The Inclusion of Students with Learning Disabilities in the French Immersion Program

By

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A Major Research Project submitted in conformity with the requirements for the degree of Master of Teaching

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2016

Abstract
The French immersion program has become increasingly popular in school boards in Ontario. This study focuses on the idea of elitism in the French immersion program, and how in the past, students with learning disabilities have been excluded from participating in the program. After examining the current literature on the benefits of bilingualism, the benefits of French immersion, and theories that explore why or why not students with learning disabilities can be successful in FI, two semi-structured interviews were conducted. Participants were two French immersion teachers currently implementing supports to encourage students of all learning backgrounds to be successful in FI. Analysis of the current literature on this topic, and of the data collected indicates that French immersion should be accessible to all types of students, and that resources and strategies need to continue to be developed so that the program can continue to grow.

Keywords
French immersion; Second Language Education; Learning Disabilities; Inclusive Pedagogy
Acknowledgements

There are several people without whom I would not have been able to complete this research. I am so grateful for my participants who took the time to meet with me and share their experiences and insights. I have so much faith and respect for the members of my cohort, all of whom are phenomenal teachers whose future students will be so fortunate to benefit from each of their gifts. My family and friends have been endlessly supportive of my journey, and I have appreciated having had them by my side to bounce ideas off of. Of those family members, I’d like to highlight my parents for choosing to enrol me in French immersion as a child, and for continuing to encourage my love of language and education. Finally, I dedicate my findings to my future students, who I hope to inspire and have them leave my classroom everyday feeling successful.
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Alexa Nemfield
CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

1.0 Introduction to the Research Study

The French immersion program was introduced in Canada in the 1970s. It catered to students for whom English was their native language in hopes that they would achieve a functional level of bilingualism in both English and French. Students in the first French immersion classes came from similar cognitive and socio-economic backgrounds (Pellerin 2013). This first class of French immersion students is very different from what we see in schools today. However, there does not appear to have been significant changes made pedagogically in the way that we differentiate to include students of differing cognitive and socio-economic backgrounds to make the French immersion program more widely accessible.

1.0.1 Misconceptions about the French Immersion Program

Given that there is an increase in demand for the French immersion program, there is some confusion as to why the program is still seen as being for the academic elite. In a recent article published by the National Post, research and French immersion advocate Nancy Wise speaks about the misconceptions around the French immersion program. She explains how these misconceptions may be leading to the notion of FI being elitist, and how parents may be feeling discouraged when considering enrolment for their children. Wise explains that for the most part, these misconceptions come from studies with “methodological weakness” or “research results that were taken out of context” (Wise 2015). I looked further into the misconceptions that deter parents from enrolling their children in French immersion and the research evidence I have found demonstrates that they are mostly false.
On the subject of equity, and equal access to the French immersion program, Nancy Wise focuses her comments, speaking about New Canadians and families from low socio-economic backgrounds. She explains that, “New Canadians and parents who speak languages other than English at home are regularly informed that their children should focus on gaining proficiency in English before learning French” (Wise 2015). She says that often times, parents are told that acquiring another language will have a negative impact on the development of their first language. More often than not, they are advised that learning an additional language will adversely affect the development of first language skills. However, Swain and Lapkin found that in the ten years prior to the publication of their 2005 study, the idea that all French immersion students are anglophone had become increasingly false. They reviewed three key studies of immigrant children enrolled in immersion and found that their trilingualism was seen as a resource and not a handicap, since immigrant children performed as well as or better than their anglophone peers (Swain and Lapkin, 2005).

Another misconception is that enrolment in early French immersion (which begins in kindergarten or grade one) will slow a student’s ability to learn English, given that the language of instruction is 100% in French until students enter the fourth grade. When students are assessed before formal English instruction has begun, there has been a discrepancy in their skills when compared to their peers in English programs. However, once students do begin formal English classes, they make quick progress in their reading and writing abilities. W. Lazaruk highlights the findings of M. Swain’s 1974 study in his review of the research on the linguistic, cognitive and academic benefits of French immersion. Lazaruk shares that Swain found that, “although early immersion programs devote just 20% of instructional time to English Language Arts from Grade 4 through Grade 8, by the end of elementary school EFI students typically develop English skills that match or surpass those of their
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peers in the regular English program” (Swain 1974). In some cases, this misconception acts as a deterrent, convincing parents that FI is not the right fit for their child.

Given that these types of misconceptions exist, and may be perpetuated by researchers, school administrators and teachers, the goal of my research is to find strategies that promote the inclusion of all students in FI. I hope that these strategies inform my own practices as a future French immersion teacher, and help me become a stronger advocate for inclusion in FI. Furthermore, I aim to continue to deconstruct the misconceptions around inclusion in French immersion that may be acting as a reason parents shy away from enrolling their children in FI. These misconceptions have served as my motivation to begin this research, and have had a strong impact on the purpose of my research.

1.1 Purpose of the Study

The goal of my research is to learn what a small sample of French immersion elementary school teachers are doing to include students with learning disabilities in their French immersion classrooms and schools. I am hoping to learn more about the barriers that are currently preventing teachers who are advocates for inclusion in French immersion from being inclusive. I also hope to continue the deconstruction of the misconceptions about the type of student French immersion is designed for. I hope that in the future, the French immersion program will be seen as an excellent option for any and all learners.

Additionally, there are many cognitive benefits to bilingualism that I believe all children should have access to. The cognitive research reviewed by Lazaruk in 2007 explains that bilingualism is associated with,
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“heightened mental flexibility and creative thinking skills, which may be linked to bilingual learners’ greater metalinguistic awareness. Bilinguals also demonstrate greater communicative sensitivity, as indicated by their responsiveness to verbal and non-verbal cues and by their ability to attend to listeners’ needs. Because cognitive benefits are contingent on a bilingual learner’s proficiency in both languages, it may be that immersion programs, which promote heightened proficiency in both French and English, foster in their students an underlying cognitive advantage” (Lazaruk 2007).

Given my belief that all children should have the opportunity to access these benefits, an additional purpose of my research is the hope that the strategies being used by teachers will allow more students to become bilingual.

1.2 Research Questions

The main question guiding this research is: how is a small sample of French immersion elementary school teachers differentiating their instruction to accommodate the learning needs of their students with learning disabilities, and what outcomes do they observe from these students?

The following is a sample of the more in-depth questions to be developed and then asked during interviews with my participants:

- What are these teachers’ observations and beliefs about the challenges students with LDs face in French immersion programs?

The challenges that I’m looking for extend beyond the academics. I am interested to find out what barriers might exist outside of the subject material. I am also interested to find out how teachers feel. Are they noticing growth in the number of students with learning disabilities who are enrolling in
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French immersion? It would also be interesting to see whether teachers’ attitudes have an impact on the success of these students.

- How do these teachers differentiate their instruction to accommodate these students learning needs in the French immersion classroom? What instructional strategies and approaches do they use?

Given that I am specifically looking for participants that are using inclusive strategies to accommodate for students with learning disabilities, I am interested to see what they’re doing that’s working. Additionally, if there are things that they have tried that did not work, that is of interest to me as well. I will also be asking how students react to the strategies they have deemed successful, in order to find things that I can take with me into my future practice and share with my colleagues.

- What resources and factors support these teachers in this work?

In order for students to be successful, I believe teachers need to feel supported and successful as well. I am interested to learn as to whether there is specific professional development opportunity that caters more directly to the French immersion teacher.

- What challenges do these teachers encounter, and how do they respond to these?

I am interested to see challenges that arise from students, administrators and parents and what teachers are doing about it. I am hopeful that the research findings will enable me to identify different teaching methods currently being used to include students with learning disabilities in the French immersion, in hopes of drawing a wider range of learners to French immersion in the future.
1.3 Background of the Researcher

It has come to my attention that in certain Ontario school boards, the French immersion program is widely seen as an enrichment program, or as a program for the academically elite. As a product of the French immersion education system, I understand that some may perceive my bias as being elitist. However, it is my belief that any and all students should have equal opportunity to pursue a second language education in the program that is known as the most effective environment for learning French as a second language.

As a student who had to put in an average amount of effort to achieve the grades I wanted, I recognize that I am privileged to have had a positive experience in French immersion, and in school in general. I am concerned that, if and when I encounter obstacles, that I will not fully be able to understand the barriers posed by certain learning disabilities. It is important to me that I pay attention to my own sensitivity towards the diverse ways students learn, and take every comment as a learning opportunity to help shape my personal and professional identities.

1.4 Overview

To respond to the research questions I will be conducting a qualitative research study using purposeful sampling to interview 2 teachers about their instructional strategies for meaningfully integrating students with learning disabilities in French immersion classroom. In chapter 2, I review the literature in the areas of language learning and inclusive pedagogy. In chapter 3, I elaborate on the research design. In chapter 4, I report my research findings, and in chapter 5, I discuss these findings and their significance in relation to the literature and the implications for my own practice as a beginning teacher.
CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

In this chapter, I review the literature in the areas of bilingualism, French immersion, teacher education, and the success of students with learning disabilities in the French immersion program. More specifically, I review themes related to the inclusion of students with learning disabilities in the French immersion program. I start by reviewing the overall goals and history of French immersion, and I consider how teacher education program may not be adequately preparing FSL teachers to accommodate the various learning needs of their students. From there, I go on to consider the benefits of bilingualism in both a Canadian and global context, and the overall benefits of the French immersion program. Finally, I look at the ways in which students with learning disabilities can find success in French immersion, and why a switch to the English steam is not necessarily the best solution. In this section, the terms learning disability and learning difficulty are used interchangeably, as is found in the research.

2.0 French Immersion, a History

The French Immersion program was initially developed in Quebec, as a means of providing language instruction to Anglophones in hopes of getting them to the same functional level of French as their Francophone peers (Pellerin 2013). Its original participants were members of the same socioeconomic background, and had similar cognitive abilities (Pellerin 2013). Because of the possible lack of diversity being that students shared the same background both socially and academically, as the program grew and demand increased, there was perhaps a need for development that has not occurred in all FI schools. The classes of French immersion students we see today are considerably different from the first French immersion classes, and we are observing a need for change in the way we
accommodate for students of all learning backgrounds. French immersion is different from other forms of French as a second language (FSL) instruction in that it shifts from teaching the language as the subject to using French as the language of instruction (Lazaruk 2007). This may mean that the types of supports that need to be developed for FSL students will look different for students in Core, Extended and French immersion.

2.1 Elitism in French Immersion

2.1.1 French Immersion as an Enrichment Program

Because of some of the misconceptions discussed in my first chapter, there are parents and teachers that believe French immersion is designed for advanced students with similar cognitive abilities. This may be a factor that contributes to parents not seeing French immersion as an appropriate fit for their children. Students with learning disabilities are often unable to receive the same types of support in French immersion programs, as they might have access to, which is due in part to a lack of sufficient teacher training (Arnett & Mady 2010). Even in my own experience, I took my FSL teachable course, and a course on Special Education, but there were no connections drawn between the two, or no connection made to Special Education in other subject areas either. When viewed through a more critical lens, it has been argued that this absence of support, despite a recognized need for them, points to a level of oppression of students with learning disabilities. (Arnett & Mady 2010).

2.1.2 One Parent’s Perspective

The story of Elitism in French immersion (FI) is best told by a mother who tracked her son’s progress in FI before finally choosing to withdraw him from the program due to a lack of support. Despite this mother’s best effort, there was a belief in the school that FI is an enrichment program, and
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there was no obligation to give her son the support he needed in order to be successful. In this case, her son had learning difficulties that would have been easily accommodated. Arnett & Mady (2009) tell this mother’s story through an analysis of several journal entries, and identify several underlying tensions in FI that could impact the experience of students with learning disabilities. First of all, they identify that there is a discrepancy in the way that students are identified as having learning disabilities, and the inclusion movement. In Canada, students are identified as being learning disabled if there is a discrepancy between their academic performance and psychometrically measured aptitude. This model is called the Intellectual-Achievement Discrepancy (Arnett & Mady, 2009).

In the example presented in Arnett & Mady’s study, the mother sought help from both teacher and principal in hopes of having her son continue in FI despite the difficulties he was experiencing. However, the principal rapidly suggested that her son be transferred to the English stream, a suggestion that is sometimes quite common for students who struggle in FI. This reaction may also contribute to the overall idea of elitism in the French immersion program, giving the impression that it is designed for a select type of learner.

2.2 Teacher Education and Accommodation

There is sufficient evidence to show that FSL teachers may be considerably underprepared to accommodate the needs of a variety of learners in FI, and that teachers likely hold their own opinions and assumptions about students with learning disabilities that are in line with the ideologies and principles of second language education (Arnett & Mady 2010).

The unfortunate reality is that FSL and special education are two areas of teaching in which qualified personnel is limited. Even in my own experience, I recognize this. Teacher candidates with their FSL qualifications are often hired right out of school, not requiring them to immediately be
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thinking about taking additional qualifications in special education or otherwise. Although the performance of students with LDs has been studied since the beginning of FI (Genesee, 2007), in general, teachers are not prepared to handle the task of teaching students with special need in their general classroom due to a lack of coursework in inclusive education and overall classroom experience (Harvey, Yssel, Bauserman & Merbler, 2010).

The inclusion of students with learning difficulties begins at the teacher education level. While prospective FSL teachers are being instructed on the various methodologies and techniques for teaching a second language, there should ideally be a focus on accommodating the varying needs of different learners. By doing so, it is possible that a wider variety of learner may be able to access the benefits of being bilingual, that I discuss in the next section.

2.3 Benefits of Bilingualism

2.3.1 Social Benefits of Bilingualism

One of the goals of my research is to find strategies for FSL teachers to use to support students in their FI classrooms. One of the main reasons I see this as being important, is because there are many known social and cognitive benefits of bilingualism that students of all learning styles should have access to.

Socially, bilinguals have a higher elasticity in thinking, a concept that is linked to having access to two different language systems. This high elasticity contributes to bilingual individuals showing a higher level of sensitivity to verbal and non-verbal cues, making them more attentive and aware of their listeners needs (Baker, 2010). Additionally, bilingual children show signs of heightened mental flexibility, and are able to think independently of words. They also often display a more diversified intelligence than monolingual children (Lazaruk 2007).
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With regards to children with language based learning difficulties, knowing and learning multiple languages does not put these children at risk for further language impairment. Therefore, there is less reason to believe that students with learning disabilities should be excluded from French immersion programs, as their time in FI will not be detrimental to their overall language abilities (Genesee, 2007).

2.3.2 Long-term Benefits of Bilingualism

Bilingual individuals show a delay in the development of dementia or Alzheimer’s because of the effect that switching between two language systems can have on one’s brain. A study conducted by the University of Edinburgh in Scotland suggests that individuals who are bilingual have a ‘built-in’ protection against dementia and Alzheimer’s, and have been seen to develop these conditions approximately 4.5 years later than monolinguals (Alladi, Bak, Duggirala, Surampudi, Shailaja, Shukla, Chadhuri, Kaul, 2013).

The benefits of bilingualism will likely look different for each student who graduates from the FI program. However, access to these programs should be the same for all. The benefits and importance of bilingualism are arguably clear, especially in a bilingual country like Canada. Should students need supports in these programs to be able to benefit from the lasting effects of bilingualism, they should be able to.

2.4 Benefits of French immersion

2.4.1 Increased Proficiency in Bilingual Children

French immersion programs are currently regarded as the most effective option for achieving high levels of proficiency in French (Lazaruk, 2007). Students in Early French Immersion typically
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achieve native-like levels of listening comprehension and reading skills by the end of elementary school, and high levels of overall proficiency in French by the end of high school (Lazaruk, 2007). In comparison to other FSL options, immersion students have been found to achieve high levels of overall proficiency than their peers in core French programs. FI students are more proficient in reading, writing, listening comprehension and oral production, than their peers receiving core French instruction (Genesee 1984).

2.4.2 Cognitive benefits of French Immersion

Peal and Lambert observed that students who had equal levels of proficiency in both languages – what they’ve called balanced bilinguals – outperformed monolinguals in a variety of tests measuring IQ (Peal & Lambert, 1962). Bilingual children have particular strength in understanding the relation between words and their meanings, which can also be extended to accepting the arbitrariness of numbers when preforming tasks like counting in mathematics (Bialystok, 2001). This is an interesting cross-curricular connection between FSL and mathematics. Early French immersion programs enable young student to reach the level of bilingualism that is required to access the cognitive benefits associated with bilingualism (Kruk & Reynolds, 2012). The decoding skills students in immersion programs develop can also contribute to higher levels of reading comprehension (Kruk & Reynolds, 2012).

Additionally, bilinguals have access to two separate language systems, and when they have reached a certain level of fluency, they do not rely on constant translation to understand (Lazaruk 2007). Bilingual individuals organize information in accordance with the language system with which is it associated. Therefore, bilinguals have been found to have a heightened ability to adopt multiple perspectives, giving them the opportunity to consider information in different ways (Lazaruk 2007).
2.5 Performance of Students With LDs in French Immersion

2.5.1 Student Success in French Immersion

One of the fears in the inclusion of students with learning disabilities in French immersion programs is that learning French without having developed English language skills may be detrimental to a child’s development. However, results have shows that at-risk students typically experience the same levels of success in immersion contexts as their at-risk peers in non-immersion contexts (Kruk & Reynolds, 2012). At-risk students are able to function just as well in immersion contexts because of the number of transferable skills that can be used from when a child acquired their first language (L1), to learn a second language (L2) (Kruck & Reynolds, 2012). For instance, the process of reading in a second language is similar to the process of learning to read in an L1 (Kruck & Reynolds, 2012).

Students with learning difficulties who are placed in a French immersion context can develop at the same rate at which they would in an all-English classroom. Their linguistic, cognitive and academic skills may truly be unaffected (Bruck 1978). However, where they begin to benefit, is the level of proficiency they develop in French. Bruck (cited in Genesee, 2007) notes that, “students with academic difficulties can benefit from immersion in the form of increase of functional proficiency in French” (Bruck, 1985).

2.5.2 Switching is Not Always the Answer

After having been enrolled in FI for several years, students are sometimes encouraged to transfer into the English stream upon discovering that they have a learning disability. As seen before, this is not always a guarantee that a student will suddenly be successful, and begin to develop at an average rate, and as is explained below, this transfer can be detrimental to a student’s social
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development and self-esteem. Bruck (1985) noted that students who were switched from FI programs to all-English programs expressed an overall negative attitude towards school and the immersion program in particular because they felt they had been deemed as being unsuccessful (Bruck, 1985). These students were also seen to exhibit more behavioral problems, likely due to the fact that they had to abandon the school system they had grown accustomed to, and were separated from their friend group being forced to integrate into a new social situation (Bruck, 1978).

2.6 Gaps and Areas for Further Research

It is important to note that a portion of the research on the French immersion program in Canada was done in the 1980s, around the time of the program's original conceptualization. Therefore, findings need to be revisited to ensure that they are still consistent with students today. With the increasing demand for accommodations and differentiated instruction in schools today, there is an increasing need for research on how students with learning difficulties can be included, and can also experience the benefits of the French immersion program, and of bilingualism in general. I believe that the survival of French immersion programs depends on its capacity to demonstrate an inclusive attitude towards the inclusion of students with all varieties of learning styles. The FI program cannot continue to excel and prove to be the best means of learning French if it does not continue to improve and evolve with the changing needs of today's students (Arnett & Mady 2009).

In this chapter, I have looked at research in teacher education, inclusive education, and the benefits of both general bilingualism and in the context of the French immersion program. This review elucidates the extent that attention has been paid to the ways in which students with learning disabilities can find success in the French immersion program. It also raises questions about what can be done currently to support and encourage these students to continue their participation in FI, and point to the
need for further research in what current French immersion teachers are doing to accommodate diverse learner needs in their classrooms today. In the following chapter, I begin to discuss the ways in which I plan to find out what supports are in place for these students, and how they can be adapted to all French immersion classrooms in hopes of making the program more inclusive overall.
CHAPTER THREE: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In this chapter I describe the research methodology. I begin by reviewing the general approach, procedures and data collection instruments, before elaborating more specifically on participant sampling and recruitment. I explain data analysis procedures and review the ethical considerations pertinent to my study. Relatedly, I identify a range of methodological limitations, but I also speak to the strengths of the methodology. Finally, I conclude the chapter with a brief summary of the key methodological approaches and my rationale for these decisions, given my research purpose and questions.

3.0 Procedure

This study is based upon the collection of data from three face-to-face, semi-structured interviews with currently practicing teachers, and an analysis of the literature in the subject area. I use a qualitative approach to gather results that describe current practices for supporting the needs of students with learning disabilities in French immersion programs in the classrooms involved.

Qualitative research is both interpretive and naturalistic, meaning that research study their topics in a natural setting, and “interpret phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them” (Creswell, 2007). The researcher is very present in all aspects of the process, as they are the primary instrument of both data collection and analysis, and develop their own interview questions and typically do not use resources from other researchers. The researcher then classifies and codes the information based on categories that they choose, given the common themes found in the participants thoughts and opinions.
The ultimate goal in a qualitative study is to yield insight into human activities and opinions from the perspectives of the participants, putting emphasis on their voices and their experiences as the basis of the results.

### 3.1 Instruments of Data Collection

Data is collected through semi-structured interviews with currently practicing teachers. Semi-structured interviews indicate that the researcher begins the interview process having planned questions in advance, and uses those questions to frame the interaction between them and the participants. However, given that it is only partially structured, this also allows for flexible conversation where participants can feel comfortable speaking about what they feel is important.

The semi-structured interview allows the interviewer the opportunity to elicit responses that are more closely related to the question at hand, whereas a completely unstructured interview may stray further than a junior researcher, like myself, may wish. Semi-structured interviews provide the structure needed to gather the desired information, but are flexible enough that the participant’s voices and stories are still heard and valued.

Semi-structured interviews are desirable in this context because they allow for some stability for the interviewer, who can plan out interview questions, and develop categories for coding based on the results, but can also connect with participants and gather information from their personal experiences (Rabionet, 2011). Meeting face-to-face is also preferable because it allows for a less distant connection to be formed, something that would be more difficult to accomplish in a mailed questionnaire, for example.
3.2 Participants

In the following section, I review the sampling criteria I established for recruitment, and I review a range of possible avenues for teacher recruitment. I have also included a section where I will introduce each of the participants.

3.2.1 Sampling Criteria

The ultimate goal of my research is to learn about strategies that allow students with learning disabilities to find success and happiness in French immersion programs. In order to accomplish this, participants were selected primarily on the basis of being teachers in French Immersion programs in varying schools that had or were currently developing and implementing inclusive and supportive strategies.

The criteria I intend to use to find my participants is as follows. Participants must have first hand experience teaching in a French immersion setting. Additionally, they must have had experience including students with learning disabilities in their classrooms. Participants must have the appropriate French qualifications, meaning that they must be qualified to teach FSL, and a French specialists AQ is an asset. Teachers with additional training or qualifications in Special Education would also be an asset, but this is not a requirement of all participants.

It is crucial that my participants have first hand experience with the inclusion of students with learning disabilities in the French immersion program. That being said, I am choosing not to interview Core French and Extended French teachers, as I feel they are not as directly connected to my research goals. I believe French immersion teachers will best inform my future practice. I am choosing to interview solely French immersion teachers because it is important for my research that the students in
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question be completely immersed in the French language, in order to be able to find the best supports for their varying needs and learning styles.

I am interested in interviewing teachers who have had experience inducing students with learning disabilities in their French immersion classrooms, whether this was for a short amount of time, or the entire school year. If teachers have experience with a student transferring from French immersion to the English stream, that would also be an asset. I am interested to find teachers that are working to deconstruct the misconceptions of elitism that the French immersion program carries by including students with learning disabilities in their classrooms, and who are experimenting with different strategies of communication and instruction enabling and empowering those students to be successful.

3.2.2 Participant Recruitment

Participants in this case are not selected randomly, but purposively, based on how well they meet the criteria listed previously in hopes that they will accurately represent the many voices affected by my research subject. I intend to use my already established contacts, and contact principles from French immersion schools to inquire as to whether they have any teachers that fit my criteria, and who would be willing to participate in my study.

Due to work to rule action taking place at the time where I was recruiting participants, I found it difficult to find three teachers who were willing to meet with me. I instead chose to focus more on the two that had graciously offered to be my participants. I was contacted by one who was replying to my post on a social media group for French immersion teachers. The other is a connection from a colleague.
3.2.3 Participant Bios

Dorothy is the pseudonym chosen for my first participant. She is a French immersion teacher currently on maternity leave from teaching grade two, and has taught grades one, three, five and six previously. She has been teaching for seven years, and is currently at a single-track French immersion school in the Greater Toronto Area, in a neighborhood where the French immersion program is booming, and there is an increasing challenge to accommodate for such large numbers. She described the demographic of her school as very multicultural. Dorothy has completed part one and part two of her Special Education additional qualification, and has her French as a Second Language specialists.

Glinda is a Special Education Resource Teacher (SERT) at a single-track French immersion school in a school board west of Toronto. She has been teaching for four years. She has taught grades two and five French immersion in the past, and works currently supporting children in grades Kindergarten through grade eight. She described her school community as more affluent, and the school itself has just over five hundred students. Glinda has completed part one and part two of her Special Education additional qualification.

3.3 Data Collection and Analysis

I intended to use my research questions as an interpretative tool in the development of the categories I used to code the data I collect. I found common themes in my participants’ responses and used them to sort and code the information that was pertinent to my research. Not all of the information collected was used and analyzed in order to obtain results. As I was reading over my transcripts, when I found pertinent data, I created a category for it. Later, if I found two categories that were similar, I combined them. I developed themes for my data based on categories that were related to each other. In light of the existing literature on the subject, I was looking to find meaning in the strategies in place.
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dthat support students with learning disabilities in a French immersion context, and the potential barriers that stand in the way in the FI programs becoming more inclusive.

My categories have evolved as I started to notice keywords and recurring subjects in my interviews. My intention was to be flexible, and to follow the trends in responses from my participants and allow those trends to form my results. This I believe worked well in drawing similarities and making comparisons between the data that each of my participants provided.

One of the more common methods of data collection in qualitative research is grounded theory. Wilhelmina C. Savenye and Rhonda S. Robinson describe grounded theory as being a process. The researcher starts, “without fully outlined research questions and builds theory from the data, by being open-minded and continually examining the data as the study proceeds” (Savenye & Robinson, 2005). This means that the theory being developed is based in the data. This type of data collection and analysis is important in qualitative research because it allows for flexibility. Being able to refine and evolve as the results and goals of the research become more specific is important in being able to accurately reflect the opinions and beliefs of the participants, and obtain the most accurate results possible.

I transcribed my interviews in small 2-hour sections until I was finished. I used a transcription protocol that allowed for keep identifying information confidential from the very beginning. I had my transcripts reviewed by my research supervisors. My participants were sent the transcriptions of our interviews so that they could look the information over to ensure that their thoughts and opinions had been recorded correctly.
3.4 Ethical Review Procedures

Participants were assigned a pseudonym from the beginning of the interview process as to protect their identity. No specific information about the schools or students is be included. Participants have the right to choose not to answer any of the questions at any point. Participants will have the right to withdraw specific information, or withdraw completely at any point in the process. If a participant withdraws, the information and opinions they share will be excluded from the data analysis stage and the overall results. The data collected will be stored on a password-protected computer until my paper has been presented and published. 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. There are no known risks to participation in my research. My data will be stored for five years on my password protected computer. The only people that will have access to this data are myself, my participants, and my research supervisor. Before beginning interviews, participants will be given a consent letter to sign.

By conducting a qualitative research study, we are minimizing the power dynamic that often exists between the interviewer and interviewee in several ways. By inquiring about an interviewee’s personal experience, we are placing the value on their voice and their personal experiences. Although the participants are chosen based on convenience, they are still chosen based on how well they meet the criteria.

Additionally, this type of research is used to convey stories, and is written in a more flexible manner in which the interviewee and interviewer occasionally collaborate during the data analysis phase. It is my intention to collaborate with my participants, as I intend to conduct interviews in French and want the translation of my transcripts to be an accurate record of what was said and meant during the interview process.
3.5 Methodological Limitations & Strengths

Given the nature of the Master’s of Teaching Research Paper, there are certain limitations. We are limited to a small sample size of 2-3 participants, all of whom must be teachers, there is to be no contact with students or parents. Contact with students and parents may have been extremely beneficial. By speaking to students, I would have been able to ask them for their opinions on which supports worked for them. This may have helped me discover if there were supports they were no getting that they felt they needed in order to find success in French immersion. Contact with parents, especially regarding decisions to transfer students out of French immersion may also have been incredibly useful. This may have allowed me to look at different types of motivation and factors involved in transferring students, and what steps parents took to get their children the support they need, and whether the systems we currently have in place were enough for the student to be successful.

Additionally, we are limited in the way in which we conduct interviews, store, and analyze data. We are only permitted to conduct semi-structured interviews, there is no classroom observation allowed. Having been able to observe supports in practice may have aided in my interpretations of the programs and tools in place, how effective they may be, and for which type of student or learning disability they may impact.

Given these limitations, my research findings are not generalizable, and the opinions and ideas shared by my participants cannot accurately reflect the opinions of all French immersion teachers facing the same situation.

Qualitative research empowers individuals to share their personal experiences, and have their voice be heard. It allows the research to better understand the contexts or settings in which the phenomenon being studies occurs. Given that qualitative research in general does not have strict
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guidelines or specific structures, flexibility is allowed, giving the researcher the opportunity to evolve and constantly change the nature of their study, based on the changing needs of the research topic in question.

In the chapters that follow I will discuss the results that I gathered from my interviews, and will draw conclusions as to what I have learned, and how this will inform my future practice as a teacher. I will later go on to discuss the importance and value of the research I have done, and what areas should be considered for future research in my chosen field.
CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

This chapter includes information on the backgrounds of my participants, and summarizes my findings from the interviews that I conducted. I conducted two interviews with current teachers in the French immersion program, and found the information and suggestions that they provided in response to the inclusion of students with learning disabilities in the French immersion program, to be consistent with the findings from my literature review. The original goal of my research was to find strategies to be used by teachers in including students with LDs in French immersion. Based on the information provided from my participants, I structured my findings in themes and sub-themes.

4.0 Participant Backgrounds

For the purposes of confidentiality, I assigned each of my participants a pseudonym. I interviewed two teachers from two different boards in the Greater Toronto Area, both of who teach in French immersion.

Dorothy is currently on maternity leave from teaching grade two French immersion, and has taught grades one, three, five and six previously, always in French immersion. She has been teaching for seven years, and is currently at a single-track French immersion school in the Greater Toronto Area. She described the demographic of her school as very multicultural. Dorothy has completed part one and part two of her Special Education additional qualification, she has also completed part one, part two and her specialists in French as a Second Language.

Glinda is a Special Education Resource Teacher (SERT) at a single-track French immersion school, and has been teaching for four years. She has taught grades two and five in the past, and works currently with children in grades Kindergarten through to grade eight. She described her school
community as more affluent, and the school itself has just over five hundred students. Glinda has completed part one and part two of her Special Education additional qualification.

4.1 Theme 1: Profile of the French Immersion Program

4.1.1 Single Track versus Dual Track

I was curious as to whether the inclusion of students with learning disabilities in French immersion changed depending on whether the school at which students were studying was a single-track French immersion school, or a dual-track French immersion school. Single-track meaning that all classes and students in the school are attending French immersion, and it often means that all announcements, assemblies, and all school communication between students and teachers takes place in French. Dual-track means that there is a French immersion program and an English program that share the same school space, and often means that announcements and assemblies are done in English. I was curious as to whether the types of support exist are different in single-track schools versus dual-track schools.

Having taught in a single-track school before moving to her position now in a single-track school, Dorothy was able to share some of her experiences with this. She believes that single-track French immersion is considerably more effective, because the quality of the language is higher. Glinda agreed, in saying that she really liked that in her single-track school, all of the announcements and assemblies are in French, and that all of the teachers speak French. She said that the students are really immersed in a French community, in a school culture. She went on to say, however, that in the event that a student has to leave the program, they are also leaving the community in which they feel well-established, and have to transition to a brand new school, which could be difficult for some students.
4.1.2 Demand for French Immersion

The idea that the demand for French immersion is increasing is one that was supported by both of my participants, and by the research I conducted in my literature review. In a recent article published by the Toronto Star, several boards in the Greater Toronto Area such as Peel and Halton are in the process of figuring out how to implement a plan that allows equal opportunity to students who wish to enroll, but also ensures that students are still getting a good quality of education. Proposed options are implementing a cap to enrollment (Rushowy, 2015), or moving the beginning of the immersion program some grade one to a later grade, which also required fewer French immersion teachers, a constant struggle for French immersion programs.

Dorothy mentioned that because of the growing demand for French immersion in her board, students in beginning grades like one and two were being sent to a feeder school, and the single track French immersion schools like hers were going from Kindergarten to grade eight, to grade three to grade eight instead, in order to accommodate for the larger number of classes and students. This suggests that, because of the growing demand for French immersion, and the growing numbers of students enrolling, the French immersion program may need to evolve to meet the needs of its student population.

This demand is seemingly consistent across the country. In an article published by Maclean’s magazine, the author Aaron Hutchins describes the anxious accounts of parents in British Columbia as they try to enrol their young children in French immersion. One parent camped out in his car overnight to start the lineup, and others drove from 25km away to line up, because the French immersion schools in their areas received the best ratings (Hutchins, 2015). Because of this growing popularity, it might indicate a real need for changes to the program, in order to accommodate for the larger numbers of
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students, and the possibility of a wider range of learning styles that may come with the growing numbers.

4.1.3 Program Gaps and Needs

The French immersion program has changed very much from the program it was at its conception in the 1970s. The student population is arguably more diverse, and there were a few gaps noted by my participants that require attention, for the French immersion to continue to be successful and open to all students as their learning needs continue to evolve. French immersion students at the beginning of the program’s creation shared similar cognitive abilities, as well socioeconomic status (Pellerin, 2013) which is very different from today.

Unfortunately, it would appear that Special Education support in single-track French immersion schools is not quite at the level it needs to be, in order to support diverse student needs. Dorothy described the Special Education support in her school coming from one teacher, who devoted half of their time to Special Education supports, and the rest of their time to teaching their own homeroom classroom. She and the other members of the literacy team in her school tried to make up for the lack of support by taking time from their prep periods to go and pull students from their classrooms to work one-on-one with them. Sometimes, she was only able to provide 40 minutes a week, because of the other demands in her schedule. To Dorothy, this was at least something. She emphasized again and again the importance of ensuring that students feel successful, and that in French immersion, it falls a lot on the individual teachers to provide the support that they need.

Glinda is a SERT at her school, and believes that resources are limited. She says in many cases there are resources in English that can still be used by French immersion teachers, because a lot of the skills developed are transferrable, a concept that is consistent with the current research. At-risk students
are able to function just as well in immersion contexts because of the number of transferable skills that can be used from when a child acquired their first language (L1), to learn a second language (L2) (Kruk & Reynolds, 2012). However, it would still be preferable to have those resources in French. She has also said that it’s very recent that there are technology resources in French. She highlighted Google Read and Write, which is a Google Chrome add on, that will read French text aloud to students, but this is really the beginning of the development of resources for Special Education support in French immersion programs, and may indicate that there is a continued need for more to be developed, as further research is done to support students in French immersion.

4.1.4 Perceptions of the French Immersion Program

In order for the gaps to be addressed, and for real change to occur, it was also noted by my participant Glinda, that a change in mindset would also be important, for teachers, parents, and students in the French immersion program. Traditional mindset that she had observed included encouraging students with learning disabilities to transfer from the French immersion program into the English program, where they would be able to find the support that they needed, something that is consistent with the information from my literature review. Parents in several cases have found that their children with special needs are able to receive more support in the English stream, than they were receiving in French immersion (Cobb, 2015; Arnett & Mady, 2009).

However, Glinda had an interesting perspective, and she stated that French immersion was not necessarily better than any other program; it’s just different being that the delivery method is in a different language. She believes that the program is very stimulating for kids, and described it as an ideal match for one of her students with autism, because it gave him a huge reason to focus, and he wasn’t able to simply check out because the material was being taught in English. There is no current
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research on the relationship between Autism and the French immersion program, however Glinda’s insight into this topic may suggest an area to be explored by future researchers.

Because French immersion is a choice, the traditional mentality is that it was an enrichment program, something that, to an extent, Dorothy supported. She said that she believes it is an enrichment program, and describes the ideal French immersion student candidate as being curious, having lots of energy, and having a real love for learning.

Dorothy says that it brings her a lot of joy to watch students like that thrive in the French immersion program, and really be so stimulated and immersed in the language and the culture. She agrees that there needs to be more support for students with learning disabilities, but because it is an optional program, she supports the idea that it is an extra choice for students and parents.

4.2 Theme 2: Teacher Attitudes and Beliefs

Through research and interviews, I learned that the attitude of the teacher could truly make or break a student’s success in French immersion if they have a learning disability. My participants identified some core values that have made their classrooms inclusive, their feelings when faced with students who are struggling and when faced with those who resist their inclusive practices, and professional development and learning opportunities to aid in their efforts to support all students.

4.2.1 A Shift in Program Values

The teachers I interviewed shared with me the values that their schools exhibit, and how those values translate into values of the French immersion program itself.

Nancy Wise is a French immersion educational consultant who works with parents who are considering FI for their children, and who have children with learning difficulties and are enrolled in
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French immersion. She is someone that my participant Glinda referenced throughout our interview as the creator of an early-intervention reading program in grade one French immersion, on which Glinda has based some of her interventions in her current practice.

In a recent article in the National Post, Wise challenges traditional views of the French immersion program as being elitist, by sharing some of the core values of the program, that make it a viable option for all students. Wise says that current research demonstrates that French immersion does not jeopardize first language skills, and that learning a second language can enhance cognitive abilities. She also says that, recent investigations have found that students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds can also be successful, and function more confidently in French than their English-only peers (Bourgoin 2002; Genesee 2012 found in Wise 2015).

Wise also encourages a shift towards new values. For instance, she suggests that instead of questioning the suitability of the French immersion program for certain students, as some parents do, to instead questions as to whether parents want their children to attain a functional level of bilingualism in English and French, Canada’s two official languages.

This may suggest a need for a shift and change in values for French immersion, so that instead of being associated with elitism, and struggles for students who are different in any way, it can instead be associated with the number of French immersion graduates who are functionally bilingual.

4.2.2 Resistance to Accept Students with LDs

Glinda broke down teacher resistance for me, and described a few reasons as to why teachers may be hesitant to implement the changes she, as a SERT suggested in order to support specific students. She suggested that, in training to be a French immersion teacher, there is no specific training on how to support students with learning disabilities, so a lot of that responsibility falls onto the
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teacher’s shoulders. She says that, because of the traditional values in the French immersion program, she encounters and works with teachers on a regular basis that have never taught students who are on IEPs, and because it’s something they’ve never encountered, they often find it too challenging. Some of the teachers she works with still believe that if students are struggling, that they should transfer out since French immersion is a choice. So, when Glinda approaches them with support strategies, some teachers focus a lot on what they believe student cannot and will not be able to handle. Glinda however, is well aware of what the students are unable to do, and focuses instead on what they are able to do, and tailors the students’ support programs to their strengths.

This is a very interesting change in mindset I believe. If, in supporting students with special needs, we focus more on what they enjoy doing and are able to do, will this perhaps make improving and managing their struggles more feasible in schools?

4.2.3 The Teacher as a Learner: Professional Development

There are many options for teachers who wish to learn more about the ways in which they can support students with learning disabilities in their classrooms. Both of my participants have taken part one and part two of their Special Education additional qualifications. Dorothy mentioned that she wished it were a requirement for all teachers, like having French as a Second Language Part 1 is for French teachers. She said she strategies and information learned in her additional qualification courses were invaluable, and went beyond what she learned in her teacher education program, and really complimented what she had learned through experience.

Dorothy suggested that there is a need for more professional development that is geared towards supporting children with learning disabilities specifically in French, since there is not a lot of in-school support outside of the classroom. She said that she is beginning to see a paradigm shift in the
acceptance of these students into the program, which would require further teacher training. In order to support students, it is important to also support teachers, and give them the tools and information they need to help a wider variety of students find success.

Because Special Education additional qualifications, and courses in teacher education programs are taught generally, as to be able to be applied to a wide range of teaching contexts, there is a gap in teacher education with regards to special education support in French immersion. Hopefully this is something that changes in the future, because in order for teachers to be able to support their students, they first need to have the tools and information with which to do so.

4.3 Theme 3: Learning Disabilities in French Immersion

Given that the topic of learning disabilities is so broad, and there exists such a wide variety in learning disabilities that students face, my aim in this section was to identify which types of learning disabilities my participants had encountered in their French immersion classrooms, and with which students they found success in the program. My goal was to determine if there is a difference, and if certain learning disabilities are easier to support than others, and if there are learning disabilities that truly may not be compatible with the demands of the French immersion program.

4.3.1 Presence of Students with Learning Disabilities in French Immersion

Because the inclusion of students with learning disabilities in French immersion programs is a relatively new concept, and is continuing to grow, I thought it useful to identify learning disabilities that are commonly found by teachers in their current classrooms. My participants shared their own experiences, and discussed details with me about student they had encountered, and the details of their learning disabilities.
As a SERT, Glinda is part of a small team of teachers who are responsible for the support of students with learning disabilities at her school. She talks about working with a student who has a processing disorder. This student is in grade four, and Glinda is currently working with her. Glinda describes this student as being able to read anything you ever give her, but she can tell you nothing about what she had read, and couldn’t process any of the information. She also described seeing this student speaking, and seeing her grammar fall apart after a couple of sentences. They have started doing assessments with this student, and Glinda talked about a couple of interventions in place to support this student, based on what they have found so far.

Glinda said that this student responded well to the use of graphic organizers and mind maps. They’ve structured all of her work in the exact seem way, which follows the importance Glinda attributes to consistency in working with her students. In math, the student has her own box of manipulatives, which she uses to answer her question cards. She is also given lots of visual support. Glinda says this student is responding well to all of these strategies, and that her mother comes in once or twice a month to monitor progress, and see how things are going. The parental support, and intervention in place, may lead to her success in the French immersion program.

Dorothy shared her experiences working with a child in her first year teaching, whom she suspected might have Aspergers. She described this first grader as having trouble focusing, but truly being brilliant, and grasping the language well. While she had all of the students on the carpet, she found that this student would often sit by the bookshelf and would read while she was talking. At first, this concerned Dorothy, she wasn’t sure if the student was grasping what she was saying, and to add to her concerns, the student was also reading French books for the first time. However, she saw this student make progress. He understood what he was reading, and what she was saying while they were on the carpet. Dorothy also approached her Special Education team, and they suggested also giving the
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student breaks. For instance, sending him on small errands if he was having a difficult day, allowing him to stretch his legs and potentially refocus his energy.

This suggests that, despite traditional ideologies of excluding children with learning disabilities in French immersion, they are noticeably present in classrooms today, a presence that Dorothy notices in her more recent years of teaching, as growing. Thus, it can be said that there is also a growing need for support for these students, in order for them to feel successful.

4.3.2 Student Success

It is important to identify that it was indeed possible for students with learning disabilities to find success in the French immersion program, a concept that both of my participants strongly believe. In sharing their experiences with successful French immersion students, I also found common factors that they considered essential in supporting a student on their path to success, and their opinions on one more commonly known option: transferring students out of the French immersion program into the English stream. It is also important to note that there is a significant gap in specific research on the success of students with LDs in French immersion. There are studies that suggest that certain interventions may work for some students (CITE STUDIES), but this remains a current gap in the research on this topic. The following information shared by my participants is representative of a small group of students, and is based on their personal experiences.

My participants both highlighted the importance of getting to know a student’s profile as being an essential factor to support them in their success in the program. Glinda emphasized the importance of working with that student’s community, so including parents, teachers and administration in the decisions and conversations that determine the intervention put in place for that child. She shared her experience working with a child who transferred out of the French immersion program, hoping to find
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better support in English, but who was actually transitioning back to French immersion. She realized that the interventions in place for her in French were truly helping her, and she misses that support. Glinda elaborated on this situation by saying that many parents pull their children from FI when they are not getting straight A’s. She says that a conversation about what student success looks like in FI is often needed, and she explains to parents why it’s perfectly normal that their children are receiving Bs and Cs in French immersion. This may suggest a need for a shift in what we identify and associate with success in schools, and what definition of success we teach to our students.

Transferring students out of French immersion is a common attitude that both of my participants highlighted. They have seen the desire to transfer from both parents, who are watching their children progress more slowly than they would like, or from teachers who perhaps have little experience working with students who have learning disabilities. However, both of my participants expressed that the idea of transferring out of the program should be a last resort, and should really only be an option if the student is not feeling successful. Both Glinda and Dorothy suggested that students with learning disabilities that have an impact on their ability to learn and process language, may not find success in the French immersion program, and may be able to find a bit more support in English. Glinda suggested however, that this increase in processing ability would perhaps only be 20% given that their difficulties would likely still transfer with them to the English program.

4.4 Theme 4: Strategies for Inclusion

The main aim of my research was to identify strategies that teachers could use to support their students. I wanted to find strategies that, when implemented, not only benefited students with learning disabilities, but benefited all students. In having these conversations with my participants, I was able to
find strategies that they had used as teachers, and their ideas on parent involvement, support from administration, and overall student response to the strategies and supports being put in place.

4.4.1 Implemented by the Teacher

Glinda suggested referencing the newly created Ministry of Education document released in 2015 called “Including Students with Special Education Needs in French as a Second Language Programs: A Guide for Ontario Schools” which provides teachers with examples of accommodations and modifications they can make in their French immersion classrooms to help support students with learning disabilities. The document reviews the current research and provincial data, and suggests strategies based on that information for teachers to implement in their classrooms.

The following are strategies my participants identified as being successful, after trying them themselves and seeing the ways in which students respond.

Table 1: Strategies for Inclusion

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Strategy</th>
<th>Student reaction</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dorothy</td>
<td>Giving students warnings before transitions, or posting a visual schedule so they can anticipate changes.</td>
<td>A student with anxiety was made aware of what was coming next, and was able to begin their transition to the next activity ahead of time.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dorothy</td>
<td>Adding information to a student’s IEP, so that their teacher the next year could continue the strategies that worked.</td>
<td>Dorothy did not mention specific student reactions to this, but this type of planning may help teachers use their limited time effectively by not wasting time trying strategies that haven’t worked in the past.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dorothy</td>
<td>Breaking down tasks for students that need it, and checking in with them constantly throughout a work period.</td>
<td>A student was able to access the information at a manageable pace, without feeling overwhelmed.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Glinda</td>
<td>Maintaining consistency and structure: if a student understands a certain type of questioning, ask them in that way every time, and creating visual supports that always look the same like mind maps or graphic organizers.</td>
<td>Consistency and structure not only helps the students for whom the strategies are intended, but it also helps all of the other students. The other students also know what to expect when the questions are clear, and the graphic organizers are</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The strategies and interventions that Glinda is using in her role at her current school, she said were motivated by Nancy Wise’s early intervention program implement in York Region in 2015. Her study demonstrated how additional phonological teaching could help early elementary students with their difficulties in reading. She determined that, despite the small sample size, there is a correlation between reading skills learned in English and French, and that these skills transfer language to language (Wise, 2015).

4.4.2 Parent Involvement

Parent involvement was identified as a key component of student success in general, but especially when students have learning disabilities. Parents that are involved in the testing process, and that continue to stay involved in supporting their children at home by doing reinforcement activities, or keeping strategies consistent in helping with homework or projects, were highlighted as being invaluable to teachers and to student success.

Glinda sends home flash cards, and other activities with her students, so that parents can stay involved in their learning process. She also meets with parents and discusses what they have done, or what they do at home that seems to be working, or the general interests of their children. She does this in hopes of finding strategies that work for each specific student, as she recognizes that all students are
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different, and all learning disabilities are different. Dorothy has also suggested talking to parents. She was able to help identify one of her student’s anxiety triggers by meeting with parents.

Parent involvement will look different in each teacher’s situation. Although there is evidence to suggest that parental intervention and participants in supporting their children with learning disabilities is beneficial (Hampton & Fernandez 1985), there is no literature on this concept applied to the French immersion context. This success may suggest that parental intervention and support would be equally as positive in French immersion, however because of certain constraints, like a language barrier, this has only been confirmed by my participants’ testimonials.

4.4.3 Support from Administration

Having an administration that stands behind the French immersion program being inclusive is something that my participants identified as being essential in a school community. Dorothy, for example, highlighted her the attitudes of her school’s principal towards the transfer of students, and stated that her Principal only wanted to consider transferring a student out of the program as a very last resort. Dorothy said that the principal at her school was very passionate about keeping students in French immersion if she saw potential for their success, and that she doesn’t want to be too quick to decide that it isn’t the right fit for a student. There is a long process that takes place at her school. It started by creating a growth plan for that student, and if there is no success in implementing that, there is an in-school team meeting with teachers, school administration and a school psychologist. The psychologist then determines the next course of action for the student. She described it as a long process, and said it can sometimes take up to a year to find a proper plan for students.

Glinda identified similar levels of support from the principal and administration at her school. As a SERT, Glinda often feels that she and her ideas are unpopular among the French immersion
teachers at her school. However, she says that her principal is very supportive of the interventions and her efforts to try out different strategies with her students. She also described a strong community at her school, which may also help Glinda feel supported in her efforts.

4.5 Conclusion of Findings

The data I collected from my participants was consistent with the research information gathered during my literature review.

In the topic of the profile of the French immersion program, my participants determined that there is a benefit to teaching and learning in a single-track French immersion context because students and teachers are fully immersed in the language and culture that is created in the school community. Additionally, because of the increasing demand for French immersion spots for students, the gaps and needs of the program are amplified, and the traditional views of the program are beginning to be called into question. This may suggest a need for change; change in program values, and change in resources and support in order to better address the needs of our changing student population.

This shift in program values was also identified in my section on attitudes and beliefs. My participants both called into question the traditional lens through which some teachers still view the French immersion in its students, and that a resistance to accepting student with learning disabilities into the program is not because they lack the desire to be inclusive and equitable, but rather that they have never worked with students with learning disabilities and fill underprepared to support them in their classrooms. As a potential solution to this, my participant Dorothy suggested a need for more teacher education that specifically addresses learning disabilities in a French immersion context.

One of my mains goals in my research was to identify which learning disabilities can be found in French immersion classrooms today, and what strategies teachers are implementing and using in
order to encourage student success. My participants identified that they had worked with a wide range of learning disabilities, and emphasized the importance of consistency with whatever interventions are being put in place. In being consistent and using a variety of strategies, having open conversations with parents and including them in the process, and adding information to students’ IEPs for their future teachers to reference, they noticed students were finding success and support in the French immersion program.

Finally, my participants identified actual strategies that they have used and seen used to support students with learning disabilities, and found that these strategies also benefited the other students in the class. Furthermore, they emphasized the importance of parent involvement in their students’ learning processes, and gave suggestions of what to send home with students so that their parents can continue to support their learning at home. They also were very grateful for the support given to them by the administration at their individual schools, and identified this as a key component in student success.

Some of the data gathered from my participants indicated areas where further research would be beneficial, as well as gaining first hand experience in those areas, which I intend to expand upon in my next and final chapter. In chapter five, I will discuss the implications of my research on my future practice as a teachers, areas for further study, and questions that remain, or new questions that have stemmed from my research.
CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION

In this chapter, I provide an overview of the goals of my research. Additionally, I elaborate as to how and how I accomplished these goals by referencing my review of the current literature on the subject, and an analysis of my findings from two semi-structured interviews with currently practicing French immersion teachers. I feel as if I gathered enough information throughout the process to say that I was able to accomplish those goals.

I was drawn to this research because of my personal connections to the French immersion program. I also hold a strong belief that it truly is a valuable program, and has very much helped shape my linguistic identity. When, during my undergraduate degree in Second Language Teaching, I learned about issues of access within the French immersion program, I was inspired to research why that was the case. I wished to discover what French immersion educators could do to deconstruct the notion of elitism, and work to include students of all learning backgrounds and with all types of learning potential in the French immersion program.

This passion inspired my research question, which was to find resources and supports for French immersion students with learning disabilities, for teachers to use in their FI classrooms and schools in order to make the French immersion program more inclusive, and more equitable. Additionally, I was curious as to whether there were specific learning disabilities that were more commonly found in French immersion classrooms. I conducted two 40-minute semi-structured interviews with currently practicing French immersion teachers, that had experience including students with learning disabilities in their classrooms, and explored the different strategies they used, and their perceptions of inclusion in French immersion. One interview was conducted in person, at my participant’s home, and the other was conducted over Skype.
5.0 Overview of Key Findings and Their Significance

In my previous chapter, I discovered that the data I collected from my participants was consistent with the research information gathered during my literature review.

In the topic of the profile of the French immersion program, my participants determined that there is a benefit to teaching and learning in a single-track French immersion context because students and teachers are fully immersed in the language and culture that is created in the school community. Additionally, because of the increasing demand for French immersion spots for students, the gaps and needs of the program are amplified, and the traditional views of the program are beginning to be called into question. This may suggest a need for change; change in program values, and change in resources and support in order to better address the needs of our changing student population.

This shift in program values was also identified in my section on attitudes and beliefs. My participants both called into question the traditional lens through which some teachers still view the French immersion program and its students, perpetuating the misconceptions I deconstructed earlier. They both described that the resistance to accepting students with learning disabilities into the program is not because teachers lack the desire to be inclusive and equitable, but rather that they have never worked with students with learning disabilities and feel underprepared to support them in their classrooms. Although it is not only teachers that have to accept students into their classrooms, they arguably play a large role in the process. As a potential solution to this, my participant Dorothy
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suggested a need for more teacher education that specifically addresses learning disabilities in a French immersion context. Even in my own education as a teacher candidate, I have found myself wishing for resources and strategies that are specific to French immersion, which have inspired some of the questions I still have, and have lead me to identify areas for further research, which I go on to discuss later.

One of my mains goals in my research was to identify which learning disabilities can be found in French immersion classrooms today, and what strategies teachers are implementing and using in order to encourage student success. My participants identified that they had worked with a wide range of learning disabilities, meaning that there were not specific learning disabilities that were more commonly found in French immersion. In talking about supporting these students, my participants both emphasized the importance of consistency with whatever interventions are being put in place. In being consistent and using a variety of strategies, having open conversations with parents and including them in the process, and adding information to students’ IEPs for their future teachers to reference, they noticed students were finding success and support in the French immersion program. Additionally, getting support from administration for any interventions happening is something that each of my participants identified as being essential to student success.

Finally, my participants identified actual strategies that they have used and seen used to support students with learning disabilities, and found that these strategies also benefited the other students in the class. Furthermore, they emphasized the importance of parent involvement in their students’ learning processes, and gave suggestions of what to send home with students so that their parents can continue to support their learning at home. Additionally, my participants suggested different print resources for teachers to consult for strategies and ideas. Recently, the Ministry of Education has published a document on the inclusion of students with special needs in French as a Second Language.
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(FSL) programs, which includes interesting information about French immersion that I have discussed in my previous chapters, and supports for students enrolled in all FSL programs.

Some of the data gathered from my participants indicated areas where further research would be beneficial, as well as gaining first hand experience in those areas, which I intend to expand upon in the sections that follow. In the following sections, I discuss the implications of my research on the educational research community, and on my own professional identity and future practice as a French immersion teacher. I also discuss recommendations to teachers, which come primarily from the strategies and suggestions of my participants, as they are the ones with first-hand knowledge and experience. Finally, I discuss the areas for future research that I have identified through questions that came up over the course of my research process.

5.1 Implications

5.1.1 The Educational Community

The educational research community includes the following people: students, parents, teachers, administration, as well as the school, school board. More specifically, I believe there are implications for French immersion teachers, students, and their parents, as well as dual-track and single-track French immersion schools, and school boards that offer these programs.

My research notes an increase in demand for the French immersion program in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA). Due to this increase in demand, I have noted from my own personal experience, that qualified French teacher applicants are being fast-tracked to long-term occasional and full-time permanent teaching positions in school boards around the GTA. There are growing numbers of parents who wish to enroll their children in French immersion, but statistics found in the Ontario Ministry of Education’s document note that as students progress through the program, the attrition rate increases,
and fewer and fewer students continue in the French immersion program (Ministry of Education, 2015). In some cases, I have observed that schools may start with six grade one French immersion classes, and one two classes will graduate from grade eight. Among many other possible factors, the lack of support that exists in French immersion currently, and the encouragement that is happening to have students who are struggling transfer to the English program may be contribution to this high attrition rate.

Furthermore, my participants have noted that parents may not believe that French immersion is the right fit for their children, because it is perceived as too challenging. There is an additional belief that, because French immersion starts with 100% of classes being in French until grade four, some parents believe that their children will not develop sufficient proficiency in English, or in their first language, which means that these parents may not choose to enroll their children in the French immersion program.

My participants noted a significant lack of French resources and supports for students with particular needs. There is a wide range of material in English, which one of my participants noted as still being useful, and transferable. However, both indicated a preference for more to be developed in French, to support students in their language of instruction.

5.1.2 My Personal Professional Identity and Practice

As a teacher my research findings might mean that, as my career progresses, I will see more and more students with learning disabilities enrolled in my French immersion classes. I look forward to accommodating and modifying my program, as they need. It may also mean that my conversations with parents change. I hope I am able to communicate that learning two languages doesn’t always make school more difficult for students, and that I am able to provide them with resources to support their
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children at home. When and if parents come to me with questions about transferring to the English stream, I hope that I may be able to provide them with the supports that allow their children to stay in FI. I hope that as an advocate for inclusion in French immersion, I am able to find more and more of my future colleagues also supporting this idea, and working towards the goal of breaking down the stereotype of elitism in the program.

As a researcher, I would like to continue my research through observation of my own students, and the students at my future school. I will continue to develop and experiment with strategies to support students, and work with them and their parents to figure out what I am able to do and how I can share my findings with other teachers. I believe that my research also means that in my future practice as a teacher, I should continue to do my best to differentiate as much as possible, and provide students with a lot of choice in the work that we’re doing. Additionally, I believe my research demonstrates the importance of working hard in developing the connection each student has towards the French language, in hopes of increasing their confidence and level of comfort in my class and in speaking French outside of the classroom.

My research reaffirms some of the beliefs and habits I already have, and the habits I have seen in some of my associate teachers, and French immersion mentor teachers I have had the pleasure of volunteering with. It has reaffirmed for me, that compassion can go a long way. I have observed that caring about student success, and not giving up on them is important in the way in which they see themselves within the school community, and the way their parents see them as well. I hope that by continuing to care about the well being of students, we as French immersion teachers are able to keep more students in the French immersion program for longer, so they can benefit from the opportunities that bilingualism may present.
5.2 Recommendations

5.2.1 A Change in Attitude Towards FI Registration

One of the main goals of my research was to find strategies to be used by teachers and administrators in schools and classrooms, so that students with LDs can continue to be included in FI programs. First of all, my research has called into question the attitudes toward French immersion, and the data from both my literature review, and interviews with my participants has implied that there is a need for a shift in the way we view the French immersion, and access to the program. For this attitude shift to happen, school boards, individual schools and teachers will need to make some adjustments to advertise that the French immersion program is accessible to all, and that students of all learning backgrounds can find success and support in the program.

Additionally, as was pointed out in the literature, a change is needed in the question asked by parents when they are considering registering their kindergarten or first-grade-aged children. Instead of asking if the French immersion program is right for their children, they should instead ask themselves if they wish to have their children enroll in a program that helps them achieve a functional level of bilingualism (Wise, 2015).

5.2.2 Differences in FSL Programs and Teacher Education

Similar to the topic of a shift in attitude, a shift on the part of school boards and teacher education programs might also be useful. Given that the demands of each French as a Second Language program are so drastically different from each other, I have found myself struggling to comprehend why we certify and train teachers as if all FSL programs are the same. The role of a Core French teacher, an Extended French teacher, and a French immersion teacher are all very different. We see a shift from French being the subject of instruction to the means of instruction when we look at the
different between Core and immersion. We also see a difference in timing, when we consider that both Core French and Extended French begin in fourth grade, but French immersion can either begin in kindergarten or grade one. Arguably, the role of the teacher in each FSL context is different, and training all teacher candidates the same way, is too general, and does not provide teacher candidates with the specific skills required from each of the different FSL programs.

Additionally, my research has indicated that a series of additional qualification courses, or general professional development courses for teachers that put special education into context with the French immersion program, would be very beneficial, in addition to developing resources for French immersion teachers that support students with different needs in French, instead of mostly in English. Along the same lines, because of the increasing demand for French teachers, I also recommend changes on the teacher education level. Those who are being qualified to teach French should be given more opportunities to have French teaching placements, and should be able to opt to take courses that have a specific French focus. There are programs that exist, at certain Ontario universities that prepare teachers to instruct in French immersion, and an increase in institutes that provide these types of programs, would also be ideal.

5.2.3 Strategies for Educators

Furthermore, the strategies provided by my participants and that are listed in the new document created by the Ontario Ministry of Education, are there for teachers to use. These strategies are suggested as a means of helping to promote inclusion in French immersion classrooms and schools. As pointed out by one of my participants, Glinda, who is a Special Education resource teacher at her school, these accommodations and modifications are not far from what we already do with students who have special education needs in the English stream. They have been described as natural to
implement, and with the support from school administrators and parents, students will hopefully feel successful in the program.

5.3 Areas for Further Research

Throughout my research process, several other questions were raised. Given what I have found, the following are areas that I believe are important for future research, and shape the direction I intend to go, and where other educational research scholars, who are passionate about equity and inclusion in French immersion, should also direct their attention. I have identified a few areas, and have formulated questions that may inform future areas of research, and briefly explain how they came up in my research, and why they are important to pursue.

Q: In terms of language identity, how do students with learning disabilities feel when they are included in the French immersion program; do they feel the same sense of belonging as other students?

Now that we are at a point where there are suggestions for accommodations and modifications to support students with a diverse range of needs in FI, the next step would be to actually talk to students, and address their feelings of belonging and success in the program. If students are happy, and are enjoying their time in French, and are feeling successful, strategies that have worked for them would be useful to share with all FI teachers, so we can continue to provide a high level of support for students. Additionally, it is important to discuss and analyze whether these strategies are effective, and whether new strategies need to be put in place if things are not working, or if there are students with particular learning disabilities that are still not finding success. Future studies in this area may include
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classroom observations, conversations with students, and data collection around student success and student well being in French immersion, with a focus on students with learning disabilities who are receiving in-school support.

*Q: Are there particular learning disabilities that block students from acquiring a second language? If so, how can these students be supported so that they feel successful in school, especially if faced with a situation where they need to transfer out of French immersion?*

There are questions my research does not address, but that I am curious about. I do not believe we are at the point in the development and growth of the French immersion program to find the answers to these questions, but in the future, this information may be beneficial in informing the way, as FI teachers, we support and encourage students. If there are learning disabilities that completely prevent a student from learning a second language, what are they, and are they able to find success in different FSL programs?

*Q: Conversations in French: how do we have conversations with students about learning styles, and learning needs in their second language? Additionally, how do we have those conversations with students who are reluctant to communicate in French?*

One of my main focuses as a future teacher is to have conversations with students about their learning styles, and about the ways in which people learn in general. In my mind, this plays into our conversations about equity and diversity in that it is important that students understand each other’s learning styles, and respect and accept that not everyone learns in the same way. With that in mind, as I
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was uncovering new strategies to support students in FI from listening to my participants’ experiences, this question came to mind. These conversations are challenging, even in a person’s native language, and I would be interested to see what strategies exist to have these conversations in students second languages. Future studies in this area may include classroom observation, or conversations with educators who have had these conversations in their classrooms, and their perceived effectiveness.

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

In conclusion, I believe I have accomplished my original goal in finding strategies that allow teachers to include and support students with learning disabilities in their French immersion classrooms, and also enable students to feel successful. I believe this is significant, because it helps break down the stereotype of the FI program being elitist, and only designed for the academically advanced student. I hope that my research allows all members of the educational research community to see how accessible the French immersion program can be, and how important it is for all students across Canada to have access to a program that helps them attain a functional level of bilingualism in our country’s two official languages. I believe my research will help more students feel connected to the French language, provided the right supports are put in place. I have found, with the help of my participants, that it is possible for students with learning disabilities to be successful in French immersion, and that with the right attitude, they will feel more confident.

I hope that my future colleagues, parents of my students, and the students in my class may all benefit from this research, and from the skill set and area of interest that I have developed throughout the process. I believe that my research will allow me to start these conversations in French immersion
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schools, and get teachers thinking about their own perceptions of French immersion, and the history of
students they have typically seen in their classrooms.

I am thankful for the experiences that my participants provided me with, and their willingness
to openly and honestly share strategies and discuss which ones they found were successful, and which
ones they found were not.

In the future, I hope to continue my research, and find the answers to some of my outlying
questions in my own teaching practice, and by experimenting with different strategies, attending
regular professional development, and continuing to be an advocate for FSL education in Canada, and
its benefits. Above all, I hope to inspire a love of French in my students, and have them leave at the end
of everyday feeling successful.
References


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APPENDIX A: 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 disabilities in French immersion programs 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. Eloise Tan. 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 a 45-60 minute interview that will be audio-recorded. I would be grateful if you would allow me to interview you at a place and time convenient to you.

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 audio 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.

Alexa Nemfield
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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.

Sincerely,
Researcher name: Alexa Nemfield

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 Alexa Nemfield and agree to participate in an interview for the purposes described. I agree to have the interview audio-recorded.

Signature: ______________________________________

Name (printed): ________________________________

Date: ________________________________

*for the purposes of the submission of my research, my contact information and that of my instructor were omitted. This information was provided to participants prior to interviews.
APPENDIX B: Interview Protocol and Questions

Thank you for participating in this research, I appreciate the gift of your time. The aim of this study is to learn what strategies teachers use to support students with learning disabilities in the French immersion program. The interview should take approximately 45-60 minutes. I will ask you questions about your background as a student and teacher, your current practices and your suggestions for next steps. I want to remind you of your right to choose to not answer any question, and your right to withdraw at any point during the study. Do you have any questions before we begin?

Section A: Introductory/ice breakers
1. Can you state your name for the recorder?
2. What grades and subject areas do you teach? Which have you taught in the past?
3. How long have you been teaching? Have you always taught French immersion?
4. Can you tell me more about the school you currently work in? (e.g. size, demographics, program priorities)
5. Can you tell me about your education? What did you study, and how did you decide to pursue a career in education? What made you decide to teach French immersion?
6. As you know, I am interested in learning how French Immersion teachers support students with learning disabilities. Can you tell me more about your commitment to supporting students with learning disabilities? What personal, professional, and/or educational experiences contributed to developing your commitment and preparation for this work?
7. How common is it for you to have students with diagnosed learning disabilities in your class?
8. What kind of support exists at your school for students with learning disabilities?

Section B: Teacher Beliefs and Experiences
9. What does French Immersion education mean to you? Why do you believe it is important? What are the benefits for students participating in French Immersion programs?
10. Do you believe that there is a difference in the effectiveness of dual-track French immersion versus single-track French immersion?
11. What is your perspective on the inclusion of students with special needs in French Immersion programming?
12. More specifically, what is your perspective on the inclusion of students with learning disabilities? Do you believe that students with learning disabilities can be successful in French Immersion programs? Why/not? What do you think it will take to ensure their success?
13. What do you believe are some of the common challenges experienced by students with learning disabilities in French immersion programs?
14. In your view, how well do schools (generally speaking) do in supporting students with learning disabilities in French Immersion programs? How do you think they could further support these students?
15. Have you experienced the transfer of a struggling student from French immersion to the English program? What was your opinion on this transfer?
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Section C: Teacher Practices
16. What are some specific strategies that you implement in your classroom to support the French language education of students with learning disabilities?
17. How do students respond to these strategies?
18. Can you give me a specific example of a student that you have had with a learning disability, and share with me some of their challenges and ways that you supported them?
   a. Who was this student (grade, subject)?
   b. What struggles did you observe from them?
   c. How did you respond to those struggles? What were you goals? What opportunities for learning did you create?
   d. How did your student respond?
19. What outcomes did you observe? Are these strategies that you commonly use as responsive instruction to meet these students learning needs, or strategies that you implement more broadly with all students?
20. What resources do you use and draw on to support students with learning disabilities in the French immersion classroom? Do you work in collaboration with others (e.g. support workers, resource teachers)?

Section D: Challenges, Support, and Next steps
21. What challenges do you encounter supporting students with learning disabilities in the French immersion classroom? How do you respond to these challenges? How might the education system further support you to help you meet these challenges?
22. What advice, if any, do you have for beginning teachers committed to supporting students with learning disabilities in French immersion classrooms?