

What School Administrators Need to Know about the Inclusion of Students with Diverse Needs in French Immersion Schools

Introduction

Today's French Immersion classrooms are as diverse as those delivering other programs. Experts such as Fred Genesee (Duval, 2008) believe there is no reason to exclude students who are struggling from French Immersion programs. For many students, the benefits outweigh the challenges; the immersion setting helps them build better language strategies in ways that might not be possible in an English only program. Some students may require accommodations to participate fully in a French Immersion program, but this requirement can also be seen as an opportunity for administrators and teachers to find innovative ways of meeting all the needs in their immersion classrooms.

This brochure/chapter presents a series of questions and answers to help the school administrator support teachers in meeting the needs of students who may be struggling in the French Immersion program.

What is Inclusion?

Alberta Education's Standards for Special Education, Amended 2004, states that "'inclusive setting/ inclusion' means specially designed instruction and support for students with special education needs in regular classrooms and neighbourhood schools" (p. 3). More recently, educational literature has begun to see inclusion as a child-centred philosophy and approach that allows students to reach their full potential. This approach provides students with the best learning opportunities that will meet their needs by removing barriers to their participation. Inclusive schools recognize and celebrate diversity, value students and staff and see differences as valuable resources to support learning.

What are the advantages of keeping the struggling student in French Immersion?

French Immersion programs can be a good choice for some students who are struggling or who have special education needs. By learning both of Canada's official languages, students gain more than the ability to speak the languages. For example, students may benefit from a wider range of learning strategies for overcoming learning difficulties and renewed confidence for learning new things. Recent research has shown that language skills learned in one language may transfer to the other language, thus advancing language skills in both the first and second languages (Woolfolk, 2006). Furthermore, students at risk for reading or language development issues might benefit from attending a French Immersion program where there is more instruction time spent on basic sounds and letters. In fact, more repetition and skill transfer can make students in French Immersion stronger readers overall and help those with language difficulties to develop strategies for overcoming those difficulties.

The benefits of attending a French Immersion program in Canada are well documented. The Canadian Council on Learning (CCL) states that Canadians who speak both official languages have higher employment rates and generally earn more than those who speak only English or French. Furthermore, bilingual individuals have enhanced problem-solving skills because they better develop their ability to discern relevant from irrelevant information. Finally, bilingualism in French and English enhances one's ability to fully participate

in Canadian society (CCL, 2007). Other benefits identified include greater cognitive flexibility, creativity and concept formation (Woolfolk, 2006). French is also an asset for employment, travel and leisure pursuits around the world.

How do I guide a teacher who is concerned that a student is struggling in the French Immersion classroom?

When a French Immersion teacher is concerned that a student is struggling, there are a number of steps that should be considered:

- 1) Work with the teacher to decide what kinds of data could be collected to help identify problems or issues that the student is experiencing. A portfolio of work, sample assessments and more formal assessments such as COLI (see resource list for more information) may be useful in determining the student's strengths and needs. Data should include everyday classroom tasks that are presenting a problem and strategies that the teacher has attempted to address these issues. It is also important to consider the learning environment and to observe if there are particular times when the student faces greater struggles.
- 2) Once the teacher has identified the student's strengths, needs and other environmental factors, the next step is to try new strategies to help the student progress. Examples of strategies may include presenting the materials differently, moving the student to a different area of the classroom or designing homework to address the student's needs. The teacher uses the data collected in first step to determine which accommodations can and should be made. During the second phase, the teacher continues to collect data on the student's progress and should, at the end of several weeks, be able to determine whether the new strategies have helped the student progress or if it is time for more specialized assessments.
- 3) If it is decided that the student requires specialized assessments, it is a good idea to hold a meeting that includes the classroom teacher, the student's parents and special education

personnel from the school or school jurisdiction prior to assessment taking place. This is an opportunity to gather more data that will benefit the assessment and to create an understanding of the purpose of the assessment.

- 4) If the student requires an intellectual assessment (i.e., IQ test), it should be performed in the student's first language to ensure the assessment is as valid as possible. Achievement or academic functioning assessments should be provided in French, but these may be done at the school level by personnel qualified to administer Level B assessments.
- 5) The last step in the assessment process is to look again at the student's strengths and needs from a more formal perspective and to develop an Individualized Program Plan (IPP) that outlines goals, strengths and accommodations for the student. For more information on creating IPPs, see Alberta Education's *Individualized Program Planning* (2006).

Which types of special education needs can be accommodated in a French Immersion program?

A student's ability to succeed in a French Immersion program depends upon many factors, including motivation, support and environmental factors. If appropriate supports are in place, students with a variety of special education needs can succeed in French Immersion.

Students with language or reading difficulties or a learning disability can often thrive in French Immersion. As these difficulties are pervasive (i.e. they will exist regardless of language of instruction and in all languages learned by the student), the student may not struggle more in French Immersion than they would in an English-only program. Students struggling with reading or language may even be at an advantage because the repetition and review of basic skills in French may be beneficial. Furthermore, skills and strategies learned to overcome language or reading difficulties are transferable from one language to another, meaning that interventions can benefit the student for both languages.

Students with cognitive disabilities can also benefit from learning a second language in an immersive setting if they are provided with the appropriate supports. These students will learn more slowly and will require adaptations, but they will also enjoy benefits from learning a second language.

Students with behaviour difficulties or AD/HD often require behavioural interventions, but their ability to learn languages is not usually impaired. Behaviour issues may be addressed using strategies similar to those used in other programs.

Students who are gifted may benefit from the opportunities that French Immersion education presents. However, some differentiating of instruction for these students is often required in order to best meet their needs.

French Immersion may not be appropriate for students with a significant delay or disorder in their first language or with significant hearing impairments, unless these can be rectified by adjusting the educational environment (e.g., by installing an amplification system or other equipment).

Can French Immersion schools access additional financial support for students with special education needs?

Many principals in French Immersion schools wonder whether there is funding available to meet special education needs. Currently, special education funding for students with mild/moderate needs is included in a school division's general revenue. For students identified as having severe special education needs, school divisions receive a grant to help fund specialized services for the student. This grant is available for students attending any school in the jurisdiction. At this time, the Setting the Direction for Special Education in Alberta project is looking at identification and funding options, so these standards may change at the completion of the project.

Who decides that a student should be moved to an English-only program?

The school principal, together with the student's parents or guardians and other school jurisdiction staff, should decide what is best for the student. Psychologists and other specialists are an excellent resource for identifying student needs and strengths, but placement decisions should be made by all the members of the learning team.

Are special education staff in school jurisdictions accountable to students in French Immersion schools?

Yes. According to the Standards for Special Education, all students in a jurisdiction have the right to have their needs met. It is up to the school jurisdiction to make decisions as to how the needs of all students will be met.

What types of strategies can be used to meet all needs in the French Immersion classroom?

Students in the French Immersion classroom require the same range of strategies that they would need in an English-only program. Once the student's particular needs have been determined, appropriate strategies should be used. Generally, all students can benefit from differentiated instruction that meets the varying levels of ability found in any classroom.

What does differentiated instruction look like in a French Immersion classroom?

French immersion classrooms are just like any other classroom where students' abilities vary. Teachers skilled in differentiated instruction techniques are better able to meet all the needs in their classroom by varying assignments, assessments and time allotments for completing tasks. More detailed information for French Immersion teachers can be found in *L'Inclusion en immersion*, a practical guide to implementing differentiated instruction in the French Immersion classroom. Many other excellent resources on differentiated instruction are available in English, such as Carol Ann Tomlinson's

publications (2000; 2001) on differentiating instruction and leadership for differentiated schools and classrooms.

What if we decide the student really should be moved to an English-only program?

If, after careful consideration of all relevant factors, parents, school personnel and the student (if appropriate) conclude that the student should be moved to an English-only program, it is important to ensure a smooth transition from one school to the next. Although it is not specifically geared toward use in the French Immersion context, Alberta Education's resource entitled *Building on Success* is an excellent reference to help manage transitions so that they happen more smoothly. Generally, it is good practice to gather all the relevant documents and evaluations as well as the student's IPP and to outline the student's difficulties so that he or she may obtain the necessary support in the new school.

Conclusion

Research shows that a wide variety of students can be successful in a French Immersion program, so it is important for teachers and school administrators to be open to student diversity in French Immersion. Interventions can make a big difference in a student's learning, but teachers first have to be willing to intervene and to provide students with the tools they need to succeed in their French Immersion program.

Recommended resources available online at <http://education.alberta.ca>

or from the

Learning Resources Centre,
<http://www.lrc.education.gov.ab.ca>:

- *COLI*
- *L'inclusion en Immersion*
- *Resources to Support Students with Diverse Learning Needs/Ressources pour appuyer les élèves ayant divers besoins spéciaux*
- *Unlocking Potential/Révéler le potentiel*

References

- Canadian Council on Learning (2007). *French-immersion education in Canada*. Retrieved from http://www.ccl-cca.ca/CCL/Reports/LessonsInLearning/LinL20070517_French_Immersion_programs.htm December 30, 2008.
- Duval, S. (2008). *French immersion: Do English skills "translate?" Clar(!)ty*. Canadian Language and Literacy Research Network, London, ON, 16-19.
- Tomlinson, C. A. (2001). *How to differentiate instruction in mixed-ability classrooms*. (2nd Ed.), Alexandria, VA: ASCD.
- Tomlinson, C.A., & Allan, S. D. (2000). *Leadership for differentiating schools and classrooms*. Alexandria, VA: ASCD.

