Student Retention Issues in the TDSB French Immersion Programs

By

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

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Abstract

The Toronto District School Board (TDSB) is experiencing problems in retaining students in their French Immersion (FI) programs. This study aims to identify some of the strategies that French Immersion teachers are using to keep students in the program and to point to some of their perceived reasons for students choosing to leave. After reviewing literature on the benefits and barriers of second language immersion programs, special education in French Immersion, gender differences in language immersion programs and teacher strategies in the matter, three semi-structured interviews with FI teachers in the TDSB were conducted. The findings indicate that teachers perceive that: students experience behavioural or academic difficulties, there is a lack of French in-school support and atmosphere, and the motivations of parents and students differ, which all are perceived to contribute to retention issues. Also, FI teachers are using many in-class strategies such as kinesthetic learning and teaching on areas of student interest, and enacting vigorous processes in an attempt to retain their students.

Key Words: French Immersion, Toronto District School Board, attrition, retention
Acknowledgements

I wish to acknowledge and thank my mom for the tremendous amount of support that she provides everyday and the opportunities that she has presented to me in life. I could not accomplish anything if it were not for her.
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Chapter 1: Introduction

Research Context

In Canada, French is one of the official languages and a strong part of the national identity. In the Ontario public education system, French is mandatory all students from Grades 4-9, and is known as Core French. For students who are interested in becoming more fluent in the language, Extended French and French Immersion programs are provided in certain schools. All of these programs are publicly funded and offered to all students who enroll in the Toronto District School Board (TDSB). The studies *French Immersion Enrollment by Province/Territory and Grade 2011-2013* (Canadian Parents for French, 2013) and *Enrolment in French Immersion/Extended French Programs 2015-2016* (Toronto District School Board, French as a Second Language Advisory Committee, 2014) found that there is an increasing level of enrollment in French Immersion programs in Ontario every year. Moreover, according to a 2010 *Research Report on Programs of Choice in the TDSB* (Toronto District School Board, Organizational Development Department/ Research and Information Services, 2010), French Immersion programs have the highest rate of enrollment in primary grades, a gradual decline in the junior grades and the highest rate of decline in secondary grades. Out of all of the elementary grades, French Immersion sees the largest decline in students after Grade 6 (Toronto District School Board, Organizational Development Department/ Research and Information Services, 2010). The lower high school age could also be a critical period for retention in French Immersion (Obadia & Thériault, 1995). Most students who enter the program at some point, do not graduate high school with an Honours Certificate of Bilingual Studies from French Immersion in the TDSB.

There are many types of French programs that are offered within the TDSB. The school
board offers a variety of programs to incorporate more than just the basic required French into a student’s educational career. There are several schools that make supplemental French accessible to students. Early immersion begins in Senior Kindergarten, with 62 schools on board. The instruction is done in French full-time until the end of grade 3. English instruction is introduced in grade 4 and gradually becomes a half-day program from Grades 6-8. By the time students reach high school, there are 10 schools in the board offering French Immersion where students must complete 11 or more credits in French instruction. Students can also commence their French education in middle immersion in Grade 4, offered by only three schools. Aside from immersion, Extended French is another program which can begin in the either Grade 4 or in Grade 7 and is available in 42 schools. The instruction is done in French 40-50% of the time for subjects like Social Studies, Art and of course French Language Arts (Toronto District School Board, French as a Second Language Advisory Committee, 2014). There are very few entry points for students to enroll in French Immersion, but every year and even during the year they have an exit point, as the English stream will always accept them.

There is not an equal level of French school options compared to English in the TDSB. The Canadian Council on Learning (2011) points out that “[in] a country that considers itself bilingual, Canada also shows a remarkable shortage of French-language options in most [post-secondary education] institutions” (p. 15). It is possible that students are not able to continue in the French Immersion secondary program because the options are not available.

Another factor influencing the French Immersion context is redirection of students when applying to French Immersion programs. Students may be redirected to a school much further from their home than anticipated. The Toronto District School Board, French as a Second Language Advisory Committee (2014) reports that this is a result of French Immersion schools
receiving more applicants than the capacity of the school allows. They also report that
the percentage of applicants being redirected has dropped from 11% in 2014 to 7% in
2015. About 53% of the redirected students accepted those offers. It is a tough choice for
parents of young children – location or program. They have to consider child care and
tavel times and often, they feel no community connection with the receiving school
(Toronto District School Board, French as a Second Language Advisory Committee,
2014, p. 2).
Although this issue is improving, these randomly selected, redirected students would have to
tavel far to attend the next designated French Immersion school which may not necessarily be
the best choice for them. This problem may not occur in the English stream where there are
many more schools available.
An integral part of teaching French in an immersion setting is exposing students to the
culture of French and teaching them advanced language skills. To assist teachers, there is a
section in The Ontario Curriculum, French as a Second language: Core, Grade 4-8; Extended,
Grades 4-8; Immersion, Grades 1-8 (2013) and The Ontario Curriculum, Grades 9 to 12:
French as a Second Language – Core, Extended, Immersion, for all grade levels, devoted to
guide educators in the French Immersion programs. Teachers must make sure “that French be the
language of communication in class so that students have constant exposure to correct models of
the language and many opportunities to speak in French” (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2013,
p. 37). Students are learning in an environment where most of their learning, even in core
subjects, is done in French.
1.1 Research Problem
Students are persistently dropping out of French Immersion and teachers are struggling to
find ways to retain them starting in the early years of education, a task which becomes progressively more difficult as the students get older. One of the key differences between French Immersion and the English stream is that when students feel dissatisfied or are struggling, they may have the idea that they can always continue in English as though that is a sort of safety net. Students have the choice to remove themselves from a French Immersion program and continue in an English program within the same school board with no educational repercussions. Educators can be aware of this issue and play a vital role in student decisions.

There are many factors that influence these retention issues. Teachers may be struggling to teach all of the necessary school subjects and simultaneously teach a second language effectively (Fortune, Tedick & Walker, 2008) or that content in a second language is becoming too difficult as the years pass (Walker & Tedick, 2000). Furthermore, there may also not be enough space in a student’s timetable to take French once they have added their other, more interesting courses for the year (Makropoulos, 2010a). By the time these students reach high school, there are only 10 schools in the TDSB offering secondary French Immersion Programs out of 110 secondary schools (Toronto District School Board, 2014). This shows that attrition, the slow decline of engagement, is a current issue in the TDSB.

Considering that French Immersion programs are not always heterogeneous, TDSB should be striving for a more equitable and diverse classroom. The Research Report on Programs of Choice in the TDSB goes on to conclude that

[s]tudents of immigrant parents, from a single-parent household, of a minority group, born outside of Canada, recently arrived to Canada, with special education needs, or living in families with a low socio-economic status (SES) or with a low educational background are less likely to enroll in French Immersion programs across the TDSB.
This seems to be a persisting issue even though research suggests that students from all backgrounds are able to succeed in French Immersion programs (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2015; Toronto District School Board, Organizational Development Department/ Research and Information Services, 2010), and can even achieve higher results than their English counterparts (Lazaruk, 2007; Swain, 1974).

Despite the efforts of educators in the TDSB French Immersion programs, reports suggest that most students do not pursue French further into high school (Toronto District School Board, French as a Second Language Advisory Committee, 2014). Although the levels of retention are slowly increasing (Toronto District School Board, French as a Second Language Advisory Committee, 2014), there remains a large gap in how many students are entering the program compared to how many students are actually graduating with a French Immersion diploma. Hearing directly from teachers can be useful in giving insight into perspectives and strategies that are currently being used in attempting to retain students in FI.

1.2 Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to explore elementary French Immersion teachers’ experiences of supporting students at risk of attrition in the TDSB to lessen the outflow of these students. These teachers’ experiences in working with students who are at risk of attrition will be generally defined as: French Immersion teachers’ reported strategies and supports used with students at risk of attrition; their experiences working with students choosing to drop out or to remain in the program and; their understandings of reasons why students do or do not follow French Immersion. I hope to explore the effective strategies that these teachers are using to retain
their students in French Immersion. This study also aims to help raise awareness to all stakeholders in a child’s French Immersion education about current retention issues in TDSB.

1.3 Research Questions

The central question driving this study is: what are French Immersion teachers’ experiences of and strategies for supporting students at risk of attrition in the TDSB? Sub-questions to further guide this study include:

What are some of these teachers’ core values in relation to second language teaching and how does this effect their in-class strategies?

What supports and resources do FI teachers use in order to retain students?

How are teachers communicating with these students and their parents about their difficulties?

1.4 Background of the Researcher

As someone who has always had motivating teachers and great experiences relating to French learning, I have developed a strong interest in learning how to improve the level of students who pursue French as a second language. I attended a French first language school just north of Toronto, where all subjects were taught in French except for the English language classes, which were introduced in grades 4 to 8. The educators there possessed great pride in the language and culture, which helped earn an appreciation myself. Growing up speaking Italian at home – a romance language similar to French – the language and culture overlapped with my own. In order to properly help me with my homework, my mother enrolled in college French courses. She enjoyed the courses so much that she even decided to take up Spanish. I have always been committed to learning languages because it is rooted in my family’s culture. It is part of my identity and I believe learning French in Canada is a great opportunity.

In grade 9, I had my first French immersion experience when I changed school boards to
gain more English exposure to prepare me for University. The environment was very different and the other students did not share the same Francophone cultural identity which I had developed. Unhappy with the program, I decided to return to my initial school board and finish my studies in the French first language program.

Because of these experiences and love for the language, my undergraduate studies were completed in French Studies. Being fluent in French has opened the door to many job opportunities over the years. In addition, I began tutoring for three years and helping students in French immersion programs to complete homework and improve their overall French skills. These particular students have been successful and the primary reason is because their parents were able to pay for additional support. Finally, my Aunt is an elementary French Immersion teacher in the TDSB and we often discuss challenges that have made me more aware of retention issues. I am now interested in what we can do within the schools, specifically TDSB, to help students that do not necessarily have the resources for extra additional help, remain in the program and be more successful.

1.5 Overview of Whole

To respond to the research questions, I will be conducting a qualitative research study using purposeful sampling to interview three teachers working in French Immersion schools about their experiences with French Immersion students in TDSB. In Chapter Two, I review the literature in the areas of student involvement in French Immersion programs, benefits and barriers of the program and reasons for attrition. Next, in Chapter Three, I elaborate on the research design. In Chapter Four, I report my research findings and discuss their significance in light of the existing research literature, and in Chapter Five, I identify the implications of the research findings for my own teacher identity and practice, and for the educational research
community more broadly. I also articulate a series of questions raised by the research findings, and point to areas for future research.
Chapter Two: Literature Review

2.0 Introduction

In this chapter, I review the literature on the benefits and barriers of French Immersion (FI) programs, and explore what could be leading students to either enroll in or drop out of these programs. I also review the implications that special education and student gender may have for continued enrollment in French Immersion. Additionally, I examine the strategies that teachers are using to support students in FI. More specifically, I examine the cognitive benefits of second language learning as well as some of the academic issues that students can develop as a result of the program. From there, I review existing literature on factors that can influence students’ and their parents’ decision regarding these programs in order to examine some of the reasons why they enter or choose to withdraw from a French Immersion program. I then outline in summary how student characteristics like special education needs or gender difference are apparent in these programs. Finally, I examine existing evidence of what teachers are trying to do that may contribute to less drop-out rates.

2.1 Second Language Immersion Programs

French Immersion in Ontario began in the mid 1960s as there was an increasing awareness of the social, economical and political value of learning French (Genesee, 1998; Swain, 1997). The model is that of having full instruction in French in the early years of schooling, where topics in English are slowly introduced as the student gets older. This model has had successful bilingual outcomes (Cummins, 1980; Swain, 1997). Rebuffot (1993) explains the differences between early and late entry to the program where early entry has a more positive effect on these bilingual outcomes. Many researchers (Au-Yeung, 2015; Hipfner-Boucher et al.
2016; Lappin-Fortin, 2014; Nicolay & Poncelet, 2013) have focused on the benefits and
downfalls that FI can have on language learning.

2.1.1 Benefits of second language immersion programs

Research has been able to identify second language immersion programs as being
beneficial to students (Au-Yeung, 2015; Lappin-Fortin, 2014; Nicolay & Poncelet, 2013). In a
study which compared French Immersion student performance to student performance in the
English track, Cammarata and Tedick (2012) found that FI students were able to perform just as
well as their non-immersion peers. Additionally, in a study of the cognitive benefits that second-
language immersion programs have on students, Nicolay and Poncelet (2013) found that when
students were enrolled in these programs for three years, it proved to have benefits on their
attentional and executive functioning skills. Another study of comparing immersion and non-
immersion students’ literacy skills showed that English learning is not diminished even when a
sample of students had been enrolled in a French immersion program for many years (Au-
Yeung, 2015). This shows that the skills that students are developing are not only in French but
in both languages. When comparing FI to Core French, another program which aims to teach
French skills with less input time, a study of the written competencies of Core and Immersion
graduates found that French Immersion students tended to have a better output of French
compared to their Core French counterparts when they had no other immersion-like experiences
(Lappin-Fortin, 2014). The above-cited studies describe immersion experiences to possibly be a
gainful choice for students who are attempting to be bilingual.

Benefits on bilingualism can occur if students persist with French learning. Students may
be able to enhance their bilingual abilities as the years pass, if they persist with the program. In a
study on the development of cognate awareness in immersion students, Hipfner-Boucher et al.
(2016) found that students improved significantly from Grade 1 to the next year in Grade 2 in their ability to make language connection from English to French, when they persist and this also enhances comprehension skills.

The aboved cited studies describe immersion experiences to possibly be a positive choice for students when wanting to be bilingual as they improve their French language skills over the years.

2.1.2 Barriers of second language immersion programs

On the other hand, language immersion programs can pose problems for some students’ bilingualism. Studies have found that some students do not acquire native-like language skills (Celce-Murcia 1993; Cummins, 2000; Netelenbos et al., 2015). In a linguistic study of stop consonant production of French Immersion students in western Canada, Netelenbos et al. (2015) found that students who began in early immersion had non-native-like pronunciation which displayed gaps in their phonetic development. Moreover, studies show that students develop more receptive skills than expressive skills (Celce-Murcia 1993; Cummins, 2000). When speaking to the French Immersion context in Canada, Cummins (2000) argues that students do not have as many opportunities in the classroom to use French with native French speakers therefore their expressive skills are not as developed. French Immersion could not be equipping students with complete fluency in French.

2.2 Enrolment and Retention in French Immersion

Students could be enrolled in FI programs for many reasons. Reseachers (Guttman, 1983; Olson & Burns, 1983) have found that parents play a vital role in students’ decision to begin these programs. In an review of FI as a whole, Guttman (1983) describes that FI parents can be "looking to the school to provide new and stimulating environments beyond what they can offer
The FI parent is very committed to language learning and could have much involvement in the local school, a willingness to transport a child over some distance, and even relocation of the family home in a French immersion school district” (Guttman, 1983, p. 19). Also, it is interesting to know that, regardless of their class or family language, students were able to have high levels of engagement – defined as ability and interest – in language immersion programs based on the thought that it would benefit them in their future careers (Makropoulos, 2010b). Being in a FI program could come from parents and students alike wanting a better future.

There are commonalities in the reasons why students made choices to drop out or remain in a French Immersion program. In a review of possible solutions on student attrition in French Immersion programs, Obadia and Thériault (1995) describe the main issues that lead students to drop out as academic difficulty, social and emotional difficulty, and quality of program or teaching. Studies show that the highest rate of attrition in French Immersion programs happens in high-school years, that is a year where there is a natural break in the program, when students have to change schools (Makropoulos, 2010b; Obadia & Thériault, 1995). Some students in the program could also have experienced making sacrifices to remain in their French program (Culligan, 2010; Makropoulos, 2010a). In a study of the access of French Immersion programs to high school students in Ottawa, Makropoulos (2010a) found that students often had to take French courses in place of other courses in the educational program, especially in the senior years of high school. Thus, difficulties experienced, quality of program, and course choice could all be factors influencing the choice to exit the FI program.

Naturally, students tended to have a positive outlook on learning in FI if they were currently engaged in the program as opposed to a negative outlook if they had chosen to abandon
it (Makropoulos, 2010b). Students of whom were choosing a different path had a previous dissatisfaction with FI. Because FI allows for the option to discontinue and resort to English programs as default, students blame the language for poor results instead of their general abilities in the subjects (i.e. struggles in math or science). On the other hand, studies have shown that students in FI have the same level of subject knowledge as their non-immersion peers (Bialystok, Peets & Moreno, 2014; Cammarata & Tedick, 2012b). In another study done by Swain (1974) FI students in Grade 2 had their English reading and spelling skills compromised, but once formal English studies are introduced in Grade 3 or 4, these students made rapid progress in English (Lazaruk, 2007; Swain, 1974). This may cause students to drop out before they have the chance to catch up in English in the next years of FI.

2.3 Students with Special Education Needs in French Immersion

This is a significant factor in the literature. The question of special education and its importance in the French Immersion program has been a major focus in recent studies (Arnett, 2013; Bourgoin, 2014; Genesee, 1987; Kruk and Reynolds, 2011; MacCoubrey et al., 2004; Sauvé, 2007; Wise, 2011). This outlook has been different in previous years. In Guttman’s (1983) study of an overview of the French Immersion program, he found that, “[p]oor performers are ‘tracked’ or counselled out of the program. The learning atmosphere encourages high concentration, intensive listening skills, structured learning, and completion of specified tasks. There is high respect for discipline, and disruptive behavior is not easily tolerated.” (p. 19). Not only do these students with exceptionalities not ‘fit-in’ to the program, the teachers do not have the appropriate resources in order to assist them (Parkin, Morrison & Watkin, 1987).

Contrarily, recent research highlights new outlooks on special education in FI programs. A more positive approach to including students with special education needs is highlighted in
other studies (Arnett, 2013; Kruk & Reynolds, 2011; Sauvé, 2007). In a study of comparing at risk readers in FI to English programs, Kruk and Reynolds (2011) found that students in the FI program were benefitting from the transfer of phonological awareness across both languages which increased comprehension. Moreover, in Sauvé’s (2007) comparing of many aspects of students with different reading abilities’ success such as reading comprehension, spelling, behaviour and perceived social acceptance, no significant difference was found. Additionally, Arnett (2013) found that students with special education needs who are properly supported in the program experience increased self-esteem and confidence.

Because the above studies were able to show how students with special education needs can do well in FI, the reasons for students leaving the program could be the result of not having the proper supports in place for them (Bourgoin, 2014; Wise, 2011). In a study of early literacy indicators of Kindergarten students, Bourgoin (2014) shows how phonological awareness can be used to identify students who may be at risk for reading difficulties in order to better support them at a very early age. Also, in a study of the access that students with exceptionalities have to additional resources and services, Wise (2011) found that teachers will at times suggest to parents that their child might be more successful if taken out of FI, because there are more resources to support them. Therefore, students could be leaving the program because of their special education needs are not being met.

2.4 Gender Differences in Language Immersion Programs

Due to the demanding nature of FI, students experience a variety of different academic abilities, motivations and attitudes around second language programs. According to the literature, some of these differences can be based on student gender.

2.4.1 Academic abilities
Academic influences have a large impact on student retention and there can be slight differences between the achievements of boys in comparison to girls. Different genders prove to have differences in abilities when it comes to the academic aspects of second language learning, where overall females tend to be more successful (Davies, 2004; Toronto District School Board, 2014). Teachers must therefore take into consideration these differences when teaching in the French Immersion setting. In a study on boys’ and girls’ achievement in French rated by teachers on a four grade scale: ‘very good’, ‘good’, ‘average’ and ‘poor’, the largest number of girls ended up in the good and the largest number of boys ended up in the poor, yet a small number, but more boys than girls, were in the very good (Davies, 2004). This means that although there were fewer boys in this study that are doing very well, most were found to be doing poorly. Davies (2004) also suggests that this may explain that boys never had a good start to learning the language instead of thinking that their interest was ‘switched off’ later in the program. When it comes to reading, student performance or abilities were found to be different in terms of gender, based on the topic of texts read in that foreign language. Therefore, the text must interest the boys in order for them to be good readers (Bügel & Buunk, 1996). Moreover, there are gender differences related to topic familiarity in the texts. Gender-related experiences (or background knowledge) contribute to their comprehension of what materials teachers are presenting to them (Brantmeier, 2003). Teachers must take into consideration the topics of the texts they use in the classroom. They should cater to all students in order for all genders to excel and to reduce the gender gap in French Immersion.

2.4.2 Motivation

The motivation of boys and girls while learning a second language can vary. There were very slight differences found for boys and girls when comparing their levels of motivation. Goal
setting, which is directly related to self-motivation in students, can be an important factor in being successful in language programs. Kissau (2006) found that girls were slightly more successful than boys because they set more goals for the future. On the other hand, motivation can vary according to the type of school and year of study, and there is only a very small difference between boys’ and girls’ overall motivation in second language programs (Coleman et al., 2007). This said, there are other factors beyond gender that contribute to student motivation in the second language classroom.

2.4.3 Attitudes

The attitudes of the different genders about learning a second language were found to be only slightly different. Over the span of their elementary school careers, both boys and girls become disenchanted with foreign language learning (Heining-Boynton & Haitema, 2007). This explains the situation of the TDSB’s attrition in its French Immersion programs. Both genders thought French to be of average importance compared to other subjects, where girls were slightly more positive than boys (Stables & Wikeley, 1999). In addition, in a study done by Pritchard (1987) there was no significant difference between boys’ and girls’ responses to their interest in French; just over half of the students said that French usually interested them (Pritchard, 1987). Despite this, girls did report devoting a greater effort to languages than boys (Coleman et al., 2007). These results explain how the vast majority of students end up leaving the French Immersion programs of the TDSB, where in the end it is mostly girls of whom end up graduating high school with a bilingual diploma.

The way society perceives French Immersion and its relation to gender is an important topic to discuss. The social constructions around language programs can have a direct effect on whether a student will study a second language, and this is different depending on if you are a
boy or a girl. In the same study done by Kissau (2006) that was discussed earlier, boys felt less capable of or willing to learn French than girls because of societal perceptions that French can be seen as a ‘feminine subject.’ On the other hand, regardless of being a boy or a girl, Clark and Trafford (1995) were able to show that if the student judged learning another language as important to their future career, they were able to appreciate the value of the program regardless of gender. Consequently, if students are able to see the benefits of learning the language, these societal perceptions may not have as much influence on them. Based on the statistics of the TDSB (Toronto District School Board, 2014), boys may struggle to overcome this influence because it remains a female-dominated program.

2.5 The Strategies Used by Second Language Immersion Teachers

Teachers play a sizeable role in the success of their students in French Immersion programs. Through the research, I was able to identify a few key strategies that teachers are using that prove to help all students. Educators need to foster the positive desire of young people to learn and be successful in language learning, ensuring and expecting high levels of language achievement (Clark & Trafford, 1995; Heining-Boynton & Haitema, 2007). Also, in a study on student attitudes toward language immersion programs, students preferred learning more about culture and liked interactive, game-based learning rather than doing textbook-based work (Clark & Trafford, 1995). Moreover, teachers should strive to build student confidence as it is crucial in the successful learning of the language (Clark & Trafford, 1995; MacIntyre et al., 2002). Teachers have the ability to make students feel like they are completely capable of being in, and completing, a second language immersion program. These teacher strategies, building confidence, staying positive and presenting students with interactive learning materials, may
contribute to closing the gender gap, the special education gap, and also improving attrition overall in TDSB French Immersion programs because they cater to all students’ needs.

2.6 Teachers Balancing Content and Language

Students experience dissatisfaction for many reasons. One of these is the possibility that they believe they have not acquired the required content for their grade level. Thus, one of the teacher’s roles in the FI classroom is to be able to balance content (i.e., subject matter), such as Science or Social Studies while teaching a second language. If a teacher successfully achieves this, it proves to be academically beneficial for students, both linguistically and cognitively (Fortune, Tedick & Walker, 2008; Lazaruk, 2007). In a study done by Mison (2011), they found that if there is a lack of comprehension in the second language class, teachers will sometimes use the English language (L1) to clarify content. That being said, integrating student’s L1 (which in the context of the TDSB is mostly English) is called plurilingualism, and this can be used as a tool in the immersion classroom (Cummins, 2007; Swain & Lapkin, 2000). On the other hand, use of L1 can become problematic as “it may substitute for, rather than support, second language learning” (Swain & Lapkin, 2000, p. 268). In order to encourage the demonstration of comprehension, teachers at times may award part-marks if answers are correctly given in English during assessment of French content (Mison, 2011). Despite the practicality of this assessment method, some studies consider it a setback for teachers because students may acquire the proper content, but end up with inadequate language production skills (Fortune, Tedick & Walker, 2008; Genesee, 2004; Walker & Tedick, 2000). Teachers also report concerns about the fact that as students get older, the subject matter becomes more advanced, yet students’ language proficiency may not necessarily be at par with their grade/age level (Fortune, Tedick & Walker, 2008; Turnbull, Cormier & Bourque, 2011; Walker & Tedick, 2000). Fortune, Tedick and
Walker (2008) found that teachers are putting a larger emphasis on teaching content because it is generally believed that second language will be taught naturally through the vocabulary and subject matter. Due to this belief and the propensity to teach content over language skills, teaching the rudiments of French language is given less importance. Therefore, the French language itself is not given the required significance and student outcomes of output skills in French can be compromised. Consequently, it stands to reason that in order for teachers to be effective in the immersion classroom, there is a dire need to properly and equally balance content comprehension and language skills.

2.7 Conclusion

Overall, French Immersion has proven to provide many benefits as well as yielded some challenges. Many factors influence why students choose to enroll in French Immersion, the main being the perception that it will enable them to have a better future. On the other hand, students are dropping out of FI due to factors such as course selection conflicts or special education needs. Additionally, the literature discusses differences in motivation, attitudes and academic abilities in regards to gender. In speaking to pedagogy, teachers are having to balance many aspects of bilingual teaching, which may determine how far students are satisfied or dissatisfied with the program. In conclusion, my literature review sheds light on the above components yet shows gaps. It reveals commonalities, where researchers agree that second language immersion programs are beneficial to students academically. It identifies divergencies where some researchers believe that there is a place for students with special needs in FI, and some do not. Also, reseachers disagree on whether using English o support comprehension of content in a French immersion setting proved to help student output skills. However, my literature review identified a gap where practical FI teacher strategies have not been critically analysed and this
will frame my research. I hope to demonstrate practical teacher strategies in order to add to the existing research base. In the following chapter, I will explain the methodology of my research, discuss its purported strengths and limitations, as well as provide an overview of my sample.
Chapter Three: Research Methodology

3.0 Introduction

In this chapter, I explain the research methodology. I begin by describing the approach and procedures that my research follows. I then explain the instruments of data collection and how I will go about recruiting participants. I go on to explain more specifically the procedures for data collection and the ethical considerations that are relevant to my study. I then recognize the scope of methodological limitations but contrarily recognize its strengths, accompanied with a rationale for these decisions given my research purpose and questions.

3.1 Research Approach & Procedures

This study was administered using a qualitative approach, where I had done a review of the existing literature relevant to my research questions and purpose. There are many different definitions surrounding the idea of qualitative research and there is no specific and accepted method of carrying it out (Ritchie et al., 2013). It can be described as an interpretive approach which considers the experiences of research participants embedded within a particular social reality (Ritchie et al., 2013; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Moreover, it is of a flexible nature where there could be multiple methods of data collection involved, such as semi-structured and in-depth interviews, observations and focus groups (Ritchie et al., 2013). Qualitative research can take an ontological position, what there is to know, and an epistemological position, how do we go about knowing (Ritchie et al., 2013). These are both ways in which a researcher can study the social world (Ritchie et al., 2013) and play a vital role in the purpose of this study because they guide me through the inquiry process.

The purpose of doing research of this type was to provide an in-depth and interpreted understanding of perspectives, experiences and histories that make up the social world (Ritchie et
Given my research questions, I discussed with teachers what they were doing in reality and used their experiences to answer my questions. What there was to know is teachers’ strategies to encourage students to remain in French Immersion programs, and how I went about knowing was using semi-structured interviews to hear about their experiences and opinions.

3.2 Instruments of Data Collection

A variety of interview methods can be used when conducting qualitative research. DiCicco-Bloom and Crabtree (2006) give a general description: “[q]ualitative interviews have been categorized in a variety of ways, with many contemporary texts loosely differentiating qualitative interviews as unstructured, semi-structured and structured.” (p. 314). For the purposes of this study, the instrument of data collection was semi-structured interviews completed in-person with three teachers.

In a semi-structured interview, the interviewer creates the overall structure and controls the features of the interview, but also allows the interviewee to elaborate where wanted (Drever, 1995). Semi-structured interviews are of value to my research because I was interested in encouraging people to talk at some length in their own manner (Drever, 1995) to provide data in relation to my topic. Although interviewing is labor-intensive (Seidman, 2013), it can generate meaningful data for the purposes of my study. The advantage of this method was to gain an understanding of the lived experience of others and the meaning they make of these experiences (Seidman, 2013). Strauss and Corbin (1990) explain that qualitative methods are used to create knowledge about feelings and thought processes that may be more difficult to access through other methods of research (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). This allowed for my specific questions to be answered but also allowed the interviewee to elaborate on their experiences and if they wished to speak about areas that may be relevant yet not anticipated. Some questions were open-ended and
allowed the interviewee to talk about their thoughts. Examples of some questions that I asked were:

- Tell me about a situation where you found out a student was no longer continuing in the French Immersion program. Did you anticipate this?
- Do you feel that there is a lack of resources available to you as a French Immersion teacher?
- What are some of the teaching strategies that are successful in your classroom?

3.3 Participants

In this section, I review the sampling criteria that I set out for the recruitment of participants while outlining many possibilities in doing so. Finding the right study sample was critical because they all had to comply with the same criteria. I have also included a section where each participant is introduced.

3.3.1 Sampling criteria

The following criteria were used to recruit teacher participants:

1. Teachers have been working as a French Immersion teacher in the TDSB for at least 5 years.
2. Teachers have taught elementary FI.
3. Teachers have taught in a dual-track school.
4. Teachers have worked with students who leave French Immersion and enter the English program the year after they were their teacher.

To address the central research question, these teachers had to be aware of and have had first-hand experience relating to retention issues in the programs in which they had taught to be able to speak to this topic. Making sure that they had knowledge of a former student of theirs
leaving the program was essential because they had to be able to provide insight into my topic. These teachers had experience working in the TDSB for at least five years in order for them to have experienced this issue over time because attrition is a process: a gradual reduction in program retention.

Lastly, teacher participants worked in a dual-track school in which there was a French Immersion program running as well as an English program. Teachers having this type of experience provided an understanding of situations where teachers can observe and hear about students outside of the French program.

3.3.2 Sampling procedures

There are specific ways in which to conduct sampling in qualitative research. It is contrary to quantitative research sampling which is to, “draw a representative sample from the population, so that the results of studying the sample can then be generalized back to the population” (Marshall, 1996, p. 522). It would be inappropriate to do this for qualitative because the findings are not generalized. Marshall (1996) also suggests that purposeful sampling is effective for qualitative research because you get the perspective of real people that can offer insight in natural setting.

To recruit participants, I used purposeful sampling. I contacted teacher associations and provided them with an overview of my research study. I provided them with the participant criteria and asked that the association distribute my contact information to teachers they believed to be the right fit. This was not of any ethical concern because I did not gather any names to contact them personally so volunteers did not feel obligated to participate. I also used convenience sampling due to the network of educators that suggested participants that they felt fit my criteria. They were able to ask on my behalf to participate in my study.
3.3.3 Participant biographies

**Pascale** has been a French Immersion teacher for the TDSB for 25 years, with most of them being at her current, dual-track school. She has had a wide variety of roles within the school such as special education teacher, committee member, intramural coach, and teacher of almost every grade level in Core and Immersion. Pascale attended Francophone school as a child and studied multiple languages, as well as French, in her university career.

**Giselle** has been a French Immersion teacher for the TDSB for 10 years at her same current, dual-track school. She currently teaches Senior Kindergarten FI, where all of her students are in their first year of French learning. She has also had experience in teaching Grades 1 to 3. In addition to her role as a teacher, she is an administrator, club supervisor, and coach. She was enrolled in French Immersion herself for two years in primary school, then was pulled out because her parents found it to be overwhelming having just immigrated from another country. She then continued in Core French and pursued it in university.

**Martine** has been teaching for the TDSB French Immersion programs for over ten years, in two different dual-track schools. She is currently a Grade 1 and 2 split class teacher, where the Grade 1 students are in their first year of French learning. Before working in the TDSB, she has had many more years of prior teaching experience overseas. She learned French in university in her home country.

3.4 Data Analysis

In this section, I will describe my analysis procedures with reasons why this procedure will be effective. I coded my data in order to find common themes or variances within my interview transcripts pertaining to my research questions and purpose. I then synthesized the
data. This matters because I was able to turn the synthesized data into findings for my study, contrasting it with the review of research that was already found.

More broadly, analyzing data means developing ideas about your findings and relating them to the literature and to the questions and purpose of the study (Bogden & Biklen, 2003). More specifically, “[a]nalysis involves working with the data, organizing them, breaking them into manageable units, coding them, synthesizing them, and searching for patterns. Interpretation involves explaining and framing your ideas in relation to theory, other scholarship, and action, as well as showing why your findings are important and making them understandable” (Bogden & Biklen, 2003, p. 147). These ways of going about analyzing data were important for being able to explain findings in my study.

In order to gather data, I coded my interview transcripts. After finding common codes, I grouped them together to form categories. From those categories emerged themes or units of data from which I was able to make arguments.

3.5 Ethical Review Procedures

Why should we be concerned with ethics when it comes to research? Bloor and Wood (2006) explain that ethics is a set of principles concerned with morality and integrity. This study involved principles such as confidentiality, consent, right to withdraw, outlining risks of participation, and proper storage of data. Because their stories can defy the anonymity of many people, making pseudonyms is a difficult and sensitive task (Seidman, 2013), yet it was the way to keep the identities of participants confidential including school information. Interviewees were also notified of their right to withdraw from the study at any stage. There were minimal risks associated with participation in this study and a consent letter (Appendix A) was sent to participants ahead of time to make sure they were comfortable in speaking to this issue. All data,
audio recordings and transcripts, are stored on my password protected laptop and phone, and will be destroyed after five years. These processes ensured that the study was done ethically.

3.6 Methodological Strengths and Limitations

Here, I identify some key areas of strength and some limitations of this qualitative research study. The significance of interviewing teachers is the in-depth answers about what matters to them most through their voice and lived experiences. Qualitative research allows to have a sample of people who have first-hand experience in the matters of my study that can offer detailed insight (Marshall, 1996). Also, only three teachers were interviewed, so no generalization can be made about the broader teaching population.

Although I can only interview teachers, one large drawback of this study is that I missed the perspective of students and parents, who were not interviewed given the ethical parameters. This type of study could also allow for bias on my part as well as on behalf of the interviewees (Merriam, 2002). While the findings could be one-sided, it could also have validated teachers’ experiences regarding my topic.

3.7 Conclusion

In this chapter I explained the research methodology. It was a small-scale study that used semi-structured interviews in order to gain a better understanding of teachers’ knowledge and experience, of whom are able to provide insight on the key issues of my research. I began by explaining the research approach and procedures while relating it to the significance of my study. I explained the instruments of data collections, where interviews are the primary source of data collection. I then discussed participants; the criteria of my sample, how I found my sample, and their biographies. I proceeded to discuss data analysis, where I explain the methodology of coding common themes between each interview. The ethical review procedures such as
confidentiality, consent, right to withdraw, outlining risks of participation, and proper storage of data were addressed. Next, in Chapter Four, I report the findings of my research.
Chapter Four: Findings

4.0 Introduction

In Chapter One, I explained the context of my research for the retention issues that occur within the TDSB French Immersion programs. I reviewed the literature related to these issues in Chapter Two. In Chapter Three, I described the research methodology and included the biographies of my participants. In this chapter, I include a summary of the findings collected from three semi-structured interviews with experienced French Immersion (FI) teachers who work in the Toronto District School Board. They were able to speak to student retention issues in FI programs, which were consistent with what I learned from my literature review. I report my findings in themes: participants’ perceived reasons for students not succeeding in FI, students staying in FI despite lack of success, teachers’ attempts to retain students in FI, strategies they use for a successful FI program, as well as factors contributing to an unsuccessful FI program. These themes all help to point out strategies that these teachers were using in order to retain and help students in FI.

4.1 Participants’ Perceived Reasons for Students Not Succeeding in FI

Teachers perceive students’ lack of success in FI to be related to behavioural or academic issues. The teachers whom I interviewed were each able to talk about two students they taught who left the program the following year. This gave me insight into some of the issues that were prominent in the year leading up to the decision, and what the teachers thought were the leading reasons for making the switch. Teachers identified some of these reasons to be academic or behavioural issues. They also reported that parents believed that changing the program would result in greater success.

One of the reasons why the program was not working for these students that teachers
discussed was behavioural issues. These students did not necessarily lack the academic ability to comprehend a second language, but there were behavioural barriers that contributed to their lack of success. Giselle discussed one of the boys in her class who was experiencing disruptive behavioural challenges:

I would pull the child aside and say, what is it that's bothering you at the moment, when there's sort of a situation. I would talk to them in English, and say, you know, is it Madame that's doing something, is it French, do you understand, try to sort of eliminate the variables from the equation. With this particular student, it was more than the language, I think if we took away that layer of behaviour, I think he probably would have done very well in the program.

Here, Giselle explained how she tried identifying if the behaviour was caused by the FI setting. She later went on to report that this student had moved and continued in an English school, where these same behaviours persisted. This was similar to an experience that Pascale reported with a child who “was a danger to himself and the other kids so they had to remove him from the classroom, so he wasn’t even there for the instruction and in second language instruction you have to hear it.” In these cases, teachers perceived that it was the behavioural barriers that prevented these students’ success.

Moreover, some of the students discussed were experiencing academic difficulties. An example of a student, discussed by Pascale, highlights some of the academic difficulties that occurred for one particular student in her FI class that was experiencing academic issues around language acquisition:

For him I remember, reading two years behind, I think he was reading at about a Grade 3 level of comprehension. Just lack of vocabulary in French, and of course it transferred to
the English, one because he only started learning English in Grade 4, right, so the gap was so wide. He had missed all those years of the English. The foundations weren't there. His interest for school wasn't there anymore because he just got to the point where he was having so much difficulty keeping up.

In this example, Pascale perceived that the student’s lack of comprehension in French hindered his academic ability in both languages. Pascale was not able to comment on the success of the child after continuing in an English program because he had continued at a different school but she assumes, “because he missed all of that [learning], I’m sure the gap was still large and he had difficulties.” Thus, teachers believe that academic barriers can prevent students from succeeding in the program.

All three of my interviewees were in agreement that it is beneficial for students experiencing academic and behavioural issues to leave FI. They thought these students were in need of different learning environments that would contribute to greater success in the classroom. Having experience with many students who struggle in FI, Giselle was able to provide some insight by explaining that these issues may be persisting because she thought there is a lack of comfort when the whole environment is in a second language. Teachers perceived that students could be unsuccessful in the program because that ‘element of comfort’ is not there. Which ever the problem may be, parents may not have wanted to watch their child constantly struggle and were hoping to see benefits in changing the program all together.

These particular academic and behavioural issues arising in language immersion programs have been explored in the literature and converge with my findings. In the study of identifying at-risk readers in French Immersion, MacCoubrey, Wade-Woolley, Klinger and Kirby (2004) found that about a third of sampled students tended to struggle with accurately reading French
words in Grades 1, 2 and 3. Many students can struggle with the language at an early age and be described as unsuccessful by their teacher.

4.2 Staying in FI Despite Lack of Success

Participants perceive that sometimes students remain in the program even when they were experiencing lack of success. I was looking to discover some of the motivations behind being in the FI program. Participants described some of the factors that made parents reluctant to having their child leave the FI program even though teachers suggested that a different program would suit them better. These reasons included extra programs offered at school, the area in which the school is located and parents having a strong desire for their child to be bilingual.

When students are enrolled in a FI program, there can be extra programs available to them such as bussing or daycare. Students may be coming from a different community and have the option to take the bus and stay at the daycare in case they are arriving early. Pascale brought up this issue when talking about parents who waited a while to pull their child out of FI in order for him to have access to the resources in the English program to help with his behavioural issues:

I communicated [these issues] to the parents. It took them the whole year, and at the end of the year they made the change but they didn't want to maybe for the same reasons: the daycare, the bussing, and all the stuff that made their life easier because they were both working parents.

In this case, Pascale described how these programs can at times retain students that are struggling just because of the extra benefits they offer. Giselle was also able to comment on this same issue: “I think it has something to do with the bussing too. It’s convenient to have their child on a bus.” Even though students may not be successful with French, they could remain in the program to reap its benefits.
Pascale also spoke to another one of the reasons why parents may be reluctant to pull their child out of the program. She explained that the area in which the FI school was located was seen as more desirable. Some of the neighbouring communities were described as “rough”; therefore parents wanted to enrol their child in FI so they could be in a different community other than where their home-school was located. Pascale discussed this issue when talking about her experiences with parents upon registering their child:

Some parents don't even know when they register their kids that FI is *all* French. And they're shocked, and they're like, “what do you mean you don't speak English half the time!?” Some people have no clue and that's when you know they're just registering them in the program, at times, just to get them out of their bad area. Not all, but some.

Pascale reported this as one of the reasons why a student may begin or remain in the FI program. Even though their child may not be experiencing success, parents may be using the FI program to have their child go to school in a more desirable area instead of wanting their child to learn another language.

Moreover, participants communicated to me that some parents had a very strong desire for their child to be bilingual even when the child was struggling in the program. All three participants were able to comment on this to some degree as they all experienced dealing with frustrated parents who could not understand why their child was experiencing such difficulty. When talking about having to communicate with parents about their child’s struggles, Giselle spoke to this issue:

So, they generally seem to be positive about it. But I think when we start to lay down the evidence, the parents sort of get very, um, you know, “How come?”, they start to get agitated, “Well, why not?” or, “Well, it's only kindergarten!”, and there's a lot of excuses.
They have this notion that French is going to open up a lot more doors.

Here, Giselle talked about some of the frustrations that she saw parents experience when told that FI might not be the best for their child. Participants perceive these contributing factors to be some of the reasons why students remain in the program even when experiencing lack of success.

These particular factors that lead students to remain in the program despite teacher perceptions of their lack of success have not been explicitly explored in the literature. Another reason that was explored regarding external factors that influence students’ reasons to stay is the their strong desire to receive a bilingual diploma. In the study of program choice and experience of French Immersion students, Culligan (2010) found that students thought that if they did not end up receiving their French certificate at the end of their study, all of their attempts at studying French would be a ‘waste.’ This external factor, like the bussing or daycare programs, could lead students to remain in the program even if experiencing difficulties.

4.3 Attempts to Retain Students in FI

Participants reportedly used multiple strategies and steps when trying to help students who are at-risk of leaving the FI program. They described this vigorous process as implementing strategies of their own, discussing issues with parents and implementing new strategies from a team of specialists. These teachers had also been involved in suggesting new paths for students if they had chosen to change programs.

When participants noticed students struggling in FI, they attempted to implement certain strategies that mitigated the issues. An example of this is when I inquired about a certain student who was experiencing behavioural difficulties, Giselle spoke to some of the strategies she used before asking the team of specialists for assistance:
Prior to resource team there were certain things that I changed in the classroom. I would allow him to choose the activity that he wanted to do first, and sometimes I would incorporate the literacy, numeracy, academic into what he was actually doing. So if he was building a car, ok, “Come over here and write about how you made it,” or, “Tell me,” or “Draw a picture.” I would try to implement something he was already interested in to what I needed to extract in terms of literacy, numeracy.

Here, Giselle – agreeing with other participants – reported incorporating some of her own tactics such as including student interest into what was expected academically in order to retain the student in the FI program.

Participants also discussed having to frequently chat with parents in order to discuss these strategies and next steps for their child. They told the parents the difficulties their child was facing and some of the steps the teacher and other stakeholders were taking to help. Martine talked about what the parent phone calls were like:

There were meetings [with the parents] at the beginning of the school year. After a couple of weeks, I met with them. I talked about my concerns and also explained to them what I was going to do, the strategies that will help him. How they are looking into special education programs in terms of FI, and the parents were not very happy with that. It might have served as a trigger; he would be outside the class.

In this quote, Martine explains what was discussed during phone calls and meetings with parents and what was important to bring to their attention about their child. Teachers discuss how talking to parents is a crucial part in attempting to retain students in the FI program.

All three teachers also discussed consulting a team of specialists when they found their own strategies were not effective. An example of this was when Pascale was reiterating the
importance of getting many different staff at the school to be able to help a child who is struggling. When discussing the process of trying to assist a particular student who had academic difficulties, Pascale shared her experiences with the process in talking to a team of professionals:

We bring them to our team, Special Ed., resource, and they're spoken about in front of other specialists, and sometimes we do the in-school team meetings, so myself, the teacher and the Special Ed. teacher and the VP, and we try to come up with some solutions. At times, there's the psychologist, the social worker, the speech and language pathologist are there to try and help the student succeed. And that's why, when you're trying to suggest to the parent that maybe French is not the option for them, we have a lot of professional opinions about it.

Here, Pascale explains what the process was like in trying to discuss next steps for a student in FI. Meeting with a team of professionals can be a crucial step in trying to help a child remain in FI.

Furthermore, some participants gave me insight into what they suggested to parents who had already decided that FI was no longer the option for their child. There are sometimes alternate paths and it is not only the choice to abandon French altogether. Martine brought forward a valuable point when explaining what she did after a student’s parents decided to pull him out of FI:

You know, I told the parents, taking into consideration that the child is very smart and always curious about things, and has a good attitude towards learning; he is interested. I told them for now, just figure out what's not going well and then when he goes to Grade 4, he can go into Extended French because the child is capable mentally. He has those abilities. Another language definitely helps develop the brain in a different way. That's
why I recommended this: Extended French.

Martine was able to suggest an alternate path for this child because she saw that the child was interested in French and wanted to foster that even though FI may not have been the best fit for him. Pascale also iterated this same idea when talking about suggesting the Gifted program to a child’s parents when FI was not necessarily the best fit for him:

I had one student that I recommended to the Gifted program and he got in. Because the tests are done in English, sometimes teachers think that being in FI, they’re already in an enriched program, and there’s no gifted program in French.

Here, Pascale was able to comment on how she suggested a different path for a student but, in her view, this might not be what most teachers would do. When teachers have the best interest of the student in mind, they are able to suggest an alternate path for them, French or not, in order to ensure that they can thrive academically. Teachers explained that all of these steps are the vigorous process that they go through in trying to retain students in FI.

The literature has explored many ways in which teachers attempt to retain students of whom they identify as at-risk of leaving the program. In the study of the suitability of immersion programs for student who struggle, Genesee (1987) found that children are no worse off in the immersion class than in an English one in their L1 language development and that all children can benefit and learn from immersion programs. This point of view supports my findings as these embody the beliefs of my participants in trying their very best to retain students in FI.

4.4 Strategies for a successful FI program

In their daily practice, participants reportedly used a variety of strategies to ensure the success of all students in their FI class. By success, I mean students finishing that year in FI and beginning the next in the same program. These best practices include integrating kinesthetic
movement, establishing community, making connections with the purpose of learning French, and modifying the language and materials to be developmentally appropriate.

Integrating kinesthetic movement can be a best practice in the FI program that helps contribute to the success of struggling students. Giselle and Pascale both incorporated kinesthetic movement as a part of their every day teaching strategies in order to see positive results in the program. When speaking about the strategies that were being used to support a student who was experiencing behaviour difficulties, Giselle explained that, “[h]e liked movement. He liked dance. He liked music. Again, that’s a part of my program too. I try to incorporate that; a lot of kinesthetic movement.” Pascale also talked about using this similar strategy in her classroom:

That’s why they’re saying there’s more behaviour in FI, because of how difficult it is.
They need to move around a bit more. Imagine sitting there all day listening to a foreign language; that takes a lot out of you! Sometimes I try stop, drop and dance. It has to be go, go, go. It has to be changed.

These comments suggest that incorporating a lot of kinesthetic movement into the FI program on a daily basis contributes to greater student success and therefore, less issues in retaining students in TDSB FI programs.

Making students feel comfortable and establishing a sense of community in the classroom is another reported strategy that these FI teachers try to implement in order to see less attrition in FI. Giselle discussed some of the procedures that she used that the beginning of the year:

I think my goal is not so much the French. My goal the first 6 to 8 weeks is, do the kids like coming to school? are they excited? are they going home singing a few simple songs? I think for me, that's my goal the first few weeks. The first 6 weeks is very oral, sort of building that sense of community because a lot of kids come here in their first
week and they're crying, “I hate French, I hate school!” a lot of negative attitude. So, I want to sort of dissipate the negative attitudes surrounding French, and I think it's overwhelming to throw books and materials to a child, like, “Sit down and read this!”

Once the child becomes comfortable in French, they get excited to come in.

Here, Giselle wanted students to feel comfortable and unintimidated when coming into the FI program. Martine also made a similar comment. Her ultimate goal was to “want students to feel comfortable. I don’t want self-esteem to go down.” Teachers explained that implementing strategies that contribute to building classroom community can help them see more success in the FI program.

Making connections with the purpose of learning French can help motivate students. Pascale was able to discuss this issue while talking about how students sometimes commented on how much they hate learning French and their negative attitudes surrounding the language:

We try to encourage parents to try to motivate their children by why they're learning French. And I try to do that; tell them why they're there. As they get older, they can articulate that, like, “My mother just wants me to be bilingual because I'll be more hireable; it's easier to get job.” And I always tell them about my experiences speaking 4 languages, but it was the French that helped me, being the official language I never had trouble finding a job. But the barrier is I guess when the kids don't really know why, they see themselves as different and they don't understand.

Pascale was able to express how she tried to get students to see the reasons why they were in the program. Giselle also talked about this same concern when talking about how parents should address this problem when their child was saying these types of comments: “[y]ou don’t want it to be sort of imposed on them at a young age, you know.” Emphasizing the reasons why students
are learning the language instead of leaving them feeling like it is forced upon them could help students be more successful in FI.

Participants described how using materials that are developmentally appropriate can contribute to a more successful FI program. All three discussed having to use adapted materials, that they usually had put together themselves, in order to make sure that it was at the appropriate academic level for their students yet making sure that the content was age appropriate as well. They explained that Francophone materials have often advanced wording for the age level and when attempting to find easier language, the content then becomes too childish. They ended up translating a lot of English materials that are available in the school or creating their own. Tailor-making French materials can be an effective strategy to ensure that students are engaged and also succeeding in the FI program. These teachers explained that they used a variety of effective strategies to ensure the success of all students in their FI class.

The literature explores many different and successful strategies that teachers use that reportedly contribute to greater student success in language immersion programs. In the study of exploring two different ways to conduct a unit in Science, Turnbull, Cormier and Bourque (2011) found that making sure the language was advanced yet properly supported by the teacher using scaffolding strategies proved to be more effective. This is a divergent theme because this study described simplifying the language as a less effective strategy when reviewing student performance in French at the end of the unit. Although my participants identified adjusting the language to meet students at their level as an effective strategy, Turnbull, Cormier and Bourque (2011) found that pushing students beyond their language level but supporting them throughout the process was more effective.

4.5 Factors contributing to an unsuccessful FI program
Participants noted both systemic and classroom based factors that contribute to unsuccessful FI programs. They had the opportunity to express their concerns as they are at the forefront of some of the issues that occur, out of their control, that contribute to attrition. When commenting on some of the strategies they use to help students, they were also able to counter those with systematic issues that contribute to many students’ lack of success. They described these factors as not getting the required amount of hours instructed in French, lack of French atmosphere in the school, teachers using English to explain concepts, and lack of in-school support.

Participants brought forward that students may not getting the required amount of hours instructed in French. Pascale was blunt in saying that sometimes teachers are not honest when writing the required amount of hours of French instruction on student report cards:

Even Drama and Dance in French because they are supposed to be getting 100% French. This is why I'm thinking that their fluency is not as good as it used to be when I first started teaching. They are not getting 100% exposure in French because a lot of our teachers that are teaching like the Gym or the Art and stuff are English-speaking people. They're not getting 900 hours of French! So we're actually not being accurate on that.

Pascale described how, because of the scheduling done by administration, students may not be getting the required amount of French instruction. Pascale believed this to be a negative factor that could contribute to more attrition in the FI program.

Some participants noticed that there was a lack of French atmosphere in the school. Some FI schools are dual-track, which means that there is an English and French program in the same school. Giselle was able to situation in her dual-track school and what people may notice when entering the building:
When you're in a dual-track school, like I'm sorry when you walk in could you tell it’s a FI school? Just by walking in, you can't. So that's the other thing too, sometimes we are kind of muted in the back. But then oh, if the superintendent comes, then oh we're bilingual. Now we're all bilingual, right? We kind of feel like that sometimes. You know, announcements are in English, plays, they show films to the kids. I don't send the forms out. My kids are French, you’re taking them out for an afternoon to watch an English film? And then they say well it's for fun.

Here, Giselle described how there was an absence of French in the atomosphere of her school. Not being able to tell that the school itself is a FI school could be a negative factor that teachers perceive contributes to an unsuccessful program.

Participants commented on how teachers may be using English to explain concepts, and how they were guilty of this at times themselves. Martine talked about how she contemplated if using English to reinforce concepts was at all beneficial for her students:

It's not right to translate. I notice that I tend to translate for the kids. I have to work on that. To eliminate it from my program. It doesn't contribute to the knowledge of the language. It slows down your thinking when you're translating in your head. I have no opinion yet, if it should be done or not. We use our professional judgment.

Martine explained that this is an ongoing reflection that she has about what works and what does not work in the FI classroom. Pascale also discussed this same topic by stating that, “if you tend to speak in English often, they'll tune out, because they know if it's too hard to figure out, you'll just use English to explain, so all they do is sit there not listening because you'll just say it in English.” Pascale is of the belief that it is not beneficial to be using English in the classroom and this could be a factor that contributes to an unsuccessful FI program.
All three participants agreed that it would be beneficial for students to have more in-school support such as Special Education specialists. They all commented that the English stream has far more available to them to ensure the success of all students. They explained that at times it was better for students to leave FI only because they could receive the help they need by switching programs. Martine, referring to what the TDSB had to offer in terms of resources, stated that, “they introduce the program but they don’t support the program.” The FI programs are extant, therefore there should be more resources available to teachers and students alike in order to see more success in the program. Teachers perceive that factors such as not getting the required amount of hours instructed in French, lack of French atmosphere in the school, teachers using English to explain concepts, and lack of in-school support as some of the main reasons for student attrition in FI programs.

Regarding the use of English in the classroom, participants believed that using English hindered French learning either by translating or having too much English exposed in the school. However, diverging from this is the study of rethinking the effectiveness of multilingual strategies, where Cummins (2007) found that it was less beneficial to see both languages as rigidly separate. In Cummins’ study, students were encouraged to use their L1 through bilingual dictionnaries or by getting support from others in order to support their acquisition of the L2.

4.6 Conclusion

Overall, participants were able to provide detailed strategies that they were using in order to retain students in the FI program and also help them experience more success when enrolled. On the topic of perceived reasons for students not succeeding in FI, participants were able to discuss how behavioural and academic difficulties contributed to students having trouble and leaving the program. They were also able to identify one of the reasons for leaving as parents
thinking that another program would better suit their child.

Contrarily, participants were also able to speak to some of the reasons why students remained in the program even when they were struggling. They discussed extra arrangements such as bussing and daycare as reasons why students stay in the program. They also brought up that the FI school may be in a more favourable area, therefore parents want their child to remain in that school with that intention. Moreover, participants said that some parents had a very strong desire for their child to be bilingual and therefore will keep their child in the program even when struggling.

Participants also explained how they went through a vigorous process in trying to retain students in the FI program. They explained that they would implement some of their own strategies, spend quite some time talking with the student’s parents, and discussing more strategies with a team of specialists, when that student was experiencing difficulty.

One of the main goals of my research was to be able to identify some of the key strategies that these teachers used that could contribute to a successful FI program, with less student attrition. Participants explained that some of their best practices in FI were incorporating kenesthetic movement, establishing community, making connections with the purpose of learning French and modifying the language and material to be developmentally appropriate for the students.

On this same topic, participants found that there were many factors that contribute to an unsuccessful FI program despite all of the positive strategies that they were trying to implement. Some of these negative factors were not getting the required amount of hours instructed in French, lack of French atmosphere in the school, teachers using English to explain concepts, and lack of in-school support.
Overall, my findings identify teachers’ perceptions of what contributes to retention issues in the TDSB FI programs, as well as ways in which they try and retain students to the best of their ability. My findings point to ways in which FI teachers are using strategies in the classroom in order to allow FI to be successful for all students. In Chapter Five, I will explain implications and recommendations for FI teachers and administrators, the areas for further study, questions that I still have regarding my topic as well as new questions that have stemmed from my findings.
Chapter Five: Conclusion

5.0 Introduction

In this final chapter, I summarize the key findings from Chapter Four and consider how they are significant to educational research. Next, I discuss the broad implications that they may have for the educational community and then discuss narrow implications for my own personal practice as a potential French Immersion teacher. I then offer recommendations to teacher education programs, school boards, school administrative staff, and FI teachers. Lastly, I discuss areas for future research on the topic of retention issues in the Toronto District School Board (TDSB) French Immersion (FI) programs.

5.1 Overview of Key Findings

I generated five key findings from my semi-structured interviews conducted with three FI, TDSB teachers. My first key finding was that teachers reported that students’ lack of success in FI was related to behavioural or academic issues. Giselle was able to describe one of her students’ disruptive behaviour and Pascale pointed to her student’s lack of language acquisition skills as their perceived reasons for these students later on leaving the program. Participants reported that students’ parents believed that changing the program would result in greater success as they thought learning in English would be more comforting to the students and therefore reduce their behavioural or academic struggles. This is significant because it highlights some of the reasons why teachers believe students become disengaged with French Immersion.

Another finding was that participants perceive that teachers report that some students remain in the FI program even when they were not experiencing success. I was looking to discover some of the students’ and their parents’ motivations behind them being in the FI program. Pascale discussed extra programs, like bussing and daycare, as some reasons she
thought parents could be keeping their children in the FI program even when they were struggling. She also brought up that her FI school was in a more desirable neighbourhood, which she thought could be a reason why parents enrol their child in FI. Moreover, all participants were able to speak to their perceptions of parents’ strong desires to keep their child in the program because their child will be bilingual and might have a more promising future. This finding is significant because it discusses teachers’ perceptions of parents’ motives for keeping their children in FI.

My third finding was that participants reportedly used multiple strategies and steps when trying to help students who are at risk of leaving the FI program. They described this vigorous process as implementing strategies of their own, like Giselle who reportedly attempted to give a student a choice about what they wanted to learn and later reportedly integrated academic components to mitigate disruptive behaviour. All participants also reportedly discussed issues and action plans with parents. Martine then discussed implementing new strategies from a team of specialists in order to further help these at-risk students. These teachers had reportedly also been involved in suggesting new paths to the parents of the children of whom had chosen to change to programs, such as Gifted or Extended French, if teachers thought it would better suit that child. This proves to be significant because it shows that teachers reportedly do everything in their capacity to retain and support their students.

Participants reportedly used a variety of strategies in their daily practice to ensure the success of all students in their FI class. Some participants discuss kinesthetic movement as one of their best practices as they thought students needed to move around due to the demanding nature of learning in a second language. Teachers also discussed establishing community and making sure students enjoy coming to school as one of the ways they attempted to retain more
students. Moreover, Pascale brought up that she reportedly made connections to the purpose of learning French so that students would feel intrinsically motivated. Participants also talked about how they modify the language and materials to be developmentally appropriate for the students that they teach. This is significant because it highlights some of the reported best practices currently being used in FI programs.

Lastly, participants noted both systemic and classroom based factors that contribute to unsuccessful FI programs. Pascale had the opportunity to express her concerns about how students are not always getting the required number of French-language hours due to courses like Physical Education, Dance and Drama being taught in English. Giselle also pointed out that there was a lack of ‘French atmosphere’ in the school, drawing on examples like announcements, films and plays being shown in English. Moreover, Martine talked about using English in the classroom to help translate concepts; she believed this was not an effective strategy as it takes away from the French atmosphere. Teachers then expressed how they felt as though there was a lack of in-school support. Martine stated that “[The TDSB] introduce[s] the program but they don’t support the program.” These findings are significant because they show that FI schools may be lacking the appropriate atmosphere/environment that they need to be more successful.

These key findings lead me to discuss the implications of this study broadly for the educational community at large, and narrowly for my own future practice as a future FI teacher.

5.2 Implications

In this section, I bring forward the broad and narrow implications of this study. I first discuss the broad implications for the education community including students, parents, FI teachers and school administrators. I then discuss the narrow implications for my personal practice and identity.
5.2.1 Broad implications: For all stakeholders in a FI child’s education

My findings help to shine a light on some of the implications that they may have for students, parents, FI teachers, and school administrators. I will discuss each of these stakeholder groups in turn.

Students may be more successful in FI if they were to receive more specialized support from support staff in the school. My participants reported that there was a lack of in-school support. If students are struggling with academic and/or behavioural issues which will lead them to drop out of FI to seek that specialized support from elsewhere, having more support in their own school might allow them to stay. Having additional support could lead students to have more success in their second language learning as well as reduce troublesome behaviours.

Parents could have more access to information about the FI program, in regards to its demands, bussing and locations in order to make choices when either enrolling in, or withdrawing their student from FI. Because participants reported that parents could be very adamant about their child learning French, it could potentially hinder parents’ ability to see the programs’ potential downfalls. This could help parents know the program better and how it may or may not suit their child. This may help retain students in FI because they will be enrolling their child based on a well-informed decision.

Some French Immersion teachers may not be using effective strategies to retain students and allow students to find success in their program. Participants reported that they saw much success in using strategies such as incorporating movement, connecting with the purpose of learning the language and establishing community. FI teachers may be struggling to use incorporate these strategies into their pedagogy. These are viewed as positive strategies because they could be more motivating for students who are faced with the demands of the program.
There may be a lack of Special Education staff in FI programs needed to assist teachers and parents with the IEP process in French. Because participants reported that this was the case for their schools, it could be why parents are looking to the English program for the appropriate resources and supports in order for their child to achieve to their standard. These Special Education staff members may also be able to offer advice to teachers on how to help retain an at-risk student.

Principals might be struggling to support the needs of FI teachers and promoting a French atmosphere within their school, especially when the school is dual-track. Participants reported that announcements, films and plays were being offered in English, which shows that French may not have been playing a big role in the out-of-classroom culture of the school. Making sure that clubs, announcements, school plays and extra-curricular activities are offered in French as well may help foster a better French teaching and learning environment for the students and the teachers.

5.2.2 Narrow: For My Professional Identity and Practice

My findings also help me as a future FI teacher to reflect on how they will inform my own practice. The purpose of this research study was not only to bring awareness to possible FI attrition issues in TDSB but also to explore some of the effective strategies that teachers were using which they thought helped retain these students. Learning about these strategies will help me in my own practice in order to see more students remain in FI programs.

French Immersion should be accessible to all students with all the right supports to see more student success. Because my participants found this to be a major concern, as a new FI teacher, I will advocate for more in-school support as well as appropriate resources. French Immersion should involve a balance of making sure the language level is appropriate and
accessible for all students yet also making sure content is engaging and relevant to them and I will strive to make my program suitable for all of my students. This is a strategy that I learned from my participants that I would like to implement in my own practice. It is my goal to prepare students to be bilingual while also being successful in the other subjects I will teach.

There are other avenues for learning French, not only FI, so leaving the program is not the end of French language learning. If the child is interested in French, their learning should be encouraged. My participants shared insight with me when they explained that there are other avenues for learning French, other than FI, that they were able to suggest to parent after a student had left the program. As a future FI teacher I will make sure to inform myself of all the French language programs being offered in the community so that I am able to suggest alternatives for parents and students who decide that FI is not the best option for them.

5.3 Recommendations

After gathering my findings and discussing implications, I am able to make the following recommendations for teacher education programs, school boards, school administrators and FI teachers.

5.3.1 Teacher education programs

Teacher education programs should be more directed toward FI, with practicum experience offered in FI, if a teacher candidate will be qualified to teach in a FI program. Often, French as a Second Language is an umbrella topic for both Core French and French Immersion, which does not necessarily require the same strategies and skill set. Teacher candidates should be better trained to teach subject matter (or content) in French, such as Mathematics, Social Studies or Science. Instead of learning how to teach French itself, they can be working on specific FI
skills. This could be implemented in the next few years with teacher educators collaborating to implement a well-designed new course that builds these skills in teacher candidates.

5.3.2 School boards

The TDSB should direct more funding to supporting FI programs as well as offering the program, as all students are welcome. As FI enrollment increases, the additional supports should increase. According to the Ministry of Education (2015) document, *Including Students with Special Education Needs in FSL Programs*, having more supports in place for students will promote diversity and inclusion in FSL. In the next five years, many French-speaking support personnel should be available in each FI school. This would require hiring teachers who speak French, or existing FI teachers, who have taken the required three-part additional qualifications to be a French special educator.

5.3.3 School administrators

The administrative staff in FI schools should be organizing more French events for parents as well as students. This can take many forms as parents should be involved in the school community and be well-informed of the program itself, and students should be more involved in French speaking extra-curricular activities. By the beginning of the next school year, all parents should have access to a variety of information about FI, including research studies like this one. Moreover, when extra-curricular programs are starting, they should be offered in French as well. This includes school clubs, sports teams, announcements, assemblies, and watching films. Offering these additional aspects of school culture in French is positive and could help students further develop their vocabulary and French proficiency skills.

5.3.4 French Immersion teachers
Teaching in FI can be quite the juggle of finding appropriate content that compliments students’ language abilities. Teachers should seek help and support from colleagues to plan together. Immediately, teachers should collaborate to reduce the workload that results from having to create individualized resources to suit each class’ level. A French Immersion teacher should also promote more positivity toward French. FI teachers should use non-intimidating approaches such as oral and kinesthetic learning. They can implement this by incorporating Drama into their pedagogy and give more opportunities for student discussions.

5.4 Areas for Further Research

This study could extend into different avenues of research. Due to the nature of this qualitative research study, I was limited to only the reports of three FI teachers. I would like to see the perspective of parents, students and administrators on this matter and not only teacher perceptions. Also, this study had a small sample within the TDSB, and it would be beneficial to study and compare many different FI programs offered in other boards within Ontario. Thus, this study can lead to multiple additional paths.

I was left wondering more about why students remain in the FI program for reasons other than wanting to be bilingual. One of my significant findings was that students can be left struggling in the FI program because they seem to have other services offered to them such as daycare and bussing. A next step could be to conduct a study on the additional services that FI offers and how they can impact appropriate programming for students.

A complimentary area of research would be to see the outcomes of students who graduate with a bilingual diploma from a TDSB FI program. This should consider students who have graduated high school 10 to 15 years prior being tested to ensure that the skills that they have gained from FI were long-lasting. Studies can test these students’ proficiency in French as well
as job opportunities they have had. This will assist in either supporting or contradicting parents’ beliefs that French Immersion will help their child in their future.

Lastly, further research might consider comparing the outcomes of students in dual-track schools to single-track, where French is the only language spoken in the whole school. Because the lack of French atmosphere in dual-track schools was a significant finding of my research, comparing these two types of schools can contribute to finding out whether more students stay in FI if the school is more French-focused.

5.5 Concluding Comments

This research has uncovered successful strategies that FI teachers are using to retain their students. It has also pointed to teachers’ perceptions of why students and their parents chose to stay or drop out of FI TDSB programs. These findings are an important contribution to the literature, especially in an area where the issue of attrition in these programs is prominent. This has resulted in implications and recommendations for teacher education programs, school boards, students, parents, school administrators and FI teachers. I am hopeful to enter FI teaching with the main goal of supporting students to the best of my ability in order to see attrition rates decline. This study not only better informed my personal practice but also contributes to the FI community.
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doi:10.1017/CBO9780511620829.017


APPENDICES

Appendix A: Letter of Consent for Interview

Date: __________________
Dear ___________________,

My Name is Alexandrea Nazzicone 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 strategies that teachers use in order to improve retention issues in the French Immersion programs of the Toronto District School Board. I am interested in interviewing teachers who have previously experienced attrition in FI and taught Grade 6 in a dual-track school within the TDSB. I think that your knowledge and experience will provide insights into this topic. Your participation in this research will involve one 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 informal presentations 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 who will have access to the research data will be my course instructor. 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 question 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,
Alexandrea Nazzicone
Phone number: 647-999-9899               E-mail: alexandrea.nazzicone@mail.utoronto.ca

MT Program Contact: Dr. Angela Macdonald-Vemic, Assistant Professor – Teaching Stream
Phone Number: 416-821-6496               Email: 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 at any time without penalty.

I have read the letter provided to me by Alexandrea Nazzicone 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

Thank you for participating in my research study. The purpose of this research is to learn what strategies French Immersion teachers are using to help with retention issues within the TDSB French Immersion programs. This interview should take approximately 60 minutes, and is comprised of approximately 21 questions. The interview protocol has been divided into four sections, beginning with the participant’s background information, followed by questions about their encounters with students of whom do not end up pursuing French, then their experiences as a French Immersion teacher in the TDSB, and concluding with questions regarding supports, challenges, and next steps for teachers. I want to remind you that you can choose not to answer any question, and can remove yourself from participation at any time. Do you have any questions before we begin?

To begin can you state your name for the recording?

Section A – Background Information

1. How long have you been a French Immersion Teacher in the TDSB?

2. How many of those years have been in a dual-track school?

3. What grades and subjects in French Immersion do you currently teach? Which have you previously taught?

4. In addition to your role as a teacher, what other roles do you fulfill in the school (clubs, coach, advisor, resource teacher etc.)?

5. Can you describe the community within your school? Demographics? (SES, ethnicity, etc.) From what area do the students in the FI come from? Are they bussed in? Is there parent involvement?
6. Are you a native French speaker?
   (if yes) Are you French-Canadian
   (if no) What is your French learning background?

Section B – Encounters with Students Who Leave French Immersion

8. I’m going to ask you to describe your experience of working with two students who left the French Immersion program the year after you had them as a student in. Please take a moment and think about two students who fit this description and who you would like to talk about today.

Proceed through the follow-up questions below twice (once for each student).

   a. Can you describe the student? (academics, social skills, family, exceptionalities, behaviour, etc.)
   b. Would you say there were ‘warning signs’?
      (if yes) What were these?
      (if no) Were you surprised?
   c. Had you communicated with the student about leaving? Please describe.
      How about with parents or colleagues? Please describe.
   d. Do you agree with the decision to remove the student from FI?
      Why/not?
   e. What supports, if any, had you or colleagues put in place to support this student in the year before they left FI?
   f. What else, if anything, do you think could have been done to retain the student?
   g. In your opinion, should this student have been in FI?
   h. Have you had contact with this student since they left FI? Please describe.

9. Now that you have described your experiences with these two students in detail, can you think of any similarities between them/their situation? How about differences between them?

10. Have you shared the above experiences with these two students with other FI teachers?
    a. If yes, how did your experiences compare with their own?
    b. If no, why have you chosen not to discuss these experiences with colleagues?

Section C – Supports, Challenges, and Next Steps for Teachers

17. What supports and resources are available to you as a French Immersion teacher in supporting students at risk of attrition from FI?
    What supports and resources would you like to see made available?

18. What barriers do you face as a French Immersion teacher in supporting students at risk of attrition from FI?
    How do you manage these barriers?
19. What advice do you have for me, a beginning French Immersion teacher, on retaining students in FI?

20. Do you have any final thoughts?