

# **A critically conscious examination of special education within FSL and its relevance to FSL teacher education programs**

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## **Abstract**

Using the lens of critical theory, this article explores the tenuous relationship between special education and French Second Language (FSL) education, particularly as it manifests in the issue of including students with language-based learning disabilities/difficulties within the French immersion context. Drawing on considerations of these issues within empirical, theoretical, and popular literature, the authors point out that the current tensions are borne of conflicting ideals about what should comprise the requisite educational experience of students who learn in atypical ways in an age where learner difference is fully expected to be accommodated. Through this analysis, the authors consider how FSL teacher education programs could become sites for reconciling these tensions and potentially enabling greater inclusion within FSL programs, even though their current structures could explain some of the tensions that exist between the fields of special and FSL education.

## **Résumé**

Utilisant de la théorie critique, cet article explore la relation tendue entre les programmes d'enfance en difficulté et les programmes de français langue seconde (FLS), surtout tel qu'elle se manifeste dans la question de l'inclusion des élèves avec des difficultés d'apprentissage liées au langage dans le contexte de l'immersion française. En examinant ces questions dans les littératures empiriques, théoriques et populaires, les auteurs soulignent que les tensions actuelles sont à cause des idéaux contradictoires sur ce que devrait comprendre l'expérience pédagogique pour les élèves qui apprennent de façon atypique dans un âge où on exige que les différences chez les apprenants soient accommodées. Grâce à cette analyse, les auteurs considèrent comment les programmes de formation pour enseigner le FLS pourraient devenir des sites de concilier ces tensions et de permettre une plus grande inclusion dans les programmes de FLS, même si leurs structures actuelles pourraient expliquer certaines des tensions qui existent entre les domaines des programmes d'enfance en difficulté et de FLS.

## Introduction

The purpose of this article is to examine, through the lens of critical theory Willis, Montavon, Hall, Hunter, Burke, & Herrera, 2008), the sometimes tenuous relationship between French as a Second Language (FSL)<sup>1</sup> programs and students with special education needs<sup>2</sup>, and how the current tensions within that relationship could be influenced by FSL teacher education. There was a multi-layered impetus for such an analysis. Our previous study of one mother's experience with her son's learning-difficulty-based struggles in the French Immersion (FI) program (Mady & Arnett, 2009) revealed that the situation was apparently influenced by societal, legal, and philosophical schisms within and between special education and FI education in Ontario. In addition, since 2008, FI programs in several jurisdictions have come under scrutiny, including through legal actions, for their perceived discrimination against certain learner populations, including students with learning difficulties (Law Society of New Brunswick *v.* Ryan, 2003; Rushowy, 2009). Yet, recent research within the core French context has indicated the potential for successful inclusion of students with special education needs in that learning environment (Arnett, 2003, 2008, in press) by focusing on the link between pedagogies that addresses diverse learner needs<sup>3</sup> and pedagogies that support language learning. Such findings give support to the philosophical undercurrents of "inclusion" that are now a prominent paradigm in Canadian education (Hutchinson, 2006).

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<sup>1</sup> References to "FSL programs" imply considerations of French immersion and core French, the two most common FSL teaching models in Canada. In French immersion programs, students develop skills in French through the study of traditional school content because French is the language of instruction. In a core French context, students study French as a content area of its own, much in the same way students learn about history, math, and science (LeBlanc, 1990).

<sup>2</sup> We consider "students with special education needs" to be the broad spectrum of students who have been formally identified with a disability/disorder that influences the educational experience and have been given an "Individualized Education Program" (Hutchinson, 2006). At times, we will mention a specific kind of special education need—language-based learning disabilities/difficulties—because this particular kind of special education need has been of notable concern in the second language classroom (Arnett, 2003; Mannavaryan, 2002). A "language-based learning disability/difficulty," is constructed to be a challenge with the perception, processing and/or expression of language that can delay the speed and complexity with which students comprehend and/or use language (Lerner, 2010).

<sup>3</sup> We use "diverse learner needs" as a synonymous idea to "special education needs," because of the increasing preference for positively connoted language within the field of special education. Though "diverse learner needs" can include references to students' first language and socioeconomic status, for the purpose of this article, we are restricting the conception of

and special education is at a crossroads, and as the institutions responsible for preparing the next generation of FSL educators, FSL teacher education programs become instrumental in facilitating a meaningful reconciliation between the two areas, even though the programs may actually be contributing to the current tensions. Because the majority of empirical, theoretical, and practical considerations of the relationship between FSL and special education have specifically considered the educational experience of students with language-based learning difficulties within French immersion, most of our analysis will focus on those learning needs within that classroom environment; however, we believe that the analysis will nonetheless be relevant to all of FSL and FSL teacher education.

Critical theory was selected as a framework for this inquiry because of its focus on how policies and practices come to be unfair and/or unjust and how dominant forces, people, and/or philosophies oppress and discriminate against minority populations. A critical investigation of how FI programs support students with certain special education needs, namely those language-based learning disabilities/difficulties, is of particular relevance at present, because the aforementioned broader philosophical movement to ensure the “inclusion” of all students with special education needs in the classroom (Hutchinson, 2006) has not been sufficient to stave off noticeable current concerns about FI’s appropriateness for students with special education needs (Gardner, 2008; Rushowy, 2009; Willms, 2008). Given these issues, a critical lens seems a logical vehicle for analyzing how these two fields intersect within FSL and how a power structure within FSL education—namely, FSL teacher education programs—could explain and perhaps remedy these tensions.

Despite the theme of the current issue, the decision to consider this analysis in relation to the context of FSL teacher education was spurred by a recent editorial (Liston, Whitcomb, & Borko, 2009), which urged teacher educators to use more than constructivist and progressive considerations of teaching theory and practice in their programs. Liston et al. (2009; p. 107) contend that alternative frameworks for thinking about education are needed to ensure that candidates do not become “inculcated” into a sole perspective that limits how they will question and solve problems in their own classrooms. We do not necessarily believe that FSL teacher candidates are being presented just one way of thinking about their pedagogies: traditional, progressive, and constructivist perspectives are evident (Ferguson & Dorman, 2001; McGhie-Richmond, Underwood, & Jordan, 2007; Porath & Jordan, 2004). Still, it is possible that none of the frameworks effectively facilitates meaningful explorations of student differences; this conceptual/theoretical oversight might explain the concerns about meeting the needs of the increasingly diverse learner populations in FSL programs (Lapkin, McFarlane, & Vandergrift, 2006) and possibly, whether such oversight is due to the current structures of FSL teacher education.

In particular, this article will address these issues by exploring three distinct questions under a critically conscious lens that considers both the theoretical and practical

1. What is critical theory, and how is it relevant to the consideration of special education within FSL?
2. What is the current state of the relationship between FSL and special education, and how might that status influence what is covered in FSL teacher education programs?
3. What should the role of FSL teacher education programs be when considering issues of special education: should it equip pre-service candidates with the information and tools to uphold or to challenge the status quo in the schools?

In addressing these questions, we will endeavour to situate their implications within the broader contexts of second language and special education and demonstrate how the three questions are connected to one another. This analysis was facilitated by reviewing theoretical, empirical, and popular literatures of the past four decades that have appeared in broad educational database and Internet searches using “FSL,” “French immersion,” “core French,” “inclusion,” “disability,” and “difficulty” as the key terms. Largely, we were interested in those studies/publications that reported negative views or concerns about special education within FSL, because we believed an analysis of those findings would test the chosen theoretical lens. Where possible, research that had more favourable views of special education within FSL was used to refute claims of the other body of research and/or demonstrate the applicability of the chosen theoretical lens.

### **Critical Theory and teacher, special and second language education**

Traditionally, critical theory has been used to explore how dominant groups have used their racial, class, and/or gender differences from other groups to create exploitative situations that oppress the minorities (Willis et al., 2008). Building on the works of Marx and Hegel, and back to Socrates and Plato, research that takes a critically conscious perspective “challenge[s] barriers to social change, inequality and democracy as they resist the reproduction of the ideas of the privileged and dominant groups” (Willis et al., 2008; p. 13). Thus, a key goal of critical theory is to question the status quo and how it serves to perpetuate the goals of those who hold “power,” at the expense of those who do not have such status. DeValenzuela, Connery, and Musanti (2000; p. 113) posit that critical theory complements the sociocultural (SCT) theoretical framework evident within modern special and second language education because it considers how the “differences in power, status, and prestige among certain types of knowledge, experiences, and ways of being can affect the ways students, families, communities, and educators interact with each other.” In other words, the interactions taking place between stakeholders in the learning process are influenced by the stakeholders’ differences in power and status—and not just by the differences in their knowledge bases.

Critical theory has more recently been used as a lens to examine the practices of

increasing diversity of the school population: as more exceptions to the “norm” present themselves in schools, this is an implicit challenge to the status quo. Though much of critically focused research considers the American context, it has clearly established that teacher candidates, “tend to uncritically and often unconsciously hold beliefs and attitudes about the existing social order that reflect dominant ideologies that are harmful to so many students” (Bartolomé, 2004, p. 100, citing, Bloom, 1991; Davis, 1994; Friere, 1997, 1998a, 1998b; Gomez, 1994; Gonsalves, 1996; Haberman, 1991; Macedo, 1994; Sleeter 1992). Although our examination is considering notions of “ability” more than those of race, ethnicity, gender, or class, we contend that when it comes to “ability,” there is indeed a social order in North America: students with disabilities are often assumed to be inferior to their peers. If this assumption were not true, it is highly unlikely that there would be a documented reluctance among many parents to have their students identified with special education needs, even though they have good reasons to get their children extra support in school (Lindsay & Dockrell, 2004; Rogers, 2007). Further, if the stigma surrounding special education were not true, there would also not be a history of documented reluctance on the part of teachers to meet the needs of students whose learning styles are different from the norm (Jordan, Lindsay, & Stanovich, 1997; Jordan & Stanovich, 2001, 2003). It seems reasonable to argue that FSL teacher candidates likely hold assumptions about students with learning difficulties that reflect the dominant ideologies of both second language and special education within Canada.

The application of critical theory to the research and constructs of second language and special education is still novel, compared to its use to examine race, gender, and class differences. Though Canada recognizes bilingualism as part of the Canadian identity, Anglophones significantly outnumber Francophones. It is only because of the rising immigrant population in recent years that English as a Second Language (ESL) education programs have been gaining in prominence. For many years, FSL was the dominant “second language education” program in the country, and consequently shaped much of what we know of the field. In five of the twelve English-dominant provinces/territories, all students are required to study French for a portion of their schooling experience (Mady & Turnbull, 2009). Although Core French remains the most popular program for FSL study (LeBlanc, 1990), FI is currently touted as the most effective program for producing students proficient in French (Genesee, 2007). While FI is often known as an “enrichment” program for FSL study (Mady & Arnett, 2009), the fact that it has proven to be the most successful program means that discouragement or exclusion from pursuing the FI program places students at an academic disadvantage in their French studies. Therefore, any form of discouragement or exclusion from FI, if interpreted through a critically conscious lens, is a tool of oppression.

The FI program, however, cannot be solely blamed for this debate. In Canada, special education in most provinces has been structured on a “deficit model,” meaning that students who have been found to have a particular learning need are defined by what they cannot do within the learning environment (Jordan, Lindsay, & Stanovich, 1997;

because of the perception that they are “lacking something” that prevents a “normal” course of study. Even with the spread of the philosophies of inclusion, which promotes meeting *all* students’ needs in the general education classroom (Hutchinson, 2006), and differentiation, which promotes teachers’ use of pedagogical practices that naturally support a wide spectrum of learning styles and learning needs (Hume, 2007), the fact remains that the special education system is predicated on defining what causes one learner to be at a disadvantage in the classroom over another. This system has thus encouraged at least a conceptual hierarchy of students in the classroom.

By merging the critical special and second language perspectives, we posit that that FSL education, particularly FI, is currently constructed in a way to favour the academic elite in Canadian schools through its curriculum, program structure, and admission policies (Gardner, 2008), consequently creating a system by which at-risk students or students with special education needs are given limited opportunities to access and/or receive support. As special education was first conceived in the 1970s, one of its primary goals has been to make the general education curriculum accessible to students with disabilities; “access” to an educational opportunity is thus a major component in determining the extent to which a program can be viewed as “inclusive,” not just the teaching strategies used therein (Hutchinson, 2006; Turnbull, Turnbull, & Wehmeyer, 2007).

The notion that FI is associated with the academic elite is not new; Genesee (1992) cautioned stakeholders in his analysis of at-risk Anglophone populations enrolled in the program that FI could be labeled as such, if struggling students were not better supported in the program. Yet, the notion of FI being “appropriate” only for a certain learner population is actually older. Since the launch of the program in the late 1960s, there has always been somewhat of a side debate about whether students who struggled to become as proficient as their peers in their other official language of Canada should be removed from the program. Researchers have attempted to answer the question off and on in every decade since (Bruck 1978; Cummins 1979; Majhanovich, 1993; Rousseau, 1999; Trites & Price, 1976, 1977; Wiss, 1987, 1988), and this current decade, in particular, began with a book about the FI debate that asked in the title, “French for All or All for French?” (Mannavarayan, 2002). The Mannavarayan text argued that it was “unfair” for students who “lack ability” to be pushed to continue FI (Makropoulos, 2002; p. 525).

Although the perception of FI being “suitable” (Bruck, 1978) for a certain student population is also perpetuated by the deficit model that guides special education, FSL education seems to be the only education program/content area in Canadian schools that has been at odds with the inclusion movement’s emphasis on meeting diverse learner needs (Hutchinson, 2006; Safty, 1992) over the past few decades. There have been no empirical or theoretical efforts, for example, to discourage and/or exempt students with math-based learning disabilities/difficulties from math coursework or students with physical disabilities from physical education, but FI has been openly challenging the

summary of these efforts) and in spite of calls to make the program more accessible to a wide range of learner needs (Genesee, 1992; Safty, 1992). Though Arnett's work in the core French context (2003, 2008, in press) indicates compatibility between the pedagogical demands of FSL in that setting and the needs of the included students and has succeeded in challenging some of these perceptions, the recent legal actions and editorials about students with disabilities in French immersion still point to a strong sentiment against including students with these needs in this particular course of study (Gardner, 2008; Rushowy, 2009; Willms, 2008).

We acknowledge that FSL is somewhat unique in its status within Canadian education because of the large gap between requisite content in provincial curricula and enrichment content (e.g., what is offered through FI). Yet, historical discussions of exclusion of some students with language-related challenges from FI has had an inadvertent consequence of questioning the plausibility of *any* type of FSL education for students with these sorts of learning needs, as the first author can attest from her own efforts to conduct research about inclusive teaching within core French. Further, school boards have also developed policies and procedures for exempting students with certain learning difficulties from the mandated Core French program, based on the belief that the students' learning needs cannot be met in the program (Mohindra, 2001). Moving the exemption debate into the requisite program promotes the idea that FSL education is only for certain learners, and furthers the notion, if seen through a critically conscious lens, that such exclusion continues to deny rights to a minority population. Also, if the conception of FI as a program for the academic elite (Gardner, 2008; Genesee, 2007) is not confronted and questioned, it may jeopardize the education system's ability to effectively implement enact the current philosophies of inclusion and differentiation (Hume, 2007; Hutchinson, 2006). This analysis suggests that the goal should be to avoid replicating this status quo and to encourage a new paradigm of thinking about special education within FSL.

### **Current Challenges to Inclusion in Immersion and what it means for FSL Teacher Education**

As mentioned in the previous section, there has been a long history of questioning the appropriateness of students with language-based learning difficulties pursuing FSL studies in the immersion program. This debate is harmful to students with language-based learning difficulties who are interested in FI study, as it could subconsciously prejudice teachers against the idea that all students can learn another language through immersion. From a critical theory standpoint, the presence of the debate can be interpreted as hegemony within the FSL education experience; recent legal and ethical challenges to remove barriers to FI seem to have provided justification for this view.

While educational stakeholders (i.e., parents, teachers, politicians) across Canada encourage equitable access to second language learning opportunities (Canadian Parents

(Government of Canada, 1982). The limitation of language education rights to those who are members of official language minority communities was confirmed through the decision in the “Small and Ryan vs. New Brunswick” case. The Court of New Brunswick ruled that immersion was not a right protected under the Charter of Rights and Responsibilities (*Law Society of New Brunswick v. Ryan*, 2003).

The exclusion of second language education from language education rights was also highlighted as New Brunswick’s Minister of Education (2008) planned to eliminate early FI in New Brunswick. Although such a plan has since been changed to offer immersion starting in Grade 3, as opposed to Grade 1, the commissioned study that inspired such a plan, and the response to said study, underscores that students with learning difficulties in FI is an issue. First, the report that informed the Minister’s plan was commissioned to conduct an assessment of FSL programs in New Brunswick. Through data gathered from interviews with educational stakeholders in all nine school districts, and from written submissions from seven of the nine districts, and online data collected from parents and teachers, Croll and Lee (2008) revealed that streaming was an area of concern. In particular, administrators, parents, and teachers reported that the majority of students with learning difficulties were in the English program. Although the quality of this research has been questioned, the responses that followed do not negate the occurrence of streaming. For example, Willms (2008) highlights the occurrence of streaming due to ability and behavioural indicators. Willms (2008) points out that the students who were enrolled FI had more favourable literacy and behaviour measures than those students who were not selected. In his response to Willms, Dicks (2008) does not deny the existence of streaming in FI, but highlights the need to investigate the reasons behind decisions to not enroll students and possible solutions. As part of a solution, Dicks underscores the need to better inform parents and teachers. Dicks and Kristmanson (2008) highlight the lack of support for students with learning difficulties within the FI program.

This is not the first time that limited support was cited as a challenge to the inclusion of students with learning difficulties in FI. Prior to the Croll and Lee report (2008), the New Brunswick Department of Education became aware of such concerns from at least two sources. First, the government commissioned a review of programming and services in New Brunswick (2006). In that report, Mackay highlighted the streaming of students with learning difficulties out of immersion, but underscored one of the possible reasons for such segregation: lack of support services within the immersion program. Second, in the *Quality Learning in French Second Language in New Brunswick Report* (2006), Rehorick, Dicks, Kristmanson and Cogswell determined that students with learning difficulties did not receive sufficient support because their teachers did not have sufficient training; nor were there sufficient, specialized support personnel to meet those needs. In their subsequent proposal of a model for FSL programs in the province, the researchers recommended improving the inclusion and retention of students with learning difficulties with the provision of professional development opportunities for

programs is also reflected in research from provinces outside of New Brunswick. In Ontario, from 1993 to the present, research studies (Lapkin, Harley, & Taylor, 1993; Calman & Daniel, 1998; Mollica, Philips, & Smith, 2005) have cited teachers' concerns with their abilities to meet the needs of students with learning difficulties within the FSL classroom. Such provincial results have been corroborated nationally. In their national survey of over 1300 FSL teachers, Lapkin, MacFarlane, and Vandergrift (2006) highlighted that in response to an open-ended question, teachers raised particular concerns over meeting the diverse needs of their students.

Early in 2009, a parental group in Oakville, Ontario, whose children attend elementary school in the Halton District School Board, filed a claim of discrimination, stating that FI leads to segregation. Among other areas of inequities, the parents claim that FI discriminates against students with learning difficulties. The parents support their claim with data from neighbouring schools; where one school offers the English program (Captain R. Wilson) and the other FI (Forest Trail), there are 70-100% more students with special needs in the English program (Education Quality Assurance Office, 2007a,b). Although, the board claims that the FI program is not elitist, it does concur that there are fewer students with learning difficulties in FI, as a result of "natural streaming" (Halton District School Board, 2009a). The board, however, encourages parents to consider the risk factors in enrolling their children in immersion, one of which being student performance below the standard in their first language (Halton District School Board, 2009b). The board response implies that FI is "naturally" a better fit for more academically proficient students, again propelling the idea that FI study is not accessible to all.

Concerns regarding the access of students with learning difficulties to FSL programs have also been raised in the Ottawa-Carleton District School Board. In its FSL program review (Ottawa-Carleton District School Board, 2007), the Ottawa District School board stated that one of its objectives was to ensure that students have equitable access to FSL programs. Through a literature review, the Ottawa-Carleton District School Board identified FI as a program where students with learning difficulties may succeed. At the same time, while the Board acknowledged low enrollment of students with learning difficulties in immersion, it suggested that having three different entry points to the FI program addressed the question of equitable access. Although the board suggests that FI is accessible to all, it encourages parents to consider their child's first language development before registering him/her in early immersion (Ottawa-Carleton District School Board, 2003). In addition to considering first language development, when considering enrollment of children in middle immersion, the board encourages parents to consider whether the child has experienced difficulty in the primary grades (Ottawa-Carleton District School Board, 2004). These recommendations also imply that FI should only be pursued by "certain" students.

When viewed with a critical lens, the absence of supports (despite a recognized need to offer them to the included students) points to oppression of the minority

because those in power fail to change the situation. Certainly, it is harmful to put students in a known environment where their needs will unlikely be met, but it is even more unadvisable to continue to replicate the existing structures that support oppression, even though potential mechanisms for removing barriers have been identified (MacKay, 2005; Rehorick et al., 2006). From a critically conscious standpoint, it is unreasonable for the burden to be borne by the students who are “atypical”: the burden of change lies with those in power—and FSL teacher education programs comprise part of the power structure in FSL education.

### **FSL Teacher Education and the Status Quo**

When the tenets of critical theory are applied to classroom practice, the result is “critical pedagogy.” Critical pedagogy has varying definitions and applications (Giroux, 1999; Friere 1970; Willis et al., 2008), but for the purpose of this analysis, the focus will be on how critical theory is pedagogically applied to challenge or replicate the existing power structures and social orders. As Leistyna and Woodrum (1996; p. 3) note, “Critical pedagogy is primarily concerned with the kinds of educational theories and practices that encourage both students and teachers to develop an understanding of the interconnecting relationship among ideology, power, and culture.” It is through that relationship one can ensure the replication or rejection of the norm. Teacher education programs have become increasingly popular vehicles for examining this conception of critical pedagogy for critical theory because, simply stated, they help to establish and promote the norms of teaching practice. This section will therefore consider the degrees to which FSL teacher education promotes or discourages the tension between special education and FSL study.

Teacher qualifications are determined at provincial levels, and most teacher education programs can freely determine the content of their programs (only two provinces in Canada have regulatory bodies that govern teacher credentials: British Columbia and Ontario). In the absence of standardized content for teacher education, programs can set their own agendas about what is “important content” for becoming a teacher. This situation has led to great variation among programs—including those for FSL education. Although it is stipulated that these programs offer theoretical and methodological content for FSL, a critically conscious analysis will find that the potential absence/variance in the special education content is more significant. Inequalities in the knowledge set related to a minority population can limit one’s ability to impact change in the treatment of that group (Willis, 2008).

When we investigate program requirements for special education, it is not surprising that research shows that FSL teachers feel inadequately prepared to meet students’ needs (Lapkin, MacFarlane, & Vandergrift, 2006). Both the British Columbia and Ontario College of Teachers specify that programs contain “course content” that addresses aspects of diversity, such as special education needs; however, there is no sense into the depth and breadth of content that is considered basally sufficient for becoming a

preparation in meeting the needs of their included students (Burge, Ouellette-Kuntz, Hutchinson, & Box, 2008). For those provinces and territories that lack such regulation, there is no consensus on what is considered necessary pedagogical, theoretical, or philosophical knowledge for new teachers. For example, Fox (2005) reports that teacher education programs in New Brunswick regularly offer instruction in special education and adaptive instruction through specific courses, but there is variation in what is requisite and optional content across the programs.

However, as this review has only been cursory, based largely on document analyses of program structures, additional research is needed into FSL program content and structure. FSL stakeholders at all levels would benefit from knowing more about the curricula of teacher education programs, with a specific emphasis on what currently comprises the curriculum on special education and inclusive teaching. This would better inform our understanding of the knowledge and skills new teachers bring to the profession and could guide more specific and meaningful professional development opportunities once they enter the field.

The absence of national standards for new teachers in Canada is a logical starting point for identifying a source of the tensions between special education and FSL. As the term implies, “standards” establish consistency of expectations for the stakeholders; without them, there are no guarantees of equality in the teacher candidates’ preparation. If new teachers are entering their classrooms with varying skill and knowledge sets, their preparation inevitably manifests inequities in the schools and promotes the continuation of the status quo; this philosophy prompted the adoption of the teacher qualifications standards in the *No Child Left Behind Act* in the U.S. (Roellke & Rice, 2008), and the standards guiding general teacher competencies in the U.S. have been informed by the professional associations of each discipline, (s part of the Goals 2000 Act of the Clinton administration (U.S. Department of Education, 1998). Perhaps the time has come for the Canadian Association of Second Language Teachers (CASLT) to work with FSL teacher education programs in Canada to collaborate on a similar document.

These philosophical shifts to promote inclusion and differentiation within the classroom environment require a teaching force skilled in understanding the range of special education needs and the teaching strategies that are of greatest benefit to that student population. There is sufficient evidence to indicate that FSL teachers are largely unprepared to address the needs of a diverse learner population (Calman & Daniel, 1998; Lapkin et al., 2006; MacKay, 2005; Rehorick et al., 2006), and given the increasing emphasis on acknowledging and accommodating learner diversity, failing to address this lack of preparation is only going to perpetuate the challenges that face students with disabilities. It falls to the teacher education programs not only to better prepare their candidates for these classroom populations, but to be more transparent in exactly how they do so. Professional standards could be mechanisms to facilitate such transparency, as would greater clarity in the specific learning outcomes for each FSL teacher education program. This does not necessarily imply national uniformity in the learning outcomes of

## Conclusion

When we examine the relationship between special and second language education with a critically conscious lens, several inequalities emerge; these inequalities may explain the continued challenges in including students with learning difficulties in FSL classrooms, particularly in FI. First, the mere presence of debates about who should pursue FSL study and who should not implies a hierarchy of students. Some students have the advantage of studying FSL in the best program possible (Genesee, 2007), while others are excluded from the opportunity or FSL education altogether (Mohindra, 2001) because of beliefs about the “incompatibility” of their needs with the goals of the FSL curriculum. The argument against including all students in FSL classrooms runs counter to the realities of other classroom environments in which students who have a special education need that directly “opposes” the content under study are still supported in that setting; Arnett’s research (2003, 2008, in press) gives hope that inclusion within FSL is possible, but underscores a need for further research in the area because it has not determined the extent to which inclusive pedagogy is effective in facilitating the development of second language proficiency. Why should FSL be allowed to approach inclusion differently? Second, most conceptions of special education in Canada are based on a deficit-orientation model, which identifies students with special education needs by what they cannot do, in comparison to the norm (Kozey & Siegel, 2008). This deficit-orientation model also encourages a hierarchy of students within the schooling environment. Further, the model is currently in opposition to the dominant teaching philosophies of inclusion and differentiation within the Canadian education system (Hume, 2007; Hutchinson, 2006). Accordingly, teachers and other stakeholders are getting mixed messages about the purpose and function of special education.

Because teacher education programs generally do not have clearly defined standards of basic teaching competencies, they can be viewed as perpetuating the problems that face *any* minority population in school. Critical theory maintains that it is not possible to limit even unconscious discrimination against a minority population without a firm awareness of the ideologies and power structures that work within the system (Bartolomé, 2008; Willis et al., 2008); the lack of clearly defined teaching standards makes it easier to maintain the status quo, even if the status quo is flawed. Further, given the increasing evidence that teachers are unprepared to work with students who have special education needs (Burge et al., 2008; Calman & Daniel, 1998; Lapkin et al., 2006; MacKay, 2005; Rehorick et al., 2006), it would be wise to ensure that new teachers are equipped with the knowledge and skills that will increase their comfort in teaching diverse learner populations, perhaps through studies examining pre-service teachers’ beliefs and knowledge bases about key principles of second language learning and inclusive pedagogy. The time has come for stakeholders—in teacher education

prepared and supported in meeting the needs of an increasingly diverse classroom.

FSL education in Canada has always been regarded in an esteemed light because of its innovations with immersion, core French, and more recently, Extended French (Safty, 1992). FSL educators could once again be seen as key innovators in education as a whole by working to ensure that every student who wishes (or is required) to study French has the best possible learning experience with the best-prepared teachers. The time has come to stop saying that FSL teachers are unprepared to meet the needs of students with diverse learning needs and start preparing them to do so in the teacher education programs. The “system,” as it stands, cannot continue to function as a barrier to certain student populations simply because of the inaction of its stakeholders.

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