Supporting Students with Exceptionalities in French Immersion Programs in Ontario

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Abstract

French Immersion (FI) education continues to be a popular choice for parents across Canada. However, recently FI programs have come under criticism for not being inclusive to students with exceptionalities. While there has been research around the suitability of FI for students and the factors that attribute to students leaving the program, this qualitative research study serves to investigate the perceptions of teachers who are modifying and accommodating for students with exceptionalities in FI classrooms. The methodology of this study was to conduct semi-structured interviews with two Ontario certified teachers who have worked in FI classrooms for at least five years and have experience supporting students with exceptionalities in the FI context. Through the transcription and coding of the interviews, four themes became apparent and led to important implications for FI programs. First, the participants revealed that despite an increase of students who are considered exceptional and that require additional support in FI programs, there continues to be a trend of students with exceptionalities leaving the program. Next, participants aligned with current research around student suitability in FI, stating that students with exceptionalities are no greater risk for success in learning French. Finally, the participants identified current strategies and resources for students with exceptionalities in FI as well as how lack of availability and access creates a barrier for the design and implementation of an equitable program.

Key Words: special education; French immersion; exceptional students; inclusion
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Chapter One: Introduction

1.0 Research Problem and Context

French Immersion (FI) is continuing to grow as one of the preferred options for public education in Ontario; in the past decade FI programs nationally have increased enrollment by 40% (Alphonso, 2016). These programs are considered an attractive option as they offer the chance for students to be immersed in French, an official language in Canada. There are no prerequisites in Ontario for FI programs so all students are eligible to enroll.

Despite its popularity, many students are starting but not completing the program, some leaving after one or two years, some even later. One of the concerns is that many the students who do not remain with the program are students with learning and/or behaviour exceptionalities, or students who are considered “at risk” of being unsuccessful in the program. This process of streaming is supporting FI’s image as a program for the academically elite. Wise (2012), Hutchins (2015), Wente (2013), Cobb (2015), Gardner (2008) and Genesee (2007) agree that FI programs have recently taken on a negative image, one of exclusion and elitism. Hutchins agrees with Wise saying: “If we are going to offer this program [FI], how can we justify it if we don’t give kids – from whatever background – the tools that they need?” (2015). Wise’s statement presents a troubling issue, especially in the wake of the new inclusivity practices across the province.

Despite numerous special education initiatives in Ontario, (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2007, 2011, 2015), there continues to be a perception that students with exceptionalities will not be successful in FI. As our society moves to be one that is more accepting, I want to explore whether students with exceptionalities have the same level of access to FI as students who are deemed to be at the provincial standard. I want to explore how FI programs in Ontario currently support students with exceptionalities and how these students benefit from FI programs. The goal of the present study is to look at teachers’ perspectives of inclusivity in current FI programs and determine FI’s strengths and weaknesses in regards to supporting students with exceptionalities.

1.1 Purpose of Study

The purpose of this study is to explore the perceptions of FI teachers working with students who have exceptionalities in Ontario. It has been my experience that students with
exceptionalities are underrepresented in FI programs. With this research, teachers and administrators can gain a better understanding of strategies and resources needed to support an equitable and accessible program for all learners as well as investigate the research surrounding the suitability of FI for students with exceptionalities. The present study offers data which presents an opportunity to develop new policies and practices to support all students within FI programs.

1.2 Research Questions
The main research question that guides the present study is:

What are FI Teachers’ attitudes and practices towards accommodating and modifying for students with exceptionalities?

The sub-questions that will be considered are:

1. What current policies and procedures are in place to ensure support for FI students with exceptionalities?
2. What are teachers’ perceptions of the relationship between students with exceptionalities and attrition in FI?
3. What resources do FI teachers need to support students with exceptionalities?
4. What experiences are present and what strategies are used in FI classrooms?

1.3 Introduction to Methods
The methodology in this study follows a qualitative research approach, using the instrument of semi-structured interviews with two FI teachers in Ontario. These interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed with the participants’ consent. During the data analysis, these interviews were subject to coding, with the goal of identifying common themes amongst the responses. Both the methodology and these findings are described in detail, in chapters three and four.

1.4 Background of the Researcher and Positionality
Both my experience developing my second language skills and my experience as a primary-junior teacher candidate have offered me invaluable insights into why this area of research is important. As a graduate of both a FI program and an Honours Bachelor of Arts specializing in French Studies, I am passionate about bilingualism in Canada and an advocate for
the positive outcomes of FI programs across Canada. It was in the last year, as I worked as a tutor for a local school board, that I noticed that there was a lack of support and resources available to students with exceptionalities within FI programs. Currently, this issue is being discussed by many in the media (Hutchins, 2015; Wente, 2013; Wise, 2012; Gardner, 2008). Aaron Hutchins (2015) claims that FI programs have turned into “elitist, divisive and a deeply troubled system” (n.p). Upon reflection, I realized that in my experience as an FI student, I remember only one student with an exceptionality that remained in the program. He was not diagnosed as being on the autism spectrum until his behaviour became problematic in grade four. After that, he had some support but did not continue with the program after grade eight.

Throughout my undergraduate degree, I worked at camps supporting children with exceptionalities. I feel passionate about inclusivity in all areas, especially in education. Additionally, as a bilingual young adult, I value the second language instruction I was given early in my life. I had an extremely positive and successful experience in my local FI program, and it was a shock to learn of a trend of exclusivity and lack of special education resources in FI. For me, bilingualism is an important part of our identity as Canadians as it promotes cultural unity and equity. It is also evident that bilingualism is an asset in future employment, especially in the both the public sector as well as in Canadian and global commerce. Bilingualism can be achieved through multiple venues and FI is an excellent method. Consequently, I believe that students have the right to access education in either official language, regardless of their exceptionalities. Although I had a positive experience in a FI program, I remain open to the different sides of the issue surrounding it. I acknowledge that many students were not as successful; with a review of the literature and conducting this study, I hope to investigate ways to better support students with exceptionalities in FI programs.

1.5 Overview of the Study

Chapter One introduces the research problem, the research questions and purpose, my background in the subject, as well as why I chose to pursue this topic. Chapter Two will contain an in-depth review of the current literature and how this supports my topic. Chapter Three contains the methodology and procedure that was used in this study including information about the participants and data collection. In Chapter Four, I will present the findings collected from the interview of two FI teachers and any patterns. Lastly, Chapter Five discusses my findings and
how this affects my role as teacher and researcher. Consent forms and interview questions will be included in the appendices.
Chapter Two: Literature Review

2.0 Introduction to the Current Literature

The FI program started in 1965 in Lambert, Quebec as a way for children to become proficient in both official languages (Campbell, 2014). Over the past four decades, FI programs have become a publicly funded program for non-French speakers in every province and territory except Nunavut (Council of Ministers of Education, 2008). Although a large boom in popularity occurred in the 70’s and 80’s, FI continues to grow rapidly (Alphonso, 2016); in 2011, there were over 341,000 Canadian children enrolled in FI, which is a 28% increase from 1993 (Lepage & Corbeil, 2013). There are three main types: Early FI, which starts in SK or Grade 1; Late Immersion, which usually starts in Grade 4 or 5; and lastly, Extended Immersion which starts in Grade 7. The difference between FI and other French as a second language (FSL) programs in Ontario is that at least fifty percent of the course load is taught in French (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2013b). Since its conception, there has been literature outlining the benefits of FI (Alphonso, 2016; Stuart, 2013; Marain & Shock, 2012; Genesee, 2001;), the suitability of FI for students with exceptionalities (Genesee, 2007; Mannavarayan, 2002; Cummins, 2000; Burns and Olson, 1981), and studies investigating the attrition of students in FI programs (Bruck, 1978a; 1978b; Noel, 2003; Stern, 1991; Mady & Arnett, 2009). However, until recently, only a few have looked at the inclusion of students with exceptionalities in FI programs exclusively (Arnett & Mady, 2010; Wise, 2012; Cobb, 2014; Joy & Murphy, 2012). The latter studies only begin to explore the surface of this complex topic involving diverse issues. Moreover, to ensure equitable access to all students, researchers need to observe classroom dynamics, interview teachers, and involve students and parents both in and out of FI programs. The present study serves to explore the perspectives of FI teachers with exceptional students, as they are FI’s frontline. This chapter delves into the literature surrounding FI programs; specifically discussing, the benefits of FI and the parental appeal, criticisms of the program and suitability of students with exceptionalities for FI programs. Additionally, research that identifies barriers to equitable access for FI students with exceptionally will be explored. Specifically regarding available funding and resources. Finally, studies that involved interviewing FI teachers for their perceptions of FI programs will be discussed.
2.1 Benefits of French Immersion

Nationally, FI programs continue to grow annually (CPF, 2012) as more and more parents choose to send their children to FI. Some school boards have moved to a lottery system as they struggle to meet the demand of enrollment with qualified FI teachers (Alphonso, 2016). Why are parents choosing to send their kids to FI? According to Genessee, “there is no downside to being in FI: even if kids struggle or are not intellectually gifted, they do just as well as the same types of kids in an English-only program” (Stuart, 2013). This supports the idea that FI is suitable for all students, even those with exceptionalities. Mannavarayan (2002) agrees; she concludes that “learning a second language (L2) through FI takes place without desirable consequences to the cognitive and academic development of students” (p. 26). Overall, there are many reasons why parents decide to place their children in FI including the cognitive and academic benefits of learning a second language; however, the social benefits like bilingual status, opportunity for enrichment, and higher rate of employment are cited more often as reasons for enrollment (Alphonso, 2016; Genessee, 2007; Mannavaryan, 2002; Burns and Olson, 1981). Parents who enroll their children in FI have the expectation of bilingualism, increased job opportunities and academic advantages.

2.1.1 Benefits of second language learning.

The benefits of second language (L2) learning is a highly researched field that does not exclusively focus on FI; however, many researchers have explored bilingualism within the FI context in Canada (Mannavaryan, 2002; Genessee, 2001; Cummins, 2014; Cummins, 2000; Cummins, 1987). Bilingualism in general is increasingly more likely in adults, as Canada continues to grow into a multicultural society. Marain & Shock (2012) agree that bilingualism has positive effects throughout one’s whole life. For example, studies show that “bilingual children as young as seven months can better adjust to environmental changes, while bilingual seniors can experience less cognitive decline (para.1). Cummins (1987) found that bilingual children have neurological, cognitive and academic superiority; specifically, he notes there is an increased cognitive flexibility. What does this mean for FI students? Essentially, FI students can apply skills they developed in French to the writing and comprehension of English. FI students can therefore catch up rapidly to their English peers and even surpass peers who are in the English-only program (Genessee, 2007; Stern, 1991; Barik & Swain, 1978). These benefits are attractive to parents of all groups. In fact, a developing trend is that even families who are new to
Canada and who may or may not speak English at home are choosing to enroll their children in FI (Campbell, 2014). In addition to the cognitive benefits of bilingualism, there are also many social benefits for families who choose for their children to pursue FI.

2.1.2 Social benefits.

When considering social benefits of FI, one of the most prominent is the benefit for employability of bilingual individuals. Burns and Olson attributed the increase of enrollment in FI to the goal of achieving higher socio-economic status and found that many of the FI graduates they interviewed were in FI to get a better job (1981). In addition to increasing the future socio-economic status of the child, parents also benefit from a social advantage: “For many parents, FI is seen as a way to get their child into what they consider to be a better school” (Ripton, 2013, para 6). This better school is partially because many groups are excluded or decide not to enroll their children. These groups include students from lower-economic households and students with exceptionalities. A Toronto District School Board (TDSB) study found that the proportion of students identified as having special education needs was less than the TDSB general program, where only 3.5% of students in FI have a special education need versus 14.2% of students in the general English program (2009, p. 20). Trites and Moretti (1986) also concluded that children who were successful and remained in FI programs were from higher socio-economic backgrounds and had parents who read to them (p. 163). According to Canadian Parents for French (CPF), there are many benefits to FI programs—namely, that it is an easy and efficient way to learn French. Furthermore, FI fosters excellent students who are excellent communicators who will go onto get better jobs (*Benefits of the FI Program*). The social benefits associated with FI are often challenged in the media, with FI being considered “elitist”. (Alphonso, 2016; Stuart, 2013; Hutchins, 2015; Wente, 2013; Cobb, 2015; Gardner, 2008; Genesee, 2007). The argument that bilingual children attain an academic superiority and often meet or surpass their peers in English-only programs (Stern, 1991, Genesee, 2007) is challenged by some who feel that this was because of streaming (Keep, 2007; Genesee, 2007; Cummins, 2000). Keep (2007) clarifies that students in FI are higher achieving because students with exceptionalities are most likely filtered out.
2.2 Criticism: Who is Being Left out of FI?

The critique that immersion is elitist brings the issue of access to FI to the forefront. Gardner criticizes that FI is the ideal classroom as it admits only the “bright, well-behaved, hard-working kids from prosperous homes (2008, para 2). Since 2008, FI programs in several jurisdictions were in the spotlight with legal actions for perceived discrimination against certain learner populations (Arnett & Mady, 2010; Law Society of New Brunswick v. Ryan, 2003; Rushowy, 2003). However, Willms (2008) claims that segregation in FI is not limited to students with exceptionalities. He also noticed segregation by gender and segregation along social class lines. Statistics Canada agrees and published a data set that found that girls account for three out of five students in FI programs in all provinces except for Quebec (2008, sec.3) and that students in FI programs tend to come from better-off families than non-immersion students (2008, sec. 5). It is unfortunate that this has not changed with the progression of FI programs over the past 30 years. Trites and Moretti (1986) concluded in an earlier study that children who were successful and remained in FI programs were from higher socio-economic backgrounds (p. 163). One consequence of the segregation of social economics status is that it fuels the notion that FI is in fact the “poor man’s private school” (Gardner, 2008). This notion of the poor man’s private school supports the idea that FI is perceived to be an enrichment program for FSL study (Mady & Arnett, 2009; Wise, 2012). The result is that many students with exceptionalities are discouraged from enrolling initially or are being filtered from pursuing a FI program.

2.3 FI Students with Exceptionalities

There is currently a broader philosophical movement to ensure the “inclusion” of all students with special education needs in the classroom (Hutchinson, 2016). Arnett and Mady claim that this has not been sufficient to stave off noticeable current concerns about FI’s appropriateness for students with special education needs (Willms, 2008; Rushowy, 2009; and Gardner, 2008). One concern is that, despite the push for equitable access, FI is not considered a constitutionally protected right (Government of Canada, 1982). Jordan, Lindsay & Stanovich (1997) claim that this problem is not exclusive to FI, as special education in Canada has been structure on a deficit model where students with exceptionalities are assessed based on their deficiencies instead of their capabilities. Wise argues that there are no prerequisites for a FI program; therefore, all students should be able to access FI. Unfortunately, this is not the case. Willms (2008) argued that, if students with special needs were equally distributed among all
classrooms, each teacher would have on average 3.4 students with special needs. However, currently there is a gap between immersion programs and core programs where the average of students with exceptionalities is 5.7 (p. 91).

2.3.1 Suitability.

The suitability of FI is a widely researched topic that began within the first decade of the program and continues to be investigated. Primarily, suitability is broken down into a few key areas. Firstly, research is concerned with the need to test students for suitability (Trites & Moretti, 1986; Wiss, 1989; Stern, 1991). Stern (1991) recommends that parents be aware of all risks and benefits in order to make an informed decision about FI (p. 32). Currently, there are no provincial screening procedures which means no child is ineligible for FI (Wise 2012, p. 182). Canadian Parents for French (2012), a non-for-profit that promotes French language learning in Canada, agrees that FI should be available for all; however, some children may be better suited than others. Currently, there continues to be controversy surrounding the suitability of FI for students with exceptionalities and whether tests can determine this suitability. Additionally, students who are suitable for the program still decide to transfer out and those who are deemed unsuitable register and remain in the program. This phenomenon of transferring or switching is called attrition and is another highly debated topic among researchers (Stern, 1991; Genesee, 2007; Mannavaryan, 2002).

Second, many researchers have explored the suitability of FI for students with exceptionalities explicitly (Arnett, 2016; Kruk & Reynolds, 2012; Arnett & Mady, 2010; Mady & Arnett, 2009; Genesee, 2007; Sauvé, 2007). An excellent overview of the arguments for suitability was recently compiled by the Ontario Ministry of Education in the document, *Including Students with special education needs in FSL* (2015). Additionally, researchers in the field are starting to provide a thorough review of the research surrounding FI suitability and the consensus is that students with exceptionalities are suitable for FI and benefit from the opportunity to develop unique skills (see Mady, Muhling & Rose, 2014; Genesee, 2007; and Mannavaryan, 2002). For example, Kruk and Reynolds (2012) found that as they compared the reading abilities of FI students (both average and at-risk groups) and English students (both average and at-risk groups), they determined that at-risk readers benefited from the participation in FI programs. They claimed the at-risk group in FI had increased flexibility in the use of comprehension strategies and phonological awareness. This aligns with Genesee (2007, p. 669)
who concluded: (1) that students from low socio-economic backgrounds and/or who have lower academic ability or students who are at-risk, perform just as well as their peers in the English-only program and (2) that students who are at risk for language impairment or who are at-risk readers are “at no greater risk than their peers.” In this case, Genesee stipulates that the language impairment is the same even if learning two languages. This supports current claim that FI is, in fact, suitable for all (Wise, 2012; Mady & Arnett, 2010; Mady & Arnett, 2009; Stern, 1991; Cummins, 2000). If students with exceptionalities are likely to experience similar challenges in both languages, there is not a strong reason to transfer them out. Additionally, students who receive the necessary support in FSL gain access to the advantages of bilingual Canadians (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2015). Arnett (2013) adds these benefits include social advantages like increased motivation, self-esteem, and confidence. With this extended research on suitability, both the Ontario Ministry of Education and non-for-profit groups like Canadian Parents for French are calling for policies and practices to support an inclusive FSL program.

2.3.2 Current policies.

Ontario, like other provinces, is moving forward with the implementation of inclusive policies and practices. With the new inclusive policies, we should be seeing more students with exceptionalities in FI classrooms; but unfortunately, that is not the case (Wise, 2012). This issue is not only about streaming or filtering of students with exceptionalities out of FI, but also because parents are not aware of the supports available for their children (Cummins, 2000; Genesee, 2007; Stern, 1991). In response to this need, the Ontario Ministry of Education (2015) document was created with the goal of informing stakeholders of the research and policies surrounding the inclusion of students with exceptionalities in FSL as well as the strategies for supporting students with diverse learning needs. Previously, students with exceptionalities had the possibility of exemption from the elementary core program (PPM No.58, 2004). This is concerning as it ultimately discouraged students with exceptionalities from attempting to be successful in any FSL program including FI. In 2014, there was a new FSL curriculum released had a different point of view: “to be effective, instruction must be based on the belief that all students can be successful and that learning French is important and valuable for all students” (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2013, p. 35). Arnett (2013, para. 3) agrees: “I believe the exemptions are problematic because they perpetuate the idea that FSL study is not for all, and particularly that exceptionalities and FSL cannot coexist”. Policies are instrumental in assuring
success in any movement, however the challenge remains putting policies into practice to eliminate barriers.

2.4 Barriers to Equitable Access

Despite the research that supports students with exceptionalities as well as the policies in place to ensure inclusion, there are many barriers to access for students with exceptionalities. These include access to funding that provides supports like additional resources and staff, negative attitudes towards the suitability of FI, and teaching methodologies and pedagogies that do not support diverse learner needs. Finally, one last barrier is that the decisions regarding the continuation of studies in FI for students who are struggling are not being informed by research on students’ potential for success but rather by individual principals’ beliefs (Mady & Arnett, 2009).

2.4.1 Funding and resources.

Funding is an issue that is contested in regards to any educational program. In FSL, and specifically special education in FI, Nancy Wise (2012) clearly puts the blame on the various stakeholders, agreeing that it is the “poor man’s private school” in the sense that parents and teachers benefit from “academic elite classes without challenging students” (p.183, also in Alphonso, 2016 and Garner, 2008). Currently there is no policy requiring school boards to report on FSL funding (Wise, 2012, p. 186) and the Special Education per pupil amount (SEPPA) is based on the total number of students enrolled in a board, rather than based on individual schools’ students with exceptionalities (p. 187). This addresses the myth that the current funding model does not allow for special education options in FI. Both Harding (2012) and Mady & Arnett (2009) have followed cases where students were told that the support they needed was not available in FI. Harding found that in general, “little support is available in school and at home. Parents are often left to find remediation and support on their own. The result is that it may be easier to leave FI than challenge the system” (CPF Executive Summary, p. 10). As mentioned, per Wise, the issue is not the availability of funding, in fact she argues that the inclusion of students with exceptionalities will increase funding within the school board (2012, p. 186). The challenge is utilizing these funds to provide supports for students with exceptionalities.
2.4.2 Negative attitudes towards FI programs.

As noted previously, there are many criticisms of FI programs. These negative attitudes come from many different places for a variety of reasons. Noel (2004) considered the decision-making process of parents with children experiencing learning difficulties in FI programs and specified four factors of decision making when considering whether to continue in the FI program. She concluded that the choice of program, academic concerns, parent comfort and child comfort are all considered when enrolling a child as well as when considering the transfer of a struggling student to an English program (p. 92). It is important to note that these levels of comfort can be influenced by the information available to parents. For example, Arnett states the exemption policy and the attitudes around exemption within FSL help to create an attitude that is counterproductive to retaining students (2013). Furthermore, as Noel mentions, parent comfort level is a large part of the decision-making process for remaining within the program and Arnett is concerned that many students who were exempted will become skeptical about FSL for their own children. It is essential that research concerning the suitability, the supports and the policies be accessible to parents. Consequently, even when a parent’s comfort level is high, a student with an exceptionality may still be excluded from FI.

Mady and Arnett (2009) presented a case study of a parent whose child was struggling in FI. The mother, who was herself a teacher, was an advocate of French and wanted her son to continue in FI even after it was discovered that her son had dyslexia. The challenge, however, was that even after the diagnosis, which she pursued privately, her son did not receive the support he needed to be successful. Mady and Arnett report that the mother wrote in her journal:

We continued to advocate for his inclusion in FI and asked for Bob to receive support from the teacher of special education. The principal denied the support explaining that support was not provided to students in the immersion stream. She continued to explain that immersion was considered an enrichment program where such support was deemed unnecessary. (p. 41)

This instance illustrates the attitude that FI is for the academically elite student who wants further enrichment (Hutchins, 2015; Wente, 2013; Cobb, 2015; Wise, 2012; Gardner, 2008; Genesee, 2007).
2.5 Teachers’ Perceptions of FI Students with Exceptionalities

In addition to the barriers above, it is important that teachers’ perspectives be considered. Teachers can be a barrier to inclusive programming, although they can also be a great support (Mady, 2012). Jordan, Lindsay, and Stanovich (1997) found that teachers hold less than positive views of students with special education needs; for example, they interacted with them in a less academic way. Arnett (2013) concedes that exemption or even transfer are “a necessary evil” because of the limitations within the FI system as well as the lack of effort made when some teachers or principals doubt a student with exceptionalities’ ability for success (2013, para 8-9). In Lapkin, McFarlane and Vandergrift’s (2006) study they looked at second language (FSL) teachers’ perceptions of FSL resources, support from administration, manageability of teaching and professional development. Interestingly, the authors found that most teacher respondents felt that funding, consultants and resources for students with exceptionalities was limited. Moreover, it was highlighted that only 33.9% of Early FI (EFI) teachers found the proportion of students with special needs to be manageable, although it should be noted that FI teachers found the proportion more manageable than Core French teachers, at 21.5% (Lapkin, McFarlane and Vandergrift, 2006, p. 23). They attributed this to the fact that many students with exceptionalities remain in the English program, thus receiving only core French instruction. Willms (2008) agrees and supports universal FSL instruction as it would equally distribute students with exceptionalities and provide more access. Lastly, the report concluded that the greatest challenges for EFI teachers are the lack of appropriate educational resources for immersion, lack of in-school support, and class diversity.

2.6 Conclusion

In conclusion, it is important to note that the research surrounding FI is a field that is continuing to grow. Unfortunately, FI programs are at a crossroads in regards to the state of inclusion within its programs: “the relationship between FSL and special education is at a crossroads, and as the institutions responsible for preparing the next generation of FSL educators, FSL teacher education programs become instrumental in facilitating a meaningful reconciliation between the two areas” (Arnett & Mady, 2010, p. 21). This preparation for the future generation of teachers is an area where further research is needed. In addition to more studies on teacher perceptions, it is essential that we look at teacher preparation courses, particularly with the new standards of the two-year program in Ontario. This study interviewed
two FI teachers in Ontario with the goal of getting insight on their strategies and practices working with students who have exceptionalities. This small study hopefully offers a starting point for research into the challenges that face FI teachers in Ontario as well as the attitudes surrounding the program. Mady & Arnett note that the survival of FI depends on its ability to show how it can be inclusive of a wide range of learner needs; a language program cannot continue to thrive if it does not challenge itself to do better (2009, p. 47).
Chapter Three: Research Methodology

3.0 Introduction to the Methodology

In this chapter the methodology of the present study is discussed. Specifically, the qualitative research approach, procedures and data collection instruments will be presented with an elaboration of the participant recruitment, sampling criteria and participant backgrounds. In addition, the ethical considerations and methodological limitations of this study will be outlined while also speaking to the strengths. Lastly, the chapter will conclude with a summary of key methodological decisions and the rationale for these decisions.

3.1 Research Approach and Procedures

This study was conducted using a qualitative research approach that includes a review of existing literature pertinent to the research questions and semi-structured, face-to-face interviews with two teachers. Qualitative research is a very popular method of research in the field of education (Bogdan & Bilken, 2007; Cooley, 2013; Masaryk & Sokolova, 2012). This method stems from early sociological and anthropological roots and grew to incorporate the field of education, as researchers looked at how young children become adults. Masaryk and Sokolova (2012) highlighted a limitation that politicians and policy makers often rely on statistical data or quantitative research to guide and inform their decisions on policies in areas of social welfare like, corrections, health and education. Per Cooley, qualitative research is the most inclusive way to understand “the complexities of education and the process of schooling” (p. 248).

Qualitative research is defined by many researchers (Creswell, 2013; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Schram, 2006), but the present study aligns most with Denzin & Lincoln’s definition, specifically that “qualitative research is situated activity that locates the observer in the world. Qualitative research consists of a set of interpretive, material practices that make the world visible. These practices transform the world” (p. 3). As a researcher, particularly in education, the concept of material practices is essential since for theory to transform the world it needs to be put into practice. Creswell’s definition is similar and he clarifies that “qualitative research begins with assumptions and the use of interpretive/theoretical frameworks that inform the study of research problems addressing the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem” (p. 44). Both definitions were considered in the design of this study.
The present study uses a qualitative approach over a quantitative approach because it is useful to have research that has a focus on the process of the research as well as an interpretive lens (Creswell, 2013). Along with Creswell, the present study operates on the belief that the meaning brought by individuals or groups is essential to understanding phenomena. Therefore, to ensure valid research, the study attempted to ensure accuracy and authenticity. Unlike qualitative research, quantitative studies are limited. When one simply compares numbers, the data is interpreted by the researcher without access to context, intention or experiences. Additionally, the process of quantitative research can be quite artificial as it can be conducted through surveys and statistics. However, when a qualitative research approach is used, the participants’ meaning is considered by the researcher and is used to create an accurate depiction of the issues or concerns of a certain group or individual. Creswell says that qualitative research should be used when areas need to be explored and we [the researcher] want to empower the silent voices. Interviews give the option to allow participants to be heard. In choosing semi-structured interviews as the main instrument, participants’ meanings are addressed; and by coding and analyzing those interviews, the researcher is practicing reflexivity as they consider their relevant experiences in regards to FI immersion programs in Ontario.

3.2 Instruments of Data Collection

As a teacher candidate in the Master of Teaching program, this paper is a graduate research project and has a set of strict parameters. These parameters include details about data collection; specifically, that the only instrument of data collection approved through the ethical review process is a semi-structured interview. Despite the imposed parameters, the semi-structured interview is an excellent method for an investigation into perceptions of inclusivity with FI programs in Ontario. It ensures that the insights of teachers are given and they are integral to this study. Teachers are the front line for any practice in education, so they should be the first ones interviewed when the goal is to gain insight into the policies and practices in education.

The semi-structured interview is similar to a structured interview, with the added advantage that the interviewer may ask questions beyond those on a pre-established list. According to Fontana & Frey (2000), in a structured interview the interviewer asks the same questions to all interviewees and there is a limited set of response categories or codes. Semi-structured interviews have more flexibility and is appropriate in this scenario because we are
looking to uncover teachers’ perceptions and experiences. These cannot be pre-established in a list; they need to be brought out as the interview reaches a fine balance between formal and informal. It also allows the researcher a little bit of wiggle room to discuss an area in more depth if they find that the participant’s response might contain important insights when unpacked in greater detail.

3.3 Participants

The participants chosen for this study were two teachers from a southwestern school board, who worked in different and distinct communities. The participants, Katie and Bonnie (both pseudonyms) were at different points in their careers but offered valuable insights about supporting students with exceptionalities in FI. Each participant had a unique experience that helped the present study explore how students with exceptionalities are being supported in FI programs.

3.3.1 Sampling criterion.

The sampling criteria was very simple, with the goal of pooling a variety of participants who could provide multiple perspectives. The first criterion was in regards to years of teaching experience. The preferred participant, was one who had at least five years’ experience teaching FI in Ontario. Although it would have been preferable to have participants with over 10 years’ experience teaching FI in Ontario. Even though this limited the pool of available participants, two participants were found with varying years of experience. The insight from these the two teachers provided a variety of different experiences with multiple examples where they supported students with exceptionalities. Second, the researcher attempted to get teachers who have taught a variety of grades within a FI program. Once again, this limits available participants, but provides insights about the variety of strategies used in the various grades. Consequently, this information was imperative as it spoke to teachers’ perspective of the diversity of needs within the FI program, specifically the difference and similarities in the strategies that teachers were using in both the primary and junior divisions. Finally, the study called for interview participants who had experience creating Individual Education Plans (IEP) for students in an FI program. This was paramount because one distinct area that the study sought to uncover was the practices and procedures of special education support in FI. Through
this criterion, the study could access the knowledge and perspectives of teachers who were aware of the procedures and policies in regards to accommodating and modifying for students.

3.3.2 Participant recruitment.

To recruit participants, this study relied on convenience sampling. As the researcher, I called upon my existing network of teacher colleagues and mentor teachers, as well as their acquaintances. However, since I had the experience of working in various roles within multiple school boards in addition to practicum experiences, I secured the participants through direct contact.

3.3.3 Participant biographies.

This study was fortunate enough to have two experienced teachers as participants, Bonnie and Katie. Bonnie, a recently retired teacher and principal, offered a lot of insight into both the classroom experience as well as the perspective of an administrator. Bonnie, a former child and youth worker has taught for over 30 years in both the local English program and the FI program. She finished the last few years of her career as a vice principal and principal, and is now retired. Bonnie’s experiences drew from both her time as a classroom teacher and as an administrator which helped to broaden the perspective of supporting students in FI. The second participant, Katie, a primary teacher at a FI school in a small community, has been a classroom teacher for over eight years and offered valuable insight into the grade one FI program, where many children are entering the program for the first time. She began her career in the intermediate stream of core French but she has been in primary FI for over eight years. Her insight into the challenges faced by students and parents surrounding suitability were extremely valuable.

3.4 Data Analysis

The data analysis procedure began with transcribing the interviews and verifying the information with the participants to ensure accuracy in terms of context and conveyed meaning. Using the advice of Ryan & Bernard (2005) and Creswell (2013), each transcript was coded individually to identify different categories of data and themes. Coding, per Creswell, involves combining the text or data into small categories of information, seeking evidence for the code and then assigning it a label. Ryan and Bernard agree; however, they simplify the process into four simple steps: (1) discovering themes and subthemes, (2) narrowing these themes down to a few, (3) building hierarchies of themes and (4) linking these themes to theoretical models (p. 85).
Ryan and Bernard also identified that, when coding, the researcher needs to consider how the study will benefit from the established themes, specifically how it is perceived by any reader. This can be achieved by using “explicit and jargon-free vocabulary” to communicate with multiple disciplines (p. 86). Czarniawaska (2004) highlights that a researcher should acknowledge the silences as well as disruptions and contradictions, focus on the peculiar, and interpret metaphors. These are important to the understanding of the data and creating categories. The next step in the data analysis involved the researcher reading each category with the goal of highlighting patterns and themes within the data. Lastly, the findings were compared with the existing literature with the goal of either confirming current research or identifying further needs. These findings and needs will be addressed in the fourth chapter.

3.5 Ethical Review Procedures

There were several ethical considerations considered for this study. First and foremost, this study is written as a partial requirement for the Master of Teaching program at the Ontario Institute of Studies in Education (OISE) and is subject to a blanket ethics review for all students’ research studies in the program. There are no known risks to participation in this study; however, participants were made aware that they could choose not to answer any question that made them feel uncomfortable. To protect confidentiality, all participants were assigned a pseudonym and any identifiable markers relating to specific school boards or schools was excluded. Furthermore, all participants were aware that they have the right to withdraw from the study at any point. This was included in the letter of consent, found in appendix A. The consent letter provided an overview of the study, the ethical considerations and specified the participation expectations of one 45-60 minute, semi-structured interview. It also detailed the method of collection of data and that their interview would be recorded via audio recording and transcribed. Participants could ask to see the questions ahead of time but were also aware that some questions would be asked ad hoc. All data (audio recordings) was stored as a password protected file on the researcher’s personal laptop and will be destroyed after five years. Lastly, to ensure that the participants felt protected and to ensure accuracy, the participants had the opportunity to review their transcripts and clarify or retract any answer. The above standards are all preventative and were put in place at the beginning of the study; however, as Creswell (2013) identifies, there are ethical issues that can arise in all steps of the research process. Interestingly, he comments on the potential issues that can arise during the interviewing process, not just the data analysis. These include making
sure that participants are aware of both the nature of the research and the nature of the inquiry, which helps to avoid potential power imbalances. Specifically, he suggests “building trust and avoiding leading questions” (2013, p. 60). Creswell’s ideas align with Heron & Reason’s (2001) views on co-operative inquiry, working with people rather than doing research on people. The aim throughout this study was to get teacher’s voices heard without making any participant feel uncomfortable during the process. To build trust, participants could choose where they were interviewed in addition to protecting their identity. The result of these measures is that the participants shared open and honest responses to the questions. In turn, their responses worked to validate the findings in the current study.

3.6 Methodological Limitations and Strengths

One of the main limitations to this study was that the only method of data collection was semi-structured interviews of teachers or educators. Additionally, due to time constraints, only two teachers were interviewed. This limited the scope of the present study. The findings these teachers present can inform the topic, however, they cannot generalize the experiences of teachers in a broad sense. Whereas, the perspectives of dozens of teachers would make a compelling study and it would be interesting to see if the data from this study would be validated. This limited scope extends to the types of participants as well. While teachers are the primary source, the perspectives of parents and students would be intriguing as they are important stakeholders in FI programs. Students hold a lot of insight into what kinds of support they need as well as their perspective of the inclusion of students with exceptionalities throughout their FI schooling experience. Additionally, parents can offer insight into their own child’s experiences as well as their support or criticisms for the program.

The second limitation is the nature of interviews, themselves. According to Fontana & Frey (2000), “the spoken word or written word has always a residue of ambiguity, no matter how carefully we word the questions and how carefully we report or code the answers” (p. 645). As a researcher, one often has a predetermined expectation of what the interviewee is going to say, with hopes that their answer supports their research. This could result in misinterpretation of the data or an inclusion of biased information. In order attempt to surmount this limitation, the wording of the interview questions was carefully considered to get deep, meaningful responses as well as attempting to leave the question open. The goal was to ensure that the participant was not led by any researcher bias or preconceived expectations.
Lastly, the limitations of the chosen method of data collection was considered. Often in qualitative research, multiple methods are used, as Creswell (2013) suggests, so that researchers can ensure that the data is rigorously collected, which can increase authenticity. Specifically, the inclusion of observations of FI classrooms would be an excellent way to complement the data brought forth in the interviews. It would allow the researcher to gain firsthand knowledge of some of the resources and strategies in place to help support students with exceptionalities. It would also allow the researcher to observe how students with exceptionalities fit in the FI environment in terms of academics, development and social relationships.

Despite the above limitations, semi-structured interviews were still an excellent choice for data collection. The significance of interviewing teachers is that they are the front line, with the most interaction with students. Like in business, it is challenging to work only from a Top-down approach, where all decisions are made by upper management or authority and passed down the chain of command (Filev, 2008). By interviewing teachers, all stakeholders can start to collaborate with each other to make any necessary changes at all levels. Policy makers can gain access to the daily, ‘on the ground’ issues and gather the insights on how their policies will look in action. This alternative method, the bottom-up approach, supports an environment where everyone participates in decision-making about the strategy and in the selection of the priorities to be pursued in their local area (Filev, 2008). Interviews are a great first step at encouraging a collaborative approach as it gives a voice to the frontline. Since teachers spend the most amount of time with students, their perceptions are invaluable in regards what works and what does not work. These perceptions are the beginning of exploring how best FI teachers support students with exceptionalities.

3.7 Chapter Conclusion

This chapter discussed the methodology, instruments for data collection, sampling processes and data analysis strategy of the present study. It provided support for a qualitative research approach using semi-structured interviews to gain insight into the strategies and practices of FI teachers in accommodating and modifying for students with exceptionalities. In addition, it introduced the participants, FI teachers who come from different backgrounds and with diverse experiences. Next, the chapter acknowledged that although the present study has no known risks, there are still ethical considerations throughout the multiple stages of this research study. These include confidentiality, consent and comfort levels. Finally, the chapter discusses
the strengths and limitations of the chosen methodology. These limitations are not insurmountable and they provide an opportunity for future research of this topic. In the next chapter, there will be an in-depth analysis of the study’s data followed by discussion of the distinct findings of the research, including themes and patterns.
Chapter Four: Research Findings

4.0 Introduction to the Chapter

The purpose of this chapter is to discuss the present study’s findings with the goal of determining how this aids in responding to the research questions. As French Immersion (FI) programs continue to grow in enrollment (Alphonso, 2016), there has been further emphasis on including all students in French as a second language (FSL) learning (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2015). This is especially true in FI program strands, where the current perspective is that the program is exclusive (see Hutchins, 2015; Cobb, 2015; Wente, 2013; Wise, 2012; Gardner, 2008 and Genesee, 2007). The primary objective of the present study is to gain insight into teachers’ experiences and perspectives in supporting students with exceptionalities in their classrooms. Furthermore, there is the hope that that any barriers to equitable access can be limited so that students with exceptionalities can be successful in FI programs. By interviewing two experienced FI teachers, Katie who teaches grade one, and Bonnie, a retired elementary teacher and principal (both pseudonyms) in a semi-structured interview, their experiences and perspectives were brought forward with the hope of gaining a better understanding of the triumphs and challenges in supporting students with exceptionalities in FI classrooms. In the process of analyzing the data provided from transcribed and coded interviews, four important themes became apparent.

These themes, as well as their subthemes, offer insight into how teachers are currently supporting students with exceptionalities in FI. First, it became obvious that the participants’ definition of an exceptionality was an essential first theme as it set a framework for future responses, including observations regarding the types of exceptionalities in their classrooms and a perceived increase in students with exceptionalities in FI. Second, as in the literature, student suitability in FI became an important factor when discussing the support of students with exceptionalities, specifically, what are some characteristics of a student who experiences success or contrarily, who is deemed at-risk. Third, with the goal of answering the research question, a theme regarding strategies for supporting students in FI emerged. Within this theme, the identification of students with exceptionalities, strategies for in the classroom, support from parents and support from outside the classroom are all discussed. The final theme, barriers to supporting students with exceptionalities, includes the participants’ biggest challenges,
programming and managing behaviour, as well as what they would like in terms of resources to ensure they are supporting their students with exceptionalities.

4.1 Students with Exceptionalities in FI

Exceptionalities are becoming more and more prevalent in today’s schools. In Ontario during the 2012-2013 school year, there were on average 8% of students with a special education need in French Immersion programs (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2015, p. 18). To frame the discussion, it is imperative that the participant’s own definition of an exceptionality be explored. When the participants were asked about their personal definition of an exceptionality, each presented a unique answer. Both Bonnie and Katie agreed that any child can have an exceptionality. For Katie, she believes that every child fits this definition: “It’s somebody who you have to change what you have already pre-set in your plans.” For Bonnie, it’s a student that learns differently that is perceived to be expected by the school system. Per the Ontario Education Act, an exceptional student is a “pupil whose behavioural, communication, intellectual, physical or multiple exceptionalities are such that he or she is considered to need placement in a special education program” (1990, Subsection 1(1)). Interestingly, the two participants did not limit their definitions to those who are considered in need of a special education program, but rather that many students learn in different and exceptional ways.

In the current media, FI education is highly debated. One pertinent topic is the perceived notion that FI is an elitist program and is not accessible to all (Wise, 2012; Gardner, 2008). The participants acknowledged that FI programs are often perceived not to have challenging students. When asked if students with exceptionalities typically remain in FI, Bonnie responded,

Honestly, I think that FI tries their best to move them out … Boards tend to see immersion as perfect schools; well, not perfect schools, but the kids have no problems there … That they don’t get bad kids here, they don’t get kids that struggle. But in fact, immersion does, but we don’t always get the support that schools, English school, might get.

This only further aligns with the perception that students in FI do not have challenges and that it is an enrichment program. However, both participants spoke to the trend of promoting inclusivity in FI. Katie commented that she has noticed an increase in IEPs and accommodations over the past few years. Ultimately, both participants noted their experience with the many
exceptionalities that they have seen in their classrooms including students with autism, students with behaviour challenges, and students with learning disabilities, like dysgraphia and dyslexia.

4.2 Student Suitability in FI

As mentioned in the previous review of the literature, the suitability of FI programs for students with exceptionalities has been debated. A theme that became evident was the distinct perceptions of the interviewed teachers regarding characteristics of students who are more likely to be successful or at-risk in FI programs. In Ontario, there is an inclusive mindset that all students can be successful in FI (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2015) and, furthermore, there are no screening procedures which means that no child is ineligible (Wise, 2012). Through interviewing the participants, it became apparent that although this is true, teachers believe that there are certain factors or characteristics that make a FI program challenging. Ultimately, these factors can be overcome provided there is adequate support for the student.

4.2.1 Characteristics of students who are successful.

The participants’ idea of characteristics of students who are successful in FI were very similar with motivation to learn French being valued as the most important. As Katie outlines: “The most important thing is that they want to learn French. They are excited about it. Even if they are struggling with it. Some kids struggle with it, but they really want to learn.” Bonnie agrees that motivation and positive attitude towards French are essential. She also highlights that students who come in with strong language skills are at an advantage; but most importantly, it depends on the student. There are a multitude of factors that can support successful students. In Katie’s experience, she found that students who were quiet and who receive more input, rather than output, are often very successful. She discovered that the kids who are observers as well as kids who take risks can be successful. Another important discussion that evolved from the interviews was regarding temperament. Katie acknowledges that behaviour does not necessarily cause a student to be at-risk: “As far as temperament goes, … there are kids who have behaviour problems who do really well and then there are kids who almost just coast along who don’t do well. It depends on the kid.” Bonnie agrees that kids with behaviour challenges do not necessarily experience difficulties. Furthermore, these behaviours will not improve in an English-only program.
4.2.2 Characteristics of students who are at-risk.

Both participants echoed sentiments that motivation, positive attitude and strong language skills are assets to any student in FI. Consequently, academic ability was not considered to be a definitive characteristic of a student who is at risk. For Bonnie, she felt that it was important to note that the characteristics are different provided whether it is the student’s or the school’s point of view. When asked to clarify, Bonnie responded that from a school’s point of view,

We tend to exclude kids fairly quickly based on like, say, they have a behaviour disorder in immersion. I don’t think that that is the right thing to do… I don’t share these beliefs. But how it happens, currently, for the past twenty years, is that as soon as there is a student that has difficulty with behaviour, difficulty with written language, or shows signs of having a learning disability, like dysgraphia or dyslexia, they are quickly excluded.

In comparison, when asked about the student’s point of view, both Bonnie and Katie agree that French is not always what causes student difficulties. Katie believes that students are at-risk if they have experienced failure or have been told they are not good at something—specifically, if students who have developed a closed mindset. This is significant as it moves beyond the academic and into the social and emotional wellbeing of the learner. Both participants concur that only contending with one language may be easier, but it will not remove the challenge. This converges with Wise (2012), Mady & Arnett (2009, 2010), Genesee (2007), Cummins (2000), Stern (1991), who maintained that if a student with an exceptionality is likely to experience similar challenges in both languages, there is not a strong case to transfer them out of the program. Katie mentions that having a student remain in French can often be a bonus. She expressed her sadness when students leave because they have exceptionalities that the school couldn’t support: “I have been sad to see them leave the program … I can think of one little boy... His brain went far above and beyond mine, but he did not read.” This statement is significant as it shows that, without adequate support, students that teachers believe could be successful are unable to access the FI program.
4.3 Strategies for Supporting Students with Exceptionalities in FI

Currently, equitable education for all is a goal for Ontario schools. This goal is beginning to be attained by the inclusion of students with exceptionalities in all programs. One of the main goals for the present study was to hear teachers’ experiences in regards to the strategies they use to accommodate for and support students with exceptionalities in the FI context. Specifically, the participants discussed the process for identifying students in FI, specific strategies and accommodations that they use in their classrooms and lastly, any support available to students outside of the classroom.

4.3.1 Identification of at-risk students in FI.

In the province of Ontario, the identification of students with exceptionalities is through an Identification, Placement, and Review Committee (IPRC) in accordance with Regulation 181/98. The goal of the committee is to decide whether the student should to be identified and/or if the student will require a different placement (Government of Ontario, 1990); however, it is important to note that there are informal steps that take place before a student is brought to an IPRC. When asked to elaborate on the process for identifying students in their schools, the participants explained that a classroom teacher is responsible for determining if the student needs to be presented to the IPRC. Katie, a grade one teacher, highlighted that at the beginning of a student’s education, there is sometimes hesitation in identifying a student. She revealed that “it’s a lot of just waiting and watching to see how they develop” – specifically, in grade one where some students are adapting to school routines, new social experiences and the French language. Katie notes that if a student is struggling it is hard to tell if it’s the French language or a learning disability. Ultimately, the identification process takes time and it is up to the teacher to discover how best to support students in their classrooms.

4.3.2 Classroom support strategies.

To date, there have been limited studies that explore teachers’ perceptions of students with exceptionalities or that offer practical suggestions for strategies to support students with exceptionalities in an exclusively FI context (Arnett, 2013; Lapkin, McFarlane & Vandergrift, 2006; Jordan, Lindsay & Stanovich, 1997). When the participants were asked about strategies that they use in the classroom, they both presented a holistic approach. For Katie, it’s about changing the program to holistically differentiate for students who need support. She expresses that “what’s needed for one, works for all … So, if I notice one student has a certain need, I try
to incorporate it into my program.” For Bonnie, it depends on the exceptionality and every student is different, but the strategies used are no different than strategies used in an English-only program. Specifically, each participant offered accommodations that were both academic and behavioural. In terms of academic strategies, the participants highlighted the inclusion of hands-on activities, standing desks, pencil grips, scribes, audiobooks and technology into their program. In terms of behaviour, both participants use strategies such as preferential seating, kinesthetic manipulatives, chunking work, smaller tasks, and constant feedback that can be presented to the whole class or tailored for individual needs. These approaches are imperative as strategies for educators who are supporting students with exceptionalities in FI. This aligns with the main purpose of the study, which is to understand the current practices of teachers.

4.3.3 Parent support.

Support outside the classroom can come in a variety of formats, whether it be in school support with other staff, through external agencies or even through parental involvement. In fact, both participants stated that communication with parents is essential in all aspects of supporting students. Katie advocates that it is important to establish a rapport with parents early on, particularly if there is a concern that the child may have an exceptionality, especially in primary grades as it is sometimes the first time a parent will hear that their child is not meeting developmental milestones. In some cases, Katie cautions, gaining information about the student from the family is imperative: “Find out from the family what they experience at home, because once in awhile it’s a kid who doesn’t have an exceptionality; they are just really good at what they are doing.” She explains that occasionally parents can help to curb behaviour challenges before they affect a student’s ability to learn. Bonnie agrees that parents are often eager to help support their students experience success in FI, but she cautions that parents often have preconceived expectations of the program. She advises that, in some communities, parents can be very political and demand accountability. Ultimately, parents need to be aware of their student’s progress and should be included in the plan for supporting a student with exceptionalities.

4.3.4 Additional support available.

Students with exceptionalities, especially those who are formally identified, are entitled to support outside of the classroom. However, in a FI program, this support can be somewhat limited. Both participants spoke about the limited number of educational assistants (EA) as well as the limited support from the learning support teacher (LST). In Katie’s experience, support
outside of the classroom often needs to be advocated by outside parties. She acknowledged that there are EA’s in FI, but that they are often part time and work only with students who have high needs. Bonnie agrees: “Sometimes we get educational assistants, depending on the classification of learning disability. Physical needs come first.” She elaborates that students with language disabilities rarely had any outside help and that the responsibility fell on the teacher. This aligns with Lapkin, McFarlane & Vandergrift’s study, where they found that FI teachers felt a lack of in-school support for students with exceptionalities and that only 33.9% of FI teachers found the proportion of students with exceptionalities to be manageable (2006, p. 23). Moreover, Bonnie spoke from her perspective as an administrator about the lack of support available to the classroom teacher:

    Administration can support them, but that is from afar... We advocate, certainly, for those teachers, to get help for those students... but really it’s the responsibility of the teacher. To support all students no matter what their disposition. It’s a big job.

It was interesting to get an administrator’s perspective as it acknowledges that there is a problem with support in FI. Katie explains that she cannot rely on getting extra support outside the classroom and that the LST is often pulled away to act in a similar capacity to a vice principal to deal with behavioural needs and that the current model bases support on urgency.

4.4 Barriers to Supporting Students with Exceptionalities

The topic of inclusivity and equitable access to education is one that continues to be prevalent. Mady and Arnett brought forth the story of one parent’s perspective dealing with barriers to FI for her son (2009). This parent who’s child was externally diagnosed with dyslexia recounts the struggle of attempting to obtain learning support for her son in an FI program (See chapter two to review). This aligns further with Alphonso (2016), Arnett (2013), Wise (2012), Gardner (2008) and Noel (2004) who all maintain that many students with exceptionalities face barriers to accessing FI programs such as negative attitudes towards the inclusivity of FI programs and lack of funding and resources. Both participants mentioned that the perception of the FI program is that the FI program has very few students who are challenging, especially students with behaviour disorders. This aligns with Gardner’s article (2008) where he criticizes FI programs as having only the “good and smart kids”. Interestingly, this negative perception of the program was not seen as the biggest challenge perceived by the participants in supporting
these students. During the interview, both participants were asked to elaborate on their perceptions of the most significant challenge as well as any proposed solutions and desired resources needed to support their students with exceptionalities.

### 4.4.1 Combining programming and classroom management

One of the benefits of using interviews is that researchers can explore the perspectives of involved parties (Creswell, 2013). In the present study, the participants are teachers who work in the research context, an FI program, and their insight into the biggest challenges in supporting students with exceptionalities in FI is extremely pertinent as they spend the most time with their students. From analyzing the interviews, a few challenges emerged—specifically, combining programming and classroom management. For Katie, the biggest challenge was supporting students while dealing with behaviour challenges. She admits that she had to be very strict with the view that “the classroom has to run like clockwork to get to the rest of them … and sometimes its getting kids who can work independently—to work independently so that you can have that extra time for those who need it.” Bonnie agrees that managing behaviour and programming is challenging for teachers. She elaborates that sometimes behaviour can be disruptive for everyone and this limits the amount of “exciting work” that is available for students. Furthermore, Bonnie mentions that technology and safety are also top concerns for teachers and that they present a challenge for teachers—specifically, that computers are out dated and slow which hinders the learning of the students who need the technology to complete a task. As for safety, students with high behaviour needs, students with medical exceptionalities, and those with physical exceptionalities are all at risk for hurting themselves or others and teachers need to be aware of these students always.

### 4.4.2 Desired resources.

In face of the challenges teachers are experiencing in regards to supporting exceptional students, both participants offered insight into what might mitigate these challenges. Bonnie presented holistic solutions with the view that there are more students with exceptionalities in all programs in Ontario, not just FI. She acknowledges these students with exceptionalities are being included and that it is teachers’ responsibilities to support them: “Those kids are in our system, right and we are the only ones who cannot say no to those kids coming, no matter what.” Therefore, smaller class sizes, more staff availability, and up to date technology were on her wish list for supporting students in all programs, not just within the FI program. Katie had
similar requests, specifically more time and space for students who need support. As mentioned previously, both participants found that there was limited LST and EA support due to a variety of factors and that they would like to see more staff devoted to exceptional students. In conclusion, Bonnie mentions that teaching is “the hardest job in the world … If you do it right, then it’s hard. And the expectations, there is a lot of accountability out there… Know your community.”

4.5 Chapter Conclusion

Throughout this chapter, the participant responses were presented with the goal of establishing how two experienced FI teachers support their students with exceptionalities. To present a full view of the findings, the data from the interviews was organized into themes and to subthemes. The first theme set to establish the participants’ definitions of a student with an exceptionality. This distinction was imperative as it acted as a framework for the other responses. Furthermore, this theme explored the subtheme, participants’ perceptions of the number of students with exceptionalities in FI. This information is imperative as it brings truth to the conflicting reports of a lack of students with exceptionalities in FI. The participants acknowledged that, overall, the FI program is more inclusive and they have experienced an increase in students with IEPs and other needs. However, the participants also maintain that, in many cases, students with exceptionalities do not have access to adequate support and are told that FI is not the best fit for them, which converges with the current literature indicating the lack of support of students with exceptionalities.

The second theme discussed was student suitability of FI. The participants’ perspectives regarding the characteristics of successful and at-risk students was an important factor that the present study aimed to bring forward. The current literature maintains that although students may experience a variety of challenges in an FI program, this should not exclude them from the program. The participants echoed this sentiment stating that a desire to learn French and a positive attitude were essential for any student in FI, characteristics that do not relate to ability. Furthermore, they agreed that transferring a student out of the program does not ensure their success, nor does it mean that the exceptionalities would be better supported in an English program. The data gathered is significant as it converges with Ontario’s inclusive education strategy, particularly providing FSL instruction for all students.

Thirdly, the theme of strategies for supporting students was discussed as the responses given by the participants answered the primary research question. Starting off, the participants
spoke about the process for identifying students with exceptionalities, notably that before a formal identification, the classroom teacher notes observations and consults with parents. The findings were imperative as they allowed for an accurate picture into some of the current practices in FI classrooms, in addition to, parental involvement and support outside of the classroom. Notably, these strategies were employed in a holistic approach that supported all their students regardless of exceptionality.

Finally, the barriers our participants face in supporting their students in an FI context was identified as a theme, including the participants’ biggest challenges as well as their recommendations for resources. Specifically, balancing programming and classroom management provides a challenge for teachers as they attempt to deliver the curriculum in an engaging manner, deal with challenging behaviour, and accommodate fort students. Additionally, in terms of resources, the participants outlined the need for adequate staff, up to date technology and resource spaces for students. This theme was essential because it highlights concerns facing FI programs. It is essential that moving forward, stakeholders in the FI program acknowledge that there are areas for growth, particularly, in eliminating barriers to maintain an inclusive program.

This study’s aim was to identify the current practice of some FI teachers. Through this, it became obvious that although teachers work to include all students in FI, there are still areas for growth and development. With this in mind, the following chapter will discuss the broad and narrow implications of these findings, followed by recommendations for further research.
5.0 Introduction to the Chapter

The present study was designed to investigate the experiences of teachers who support students with exceptionalities in French Immersion programs in Ontario. The findings serve to further support the existing literature pertaining to the suitability of students with exceptionalities in FI programs. This includes criticisms of FI programs, evidence to support suitability, and barriers to equitable access. Furthermore, this study highlights the experiences of teachers who are struggling to support students with exceptionalities in FI. This chapter summarizes the research findings, identifies the present study’s implications for various stakeholders, provides several recommendations, and suggest directions for further research.

5.1 Key Findings and their Significance

Following interviews with two teachers, a rigorous analysis revealed four important themes, (1) students with exceptionalities in FI, (2) student suitability, (3) strategies for supporting students with exceptionalities in FI and (4) barriers to supporting students. The first theme, students with exceptionalities in French immersion, served to establish a basis for discussion. It was essential that the participant’s personal definition of an exceptionality be discussed; both participants agreed that it was possible for any child to have an exceptionality and that these exceptionalities are not limited to specific labels, but rather to any student who needs additional support to meet curriculum expectations. The second part of the discussion was in regards to the students with exceptionalities currently in their programs. Both participants acknowledged that although any student can be successful, many students with exceptionalities are leaving the program, which supports the current notion in the media that FI is an elitist program for intelligent and well-behaved students (Wise, 2012; Gardner, 2008). Both participants commented on an increase in IEPs and accommodations for a variety of exceptionalities including autism, behaviour challenges, and learning disabilities.

The second theme answered the question of the participants’ perceptions of student suitability in FI. Interestingly, when asked about characteristics of students who experienced success and students who were at-risk, the participants acknowledged that the characteristics of a successful students were more often intrinsic and were not linked exclusively to students with exceptionalities. Attitude, motivation and support were listed as prominent characteristics for
success whereas behaviour, temperament and ability were mentioned with less conviction. Both participants’ experiences converged with the existing literature, in that they confirmed that although students may face challenges due to an exceptionality, FI programs are beneficial for many learners. Furthermore, as Genesee (2007; 2001) and Stern (1991) have both argued, transferring out of FI programs can be detrimental for students as they are not likely to experience an increased level of success in an English-only program. The participants echoed this sentiment, speaking about students who they believed would have benefitted from remaining in the FI program; ultimately, benefitting from the opportunity to become bilingual, if they had access to the required support.

The third theme helped to concretely answer the fourth sub-question: “What experiences are present and what strategies are used in FI classrooms? This theme highlighted the identification process for students with exceptionalities, classroom strategies used to support these students, as well as external support from parents and other professionals. The participants mentioned a variety of ways that students were supported, including the differentiated programing, incorporating technology and working with additional staff like educational assistants and learning resource teachers. Additionally, they noted that the process for identifying students with exceptionalities is the same across all programs; however, the access to testing and support is where the participants found a noticeable difference.

The final theme, barriers to supporting students with exceptionalities, underlined the current challenges that teachers face. Specifically, the biggest challenges were classroom management, programming, and access to resources and support. While the previous theme identified various strategies and resources that are being used in the classroom, this theme focused on how the lack of regular and equitable access to additional staff, up-to-date technology and general support are barriers to both students and teachers. Specifically, the participants mentioned that without these resources, creating an inclusive and differentiated program is extremely challenging and the worry is that some students may get left behind.

5.2 Implications

The present study has important implications for educational reform; this study should serve as a reminder to policymakers and curriculum planners that, in order for FI programs to be equitable for all, there needs to be more support in place for students. First, consistent with the conclusions of Genesee (2007) and Wise (2012), the participants highlighted that when it comes
to FI suitability, intrinsic factors like attitude and motivation hold more weight than academic factors. However, both participants agree that these intrinsic factors alone are not enough to guarantee success in FI programs. This leads to the second implication: teachers have found that, despite the increasing number of students with exceptionalities’ in FI programs, there continues to be barriers for both students and teachers including access to additional support and resources, as well as combining classroom management and programming effectively. Finally, it is important to acknowledge that, despite the increased number of students with exceptionalities in FI programs, both participants agreed that students with exceptionalities were more likely to be pushed out of the program. It is imperative that these implications be taken into consideration as they offer novel insight into the accessibility of FI programs in Ontario.

The first implication echoes the existing literature which speaks to the suitability of FI for students with exceptionalities in FI (Wise, 2012; Mady & Arnett, 2010; Mady & Arnett, 2009; Cummins, 2000; Stern, 1991). The conclusion is that FI is, in fact, suitable for all. Moreover, that if students are likely to experience challenges in either French or English, there is not a strong reason to transfer them out. If this myth is not addressed, the program will not be accessible. Both participants echoed this sentiment in that to them, the most important factors attributing to the success of students are intrinsic and that attitude and motivation towards learning French can outweigh academic and cognitive ability. While the Ministry of Education has agreed with the current research, there continues to be a disparity in the number of students with exceptionalities in FI, especially compared to the English program (TDSB, 2009). Moreover, those students who remain in the program continue to struggle as they face barriers to receiving adequate support.

The second implication of the present study, barriers, needs to be acknowledged by both the Ministry of Education and individual Ontario school boards. The current criticism of the FI program including Wise (2012) and Gardner’s (2008) claims that FI is elitist and inaccessible cannot be ignored. Despite this, FI continues to grow nationally, with a 41% increase in 10 years (Alphonso, 2017). The participants in this study maintain that to support their students with exceptionalities and create an inclusive and equitable learning environment, they need access to resources like learning support staff and educational assistants, smaller classroom sizes, and up-to-date technology. As Ontario moves forward with the implementation of inclusive practices and policies, it is important to note that not all programs are receiving the same support. The present study illuminates that access to adequate resources and support can prevent FI from
becoming an equitable and successful program. These resources, in narrow strokes, will help teachers to develop appropriately differentiated programs which will ultimately, increase the success of all students in FI programs.

Finally, it is important that the Ministry of Education and school boards take notice that to be an equitable and accessible program, students and their families need to feel as though they have the support needed to be successful. Both participants commented on times where they have had a student who required an accommodation that the FI program could not provide. It is imperative school boards acknowledge that this is not uncommon, as both Harding (2012), and Mady and Arnett (2009) have researched cases where students were told that the support they needed was unavailable in FI. If this is not addressed, groups of students will be excluded, even though FI is part of the public-school system.

5.3 Recommendations

The implications of the present study point specifically to several recommendations for the various stakeholders of Ontario’s education system, including the Ontario Ministry of Education, school administrators and teachers. Specifically, an investigation into the allocation of funding for FI programs, an increase in support staff available in FI programs, and finally, an overview of FI programs in their entirety with the goal of determining specific areas of need and developing professional development for these areas. These recommendations are not stand alone; in that it is the responsibility of all stakeholders to work towards establishing an equitable program.

First, there needs to be action in regards to the monitoring of funding for FI programs in Ontario, both the Ministry of Education and individual school boards need to be involved in this process. There needs to be a broad investigation in regards to the current funding structure of both special education and FSL funding both at the school board and the school level. Wise (2012) agrees that while the current funding system is delivered at the board level on a per student amount, there needs to be more clarity surrounding how the money is being used across programs within a board. This will offer transparency in where funding is being allocated with the goal of ensuring that it is being equitably distributed. With a better understanding of the areas of need, the Ministry of Education can then start to look for solutions to removing barriers to the inclusion of students with exceptionalities.
Second, as mentioned in the previous recommendation, having access to specialized staff like learning resource teachers (LST) and educational assistants (EA) is a barrier for supporting students with exceptionalities. Both at the Ministry and the school board level, there needs to be an increased focus on creating positions for these staff. The recommendation for this is twofold. On a Ministry Level, there needs to be policies in place to ensure that all students with identified exceptionalities are entitled to having access to EAs and LSTs, not just those deemed to have the most need or risk. Whereas, on a school board level, learning support staff need to be available to help the students with exceptionalities on a consistent basis. These support staff need to be available without being expected to act in other roles or areas of the school.

Finally, the Ministry of education needs to look at FI programs in Ontario in their entirety. To date, they have released both a new curriculum for FSL education and an inclusive education strategy for FSL. Although this is an excellent start, the support is often generalized to second language learning and it is important that the different FSL programs—immersion, core and extended—be separated as they face unique challenges. To support teachers, it is recommended that access to professional development on supporting students with exceptionalities in FI be available. For current teachers, this means having professional workshops around strategies for supporting language acquisition for students with exceptionalities and classroom management techniques. For teacher training, there needs to be an in depth look at the FI context, in regards to students with exceptionalities and teachers need to be aware of the differences between FI and the core French programs.

5.4 Areas for Further Research

In as much as the current study has served to expand the existing literature, it has also highlighted three areas for further research. Firstly, as noted in chapter three, one of the limitations of the present study was that it focused only on teachers. In future research endeavours, it is recommended that a similar study be conducted with a larger number of participants that includes multiple stakeholders, including administrators, teachers and students. The goal of this research would be to offer an in depth look at the state of FI programs in Ontario. The present study should be viewed as a call for further research as there is limited research surrounding the support of students with exceptionalities in FI programs.

Second, there needs to be a broad study of the experiences of students in FI programs. Specifically, the research of the present study leaves the question of how many students with
exceptionalities are remaining in the FI program and are these students successful. Previously, there has been research regarding the attrition or transferring of students in FI, (Bruck, 1978a; 1987b; Noel, 2003; Stern, 1991); however, there needs to be updated research as the FI program continues to grow nationally. This research should explore both student and parental experiences of navigating the FI system as well as perceptions about students with exceptionalities in FI programs.

Finally, as mentioned in the recommendations, the present study leaves the question about how resources and funding are allocated for students in FI programs. Further research should explore where funding is being allocated to ensure that it is being appropriately distributed in both past and current contexts. With this data, there needs to be an analysis of the current funding structure, which will lead to open discussions about solutions to providing an equitable distribution amongst programs.

5.5 Concluding Comments

The purpose of the present research study was to investigate teachers’ perceptions of supporting students with exceptionalities in FI programs. The overview of the literature, the experiences of the participants, and the recommendations for action begin to offer insight into the complexity of this issue. The participants of this study highlighted the strategies used to support students as well as the barriers to success. Additionally, they recognized that although students with exceptionalities should be given equitable access to FI programs, there continues to be systemic exclusion. This exclusion stems from a lack of available support including support staff, appropriate technology and funding. The findings of this study are imperative as they serve to alert policymakers and administrators that action must be taken in order for FI programs to be accessible to all. There needs to be a province-wide investigation into the state of FI programs. This investigation needs to include multiple stakeholders, with a focus on the current funding structure and the experiences of teachers, students and families. Without these steps, FI programs in Ontario will remain exclusive and inaccessible. The goal of future policy and research needs to be to move beyond a program that is deemed for enrichment only, to a program that creates an inclusive French loving community where any student can develop into a bilingual citizen.
References


Cummins, J. (2000). Immersion education for the millennium: What we have learned from 30 years of research on second language immersion.

Cummins, J. (2000). Immersion education for the millennium: What we have learned from 30 years of research on second language immersion.


Appendix A: Letter of Signed Consent

Date:

Dear __________________________,

My name is Megan Blanchette and I am a student in the Master of Teaching program at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto (OISE/UT). A component of this degree program involves conducting a small-scale qualitative research study. My research will focus on the inclusion of students with exceptionalities in French Immersion (FI) programs in Ontario. I am interested in interviewing teachers who have at least five years’ of experience teaching multiple grades within a FI program in Ontario. I think that your knowledge and experience will provide insights into this topic.

Your participation in this research will involve one 45 to 60-minute interview, which will be transcribed and audio-recorded. I would be grateful if you would allow me to interview you at a place and time convenient for you, outside of school time. The contents of this interview will be used for my research project, which will include a final paper, as well as an informal presentation to my classmates. I may also present my research findings via conference presentations and/or through publication. You will be assigned a pseudonym to maintain your anonymity and I will not use your name or any other content that might identify you in my written work, oral presentations or publications. This information will remain confidential. Any information that identifies your school or students will also be excluded. The interview data will be stored on my password-protected computer and the only person will have access to the research data will be my research coordinator, Angela Macdonald. You are free to change your mind about your participation at any time, and to withdraw even after you have consented to participate. You may also choose to decline to answer any specific questions during the interview. I will destroy the audio recording after the paper has been presented and/or published, which may take up to a maximum of five years after the data has been collected. There are no known risks to participation, and I will share a copy of the transcript with you shortly after the interview to ensure accuracy.

Please sign this consent form, if you agree to be interviewed. The second copy is for your records. I am very grateful for your participation.

Sincerely,

Megan Blanchette
meg.blanchette@gmail.com

Research Coordinator: Angela Macdonald
angela.macdonald@utoronto.ca
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 from this research study at any time without penalty.

I have read the letter provided to me by Megan Blanchette and agree to participate in an interview for the purposes described. I agree to have the interview audio-recorded.

Signature: _______________________________

Name: (printed) ___________________________

Date: _________________________________
Appendix B: Interview Protocol

Introductory Script: Thank you for agreeing to participate in this research study, and for making time to be interviewed today. This research study aims to learn the perceptions and practices of French Immersion teachers towards accommodation and modifying for students with exceptionalities for the purpose of gaining knowledge about the inclusion of students with exceptionalities in French Immersion. This interview will last approximately 45-60 minutes, and I will ask you a series of questions focused on your experience using strategies to help meet your students’ needs. I want to remind you that you may refrain from answering any question, and you have the right to withdraw your participation from the study at any time. As I explained in the consent letter, this interview will be audio-recorded. Do you have any questions before we begin?

Background Information

1. How long have you been teaching in a French Immersion (FI) program?
2. What range of grades have you taught in FI?
3. What is your background in terms of your own French language learning?
4. In your own words, what would be your rough definition of a student with exceptionalities?

Teacher Perspectives

5. In your experience, what are some of the qualities that students who are successful in FI possess?
6. In your experience, what are some of the factors that contribute to a student being at-risk of leaving FI programs?
7. What is the process for identifying at-risk students in FI programs?
8. In your experience, have you observed any changes over the years in the numbers of students with exceptionalities in your FI classroom?
9. In your experience, do students with exceptionalities typically remain in a FI program?

Teacher Practices

10. Can you describe the process of formally identifying a student with exceptionalities? What are the procedures in place?
11. What are some examples of accommodations you use in your FI classroom to support students with exceptionalities?

Support and Challenges

12. What are some examples of supports available to a student with exceptionalities in FI programs? (e.g. resources, support staff, external organizations)
13. What processes are in place to support FI teachers who have students with exceptionalities in their classrooms?
14. Can you describe your biggest challenge in supporting students with exceptionalities in FI?

Next Steps

15. What are some tools and/or resources you would like to be made available to you, as a FI teacher supporting a student with exceptionalities?
16. What are some suggestions you have for a new teacher in regards to supporting a student with exceptionalities in FI?

Thank you for your participation in this research study.