From Exclusion to Inclusion: Meeting the Needs of Struggling Learners in the Primary Level French Immersion Classroom

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A research paper submitted in conformity with the requirements
For the degree of Master of Teaching
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Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the University of Toronto

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Acknowledgements

There are several people without whom this research project would not have been possible. First and foremost, I would like to thank my research supervisor, Dr. Antoinette Gagné for her feedback and support in guiding me through this research process. My deepest gratitude also goes out to all of my participants who took the time to sit with me and share their experiences and insights. I would also like to thank my course instructors in the Master of Teaching program for the role they all played helping me develop as a teacher and a researcher. A very special thank you goes out to my colleagues in the Master of Teaching program who, together, form the most supportive community that I have ever had the privilege of being part of. I would also like to thank my friends and family for their encouragement and advice and for listening to me talk endlessly about what I have been working on for the past two years. Finally, I would like to thank my parents, not just for their encouragement, but also for the decision that they made many years ago to enroll me in French Immersion, inspiring my lifelong interest in second language teaching and learning.
Abstract

The French Immersion program is popular in many school boards across Canada, but the attrition of learners experiencing difficulty has often been criticized. While the suitability of the program for all learners has been questioned, an emerging body of research suggests that this practice runs counter to a philosophy of inclusion and that students with diverse learning needs can be successful in immersion programs. This qualitative study explores the insights and perceptions of three practicing classroom teachers and one teacher educator who described their experiences working with struggling learners in the primary level French Immersion classroom. While some participants described having observed exclusionary practices, they all believed that everyone should be able to try French Immersion. Some nevertheless understood the program to be a better fit for some students than for others. Analysis of both the existing research and the data collected through this study suggest that the social and emotional well-being of a student plays a critical role in identifying and supporting struggling learners through differentiated instruction and in making decisions regarding their placement in the program.

Keywords: French Immersion, second language education, social and emotional well-being, differentiated instruction, inclusion
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Chapter 1: Introduction

Introduction to the Research Study

In Toronto, as well as many other Canadian cities, high demand has made it increasingly difficult for parents to enroll their children in French Immersion, but, despite the documented advantages of bilingualism and the popularity of the French Immersion program, attrition rates remain high, particularly among students with learning disabilities (Canadian Council on Learning, 2007), and there still exists a debate about the suitability of the program for all students. School boards across Canada promise inclusive and equitable education. French Immersion is “open to all, reflective of the community and gives access to a remarkable program, regardless of parent income or social status” (District School Board of Niagara, 2008). This means that all students have access to the opportunity to become bilingual in both Canadian official languages through this program. In reality, research has revealed that many students with learning difficulties or disabilities are effectively transferred out of the program. (Arnett & Mady 2010a; Willms 2008).

Who succeeds in acquiring a second language? Who does not? Why? These questions are at the core of the study of second language acquisition research in general and they are certainly not new to the study of a program that has existed across Canada for roughly forty years (Canadian Council on Learning, 2007). However, French Immersion has garnered new attention even in the popular media, where we find discussions of a number of challenges including increased demand for enrollment, a lack of qualified French Immersion teachers and critiques of elitism (Campbell, 2013; Gardner, 2008; Woo, 2014). In the academic literature, we find that a small but growing body of research that critically examines the program’s inclusivity has changed the tone of the debate about the suitability of the program for all students. This new
focus has been paralleled by and quite possibly resulted from not only the increasing popularity of the program, but also a move towards inclusive education and changes in the ways that we view and understand learning difficulties in a diverse learning community.

Graham Fraser, the Commissioner of Official Languages recently gave a speech about immersion education to the House of Commons Standing Committee on Official Languages and presented his recommendations for improving access to French Immersion and other second language education programs in order to increase the level of bilingualism among Canadians (Fraser, 2013). This only attests to the timeliness of this issue, the perceived advantages of bilingualism and the importance of ensuring that access to these advantages is equitable, hence the interest in exploring inclusivity in French Immersion.

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study is to determine what teachers are doing in their own classrooms and what insights they have to offer on the inclusion of struggling learners in French Immersion. It is not acceptable for a program to be considered suitable for only a certain elite group of students, nor is it advisable to force students to continue in a program in which they are unhappy. Focusing on the primary years of the Early Immersion program, this study explores how teachers understand the inclusivity of the French Immersion program as well as how they identify and support struggling learners at this early stage. The hope is that the findings of this study will offer practical information to teachers, open up lines of dialogue with parents and provide all members of the education community a better understanding of inclusive practices in French Immersion classrooms. The objective of this study is not to find a way to make all students do French Immersion, nor is it to determine how to identify and transfer out students who do not
belong. It is about achieving a greater depth of understanding, making better decisions and finding balance. This can only be achieved with practical information and through continued debate so that ultimately, the decision to keep students in French Immersion becomes a more informed one, and one that prioritizes both inclusion and the best interests of individual students.

Research Questions

In order to achieve the above-stated goals, this research project aims to answer the following question and sub-questions:

How do four teachers describe their experiences working with struggling learners in the primary grades of the Early French Immersion program?

- How do these teachers identify the learners who are struggling?
- How do these teachers differentiate their instruction to meet the academic and affective needs of their learners?
- How do these teachers perceive the inclusion of struggling learners in the French Immersion program?

Background of the Researcher

It is both my experiences as a French Immersion student and my training as a future French Immersion teacher that have brought to my attention the need for research in this area. I was enrolled in French Immersion from kindergarten to Grade 12, later achieving a B.A. with a major in French, for which I took courses in second language teaching and learning and completed an independent research course about the teaching and learning of French by immigrant children in Quebec. It was thanks to my educational background and my fluency in French that, while completing my undergraduate degree, I had the opportunity to develop second language proficiency tests for the City of Ottawa and to work as a teaching assistant in the
writing and conversation support services offered by the French Department at Carleton University. Being bilingual has therefore always been an asset for me. It has also sparked my interest in second language teaching and learning research and shaped my career path, inspiring me to become a French Immersion teacher myself.

It would be difficult for me to describe my experience in the French Immersion program as anything but overwhelmingly positive. However, while working as a teaching assistant, I met students who shared a diverse array of experiences in the program, both positive and negative. Some felt that even after eight or more years in immersion they still could not actually speak French. Some felt that the program had not been for them but were once again trying to learn a language that many of them felt they needed to be able speak in order get a job in Ottawa.

Around the time that I started studying at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, I read an article by Dan Gardner (2008) that appeared in the Ottawa Citizen a few years prior. Titled “The Real Reason We Send Our Kids to French Immersion,” the article presents a scathing critique of an elitist streaming problem in the French Immersion program. While I was aware that the writer had adopted a certain tone to make a point, his words were nevertheless difficult for me to read. It described a side of the program I had never seen as a student who had loved the program and as a teacher who was excited to play a role in the second language learning journey of my students. It caused me to reflect on my own experiences in French Immersion in ways that never had before. I was inspired to do additional research to find out more about the basis for this argument. What was really happening in the program? What did people think? I gradually became aware of a controversial debate about certain aspects of the program that seemed to merit further exploration and over the last two years in the Master of Teaching program this investigation evolved into this research project.
Overview

The first chapter of this study includes an introduction to the research problem and the purpose of the study, as well as a description of my background as a researcher in this area. Chapter 2 presents a review of relevant academic literature and Chapter 3 describes the methodology that was used and the procedure that was followed, from the selection of participants to the collection and analysis of data. Findings are presented in Chapter 4 and these findings are discussed in Chapter 5. A list of references and two appendices are included at the end.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

The issue of inclusion is much debated within the framework of French Immersion. On the one hand is the argument that the program is not for everyone. On the other, teachers, parents and researchers argue that the program may not currently be suitable for everyone but it should be and can be. This chapter presents a summary of the existing research in this area with a section devoted to the studies supporting each of these views. These are preceded by an introduction to the French Immersion program and the benefits of learning a second language as well as a section summarizing research on cognitive and affective factors influencing language learning. A final section about differentiated instruction in second language learning concludes this review.

Second Language Learning and the French Immersion Program

The French Immersion program

The French Immersion program started in a school in St. Lambert, Québec in 1965 in order to offer families a way for their children to become bilingual. (Campbell, 2014). It was not long before it was being implemented across Canada, in a few different variations. In Ontario, there are different entry points into the program. The Early Immersion program starts in either Senior Kindergarten or Grade 1. The Extended French program starts in Grade 4. Expectations for these two programs are outlined in The Ontario Curriculum: French as a Second Language document (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2013). Some schools also offer a Late Immersion program, which starts in Grade 6. The percentage of the day for which French is used as the language of instruction varies by program and grade level. In the Early Immersion program, which is the focus of this study, French must be the language of instruction for a minimum of 50
percent of the day for a total of at least 3800 hours by the end of Grade 8 (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2013). Contributing to the variety of possible French Immersion experiences is the fact that some schools have both an English stream and a French Immersion stream, others offer only French Immersion.

In the 1970s and 1980s, the program experienced tremendous growth in enrolment, which has since levelled out (Statistics Canada, 2013). It however remains popular enough that many school boards have to use a lottery system to control access to enrolment (Fraser, 2013). Parents who enrol their students in the program are generally satisfied with the decision and many who do not enrol their children later regret it (Canadian Parents for French, 2010). The program is considered to be an effective way for students to learn a second language and researchers claim that there are numerous other benefits, which are described in the following section.

The benefits of learning a second language

Lazaruk (2007) reviews research studies on the benefits of French Immersion and groups them by linguistic, academic and cognitive benefits to students. While both the total hours of instruction and the intensity of instruction are important factors, according to Cummins (2001) and Genesee (1987), students enrolled in French Immersion are able to reach high levels of proficiency in French by the end of high school, with receptive (listening and reading) skills that rival those of native speakers. With respect to English proficiency, students in Early French Immersion do not receive English instruction until Grades 3 or 4 and may initially lag behind but quickly catch up and even surpass their non-immersion peers. Cummins’ (2001) theory of linguistic interdependence theory, according to which literacy skills are transferrable from one language to another, is important to note here. Second language proficiency can therefore be
dependent on native language proficiency and vice versa. Furthermore, several studies show that academic success was not compromised in subjects taught in the second language (Lazaruk 2007, p. 613). With respect to the cognitive benefits, Peal and Lambert (1962) and later Baker (2006) demonstrate that bilingualism does lead to cognitive advantages. On tests of divergent and creative thinking, bilinguals provide answers that demonstrate more originality and creativity than monolinguals. According to Bialystok (2001) the higher levels of creative thinking can be attributed to the higher level of metalinguistic awareness that bilingual children have.

Explaining varying degrees of success in second language learning

Cognitive and academic factors

Sparks and Ganschow (1991) explore why some people have more difficulty learning a foreign language than others, even when immersed in the language. They distinguish between affective factors and basic language aptitude factors and propose an alternative to an affective explanation of language learning difficulties. They conclude that a student's control over the syntactic, semantic and phonological aspects of language processing has a huge impact on their ability to learn a language. When this control is limited, students experience difficulty and, according to the authors, it is as a result of these control deficiency induced difficulties that students experience a lack of motivation and anxiety. We can see that this as essentially a way of justifying the use of Cummins’ (2001) interdependence theory mentioned above. Those language processing skills used in learning and mastering one’s native language have an impact on the learning of a second language. A student will face these challenges irrespective of the language in which they are learning.
The Role of Affect in Second Language Learning

Despite the explanation presented by Sparks and Ganschow (1991) as an alternative to an affective explanation, the research nevertheless shows that affective factors play an important role in language learning. The affective filter hypothesis, proposed by Krashen (1982) as part of his Theory of Second Language Acquisition, is an explanation of the relationship between affect and cognition in second language learning. This “filter” is comprised of negative emotions, namely a lack of motivation, low self-esteem and anxiety, which have an adverse effect on language learning. The higher the filter, the lower the level of language acquisition.

The significance of affective factors was confirmed by Bruck (1985), who conducted a quantitative study of ten schools offering French Immersion. Teachers of Grades 2, 3, and 4 nominated students that they thought should or should not transfer out of the program and into the regular English stream. Data was collected from tests and questionnaires administered to students, teacher evaluations and interviews with parents. At the end of the year, when some students transferred out of the program and into the regular stream, the researcher was able to determine that attitudinal and motivational factors were better predictors than cognitive academic factors of whether or not the student would transfer out of the French Immersion program.

The role of affect in language learning has since been attested in a large body of research and numerous guides for teachers have been published on the subject (Arnold, 1999; Young, 1999). The research therefore suggests that for some students experiencing real difficulty, their struggle is not just an academic one but an emotional one as well. In the French Immersion classroom, student frustration often operates as a first indicator of serious difficulty, prior even to a decline in academic performance (Arnett & Mady, 2010b; Mannavarayan, 2002). Supporting these students and addressing their emotional needs before they become disengaged is critical.
because difficulty with the language leads to struggle in the other subjects taught in the language, compounding their frustration. One aspect of this study therefore aims to determine how teachers use affective factors as indicators of difficulty and how they use strategies in their classrooms that help lower the affective filter, specifically for students experiencing difficulty.

The Question of Program Suitability

Ever since the implementation of French Immersion programs in Canada, researchers have tried to determine for whom this learning context is most suitable, who succeeds and who does not. Research has examined whether students with low levels of academic ability or with learning disabilities could be successful in immersion (Genesee, 1987; Murtagh, 1993; Obadia & Thériault, 1997). As was presented above, Bruck (1985) concluded that cognitive and academic factors were not as effective as predictors of transfer out of the French Immersion program as attitudinal and motivational factors. Genesee (2007) argues that overall, “[r]esearch evidence that students who are experiencing academic difficulty in immersion because of either low levels of academic ability or language or reading impairment […] is scant at best and methodologically weak.” (p. 676). While he does state that it may indeed be true that the program is not suitable for every child, we cannot determine this in advance or decide based solely on academic difficulty or a learning disability. Decisions should be made on a case-by-case basis.

Mannavarayan (2002), questioning the suitability of the program for every student, also argued that educators and parents should make these decisions by taking the whole child into consideration. She presents a review of the research in this area and reflects on her own experience teaching intermediate and high school students. The students whose cases she presents struggled a great deal in the program and felt discouraged and resentful. They had
become disengaged and disinterested not only in learning French, but also in school in general. Mannavarayan (2002) explains that these students had been pushed along and given just enough teacher support and parental pressure to continue in the program. However, when many of them finally transferred out, they were much happier and experienced greater academic success. She had come to question the claim that French Immersion can be suitable for every child, and argued that this suitability be based on a combination of the student’s abilities, affect and aspirations.

Researchers have identified certain skills that support achievement in immersion programs, low levels of which may be predictors of potential difficulty in this type of learning environment. Weak auditory discrimination skills are often cited as a predictor of difficulty in immersion and studies have also found that students who struggle with memory and auditory-visual association are at risk for experiencing difficulty (Demers, 1994; Stern, 1991, as cited in Fortune, 2010; Trites, 1976). Difficulties of this nature may present a greater challenge for the student in later grades, as a certain level of proficiency in the target language is required to access content in other subject areas also taught in French.

This does not necessarily mean, however, that such a difficulty cannot be accommodated in French Immersion, just as it may be in English medium classes. Fortune (2010, citing Kohnert, 2008) points out, that a student may experience difficulty that only presents in a second language if it is the result of a learning disability for which the student has already developed ways of coping with or overcoming in their first language. Therefore, “[w]hat may look like a delay in the acquisition of the immersion language may actually be a language learning disability that can be overcome in the L2” (p. 23). In fact, many researchers have argued that students experiencing difficulties in French will often experience the same difficulties learning in English
A student with a learning disability has a learning disability irrespective of the language in which they are learning and with the appropriate support can be successful in French Immersion.

Referenced repeatedly throughout the literature and on the websites of many school boards is the work of Demers (1994) who developed a list of the characteristics of students who are successful in French Immersion and those who are not. He argues however, and Fortune (2010) reminds us, that he never intended for this list to be used as a screening tool that would help educators and parents make decisions about whether a particular child should be in French Immersion. Demers’ intent was this list to be a guide for the kinds of behaviours that educators should try to promote in the program.

**Teacher perceptions**

Studies have shown that a teacher’s opinions regarding the inclusion of students with special education needs influence how they make instructional decisions (Jordan, Lindsay & Stanovich, 1997; Arnett, Mady & Muilenburg 2014). Teachers’ views can also influence decisions made regarding students’ placement in French Immersion. In a study involving interviews with teacher candidates Arnett, Mady & Muilenburg (2014) explored teacher-candidate perceptions of students with learning difficulties in FSL. The teacher candidates in this study understood that students with learning difficulties were likely kept out of French Immersion and they had observed that they did not have students with Individual Education Plans in their French Immersion classrooms. Learning in a second language was believed to complicate any difficulties that these students were already experiencing. Mady (2012) considered that teachers can sometimes be “a barrier to inclusive programming” because they
often discourage the students who are already experiencing difficulty from enrolling in early French Immersion or recommend that they transfer out early on in the program if they do not believe that the students can be successful (p. 7). She argues that teachers have a great deal of influence with parents, who make these decisions for their children, and with administrators, who may not actually be second language educators. Unrealistic teacher expectations regarding the academic abilities of student in French Immersion have been identified as a challenge faced by the program (Fortune, 2010). Studies confirm that teachers require additional support and training to be able to support students with diverse learning needs in FSL. Lapkin, MacFarlane and Vandergrift (2006) found that this was the most often cited challenge by the 1305 FSL teachers from across Canada that they surveyed. Mady (2012) argues that this “lack of support allows them to maintain their beliefs,” emphasizing the need for professional development opportunities in this area as well as additional research into the perceptions and beliefs of teachers and teacher educators (p. 7).

**Inclusive Education and French as a Second Language Programs**

There are many who argue that the very idea of the French Immersion program being suited to only a certain group of students is essentially discriminatory and suggests a problem with the way that we perceive the program and the way that we understand learning difficulties. In one study, Arnett and Mady (2010a), who have conducted much of the research in this area, use critical theory as a framework for exploring the relationship between students with special education needs and FSL programs and identify inequities that may be seen as effectively excluding these learners from FSL education.
Similar critiques can be found in the mainstream media such as the article by Gardner (2008) mentioned in Chapter 1. This critique of the French Immersion program as elitist is not new (Willms, 2008), but the philosophy of inclusion that underlies many new initiatives in education has led researchers, educators and parents to argue that questioning the suitability of the French Immersion program for certain students runs counter to “an attitude, an approach that encourages all students to belong” (MacKay, 2007, p. 38).

There is some recent research indicating that students with learning difficulties can in fact be successful in FSL programs. In one study, Arnett (2008) conducted individual interviews with seven students in a core French classroom about what they believe makes an FSL classroom effective and inclusive. The article explains the key features of effective instruction in the language classroom and then presents the students' perspectives on different themes related to these key features. Some of the students describe the benefits of peer collaboration in the language learning process, even when the proficiency levels of the students are different. Arnett underlines that teachers have to implement effective and universal strategies of differentiated instruction to accommodate a diverse student population within the classroom.

In a second study conducted in the same Grade 8 classroom, Arnett (2012) presents an analysis of the strategies used by the teacher, including different scaffolds, such as comprehension monitoring through questioning that requires students to provide information, strategies to build language comprehension and strategies to build meaning. Arnett also provides an overview of recent research challenging the notion that FSL is only suited for certain students and presenting ways of making it more inclusive for all students, including those with learning disabilities.
Additionally, Joy & Murphy (2012) conducted a study in inclusive Grade 6 Intensive French classes, which integrate students with special education needs. They applied Activity Theory to guide the interviews they conducted and their analysis of the context of the learning that took place in these classrooms. Activity Theory is essentially a model that breaks down the social context of learning in order to identify barriers to inclusion. They identified positive outcomes, particularly affective outcomes for these students, resulting from the high levels of conversation and interaction.

Fortune (2010) presents the case study of a school offering a Spanish Immersion program where educators believe that “immersion can be appropriate for children even when language and learning are a struggle” (p. 5). These educators had however observed that the program was not the best fit for students who enrolled late or who found transitions and change to be extremely challenging. While citing many of the same challenges described above that some students may experience in immersion and which may act as predictors of difficulty, Fortune (2010) nevertheless argued that in many ways, as an academically rigorous program, immersion is challenging for all students. She highlights that it is important for educators to put student needs first and consider each learner as a unique individual, for whom they should hold high expectations, regardless of their perceived level of ability.

With the exception of a few studies, including the last two described here, much of the research conducted in this particular area has focused on students with learning difficulties, learning disabilities or other special education needs in Grades 4 to 12. Since the current study focuses on Grade 1 to 3 teachers and their experiences working with much younger learners I have chosen to use the term “struggling learners” used by Fortune (2010) because students in primary grades are but rarely identified formally with any kind of learning exceptionality. The
purpose of this study was to find out how teachers describe their experiences working with learners experiencing difficulty, regardless of whether this difficulty was the result of an exceptionality that had or had not yet been formally identified or whether it was the result of something else entirely.

**Differentiation in Second Language Teaching and Learning**

**Differentiated Instruction**

Promoting inclusion through differentiated and adapted instruction for students with diverse learning needs has long been an important theme in education and numerous guides for teachers have been published on the subject (Hume 2007; Hutchinson 2010). According to Tomlinson (2001), there are four aspects of instruction that can be differentiated in order to meet the needs of a diverse learning population: content, process, product and the learning environment. Content refers to what the students are actually expected to learn as well as the means through which they can access this learning. Examples of content differentiation include using reading materials at different levels and presenting information through different modalities including auditory and visual. Teachers can differentiate process, which refers to the activities that provide students with opportunities to make sense of the learning, through the use of flexible groupings or tiered activities that offer a greater level of challenge for some students and greater levels of support for others. Other ways of differentiating process include integrating student interests, varying lengths of time or using learning centres. Teachers can also differentiate the product, or the way in which students are expected to show their learning by giving them a choice of medium or task and of whether to work alone or in a group. Finally, the learning environment itself offers opportunities for differentiation that teachers can achieve by
having reading materials representative of different cultures and making available spaces for both quiet and collaborative study.

**Differentiating Instruction for Second Language Learners**

The work of Dörnyei (2005) explores why it is that we learn languages differently and why we experience varying levels of success in our endeavour to learn a second language. The author examines the existing literature on various dimensions of individual difference in the research pertaining to language acquisition. The individual difference variables, or groups of related variables addressed include language aptitude, motivation, learning styles and cognitive styles, language learning strategies and personality, temperament and mood. This highlights the importance of considering the distinct identity of the language learner when using any instructional strategy, therefore supporting the need for differentiated instruction in language learning.

There are a number of examples in the literature of studies that examine how differentiated instruction can be used in the second language classroom, although these are specific to neither French, nor immersion (Anders & Wilen, 2006; Chien, 2012). Fortune (2010) presents this as one of a few practices that teachers can use to support the achievement struggling learners because “it requires that teachers be flexible and adjust the presentation of content to meet the particular learning needs of students” (p. 67). Arnett and Fortune (2004) argue that “[i]n any classroom, teachers face a student population that represents a spectrum of interests, motivations, ability, potential and success. The immersion setting is no different” (p. 3). They explain that teacher strategies for meeting diverse learning needs should specifically facilitate the perception, processing and expression of the second language. Since there are very few case
studies of this practice in the French Immersion classroom, the current study uses differentiated instruction as a framework for exploring how teachers adapt instruction to meet diverse learning needs in the French Immersion classroom, particularly those of struggling learners.

**Conclusion**

The focus of research in this area has generally either been on older grade levels or on learners in English Second Language, English Foreign Language, Core French or other language classes. However, learning a new language and learning in a new language that is not the spoken language of the majority, as is the case with French Immersion, present very different learning environments. There is also interest in exploring this issue from a primary grade level perspective. There is not enough research that has examined teacher perceptions and strategies for supporting students experiencing difficulty exclusively in the primary French Immersion classroom. This is why I will be trying to address this gap in the literature by focusing on what teachers are doing at the primary level to support students who are struggling in French Immersion, with the intention of ultimately being able to identify areas of future research and learning.
Chapter 3: Methodology

Procedure

The nature of the research question and the goals for this study are best suited to a qualitative research study which enables the researcher to learn about the views of individuals, in this case, the views and insights of teachers, and to obtain more detailed information from only a few people (Creswell 2009, p. 74). I will therefore be exploring in detail the research problem’s various aspects, including teacher perceptions of the inclusion of students with learning difficulties in French Immersion, strategies to support the different cognitive and learning needs of these students and strategies for providing affective support as well.

I first conducted a literature review already presented in Chapter 2. I then approached potential participants and conducted interviews with four participants. These interviews were recorded and then transcribed. The transcriptions were coded for different themes and the findings are presented in Chapter 4. A discussion of these findings follows in Chapter 5.

Instruments of Data Collection

Data was collected through semi-structured interviews conducted with Early French Immersion teachers, using a General Interview Guide Approach, as described by Turner (2010). This approach is more structured than an informal conversational interview but still allows for some flexibility in the wording of the questions. The same set of questions was asked of every participant but follow-up questions were also asked and if a participant touched on material for a subsequent question in a previous answer, this was acknowledged in the wording of the question. I tried to be as consistent as possible, only making changes that improved the flow of the interview and helped prevent confusion for my participants. These interviews began with a few biographical questions followed by questions grouped together to allow me to answer my
research sub-questions. Please see Appendix A for the full list of questions used in these interviews.

Participants

The four participants in this study, who are referenced in this paper using pseudonyms, were teachers with experience teaching in the primary grades of the Early French Immersion Program. Three of them were practicing classroom teachers and one of them was a teacher educator, all working in Southern Ontario. Sarah taught Grade 2 and had been teaching French Immersion for 23 years. She was a native speaker of French from Québec who moved to Ontario to begin her teaching career as a French Immersion teacher. She had several years of experience teaching at the primary level as well as 11 years of experience teaching Grade 6. Marie was the newest teacher of the four participants, with 4 years of teaching experience, two of which were in primary classes. She described herself as being from a bilingual community in Ontario where she attended a French language elementary school and an English language high school. Geneviève was a Grade 1 teacher with 25 years of experience teaching French Immersion at the same school, mostly in Grade 1. Like Sarah, she was a native speaker of French born and raised in Quebec, who moved to Ontario to begin her career as a French Immersion teacher. Catherine was a teacher educator who taught courses in the area of French language pedagogy, including an optional course offered to pre-service teachers interested in teaching in French Immersion. She had prior experience teaching a range of grades from 4 to 12. Unlike the other participants, she did not learn French as a first language, but rather as a second language, through the French Immersion program. All of the participants for this study were selected through the
recommendations of colleagues, with the exception of Geneviève, who was selected through the recommendation of one of the other participants.

**Data Collection and Analysis**

The data for this study was collected through the interviews recorded on my laptop that I then transcribed without using transcription software. I began my analysis in much the same way as was suggested by Wellington (2000). First, I immersed myself in my data by reading through my four interviews, making notes, circling things and highlighting certain passages that I felt were important to include in my analysis. The next stage described by Wellington (2000) is the reflection stage and this is what would describe my process of thinking about what I had started to notice and realizing that the themes that I had expected to find and the categories that I had expected to use to organize my data were not the best way to analyze what was emerging because there was so much that I would not otherwise have been able to capture. Some of my themes were, to a certain extent, pre-determined because I knew that I was looking for certain elements and structured my interview protocol accordingly. However, this structure didn’t lend itself very well to the identification of the themes that were emerging. For example, I initially had a section of interview questions about parental involvement but found that this did not stand well as a theme on its own. Instead I included a section about talking to parents under two different themes: identifying and supporting learners based on social and emotional well-being; and transfer decisions. I then proceeded with the taking apart stage by starting to try break down my data into new categories. Using new electronic versions of my transcripts, I highlighted passages using different colours, copied them into a table and looked for ways to break them down even further.
The process of determining themes was flexible and the structure of my analysis was constantly revisited. The colour-coded data was then transferred into a table with a separate section for each theme that allowed me to compare statements made by different participants on the same topic. This offered an effective way of getting an overall picture of the data and of comparing themes both within and across interviews.

**Ethical Review Procedures**

In conducting this research, I followed the Ethical Review procedures specific to the Master of Teaching Program. In order to find potential participants for this study I approached teachers with whom I had already worked in my practice teaching as well as teachers that they referred and ensured that any teacher I approached was not one with whom I would end up practice teaching in a future practicum placement, as this would present a conflict of interest.

Prior to each interview, the participant signed a letter of consent that I read through with her (see Appendix B for a template of this consent letter). Consent was however considered to be an ongoing process, meaning that at any point, a participant was able to withdraw their consent. Upon request, a participant was also able to see a copy of their transcribed responses. The participants were given pseudonyms, which are used throughout this study. Special consideration has also been given to excluding school names and any other details that may compromise the anonymity of the participants.

The interviews, transcriptions and any other data were stored on my own password-protected computer to which only I had access. The interview recordings were deleted upon submission of the research project. Finally, in addition to myself, my supervisor was also able to
review the raw data. This is something of which every participant was made aware and to which they consented in signing the aforementioned letter of consent.

**Limitations**

Due to the nature of this research and the conditions under which it was conducted, it does have certain limitations that would prevent generalizations from being made about how teachers *should* support struggling learners, how they understand inclusion in French Immersion or how the decisions regarding the placement of students in the program should be made. The purpose for this study was not to be able to draw these kinds of conclusions but rather to explore the experiences and understandings of a few teachers in order to identify possible areas of future learning and study for the educational community and to deepen my own professional understanding of these issues. The small sample size is one such limitation. Only four participants were interviewed for this study and there can be little doubt that having more participants would have greatly benefitted this research.

Given the controversial nature of the discourse surrounding conflicting notions of inclusion and suitability, an additional limitation derives from the fact that participants may have answered questions according to what they thought they should say in order to provide the most positive portrayal of their professional practice. It was my hope that I was able to mitigate this effect by framing my questions as objectively as possible and by developing a rapport with the participants that put them at ease and allowed them to feel comfortable answering honestly.

Finally, since, as the researcher, I determined what to include in the literature review, what questions to ask and how to code the data, this study has certainly been affected by my own experiences and biases, as described in Chapter 1, under “Background of the Researcher.” It is
nevertheless my hope that this has been mitigated by certain checks that were made to ensure the reliability and validity of the analysis including a comparison with the academic literature and an external audit conducted by my research supervisor.
Chapter 4: Findings

In this chapter, I will present and analyze the data obtained through semi-structured interviews with the four participants in this study. Participant statements will be organized using four major themes: identifying struggling learners and choosing support based on social and emotional indicators; differentiated instruction; teacher perceptions of program suitability and inclusivity; and transfer decisions. Each theme is analyzed under its own heading with multiple sub-sections within each of these and due to the interconnected nature of these themes, there is necessarily some overlap between them. A discussion of these themes, how they relate to my research questions and the connections established with the previously reviewed literature in a previous section is reserved for Chapter 5.

Social and Emotional Indicators: Identifying Struggling Learners and Choosing Support

Identifying the struggling learner through social and emotional indicators

When asked how they identify learners in their classroom who are struggling, some of the participants described a variety of diagnostic tools for assessing language and reading skills. Geneviève, in particular, described a very thorough range of tools for assessing students and determining what the cause of a struggle might be. However, all of the participants also described how the child’s demeanour, behaviour, interactions with peers and overall emotional well-being could suggest that the student was experiencing difficulty. For most participants, these were the first indicators that they described.

These signs of difficulty could often be very obvious, especially among students of this particular age group. Catherine explained that in her experience, when it comes to primary students, “you cannot ignore this. You cannot. I mean, if they’re not feeling okay, they will be in
a puddle on the floor. There will be tears involved and you can’t, like you have to be part of that scenario because that’s what’s presented to you.”

Another possible sign that a student is experiencing difficulty might be their avoidance of certain tasks. Sarah explained, “if they can’t do it, instead of doing bad, they won’t do it at all. So, you will notice they are having a problem if they don’t do it. It’s not often because they are lazy or because they, it’s just because they can’t do it and they don’t want to show what they can’t do.” Based on what Sarah has said, we can see that sometimes students avoid doing something because they lack confidence that they actually can. Sometimes, students also manifest this avoidance behaviourally. In Catherine’s experience, students who go around poking other students or disrupting the class in other ways may be doing so because they are actually trying to avoid what they are being expected to do. She said that these behaviours are presented when students simply do not feel ready to focus on a task, so “maybe they’ll sit in front of it, but they won’t do it. Or they’ll do it but they’ll complain about it. Or maybe they need to get a drink of water.” There are therefore multiple ways that students may try to avoid doing something but as Sarah said, they’re not necessarily lazy; they just may not feel capable of completing the task and they act out rather than let anyone know this.

An indicator that all of the participants touched on was the student’s level of participation. Marie said, “The participation thing is huge. When kids aren’t participating, it’s sort of their way of shutting down.” Geneviève explained that some students who do not participate are afraid of making a mistake because they would rather not try anything than risk making a mistake. It is nevertheless important to note that unwillingness to participate should not necessarily be construed as a sign of anxiety or a lack of confidence related to a struggle that the student is experiencing in French Immersion. Sarah explained that some students just aren’t as
verbal and “it doesn’t mean they don’t speak French and they don’t understand. They just don’t show it. […] It’s just because they’re quiet kids.” Participant responses suggested that they recognized that things aren’t always as they seem. Teachers sometimes need help deciphering what they observe and some of the social and emotional indicators of struggle are not ones that teachers even see in the classroom, which is why participants also talked about maintaining an open dialogue with parents about student progress and well-being.

Parents as a valuable source of information about the student – “the same person, but in two different spots”

All of the participants emphasized just how important it is to communicate regularly with parents in order to identify when learners are struggling and to determine what the cause of their difficulty might be. However, Catherine and Sarah both described examples of students whose emotional states and reactions to their learning were very different at home than they were at school. As Catherine explained, “it’s the same person but in two different spots.” She was surprised when the parents of a particular student came to her with concerns that their child may not actually have been learning or enjoying French when, in fact, he was the most outgoing, talkative student in the class. She also described an interaction she had with a parent about a student who did not seem to be picking up the language or participating in singing the songs that they were working on. The parent’s reaction was unexpected:

And the parent’s like, ‘Oh my gosh, every night at the dinner table, we’ve got to sing every single song, you know we go to bed time we’ve got to sing every single song. The parents start saying the song.’ Okay so everything’s alright then. And it’s just like that
kid just won’t bring anything into the classroom. They need a private place to practice it and feel comfortable with their family doing it.

This is a case where the student was not actually experiencing the difficulty that the teacher thought he was. She just had to find ways to make the child feel more comfortable using the new language in the classroom, but sometimes the situation is reversed, suggesting that teachers rely on parents to be able to identify struggles that might not otherwise have been apparent in the classroom. Sarah explained: “I always make sure I ask the parents how they are when they get home because this is when they will tell they are frustrated. This is when they will cry and say they are stressed.” Sarah is suggesting here that she might not see this frustration in the classroom and if the child is frustrated and emotional at home, then this could be interpreted as a sign that something is much more challenging for the student than it appears to be. She went on to describe a specific example:

I had a little boy who was, seemed in my class very happy, everyday and like go for it and do his work and his mom told me he was crying every night. He was upset because he couldn’t read as well as the other people.

**Social and Emotional Well-being as a Motive for Support**

Participant responses suggested that the supports that they offer, whether through an overall inclusive environment or through differentiated supports for learners experiencing difficulty, should ultimately help the student feel successful, decrease their anxiety and make them feel confident in their ability to achieve a given learning goal. Sarah explained why she differentiated instruction for the following student:
When it’s writing anything, he can’t. He doesn’t do it. He hates it and he doesn’t feel good about himself. But when it’s manipulatives, organizing, then he loves it. So you have to find something that will attract them, that will show their strength as well.

Sarah has explained here that finding ways to appeal to the student’s strengths and interests is motivating for them because having the chance to do something that they enjoy and at which they know that they excel can also raise their level of self-confidence. She also said that she does not group struggling readers with stronger readers, even though sometimes one would think they might learn from each other because her students said they found this discouraging. So she said, “You put them with students their level, with their reading level, where they feel success.” From what Sarah has observed, this makes the students feel much more confident.

The first sign that Marie said she would look for in order to know whether a strategy she was using for a particular learner was working was “seeing them look a little bit happier. You can really see when a student’s stress is removed. They seem to have, they’re a little more excited and happier about, and proud of their work when they do accomplish something.” Marie described a student who was rarely able to get work or projects completed because he did not have the same level of support at home as the other students in the class so she brought in a volunteer to help him complete work. “It was his first time being proud of what he did so he actually did the best presentation, because usually, he would refuse to do presentations, more so because he was never prepared.” Marie’s description of this event suggested the student’s pride was one of the most important outcomes and finding a way to help him feel positive about his work also supported the student’s achievement.

According to Catherine, “success breeds success” because students feel motivated when they know that they have done something well. She said that it isn’t enough to just tell a child
that they have done well because they know when they have learned something and successfully shown it. She tries to design learning experiences that offer these opportunities to all of her students. As she explained:

trying to engineer those kinds of experiences for every kid, and especially including these people who have been struggling and kind of questioning their success I think is really, really important. And it’s about me, kind of getting them in the right direction so that they can discover and notice their own success. Even though, of course I will offer feedback and that sort of thing, I really think that the motivation and the feelings about their learning comes from their own experience.

Based on what Catherine has said, ensuring that students experience success motivates them in future learning because it helps them believe that they are capable.

Geneviève said that she saw that one of her biggest responsibilities as a Grade 1 teacher was to support the development of her students’ self-esteem. As she explained, “there might be a good reason they’re struggling […] but most of the time, it starts with self-confidence.” It is as a result of this belief that she said she was constantly trying to find ways to help students feel comfortable making mistakes.

Therefore, when looking for ways to support the achievement of their learners, and in particular the learners experiencing difficulty, the priority of these teachers was often to choose ways of differentiating instruction that made students feel good about themselves, boosted their self-confidence and self-esteem by creating opportunities for meaningful success. So what are some of the ways that these teachers differentiate to support struggling learners?
Differentiating instruction to meet the needs of struggling learners

Participants were asked how they differentiated instruction in their classroom to meet the needs of all of their students and specifically their struggling learners. They were also asked about strategies they used to help them become motivated and reduce their anxiety. It was hard to separate these types of strategies because, as was described in the previous section, instruction is often differentiated with the dual goal of supporting the student academically and improving their sense of self-efficacy. Participants were not asked specifically how they differentiated content, process and product for their learners, but their suggestions can nevertheless be grouped into these categories.

The benefit to all – “what’s useful and helps one student often helps everybody.”

A couple of the participants touched on the fact that much of what they do in the classroom to support the students who are experiencing difficulty actually benefits everyone in the class. Marie explained:

if there’s one student that really needs me to be putting up an anchor chart or clarifying expectations, it’s the whole class because they’re not the only one. They’re the one that I will often do this for but probably a good chunk of the class will benefit from everything that I do for the one student that’s really struggling.

In Marie’s experience, clarifying expectations really helped reduce the anxiety of the some of the students who experienced high levels of anxiety in the classroom but it also set everyone else up for success when they knew what was expected for a given task. Geneviève made a very similar point about the use of visuals: “I use that with all the kids anyway because I find what’s useful and helps one student often helps everybody.” These participants therefore describe making
specific accommodations with certain learners in mind, but knowing that all students will benefit.

**Differentiating the content**

The strategies discussed by participants that are grouped together in this first subcategory differentiate the delivery of content to allow access based on differing levels of ability. Marie described some of the resources and reading materials she uses in the classroom, but explained that it is challenging to get the same resources for French Immersion as those used in the English stream. She explained:

“There’s these books that they’re finally coming out with in French Immersion where it’s the same text but it’s written differently. So it’s written at different levels but it’s the same content […] they’re still getting the content but they’re not struggling to get that understanding.

She described these materials as being especially important in ensuring that the language doesn’t become an obstacle to learning in other subject areas. In an ideal world, she said that she would like to have more materials such as these in order to differentiate access to content for students.

Sarah, Marie and Geneviève all mentioned the use of visuals when describing how they differentiate instruction to meet the needs of all learners. This is another way of differentiating content. Marie said, “Everywhere I have visual charts and word walls and anchor charts and whatnot because they’re often looking for words and for visuals to help them, to remind them.” She also said that she uses the Smartboard for shared reading lessons, which allows her to include a picture after each sentence or next to certain words. When describing how she gives instructions to some of her struggling learners, Sarah said, “I have to make sure it’s verbal or I
will make them cards. I would give them cards and match it, match it with the word, so instead of them writing.”

**Differentiating the process**

All four participants discussed various ways to differentiate the process to meet the needs of their learners. One of the strategies mentioned by several participants was the use of flexible groupings. Geneviève does guided reading with her students and explained that the groups “are not permanent because some kids move faster through a problem than others.” Marie and Sarah also said that they grouped students at similar reading levels. Sarah explained that being grouped this way was better for the students’ self-confidence than being grouped with stronger readers and Marie pointed out that this strategy gave her the chance to hear her struggling readers read more often.

In some situations, mixed ability groupings can be a useful strategy. Geneviève said that she also uses different grouping strategies as a means of scaffolding support for students who are struggling. She explained that she would have students first share with an elbow partner, then a bigger group and then the whole class. This way, “the student that’s struggling with language has heard different people give ideas they can share now in an appropriate and correct way.” This strategy not only provides learners experiencing difficulty with opportunities to learn from their peers, but can boost their self-confidence and reduce anxiety, as Geneviève pointed out.

Yet another strategy that uses this scaffolding approach to differentiate the process is the use of tiered activities that offer a greater level of challenge for some students and a greater level of support for others. Geneviève talked about just how much this aspect of her planning and instruction has changed since she started teaching. “When I started teaching, I expected
everybody to complete the same work, right? Same amount of work, same task.” She now tries to vary differentiate as much as possible based on the needs of her students. She said, “you start with something basic for everybody and then you gear it, okay they’re stronger in there, but they struggle there, so do a little bit of what you’re struggling to build it up.” Her students had been learning about animals and working on animal descriptions so she said that she may ask some students to write a longer text. For others who have a harder time thinking up and writing sentences, she may ask them to do just the physical description. As Catherine also explained, if all of her students were going to write in their journals, she would say, “well, please write one sentence. And then why don’t you try and write two? Oh why don’t you try and write a story? Oh yeah, why don’t I help you with your sentence?” She described this as being a basic example of how she might vary the level of support, as a means of differentiating instruction according to student learning needs.

As mentioned in the literature review, another way of differentiating the process is to do so based on student interests. All of the participants touched on this type of differentiation in some way. Geneviève said that it was really important to her to make reading engaging for all of her students. When she started teaching, she said there were not nearly as many non-fiction books or other materials that interested boys. As she explained:

Nice colours and cute stories, but nothing about animals or trucks or sports […] I always say you need to start to find what the kids really like. So you start with that. So if they’re struggling in reading, but they like hockey, find everything you can on hockey, to hook them.

Sarah said something very similar about motivating young boys in her class to read “I got them hockey books and baseball books. Now they’re reading those […] So that’s what you need to
find. Whatever motivates them, to get them motivated. The language doesn’t motivate him, but the sports thing will. So you use that.” Sarah also uses short surveys throughout the year to find out what her students like and what interests them because she believes that they find this to be motivating. She said that knowing your students and planning around their interests was not only important, but also kept her from doing the same thing every year.

Another way of differentiating process based on student interests is through the use of stations and Marie explained that she really liked using stations in her class because it allowed her to differentiate for a variety of skills and interests. When describing these stations, she said, “One can be art related. One can be sort of mathematical, scientific. And you can also have tasks that relate to their different interests.” She uses stations everyday and finds that this also allows her to spend more time with some of the learners who need more support. Catherine also discussed the use of learning centres and optional, open-ended activities in the Kindergarten classroom. She explained that, “in Kindergarten, there’s a lot that’s sort of invitational and optional and there are always alternatives.” Farther along in the year, she would have students participate in less open-ended activities and put in place a rotation for part of the day in order to prepare students for the routines of Grade 1. She also carefully observed the choices that students would make in order to come up with ways that would make them feel motivated to try things that they were reluctant to do. “Whether it’s through having an exciting book, whether it’s through bringing books out of the library and nearer to the student, whether it’s putting the books in another centre, whether it’s finding an amazing library user to be that person’s new best friend.” This is an example of trying to appeal to the student’s interests in order to promote a positive experience in new areas.
A final strategy for differentiating the process that was mentioned by Marie is the chunking of tasks, which she found to be helpful to learners who were experiencing difficulty or struggling with anxiety. Instead of giving her students a large culminating task, she gives it to them in parts, one small assignment at a time. The participants described a variety of strategies for differentiating the learning process for their students, making this the largest category of strategies identified in the data.

**Differentiating the product**

Participants also described a few ways in which they differentiate in terms of the products expected from learners. In addition to using stations to differentiate process based on student interests, Marie also thought it was important to have a variety of tasks and assignments because she recognized that her students had different strengths. She mentioned an additional way that she allowed for differentiated product: “I have students with anxiety and whatnot and instead of doing oral presentations in front of the class, I would have them videotape their presentations and then just present the video, or just present for myself or for smaller groups.”

She said she also tried to offer a choice of activities that were hands-on, written or oral. Having the option of doing tasks orally was especially important, “because really, in French, the oral comes first. So it’s very difficult if you don’t have the oral language to be able to write. So to have the opportunity for some students to do oral tasks is important too.”

Geneviève uses a very similar strategy in her own classroom. She would often try to allow students to show their understanding in similar tasks, using different material. She also explained that some students would rather use an iPad to record something than present what they know directly to her. She said that the important thing is to “give them many opportunities
to do something and to be able to share with you. Sometimes they would rather take the iPad and record something than talk to me. Sure, you could do that.”

**Teacher Perceptions and Beliefs About Program Inclusivity and Suitability**

This section brings together what teachers have said they observed and believed about supporting struggling learners in French Immersion in response to various questions throughout the interviews. Many of the statements analyzed here were made when participants were asked whether they thought the program was a better fit for some students than for others, what kinds of difficulties they see students experiencing in the program and what their experiences have been with students transferring out of the program.

**Teacher observations of inclusion practices**

This subsection examines what the participants said about the inclusive or non-inclusive practices in the French Immersion program that they had observed and experienced. While Catherine said that in her experience, students were rarely transferred out of French Immersion and into English, she also said that she had heard things anecdotally and explained:

> It’s no secret that there’s an attrition level for a whole host of reasons, but one of the reasons being learning difficulties that students encounter and I have, in my career, witnessed some students whose families opted for them to go into the English program and who have subsequently been successful.

Catherine explained that parents generally have made the decision to transfer their child out because they experienced difficulty. Sarah also said that she did not think it happened very often and understood that recommending a transfer to English was not really her role. In Geneviève’s
experience, “you have a few that leave every year, but it seems to me when we talk to the Kindergarten and even the JK (parents), when the parents showed an interest for French Immersion, they were warned that their child was struggling.” Based on what Marie has said, the students who eventually transferred out of the program had demonstrated signs of possible struggle and their parents may have been discouraged from enrolling them in immersion to begin with. In Marie’s experience, students who were experiencing difficulty were often “filtered out” by recommending that they transfer into English. She explained:

I do find at our school, to be completely honest, that anytime students struggle in any way, even if it's a behaviour issue or they're ADHD or whatnot I think the easiest thing that some teachers will just do is like they shouldn't be in French. Take them out. Which, I sort of disagree with that.

What Marie has touched on here is the perception held by some that learning in a second language presents an additional challenge for students who are already struggling, whatever the challenge may be. This is further discussed in the section below.

Perceptions of learner abilities and challenges

This subsection presents an analysis of participant statements about the students who succeed in immersion and the types of challenges faced by the learners they considered to be struggling. Geneviève:

It seems there's always a group of kids that are doing, like, above level, that are doing very well. They, some of them, when you hear them speak French, you think that somebody at home speaks French with them. And most of the time, there's not somebody. So I guess they just have a knack for languages. And you have the average kids. They're
exactly where they're supposed to be. And then you have the struggling kids. Now, after 24 years, it doesn't mean the struggling, all the struggling kids look alike.

Catherine defined her struggling learners much more flexibly. She explained that she did not categorize her students in this way:

They’re all growing and changing. You know, it’s hard to say like these are all this kind of kid and these are all the struggling people because it’s all a mix [...] it’s more a matter of thinking of, you know, where is this person today? And it’s a different answer to where they’ll be in two months and where they were last time.

She did say that French Immersion nevertheless presents a very particular environment and it is one in which some students may seem to thrive more than others. She explained that some students might otherwise be bored learning in their first language and respond well to the challenge of figuring things out in a new language. The way Catherine described it, there are some “who take to it a little more easily in the French Immersion and more obviously shine in the program but that doesn’t mean that other kids don’t belong there and it doesn’t mean that we shouldn’t be working with everybody in the class.” While Sarah did believe that everyone could learn a second language, she also acknowledged that we all have different strengths and some people are language people. This seemed to echo what Catherine had said about some students shining more obviously or perhaps taking to it more easily than others.

The participants also identified some of the things with which they see students struggling in the French Immersion. Marie thought that for students who struggle with processing, it’s possible that French Immersion “would make it more difficult for them because they're already slower at processing questions and then they have to sort of translate in their mind as well, or look for the words in French.” In Geneviève’s experience, students with certain
learning disabilities have faced greater challenges in French Immersion, such as students who have trouble with word retrieval. She said it depends though, and she has had student with learning disabilities who have stayed in the program and were successful, which is why she said these decisions are made on an individual basis. She also said that a lot of her struggling readers can decode, but struggle with comprehension and often have trouble visualizing what they are reading or determining what the referents represented by pronouns are so she focuses a lot on helping students develop comprehension and visualization strategies. In identifying learners who might be struggling at any given time, Catherine made the important point that “struggling in French Immersion is struggling at school,” meaning that a lot of the challenges that learners face in French Immersion are the same challenges that all students face in following routines, making friends and negotiating the new social environment in which these young people find themselves in the primary grades. Much of this has been described as part of the first theme analyzed in this chapter.

Some of the participants also mentioned the difficulty of knowing what the cause of the struggle is and determining whether it is something that would be present in English as well. Geneviève placed a lot of emphasis on the importance of identifying what the challenge actually is as soon as possible: “if there is a problem, finding what the problem is fast so you can help the student faster. That's key for me, for success.”

All participants made the very important point that a learner experiencing difficulty may experience the same difficulty in English as well as in French. In a conversation with a parent who was concerned about why her child was experiencing difficulty and whether he should transfer to English, Marie, unsure at the time whether the student was having trouble understanding or just paying attention, said she told the parent “if it is an attention problem, well
he’s going to have that issue in English or in French so why take away that second language if he could learn it.” She thought the student could have stayed in immersion until they determined the source of the difficulty and tried to support the student accordingly. Catherine made a very similar point: “if a student is experiencing difficulties in French Immersion it’s usually something that will manifest itself in another program as well.” Sarah and Geneviève also touched on this point in describing the kinds of challenges encountered by struggling learners in their classrooms and Sarah added that even if this is the case, there may be resources and support available in English that are not available in French Immersion.

**Does French Immersion have a place for everyone?**

The first subsection of this theme gathered and analyzed participant observations of the inclusive or non-inclusive practices in the French Immersion program. This subsection examines what the participants said that they believed about the inclusion of struggling learners in the French Immersion program. For the most part, participants said that they believed there should be a place for everyone in French Immersion, but described FI as possibly a better fit for some students than for others for the various reasons discussed earlier. Sarah said, “I think anybody is capable of doing it.” She thought that anyone could learn a second language and should have access to the opportunity to try, but also that learning *in* a second language might not be for everyone. She said, “I always think you should give students until at least Grade 2 or 3 to see what they can do before deciding.” Sarah is suggesting that some students may take more time to learn French and feel comfortable learning in a second language and the process of learning French differs from student to student. This idea is echoed in what Geneviève says here:
“In 24, 25 years of teaching, there might have been five or six kids that I strongly felt were not candidates for French Immersion. Their struggles in their own language were too hard. Others, I had doubts and I was proven wrong in a lot of the cases. They stayed, they just developed longer.”

So while Geneviève prioritized finding ways to support struggling learners through ongoing communication with parents, she mentioned having had a small number of students for whom the program was not the best fit.

Catherine understood the French Immersion program to be a place where everyone should be able to succeed and described how she felt as she viewed a video about the characteristics of students who succeed in French Immersion:

I felt kind of ambivalent about watching that because to a degree it’s fair to inform the public fully of what the program entails and what the learning experiences might be like, but on the other hand, I feel that every child should have a place there. There should be a lot of different learning pathways.

Like the other participants, Catherine believed that each students learn a second language differently. They have different reactions to this process and require different time frames in order to feel comfortable. She said that just because some might take to it more easily does not mean that others should not be in French Immersion and that we should work to support everyone who wants to try.
Transfer Decisions

Conversations with parents and families

The interviews with all participants revealed that conversations with parents and families about whether or not French Immersion is the right place for a particular child happen all the time. Sometimes they are initiated by the teacher, but often by the parents, when it is brought to their attention that their child is experiencing difficulty or might have certain special education needs. Catherine emphasized that the decision to enrol a student in French Immersion and subsequently keep them in the program is a family decision and educators are responsible for helping every child whose family has made this choice “to do the best they could do in French Immersion.” She explained that transferring a student out of the program simply was not a recommendation she would make to parents. “My approach as an educator is that it’s not a question of recommending something to parents, it’s a discussion that occurs and then it’s really the parents’ decision and I understand that as being the policy context in which I work as well.”

This does however present a challenge to educators because parents have a lot of questions and often rely on educators to use their professional judgment when they are looking for advice about whether French Immersion is right for their child. This was a point raised by most of the participants. Marie explained:

I find it's hard as a French Immersion teacher. I did have that one student, who, I wasn't sure if it was an attention issue or if it was that he didn't understand and that was really hard for me because his mom was asking, like, ‘should I take him out of French?'

Sarah said something very similar: “Some parents really, they want to make them successful as much as they can. So they will bring to you that maybe they shouldn’t be in French. They will ask you.” Catherine, despite having said that she would not want to recommend something to a
parent, nevertheless related to this challenge. She said that as a French Immersion teacher, she was constantly being asked about the French Immersion program and these questions came not just from parents, but also from friends and neighbours, all looking for advice, trying to make the best decision for their child,

> Is this the right thing for my kid? Should my kid be in Immersion? All my neighbours want to send their kid to Immersion. We don’t get this. What’s this all about? […] Should we be going through with it? Should we be continuing in Grade 2?

Both Geneviève and Catherine described this as an ongoing discussion when it came to the parents of students in their classes. Geneviève emphasized at several points throughout the interview the importance of bringing parents into the conversation early. When a student was experiencing difficulty she would talk to the parents about what she was noticing and the kinds of things that she was trying and then they would meet again in a month to discuss how the student was progressing. Catherine described the conversations that she had with parents as largely positive because she maintained consistent dialogue and they were not surprised to learn that their child was experiencing difficulty when “it’s communicated in a way that contextualizes whatever the difficulty is within the context of being a primary student and also having strengths.”

Therefore, as all of the participants have described, these conversations with parents about program suitability happen, often when a student is experiencing difficulty. All participants have said that they have but very infrequently recommended transferring a student out and one of them said she would not make this recommendation at all. However, as some of the participants brought up, sometimes, parents have already made their decision. This is discussed in the following subsection of this theme.
Learner autonomy: What does the student want?

As mentioned above, Catherine described French Immersion as a family choice, but two of the participants touched on the fact that this choice is sometimes made by the parents for their child when the child might possibly want something different. Participants were not asked about this specifically, but since these participants mentioned it as something that should factor into the decision-making process, it seemed important to include here. Sarah stated that “[s]ome students don’t want to be in French. Their parents chose for them. They don’t understand.” When talking about parents who have made this choice, she goes on to describe how “some are pushing, like even if you tell them maybe it’s not the best thing, they’re really struggling and they want them to speak French for some reason so they will just push it.” Marie, speaking from her own experience, made a similar observation:

There are some parents that, it doesn't matter how much their child is struggling, they often will refuse to remove them from French. [...] I think more than likely with some of the parents at our school, we can tell them and their kid is struggling and the marks are showing that they're struggling and yet the parents won't, they want to have that language so bad that they'll keep them, which sometimes can be difficult on the students.

The experiences described by both of these participants suggest that sometimes parents’ desires for their child to acquire the language and have access to the advantages that this language might offer are prioritized in making this choice. When talking about students who transfer out of French Immersion, Sarah also explained that “[s]ometimes that’s what they want. The students want to go in English. They want to go with their friends.” In this last statement, Sarah is acknowledging the autonomy of learners, seeing them as individuals with their own interests and desires. While Sarah did believe that everyone should be able to try learning a second language
through French Immersion, as was described in a previous section, she nevertheless said that “there are students, it's not for them and we also have to recognize that.” She described her belief that even if a student were struggling but also happy then finding ways to support them in French Immersion was the right thing to do. If they were also unhappy and really did not want to be in French, then transferring them out might be something to consider. Both of these participants have therefore touched on the fact that decisions made about French Immersion are made by multiple parties and sometimes the interests of the student in question might not match the interests of their parents.

**Social and emotional well-being of the student**

Some of the participants did suggest that for students experiencing severe emotional challenges as a result of their difficulties in French Immersion, the program might not be the best fit for them and transfer should be considered. Marie explained:

I think if they are struggling in language and they're not improving in, they're not moving up and their morale goes down. I think it gets to a point where it's not worth them being frustrated. You can see some students that were in French Immersion that moved over to English and you can tell it was the best thing for them because they became a completely different student. You can tell the frustration, it comes to a point where it's not worth it for them.

Geneviève recalled a student who experienced high levels of anxiety in the program and eventually switched into the English program. This student was very strong academically, but as she explained, “she was very anxious. They took her to the doctor. She had ulcers she was so anxious. So is this worth staying in French Immersion?” Geneviève did not believe that it was
and after the student had transferred, a conversation with her parent revealed that she was much happier in English because she understood everything that the teacher was saying. Geneviève believed, and told the parent, that this had been the right decision in this case. Similarly Sarah argued:

if the student is struggling but is happy coming to school in French, let the student [stay] in French. If the student is not happy, if they don't want to be there, if they are not motivated at all because it's in French, if the French is not helping, then maybe [transferring to English] could be something to consider.

It is clear from these examples that the key factor that made these participants feel that French Immersion was not necessarily the best fit for the student was their social and emotional well-being.
Chapter 5: Discussion

This study explored primary level French Immersion teachers’ experiences with struggling learners in their classrooms. Its purpose was therefore to find out how these teachers understand the inclusivity of the French Immersion program and how they determine which students are struggling, what kinds of difficulties they face and how they differentiate instruction to support them. The intent was also to identify areas for future learning that might help educators both support students experiencing difficulty and ensure that the decision to keep students in French Immersion is an informed one that prioritizes both inclusion and the best interests of individual students.

Interviews with the four participants in this study revealed that teachers often rely on affective indicators to identify learners who are experiencing difficulty and that the development of a student’s social and emotional well-being plays an important role in how they choose support for these students. Observations and personal beliefs about program inclusivity did vary but participants generally believed that while French Immersion could be much more challenging for some students, everyone should be able to experience it and teachers should work with all students to help them succeed. The social and emotional-well being of the learner emerged as a theme linking all of these findings together and as the top consideration in identification, support and consideration of transfer for students experiencing difficulty in the French Immersion program. A discussion of the implications and suggestions for further study follows this conclusion at the end of this chapter.
Identifying and Supporting Struggling Learners Through Emotional Well-being

The primary indicators of struggle revealed by the participants were indicators of social and emotional well-being. Participants described students who cried at school or at home, who were anxious and doubted their abilities or who displayed behavioural manifestations of frustration or lack of motivation. Such signs have been previously attested by Gregersen (2009) and participant statements would seem to confirm the argument made by Mannavarayan (2002) that we should take them into consideration because

[.] for the students struggling in the Immersion program, the emotive reactions and expressions of frustration represent a gauge of the inner state of the individual […] they are a means of communicating the difficulties that have become too great to handle (p.117).

Through the interviews conducted for this study, communication with parents was noted as essential in identifying learners who were experiencing difficulty, as the frustration and anxiety experienced by the student about learning in a second language may not always manifest in the classroom.

Interviews also revealed that these teachers try to choose supports that help students experience success and feel positively about themselves and their learning, suggesting that they feel it is important to help the students develop their sense of self-efficacy. Teachers made use of a wide variety of strategies in order to differentiate instruction for all the learners in their classroom and provide opportunities for their struggling learners to succeed. These strategies could be grouped based on the framework presented by Tomlinson (2001) for differentiating instruction based on content, process or product. Strategies described by the participants were similar to many examples provided by Tomlinson for the general education classroom,
suggesting that, in principle, differentiation in an immersion classroom can be accomplished in much the same way as in any other classroom, because all classes present a diverse range of learner abilities, interests and other characteristics, as was argued by Arnett and Fortune (2004).

**Perceptions of Program Inclusivity and Suitability**

This theme is particularly important because, as explained earlier in this paper, studies have shown that a teachers’ beliefs related to program inclusivity or to the inclusion of students with special needs influence how they make instructional decisions (Jordan, Lindsay & Stanovich, 1997; Arnett, Mady & Muilenburg 2014). In general, all of the participants understood the French Immersion program as being one in which every student should have the opportunity to participate and succeed. Catherine, the participant who was also a teacher educator, believed there to be “a lot of different learning pathways” in the program and her stance was reflective of that proposed by Arnett and Mady (2010a).

However, Arnett and Mady also argue, “the mere presence of debates about who should pursue FSL study and who should not implies a hierarchy of students” (Arnett & Mady 2010a). The participants in this study did comment that some learners seem to adapt to the French Immersion program more easily than others, the former generally being more language inclined students. As Sarah said, some people are language people. These learners seem to pick up vocabulary quickly and are eager to read and speak in French. In describing the difficulties that some learners experience, participants cited processing, memory and word retrieval as well as difficulties specific to reading and comprehension. The participants also recognized that learners might experience the same difficulties in English, which is widely supported in the literature (Fortune, 2010). Furthermore, while participants acknowledged that some students adapt to
learning a second language more easily than others, they generally also believed that this does not necessarily mean that students who adapt more slowly to French Immersion do not belong in the program. It would, however, seem that this belief is not universal, as evidenced by one of the participants saying that she had observed exclusionary practices of recommending that students experiencing difficulty of any kind transfer into English. Observations of this nature have previously been described in the literature (Arnett, Mady & Muilenburg, 2014; Mady & Arnett, 2010; Willms, 2008).

Catherine said that transferring a student out of the program was not a recommendation that she would make to parents, but the other participants suggested that they might initiate this conversation with the family and possibly recommend transfer based on the emotional well-being of a student who was experiencing extreme frustration, anxiety and unhappiness, a position that we do see supported in the literature (Mannavarayan, 2002; Genesee, 2007). Marie explained that she recommended that these students transfer into English before their frustration caused them to shut down completely and we can see evidence of this same concern in the work of Mannavarayan (2002) who described older students who had been supported and pushed along, only to have reached middle school or high school frustrated, overwhelmed and disengaged, disliking not just French, but all subjects taught in French and sometimes school in general. Geneviève even described the case of a student who was very strong academically, but transferred into English as a result of the high anxiety she was experiencing in French Immersion. This is a move that we do find recommended in the literature. Genesee (2007) not only argues that a student who is experiencing difficulty, but is nevertheless happy, can continue in the program with appropriate support, but also that “[s]tudents who are unhappy in immersion
or who feel that learning through French is a burden are serious candidates for transfer, even if they are doing well academically” (p. 680).

While some students may experience greater challenges in French Immersion, the study only confirms that there is no set of characteristics or criteria for making decisions about French Immersion for a particular student. Researchers have argued that in this case, parental and educator intuition should be trusted (Bruck, 1985; Mannavarayan, 2002). However, one of the participants in this study even said that there were students about whom she had doubts and they ended up being successful in the program. Relying on educator and parental intuition would therefore seem to be a risky thing to do without first examining how educators understand inclusion in the context of French Immersion and their role in supporting diverse learning needs in the program or examining how parents make these decisions for their children. That being said, participant responses suggest that parents often rely on educators to use their professional judgement because teachers are frequently asked about the suitability of the program for particular students. Statements made by some of the participants suggest that parent interests are sometimes very different from the student’s and that whether or not the student actually wants to be in French Immersion should also be considered. This also finds support in the literature, as Mannavarayan (2002) writes that “[t]he child should not be forgotten and should be asked to participate in the evaluation of his particular needs.” (p. 52). However, in the experience of some of the participants in this study, the child is often left out of this conversation and this is not a new concern. Twenty years ago Demers (1994) also argued that the child should be placed at the centre of this decision, writing that “[a]ny decision to change the placement of a child must be in the interest of the child, not of the program, the parents or the teachers” (p. 4).
This does however beg the question: how is the child’s wish to leave French Immersion affected by frustration that might be prevented with the right support? A child may claim to hate French because they are struggling and not getting the support that they require. The participants in this study explained that deciding factors in transferring a student out of the program were often the student’s frustration and anxiety. So how much can teachers support students in reducing their anxiety and help them find motivation? To what extent is a student’s sense of discomfort in the program inherent to the student’s own desires for their learning? These questions, left unanswered, suggest that while there is no defined set of criteria for making these decisions, the onus is on teachers to do everything they can to support students while remaining open and honest with parents about what they are seeing so that students and families can make informed decisions.

The Overwhelming Importance of Student Social and Emotional Well-being

The importance of social and emotional well-being therefore emerged as a common thread that wove its way through the all of the themes identified in this study, effectively linking them together. Through prior study in this area and through completion of the literature review in Chapter 2, I had been aware that negative emotions could both result from and compound challenges experienced in learning a second language. I had therefore expected that it would play a role in identifying and supporting learners and in making decisions about staying in French Immersion, but I had not predicted the extent to which it would seem to weave everything together (see Figure 1 below for a visual depiction of this relationship).
Most of the participants described social and emotional signs as their first indicators that a child was struggling. They also explained their reasoning for differentiating instruction as providing students opportunities to experience and demonstrate learning in ways that made them feel successful and reduce their anxiety by boosting their self-confidence and self-esteem. When it came to the question of suitability and transfer, Marie recommended that parents of very frustrated students consider it before their frustration become too great. Sarah thought that transfer might be something to consider for students who were very unhappy in the program and did not want to be in French. Geneviève questioned the suitability of the program for a student experiencing severe anxiety in the program and thought the parent had made the right choice to transfer a student who was visibly much happier in English. For teachers who seemed to hold
otherwise inclusive understandings of the program, these cases seemed to present as exceptions in which the social and emotional well-being of the child was the deciding factor. Therefore, if there were any kind of conclusion that might be made following the collection and analysis of this data in relation the existing literature, it would be that the emotional-well being of a student should be the first consideration.

**Implications and Recommendations**

This study presents itself as a small exploration of how three Grade 1 to 3 French Immersion teachers and one teacher educator in the area of FSL pedagogy understand inclusion as it relates to struggling learners in the French Immersion program. This study was undertaken on one pre-service teacher’s journey to becoming both an educator and a researcher. Based on the conclusion presented above, the first recommendation that can be made is for teachers to pay close attention to emotional indicators that might suggest that a student is experiencing difficulty. Interviews with participants suggest that this is something teachers are already naturally inclined to do. A further recommendation from this study supports the conclusion drawn by Genesee (2007) that decisions regarding the student’s placement in the program should be made based on whether or not the student is happy in the program and that we should take into consideration what the student actually wants. Recognizing that this may often be affected by low levels of motivation and self-confidence caused by difficulties that the student is experiencing, it is important for teachers to target their support toward helping the student feel more successful and confident in the program. However, if it seems that the only thing that would make a difference in the student’s overall happiness and well-being is to transfer the student into English, then it is what should be considered. These are not easy decisions to make and can only be made on a
case-by-case basis. Furthermore, this should not keep us from looking into ways to make the program more inclusive to all learners. It is important for teacher education programs to prepare educators for such an inclusive approach to French Immersion and not to question the suitability of the program for students based on academic difficulty or perceived lack of aptitude for second language learning. Given that the teacher educator who participated in this study held an inclusive understanding of French Immersion, seeing the program as a place where there should be “a lot of different learning pathways”, there is promise that new teachers entering the profession might embrace this same approach. Since teachers are more inclined to implement strategies that support all learners, ensuring that they are prepared to implement a universal design approach specific to the French Immersion context would also be beneficial as would be thorough understanding of the kinds of learning differences that affect second language learning.

**Further Study**

As was mentioned in Chapter 3, the limitations of this study prevent certain generalizations from being made about how all teachers should support struggling learners or about their perceptions of inclusion in French Immersion. In addition, the limited scope of this study meant that there were aspects of this issue that were not investigated in great depth. What started as a study to find out from teachers how to best support struggling learners in the French Immersion classroom became more of an exploration of how teachers describe their experiences working with these students in the classroom and several important questions that would benefit from further study were raised through this process. A study involving more participants, combining classroom observation of instructional practices and interviews with more targeted questions about the kinds of supports used in the classroom might prove useful for FI teachers.
Investigating the link between their beliefs about inclusion in French Immersion and instructional practices would also shed light on this issue. A study of whether teacher strategies to help students feel motivated and increase their self-confidence have an effect on the student’s desire to be in French Immersion would also be interesting. Finally, case studies of students who transfer out of the program might help us to better understand how these decisions are made, what factors are considered, which parties are involved, how their interests weigh in and when a child’s own desire to transfer out is prioritized.
References


Mady, C. (2012). *Closing the window to open the door: Preparing for more inclusive French-Immersion classes*. Panel presentation at the Canadian Parents for French Roundtable on


Appendices

Appendix A: Interview Protocol

I’d like to thank you again for participating in the research I am conducting for my Master of Teaching Research Project. As we have discussed, my research is about supporting students with learning difficulties in the French Immersion classroom. The interview should take approximately 45 minutes. As we proceed, I’d like you to know that you are always welcome to go back and revisit or add to any of your answers to previous questions. Do you have any questions for me before we get started?

Background Information

1. How long have you been teaching? How long have you been teaching French? How long have you been teaching French immersion? How long have you been teaching primary students?
2. How and where did you learn to speak French?
3. What made you want to teach French Immersion?

Experience with struggling learners and special education needs in the FI classroom

4. What types of student exceptionalities do you see in your classroom from year to year?
5. How do you identify the students who are struggling in the French Immersion classroom? What signs do you look for?
6. What kinds of challenges do these students face?
7. Do any of these struggling learners have formally identified special education needs?
8. What challenges do you experience when you have struggling learners in your French Immersion classroom?
9. What benefits do you experience when you have struggling learners in your French Immersion classroom?

Strategies for meeting academic needs:

10. What are some of the strategies you use to differentiate instruction in your classroom to meet the needs of all students?
11. Can you describe some of the specific strategies you’ve used to differentiate your instruction for struggling learners? Do some strategies work better for some students with particular difficulties than others? Can you give some examples?
12. How do you know that these strategies are effective?
13. In an ideal world, what kind of support would you like to provide to struggling learners?

Strategies for meeting emotional needs:

14. How would you compare the anxiety level of students who are struggling in French Immersion to that of the students who are not?
15. How is this manifested or demonstrated?
16. What strategies do you use to reduce the anxiety of your students?
17. How would you compare the motivation level of students who are struggling in French Immersion to that of the students who are not?
18. How is this manifested or demonstrated?
19. What strategies do you use to motivate your students?
20. How do you know that these strategies are effective?

Program suitability and transfer:
21. Are there certain student characteristics or qualities that might make the program a better fit for some students than for others?
22. What factors would lead you to recommend that a student be transferred out of the FI program?
23. In your experience, how often does this happen?
24. What is a typical process of having a student transfer out of French Immersion? Can you provide an example?
25. What role do parents play in your program? How do they react when students are experiencing difficulty in French Immersion? Or when they are identified as having, or possibly having, special education needs? During the transfer out of French Immersion process?

Closing:
26. Would you like to add to or revisit a response to any of the previous questions?
27. Do you have any questions of your own that you’d like to ask me?
Appendix B: Letter of Consent for Interview

Date: ___________________

Dear ________________,

I am a graduate student at OISE, University of Toronto, and am currently enrolled as a Master of Teaching candidate. I am studying the inclusion of students with learning difficulties in French Immersion for the purposes of investigating an educational topic as a major assignment for our program. I think that your knowledge and experience will provide insights into this topic.

I am writing a report on this study as a requirement of the Master of Teaching Program. My course instructor who is providing support for the process this year is Dr. Susan Schwartz. My research supervisor is Dr. Antoinette Gagné. The purpose of this requirement is to allow us to become familiar with a variety of ways to do research. My data collection consists of an hour-long interview that will be tape-recorded. I would be grateful if you would allow me to interview you at a place and time convenient to you. I can conduct the interview at your office or workplace, in a public place, or anywhere else that you might prefer.

The contents of this interview will be used for my assignment, which will include a final paper, as well as informal presentations to my classmates and/or potentially at a conference or publication. I will not use your name or anything else that might identify you in my written work, oral presentations, or publications. This information remains confidential. The only people who will have access to my assignment work will be my research supervisor and my course instructor. You are free to change your mind at any time, and to withdraw even after you have consented to participate. You may decline to answer any specific questions. I will destroy the tape recording after the paper has been presented and/or published which may take up to five years after the data has been collected. There are no known risks or benefits to you for assisting in the project, and I will share with you a copy of my notes to ensure accuracy.

Please sign the attached form, if you agree to be interviewed. The second copy is for your records. Thank you very much for your help.

Yours sincerely,
Kristen Lisowski
Consent Form

I acknowledge that the topic of this interview has been explained to me and that any questions that I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction. I understand that I can withdraw at any time without penalty.

I have read the letter provided to me by Kristen Lisowski and agree to participate in an interview for the purposes described.

Signature: ________________________________

Name (printed): ________________________________

Date: ___________________________