

## **Refugee-Background Students in Canadian French Immersion Programs: Exploring the Perspectives and Ideologies of Educators**

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### **Abstract**

French immersion (FI) programs are becoming increasingly culturally and linguistically diverse as a result of growing migration to Canada. In the present mixed-methods study, I explore the perspectives and ideologies of teachers, principals, and central office staff in eight school divisions in Saskatchewan, Manitoba, and Alberta with respect to refugee-background students in FI programs. Through the triangulation of survey responses (N=126) and interviews (N=40), I examine perspectives pertaining to four themes: 1) suitability of FI for refugee-background students; 2) language learning; 3) challenges facing refugee-background students; and 4) supports and resources in FI programs. Adopting the theoretical perspective of sociolinguistics for change, I discuss three underlying ideologies shaping the perspectives of FI educators across the Canadian Prairies: 1) English-first ideologies; 2) deficit ideologies; and 3) ideological tensions between inclusion and support.

### **Résumé**

Les programmes d'immersion française (IF) deviennent plus diversifiés sur le plan culturel et linguistique grâce à la migration grandissante au Canada. Dans la présente étude à méthodes mixtes, nous explorons les perspectives et les idéologies des enseignants, des directeurs et du personnel du bureau central dans huit conseils scolaires en Saskatchewan, au Manitoba et en Alberta par rapport aux élèves réfugiés en IF. En triangulant les réponses au questionnaire (n=126) et les entrevues (n=40), nous examinons les perspectives sur quatre thèmes : 1) la pertinence de l'IF pour les élèves réfugiés; 2) l'apprentissage langagier; 3) les défis des élèves réfugiés; et 4) les soutiens et les ressources en IF. Adoptant la perspective théorique de la sociolinguistique pour le changement, nous discutons de trois idéologies sous-jacentes des éducatrices et des éducateurs à travers les prairies canadiennes: 1) les idéologies anglo-dominantes; 2) les idéologies déficitaires; et 3) les tensions idéologiques entre l'inclusion et le soutien.

## **Refugee-Background Students in Canadian French Immersion Programs: Exploring the Perspectives and Ideologies of Educators**

### **Introduction**

Historically, French immersion (FI) programs across Canada have served predominantly English-speaking, Canadian-born students in their pursuit of bilingual education in the country's two official languages, French and English. Whereas FI programs have traditionally privileged white, Canadian-born, and English-speaking families to the detriment of racialized, newcomer, and multilingual families, such programs are becoming more culturally and linguistically diverse as a result of increasing global migration to Canada. Researchers have examined the experiences of multilingual families and learners in FI programs, including the motivation of such families to learn French and English, the language learning outcomes of multilingual students, and the perspectives of educators regarding the inclusion of such learners (Bourgoin & Dicks, 2019; Dagenais & Berron, 2001; Dagenais & Jacquet, 2000; Dagenais & Moore, 2008; Davis et al., 2019, 2021; Knouzi & Mady, 2017; Mady, 2007, 2015). Nevertheless, researchers have not focused on the experiences of refugee-background learners in FI programs; this represents a critical gap in the scholarship insofar as the number of refugee-background learners arriving in Canada is growing rapidly and their bilingual education experiences remain largely unexamined.

In the present paper, I illustrate the findings of a mixed-methods study exploring the perspectives of FI educators with respect to refugee-background students in eight school boards across the Canadian Prairies. First, I begin by introducing key terms and definitions for this study. Second, I offer a literature review focusing on research examining educators' perspectives pertaining to multilingual learners in FI programs across Canada. Third, I situate this study within the paradigm of critical theory and the theoretical framework of sociolinguistics for change. Fourth, I describe the research questions, methodology, and participants that shaped the present inquiry. Fifth, I present results from this study with respect to the four themes of suitability, learning, challenges, and resources. Finally, I conclude by discussing the ideologies underlying the findings and by offering recommendations to school boards to better include and empower refugee-background students and all multilingual learners in FI programs in Canada.

### **Multilingual Learners and Refugee-Background Students: Shaping Understandings**

Researchers have used a variety of terms over the years to refer to students whose home languages are neither English nor French in Canada, including *minority-language students*, *immigrant-background students*, *English language learners*, and *allophones*. Whereas such terms have been useful for examining cultural and linguistic diversity in FI programs, they also have shortcomings, such as unclear definitions and deficit-based understandings. For example, do the above terms include Canadian-born students and newcomer learners? What should we make of students who speak multiple home languages, including official languages, immigrant languages, heritage languages, and language varieties that may not be recognized as standard? Is there a level of English language proficiency at which a student ceases to be an English language learner? How do speakers of Indigenous languages fit within such categories? In the context of ongoing

settler colonialism in Canada, who is truly immigrant-background? For the purposes of this study, I use *multilingual learners* as an overarching term to include all learners, Canadian-born and newcomers, who speak multiple languages and language varieties in Canada. To be sure, this term is also imperfect, and multilingualism is itself a notoriously difficult concept to define (Blommaert & Backus, 2013; Marshall & Moore, 2018). Nevertheless, I believe that *multilingual learners* emphasizes a strengths-based understanding of such learners by recognizing their diverse linguistic repertoires and language learning resources, rejecting deficit-based conceptual frameworks that define learners by languages they are deemed to speak insufficiently.

Moreover, it is important to understand the terms *refugee* and *refugee-background students*. Drawing from the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees, the Office of the United Nations Human Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR, 2001) offered the following definition of a refugee: “A refugee is someone who has been forced to flee his or her country because of persecution, war or violence. A refugee has a well-founded fear of persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality, political opinion or membership in a particular social group.” The term *refugee-background student* is increasingly widespread in refugee studies literature and refers to students who have refugee experiences (Ghadi et al., 2019; Kikulwe et al., 2021). In this paper, I use the term refugee-background learners to acknowledge that although such learners have lived experience as refugees, such experiences do not represent their entire identities; rather, this is just one facet of their complex, dynamic identities (Massing et al., 2023).

### **Multilingual Learners in FI: Educators’ Perspectives**

In light of the growing cultural and linguistic diversity in FI programs across Canada, researchers have examined different areas of inquiry pertaining to multilingual learners in FI. First, scholars have found that multilingual families are often highly motivated to learn both French and English in Canada. Multilingual parents often believe that official-language bilingualism will offer employment opportunities for their children (Dagenais, 2003; Davis et al., 2019). Additionally, many multilingual parents are drawn to FI programs because they perceive French-English bilingualism as an essential element of Canadian identity and because they value multilingualism in all forms (Byrd Clark, 2008; Dagenais & Berron, 2001; Dagenais & Jacquet, 2000; Davis et al., 2019, 2021). Furthermore, multilingual learners themselves are often highly motivated and engaged in FI programs, especially when their plurilingual literacy practices are valued in the classroom (Dagenais, 2008; Dagenais & Moore, 2008; Prasad, 2015; Sabatier et al., 2013).

In terms of language learning and achievement, researchers have found that multilingual learners often develop strong language proficiency in French and English in FI programs. Turnbull et al. (2001) noted that multilingual learners in FI developed similar English language literacy abilities and mathematics skills as English-speaking students. Moreover, Moore (2010) observed strong literacy skills and metalinguistic awareness amongst multilingual learners in FI programs. Mady (2015) and Knouzi and Mady (2017) compared the French and English language learning of different student groups in FI programs and found that the newcomer, multilingual learners outperformed Canadian-born, multilingual and English-speaking students in French language proficiency. Additionally, Bourgoin and Dicks (2019) explored the French and English reading abilities of seven Canadian-born, multilingual learners and found that such students developed similar or

superior skills compared to their English-speaking peers. In summary, the research demonstrates that multilingual learners – and newcomer, multilingual learners in particular – tend to develop strong French and English abilities in FI programs.

Notwithstanding the motivation of multilingual families and learners toward learning French and English in Canada and the positive research evidence with respect to the French and English language learning of such students, many educators believe that FI programs are inappropriate for multilingual learners. In a recent literature review paper, I have synthesized research examining diverse areas of inquiry pertaining to multilingual learners in FI programs, including language education policy, educators' perspectives, motivation, and learning (Davis, 2023). In the present literature review, I focus specifically on previous research investigating the perspectives and ideologies of educators with respect to multilingual learners in FI programs. For the purposes of this paper, the term *perspective* refers to an explicitly stated opinion or point of view; in contrast, the term *ideology* refers to an implicit, underlying, and often unexamined belief system in which the perspective is rooted.

### **Teachers' Perspectives**

Research examining educators' perspectives demonstrates that many teachers believe that FI programs are unsuitable for multilingual learners in Canada. In a survey of 1,305 French language educators across Canada, including FI educators, teachers indicated that their single greatest challenge was diversity in the classroom, specifically naming the growing number of multilingual learners (Lapkin et al., 2006). In a seminal study in this area, Mady (2012) found that several teachers in Ontario espoused the view that FI programs were unsuitable for multilingual learners who would be learning French and English simultaneously. Moreover, Mady (2013) found that FI teachers were less likely than core French teachers to agree that multilingual learners should be included in French language programs, concluding, "French immersion respondents were less supportive of inclusion than their core French teaching counterparts" (p. 51). Subsequently, Mady (2016) explored the perspectives of FI kindergarten teachers and observed that many kindergarten teachers believed that multilingual learners should sometimes be excluded from such programs. Similarly, Arnett and Mady (2018) found that many early-career teachers believed that multilingual learners and students with learning difficulties should sometimes be exempted from French language programs, including FI programs.

Whereas much of the research examining teachers' perspectives pertaining to the inclusion of multilingual learners in FI programs has been conducted in Ontario, researchers have also explored the perspectives of FI educators throughout other provinces of Canada. Roy (2015) explored the discourses and ideologies of FI educators in Alberta with respect to several important themes and found that some FI teachers believed that multilingual learners must master their first languages before learning additional languages. In her critical analysis, Roy (2015) concluded that the perspectives of FI teachers reflected underlying ideologies pertaining to language learning and bilingualism. Moreover, Bourgoin (2016) examined the beliefs of FI teachers in New Brunswick with respect to inclusion and found that some teachers believed that FI programs were unsuitable for multilingual learners and for students with learning challenges. Specifically, Bourgoin (2016) found that educators held unsubstantiated beliefs about the ideal language learner, as well as about the suitability of FI programs for multilingual learners and for students with

special needs. More recently, I explored the perspectives of FI teachers and principals in Saskatchewan as they pertain to multilingual learners and encountered the widespread myth that English language proficiency was required for success in FI programs (Davis, 2019). Furthermore, some teachers espoused the view that FI programs might be appropriate for some multilingual, newcomer learners, but would be too difficult for refugee-background learners from Syria insofar as such families were likely facing significant challenges adapting to life in Canada (Davis et al., 2019, 2021). Thus, Davis et al. (2019) found that the perspectives of educators were shaped by several unexamined, unconscious ideologies with respect to multilingual learners and language learning. Specifically, many FI educators were influenced by English-first ideologies, espousing the view that multilingual learners should focus on English instead of French in Saskatchewan (Davis, 2019). Furthermore, several FI educators shared perspectives that were rooted in deficit ideologies about refugee-background students and language learning (Davis et al., 2021). Evidently, there remains an important disconnect between the overwhelmingly positive findings with respect to the strong motivation and language learning of multilingual learners in FI programs and the exclusionary perspectives of some teachers.

### **Principals' Perspectives**

The perspectives of school principals pertaining to multilingual learners in French language programs are especially important to understand, insofar as principals often serve as gatekeepers in such programs. Researchers have found that the perspectives and gatekeeping practices of principals in French language programs toward multilingual learners are often based on personal beliefs and experiences, rather than on research evidence (Arnett et al., 2014; Arnett & Turnbull, 2007; Mady, 2007). It is important to note, however, that few studies exploring principals' perspectives have been conducted in FI programs. Therefore, Mady and Turnbull (2012) called for further research examining this area of inquiry in FI programs across Canada.

More recently, Mady and Masson (2018) explored the beliefs of school principals with respect to multilingual learners in FI, as well as gatekeeping practices in such programs. In terms of principals' perspectives, the researchers observed several contradictory ideologies pertaining to inclusion, bilingualism, language learning, as well as discourses surrounding the ideal language learner. Notably, Mady and Masson (2018) found that many principals believed that multilingual learners should focus on learning English before French. Moreover, Mady and Masson (2018) found that FI principals adopted a variety of gatekeeping practices with respect to the inclusion of multilingual learners. This study has contributed to a greater understanding of the perspectives of FI principals. Future research is needed to further explore the complex relationship between language ideologies and gatekeeping practices in FI programs.

### **Teacher Candidates' Perspectives**

Researchers have also begun to examine the perspectives of French language teacher candidates pertaining to multilingual learners (Byrd Clark, 2010, 2011, 2012). For instance, Byrd Clark (2012) conducted ethnographic research with French language teacher candidates in Ontario and found that core French and FI programs often do not reflect the diverse linguistic repertoires in Canada today. More recently, Byrd Clark and Roy (2022)

explored the diverse perspectives and ideologies of French language teacher candidates in Ontario and Alberta to become multilingual and to implement plurilingual pedagogical approaches in recognition of the increasing diversity of French language programs across Canada. The researchers found that although “some of the student teachers’ initial perceptions reflect essentialist and mono-ideological representations of languages, cultures, and identities demonstrating a critical need for a rethinking of French language pedagogy,” teacher candidates also challenged dominant language ideologies in French language education programs (Byrd Clark & Roy, 2022, p. 265).

Additionally, Masson et al. (2022) conducted a prescient study examining the ways in which teacher candidates in two French language education programs in Ontario were being equipped to disrupt colonial, racist, and white supremacist ideologies in French language programs. Adopting an anti-biased, anti-racist lens, Masson et al. (2022) found that professors promoted intercultural competence to varying degrees and were beginning to examine racism more explicitly in their teaching. However, teacher candidates nevertheless reported feeling unprepared to address issues of equity and racism in their French language classrooms. The researchers concluded by calling for more deliberate efforts to integrate critical equity and anti-colonial approaches in French language teacher education programs across Canada.

### **Sociolinguistics for Change**

Sociolinguistics for change was first conceptualized as a theoretical framework by Auger et al. (2007) and revisited by Dalley and Roy (2008). While Auger et al. (2007) drew inspiration from critical sociolinguistics (Heller, 2002, 2003), they found that this framework was not sufficiently practical and sought to develop a theoretical perspective that would be more conducive to collaborating with teachers in order to examine and challenge language ideologies and to make practical changes in schools. In her landmark scholarship synthesizing years of research examining language ideologies in Canadian FI programs, Roy (2020) offered the following explanation of the distinction between the two overlapping, yet discrete, theoretical frameworks: “The difference between critical sociolinguistics and sociolinguistics for change is that the latter focuses on consistently monitoring discourses that transmit ideologies especially in schools. This is important because we could make decisions that would affect children in the long term” (p. 23). In summary, while this theoretical framework shares several features with critical sociolinguistics (Heller, 2002, 2003) sociolinguistics for change is distinct insofar as it was developed specifically for exploring language education contexts, collaborating closely with educators, and critically analyzing and challenging dominant and unexamined assumptions and ideologies (Roy, 2020).

Through the present research, I hope to contribute not only to a greater understanding of the perspectives and ideologies of FI educators across the Canadian Prairies, but also to advocate for transformative and systemic changes to better include, support, and empower refugee-background students and multilingual learners more broadly in FI programs throughout Canada. I seek to build upon the seminal research of Roy (2012, 2015, 2020) by further examining language ideologies in FI programs in Canada, focusing on the perspectives and ideologies of educators with respect to refugee-background learners and advancing political and pedagogical recommendations to adapt FI programs in light of the increasing cultural and linguistic diversity. While there are certainly real and significant

challenges facing many refugee-background students in Canada, I believe that educators, including myself, sometimes unknowingly espouse essentialist views rooted in deficit ideologies about refugees and language learning. Therefore, I believe that the theoretical framework of sociolinguistics for change, rooted in the research paradigm of critical inquiry, aligns auspiciously with my motivations for this study.

### **Methodology**

In the present study, I explore the perspectives and ideologies of educators with respect to refugee-background learners in FI programs across the Canadian Prairies. My reasons for conducting this research throughout the Canadian Prairies – namely, the provinces of Saskatchewan, Manitoba, and Alberta – are twofold. First, the Canadian Prairies remain underrepresented in FI research (Arnott et al., 2019). Additionally, the Canadian Prairies are a particularly English-dominant region of Canada with low levels of French-English bilingualism compared to other provinces and territories across Canada (Statistics Canada, 2023); therefore, the perspectives of FI educators in this distinct sociolinguistic context are especially interesting. For the purposes of the present paper, the following research questions have guided my inquiry:

1. What are the perspectives of educators with respect to refugee-background learners in FI programs across the Canadian Prairies?
2. What are the underlying ideologies of educators pertaining to refugee-background learners and multilingual learners in FI programs across the Canadian Prairies?

To this end, I adopted a transformative mixed-methods approach to explore the above questions within several school divisions across the Canadian Prairies (Creswell, 2014). In this section, I provide a rationale for my research approach, present an overview of the research participants, and discuss the methods employed for data collection and analysis.

### **Transformative Mixed-Methods Study**

The methodology that I have adopted for the present study is a transformative mixed-methods approach (Creswell, 2014). Transformative mixed-methods approaches are especially appropriate for research conducted within theoretical frameworks related to social justice and critical perspectives, seeking to contribute to the advancement of knowledge and to systemic social change (Creswell, 2014). The present study reflects a transformative mixed-methods approach insofar as I draw from survey and interview data concurrently in order to contribute to a greater understanding of the perspectives and ideologies of FI educators and to advocate for the inclusion and support refugee-background learners in FI programs. In summary, the present research design represents a transformative mixed-methods study, rooted in the critical theoretical framework of sociolinguistics for change within the paradigm of critical inquiry

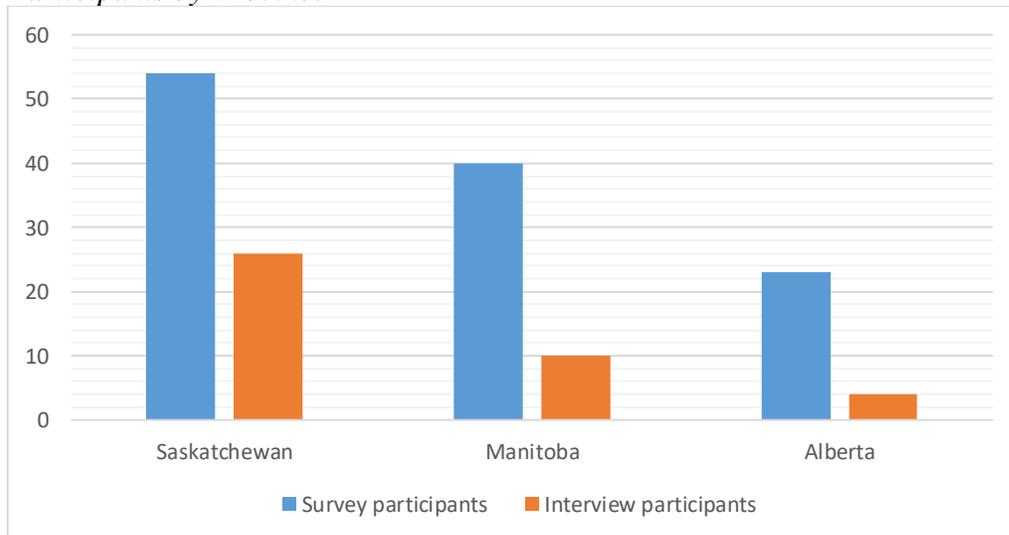
### **Participants**

The present study explores the perspectives and ideologies of FI educators with respect to refugee-background learners throughout the Canadian Prairies. I invited several school divisions across Saskatchewan, Manitoba, and Alberta to participate in this research during the 2022-2023 school year, focusing on urban school divisions that tend to serve

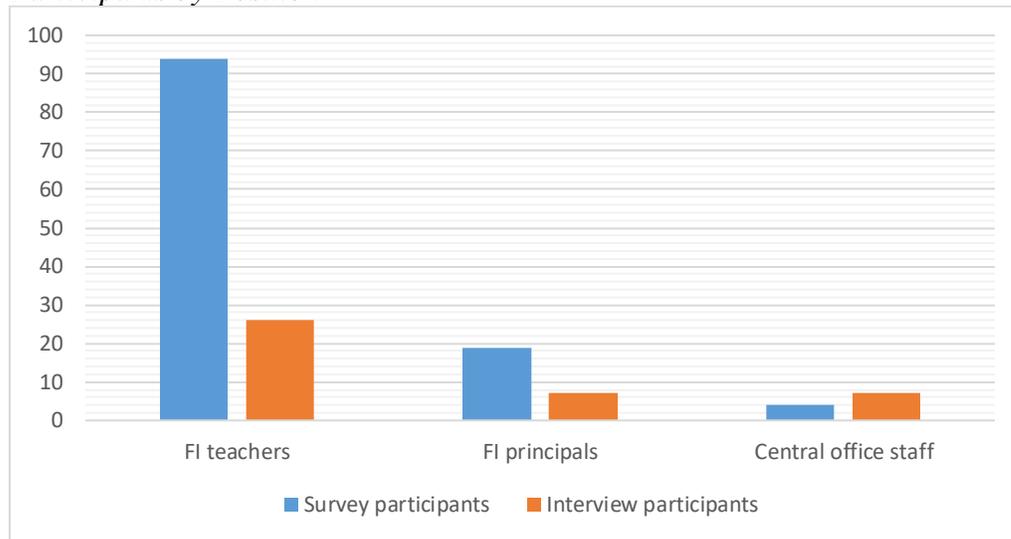
greater populations of refugee-background students and multilingual learners more broadly than rural divisions in these provinces (Wilkinson et al., 2017). Eight urban school divisions of varying sizes participated in this study, including four in Saskatchewan, two in Manitoba, and two in Alberta. I invited FI educators within the eight school divisions to participate in the survey and interviews, accepting all consenting participants. In total, 126 educators completed the survey. Although some survey participants did not specify their province, 54 indicated that they worked in Saskatchewan, 40 in Manitoba, and 23 in Alberta. In terms of interview participants, I interviewed 40 FI educators, including 26 from Saskatchewan, 10 from Manitoba, and four from Alberta (Figure 1).

Furthermore, with respect to the positions of participants, a variety of FI teaching and administrative positions were represented in the research. This diversity of positions amongst FI educators is important for several reasons, including the breadth of experiences and perspectives from which participants could draw, as well as the ability to juxtapose diverse perspectives and ideologies between different teaching and administrative positions. Specifically, participating educators belong to the following three categories of positions: first, FI teachers, including elementary (K-8) and secondary (9-12) teachers; second, FI principals, including principals and vice principals; and third, central office staff, including superintendents and consultants. Again, not all survey participants indicated their current positions, but among those who did, 94 were FI teachers, 19 were FI principals, and four were central office staff. In summary, the majority of participating educators were FI teachers, most of whom taught in elementary schools; however, FI school principals and central office staff were represented in this study (Figure 2).

**Figure 1**  
*Participants by Province*



**Figure 2**  
*Participants by Position*



### Interview Methods

In the present mixed-methods study, I examined the perspectives and ideologies of FI educators with respect to refugee-background students across the Canadian Prairies through interviews and surveys. As it pertains to interview methods, I conducted 40 semi-structured, audio-recorded interviews, which lasted approximately 60 minutes. Educators were given the choice to be interviewed in English or in French, as well as whether to participate in person or via Zoom. In terms of data analysis, I transcribed all 40 interviews in full, shared interview transcripts with participants for member checking, and assigned pseudonyms to all educators. Subsequently, I used NVivo 12 software to analyze and code transcripts for emerging themes through inductive analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Gibbs, 2007). Finally, for the purposes of data triangulation (Creswell, 2014), I compared interview transcripts and codes with survey responses to find common themes across qualitative and quantitative data.

### Survey Methods

The second source of data for this study was a survey. I created an anonymous online survey using Qualtrics software, which was piloted by a small number of educators who provided feedback on its design. Survey questions were asked in both French and English, and participants had the option of writing comments; thus, the survey generated both quantitative and qualitative data. The questionnaire began with three demographic questions asking educators to indicate their province, teaching position, and years of teaching experience in FI programs. Subsequently, the survey included 20 questions using a Likert scale of measurement to assess the degree to which participants agreed or disagreed with different statements (Creswell, 2013). In terms of analysis, I conducted descriptive statistical analysis to determine trends in survey responses. Additionally, I compared the survey responses to the interview data to triangulate the results and find common themes across both sources of data (Creswell, 2013).

## Results

Through the present study, I explore the perspectives and ideologies of educators with respect to refugee-background learners in FI programs within eight school divisions across Saskatchewan, Manitoba, and Alberta. In this section, I present interview and survey data pertaining to several key themes that emerged through inductive analysis and data triangulation. For the purposes of this article, I focus on findings pertaining to the following four themes: 1) suitability of FI programs for refugee-background learners; 2) language learning of refugee-background students; 3) challenges facing refugee-background learners; and 4) resources and supports offered for refugee-background learners in FI programs.

### Suitability of FI for Refugee-Background Learners

The first key theme of this study relates to the perspectives and ideologies of educators with respect to the suitability of FI programs for refugee-background learners. Educators across all eight school divisions expressed that FI programs were becoming increasingly diverse, discussing the growing cultural and linguistic diversity in such programs. Some educators shared that they had not yet had the experience of teaching refugee-background; however, all participants had taught newcomer learners in FI programs. In terms of suitability, one survey item measured the perceived suitability of FI for newcomer learners (Figure 3). Most educators believe that FI programs are suitable for newcomer learners, as expressed by the following teacher who shared that such students are often among the strongest in her class:

C'est une régularité dans chaque année que j'enseigne. La plupart des familles immigrantes – c'est souvent les parents qui sont les immigrants – leurs enfants sont les plus forts et ils travaillent le plus fort en salle de classe. *Dana, Teacher, Saskatchewan.*

Many teachers also shared that FI programs were appropriate for newcomer learners and families because of their keen motivation to learn both French and English in Canada, as well as their language learning experience. The following interview excerpt reflects this perspective:

My kind of, my kind of whole spiel when I do speak to those families – I'm obviously a big advocate for FI, and I think most or all FI teachers are – is that if your child speaks another language already, I think that that's an obvious sign that they should go into FI. And I think FI can be suitable for everyone, too. So, if they have a good base in their first, in their native tongue, and they're already learning English, I think that FI is a great bet. *Marie, Teacher, Saskatchewan.*

In summary, most educators believe that FI programs are suitable for newcomer students because of the strong motivation and language learning experience of such learners and families.

As it pertains to refugee-background learners specifically, one survey item measured the perceived suitability of FI programs for such students (Figure 4). The responses to this question are similar to the previous survey item, except for slightly fewer

participants who responded affirmatively and slightly more who responded neutrally. Therefore, the survey data seem to suggest that most educators believe that FI programs are suitable for refugee-background students, although some may have misgivings about refugee-background learners that they may not have about newcomer students more broadly. In this vein, one teacher shared that he believed that FI programs were suitable for most newcomer students, but that he would recommend English programs for refugee-background learners arriving in English-dominant Saskatchewan:

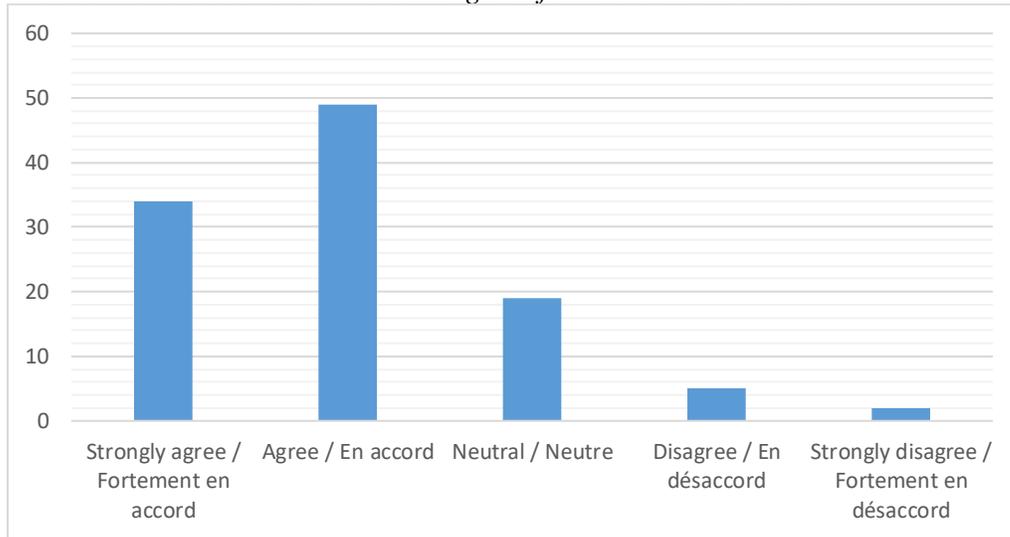
Les élèves dont on vient de parler, ils sont stables. Très souvent, les parents sont des intellectuels. Mais les réfugiés, la plupart du temps, les parents n'ont pas été à l'école, les enfants ont subi des traumatismes. Et là, à ce niveau, je trouve que c'est un peu difficile de répondre si le programme est adapté pour eux parce que déjà, si l'élève vient et il ne parle pas le français ou l'anglais, est-ce qu'il faut tout suite apprendre le français ou l'anglais? Pour ma part, je le mettrais – c'est mon point de vue – je le mettrais en anglais d'abord pour se socialiser, pour trouver ses repères, tu vois, dans la langue dominante. Si on est en Saskatchewan, il faut commencer par l'anglais, mais cela ne les empêche pas de se convertir en immersion. Mais moi, je commencerais cela en anglais. *Owen, Teacher, Saskatchewan.*

Similarly, another teacher shared the perspective of her colleague regarding the suitability of FI for a student who had recently fled Ukraine and enrolled in a FI program in Saskatchewan:

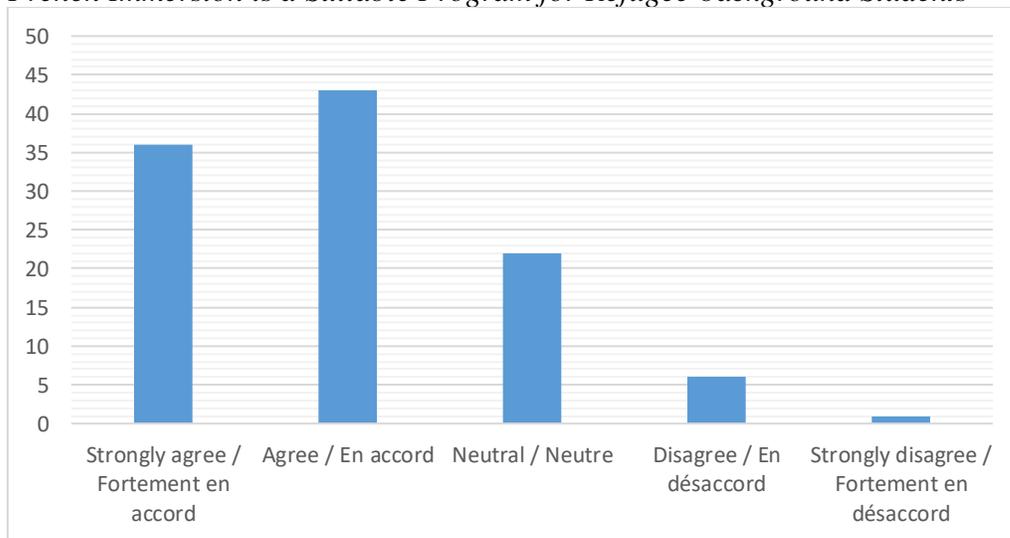
There was a colleague and their student is in Grade 1, just moved from Ukraine, post-war. So, there's a lot going on for this kid. Not a lick of English and the student's in FI. The teacher's perspective was: "This kid just went through hell. Dad didn't come with them. And now you want to put them in a classroom in Regina, Saskatchewan, to learn French when they don't know a lick of English?" And the teacher was under the impression that this student should be in an English class, and then they could at least speak the majority language in this province... What I heard was: "This student just went through trauma and now they can't learn to talk to anyone, and they're learning the wrong language for this city." *Karen, Teacher, Saskatchewan.*

To summarize, the survey and interview data indicate that most participants believe that FI programs are suitable for refugee-background learners; however, some educators expressed in interviews that FI programs were inappropriate for such learners and that refugee-background students should focus on learning English, the dominant language across the Canadian Prairies.

**Figure 3**  
*French Immersion is a Suitable Program for Newcomer Students*



**Figure 4**  
*French Immersion is a Suitable Program for Refugee-background Students*



**Language Learning of Refugee-Background Students in FI**

The second key theme that emerged from the data relates to the language learning of refugee-background students in FI programs. To this end, one survey item measured the extent to which educators believed that refugee-background students typically developed strong French proficiency in FI programs (Figure 5). While most educators answered affirmatively, there were also several participants who responded neutrally, which might suggest that they had not taught such students or that they preferred not to generalize. One principal shared the French learning experiences of three refugee-background brothers from the Democratic Republic of Congo:

Mom and Dad were both from the Congo, and Mom and Dad both had some verbal, like, oral language in French, and they were really making a case that it would be easier, it would be an easier transition for the family, because at least it was a language that was known to Mom and Dad. And so, they had three boys all in a row – Grade 1, Grade 2, and Grade 3 – and we accepted all three of the boys. Now, this is a very unique situation, so not really one that you or I could use as an example and say, “Look, this really works!” because these boys have, and still have – the youngest is with us still in Grade 6 – there are some significant learning issues with these boys. Now, that being said, all of the boys speak French, and all of the boys learned French. *Danielle, Principal, Alberta.*

This principal emphasized that although the three students encountered significant obstacles in their education, such as difficulties transitioning and adapting to a new school system in Canada, they were successful in their French language learning. Moreover, a principal discussed the French language learning of three refugee-background siblings from Syria:

The Grade 5 girl just joined us in October... She was very interested in learning French based on her French culture and communication class, which is basic French here. And of course, a couple of weeks after getting into school and realizing that we speak French all day long except for a small portion of the day, she’s very tired of it... And then her brother, in Grade 3, I’d say that he’s had a couple of lightbulb moments in the last three to five weeks and he seems to be catching on, and I think that he certainly has the potential. He came in at a time where he’s been able to facilitate that learning with the Grade 3 curriculum a little bit easier than the Grade 5. And then the Grade 1, he’s doing well. It seems to be that, since it’s a natural entry point, he doesn’t seem to be that different from his peers in terms of knowledge of French. *Alana, Principal, Manitoba.*

Indeed, educators noted that refugee-background students have diverse language learning experiences in FI programs, even within the same families. Furthermore, the age of entry into FI programs emerged as an important theme, insofar as many educators expressed that refugee-background learners could learn French effectively in earlier grade levels, whereas students entering FI programs in later grades often experienced difficulty in their learning of French.

In terms of the English language learning of refugee-background students in FI programs, the results for this survey item were similar to the question measuring French language learning; specifically, most participants affirmed the English language learning of such students, but a large number of educators responded neutrally (Figure 6). Some educators shared that refugee-background students tended to learn both French and English effectively in FI programs, but that English was often easier for such learners because of its prevalence across the Canadian Prairies:

De ce que je voyais, ils apprenaient très, très vite l’anglais parce que c’était la langue de la récréation et dans la communauté. Et ils apprenaient assez vite le français aussi parce qu’ils étaient entourés par le français. L’anglais était peut-être plus vite, juste parce que c’était communautaire. *Alexis, Teacher, Saskatchewan.*

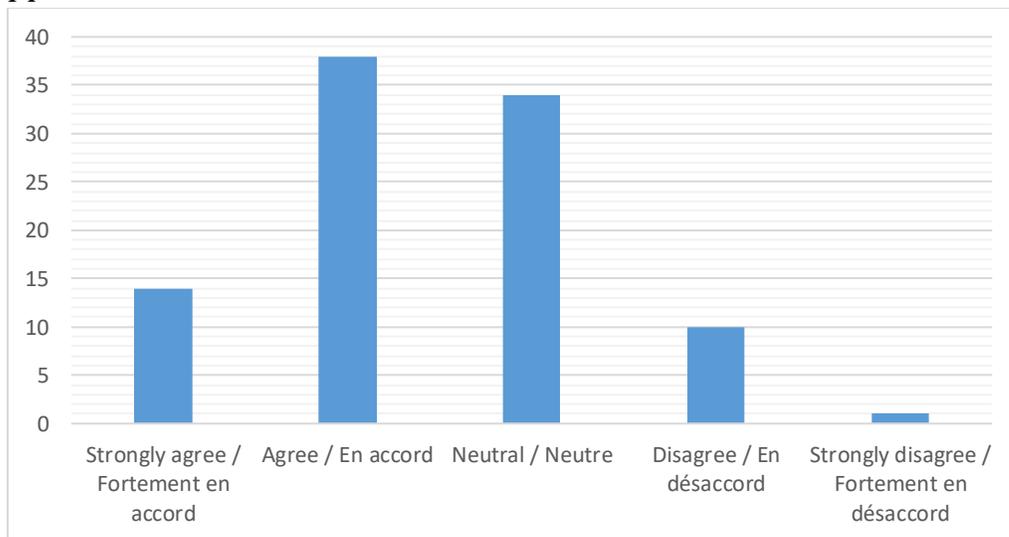
Additionally, some educators shared experiences about refugee-background learners entering FI programs with previous French language knowledge, such as the following story of a student from the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) whose classmates helped him learn English:

They spoke French with him, especially at the beginning, because he just couldn't understand what they were saying at all. They would speak to him in French all the time because that was how he would understand. So, it kind of helped them out, too. And then they would, like, start teaching him little things. He would come in from recess and be like, "Madame, how was your day?" and the kids would be watching and they would clap for him because they taught him how to do that outside. They would do little things like that to help him... So, it was good for him because they spoke French, because otherwise, like, if he had gone into an English school where nobody spoke French, I think he would have really struggled. *Elizabeth, Teacher, Manitoba.*

In summary, the survey and interview data demonstrate that most educators believe that refugee-background learners tend to develop strong French and English language proficiency in FI programs, although many noted that the age of entry, previous knowledge of French, and the dominance of English across the Canadian Prairies were determinants of language learning.

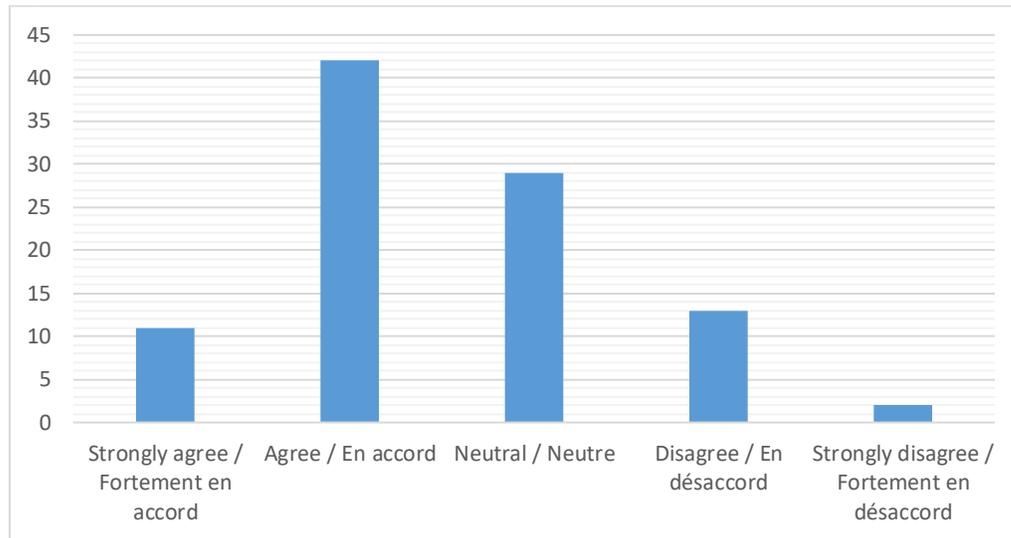
### Figure 5

*Refugee-background Students Typically Develop Strong French Language Proficiency in FI*



**Figure 6**

*Refugee-Background Students Typically Develop Strong English Language Proficiency in FI*

**Challenges Facing Refugee-Background Learners in FI**

Educators discussed several challenges facing refugee-background learners and families. In this vein, one teacher shared that refugee-background families often face complex challenges, such as being forced to flee their home countries and adapt to new cultures and languages:

Les parents réfugiés, ils font face à beaucoup de défis. Le réfugié, c'est quelqu'un qui ne s'attendait pas à une catastrophe mais c'est arrivé et il a laissé son pays dans un tel état. Donc, derrière lui, il y a beaucoup de bagage qui est toujours connecté avec lui. Il est allé dans un pays nouveau pour lui. D'abord, il y a l'adaptation. Il doit lui-même s'intégrer dans le milieu social. D'ailleurs, il y a aussi la langue; si ce n'est pas la langue qu'il sait parler, il doit aussi apprendre la langue. Il doit aussi réfléchir à comment avoir des moyens financiers. Si tout ça n'est pas là, ce sera difficile d'intégrer son enfant dans une école ayant une nouvelle langue. Les parents ont aussi beaucoup de stress dans la vie, et souvent, les élèves vivent ces stress aussi. *Ahmed, Teacher, Saskatchewan.*

Indeed, refugee-background students and families often encounter considerable challenges in their migration and in their integration into new countries. The following superintendent observed diverse challenges for refugee-background students upon arriving in Canada:

I can think of a number of students who had housing needs. They were given notice that they had to move, and so they had to try to find new accommodation. One student came in with very little English, no driver's license, but he was driving, so he was in trouble with the police and we had to help him sort that out. You know, students who were ill and had no parents in town, so I wanted to make sure they had

the medication they needed and that kind of thing. *Stella, Central Office Staff, Saskatchewan.*

In summary, refugee-background families often face diverse challenges at different stages of their journeys, beginning in their home countries and continuing into their new lives in Canada.

As it pertains to the perceived learning challenges of refugee-background learners, two survey items measured the extent to which educators believed that such students had advantages (Figure 7) and disadvantages (Figure 8) learning languages in FI programs compared to Canadian-born students. The large number of neutral responses suggest that many educators are uncertain about refugee-background learners having advantages or disadvantages, although several participants disagreed with the notion that such learners had disadvantages. Several interview participants discussed the complex ways in which the challenges of refugee-background learners and families appear to shape the learning of such students in FI, such as the following account of the multifaceted challenges of a refugee-background student from the DRC:

Academically, he was not strong because he had been in a refugee camp before coming to Winnipeg, so he hadn't been in school for a while. We weren't actually sure that he was going into the right grade when he came. We weren't sure, like, where he had kind of finished off; they just went based off age. So, he didn't do, like, he wasn't strong, but he was a hard worker and he would answer questions in class all the time when he could. He got better and he improved throughout the year as well. Technology was very difficult, like, really hard for him because he had basically never used a computer before, right? And then the poor thing had to go remote. I felt so bad for him. But he managed. He did manage, even in that tough situation. *Elizabeth, Teacher, Manitoba.*

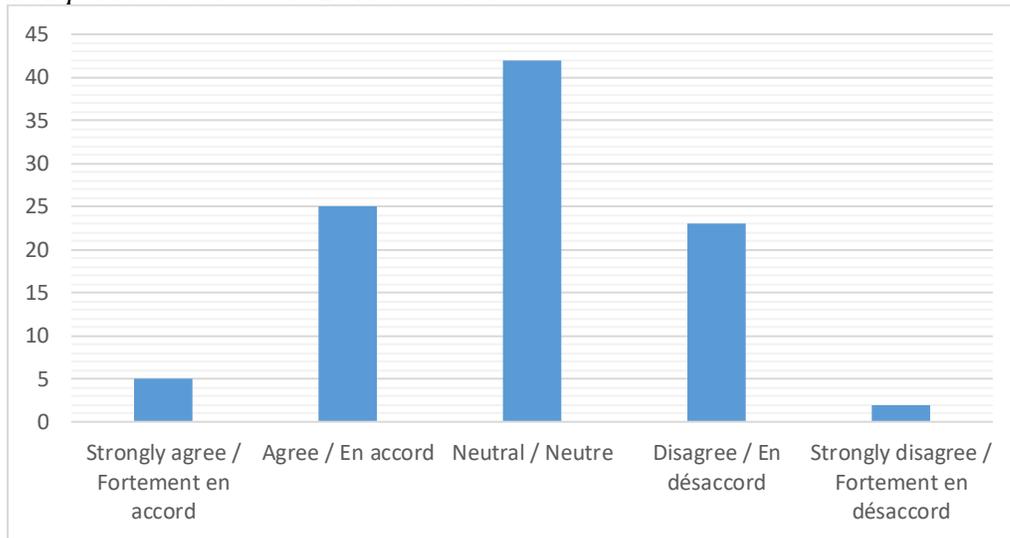
For this student, several interrelated challenges presented difficulties for learning in FI, including interrupted schooling, language barriers, and difficulties with technology, all of which were exacerbated by the shift to remote learning in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Moreover, a principal discussed the challenges of a family that had recently fled the ongoing war in Ukraine and the impact of this difficult family situation on the student's learning and enrolment in FI:

The child from the Ukraine, she is doing well in the sense that she has a lot more understanding than you would expect, joining late. She has a knowledge of English, Ukrainian, and Russian, and so French has sort of flowed in most of her understanding. However, I think with the addition of, you know, her dad is still back home and he's not allowed to leave the country and she fled here with her mom and her brother in the middle of the night. So, there's just lots going on in the sense of trauma and ongoing warfare. I would say, you know, she isn't loving it and she has chosen English for Grade 6. *Alana, Principal, Manitoba.*

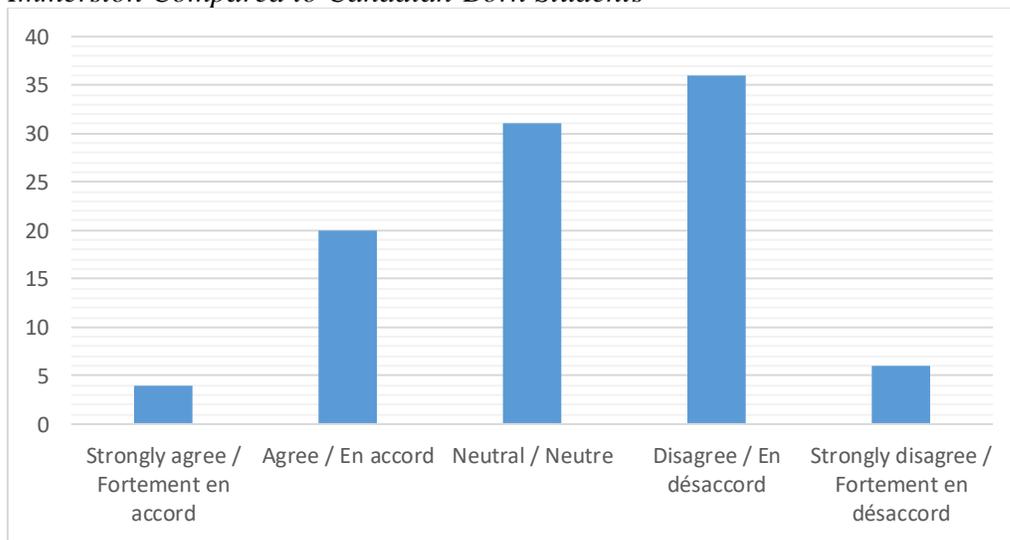
Evidently, this principal believes that the student from Ukraine was learning French and English effectively in FI, but because of trauma and family separation, she has chosen to discontinue FI. To summarize, many educators perceived diverse and multifaceted

challenges facing refugee-background learners and families in Canada, some of which were not strictly academic challenges but had important implications for language learning and continuity in FI programs.

**Figure 7**  
*Refugee-Background Students Have Advantages Learning Languages in French Immersion Compared to Canadian-Born Students*



**Figure 8**  
*Refugee-Background Students Have Disadvantages Learning Languages in French Immersion Compared to Canadian-Born Students*



**Resources for Refugee-Background Learners in FI**

The fourth important theme pertains to the perspectives of educators with respect to the supports and resources offered to refugee-background learners and families in FI programs. One survey item assessed the degree to which participants believed that their

school divisions offered sufficient supports for refugee-background students in FI programs (Figure 9) and another measured the extent to which educators believed that their school divisions needed to offer more resources for such learners (Figure 10). The responses demonstrate that most educators believed that there were insufficient resources offered for such learners in FI programs and that the school divisions must offer more support. Several educators shared that greater supports for refugee-background learners were needed in FI programs, including English as an Additional Language (EAL) instruction, Resource support, and mental health support, as per the following excerpt:

I think that there definitely needs to be more one-on-one support for these students. I think that we need to increase EAL positions, Resource support for these kids, getting counsellors, therapists in the school to better adjust these kids, more interpreters within the school to communicate with the families, smaller class sizes for these students in particular. If we want them to succeed in any language, but in French immersion as well, there needs to be just more support. *Marie, Teacher, Saskatchewan.*

Furthermore, several educators expressed that resources were more widely available in English programs than in FI. For instance, a superintendent said that in dual-track schools offering FI and English programs, EAL and Resource support were offered predominantly in English programs:

Malheureusement, ce que je vois, c'est que l'immersion est un peu défavorisée... Je dirais que dans les écoles à double voix, on favorise les enfants qui sont en anglais quand ça vient aux appuis pour l'anglais comme langue additionnelle, et même pour les besoins spéciaux. *Samantha, Central office staff, Alberta.*

Similarly, a principal in a different school division said that when her school became a single-track FI school, several resources were removed because of an assumption that FI students did not require such supports; therefore, she needed to advocate to continue to offer resources in FI:

We actually had to advocate quite strongly since we have become a single-track school for supports to still be in place. It's also very interesting because it's not... I wouldn't say it's universally... Not accepted, accepted isn't the right word... There's a lot of people who would feel otherwise about these families, like: "Why would they be choosing FI?" So, I think that's interesting. We have had to advocate. *Danielle, Principal, Alberta.*

In summary, some participants shared that their school divisions were beginning to offer more resources for refugee-background learners in FI programs; nevertheless, most educators expressed that EAL instruction and resource support were still offered more widely in English.

In addition to the pervasive perspective that school divisions must offer more supports and resources in FI programs, several educators also discussed the need for professional development and educational opportunities focused specifically on refugee-background students. In this vein, one superintendent discussed the growing need for more

professional development (PD) opportunities for both FI and EAL educators pertaining to refugee-background learners:

Well, in my ideal world, if we had lots of refugees and other newcomers coming into French immersion programs, it would be nice to do a specific PD with those EAL teachers so that they, you know... Not many of our EAL teachers speak another language or study French or any other language. So, I think it would be really good to do some PD with them so that they can better support newcomers and EAL students coming into those programs. *Stella, Central office staff, Saskatchewan.*

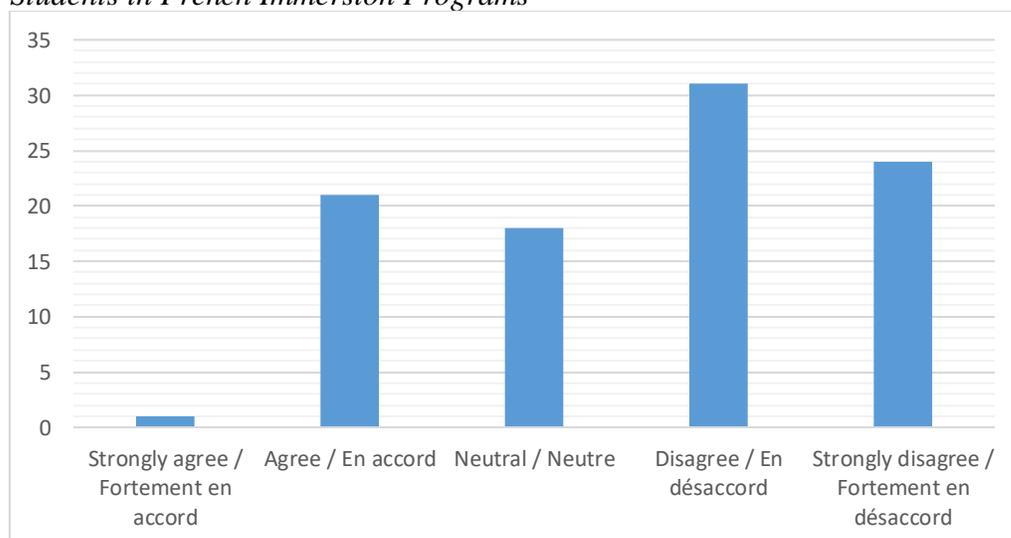
Likewise, another superintendent shared that her school division allowed students, including refugee-background learners and newcomer students, to enter FI programs at all grade levels, and she believed that greater supports and professional development opportunities were needed:

I would love to see supports for anyone entering French immersion at a non-traditional entry point. I would love to see that. I would love to see some specific training for Resource teachers to be trained in this area. I would love to see administrators being given in-service for this. *Stephanie, Central office staff, Manitoba.*

Evidently, the survey and interview data indicate that most educators believe that refugee-background students are underserved in FI programs in their school divisions, emphasizing the critical need for supports, resources, and educational opportunities focusing on such learners.

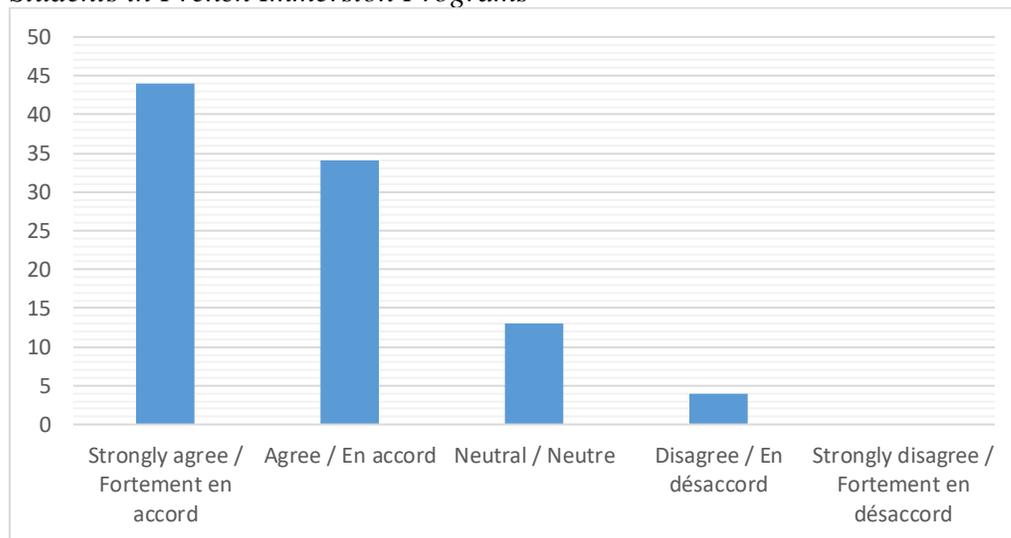
### Figure 9

*My School Division Offers Sufficient Supports and Resources for Refugee-Background Students in French Immersion Programs*



**Figure 10**

*My School Division Must Offer Greater Supports and Resources for Refugee-Background Students in French Immersion Programs*



## Discussion

Throughout this article, I explored the perspectives of educators with respect to refugee-background learners in FI programs in eight school divisions across the Canadian Prairies. In the previous section, I presented the survey and interview results of this research pertaining to four overarching themes, including the perceived suitability of FI programs for refugee-background students, the language learning of such students, the challenges facing refugee-background learners, and the supports in FI programs. Here, I discuss the findings of this study as they relate to previous research, examining three distinct, yet interrelated, underlying ideologies shaping the perspectives of FI educators. First, I explore English-first ideologies amongst FI educators; second, I unpack the deficit ideologies surrounding refugee-background learners in FI programs; and third, I examine the ideological tensions between educators' desire for inclusive FI programs and school divisions' unwillingness to support refugee-background learners in such programs.

### English-First Ideologies in FI

The present study contributed to a greater understanding of the perspectives and ideologies of FI educators regarding refugee-background students across the Canadian Prairies. Most educators espoused the view that FI programs were suitable for refugee-background students and that such learners typically develop strong French and English language abilities in FI programs. Although no study has focused specifically on the language learning outcomes of refugee-background students in FI, research examining the French and English language learning of multilingual learners in such programs has consistently generated positive results (Dagenais, 2003, 2008; Knouzi & Mady, 2017; Mady, 2015, 2017; Moore, 2010). Interestingly, some educators conceived of the language learning experience and metalinguistic awareness of refugee-background students as an advantage in FI, whereas some considered limited English language proficiency a

disadvantage in FI; such findings corroborate previous research examining the perspectives of educators with respect to multilingual learners (Bourgoin, 2016; Davis, 2019; Davis et al., 2019, 2021; Mady & Masson, 2018). Paradoxically, the diverse linguistic repertoires and experiences of refugee-background learners seem to be perceived as both advantageous and disadvantageous for language learning in FI programs.

I believe that the perspectives of some FI educators reflect underlying English-first ideologies, which are complex and take many different forms in this research. For instance, some educators believed that it was in the best interest of refugee-background students to learn English upon arrival to Canada, especially in the English-dominant sociolinguistic context of the Canadian Prairies (Statistics Canada, 2023). Such educators seem to associate English language proficiency with successful integration into Canada and therefore might question the suitability of FI programs for students deemed to have limited English language proficiency. Whereas researchers have found that FI educators often recommend English programs for multilingual learners in several different provinces of Canada (Bourgoin, 2016; Mady, 2016; Mady & Masson, 2018), I believe that English-first ideologies are especially prevalent across the Canadian Prairies, given the dominance of English in these provinces (Davis, 2019; Roy, 2015; Sterzuk & Shin, 2021). In this vein, the perspective of refugee-background students in FI programs learning ‘the wrong language’ for the given community suggests that some educators perceive Saskatchewan, Manitoba, and Alberta as essentially English-monolingual provinces. Further research is needed to better understand how FI educators perceive the value of minoritized languages – including French, Indigenous languages, and diverse heritage languages – in the unique sociolinguistic and English-dominant context of the Canadian Prairies.

### **Deficit Ideologies about Refugee-Background Learners**

Several educators expressed concern for the challenges facing refugee-background learners in FI programs across the Canadian Prairies. Notably, educators discussed challenges such as experiencing and witnessing violent conflict, trauma and mental health issues, poverty and malnourishment, interruptions to formal schooling while living in a refugee camp, family separation, language barriers, and social isolation in Canada. Researchers have documented such challenges amongst some refugee-background learners in Canada (Bahi & Piquemal, 2013; Guo et al., 2019; MacNevin, 2012; Massfeller & Hamm, 2019; Stewart et al., 2019; Wilkinson, 2001). However, it is important to note that although some refugee-background learners and families encounter these challenges, such experiences do not describe all refugee-background families. Therefore, there is a danger in essentializing the complex, diverse, and unique experiences of refugee-background learners as though they share the same journeys (Shapiro, 2014).

Researchers have found that teachers and principals often unwittingly perpetuate deficit ideologies pertaining to refugee-background learners (Shapiro, 2014; Shapiro & MacDonald, 2017). I believe that this is true for FI educators as well. Whereas several participants expressed that they had taught refugee-background students in FI programs, many had not or were unsure; therefore, such educators might have based their perspectives on assumptions and hearsay, rather than on personal experience or research findings. For instance, educators might assume that refugee-background learners have lived through traumatic experiences or interrupted schooling, which may or may not be the case, and then believe that learning two additional languages would be too burdensome for such students.

Moreover, deficit ideologies about refugee-background learners are often interrelated with English-first ideologies. Specifically, some educators believe that refugee-background learners experience significant challenges that would prevent them from learning two additional languages successfully and therefore believe that English programs are in the best interest of such students insofar English is seen as the most important language across the Canadian Prairies. Nevertheless, even in cases where FI educators were aware of specific challenges in the lives of refugee-background learners in their classrooms – traumatic experiences, interrupted schooling, family separation, poverty – the underlying ideology that such experiences preclude a student from learning languages successfully is entirely unsubstantiated by research. Indeed, researchers have not identified a single language background, learning disability, or socioeconomic factor that can reliably predict failure to learn languages in FI programs (Genesee, 2007; Wise, 2011). Respectfully, I urge FI educators to reflect critically on their assumptions as they pertain to language learning and refugee-background students. I echo the call of many participants for greater education and professional development opportunities focusing on refugee-background students and multilingual learners more broadly in FI programs.

### **Ideologies about Supports and Resources in FI**

The third set of perspectives I examined in the present study pertain to the supports and resources offered in FI programs across the Canadian Prairies. The survey and interview data demonstrate resoundingly that the majority of participating FI educators in eight different school divisions believe that there are insufficient resources for refugee-background learners in FI programs and that their school divisions must provide greater supports for such students. More specifically, educators throughout the eight school divisions shared the perspective that there was more resource support, EAL instruction, and counselling services offered in regular English programs than in FI programs. Thus, although most educators affirmed that FI programs were suitable for refugee-background learners, many expressed apprehensions about FI for such students because of the lack of supports and resources offered compared to regular English programs. This finding corroborates previous research examining the perspectives of educators with respect to multilingual learners in FI programs (Bourgoin, 2016; Davis et al., 2019; Mady & Masson, 2018). Nevertheless, I believe that FI educators likely feel more apprehensive about including refugee-background students than about other groups of multilingual learners because of the real or perceived challenges facing many refugee-background learners and the deficit ideologies surrounding such students.

In my estimation, the extent to which most educators indicated that FI programs were suitable for refugee-background students while expressing that greater resources were required to support such learners reflects a critical ideological tension between inclusion in theory and a lack of support in practice. Whereas most educators believe that FI programs are essentially appropriate for refugee-background learners, they believe that the implementation of supports and resources is lacking in immersion programs and therefore have reservations about including such students. This ideological tension pertaining to support and inclusion is often perpetuated cyclically in school divisions. Namely, educators and administrators often discourage refugee-background students and multilingual learners from enrolling in FI programs because of insufficient resources, and then educators and administrators do not provide sufficient supports and resources in FI programs because

such learners are underrepresented. Echoing the call of the educators, I urge school divisions to break the cycle of neglect and exclusion by providing greater resources in FI programs, including Resource support and EAL instruction. If educators truly believe that refugee-background students and multilingual learners can learn effectively in FI programs with proper supports, it is high time for school divisions to provide the necessary resources to ensure the success of such learners.

### Conclusion

In the present paper, I shared the findings of a transformative mixed-methods study exploring the perspectives and ideologies of educators with respect to refugee-background learners in FI programs in eight school divisions across the Canadian Prairies. For the purposes of this article, I focused on the following four themes: the suitability of FI programs for refugee-background students, the language learning of such students, the challenges facing refugee-background learners, and the resources offered in FI programs. Drawing from the theoretical framework of sociolinguistics for change, I reflected on the underlying and interrelated ideologies of FI educators, including English-first ideologies, deficit ideologies about refugee-background students, and ideological tensions between perspectives about inclusion and misgivings about supports in FI programs. Certain limitations notwithstanding – including the difficulty of collecting demographic information for FI educators and students, the difficulty in exploring nuanced perspectives about specific refugee-background populations, and the difficulty in analyzing how supports and resources are allocated in different school divisions, to name but a few – I believe that this study contributes to a greater understanding of the perspectives and ideologies of FI educators in the underexamined sociolinguistic context of the Canadian Prairies, as well as about an important and growing population of students, refugee-background learners in Canada.

In keeping with the theoretical perspective of sociolinguistics for change and the research paradigm of critical inquiry, I seek not only to contribute to greater academic knowledge, but also to inspire meaningful, systemic change for social justice. To this end, I have advanced several recommendations for school divisions to better include and support refugee-background students in FI programs, such as providing greater resources for such learners, offering professional development opportunities for FI educators, and reflecting critically on unexamined assumptions and ideologies that perpetuate elitism and exclusion in FI programs. Truly, I believe that all educators and all school divisions have the power to create more inclusive and equitable FI programs, not only for refugee-background students and for multilingual learners, but for all students who have historically been excluded from FI programs throughout Canada.

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