

## **Raising FLAGS: Renewing Core French at the Pre-service Teacher Level**

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### **Author's Note**

The author is grateful for the generous sharing of perspectives offered by the members of UBC's first FLAGS cohort (2007-8).

### **Abstract**

A new program for core French teacher candidates called FLAGS (French Language and Global Studies) was established at the University of British Columbia (UBC) in 2007. The program is intended for those who are keen to teach core French and possess rudimentary proficiency in the language but may not necessarily have the same proficiency or prior coursework as candidates applying to existing French specialist cohorts. The FLAGS program begins with a five-week summer immersion experience through *Explore!* and then proceeds with UBC's regular Bachelor of Education program but with an added French conversation course, a core French methodology course and a core French practicum concentration (augmented, in some cases, with a three-week practicum in a francophone locale). FLAGS is intended to address the less than satisfactory state of elementary core French teaching and learning in British Columbia.

### **Résumé**

FLAGS (French Language and Global Studies) est un nouveau programme établi en 2007 par l'université de la Colombie-Britannique pour les futurs enseignants du français de base. Le programme s'adresse à ceux et celles qui veulent enseigner le français de base et dont le niveau de compétence en français est adéquat pour la communication mais n'est pas nécessairement au même niveau de celui des candidats du programme pour les spécialistes et/ou les cours pré-réquis pour être spécialiste manquent. Le programme démarre en été avec une expérience immersive de cinq semaines grâce au programme *Explore!*, puis continue avec le baccalauréat régulier en éducation de l'UBC supplémenté avec un cours de conversation, un cours de méthodologie et un stage en français de base (avec l'option pour certains de compléter trois semaines de stage dans une région francophone). FLAGS a comme objectif de contribuer à l'amélioration des conditions d'apprentissage du français de base en Colombie-Britannique.

## Introduction

FLAGS (French Language and Global Study) is a new program at the University of British Columbia (UBC) designed for elementary generalist teacher candidates who have a special interest in teaching core French. The program begins with a five-week summer immersion experience in a Canadian university (subsidized by the federal/provincial *Explore!* bursary program) followed by UBC's regular 12-month Bachelor of Education consecutive program with two additional courses: French methodology and French conversation for teachers. There is no language screening test or specific pre-requisite French courses to enroll in the program; however, students must possess a rudimentary level of proficiency and a strong desire to learn and teach French. The program for elementary core French generalists complements the existing French specialist<sup>1</sup> cohort that is oriented to French immersion teaching and learning.

FLAGS addresses a gap in teacher education in British Columbia (BC). Candidates enrolled in a regular teacher education program in BC, though required to teach core French if employed at the Grade 5 to 8 level, are not required to take a French second language (FSL) methodology course. Further, many enter the program with a linguistic background of a Grade 11 core French course or, in many cases, lower since only a Grade 11 second language course<sup>2</sup> is required to enter university. One FLAGS student described this gap:

Usually, students are either generalists or in a full French stream. Thus, teacher candidates who have an interest in teaching French but perhaps need more time to work on their language skills are left to do so independently.

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<sup>1</sup> The terms 'generalist' and 'specialist' are used, in part, to denote the language of instruction for each cohort as well as practicum context. The French specialist cohorts (elementary and secondary) undertake most of their BEd program coursework in French and are oriented towards teaching in French. The French generalist cohort (FLAGS) undertakes most of its coursework in English with the exception of two courses. Candidates in the French specialist cohorts who have passed the French Language Appraisal at the immersion level undertake their practica in immersion classrooms; those who have not met the immersion threshold undertake their practica in a regular English classroom with several blocks of core French. FLAGS candidates also undertake their practica in a regular English classroom with several blocks of core French.

<sup>2</sup> A Grade 11 language is required for general university entrance at UBC, Simon Fraser University and the University of Victoria; however, it may be an introductory course, such as Introductory Japanese or American Sign Language that starts in Grade 10, or in some cases, Grade 11. It is possible, therefore, for candidates to enter the Teacher Education program having taken core French from Grade 5 to 8 (mandated by BC's Language Education Policy) and then a different Grade 10 and/or Grade 11 language course.

They are not given practicum experience in the classroom teaching French nor any language-teaching methodology. They must do so on a more risky trial and error basis after they have launched their careers. This is a loss for students and teachers alike. (Seda<sup>3</sup>)

The lack of linguistic and methodological background exacerbates a less than satisfactory state of affairs in the field in BC (Carr, 2007) and may be contributing to poor program quality at the elementary and middle levels (Carr, 2006; Daneault, 1999; Horban & Taddei, 2008) and extreme student attrition rates at the secondary level (Canadian Parents for French [CPF], 2004; Hawkey & Fort, 2007).

FLAGS takes an important step in improving access to FSL education for teacher candidates as well as increasing the number of potential core French teachers. In this article, the author outlines the need for renewal in the field of core French teaching and puts forth FLAGS as a model for pre-service FSL teacher education. The perspectives of FLAGS candidates are examined in this article using notions of investment and identity as theoretical lenses, and this is followed by a discussion of program and field challenges. To begin, let us consider the larger context of core French education in Canada and British Columbia into which this program and these new teachers will fit.

### **Core French Education in Canada**

The most commonly implemented option for second language learning in Canada is core French, where students receive two or more lessons per week. Although approximately 85 percent of Canadian children learning French participate in core French (CPF, 2004), insufficient contact time, lack of intensity, and limited teacher expertise, among other factors, have contributed to less than satisfactory results. In a survey of Canadian university students, almost half of those who passed Grade 12 French felt that they could not understand spoken French, and most reported they could not carry on a conversation longer than a few set phrases (CPF, 2005). As well, core French programs have high attrition rates, with only 16.5 percent of students who begin core French in Grade 4 or 5 continuing in the program to Grade 12 (MacFarlane, 2005). Most drop French once it is no longer mandatory (CPF, 2005). In British Columbia, the completion rate is even lower than the national average with only one in ten students who take core French continuing to French 12 (CPF 2004).

In nearly 40 years since the Official Languages Act was passed, there has been considerable attention paid to second language education in the form of programming, research, and funding. Almost all provinces have a second language education policy that requires students to take a second language (in most cases, French) for at least four years and offer a variety of FSL program options. And yet, the low proportion (24 percent) of young Canadians who know both official languages prompted the Federal Government to develop an Action Plan to double the number of bilingual Canadians by 2013 (Dion, 2003). A

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<sup>3</sup> All FLAGS candidates gave permission for their first names to be published with their verbatim citations.

challenge was issued by the Director General of the Official Languages Branch to find ways to “do things differently” in second language education (Canadian Heritage, 2004). This is not the first time such a challenge has been issued.

More than 30 years ago, educator and scholar H.H. Stern called into question the core French model, saying that it had not fulfilled objectives and was in danger of being abolished. It was, in his words, “a poorly working core program which did not deliver the goods” (1976, p. 219). He lamented over a number of issues still on research agendas today, such as the lack of attainment of bilingualism, the undefined use of the term “bilingual” and the need for consistent proficiency standards rather than simply relating one program to another. Stern suggested that language teachers and scholars critically consider their practices in an effort to remedy the program’s shortcomings. The National Core French Study (Canadian Association of Second Language Teachers [CASLT], 1990), involving all provinces and territories in an effort to improve the quality of core French programs, produced recommendations to revolutionize the way French would be taught, shifting the focus from language form to language use. The National Core French Study [NCFS] recommended “a program of 40 minutes per day commencing in Grade 4” (p. 2) delivered by “communicative teachers [who are] fluent or at least have the ability to communicate in the second language well enough that they feel comfortable in the teaching situation . . . and have training in the latest methods of communicative second language teaching” (p. 6). Some provinces, such as Ontario and New Brunswick, were able to consistently meet these conditions. Others, including British Columbia, were not.

### **Core French Education in British Columbia**

In British Columbia, core French is mandated provincially from Grades 5 to 8 but has no stated time requirements. A recent survey of BC French coordinators (Carr, 2006) revealed that the average amount of instructional time is 80 minutes per week in Grades 5 to 7, and 185 minutes per week in Grade 8 for a total average of 260 hours for the mandated grades. Comments made by coordinators also showed that there was considerable concern about the quantity and quality of instruction of elementary and middle years core French:

Many of our schools have the generalist teachers deliver French to their own classes. This is particularly the case where the school has chosen to go with another prep relief subject (e.g., computers, music) . . . Time has been reduced and teachers are teaching French who do not know it—and against their will.

A few of the 6/7 teachers are less comfortable with French . . . lots of anxiety and a real challenge for many.

The situation in elementary core French is far from ideal. Not enough time is dedicated to instruction (in some cases, 45 minutes per week) and a questionable use of French time—some doing translation, lots of art, not much communication, etc. (p. 12)

These comments also show that many teachers delivering elementary and middle years core French in British Columbia do not have the necessary knowledge and experience to implement a communicative FSL curriculum. As Netten (1993) points out, “innovative curricula are only as effective as the teachers who use them” (p. 117).

In a major study involving 800 British Columbia core French teachers, Carr (2007) explored their contexts and characteristics as well as the challenges they face in their teaching. The target group of respondents was core French teachers at the provincially mandated Grade 5 to 8 levels. Teachers reported low levels of methodological training (only 15 percent of respondents had taken a methodology course). In fact, many of these teachers did not define themselves as French teachers but, rather, as generalists who teach French among other subjects. Very few (about 25 percent) have studied French at the university level, and only an average of 21 percent reported ease in conversing in French and an average of 28 percent in reading French. The pressing challenges for British Columbia’s core French teachers are how to achieve provincial learning outcomes with low levels of teacher language proficiency and methodological background as well as a lack of time and valuing allocated to French instruction. Recommendations included providing ongoing professional development and advocating for second language methodology as a required course in teacher education programs.

Concerns about unsatisfactory conditions and outcomes for core French, especially at the junior levels, have been evident for a number of years. In a report based on a one-year study of the needs of language teachers conducted by CASLT in 2004, statements about the Western provinces and rural areas painted a less than positive picture:

The most often cited reason that core French is being delivered by unqualified teachers is a lack of specialist French teachers. Lack of training and support for these teachers is stated as a grave concern relating to the quality of the program being delivered. (p. 1)

CASLT’s findings corroborated those of earlier studies in British Columbia (for example, Carr, 1999; Daneault, 1999; Lewis, 1995; Swansborough, 1993). CASLT underscored the need to revitalize core French programs and, in particular, to focus on developing teachers’ language competency to enhance their confidence in teaching.

Other studies have called for improvements in FSL teacher pre-service and continuing education (for example, Lapkin, Arnott, & Mady, 2006; MacFarlane & Hart, 2002; Ponsart & Lewis, 2008; Salvatori & MacFarlane, 2009). Some studies identify the need for proficiency standards (Bayliss & Vignola, 2000, 2007; CPF, 2004; MacFarlane & Hart, 2002; Rehorick, Dicks, Kristmanson, & Cogswell, 2006), with particular urgency among French immersion teachers (Bournot-Trites, 2008; Veilleux & Bournot-Trites, 2005). There are also current and projected shortages of French teachers, especially in smaller districts (CPF, 2004; MacFarlane & Hart, 2002; Grimmett & Echols, 2001). The most often cited reason for these, according to MacFarlane and Hart (2002), is “an inadequate supply of new grads from faculties of education” (p. 10).

## Pre-service Teacher Education in British Columbia

Pre-service teachers enroll in a Bachelor of Education program either at the University of British Columbia (UBC), University of Victoria (UVic), or a professional development program at Simon Fraser University (SFU) and are then certified by the BC College of Teachers. There is no required course in second language methodology in these programs even though Grade 5 to 8 core French is mandated for all British Columbia students and has a fully developed curriculum document with prescribed learning outcomes, funding formulae for district budgets based on numbers of core French students, and an expectation for reporting student performance with a letter grade on report cards.

A small proportion of teacher candidates enter a specialized program in French education at UBC and SFU. The candidates must have taken upper level university French language and literature courses, are screened for oral and written language proficiency in a French Language Appraisal<sup>4</sup>, classified into core or immersion according to their assessed level, and enter a specialist cohort that takes its coursework in French and undertakes practica in core or immersion classrooms. Practica are organized by placing candidates in classrooms where the cooperating teacher has experience as a teacher and mentor and has usually been recommended by a school or district administrator—often the French coordinator. Core French placements are usually arranged with a generalist teacher who teaches French to at least his or her class and often to another class as well.

In September 2007, UBC enrolled 45 elementary and secondary French immersion and core French specialists out of 783 teacher education registrants in total. It also enrolled 17 teacher candidates in its new FLAGS program for elementary core French generalists. In the same year, SFU enrolled 56 elementary and secondary French immersion and core French specialists out of a total of 522 teacher candidates. UVic does not have a specialist program for elementary core French or immersion, although secondary teacher candidates may elect to teach French as a major or minor teaching area. This means that the majority of BC's elementary and middle years teacher candidates graduate with no coursework in second language methodology. The few who have specialized formation in FSL education are hired into immersion positions whether they have done their practicum in core or immersion classrooms. The fact that their proficiency level is high enough to qualify for the specialist cohort and take coursework in French, combined with teacher shortages in French immersion programs, results in their being hired in the area of greatest need and, some would argue, valuing. What this means for the field is that each year almost no new core French specialist teachers fill core French positions. In an effort to address the lack of core French expertise in

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<sup>4</sup> The French Language Appraisal (FLA) comprises an oral and a written part. The oral part includes ten questions about short practical situations and a role-play. The written part includes a dictation, ten questions about short practical situations, a composition, and a cloze test (text with blanks to fill in). The competencies evaluated are linguistic, sociolinguistic, discursive, strategic, and receptive. (For more information, refer to *Appréciation du niveau de français: Livret explicatif*, <http://lled.educ.ubc.ca/pdf/livret.pdf>)

the field, FLAGS' first cohort in 2007 had 17 candidates and has continued with the same number in 2008 and 2009<sup>5</sup>.

Most of the candidates had taken high school core French to Grade 11 or 12. Ten had also taken one first-year university French course, and three had taken a second-year course. Three had been in French immersion in elementary school, one of whom continued to Grade 12 in immersion while the others switched to core French. Five had travelled and/or worked in French locales (in Europe or Eastern Canada), and two had actually qualified for and started the BEd program in the French specialist cohort but asked to move to FLAGS because they preferred to do most of their coursework in English and liked the focus on core French rather than the combined focus of immersion and core in the specialist cohort. Of the 17 candidates, three were male and 14 were female. Their ages ranged from 22 to 53 years.

### **Theoretical Perspectives**

Heller (2001) suggests that, in a context of globalization, languages are now viewed less as symbols of national identity and more as economic commodities. They are perceived as a means to improve educational and vocational opportunities. She posits that forces related to globalization are causing “contradictions between language as a mark of authenticity and belonging or identity, and language as an acquirable technical skill and marketable commodity” (p. 47). Seen in this light, access to education (and teacher education) in French can be perceived as a resource worth acquiring. Access into a specialized teacher education program had, to this point, been limited by course and proficiency requirements to a small number of candidates, and now there was an additional opportunity that some saw as highly desirable.

Competition for resources is key to Bourdieu's (1977; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977) theory of social hierarchization. The objective of human activity, according to Bourdieu, is the accumulation of different kinds of capital. This activity takes place in “fields,” a term he uses to refer to institutions and conventions and their dynamic relationships within a given enterprise. Hierarchy and conflict characterize every field as actors struggle for position and capital within the constraints of the social world. Individuals exercise agency, the ability to control their own actions to differing degrees, but the degree to which they can bring about change are often limited. Applying Bourdieu's economic metaphor, Norton (2000) explains learners' investment in a second language as follows:

If learners invest in a second language, they do so with the understanding that they will acquire a wider range of symbolic and material resources that will in turn increase the value of their cultural capital. Learners expect or hope to have a good return on that investment—a return that will give them access to hitherto unattainable resources. (p. 10)

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<sup>5</sup> There are 34 applicants to the 2010-11 FLAGS program as at the time of publication of this article.

From this perspective, one might suppose that learners, or in this case teacher candidates, entering the FLAGS program, hoped that future benefits would accrue to their investment in language and methodology learning.

Norton and Toohey (2001) extend the notion of benefits to language learners as including an “enhance[d] ... conception of themselves and their desires for the future” (p. 312). Drawing on research each conducted with individual second language learners, the authors maintain that attention to social practices in language learning contexts is necessary to understand “the ways in which learners exercise their agency in forming and reforming their identities in those contexts” (p. 318). The intertwining of identity and investment—whereby candidates invested not only in the program and their future but in their identities as French second language teachers as well—emerged in initial interactions between candidates and the author and provided a theoretical lens with which to analyze the feedback collected midway through the program.

### **Methodology**

The key questions explored in this study were why students chose FLAGS as their option in becoming a teacher and what they hoped to achieve as a result. The questions were asked informally before the program began (as soon as candidates were accepted and prior to attending the summer immersion experience) and formally at the program midpoint. Additionally, the author asked candidates to share their insights about the program in terms of what was going well and what could be improved. A case study format was used to learn about one group’s experience during the first year of UBC’s pilot program.

Following Stake’s (1995) vision of case study that one comes to understand a case by watching closely and thinking deeply about it, the author talked frequently with students (in classes, outside of classes, and during a portion of the summer immersion period) and recorded initial reflections, class meeting notes and candidates’ written feedback. There were elements related to the case’s “extrasituational context”, defined by Goodwin & Duranti (1992, in Dyson & Genishi, 2005, p. 8) as “the larger field of historical, economic and cultural forces” that exerted an influence on the case. Certain market forces related to teacher employment in BC, described earlier in this article, played a part in bringing candidates together and also influenced the understandings that emerged from the study.

Prior to commencing the program, the author, who is also the program coordinator, asked each candidate about his or her educational background and why he or she had chosen the FLAGS cohort. Candidates were advised at this point that, as members of a pilot program, their feedback would be sought at several points in the year; informally throughout and as part of a study at the midpoint. They were also told that, aside from these initial questions about academic and linguistic preparation for the program, any request for feedback would be given with the option of not responding, responding in writing anonymously, or responding in writing with their names attached. They were told that their comments, with or without name, would not be shared in this study without signed consent.

In order to explore FLAGS candidates’ perspectives about the program, all members of the first cohort were invited at mid-program (February 2008) to provide written feedback

about their experience to that point. The format was open-ended; that is, there was no set of questions but, rather, an invitation to share any insights they had gained, comments about positive or negative aspects of the program, and suggestions for the future. At this point, they also formalized comments they had shared verbally prior to starting the program about their reasons for wanting to be in the cohort. Participation in this stage of providing feedback was optional and submissions could be anonymous. All members of the cohort elected to submit feedback and all chose to include their names. Consent forms were then provided to candidates willing to allow the author to include excerpts in this article with the proviso that they would be given the opportunity to review and approve, amend, or reject any citations used. All consented to be cited, and only one minor amendment was required. Even though they submitted their feedback directly to the author, whose role as FLAGS coordinator might have influenced them to cast the program in a positive light, they knew that, especially in the pilot year, frank feedback was needed. It should be noted that comments about aspects of the program needing improvement were included in most submissions.

The author highlighted and coded comments that related to reasons for entering the program, perceptions about the teacher education program in general, and the field of FSL education in particular, and specific points about the FLAGS program: positive, negative, and/or suggestions. Certain topics emerged through repeated instances, such as seeing oneself as a French teacher, belonging to a community of language learners, feeling empowered to make a difference, reactivating a love of French, and increasing employability. The themes of identity and investment, uncovered in the earliest conversations the previous summer, held fast in the midpoint submissions, but, to test their place as overarching categories, the author summarized key comments for each theme and shared them with the candidates in a meeting where she invited feedback regarding her method of categorization. She also listed their recommendations for discussion purposes. This was an attempt to engage them in a process to which Stake (1995) refers as “trying to pull it apart and put it back together again more meaningfully—analysis and synthesis in direct interpretation” (p. 75). Candidates corroborated the identified topics and overarching themes and generally agreed with the group’s most commonly suggested recommendations for the program in the future.

The following is an account of FLAGS candidates’ experience during the first year of the new program and some perspectives about why they enrolled, what they hoped to achieve, and their recommendations for improving the program.

### **FLAGS Teacher Candidates’ Perspectives**

Among the reasons stated for choosing FLAGS were a long-held love of French, a desire to teach it and positively influence future learners of the language, and the hope of increasing employability by developing skills over and above their generalist peers. This background was noted before the program commenced and then reviewed at the program midpoint. Certain themes emerged from candidates’ comments that related to their identity as a French teacher (something they had not thought possible before), investment in that identity, and what it might mean on the job market. Many stated how surprised and pleased they were to find an option in which they could develop their interest in French and become a

core French teacher even though most lacked the necessary prerequisite courses or high level of proficiency required in the traditional specialist program. Candidates invested themselves in the program even before it officially started by embarking on a summer immersion program in Québec (superseding employment and other commitments for five weeks) and saw a direct link between this investment of time, money, and energy and what they hoped to gain as a result of the program.

### **Investment in becoming a language teacher**

FLAGS candidates exercised agency in their mission to become language teachers through their early enrolment in the program (in order to qualify for a federal bursary) and commitment to a summer immersion experience prior to entering the program. These were steps over and above what other cohorts' candidates do to enter the BEd program (and, as mentioned earlier, they relinquished summer employment income in the process). They did so with the end in mind: not only did they want to become teachers, they wanted to become core French teachers.

In response to the question that had been asked when candidates first applied to the program and again at the midpoint, some indicated that FLAGS represented an easier way to become a French teacher than the traditional specialist route:

I chose the FLAGS program because it allowed me to apply to a French program without having done a degree in French. (Victoria)

I knew that I wanted to incorporate French somehow into my Education degree but I also knew that my French was not strong enough for a specialization in core or immersion. (Adrienne)

Others were pleasantly surprised that there was a program that valued and allowed them to develop their interest and background in French even though they lacked the prerequisite coursework and language proficiency required to enter the specialist cohort.

The program seemed far too good to be true. I had always assumed that I would have needed to have an in-depth French background in order to pursue teaching French. (Alexis)

I thought if I was an elementary school teacher I'd love to be able to teach French. But since I did not go beyond French 12, I never thought it'd be possible to learn to teach French unless I spent years immersing myself in French culture before applying to the Education program. So when I saw this program, I thought it was perfect for me. People who have basic French or an interest in French can learn to teach Core French. (Simone)

For at least one candidate, the program distinguished UBC from other institutions (closer to home) she might have attended:

The FLAGS cohort is the reason that I came to UBC instead of continuing my education at UNBC in Prince George. If I had wanted to be a generalist, I could have gotten that at many other universities. (Candice)

There were, clearly, instrumental reasons for enrolment in that candidates expected a return on their investment in the form of increased employability. To achieve this, they hoped to stand apart from other teacher candidates in generalist cohorts.

I am thankful to have this opportunity to acquire a “specialization” that will improve my chances of obtaining employment. (Faith)

I thought having the skills to teach Core French might be advantageous when the time came to apply for a teaching position. (Alina)

It was important to me to do some level of French because of the edge it would give me over all of the other generalists. (Adrienne)

The process of becoming a language teacher, as does becoming a teacher in general, involves shifting one’s identity to assume a new role. FLAGS candidates undertook this process as part of a cohort of similarly intentioned colleagues. There was, therefore, a strong current within their comments related to what it meant to become a language teacher.

### **Identity as a language teacher**

Candidates entering a teacher education program undergo a transformative experience as they try out and take on the role of teacher, not unlike what Norton and Toohey (2001) refer to as “forming and reforming their identities” (p. 318), or Fettes (2005) describes as “the discovery of a vocation in both inner and outer worlds simultaneously” (p. 4). It is an intensely personal experience but takes place in the company of others. At UBC, as in many universities, teacher candidates are grouped in cohorts that take most of their courses together. The sense of community that this engenders develops early and generally serves as a support structure throughout the year. The FLAGS community began earlier than other cohorts because they met each other in July in Québec; meaning that, when the BEd program started in September, candidates had already established a significant bond. Part of that bond involved the shared language immersion experience and part was being a member of a group with a common goal. Several candidates spoke of not having previously considered themselves as potential French teachers and how the cohort provided both a context and catalyst for their emerging identity as a French teacher, for example:

Even if I was in a different cohort and decided on my own to take the French methodology course, I highly doubt I would have been willing to teach French in my practicum. I think I needed that push, not because I doubted my French, but because I was not able to imagine myself as a French teacher. (Seda)

Reactivating or enriching one's love of French was another element about which many candidates commented. It was, in fact, a key reason behind their attraction to the program and, even if their proficiency levels and backgrounds were varied, they shared this common passion.

I was anxious to surround myself in a French environment again. And I was even more enthusiastic when I encountered students that were as eager as I was to continue to learn French. (Alexis)

We get the opportunity to work with other candidates who are at varying levels of French. I'm glad to be learning more about French as well as how to teach it even though I'm not completely fluent. (Linda)

The summer immersion experience provided a dynamic boost to their language learning and helped reinforce their goal of becoming a French teacher.

It had been roughly ten years since I had spoken French regularly and this brought everything back. (Adrian)

If it was not for the program, especially the summer experience, I do not think I would have ever realized the potential I had to communicate in and teach French. (Mary)

The opportunity to reawaken one's love of French through the *Explore!* program and extend one's language learning during the FLAGS year was valued by the candidates. This was most evident in the two courses taken over and above the regular BEd program: French Methodology and French Language for Teachers<sup>6</sup>. In both courses, the enthusiasm for using

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<sup>6</sup> French Language for Teachers (EDUC 490) is now a 2-credit course that is part of the FLAGS BEd program. Its earliest iteration in the first year of the program (2007-8) was as a conversation class that took place off campus, conceived and delivered by two veteran FSL teachers, Marguie Nordman and Marion Stroet. The 90-minute lessons comprised classroom scenarios, songs, dialogues, discussions and skits designed to use French in ways that would develop oral fluency but also be usable in classroom contexts. The present course is patterned on the earlier format but with an additional oral proficiency self-assessment component involving pre- and post-recordings, analysis and reflection.

French and developing their language teaching repertoire was palpable. Candidates' comments showed that they grew linguistically and professionally and developed confidence as a result.

FLAGS is very empowering for me and probably for others as well. It has thus far enabled me to feel confident in my own French and in going out into the field to teach it. (Linda)

Research supports the importance of a French environment for improving linguistic proficiency (Bayliss & Vignola, 2000) and the ongoing need for FSL teacher language learning (Bayliss & Vignola, 2007; Salvatori, 2007; Turnbull, 2000). The introduction to the linguistically and methodologically based professional development experienced in FLAGS will lead, hopefully, to career-long learning.

As education students, we are supposed to be lifelong learners, and this program gives us the motivation to be continually searching for opportunities to improve our language and teaching skills. (Diana)

FLAGS candidates understood that they were preparing to take on the role of elementary core French teacher in a field where there are concerns about program and teaching quality. Possibly the most encouraging aspect noted in the candidates' perspectives linked to the *raison d'être* of the program; that is, to make a difference in the field. For some, it was this desire that motivated them to enter the program; for others, it became their goal as they participated in the program.

For me personally I know that, after five years of studying French in a high-school setting and being unable to string a simple sentence together, it was frustrating to say the least. I see this as an obvious problem with the way French is taught in BC and, in my opinion, something has to change. I want to be a part of this change. There is a lack in the BC school system of qualified core French teachers so I hope to be a part of this group. (Marie-Claire)

I have three children who experienced core French and have seen firsthand the poor quality of instruction that is given in many schools and, therefore, I understood the need for the FLAGS program. (Faith)

My future plans/goals using my love of everything French are to help revive the core French programmes we currently have in BC elementary schools. (Dani)

### **The “G.S.” (Global Study) side of FLAGS**

The FLAGS program takes place, for the most part, on the UBC campus and in Lower Mainland BC schools. In the original conceptualization of FLAGS, it was hoped that some students could undertake a three-week practicum in a francophone locale following the ten-week final practicum conducted locally<sup>7</sup>. The difficulty is finding placements that will provide the right amount of linguistic challenge without being overwhelming. During the first year of the program, one of the FLAGS candidates did a mini-practicum in an English immersion classroom in Québec City. Teaching francophone children in English and conversing with staff, parents, and community members in French allowed him to feel confident and challenged in good measure.

I have learned a lot about another system, another grade and another culture. Supervising on the playground, participating in the year end talent show, and meeting Francophone parents were all important in my development as a teacher . . . . The ability to speak French outside the school context was an excellent opportunity. . . . Each time I spoke with someone directly I realized the importance of authentic language tasks. . . . I felt so fortunate to be part of this pilot project. It was an opportunity that I will never forget and has helped me grow professionally as a teacher. (Adrian)

In the second year of FLAGS (2008-09), five candidates undertook a mini-practicum in Québec City, Tracadie-Sheila, New Brunswick, and Montreal in English immersion and intensive English classrooms. It is hoped that placements in other francophone contexts in Canada and throughout the world will occur in the future.

### **Discussion**

Candidates were attracted to FLAGS because not only was their existing proficiency and experience in French recognized, but so too was their energy and desire to become a French teacher. Some were aware of the state of core French education in BC before entering the program and others learned during; in either case, they wanted and felt able to make a difference. Working individually and collectively, empowered by opportunities to learn and use what they learned in the program, they transformed themselves into beginning core French teachers.

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<sup>7</sup> UBC has an established policy of granting a small proportion of extended practica settings such as Science World and the Vancouver Aquarium as well as in a few international locations such as Mexico and Switzerland. These are three-week practicum placements that follow the ten-week final practicum conducted locally. (Normally, the final practicum comprises 13 weeks conducted locally.) Candidates may apply if they have demonstrated a high level of achievement in all course work and practica.

One of the reasons for investing in the FLAGS program was increasing employability by distinguishing oneself as having additional competencies in a field of generalists. Certainly, competition for teaching positions is real and warranted. Despite predictions of teacher shortages (for example, Grimmett & Echols, 2001), there are conflicting messages for candidates about oversupply in some regions and subject areas and shortages in others (for example, BC Teachers Federation, 2001, 2006; BC Statistics, 2000; McIntyre, 2005; Ontario College of Teachers, 2004). There are consistent messages, however, about the need for FSL teachers (CPF, 2004, 2007; Lapkin, Arnott, & Mady, 2006; MacFarlane & Hart, 2002; Ponsart & Lewis, 2008). If one probes the latter, one finds that the need for immersion teachers overshadows the core French side of the FSL equation. Despite the concerns that have been expressed by BC language coordinators, district administrators and others in provincial and national reports (cited earlier) about the poor quality of elementary core French instruction and the need to hire well-prepared core French candidates, it remains to be seen if school and district administrators will make this a priority.

Some districts, such as Surrey (BC's largest district), hire core French candidates as relief teachers at the elementary level. In most districts, however, core French is taught by generalists, and even those who have the background to teach it must fit into a school's overall staffing needs and priorities. What happens in many schools is that expertise in various curriculum areas is shared within schools through a process termed "platooning," whereby a teacher with expertise in, for example, music, teaches it to his or her own class and to one or more colleagues' classes in exchange for those colleagues teaching, for example, French or physical education<sup>8</sup> to his or her class. This process is not universally used, however, and a generalist model applies as default whereby teachers deliver most or all subjects to their own class.

The generalist model aligns with the BC Teachers Federation's philosophy that elementary teachers are able to teach all subjects. According to President Irene Lanziger, when questioned about whether core French teachers should be able to speak French, "There is such a thing as a generalist and a generalist can't be a specialist in everything" (in Steffenhagen, 2010). If one considers the BC College of Teachers (BCCT)'s *Standards for the Education, Competence and Professional Conduct of Educators*, it is interesting to note that Standard 6 states: "Educators understand the curricular, conceptual and methodological foundations of education and of the subject areas they teach" (BCCT, 2010) even though most certified elementary and middle years BEd graduates have not taken a French methodology course. A recent article in the BCCT's *Official Magazine* (2009) asks the questions: "Should fluency in French be required of elementary and middle school teachers?" and "Given the importance of second language instruction and its place in the curriculum, is it time for the BC College of Teachers to change its requirements" (p. 6). This growing awareness of the problem created when FSL teachers lack methodological and linguistic preparation bodes well for change. It will take the combined effort of the province's Ministry of Education to revise the secondary graduation requirements to extend the length of

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<sup>8</sup> These subjects are used as examples because, in BC elementary schools, they are generally taught twice per week.

mandated language study from the present four years to six or seven years of sustained study, for faculties of Education to include a second language methodology course for all elementary and middle years candidates, for the BC College of Teachers to consider what is required for a teacher candidate to meet its standards, and for school districts to value the teaching of a second/additional language in their hiring and staffing priorities.

One of the undercurrents in candidates' comments and, indeed, in their educational journey was the notion that their language proficiency was dynamic rather than a fixed point. This idea of continuous language learning is widely endorsed (for example, Grosjean, 2002; Kelly & Grenfell, 2004; MacFarlane, 2003; Ponsart & Lewis, 2008; Rehorick, Dicks, Kristmanson, & Cogswell, 2006). The *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (Council of Europe, 2001) and *European Language Portfolio* (Council of Europe, 2000) is predicated on this dynamic view of developing linguistic proficiency. Not only does one's linguistic proficiency level represent a point on a continuum; so, too, do teaching competencies. *The European Profile for Language Teacher Education* (Kelly, Grenfell, Allan, Kriza, & McEvoy, 2004) and *Portfolio canadien des langues pour enseignant(e)s* (CASLT, Draft), recently developed for a Canadian context, describe the multi-faceted nature of being a language teacher in terms of key knowledge and understandings, strategies and skills, and values. In both documents, there is an emphasis on the continuous and dynamic nature of building quality and capacity. CASLT is also exploring various pathways to support FSL teachers in developing common understandings, goals and tools throughout their career (Salvatori & MacFarlane, 2009). It is hoped that pre-service programs, such as FLAGS, will lead into this larger network of professional learning.

### **Challenges and Implications**

Students in the FLAGS program were conscious of needing to continue their language learning after the summer immersion experience and during their 12-month BEd program year, even though the demands of the program were high. One language course in Term 1 and one French methodology course in Term 2 provided a minimum amount of time to use their French. Even though occasional gatherings with the French specialist cohort took place, additional opportunities to speak French, preferably in informal settings, were needed.

Another challenge articulated by candidates was the lack of expert modeling of core French pedagogy in the field:

I think my practicum simply shows the reality of the state of core French in our schools. It has been disappointing in some ways. (Alina)

Finding excellent elementary core French teachers who are also skilled mentors is difficult as has been explained earlier in this article; however, there are some wonderful FSL teachers and mentors in the field and, wherever possible, FLAGS and French specialist candidates are matched with them.

The greatest challenge, and one that requires further study, is how to increase space and valuing for core French teaching expertise in the BC school system. Will the extra steps taken by FLAGS candidates to develop their linguistic and methodological skills result in increased teaching opportunities in the field? Will they be able to put these skills into practice in ways that enhance elementary and middle schools' core French programs? These questions could be pursued with further research that tracks FLAGS candidates in their early years of teaching.

### Conclusion

The need for renewal in the field of core French education has been underscored in recent British Columbian and Canadian studies. Several BC school districts are tackling the challenge with university-district courses and programs that couple methodology with language-learning experiences (Carr, 2007). At least one BC school district has conducted a comprehensive review of its core French program in an effort to build capacity and quality (Horban & Taddei, 2008). One of the review's key objectives is that core French should be "treated as a mandated and valued program" and that it should be "taught by teachers with some degree of language competency and methodological background" (p. 5). CASLT has recently undertaken a language teacher portfolio project that focuses on developing linguistic and pedagogical proficiencies and cultural knowledge and understanding. The draft resource document, *Le portfolio canadien des langues pour enseignant(e)s*, (CASLT, Draft) has been piloted in French cohorts at several Canadian universities, including FLAGS at UBC. An integral component in this and other portfolio projects is the *Dossier* in which users record their language learning experiences, competencies, achievements and action plans, thus showing the dynamic and ever-developing nature of language proficiencies and professional learning. A program such as FLAGS is but a starting point in a core French teacher's journey, so it is important that ongoing structures support and extend this initial formation.

It is clear that combining linguistically and culturally rich experiences such as an introductory summer immersion program with a teacher education program that highlights language teaching methodology and language development can play a role in renewing the field of core French education. It starts by inviting those who are interested in teaching core French but have, for various reasons, not enrolled in a specialist program, to invest extra time and effort to develop linguistic and methodological background. For some this is an instrumental equation that they hope will result in increased employability; for others, it is a chance to make a difference in a field that needs improvement; and for many, the experience of becoming a French teacher is transformative. Action must be taken by various organizations within the education system if lasting change is to occur in the field, but the FLAGS model for core French teacher education is a step towards renewal.

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