the FI context. Although these arguments tend to be persuasive when presented to vulnerable families of exceptional pupils by powerful school authorities, they have no basis in reality and there is little in the way of research evidence to support them. From a critical pedagogy perspective, these parents and their children become victims of ideology perpetrated by convincing school board personnel (Macedo, 1994). It is conceivable that some school authorities and FI stakeholders are simply unaware of the research evidence. In this final section of the inquiry, I would like to offer some recommendations which may address the issue of inequitable access to special education.

Of the 31 English-language district school boards in Ontario, 30 presently offer FI programs (Canadian Parents for French, 2008). As previously discussed, student enrolment in FSL programs determines the amount of provincial and federal funding that will be allocated to each school board to cover the additional costs associated with FSL instruction. In contrast, the provincial SEPPA allocation is not tied to the number of exceptional pupils requiring support services; rather, it is simply based on total student enrolment in each school board. The issue of inequitable access to special education programs and services for students with special needs in FI might be remedied if: (a) SEPPA funding was directly tied to IPRC decisions regarding student placement in special education programs in each district school board in Ontario, and (b) public schools were held accountable for applying SEPPA funding where required by providing appropriate programs and services for identified students with special needs. In this manner, students who have been identified as

exceptional by an IPRC would receive the support they require, regardless of whether they were enrolled in regular English or FI programs.

Once the provincial funding issue has been resolved, exceptional students who are experiencing difficulties in elementary FI programs will gain equitable access to special education programs and services without having to change schools or programs. With the provision of sufficient resources to meet their diverse learning needs in the FI context, district school board accountability, and FSL teacher education programs that promote more inclusionary approaches, they will have the opportunity to become functionally bilingual in Canada's two official languages and enjoy the sociocultural advantages associated with learning French as an L2. Parents of children with special needs will no longer have to experience anxiety in anticipation of having to withdraw them from FI programs or cope with the upheaval that frequently accompanies a transfer to a new school. Families will not be torn apart, and children will not need to agonize over being separated from siblings enrolled in the same FI school, simply as a result of having been identified as exceptional and requiring special support services.

However, some caution must be exercised. Firstly, it is imperative that IPRC placement decisions are made on a case-by-case basis (Cummins, 1984). Individual circumstances need to be carefully considered, as there may still be instances in which transfer to the regular English program is in the best interest of the child. A student who has been identified with a speech and language impairment affecting communication abilities and language processing skills, for example, may not be well-suited to a bilingual education program such as FI. Secondly, it will be incumbent upon district school boards in the province to build capacity within FI schools to ensure that the diverse learning challenges of exceptional students are adequately addressed (Arnett & Mady, 2010). Classroom teachers and support staff in the immersion context will need ample professional development opportunities to support them in their efforts to respond to the needs of exceptional pupils.

Despite the lack of incentive on the part of various FI stakeholders to accommodate the needs of exceptional pupils in this alternative public education program, the "virtual exclusion from French immersion programs of children with special needs" (Willms, 2008, p. 92) cannot continue. From a critical pedagogy point of view, the 'conspiracy' of silence and inaction must be exposed and the rights of students with special needs to access appropriate support services in the context of bilingual education programs must be recognized. The result will be liberation from unfair educational practices (Sleeter et al., 2004). Simply put, it is not equitable practice to limit access to special education programs and services for one segment of the student population. Exceptional pupils enrolled in FI programs in Ontario have as much right to the benefits associated with a bilingual education as students who are not identified as exceptional by an IPRC. Moreover, the taxpaying public has good reason to expect that the diverse needs of all students will be met in publicly funded elementary schools, including those which offer FI programs.

Once exceptional students in FI programs have equitable access to the necessary support services, there will be new directions for research. There will be a call for longitudinal empirical studies that compare the academic achievements of pupils with special education needs enrolled in regular English and FI programs. Apart from Bruck, Rabinovitch, and Oates (1975), there has been little longitudinal research in this important area. Additionally, studies will be needed to explore the language most suitable for the delivery of special education programs and services; that is, French or English.

Furthermore, a number of FI stakeholders will be keenly interested in new research which investigates the academic achievements of unidentified, typically-developing students in order to reassure themselves that the quality of FI education has not suffered as a by-product of retaining exceptional pupils in the FI program. After nearly 18 years of advocating for inclusion of students with special needs in elementary FI programs, I eagerly anticipate the results of such investigations.

References

- Arnett, K., & Mady, C. (2010). A critically conscious examination of special education within FSL and its relevance to FSL teacher education programs. *Canadian Journal of Applied Linguistics*, 13(1), 19-36.
- Baker, C. (2006). *Foundations of bilingual education and bilingualism*. (4th ed.). Clevedon, UK: Multilingual Matters.
- Bruck, M., Rabinovitch, M. S., & Oates, M. (1975). The effects of French immersion programs on children with language disabilities-A preliminary report. *Working papers on bilingualism*, 5, 47-66. Toronto, ON: Ontario Institute for Studies in Education.
- Burns, G. E., & Olson, P. (1981). *Implementation and politics in French immersion*. Toronto, ON: Ontario Institute for Studies in Education.
- Canadian Council on Learning. (2007, May 17). *Lessons in learning: French-immersion education in Canada*. Retrieved from: <http://www.ccl-cca.ca/pdfs/LessonsInLearning/May-17-07-French-immersion.pdf>
- Canadian Parents for French. (2008). *French second language education in Ontario: Report and recommendations to the Ontario Minister of Education*. Retrieved from: <http://www.dsb1.edu.on.ca/boardinfo/files/fiwc/CPF-Report-Recommendations.pdf>
- Canadian Parents for French Ontario. (2009). *FSL Enrolment in Ontario 1999-2008*. Retrieved from: <http://www.cpf.ca/eng/pdf/ON%20-%20report%20checked%20JH.pdf>
- Canagarajah, A.S. (2005). Dilemmas in planning English/vernacular relations in post-colonial communities. *Journal of Sociolinguistics*, 9(3), 418-447.
- Carlson, K. B. (2009, May 3). French immersion elitist, n'est-ce pas? *The National Post*. p. A6.
- Collinson, V. (1989). Future trends and challenges in French immersion. *The Canadian Modern Language Review*, 45(3), 561-566.
- Commissioner of Official Languages. (2004). *Vision and challenges for the 21st century*. Ottawa, ON: Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages.
- Council of Ministers of Education, Canada. (2009). *Protocol for agreement for minority-language education and second-language instruction, 2009-2010 to 2012-2013 between the Government of Canada and the Council of Ministers of Education, Canada*. Her Majesty the Queen in Right of Canada. Retrieved from: <http://www.cmec.ca/Publications/Lists/Publications/Attachments/211/protocol-for-agreements-2009-2013.pdf>
- Cummins, J. (1984). *Bilingualism and special education: Issues in assessment and pedagogy*. Clevedon, UK: Multilingual Matters.
- Cummins, J. (1996). *Negotiating identities: Education for empowerment in a diverse society*. Los Angeles, CA: California Association for Bilingual Education.

- Dagenais, D., & Berron, C. (2001). Promoting multilingualism through French immersion and language maintenance in three immigrant families. *Language, Culture, and Curriculum, 14*(2), 142-155.
- Department of Canadian Heritage. (2009, August 11). *Road map for Canada's linguistic duality 2008-2013: Acting for the future*. Retrieved from: <http://www.pch.gc.ca/pgm/slo-ols/pubs/08-13-LDL/103-eng.cfm>
- Expert Panel on Literacy and Numeracy Instruction for Students with Special Education Needs. (2005). *Education for all: The report of the expert panel on literacy and numeracy instruction for students with special education needs, Kindergarten to Grade 6*. Toronto, ON: Ontario Ministry of Education.
- Freire, P. (1992). *Pedagogy for the oppressed*. New York, NY: Continuum.
- Gardner, D. (2008, July 23). The real reason we send our kids to French immersion. *The Ottawa Citizen*. Retrieved from: <http://www.canada.com/ottawacitizen/columnists/story.html?id=7ecc8284-b182-431b-b1c5-8e418a9a33e3>
- Genesee, F. (2006). What do we know about bilingual education for majority-language students? In T. K. Bhatia & W. C. Ritchie (Eds.), *The handbook of bilingualism* (pp. 547-576). Malden, MA: Blackwell.
- Genesee, F. (2007). French immersion and at-risk students: A review of research evidence. *The Canadian Modern Language Review, 63*(5), 655-688.
- Genesee, F., & Jared, D. (2008). Literacy development in early French immersion programs. *Canadian Psychology, 49*(2), 140-147.
- Halsall, N. (1998). *French immersion: The success story told by research*. Edmonton, AB: Alberta School Boards' Association for Bilingual Education.
- Hart, D., & Lapkin, S. (1998). Issues of social-class bias in access to French immersion education. In S. Lapkin (Ed.). *French second language education in Canada: Empirical studies*. Toronto, ON: University of Toronto Press.
- Hayden, R. H. M. (1988). French immersion drop-outs: Perspectives of parents, students and teachers. *Reading – Canada – Lecture, 6*(4), 222-229.
- Hornberger, N., & Vaish, V. (2009). Multilingual language policy and school linguistic practice: Globalization and English-language teaching in India, Singapore, and South Africa. *Compare: A Journal of Comparative and International Education, 39*(3), 305-320.
- Keep, L. (1993). *French immersion attrition: Implications for model building* (Unpublished doctoral dissertation), University of Alberta, Edmonton, AB.
- Lambert, W.E., & Tucker, G.R. (1972). *Bilingual education of children: The St. Lambert experiment*. Rowley, MA: Newbury House.
- Lazaruk, W. A. (2007). Linguistic, academic, and cognitive benefits of French immersion. *The Canadian Modern Language Review, 63*(5), 605-628.
- Leistyna, P., Woodrum, A., & Sherblom, S. A. (Eds.). (1996). *Breaking free: The transformative power of critical pedagogy* (Harvard Educational Review Reprint Series No. 27). Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Publishing Group.
- Macedo, D. (1994). *Literacies of power*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.
- Mady, C. (2007). Allophone students in French second-official-language programs: A literature review. *The Canadian Modern Language Review, 63*(5), 727-760.
- Mady, C., & Arnett, K. (2009). Inclusion in French immersion in Canada: One parent's perspective. *Exceptionality Education International, 19*, 37-49.

- Makropoulos, J. (2005). *A case study of French immersion stayers in an Ottawa high school: Cultural capital, investment, and identification to French*. In J. Cohen, K. T. McAlister, K. Rolstad, & J. MacSwan (Eds.), *Proceedings of the 4th international symposium of bilingualism* (pp. 1446-1461).. Somerville, MA: Cascadilla Press. Retrieved from: <http://www.lingref.com/isb/4/114ISB4.PDF>
- Mannavarayan, J. (2002). *The French immersion debate: French for all or all for French?* Calgary, AB: Detselig Enterprises Limited.
- McLaren, P. (1993). *Life in schools: An introduction to critical pedagogy in the foundations of education* (2nd edition). New York, NY: Longman.
- O'Connor, R. (2000). Increasing the intensity of intervention in kindergarten and first grade. *Learning Disabilities Research and Practice*, 15(1), 43-54.
- Olson, P., & Burns, G. E. (1983). Politics, class, and happenstance: French immersion in a Canadian context. *Interchange*, 14(3), 1-16.
- Ontario Ministry of Education. (2001a). *The Ontario curriculum: French as a second language*. Retrieved from: <http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/curriculum/elementary/fs118curr.pdf>
- Ontario Ministry of Education. (2001b). *Special education: A guide for educators*. Retrieved from: <http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/general/elemsec/speced/guide/specedhandbooke.pdf>
- Ontario Ministry of Education (2010a). *Education funding: Legislative grants 2010-11*. Retrieved from: <http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/policyfunding/funding.html>
- Ontario Ministry of Education. (2010b). *The education act on special education*. Retrieved from: <http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/general/elemsec/speced/edact.html>
- Ontario Public School Boards' Association. (2010, July). Retrieved from: http://www.opsba.org/index.php?q=who_we_are/members/all/all
- Parkin, M., Morrison, F., & Watkin, G. (1987). *French immersion research relevant to decisions in Ontario*. Toronto, ON: Ministry of Education.
- pman. (2010, March 6). Re: Francophones to sue Education Ministry over funding [Vancouver Sun staff blog]. Retrieved from <http://blogs.vancouversun.com/2010/03/06/francophones-to-sue-education-ministry-over-funding/>
- Porter, R. P. (1990). *Forked tongue: The politics of bilingual education*. New York, NY: Basic Books.
- Rousseau, N. (1999). A French immersion learning disabilities program: Perspectives from students, their parents and their teachers. *Mosaic*, 6(3), 16-26.
- Rushowy, K. (2009, March). *French immersion debate: Oakville parents claim French immersion bias*. Retrieved from: <http://www.parentcentral.ca/parent/article/606543>
- Safty, A. (1992). Effectiveness and French immersion: A socio-political analysis. *Canadian Journal of Education*, 17(1), 23-32.
- Salvatori, M. (2008, December). The core of the matter: Change is the constant for French as a second language in Ontario. *Professionally Speaking: The Magazine of the Ontario College of Teachers*. Retrieved from: http://professionallyspeaking.oct.ca/december_2008/core_part1.asp

- Sleeter, C., Torres, M. N., & Laughlin, P. (2004). Scaffolding conscientization through inquiry in teacher education. *Teacher Education Quarterly*, 31(1), 81-96.
- Stern, M. (1991). *The French immersion transfer process: An investigation of children transferring from the French immersion program into the regular English program* (Unpublished doctoral thesis), University of Toronto, ON.
- Swain, M., Lapkin, S., Rowen, N., & Hart, D. (1990). The role of mother tongue literacy in third language learning. *Vox*, 4, 111-121.
- Théberge, R. (2010). *Memorandum to directors of education, English-language district school boards*. Retrieved from:
<http://cal2.edu.gov.on.ca/jan2010/MemoDirectorsEducationFSL.pdf>
- Vaughn, S.R., & Fuchs, L.S. (2003). Redefining learning disabilities as inadequate response to instruction: The promise and potential pitfalls. *Learning Disabilities Research and Practice*, 18(3), 137-146.
- Wanzek, J., & Vaughn, S. (2007). Research-based implications from extensive early reading interventions. *School Psychology Review*, 36(4), 541-561.
- Willms, J. D. (2008). The case for universal French instruction. *Policy Options*, 29(7), 91-96.
- Wise, N., & Chen, X. (2010). At-risk readers in French immersion: Early identification and early intervention. *Canadian Journal of Applied Linguistics*, 13(2), 128-149.