

Systemic Barriers to French Immersion: The Impact of COVID-19

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French Immersion (FI) is a popular and problematic educational program in New Brunswick. In 2018-2019, 36.8% of eligible students in New Brunswick were enrolled in FI (Canadian Parents for French, 2019), while only 7% of students on personalized learning plans were registered in the program (MacPherson, 2019). From its beginnings in the 1960s to the present day, the FI program has been criticized for elitism (Barrett Dewiele & Edgerton, 2021). Unfortunately, the recurring periods of at-home learning as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic have likely resulted in a further setback for underrepresented students in FI. This paper draws from my experiences as an elementary FI teacher during the COVID-19 pandemic, when I became increasingly aware of systemic barriers within the immersion program. I begin by relating the history of FI in Canada and highlighting its controversies, many of which I have encountered in my classroom. I then refer to the work of Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) as a suitable framework that might help us to understand why educational policy is not enough to ensure equitable access to immersion.

French Immersion in Canada

French immersion originated in Quebec as a result of parent advocacy. Worried about a growing emphasis on French as the dominant language of work, a small group of English-speaking parents began lobbying for better access to French language instruction for their children (Safty, 1991; Swain & Lapkin, 1982). After much persistence and local press coverage (Hayday, 2016), the regional Protestant school board began the country's first FI program in the late 1960s. The countrywide spread of FI began thereafter, owing in large part to "parental pressure and involvement in program initiation and implementation" (Swain & Lapkin, 1982, p. 2) from the majority (i.e., anglophone) group.

As the popularity of French immersion has grown in the fifty years since it was first developed, so too has the volume of criticisms directed against it. Some of this is a result of "perceived discrimination against certain learner populations" (Arnett & Mady, 2010, p. 10), such as students with learning difficulties (Arnett & Mady, 2018; Cobb, 2015; Genesee, 2007; Selvachandran et al., 2020). In New Brunswick, the recently released report on second language learning (New Brunswick, 2022) drew attention to the "serious classroom composition challenge" that has "created a serious contrast in the learning environments between typical French immersion and English Prime classrooms" (p. 33). Studies have also explored the impact of socioeconomic status on FI enrolment. Immersion students are more likely to have parents with higher incomes than the national average (Olson & Burns, 1983), and their parents are more likely to hold postsecondary degrees (Allen, 2004). From its inception through to the present day, French Immersion has been most appealing to parents from the middle class (Olson & Burns, 1983; Safty, 1991; Wise, 2011). As an elementary FI teacher, these criticisms make me feel uneasy. Why are certain demographics or perceived abilities associated with enrolment in this optional, publicly funded program? As I questioned my relationship with this elitist (Hutchins, 2015), unwelcoming (Hyslop, 2021) and unsuitable (Weikle, 2018) program in early 2020, I began to find answers in Bourdieu and Passeron's (1977) theory of social reproduction.

Social Reproduction, Habitus, and Cultural Capital

In an effort to explain persistent and pervasive social inequality, Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) identified a relationship between education and social reproduction. *Social Reproduction* is the system of human interactions “which tend, behind the backs of the agents engaged in the school system—teachers, students and their parents—and often *against their will*, to ensure the transmission of cultural capital across generations and to stamp pre-existing differences in inherited cultural capital with a meritocratic seal of academic consecration” (p. ix, emphasis in original). Schools play an important role in this process. Teachers hold the pedagogic authority to inculcate students with the arbitrary habits, values, and attitudes of the dominant majority.

Before walking into school for the first time, children have already begun the process of learning social norms from their parents in the form of a habitus. Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) describe the *habitus* as “a system of schemes of thought, perception, appreciation and action” (p.40) that is “the product of the internalization of the principles of a cultural arbitrary capable of perpetuating itself” (p. 31). The habitus “explains how an individual is supposed to behave, think and feel” (DiGiorgio, 2009, p. 181). The primary habitus is developed in the home “through familial osmosis and familiar immersion” (Wacquant, 2014, p. 7), where children learn a set of values and norms from their parents. The secondary habitus is developed in schools. Public education “is the equivalent, in the cultural order, of the transmission of genetic capital in the biological order” (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977, p. 32). Wacquant (2014) describes the secondary habitus as “any system of transposable schemata that becomes grafted subsequently, through specialized pedagogical labor that is typically shortened in duration, accelerated in pace, and explicit in organization” (p.7). Schooling replaces coercion, manipulation, and physical violence as tools for establishing behaviour and cultural norms, and it “tends to produce a permanent disposition to give, in every situation... the right response (i.e., the one laid down by cultural arbitrariness, and no other)” (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977, p. 36). When children begin schooling with a primary habitus that agrees with the habits, values, and practices of the dominant social group, navigating the school system might happen naturally with relative ease. But for children whose primary habitus contradicts the dispositions of the dominant social group, schooling becomes more challenging.

Let’s now turn to the concept of cultural capital. *Cultural capital* is the collection of knowledge, skills, and familiarity with societal norms that advantages some individuals over others in the education system (Jaeger, 2011). It is the “symbolic appropriation” of the capacity for “material appropriation of the instruments of material or cultural production” (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 2013, p. 295). There are three forms of cultural capital: embodied, objectified, and institutionalized (Bourdieu, 1986). Parents exercise embodied cultural capital in many ways, such as by requesting a specific classroom teacher for their sensitive child or by encouraging their children to complete their homework as assigned. The objectified form can be observed in cultural goods, such as the purchase of designer clothing or works of art. And the institutionalized form of cultural capital “confers entirely original properties on the cultural capital on which it is presumed to guarantee” (p. 17). This can take the form of behaviour charts, participation ribbons, or certificates of completion. Some forms of cultural capital are valued more than others, and how these symbols are viewed depends on the values of the dominant group. Though everyone possesses varying amounts of cultural capital, not everyone has equal ability to exchange cultural assets for power.

The strongest students might be those who best conform to school expectations. Those who are fortunate enough to arrive at school with the right habitus are more likely to become educated: that is, to be instilled with societal norms. Students who are identified as academically gifted might in fact have access to the preferred manifestations of cultural capital than their struggling peers. In this way, students who come to school without the head start enjoyed by the dominant class may appear unsuitable for an optional program like French immersion. While educational policies might be shifting towards more inclusive FSL for all students (e.g., New Brunswick Department of Education, 2018; Ontario Ministry of Education, 2015), the interruptions to classroom instruction as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic revealed that increased access alone does not address the iniquitous experience of immersion.

Impact of COVID-19 on French Immersion Students

In March 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in the unexpected shutdown of schools across Canada. New Brunswick students returned to in-person learning in the 2020-2021 school year, but recurring COVID-19 outbreaks resulted in repeated shifts to online learning that have since continued into the 2021-2022 academic year. As I worked alongside my colleagues to adapt our teaching plans for an online learning environment, I noticed how families adapted to at-home learning differently. Perhaps more importantly, I began worrying that some of my students were distinctly disadvantaged.

French immersion students need regular speaking and listening practice in the target language (Baker & Wright, 2021). During emergency at-home learning and subsequent interruptions, FI students were expected to meet their language needs using digital tools. For example, I encouraged my students to watch French videos on YouTube, to listen to stories on *Je lis, je lis, littéracie!* (RK Publishing, 2022), or to participate in synchronous Microsoft Teams meetings. Unfortunately, not every student was able to partake in these learning opportunities. For some, there were too many children in the household and not enough devices. For others, outdated software and unreliable Internet connectivity prevented regular access. The New Brunswick government responded to this digital divide by purchasing and loaning out Internet-ready devices, which Education Minister Dominic Cardy hoped would “help us level the playing field and ensure students have more equitable access to home learning options” (Poitras, 2020). Unfortunately, having access to the necessary digital tools was not enough. Some of my students continued to miss scheduled meetings and weren’t accessing our online classroom, which made me question whether access was enough.

With the shift to online learning, teachers struggled to account for the discrepancy between what the child has learned at home and what the school’s expectations needed to be. Children who were used to using digital tools for learning at home were better prepared for the sudden transition to online learning, and those with parents who shifted to remote work had the chance to witness what working at home looked like. When parents promote habits or practices that correspond were school expectations, they increase the likelihood of academic success (Edgerton & Roberts, 2014). For immersion students whose parents were working from home, they were exposed to the expectations and routines of this learning environment. Even as their parents needed to define and establish what this might look like, these students had an advantage over their peers who had entered unknown territory (Jæger, 2011). They had access to the necessary cultural capital that helped with the transition.

Unfortunately, COVID-19 disproportionately affected the employment of lower-income or less educated adults in much of the world, and many parents were laid off rather than redeployed as remote workers (Rothwell, 2021). In Canada, there was a correlation between household income and education level with the opportunity for remote work (Messacar et al., 2020). Someone without the preferred type of cultural capital might have felt out of place when accessing online learning, because access does not equate appropriation (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). In their examination of criticisms directed at French immersion, Barrett Dewiele and Edgerton (2021), suggested that lower SES parents “may be less inclined, less able and less prepared (less economic, social, linguistic, and cultural capital) to support their children’s schooling” (pp. 10-11) compared to middle and upper SES parents. At-home learning shifted education responsibilities to parents, and lower SES parents may have struggled to adapt. Immersion students have specific language needs, and teachers relied on digital tools to ensure continued access to listening and speaking practice in French. Unfortunately, parents were not equally equipped to support their children.

Even when children had the required hardware to connect with online learning, they may not have had the necessary habitus to meet requirements. Children entering schools for the first time are more likely to be academically successful if their primary habitus aligns with the secondary habitus of the school. When there is a mismatch, there are ways that schools can help to narrow the distance. But the uncharted territory of COVID-19 and the shift to online learning left teachers overwhelmed and underprepared to continue fulfilling this role (Cipriano & Brackett, 2020). Teachers typically respond to students’ needs by transmitting characteristics of the dominant group (Harker, 1984), which might take the form of a workshop, a targeted intervention, or extracurricular opportunities. For example, teachers may plan a field trip to an art gallery so that everyone has the opportunity to engage with the visual arts. In the context of at-home learning during COVID-19, teachers confronted the seemingly impossible task of both identifying and addressing students’ needs in a new domain.

While the abovementioned issues were not exclusive to immersion students, the implications are significant. The immersion program is premised on the concept of language immersion, and elementary students are expected to spend at least 80% of instructional time in French (New Brunswick Department of Education, 2021). Students need consistent reading, writing, listening, and speaking practice in the target language, and the challenges of COVID-19 made it difficult to meet these needs. And although technology helped teachers to provide guidance and some exposure to French interactions, some students were left out.

Conclusion

French immersion is a popular and effective language program. When I talk to my colleagues, there is no doubt that we are all seeing the changing demographics of immersion students. There is a nationwide shift in educational policies towards inclusive FI classrooms. But as I reflect on the recent interruptions in the wake of COVID-19, I wonder whether the system is as ready for change as policy would lead us to believe. All FI students need support in their language development, and we need to be better prepared to support every student regardless of their abilities or access to cultural capital. The question is, how?

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