An autobiographical narrative inquiry into the experiences of a French immersion teacher journeying towards inclusion

by

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Abstract

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Using the metaphor of "The Frog in the Well: Two Steps Forward, One Step Back" the author reflects on how her lived experiences have shaped her beliefs about the intersections of French immersion and inclusive education. She stories her shifting understandings of French immersion and how these have been shaped by her own student experiences, her experiences teaching French immersion and science in a variety of schools, and her formal study of curriculum and special education. This process of change is made visible through a framework of autobiographical narrative inquiry.

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Acknowledgments

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But most of all I thank my own parents for taking a chance on a new school program all those years ago.

Chapter 1: Narrative Beginnings

This project began, about a year ago, with an autobiographical account, a narrative beginning. By recollecting some stories I have lived, both as a student and as a teacher, and by weaving them into a narrative that made sense to me, some of the experiences that have been most meaningful to me during my journey to becoming a more aware teacher, particularly a teacher of French Immersion (FI), have been brought to the foreground. This narrative beginning helped me to understand who I was in this inquiry project.

The text that follows weaves recalled memories, written in italics, into my narrative beginning. As discussed in the 'methods' section of Chapter 3, these recalled memories are fictionalized in order to blur locations, times and the particularities of individuals; pseudonyms are used and these stories represent collages of interactions. They are works of creative non-fiction.

My Journey as a Student

The public school years. It would be fair, in some ways, to call me a homebody. Leaving the hearth and the comfort of our little street for school was quite difficult for me, or so I'm told. That first day of Kindergarten may have involved tears, clinging on to my mother's pant legs and a wail of "why did you sign me up?" It's one of those stories that I don't know if I actually remember, or if I have just been told it so many times that it has become part of me. My other memories of those very early school years are definitely mine but they come only in little snippets, like reading with my older buddy (I thought her wavy blond hair was the most beautiful in the world), a class play in which I

portrayed a spotted dog (at least I wasn't the slug), and the tingle of understanding I felt when I figured out that the numbers 1,9,8 and 0 was the way to say what year it was.

The French word that I think of most when I think of elementary school is 'tapis.' I doubt it was the first French word I learned – that was likely 'bonjour' – but it's the one that stands out. Boy, was it ever soothing to sit there on the tapis, listening to stories and playing with each other's hair.

Our family moved to the suburbs of Toronto when I was in Grade 2 and I was parachuted mid-year into a FI class that had already received significant English language arts instruction. I recall quite clearly my growing sense of panic when I was faced with an English book. I couldn't read in English, only in French. The idea of alerting the teacher to my predicament was too uncomfortable to consider, but I was fortunate that the cachet of the 'new kid' was so strong, as all the little girls seemed quite thrilled to let me copy their work until I was able to figure out how to read in English for myself.

We moved back West when I was in Grade 6, and I was able to rejoin the same FI class that I had left with little disruption. Over the years, and particularly in secondary school, there were some difficult moments when I was frustrated by the heavy workload of communicating in a second language, but my struggles were rarely more than I could muddle through on my own or with the assistance of my classmates or my parents. Admittedly, there were some facets of FI that I found profoundly unpleasant, such writing and presenting French speeches; I was a shy student and, consequently, I dreaded this yearly ritual, but in spite of this I never thought seriously about quitting FI.

I was a FI student for 13 years, and it was overall a very positive experience for me; I enjoyed and benefitted from the small class size and amicable relationships with my classmates, exposure to another language and culture, a challenging and stimulating academic environment, and some fantastic extracurricular opportunities and field trips.

Who takes a class of Grade 9 kids on a 100 km bike trip over a weekend? The whole idea was a little nuts. There was no moon that night we camped out, so when a bunch of us went out swimming in the ocean, we got way out before we realized just how dark it was and that we had gotten turned around and couldn't tell where the land was. Fortunately one of our classmates on shore thought to flash a bike light at us a few times. I was a little scared and cold, but also giddy at the adventure of it all. That was also the trip when Will got punched in the face by an angry driver and we had a root beer drinking contest at the A&W on the way home. The manager thought it was so funny that he gave us all the root beer for free.

The amount of 'adventure' we had on that particular field trip is perhaps more a sign of a different era than anything else, but there's no doubt that we had some amazing opportunities. Ski trips, camping trips, trips to Québec and France, plays, movies, speakers, entertainers, lots of maple syrup – this was just some of what FI offered us. My own sense of what FI was all about came, I think, from some of these special chances we got. That being said, FI was also firmly planted in a rigorous and demanding academic curriculum involving listening, speaking, writing and, of course, some challenging reading assignments.

"Aujourd'hui, maman est morte. Ou peut-être hier, je ne sais pas." Whaaaaat? Who starts a book this way? This is going to be a slog, isn't it? Where's my dictionary??

By the time we arrived in high school, all of our FI courses were academic. Our teachers were kind, but also tough taskmasters and I lived in fear of not being able to complete my homework or of producing assignments that were subpar. Some of the learning we did was quite traditional, such as taking notes or answering textbook questions, but group work and class discussions also played important roles in our daily school lives. There were a number of challenging assignments over the years, and I had to work hard to meet the high expectations. In one case, for example, we each had to choose a government ministry, call them to make an appointment to speak to their French representative, conduct an interview with this person, and prepare a class presentation of our findings. I can't even begin to express how nervous I was to go downtown to the Ministry of Aboriginal Affairs (then called 'Indian Affairs') to talk to this person I'd never met before. I doubt I'll ever forget doing that.

While I was quite involved in extra-curricular activities and I did play on a school sports team, my real focus was on my classes and by the time I reached the senior grades, I was taking a full load of academic subjects. I enjoyed and did well in my liberal arts classes, but I also really loved studying science. I took physics, chemistry and biology in both Grades 11 and 12 and probably would have taken more science courses if I had been able to squeeze them in.

During those early years the FI program was still quite small, and there was only a class or two of students per grade in the school district. There were, over the years, students who came and went from our FI class. I don't remember most of the students who left after Kindergarten or Grade 1, but I know there must have been several. After that point it was much rarer for students to leave our class, but upon reflection, I think there was always the understanding that a student should value the program and be willing to try to meet its expectations, or they should go. For example, we were often told that if we didn't want to speak French in class, we should think about whether this was the program for us. By the time my FI class reached Grade 12, although we were by then only taking one course in French and interacting mainly with students from all programs, most of the students had been at school together for 13 years.

Our friend Stacey, who had been with our class since the beginning, left in Grade 10 to go to a different school. She never really explained why she left, but she said she was really enjoying her new situation. I did know why our classmate Sara had left: she had gotten into some kind of disagreement with one of our French teachers and no one was willing to budge. I felt pretty badly about that, since it seemed a shame not to finish out your last couple of years of French immersion because of a personality conflict.

Our class had been whittled down to about 18 students by Grade 12, but we all graduated as part of the much larger class of 1992 with the knowledge that the government considered us to be 'functionally bilingual' in both official languages. I wouldn't necessarily say that we were all close friends, but by that point we had been together for a long time and we knew each other quite well; we were fairly familiar with

each other's strengths and weaknesses – who was good at grammar or math, who had strong leadership skills, who could draw, who couldn't read out loud very well – and while we sometimes bickered, we did stick up for each other in a pinch. Overall, I think we were a pretty agreeable bunch of kids, in spite of the fact that we played the odd practical joke, like confusing attendance-taking by climbing in and out of windows while the teacher's back was turned or taking turns wearing their reading glasses while they searched for them. Even then I felt privileged to have studied with a group of such interested, involved and friendly students and to have had the chance to learn a second language during my public school years.

The post-secondary years.

I headed off to university the next autumn, although to this day I can't really say how I ended up half-way across the country on a campus I'd never even seen before. Without much idea what I wanted to study, I began in a combination arts/science program, but over time, although not entirely by design, I ended up pursuing a plant biology degree. I liked the botany course I took in my first year, and before I knew it I'd taken enough courses like it to make a good start towards a major. By the time I graduated, which took a while since I was quite enjoying being a student, I was focusing my studies on plant-fungus mycorrhizal interactions and microscopy and even conducting some research in the botany lab.

As soon as I stood up out of the chair I fell right over. I remember lying there on the floor of that little dark room and holding one leg of the table to try to stop everything from moving. I guess that's what happens when you look through the eyepiece of an

electron microscope for several hours, scanning back and forth, back and forth, back and forth. I had found some microtubules in my specimens, though, so I was still pretty pleased.

The only French course I took during my undergraduate degree was deadly boring. Part of me wishes I'd stuck it out longer, but I took the easy way out and studied beginning Spanish instead. In spite of this, French did continue to be a part of my life, as I spent several years living in a French-themed residence at university and took up what social opportunities I could to continue to use and practice the language. It did round out my academic French somewhat, and I came away from it with a better understanding of Franco-Ontarian culture, a better ear for various Canadian French accents, and a pocketful of useful expressions and swear words. One of the identified limitations of FI is that students do learn quite an academic style of French, so it was beneficial to have exposure to a more 'day-to-day' use of language.

My Journey as a Teacher

My 'biology in French immersion' path. As a member of one of the first FI cohorts, I am now part of what has been dubbed the 'first wave' and also one of a relatively small number of graduates who have gone on to teach in the program. My journey to becoming a FI teacher had its ups and downs, but I have grown in my comfort and understanding of the program over the course of a decade of experience.

As a young adult I worked for several years before deciding to go back to school to become a science teacher. There was a possibility to complete this in FI, which

seemed like a good idea, but acceptance was contingent on passing a day-long test of French listening, writing and speaking abilities, so I set out to brush up and improve my skills. In preparation for this test, I studied several hours per day for about four months and just managed to pass to the level required to teach in secondary FI. I continued my efforts by spending five months working as a nanny near Vevey, Switzerland prior to beginning teacher education at the University of British Columbia (UBC). During my time on the UBC campus, along with a large portion of my fellow FI teacher candidates, I took extra French classes taught at lunch time through the Alliance Française. My language abilities continued to improve, but I still had work to do, particularly in my writing, and I never strayed far from my dictionary or Bescherelle (a book of verb conjugations) in the years that followed.

It would be a stretch to say that I enjoyed teacher training. I was a bit surprised to discover that there were only two of us being trained as FI science teachers at UBC. Our oddball status meant that the university was unsure how to handle us, so we were enrolled in both Science and FI and required to take some of our foundation courses with both cohorts, sometimes simultaneously. It was a juggling act that involved completing a hideous number of assignments for our double-booked classes. I was exhausted most of the time.

My practicum was equally harried. This is when I discovered that there are very few resources produced for FI courses; much of what is used in classes has been created by teachers themselves. I was extremely lucky to be offered a full-time, continuing job before I had even left UBC, and I fully recognize that this never would have happened

without my certification to teach ‘sciences naturelles’ in the FI program. I didn’t feel all that lucky at the time, however, as a first-year teacher struggling to keep my head above water, and my first few years of teaching were very challenging and further complicated by the wave of curriculum change that swept through the junior science program. Typically, this type of change was accompanied by new learning outcome documents, a new textbook, and a collection of other resources, such as assessment banks and blackline masters that could be purchased. This was not the case with the FI resources. We were lucky to get a textbook, and that came many months after the year of the change had begun and cost about twice as much as its English counterpart; no other French resources were produced. The FI Science teachers in the province began dutifully translating the English resources, but we were told by the textbook publisher in no uncertain terms that we were not permitted to share any translated resource with each other or other teachers. As a non-native speaker, all of this translation was both time-consuming and mentally draining, and while being in the classroom in French was enjoyable, it was also challenging. I still take explicit steps almost every day to be always developing my French skills. I’m quite dedicated to this work because I believe that FI students should have the benefit of teachers who are fluent or near-fluent in French, but it’s rarely the path of least resistance.

My life has changed quite significantly in the last few years. Due to skyrocketing property prices in the Lower Mainland, I left what had, over time, become a great job teaching science in both the FI and English programs in the suburbs of Vancouver and moved to Vancouver Island. Getting work here has been a challenging endeavour, but

I've had the chance to gain valuable experience while working as a Teacher Teaching on Call (TTOC) and in temporary contracts. I have begun teaching mathematics, in both FI and English. I have also taught at the intermediate level, experiencing a single-track elementary FI school environment for almost a year, and played a role in the Grade 7 to 8 transition process. This placement also allowed me to become more integrally involved in the cultural side of FI, and I developed a greater understanding of and appreciation for the many cultural opportunities that FI offers its students, such as 'Carnaval,' food festivals and theatre performances. I have taught on call extensively for FI classes from Grades 1 to 12, including such courses as 'Français langue' and 'sciences humaines.' These experiences have given me both a broader and deeper view of teaching in general, but particularly of the FI program.

Returning to school to study Special Education. My teacher training at UBC included one special education course ('Development and Exceptionality in the Regular Classroom'). Although it probably covered useful material, my lack of personal experience with inclusive classrooms, coupled with my lack of classroom teaching experience, made it difficult for me to find an entry point into the course material, and I got very little out of it. In my early years of teaching, while I was quite willing to try to help my students who were struggling academically or otherwise, my efforts to provide effective assistance were hit or miss.

Meanwhile, the diversity of student needs in the classes I taught was increasing while resources dwindled in the public school system, and I found it increasingly difficult to keep up with the varied needs of students. Many excellent professional development

opportunities helped me to develop some more effective systems and strategies to reach all students, but I was aware of room for professional growth in this area.

Consequently, at a time when my employment status was uncertain and regular work wasn't guaranteed, I took the opportunity to advance my own formal education. In addition to undertaking this Master's program in Curriculum Studies, I also began a Professional Specialization Certificate in Special Education. The courses I have completed through both programs have helped me not only to focus my efforts for this project, but also to begin to better understand and respond to the diverse needs of all my students, including those in FI.

Research Puzzles

My research puzzle began as a wondering about whether students with diverse learning needs could be as successful in FI as they could be in an English program. At a time when principles of inclusive education bump up against whispered perceptions of FI as an elite program for highly-able students, I wondered how best to proceed as an educator of FI students with diverse learning needs. Over time, as my inquiry unfolded, I began to wonder also about my own identity amidst this tension. Guided by these wonderings, the research presented in this project inquires more deeply into how my own experiences and formal education as a teacher have contributed to my beliefs about how FI can intersect with inclusive education.

Johnson and Christensen (2014) explained that narrative inquiry does not aim to frame a research question with a precise definition or the expectation of an answer, but rather to shift that frame to that of a research puzzle, which opens up the possibilities of

change over time. Clandinin stated that, “The shift from question to puzzle is one that allows narrative inquirers to make explicit that narrative inquiry is different from other methodologies. We begin in the midst, and end in the midst of experience” (as cited in Johnson & Christensen, 2014, p. 429). Although my project may be ‘finished’ in the sense that its written form will remain fixed in time, this research has taken place and left me in the midst of my ongoing development as a teacher. As long as I continue to inquire into my research puzzles, my understandings will continue to be reshaped.

Chapter 2: Literature That Influenced my Thinking

Introduction

In order to begin to explore some of my wonderings, I conducted a review of literature in three distinct areas. I needed some background into the first area, narrative inquiry, in order to be able to know how to begin to conduct my inquiry project. The next two areas, French immersion, with an emphasis on research into the achievement of at-risk students in the program, and inclusive education provided important background information as I began to engage in my own narrative inquiry.

Narrative Inquiry

"We're all stories, in the end." ~Steven Moffat

Narrative inquiry is relatively new a form of qualitative research that provides a means to think about, and study, experience. Bailey and Tilley (2002) presented the idea that, "The underlying premise of narrative inquiry is the belief that individuals make sense of their world most effectively by telling stories" (p. 575). Indeed, narrative inquiry attempts to understand how people think through events, what they value, and what meaning they derive from their experiences (Riley & Hawe, 2005).

Johnson and Christensen (2014) identified four key structural elements to narrative inquiry: living stories, telling stories, retelling stories, and reliving stories. Participants tell their lived experiences and then the narrative inquirer engages in a retelling of those stories. By retelling, the researcher inquires into lived and told stories. This re-storying process, essentially a form of meaning construction, may "perhaps begin

to shift the institutional, social, and cultural narratives in which they are embedded" (Johnson & Christensen, 2014, p. 427).

In order to begin to get a grasp on narrative inquiry it is important to understand the distinction made between the terms 'story' and 'narrative.' Stories are lived and told and are considered primary data in narrative inquiry; they are sometimes referred to as 'field texts.' Narratives, on the other hand, derive from the analysis of stories to produce research texts. Riley and Hawe (2005) indicated that the researcher's role is to "interpret the stories in order to analyze the underlying narrative that the storytellers may not be able to give voice to themselves" (p. 227). Bailey and Tilley (2002) stressed that narratives are reconstructed to "convey a specific perspective of an event" (p. 581) and that 'meaning' rather than 'truth' is the legitimate end product of the inquiry.

The narrative inquiry begins with an individual's experience (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007), but it also allows for an exploration of the social, cultural, linguistic, familial and institutional narratives within which each individual's experiences are located and through that study, provides "ways of enriching and transforming that experience" (Clandinin, Steeves, & Caine, 2013, p. 45). Thus, this methodology echoes Dewey, who described learning as "that reconstruction or reorganization of experience which adds to the meaning of experience, and which increases [one's] ability to direct the course of subsequent experience" (as cited in Rodgers, 2002, pp. 845-846).

Framework for narrative inquiry. Creswell (2012) described the three dimensional metaphorical inquiry space, based in Dewey's philosophy of experience and advanced by Clandinin and Connelly, as a conceptual framework for narrative inquiry.

As researchers conduct their inquiries, they attend to experiences by inquiring simultaneously into three elements, described by Johnson and Christensen (2014) as: temporality (movement in time and experience of time); sociality (interaction of the personal and social); and, place (particular situation and geographical location). Attending to these elements is important in describing the characteristics of an experience, and it is in this inquiry space that inquirers can 'unpack' lived and told stories. In this way, narrative inquirers "are able to study the complexity of the relational composition of people's lived experiences both inside and outside of an inquiry and, as well, to imagine the future possibilities of these lives" (Clandinin and Huber, in press, p. 3).

Autobiographical narrative inquiry. According to Creswell (2012), autobiography, in which the person who is the subject of the study writes the narrative, is "not a popular approach" (p. 504) to narrative inquiry. That being said, there have in recent years been some studies published that have made use of autobiographical narrative inquiry (Barkhuizen, Benson, & Chik, 2014; Benson, 2005). While these may resemble memoirs in some ways, they differ in that they typically include additional analysis, thereby making them more readily accepted as research studies (Barkhuizen, Benson, & Chik, 2014). Some of these are diary studies, in which the researcher collects data concurrently with the experience they are investigating and later reviews and analyzes these data. Others, as Benson (2005) explained, make use of recollections to explore experiences, which can be especially useful in the investigation of longer-term experiences, particularly in cases when the researcher didn't collect data for the length of

the time of the experience. While the researcher's memory of the experience may have deteriorated over time, this tends to be "counterbalanced by the researchers' intimate knowledge of the contexts of their own learning and by the insights that are gained from a longer-term view of the learning process" (Benson, 2005, p. 14). Benson (2005) also highlighted that autobiographical reflection studies have the particular potential to bring to light affective factors and the researcher's own perception of experience, which may offer a source of data for discussion and reflection and act as "examples from which teachers and learners can acquire knowledge of the processes involved in successful teaching" (p. 14).

Brady (1990) contended that autobiography plays a vital role in adult learning. In referring to autobiography as "a second reading of human experience" (p. 45), he brought to light the idea that autobiography is not merely writing out the details of one's past from memory, but rather constructing new meaning from the interpretation of past experiences. Gusdorf explained that this second reading "is truer than the first because it adds to experience itself consciousness of it" (as cited in Brady, 1990, p. 45).

French Immersion

French Immersion (FI), which has existed in Canada for almost 50 years, is a popular educational program of choice for thousands of Canadian children, since it offers a number of potential benefits, including a high level of proficiency in French. As enrolment in the program grows, so does the diversity of the students participating; consequently, a wide range of learners, including those who may be at risk of academic

difficulty due to factors such as learning disabilities, low socioeconomic situation, or immigrant language status may participate in FI.

Throughout its almost fifty year history, FI has been extensively studied and documented (Genesee, 2004; Wesche, 2002). In fact, according to the Canadian Education Association:

> No educational program has been so intensively researched and evaluated in Canada as has French immersion. The effect of the program on the acquisition of French-language as well as English-language skills and the academic achievement of French immersion students have been well documented, and research shows the program works. (as cited in Mandin & Desrochers, 2002, p. 9)

The history of French immersion programs in Canada. One of the earliest documented FI-type programs originated in 1962 in the home of Harry and Anna Giles, who undertook a radical experiment in language education (TFS, n.d.). Excited by Canada's emerging identity as a country of two languages, but frustrated by the lack of educational opportunities for their own children, they hired a francophone teacher and started a bilingual school with six students in their basement. More than 50 years later, the school they created (now called TFS) continues to offer private, bilingual education to over 1,300 students in the Toronto area. This story is not unique; in fact, across the country in the early 1960s, amidst a climate of political, social and economic changes in Québec and throughout Canada, Anglophone parents were raising the alarm that the traditional approach to second language learning, characterized by limited time devoted to language instruction in English school systems in Canada, was not working to produce

functionally bilingual citizens; they began to question whether the public school system could do better to educate students in both official languages (Government of Alberta, n.d.-b;Wesche, 2002). The most documented early experiment in FI began in 1965 in St. Lambert, Québec, a small community outside of Montréal, where twelve parents struggled for two years to convince a reluctant school board to pilot a FI Kindergarten. These parents, having sought advice from linguistics specialists, psychologists and other experts, believed that their children could learn French to a level of functional bilingualism without harming their competence in English (Government of Alberta, n.d.-a). One parent involved in the push for FI recalled that, "The parents felt their children were being short-changed and should have the opportunity to become 'bilingual' within the school system, since it was so difficult to achieve this skill outside of school" (as cited in Fraser, 2011, para. 10). Understanding that what they proposed was a radical departure from the conventional method of language learning of the time, they insisted that the new FI program be carefully studied, and by 1969 McGill University had released encouraging results.

Also in 1969 the Canadian Parliament enacted the first Official Languages Act, which gave English and French equal status in the government of Canada (Official Languages Act, n.d.). As word of the St. Lambert experiment's initial success spread, and many Anglophone parents became increasingly concerned that their children should learn both official languages, the scene was set for the growth of FI programs. The Government of Alberta (n.d.-a) stated that, "French immersion has been called 'the great Canadian experiment that worked.' It is a modern-day educational innovation that has

become a Canadian success story and has gained Canadian researchers, educators and parent groups respect worldwide" (para. 1). Public school enrolment in FI programs in Canada has gone from fewer than 30 students in 1965 to more than 341 000 in 2010/2011, with growth in enrolment of 12% between 2007 and 2011 (Lepage & Corbeil, 2013). In British Columbia (BC), public school FI enrolment has seen a steady increase; according to the Canadian Parents for French (CPF), between the years 2003 and 2013, "Student enrolment in French immersion [in BC] has increased by 42.8%, while public school enrolment has fallen by 8.2%" (Luo, 2013, p. 5). During the 2014/2015 school year, there were 50,860 students enrolled in FI in BC (Canadian Parents for French British Columbia & Yukon Branch, n.d.). Based on the success of the Canadian model, several other countries, including Australia, Finland and the USA have initiated similar language immersion programs in their own schools (Government of Alberta, n.d.-b).

The structure of French immersion programs. The basic premise of FI is that children learn core subject content through the medium of a second language. In other words, students are not only taught French separately as a subject, but rather engage in the learning of content such as science and social studies, as well as in activities and social communication, in the context of the second language (Genesee, 2004; Wesche, 2002). Use of French during the day is extensive and requires language comprehension and production for authentic purposes. The rationale for this type of bilingual instruction is to "take advantage of children's natural ability to learn language which occurs during authentic, meaningful, and significant communication with others" (Genesee, 2004, p. 8).

The program originally introduced in St. Lambert later became known as the early French immersion (EFI) model, in which students received all of their instruction in French from Kindergarten until the end of Grade 2, at which point English language arts studies were introduced for about an hour each day. Over time, the percentage of English used in classes each day increased until it represented a significant portion by the end of secondary school. Alternative models have since been developed, such as late French immersion, often beginning in Grade 6.

The advantages of French immersion programs.

Why is bilingualism important, especially in Canada? The concept of bilingualism is not a new one, but it remains relevant today; in fact, bilingualism is becoming increasingly common (Valicenti-McDermott et al., 2013), and it has been estimated that children who learn two languages before puberty represent the majority worldwide (Paradis, 2010).

Some of the advantages of becoming bilingual are largely beneficial to the individual. Growing globalization of business and commerce, immigration, increased ease of international travel, and growing access to foreign media have all created personal and work-related incentives for learning additional languages.

Bilingualism may also benefit society as a whole. Canada, as an officially bilingual country, actively promotes linguistic duality. The Government of Canada (2013), in its "Roadmap for Canada's Official Languages 2013-2018" renewed its commitment to supporting second-language learning, including FI, stressing that learning

both official languages is not only an asset to employability, but also an important tool in building nationalism:

> Learning both official languages brings Canadians together. It increases opportunities for exchange between Canadians and with the world. It encourages mutual understanding, which allows us to live and work together better. This, in turn, contributes to the long-term stability, unity and prosperity of our country. (p. 5)

While many parents consider expanded job prospects as one of the main reasons they value bilingualism and, consequently, consider FI for their children (Canadian Council on Learning, 2008), many are also swayed by a belief that bilingualism in both national languages contributes to national unity and the cultural richness of Canadian society. Robert Rothon, former national executive director of the Canadian Parents for French stated, "I've been quite surprised and moved. They really do believe in a bilingual and bicultural Canada" (as cited in Baluja & Bradshaw, 2012, para. 23).

What abilities and attitudes do French immersion students develop? As previously stated, FI has been extensively studied since its inception in 1965. Genesee (2006) stated that researchers have "found considerable consistency in immersion students' linguistic and academic achievement" (p. 2). Wesche (2002), Genesee (2004, 2006), and Fortune (2012) all provided reviews of research conducted during the 1970s and 1980s and described the following outcomes for students:

- FI students show significantly higher levels of functional proficiency in French compared to students in all-English programs who learn French in a

traditional manner. "All types of French immersion programs consistently lead to far stronger French proficiency in all skills than do traditional (40-60 minutes per day) French programs" (Wesche, 2002, p. 361).

- FI students' language skills show certain shortcomings when compared with those of French native speakers. While students generally achieve high levels of proficiency in reading and listening comprehension skills (sometimes scoring as well as French native-speaking students), they may not achieve native fluency in speaking and writing, although their level of proficiency is usually at the advanced level.
- FI students who are English native speakers (and therefore exposed to English at home, in the community and in the media), achieve the same levels of competency in reading, writing, speaking and listening comprehension in English as do comparable Anglophone students[1] in all-English programs. Their English test scores sometimes surpass those of similar children in all-English programs. (There is an exception to this finding: EFI students may show a temporary lag during early elementary school (in comparison with similar students in all-English programs) in English language arts. Deficits

[1] One example of research design to establish comparison groups was described by Genesee (1978) in a study of FI conducted ten years after its inception. In this study, a between-group design was used for a series of longitudinal evaluations. The performance of FI students on a variety of achievement measures was compared to that of "carefully selected comparison or control groups at corresponding grade levels" (p. 20). In this particular study, both English and French control groups were used. "Students in all groups were equated, as much as possible, on intellectual and socio-economic indices. Where possible, one third of each group was made up of above average students, as measured by group-administered intelligence tests; one third was made up of average students; and one third was made up of below average students. Inclusion of students at different levels of intellectual ability allowed us to assess the impact of immersion on scholastic development these different levels" (Genesee, 1978, pp. 20-21).

are normally overcome within the first year in which a daily English language arts period is introduced, although catching up in English spelling may require another year.)

- FI students attain an equivalent level of achievement in school subject matter, such as mathematics and science, as comparable control students studying in all-English programs.
- There are positive and lasting impacts on children's attitudes towards French Canadian culture. While FI students continue to identify strongly with English-Canadian culture, they acquire an understanding and appreciation of French-Canadians and French-Canadian culture that is not generally seen in non-immersion students.

For thousands of students, FI has proven itself to be a highly successful approach to becoming functionally bilingual in French without compromising the learning objectives of the regular English program.

Is French immersion suitable for all students? Although over 370,000 Canadian children were enrolled in FI programs in 2013 (Canadian Parents for French, 2013), and the program is often touted as being highly successful, there is a long-standing question about whether or not FI is an appropriate choice for all students. Attrition is a serious problem in FI, and although rates vary from province to province, it is clear that a significant number of students leave the program, particularly during the secondary school years (Canadian Council on Learning, 2007; Erdos, Genesee, Savage, & Haigh, 2010). BC has lower attrition rates than several other provinces, but the Canadian

Parents for French British Columbia & Yukon Branch (2004) reported that only 55% of Grade 7 FI students graduated in FI with their Bilingual Dogwood graduation certificates and that 35% of these students left the FI program in either Grade 10, 11 or 12. A constant in the data across Canada is that the attrition rate from FI is much higher amongst boys; while boys represented 47% of FI Kindergarten students, they represented only 30% of FI students in Grade 12. Some reasons for attrition are largely practical, such as lack of variety of available courses, tensions with other programs of choice, and the need to bus to more distant schools. However, attrition rates are also particularly high among students with learning disabilities (Canadian Council on Learning, 2007), indicating that academic difficulty may also be playing a role.

In the relatively early days of FI programs, Bruck (1978) commented on the relative absence of students with exceptionalities in FI and concluded that because the subjects of most evaluations of FI were "of average intelligence, had no particular problems, and were from English-speaking middle-class backgrounds," that it was not possible to "make any firm statements about the suitability of the programs for children not sharing those characteristics (e.g. children of low intelligence, children from working-class homes, children from minority groups, and children with language disabilities)" (pp. 51-52).

Since the program began in the 1960s, however, there have been changes to the demographics and characteristics of FI students. Murphy and Netten (1993) stated that:

> In terms of the immersion students, there have been marked challenges and changes. During the early years of the program, evaluations indicated that

> immersion students were coping very well with the demands of the program and were, in many cases, out-performing their English counterparts even in English Language Arts! However, as immersion programs grew in popularity and size, a broader, more academically average, group of students began to fill the classroom seats. Before long, administrators, teachers and researchers began to realize that the initial immersion students had been primarily a very select group from middle and upperclass backgrounds with strong support for education in the home and often with above-average cognitive abilities. Gradually teachers began to notice that there were more and more immersion students having difficulty coping with the special demands of the program, needing remedial assistance and, in some cases, even with learning disabilities. The change in the student population was noted in the [Newfoundland] provincial Department of Education's report on the Evaluation of French Immersion Programs for 1990-91 which concluded that there appeared to be a decline in the level of cognitive abilities of students entering early French immersion. (p. 13)

However, a recent paper produced in New Brunswick reported that there were significantly fewer children with special needs, children from the lowest socioeconomic backgrounds, boys, children with lower ability in terms of cognitive and language skills, and children with behavioural problems enrolled in FI programs than in English programs (Willms, 2008). In a program of choice that has been as popular as FI, why do these disparities exist? Are there students for whom French immersion is not effective?

French immersion and at-risk[2] students. Researchers, policy-makers, educators, parents and even students themselves have long asked the question of whether bilingual education is suitable for all students. Since the inception of the FI program, studies have been conducted into the achievement and experiences of its students; the following sections will examine what extant research tells us about the experiences of at-risk students in FI programs.

Some early studies in the 1970s and 1980s sought to address not only the practical question of academic programming for low achieving students, but also the theoretical issue of which factors might account for poor performance in FI programs (Bruck, 1985). Were academic problems specific to learning a second language? Did learning in the second language compound already existing learning problems? Or was poor achievement a reflection on the learner's basic characteristics rather than the language of instruction?

There is not a great deal of published research examining the performance of at-risk students in FI programs, but there are a handful of researchers, many of them Canadian, who have contributed to our understanding in this field. The term 'at-risk' is broad and open to interpretation; Genesee (2004), when considering students at-risk,

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[2] Levin stated that, "In broad terms a student 'at risk' is one whose past or present characteristics or conditions are associated with a higher probability of failing to attain desired life outcomes" (as cited in Philpott, 2007, p.9). Levin, like others, supported a call for a broader interpretation of learner diversity; he explained the concept of 'at risk' as one that signals a shift from a model that highlights a learner's deficit to a model that demonstrates increased sensitivity to the learner's educational, home and community environments (Philpott, 2007). Brendtro, Brokenleg, and Van Bockern (1990) stressed that the "concept of 'at-risk,' although very broad, avoids blaming the child and points our attention toward the environmental hazards that need to be addressed" (p. 3).

looked principally at categories of learner characteristics generally associated with underachievement in school. The following summaries of achievement of at-risk students in FI borrow heavily from his categorizations and consider the following groupings: (1) academic ability; (2) first language ability; (3) other exceptionalities associated with language ability, such as Down syndrome and autism; (4) socio-economic background; and (5) immigrant language status. The majority of the following information about these grouping comes from comprehensive analyses of research specific to the FI context conducted by Genesee (2004) and by Genesee and Jared (2008). In some cases, however, complementary research not specific to school language immersion programs, but rather regarding children with exceptionalities growing up in simultaneous bilingual environments has been included.

Academic ability. Genesee (2004) conducted studies in the late 1970s in which he measured students' performance on standardized intelligence quotient (IQ) tests and also examined their performance on reading tests. As expected, students who received low scores on the IQ tests also scored significantly lower than the average and above-average students on English reading tests. Importantly, there were no statistically significant differences on the reading test scores between the below-average students in immersion and those in the English program. Tests of French reading were also conducted, and the below-average students in FI scored significantly higher than their counterparts in the English program. Genesee (2004) concluded from these studies that "low academic/intellectual ability is no more of a handicap in bilingual education than it is in L1 [first language] programs and, to the contrary, low performing students can

experience a net benefit from immersion in the form of bilingual proficiency" (p. 18).

Bruck (1978, 1985) reported that several studies of children in early French immersion (EFI) programs had already documented that students with cognitive deficits managed well in FI and that education in a second language did not contribute to poor academic achievement, supporting the conclusion that level of academic functioning is independent of language of instruction and that achievement is primarily associated with individual differences in psychological functioning. A further study by Bruck (1985) examined the consequences of transferring poor achieving Grade 2, 3 and 4 students out of FI programs to see whether they might perform better in an English program, thereby allowing students to more fully meet their academic potential. This study also focused on students' attitudes towards their FI educations, in an attempt to determine whether negative attitudes and poor behaviour were as a result of unsuccessful and stressful learning experiences in FI (in which case a switch to an English program should have resulted in an improvement), or whether these patterns reflected basic personality characteristics, or if they were independent or precursors of poor achievement (in which case a switch should have caused little change). Results of this study indicated that the students who transferred out of FI showed academic improvement, but that this was no greater than that shown by the control group consisting of similarly low achieving

students who remained in FI. Teacher and student data indicated that students' negative attitudes towards schooling and poor school behaviour continued even after the transfer to an English program. A follow up study conducted a year afterwards indicated that the students who had transferred out of FI continued to have academic difficulties and to demonstrate negative attitudes and behavioural problems (Genesee & Jared, 2008). Bruck (1985) concluded that:

> Therefore, these nonacademic behaviors are independent of academic functioning and reflect basic personality characteristics of the child. Their relationship to language of education is more complex; they are correlates rather than consequences of language of education. Poor non-academic behaviors are associated with language of education in that children with these characteristics tend to leave French immersion programs. They are not, however, caused by education in a second language but persist across linguistic and educational contexts. (p. 117)

Conversely, Mannavarayan (2002) related results of several studies conducted during the 1980s of students experiencing academic difficulty in FI and switching out; these studies showed little detrimental effect after the transfer and that most children seemed to show improved performance, attitudes and behaviour. Genesee (2007) stressed caution when interpreting the results, as these studies were based on participants' impressions, and may therefore be unreliable and lack generalizability. He further cautioned that research conducted by Trites and Price in 1978, in which they argued that some students with developmental lags were at differential risk for difficulty in

immersion, has subsequently been critiqued on methodological and logical grounds. In view of the need for more research, many jurisdictions recommend that any decisions made about a student leaving FI be made on a case-by-case basis with appropriate consultation with parents and school personnel.

Fortune (2012), in her review of language immersion studies, reiterated that the research response to the question of academic and educational achievement on the part of English proficient immersion students is longstanding and consistent: these students are capable of achieving as well as, and in some cases better than, their non-immersion peers on standardized measures of reading and math. More relevant to this inquiry, however, is her statement that, "This finding applies to students from a range of socioeconomic and ethnic backgrounds, as well as diverse cognitive and linguistic abilities" (p. 9).

First language ability. A child's ability in their first language is a predictor of their school achievement (Duncan et al., 2007). Genesee and Jared (2008) reported that although the issue of suitability of FI for students with poorly developed first language skills was a significant concern for parents and educators, very little empirical research had been conducted on students with language learning impairment in FI programs. Are students with impairments in their first language differentially disadvantaged in FI in comparison to what they would achieve in an English program?

Bruck (1982) investigated the desirability of EFI programs for children with language-learning disabilities and found that immersion students with language impairments demonstrated comparable cognitive, first language and academic skills as similar children educated only in their first language. She also noted the following

contrast in outcomes for students with language-learning disabilities depending on the type of French program they were placed in:

> One of the phenomena we have noticed in our clinical practice is that many language-disabled children cannot cope with a typical French-as-a-second-language program (typically given for 20-40 minutes a day several times a week); they leave school with almost no knowledge of French. This may be due to the fact that most of such programs are based on teaching methods (a great deal of memory work, repetition of language out of context, and the learning of abstract rules) which inadvertently exploit the weaknesses of the learning-disabled child. The French immersion program does not seem to have this effect; rather it provides a more suitable and natural environment for these children to learn French. (Bruck, 1978, p. 70)

Bruck concluded that children whose first-language development is poor should not be excluded from FI programs, since "The children are no worse off than they would have been in an English class, and that they are learning to read French as well as to speak and understand it" (Bruck, 1978, p. 70). However, there has been a call for more studies in this area, as there remains a the paucity of research into immersion students with language impairments; as well, Bruck's operational definitions do not reflect current thinking about language impairment and her research did not take into account the full range of language impairment that might cause problems for school children (Genesee, 2004; Genesee & Jared, 2008).

Research conducted by Paradis, Crago, Genesee, and Rice (2003) did not deal directly with immersion students schooled in a second language, but it did address simultaneous French-English bilingual children (in which the child learns two languages from birth) with specific language impairment (SLI). Their study, which reflected a contemporary definition of SLI, found that bilingual children with SLI exhibited the same type and frequency of morphosyntactic errors as did their monolingual peers. These results offer support to Bruck's findings that being bilingual does not result in greater impairment for children with SLI, but more research is warranted.

Of further interest to the situation of children with SLI who are learning two languages is a proposal made by Paradis (2010) for future research. In response to her research findings, Paradis (2010) asked whether some of the enhanced executive functioning emerging from dual language learning could be compensating for some of the processing deficits associated with SLI; "In other words, it would be interesting to see research addressing the question of whether bilingualism can be viewed as a kind of 'therapy' for SLI" (p. 244).

Other exceptionalities associated with language ability, such as Down syndrome and autism. Researchers have pointed out a noticeable gap in published research regarding bilingual education and students with exceptionalities, including "severe sensory-perceptual, cognitive, or socio-affective disorders" (Genesee, 2004, p. 16). Kay-Raining Bird et al. (2005) noted that literature regarding how bilingualism affects language learning in individuals with intellectual disabilities is also very sparse. While not a study of school-based immersion education, Kay-Raining Bird et al. (2005)

investigated the capacity of children with Down syndrome, which is characterized by cognitive and language deficits, to acquire more than one language when bilingual exposure occurred in the home. These researchers reported that, due to the difficulty these children face in learning language, anecdotal evidence suggested that professionals such as speech-language pathologists were often recommending that language input for children with Down syndrome be limited to a single language. For example, members of bilingual households were being told that they should only speak one language around their child with Down syndrome. This recommendation may seem logical, in the sense that if children with Down syndrome struggle to learn one language, it would seem to follow that they would have even more difficulty learning more than one language; however, such an action could potentially cause hardship for families and isolate these children from some family members. The results of this study indicated no evidence of a detrimental effect of bilingualism. The researchers cautioned that this was the first study of its type, that their sample size was small, and that any decisions made regarding children with Down syndrome should be based on the individual needs of each child and family. However, Kay-Raining Bird et al. (2005) stated that:

> Our results suggest that children with DS [Down syndrome] can be successful in acquiring two languages and that bilingual children perform in their dominant language (in this case English) at least as well as their monolingual counterparts with DS matched for developmental level. Therefore, rather than restricting input to one language, it seems important for speech-language pathologists to provide

> appropriate supports in both languages to bilingual children so as to ensure that they acquire each language to the best of their ability. (p. 197)

Kremer-Sadlik (2005), in her paper addressing bilingualism for language delayed high-functioning children with autism, also reported that parents were being told by clinicians to limit their child's exposure to one language, namely English, regardless of the parents' English proficiency. Her interviews with parents led her to the conclusion that the effects of limiting exposure to the child's home language could produce unfavourable results, such as restriction of meaningful interaction with parents and isolation from community, and that children in multilingual home situations should be given opportunity and support to learn both their mother tongue and English.

Given the obvious importance of understanding the impacts of being raised in bilingual environments on language and communication abilities, Valicenti-McDermott et al. (2013) compared expressive and receptive language skills in children with autism spectrum disorder being raised in monolingual English and bilingual English-Spanish environments. The researchers again cautioned that their sample size was small and that their research required replication, but their findings indicated that bilingualism did not negatively affect language development in the children with autism spectrum disorder.

Socio-economic background. Genesee (2004) pointed out that socio-economically disadvantaged students in FI usually demonstrated significantly lower achievement than their middle-class peers in FI, as was true for comparably socio-economically disadvantaged students in the English program. Genesee and Jared (2008) also reported that all studies conducted on the academic performance of FI students from

low socioeconomic backgrounds had found that participation in EFI had not put students at greater risk for poor reading, math or science outcomes than that experienced by comparable students in English programs. Furthermore, the immersion students attained significantly higher levels of proficiency in French than comparison students. Interestingly, socio-economically disadvantaged FI students sometimes performed as well as middle-class FI students on tests of listening comprehension and speaking, although significantly lower on reading (Genesee, 2004).

Immigrant language status. Immigrant students who speak a language other than English, French or a Canadian Aboriginal language make up a significant and ever-growing percentage of the school-aged population in Canada, especially in urban centres such as Toronto and Vancouver. However, according to the Canadian Council on Learning (2007), these children are less likely than non-immigrant children to participate in FI programs. Researchers speculated that this may be because families are keen for their children to learn English to a high level of proficiency and believe that students might experience incomplete development of all languages if they begin FI, particularly at a very young age (Genesee & Jared, 2008). However, in the course of interviews with immigrants regarding educational choices, Mady (2012b) also discovered that some immigrants lacked knowledge of school programs available or were refused access to FI programs.

Available evidence summarized by the Canadian Council on Learning (2007) indicated that immigrant English-language-learning (ELL) students who did participate in FI programs were shown to perform as well as their Anglophone counterparts;

furthermore, ELL students who had already developed literacy in their home language often performed even better than Anglophone students. Mady (2014) viewed this as especially significant, given that the immigrant students' home languages were not being supported in school, unlike the support provided for Anglophone FI students in the English language.

Implications. While there are gaps in the research examining the experiences of children considered to be at risk for academic difficulty or even failure in FI programs, the research that does exist showed that the students studied were as successful in FI as they would have been in an all-English program. Given that the stated advantages of bilingualism may apply as much to any of the students discussed as to those not considered at risk, it follows that it could be considered unethical to exclude them from a program that has "proved itself to be the most successful school-based language program model available" (Fortune, 2012, p. 10). Why then are these groups of students currently underrepresented in FI programs?

Inclusive Education

What is inclusive education? The terms 'inclusion' and 'inclusive education' are variously interpreted in the research literature, media and policy documents. As this project takes place for the most part in the context of the British Columbia education system, the following definition from Inclusion BC (n.d) provides a useful place to start:

> Inclusive education means that all students attend and are welcomed by their neighbourhood schools in age-appropriate, regular classes and are supported to learn, contribute and participate in all aspects of the life of the school. (para. 1)

Mittler pointed out that the many interpretations of the term 'inclusion' are all underpinned by "a value system that welcomes and celebrates diversity" (as cited in Timmons, 2008, p. 134).

Since the 1990s, there has been a clear international trend towards inclusive education (Kalambouka, Farrell, Dyson, & Kaplan, 2007; Philpott, 2007; Ruijs, Van der Veen, & Peetsma, 2010; Timmons, 2008). Canada has been a global leader in this shift in thinking about the ways in which schools respond to the needs of diverse learners; as well, a progression from practices of segregation to integration to inclusion has been documented in its history (Philpott, 2007; Timmons, 2008). Timmons (2008) postulated that this progression towards inclusion on the part of educators may have been helped along by the inherent diversity of the Canadian cultural landscape, stating that, "Teachers in Canada teach classes filled with students from different cultures and religions. They approach this task with the attitude that these diverse classes are a reflection of what Canada is and what we as Canadians hold dear" (p. 144).

Hutchinson stated that, "Inclusive education is an issue within the context of Canadian society, not just within the context of Canadian schools. . . In Canada, if we choose to teach, we are choosing to teach in inclusive settings" (as cited in Philpott, 2007, p. 4). Timmons (2008) asserted that there is "agreement among parents, teachers, professors, and ministry officials that the primary purpose of schools is to ensure

maximal development of learning potential for 'every' student through effective education" (p. 138). In BC, the inclusive education mandate is well-established and the British Columbia Ministry of Education (2006) in their current *Special Education* policy affirmed that:

> British Columbia promotes an inclusive education system in which students with special needs are fully participating members of a community of learners. Inclusion describes the principle that all students are entitled to equitable access to learning, achievement and the pursuit of excellence in all aspects of their educational programs. The practice of inclusion is not necessarily synonymous with full integration in regular classrooms, and goes beyond placement to include meaningful participation and the promotion of interaction with others. (para. 11)

What are the benefits of inclusive education? Children with special needs who are educated in inclusive classroom environments experience a number of social and academic benefits, including greater strength in social situations, understanding of social roles, perception of appropriate and inappropriate behaviour, the development of social relationships and increased academic motivation (Timmons, 2008). Interestingly, Timmons (2008) reported that these benefits are not always recognized. Teachers often cite human rights or social justice as key motivators for their support for inclusive education, but Timmons (2008) presented the idea that teachers should be made more aware of these benefits, which are generally derived from the excellent pedagogical principles, such as differentiated instruction, interactive learning, varied assessment practices and strong social interaction that form the backbone of inclusive education.

Adoption of these principles benefits not only children with exceptionalities, it benefits all children.

There may also be specific benefits to inclusion within a FI environment. The Government of Alberta (2014) stated that inclusion in French immersion may provide specific benefits to students with diverse needs and provided the example that:

> 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. (p. 78)

Are there barriers to inclusive education? While the concept of inclusive education may be easy to agree with in principle, it is not always as easy to implement in practice. Timmons (2008) pointed out that the primary responsibility for inclusive practice fell to the regular educator, and while these educators showed considerable agreement on the principles of inclusive education, they also expressed worry that they might not be able to successfully educate all the children in their classrooms. In her review of some relevant literature, she reported that teachers "often felt unprepared and at times inadequate for the task...overwhelmed by the magnitude and scope of change that the implementation of inclusive education requires…apprehension about their ability to cope with the diverse learning needs presented in their classrooms" (Timmons, 2008, pp. 138-139). Moore and Roberts (2007) pointed to research in BC schools highlighting

similar concerns: a significant percentage of teachers felt professionally unprepared to teach students with diverse learning needs. According to Timmons (2008), teachers were "seeking knowledge, additional staff, smaller class sizes, and any other supports that would assist them in doing a good job" (p. 139).

Another argument that has arisen against inclusion has centred around the concern that it may be detrimental to 'typical' peers (Ruijs, Van der Veen, & Peetsma, 2010). Some educators and parents have worried that students with exceptionalities could take up a disproportionate amount of the teacher's time, or lower the general level of education in the class, or distract other students. In response to these worries, several reviews of research conducted in the 1990s and early 2000s found no evidence for inclusive education having a detrimental effect on the achievement of students without special educational needs (Ruijs, Van der Veen, & Peetsma, 2010). In their 2007 review of 26 studies Kalambouka, Farrell, Dyson, and Kaplan reported that 58% of the cited studies reported positive effects and 23% reported neutral effects of inclusive education on mainstream students; they also reported some indication that inclusion may be more difficult to manage in secondary than elementary schools and that it may also be more difficult to successfully include students with behavioural, emotional and social difficulties as opposed other types of difficulties. However, Ruijs, Van der Veen, and Peetsma (2010) cautioned that most of these aforementioned studies were relatively small-scale and based only on one or a few schools.

A subsequent study of 42,068 Dutch primary students provided evidence from a much larger sample to support and expand existing findings. In this study Ruijs, Van der

Veen, and Peetsma (2010) investigated the relation between inclusive education and the academic achievement and socio-emotional functioning of students without special educational needs, and "whether this varied between more and less intelligent typical children" (p. 385). The researchers also investigated whether the relation between inclusive education and the academic and social-emotional functioning of typical students differed by the type of problems of the special education students included in their class. Overall, this study concluded no overall relation between inclusive education and the academic achievement of typical students, regardless of whether these typical students were more or less intelligent. In terms of socio-emotional functioning of typical students, on the great majority of measures, no differences were found between typical students in non-inclusive classes, classes with a few students with special educational needs, or classes with more than a few students with special educational needs. In the case of classes with more than a few students with special educational needs, typical students seemed to score better on student-reported self-confidence than students in non-inclusive classes. The functioning of typical students did not differ meaningfully by type of special educational need of the included students. The researchers cautioned that their study had its limitations, such as the fact that could only demonstrate correlation, and that they did not consider the severity of the various special educational needs. They urged further research, but suggested that their study adds to the scientific evidence in support of inclusive education.

In BC the Centre for Education Research and Policy conducted a longitudinal study that linked student Foundational Skills Assessment (a provincial test taken by

Grades 4 and 7 students) results to the enrolment database, which records special education status. The results of this study showed that increasing the percentage of students with disabilities had only extremely small and statistically insignificant effects on the reading and numeracy achievement of other students (Campbell, 2009).

Parents have also shown a general acceptance of the concept of inclusive education (Kalambouka, Farrell, Dyson, & Kaplan, 2007), but some have spoken out that necessary supports have not always been available (Timmons, 2008). Consequently, some organizations advocating for deaf, learning disabled and gifted students have been cautious about embracing inclusive education; these organizations have worked very hard to secure specialized resources and instruction for their children and fear these could be lost in inclusive environments (Timmons, 2008). For this reason, amongst many others, it is essential that inclusive schools serve the unique learning needs of their students effectively.

Chapter 3: The Frog in the Well: Two Steps Forward, One Step Back

Introduction

I have always loved a good story. Listening to them was one of the great joys of my childhood and I would often plead for "just one more story," whether it was from a book I'd heard a dozen times already or my mother inventing the "Adventures of Anonymous Elf" as she sat by my bedside. James Orbinski (2008), Canadian physician, writer, and activist explained that, "We all have stories. Nature does not tell stories, we do. We find ourselves in them, make ourselves in them, choose ourselves in them" and in the telling of his stories asked again and again, "How am I to be, how are we to be in relation to the suffering of others?" (p. 4). The first conscious notion I had of this power of story came from my Grade 8 English teacher, himself quite the spinner of a good yarn, who disclosed that the reason we read stories is to learn more about ourselves. Although I was a bit skeptical of this idea at the time, his statement stuck with me and I've come to believe that stories do serve a purpose greater than simply entertainment or the transmission of facts. I can 'lose myself' in a story, but more importantly, I can find myself as well. A story gives me the chance to untangle my views and feelings, to uncover truths about who I am, and to imagine myself differently.

This project provided me with an opportunity to tell my own stories once lived. These stories, of both my student and teacher experiences, allowed me to discover bumping places where tensions existed. I was able to inquire narratively into these tensions, through the lens of a metaphor of "The Frog in the Well: Two Steps Forward

and One Step Back" in order to assist me to bring coherence to the ups and downs of my process of change.

It was my hope that engaging in this narrative inquiry, with a view towards better understanding how my own lived experiences have contributed to my beliefs about FI and how this program of choice may intersect with inclusive education, would help me to gain insight into who I am becoming as a teacher.

Theoretical Framework

The focus of this inquiry was on how my lived experiences contributed to my changing beliefs; therefore, I made use of Dewey's view of experience (Rodgers, 2002) as its theoretical foundation. Dewey considered that individual experience was a central lens for understanding a person (Creswell, 2012). My stories are a means through which I explored the ways that my experiences as both a FI student and teacher, as well as my interactions with students, colleagues and parents, and my learnings during both my Master's program and Special Education certificate contributed to my shifting beliefs about how FI can intersect with inclusive education. My re-storying process occurred within a conceptual framework of a three-dimensional inquiry space, as developed by Clandinin and Connelly (Creswell, 2012). As a result, my narrative considered: interactions, both personal and social; continuity, including looking backward to remembered stories and asking how these past experiences contribute to present and future experiences; and situation, particularly in terms of context and place. My remembered stories emerged from a long time span, from about 1980 to 2015. The schools I drew my stories from were located in relatively affluent neighbourhoods of the

Lower Mainland, Vancouver Island and southern Ontario, and the universities I attended were located in British Columbia and Ontario.

My Own Autobiographical Narrative Inquiry Methods

Given my total lack of experience in conducting narrative inquiry, I was at a bit of loss for how to start. If there is a *Narrative Inquiry for Dummies*, I was unable to locate it, and so I set out by examining narrative studies conducted by others. This was of some help, but each study was carried out differently from the others, making the 'how to' a bit mysterious. This was further exacerbated by the relative paucity of autobiographical narrative research examples.

In the end, I proceeded by considering my research puzzle ("how have my own experiences and formal education contributed to my beliefs about how FI can intersect with inclusive education?") and I started to write all the stories I could think of that had to do with my experiences with FI, including those experiences that may have concerned students with diverse learning needs. This storying took place over a few days in August of 2015; sometimes stories would come to me in a rush, and other times something I saw or did or said would trigger a recollection. I then took all of these stories (my 'field texts'), each on individual bits of paper, and placed them in a loose chronological timeline. I wrote some additional notes on some of the stories at that point, especially when it occurred to me how that past event was linked to a present or possible future experience. It took me quite a lot of staring at the stories, and re-reading them, and adding some more, and staring again before some threads started to emerge. I tried moving the papers around to inductively create conceptual groupings, but the papers

remained mostly in chronological order in spite of my groupings, until I ended up with a long line that lilted up and down at various intervals. It was this point that the metaphor of "The Frog in the Well: Two Steps Forward and One Step Back" finally emerged, representing the ups and downs of my lived experiences. In the midst of a confusion of stories, a metaphor served to bring some order and insight to an ambivalent situation (Keiko & Gaies, 2002). As a result, I foregrounded a number of stories that seemed important to this emerging narrative and put others aside.

Re-telling, or inquiry, into my stories was shaped by a three-dimensional conceptual framework. I paid close attention to the commonplaces of temporality, sociality and place (Creswell, 2012) in order to unpack my experiences. During this process I was concerned about the vulnerabilities of those who featured in my stories, as I knew that my final research text would be visible to others. For this reason, I recomposed many of my field texts into fictionalized interim texts as a way to blur locations, times and the particularities of individuals. Clandinin, Murphy, Huber, and Orr (2010) clarified that, "Fictionalized field and research texts are not fictional but rather are texts composed from multiple field texts based on various research experiences" (p. 85). As such, the fictionalized stories, represented throughout this project in italics, do not represent any one individual or occurrence; they are rather collages representing various interactions with students, parents, colleagues and others who have helped me shape my own understandings over the years. All names, except my own, are invented and represent a collection of individuals. This fictionalization process should not detract from what my narrative serves to illuminate, since narrative inquiry does not rely on the

facts or objective truths of accounts, but rather on the subjective meanings that emerge to convey the specific perspective of the individual (Wang & Geale, 2015).

Starting at the Bottom of the Well

Professional days were a real treat for me in my first years of teaching; it was such a relief to have a little forced break to take a breath. In the Spring, we science teachers all trouped out to the big conference for what turned out to be a day of great sessions. In the lobby I ran into a mentor I had worked with during my teaching practicum, and she asked gently how it was going for me in my second year of teaching. I didn't want to seem defeated, but I said that it was really hard and that I was struggling to keep my head above water. There was so much work to do every day just to prepare classes, and I got about 20 emails a day from parents, and the kids talked so incessantly that I could barely get a word in edgewise to start a class. She smiled sympathetically and said, "Teaching in French immersion is very demanding. Keep your head up; you'll figure it out."

(Recalled memory, fictionalized interim research text)

Looking back on the beginning of my career teaching high school science in FI, the "Frog in the Well" metaphor seems apt, as there were days when I felt like I was trapped at the bottom of a well and might never be able to climb out. I can see now that I made a lot of progress in those first years, but there were many challenges and setbacks, and it often seemed like I slid back a step for every two I was able to take forward. One of my more experienced colleagues commiserated when I said that I always felt that I had more to do than I could ever fit into the time available; she said there had been days when

she had just shut the door and cried. My vice principal, seeing the dark circles under my eyes, asked if maybe I wasn't working as efficiently as I might have been. Gazing back through the lens of a decade of experience, tasks did take me a long time to complete, but I was working as efficiently as I could have at the time. I had very few print materials at my disposal, and I wasn't terribly proficient at producing them, especially in French. I planned everything I would do and say in a class meticulously. I laboured over responses to emails from parents and colleagues. The end result was usually not bad, in the sense that I think the students and their parents were generally happy, but I spent most of my waking hours making it work.

During my first years teaching I knew that I needed to become more facile in my practice or I would never survive. I worked with a couple of mentors in the school and took part in an array of workshops. Gradually I began to fill my 'toolkit' with strategies I could pull out quickly and use effectively.

It's almost painful to think back to those days, but knowing that I did figure some of it out helps me to forgive myself for my early clumsiness. I'm more able to plan strategically now, assess 'smarter rather than harder,' and be more flexible in my teaching. If a student brings up an interesting question or idea, I can roll with that more easily, rather than needing to 'stick to my script.' An unexpected fire alarm no longer throws me into a panic, not because the building might be on fire, but because my careful scheduling might be ruined.

I have reached a stage where I've become comfortable enough with my teaching that I can actually enjoy it, and appreciate that I'm enjoying it as it's happening. I've

crawled far enough up the side of the well that I can see the sunlight, but I also know that I still have distance to cover. I continue actively with my own education and with reflecting on my experience. The real treat for me now is when I get the chance to observe other teachers as they work; these opportunities, although rare, provide invaluable insights and motivation to continue to develop as a teacher.

As an inexperienced narrative inquirer, I am becoming aware as I consider my stories and begin in their re-storying that they have a past, a present and a future. I lived these stories in the past, but as I tell and retell them now, I see what I couldn't always see before, and I can imagine what may be.

Science as a 'Saving Story'

One aspect of my practice that hasn't changed all that much since those early years is that I continue to spend quite a bit of time and energy working with students who are struggling with their studies.

Fairly early on in my placement I realized that some of the kids were really having trouble with physics. Sometimes there were issues with basic math computations, but mostly they were having problems understanding concepts like velocity or acceleration. I asked about it, but there was limited extra help available, so I decided to start holding sessions after school. A fellow teacher suggested I call it 'science club,' but no kid is gullible enough to believe that, so I just called it tutorial. It was a bit tough to schedule around all the after school meetings and all the kids' activities, but I usually managed a session or two a week. I often had to extend personal 'invitations,' but several kids did come regularly and we made some decent progress.

(Recalled memory, fictionalized interim research text)

My first year of teaching included six blocks of Science 8: three in English and three in FI. Because I was so overwhelmed and not looking for more work, I planned the same class structure and activities for both groups and then delivered half of the classes in French with translated and adapted resources. Teaching science was a real lifesaver. When I reflect on it, I think that science was actually a 'saving story' for me.

Driedger-Enns and Murphy (2014) wrote that the repeated telling of saving stories reminds us of our beliefs. They related that, "Thomas King wrote that the stories we believe influence the outcome of life. He says some stories we tell over and over, and these are our saving stories. These stories point to beliefs and shape lives" (Driedger-Enns and Murphy, 2014, p. 93). These are the stories that "keep us alive in the midst of life challenges…they are the stories that help us make sense of the world" (Driedger-Enns, 2014, p. 11). I hadn't realized the profundity of the impact that science education had played in the construction of my identity as a teacher until I began to see how it featured in my stories and how this plotline was pulled through so many other stories. Looking back now, science certainly gave me a central point to focus on, whether it was in English or in FI; I enjoyed sharing my love of science with my students.

There were students who struggled, in both the English and FI programs, but in general I was able to plan and implement science classes where most students, whichever program they were in, could find some success. I suspect that this was largely to do with the fact that science learning lends itself to a lot of hands-on work, which made it quite easy to engage these younger students. Soon, however, I started to hear some queries

from my FI colleagues about student grades. How was it that students could be receiving Bs or As in science and Cs or C minuses in their French humanities classes? As a new teacher I doubted myself and the decisions I was making. The story I had about what science learning should be bumped up against my colleagues' stories of how best to teach a second language. I was fairly certain that the reason some FI students were more successful in science class than in humanities was that I was putting less emphasis on reading and writing and when we did write, I encouraged students to elaborate with drawings, diagrams and tables. I also didn't mark their writing mechanics.

I worried a bit about this situation and wondered if I should be stricter with the students, especially in terms of their writing. The FI teachers I was working with were experienced, highly regarded and generous with their knowledge, and I looked to them for guidance in my first years of teaching. But they were also on the other side of the building and I spent much more time in the science wing with teachers who thought that while grammar was important, it was perhaps not central to the learning outcomes of the science curriculum. I tended to agree that whether students spelled words like 'développement' with two p's or one just didn't have much bearing on Grade 8 'sciences naturelles,' even though this course was also meant as an opportunity for students to further develop their French skills. At the time I was afraid that I was favouring my work as a science teacher over my work as a FI teacher, allowing one priority to silence another. Now I see that while these two plotlines, of science teaching and FI teaching, were bumping up against each other, my reaction was probably not a choice between them, but rather the emergence of another story to live by: inclusive education.

Telling and Re-telling my French Immersion Story

"Our child has a right as a Canadian to learn both official languages, so please don't tell us again that he should leave French immersion in order to get the support that he needs to be successful. Yes, he has a learning disability, and yes, he has some behavioural difficulties, but he's bright. He can also understand and speak French just fine, so we think it's ridiculous for him to have to leave immersion just so he can access the support he's entitled to. The last school he was at before we moved to BC was able to provide that, so please don't tell us it's not possible. We're not taking 'no' for an answer, so we'd appreciate you finding a way to make it work before we have to take this to the next level."

I stared carefully at a spot on the table, silently grateful that it didn't seem that anyone actually expected me to say anything at this meeting and that there were much more experienced educators doing the talking. Some gently expressed concern regarding whether FI was really the ideal situation for this student. It was conceded that students in FI had not been accessing the learning assistance program and that this request would require significant adjustment.

I felt uncomfortable in this very tense situation. I was quite willing to have this student in my science class, but he didn't seem to be learning very much and his behaviour was disruptive; I knew that I would need help to deal with that.

(Recalled memory, fictionalized interim research text)

The FI that I was experiencing as a teacher resembled the FI that I had known as a student in many ways, but it was also different. For one thing, the program had expanded

significantly over the years. I had grown up in a program characterized by one class per grade; now there were three classes per grade at the school I was teaching at, with more classes at the other secondary school FI site in the district. Predictably, growth in numbers had also led to an increase in the diversity of the students enrolled; amongst the Grade 8 FI students I taught in my first years of teaching there were several who required some adaptations or extra supports from me to be successful. I was happy to try to help them, and didn't think very much of it at the time (truth be told, I didn't think about much beyond survival in those years), until I was faced with some students I couldn't help to succeed with a few basic classroom adaptations and some after-school tutorials.

I was largely oblivious to the history or politics underpinning the predicament of FI students who could not access additional learning services, but was enlightened to some extent by my parents who related that they had been told very clearly in the early days of FI that students were only entitled to one specialty program; French immersion and special education could not be accessed simultaneously, a situation referred to as 'double dipping.' I don't know if this policy still existed when I started teaching, but it appeared that the philosophy had continued largely uncontested. Some of the families affected by this did not accept it and fought hard to have their children stay in FI, with the educational supports that their children were entitled to.

Since that time, special education services have become available to FI students, at least in theory if not always in practice. I was always very willing to help struggling students in any way I could, but I remained skeptical of whether FI was always the best learning environment for some of them. Especially in math, where many students really

had difficulty coping, would removing the additional challenge of a second language help? Or did I just need to become more practiced at helping them more effectively?

A Couple of Steps Forward

In anticipation of the rollout of a new behaviour support initiative to be implemented within neighbourhood schools, there was a district administrator visiting our staff meeting to explain the program and how it would run. There were many questions from a variety of staff members, including how this program might affect existing special education support services, as these were already overextended and not accessible to a number of students, particularly those in FI, who were increasingly in need of extra support. The administrator's response was that FI teachers don't adequately adapt instruction and teach too traditionally to engage struggling learners; the key was to remediate that behaviour before devoting additional resources to support services. As a relatively new teacher, I was crestfallen. While I recognized that I was still learning, I had devoted significant time and energy to differentiating curriculum for all my students, including those in FI, and these comments left me feeling deflated.

Several veteran FI teaching colleagues appeared displeased. We never had much of a conversation about it, but there were a few comments made quietly after the fact. One colleague pointed out that FI teachers are in fact "masters of adaptation." "Where do they think the resources our students use come from?" she asked. I hadn't thought of the specialized resources that FI teachers regularly produce for their students as a form of adaptation, but I was inclined to agree. I had no idea how many times I had taken existing resources and combined, reshaped and rewritten them to suit a FI audience.

Another colleague was concerned that FI teachers were spending so much time on this resource development for all their students, as well as organizing cultural opportunities, and working with FI parents, who were very involved and at times demanding, that there was little time left to work with exceptional learners. Another teacher pointed out how much the times had changed from the days of small FI classes in which teachers didn't have to worry so much about teaching to so many different levels at once. She wondered why students who struggled so much were in FI; the program was already challenging enough for most students, how could these students cope? I was torn; on the one hand, I had been seeing students with diverse learning needs in both FI and English classes achieving successes; on the other hand, I was exhausted by the effort that it took to provide all of my students with the support that they needed.

(Recalled memory, fictionalized interim research text)

The fact that there were students with diverse learning needs in FI never really surprised me; this seemed a logical result of the growth of the program, but they did present an 'interruption' to my FI story. As a student I had sought help from a tutor for some of my senior math and physics courses (in English), but I had never needed to access any learning assistance services. To the best of my knowledge, one of my classmates received some brief pullout assistance with reading in Grade 1, but this wasn't a common occurrence. From what I had seen as a student, FI students managed on their own or they left the program. My student experiences shaped my belief that FI was an excellent program that provided students with valuable experiences and skills, but that it wasn't easy and students needed to work hard and be fairly capable to keep up. This

story of FI bumped up against the story that was being shaped by my experiences as a FI teacher, based on my observations in the classroom and my interactions with students, colleagues and parents. There was a tension between these stories that formed my practical knowledge of FI; I hadn't known it to be a program for all learners, but was there a good reason it shouldn't be? I felt a further tension at the idea that FI might be a program operating at odds with inclusive education. This lack of coherence left me feeling unsure at times how to react to situations that arose in the classroom. Students with diverse learning needs seemed to be managing in FI, albeit with some help, but I can see now that I was unsure whether this represented the best possible learning situation for them or for others in the class. Would everyone be better off if they were in an English program? I wondered if more formal knowledge, based in peer-reviewed research, might bring more coherence to my FI story.

During the summer and fall of 2014 I dug into the research literature on the subject of FI, particularly as it pertained to diverse and at-risk learners. Heading into my exploration of the literature, I didn't really know what to expect. While I had engaged in informal discussions with some colleagues, these were usually centred on the needs of individual students. Our own observations told us that students who had left FI usually continued to struggle in their classes taught in English and that we could usually provide enough assistance for students to get by in FI, but I didn't know whether these were anomalous observations.

What struck me most as I read study after study and report after report was the consistency of the findings: students at risk in areas ranging from learning disabilities, to

low socioeconomic situation, to immigrant language status could be as successful in FI as they would be in an English program provided they had access to appropriate supports, and they could learn a second language significantly better than if they took a core French program. There were some gaps in the literature and researchers had stressed the need for more studies, but I became quite convinced, nonetheless, that there seemed to be no good reason for discouraging access to FI, or counselling students out of FI, on the basis of diverse learning needs, at least certainly not before doing everything possible to assist them within the program.

Reading this research brought me quite a sense of relief and, at the time I was a bit surprised that relief was what I felt. I knew that I was fully vested in FI as a program for second language learning, but I was a bit afraid that I also had an affinity for the way it had been when I was a student. As it turns out, in looking towards a future of a more inclusive FI, I was quite able to reinterpret and reimagine the program in a new and different way. I wonder now if I felt relief because my FI story was becoming more coherent, more in line with other aspects of my practice and with what I was learning about inclusive education in the Special Education classes I was also taking while engaging in this project. Whatever it was, it felt like I was taking a couple of steps forward.

Public Portrayals of French Immersion

I'm humbled to say that, in spite of my role as a FI teacher, it took me almost ten years to seek out and read these research studies. There are even a number of very accessible summaries presented by organizations such as the CPF, but I was unaware of

these. I wondered what sort of information parents were accessing when they made choices about enrolling or withdrawing their children from FI.

I spent a lot of time this week looking at French immersion websites from districts across BC. I wondered: if I were a parent thinking of putting my child in immersion, in either Kindergarten or Grade 6, what sort of information would I find about the program on a district or school website? Would I be led to believe that immersion was a program for ALL learners or more a program for a certain kind of learner? I was pleasantly surprised to see that most districts have something on their website that states that immersion is a program available to any child. A few schools still have some stuff about characteristics of a 'good' French immersion student, but not many. I was really impressed that there are a handful of schools that explicitly state that they have learning assistance services available in French.

I did notice a few patterns. Elementary schools had far more information about their French immersion programs than high schools – there were some high schools that offer immersion, but you would never know it from their sites. And single-track schools seemed more likely to have, or at least mention that they have, learning support services in French than dual-track schools. I hadn't really thought about these patterns before, but I guess they kind of mirror what I've noticed in schools.

(Recalled memory, interim research text, summer 2015)

I noticed that one of the school districts I had worked for had updated their FI information since the last time I'd looked at it. There was no longer the suggestion that successful FI learners might show certain characteristics such as strong skills in their first

language, being very verbal and imitating easily, having a good memory, or enjoying books, traits that Mady (2012a) identified as more likely to describe females than males. I was encouraged to see these changes, since I wondered if parents whose children don't fit those criteria might hesitate to register them in FI. I suppose that appearances can be deceiving, but there were some districts that seemed very progressive in their philosophy about FI; it appeared that they had worked hard to provide learning support services to FI students and to inform the public that these services were available and a 'normal' part of the program.

Some jurisdictions in Canada have gone so far as to produce extensive documents, readily available on the internet, regarding inclusion in FI. The Government of Alberta (2014), for example, has the *Handbook for French Immersion Administrators*, which includes a chapter titled "Inclusion of Students with Diverse Needs in French Immersion." Likewise, the Government of Manitoba (2007) has produced a similar document, which urges school administrators to promote the inclusive possibilities of FI with such statements as:

> Students who are born with or who acquire physical disabilities are easily accommodated in the French Immersion Program. Parents need to be encouraged to consider this option as it is a way to expand their child's social and cultural horizons and to give the child an added advantage later on in a greater variety of social and cultural settings and in the job market. Students with cognitive disabilities or learning disabilities will face the same issues in the French Immersion Program that they would face in the English Program. Having the

ability to speak in two languages can be a very positive benefit for students (p. 9-2).

These websites, handbooks and summaries from organizations like provincial governments and the CPF are readily available on the internet; in addition, several relevant peer-reviewed studies are available for free. Part of me wonders if I would have done anything differently had I accessed this research sooner. I'm not sure that I would have, but I do certainly feel more grounded in my own beliefs now that the plotlines of FI and inclusive education do not seem so potentially at odds with each other.

A Lack of Incentives for Inclusion

My FI science class was in the midst of our chemistry unit and we were in the lab to carry out some basic chemical and physical reactions that we had already studied in theory. The students had their written protocols and moved in groups from station to station, ran the reactions, recorded their observations, cleaning up as they went along. My main role was largely behind the scenes, in setting up the lab so that it could be run efficiently, keeping the stock solutions topped up and directing the speedy take-down of the lab setup at the end of the period.

While I was standing on the sidelines and observing the students' lab work in action, a colleague joined me and we had a brief chat about the activity and how the students were doing. They were on-task and focused, working carefully around each other in a tight space, and dealing largely on their own with problems that arose. Most of them were also making a concerted effort to speak French. My colleague was impressed. "Look at these kids!" she exclaimed. She mentioned that she was aiming to

enroll her own small child in FI, because even though she didn't care for the French language, she was keen to have her son learning with these types of students.

While I was certainly proud of my students and their fine lab work, my colleague's remark gave me pause. Was the real purpose of FI to stream students?

(Recalled memory, fictionalized interim research text)

Wise (2012), in an article written for the CPF, indicated that while no child is ineligible for a FI program, vulnerable parents are "often advised that providing both French immersion programming and special education services constitutes a duplication of programs, known as 'double dipping'" and that "many stakeholders are interested in maintaining this discriminatory practice" (p. 3). Parents, for example, may fear that an influx of students with diverse learning needs would have detrimental effects on their own child's achievement. Educators, said Wise, may also lack incentive to promote inclusive FI, as they currently work with a disproportionate number of highly capable, well-behaved, English-speaking students from privileged backgrounds and, "Many believe that French immersion is an enrichment program geared to the academic elite and complain about students 'who really shouldn't be in the program'" (p. 3).

Where do I fit into this? In my own FI story, which students 'belong' in the program? What is the 'purpose' of FI?

Different Learning in Different Places

Unfortunately, the central purpose of FI is not an explicit conversation I've had with many of my colleagues. I'm not entirely sure why this is the case, but this lack of conversation, this silence in my story, provides a small crack for me to inquire into.

Clandinin, Murphy, Huber, and Orr (2010) proposed a metaphor of a geode to illustrate the ways in which tensions or silences could open up possibilities for inquiry. While these rocks may appear smooth on the outside, examined more closely, small cracks might be visible, and gazing through these cracks into the interior of the geode might reveal interesting colours and crystals. In what might otherwise be a smooth story on the surface, tensions or gaps could mark these cracks that provide a space to inquire into. "It is in the cracks where inquiry spaces are made possible, that is, where there is possibility for retelling lives" (Clandinin, Murphy, Huber, & Orr, 2010, p. 84). Moments of tension can be used as occasions to looks "forward and backward and inward and outward with an attentiveness to place or places as a way to begin to write research texts" (Clandinin, Murphy, Huber, & Orr, 2010, p. 84).

As I consider my stories from within the three-dimensional space of narrative, an examination of *place* brings some insights into focus. While I haven't worked in more than a handful of schools, what did emerge from the stories I told about them was that learning difficulties in FI were discussed a bit differently in different schools. In general, the high schools I've worked at have been big, busy places where scheduling often made it challenging to collaborate with colleagues. General teachers didn't usually attend school-based team (SBT) meetings. In a dual-track environment, occassionally there were tensions or misunderstanding between English and FI programs, but FI staff members were fiercely creative and optimistic and worked tirelessly to create opportunities for students.

By contrast, a single-track, early FI elementary school provided a physically smaller environment, with fewer staff, and more opportunities for collaboration and staff-wide discussion. Students had fewer teachers and general teachers were more integrally involved in the SBT and invited to attend meetings with specialist teachers and psychologists. Parents were more frequently at the school site and more often in touch with teachers. The fact that students beginning FI in Kindergarten are quite diverse learners ("French second language learning in Canada," n.d.) meant that these discussions regarding how best to include children with exceptionalities occurred more frequently than in the secondary school setting.

My varied interactions with students, parents and colleagues in both types of environments have certainly shaped my own story of FI. They have been different types of interactions in different settings, but all have contributed to my own learning in different ways; I have been fortunate, for this reason as well as others, to have had the occasion to work in different schools and at different levels. What becomes clearer now as I inquire into these conversations that rarely took place is that I wish they had taken place or will take place; I think we could all benefit from thinking and discussing more openly about how diverse learner needs bump up against traditional perceptions of FI and how we are negotiating this tension.

Back to School: Professional Specialization Certificate in Special Education

Kate: "Hi Sam, I'm just here to pick up the iPads for our project this afternoon."

Sam (learning assistance teacher): No problem, I'll just finish up what we were working on this morning. It's a neat app – would you like to see? The student reads the

text out loud and any errors they make can be highlighted. Then they read it again, and if they make the same errors, they stay highlighted, but in a different colour. Anyway, you get the idea. It's been useful in our work with kids having reading difficulties.

(Recalled memory, fictionalized interim research text)

A year ago I didn't know much at all about how children learn to read; it wasn't part of my practice, so I had never studied reading instruction, much less interventions for reading difficulties. Thinking about it now, I realize that I had very little formal education in any type of special education, especially in the context of FI. The 'Development and Exceptionality in the Regular Classroom' course I had taken at UBC as part of teacher education was taught in French, but dealt very little with the specifics of FI. We had also taken a social justice course, also in French, but with a very broad purview and not touching specifically on the idea of inclusion in FI classrooms. Most everything I had learned about differentiating learning or strategies to assist learners with diverse needs had been learned on the job. I worked hard at it, but I was well aware that there was a lot I didn't know and couldn't do.

"Thank you so much for letting Ian stay in class and not just sending him out in the hallway. We know that he's a handful. He bounces off the walls at home, too, but at least we can just let him run around as much as he wants." I smiled at Ian's mother and said that it was fine, he was disruptive at times, but such a nice kid that it was hard to get upset with him. And he seemed to be keeping up reasonably well academically.

At the back of my mind, though, I was thinking about all the kids with issues like this I'd seen in later grades and how it seemed to become harder and harder for them to

hang on academically. Were there some steps I should have taken to help Ian to gain more control over his behaviour?

(Recalled memory, fictionalized interim research text)

Going back to school to study special education formally has been an intense, but rewarding, experience. I've learned some very practical strategies and skills, but more importantly, it has been a thought-provoking foray into the philosophy of inclusion.

One of my FI students approached me at the beginning of a class one day and handed me an envelope. "My mom and I made these and I'm delivering them to all my teachers," she said. I thanked her and asked if it was OK if I looked at it later. When I opened it up, there was a single sheet of paper inside with the student's picture in the top corner. The rest was a kind of letter from the student, written in the first person, explaining things she was good at and things she had some difficulty with, and offering some suggestions for adaptations in the classroom that would help her to learn better. It was succinct, the adaptations were easy to understand, and I was grateful to have received such useful insight into this student. The fact that it only took a few moments to read her letter was a bonus. I referred to that sheet of paper quite often.

(Recalled memory, fictionalized interim research text)

I wonder about some of the mixed feelings I've had over the years about inclusion of students with exceptionalities in the FI classroom. Was I just stuck in my ways, remembering the way that public school was when I was a student? Kohn (1999) expressed that new ideas in education are often condemned to not take root, pointing out that:

> This isn't because the new ideas don't make sense or can't work but because of how they clash with existing values – and also because of how challenging they are for teachers and students alike. Some people, of course, will immediately become defensive, viewing any meaningful departure from the status quo as an implicit criticism of their own schooling. "Am I not well educated? Of course I am. So make the kids do what I did' (Sizer, 1992, p. 10)" (p. 184).

Or were my misgivings rooted in a more practical worry that I couldn't adequately adapt a course to meet the needs of a student? I can say that as I become more comfortable in facilitating inclusive classrooms, I become more and more optimistic that students with diverse learning needs can be accommodated if they want to remain in FI.

A Step Back?

I met someone at a party the other night and somehow we got on to the topic of French immersion. Unfortunately, their experience had not been positive. "French immersion was not a good fit for our child. We had high hopes for the program, but he just couldn't cope. He was anxious, didn't want to go to school, and it seemed like he had tummy aches all the time. It was a tough decision for us to transfer him to the English program, but French immersion just isn't right for some students. Our child was so excited when he could actually understand what his teacher was saying in English, and it was such a relief for us. I felt better about it when the principal told me about how many kids drop out of immersion."

I could feel my forehead creasing as I heard this parent's story of what sounded like a very difficult experience for their child. Part of me was sad for a child who had

been lost at school, but another part of me was confused. I had taught quite a few FI students with exceptionalities, but I'd never felt that any of them should leave the program. Finding some success hadn't always been easy, and in many cases there had been a number of people, including administrators, counsellors, youth workers, learning support teachers, speech-language pathologists, education assistants, etc. involved in supporting that child, not to mention very involved and responsive parents. I had also been reading a lot about the suitability of FI for at-risk students and I was excited to discover that the peer-reviewed research I was reading fit with my own observations: students with exceptionalities could be very successful in FI as long as they received appropriate supports.

I wondered why this student had not been successful in immersion. But I also had quite an emotional response, a bit like the sinking feeling you get in that moment when you realize that you've offered someone a gift you thought they'd really like, because you liked it so much, but as they open it that look flashes across their face and you know they hate it. I realized that it was ill-advised to take anyone's reaction to a school choice program personally, but I couldn't help it. I believed strongly in FI and wanted to offer what had worked so well for me to everyone. Even though I didn't know this particular child, I felt an uncomfortable sense of failure because FI hadn't worked out for him.

(Recalled memory, fictionalized interim research text)

Thanks to my own experiences in schools and the various university courses I had recently completed, I felt a shift in my understanding, a rapprochement of my FI and inclusion plotlines, which in the end were perhaps not so divergent after all. After

finding some coherence the notion that some children may not be able to manage at all in FI created an interruption to my unfolding story. The near-solid ground I was standing on was again shifting under me and I felt that I was slipping back a step into the well.

There are many similar accounts of children leaving FI readily available on the internet. Some educators have also written on the subject. Mannavarayan (2002) challenged the suitability of FI for all learners, presenting a series of case studies of students who appeared to "languish, agonize and suffer" (p. 9) in the program. Quiring (2008), in her doctoral dissertation, admitted that, "Despite repeated attempts I was forced to accept that some of the students in French immersion were not going to succeed" (p. 2). She further recounted that:

> Teachers forcefully defended their philosophy about French immersion, beliefs firmly ensconced in the research about the program's suitability for all children, and that difficulties experienced in French would be similar in an English program. Furthermore, the fear of having the program perceived as an elite program influenced the teachers not to broach the subject of transfer out of the program with the parents. (p. 2)

Researchers such as Wise (2011; 2012) and Arnett and Mady (2010), looking through a lens of critical theory, described the limited access that students with exceptionalities in FI have to learning assistance as an ethical issue; all students should have equitable access to the valuable learnings offered by FI and should receive the support they need to be successful. Mannavarayan (2002) and Quiring (2008), conversely, raised the question of whether it is ethical to keep these struggling students in

FI. Genesee (2007) cautioned a lack of empirical evidence to support whether or not students who are struggling in FI should consider a transfer to an English program. He suggested that students experiencing difficulty in immersion would benefit from additional support, but that this is not always provided, and that, "While it is still possible that immersion is not suitable for some students, the evidence currently available does not allow us to identify beforehand who these students are" (p. 676).

In the midst of this confusing landscape, it is difficult to find the best path forward. Has the story that all children can succeed in FI just become a 'safe' story, one that has been made to fit conveniently into the inclusive schools movement?

A Story that is Ongoing

"Johnny is really struggling in school. His grades are always low, we know that he has trouble paying attention in class, if he remembers that he has homework he just rushes through it, his handwriting is almost unreadable, when we've tried working with him on his math it's pretty obvious that he doesn't understand what he's doing, and he's getting pretty discouraged. We're all getting pretty discouraged. Do you think we should transfer him out of French immersion?"

I was grateful that I didn't get asked this question very often. I listened carefully to what this parent had to say and then discussed their child's strengths. "As long as instructions are provided orally and in writing, and not with too many steps at a time, Johnny can usually follow along. And his spoken French is actually really good. He doesn't offer a lot during class discussions, but when I talk to him one-on-one, he can carry on a conversation. His accent and pronunciation are very good." I grappled with

whether to add that he was on his way to being able to communicate well in French, at least orally, and it seemed such a shame to think about him giving up on the work he'd already put in. I also struggled with what else we could do about his writing and the fact that he was working well below grade level in math.

When it came right down to it, I didn't really know what would be best for this child. I admitted as much and suggested that the parent could certainly speak to other school personnel for more information, but that I hoped Johnny would continue in immersion. "Now that he's at the high school level, he'll begin to take more and more courses in English anyway. We can see what we can do to get him set up with some support from the Learning Assistance Centre; I realize that there's very little in the way of special education services in French, but he could probably get help in English. And he can always see me for tutorial."

Did I do the right thing?

(Recalled memory, fictionalized interim research text)

Who am I in my students' stories when I recommend for them to remain in FI? Am I an advocate for their equitable participation, or a detriment to their better interests? How do they perceive me?

In reflecting back over a decade of experiences in the classroom, but especially on the last two years during which time I have been engaged in both a Master's in Curriculum Studies and a Certificate in Special Education, I can begin to see some of the ways in which my understandings and beliefs have shifted.

While I am retelling my stories in the present time, I have related my past experiences with the insight I have today and my visions for the future of my practice. Writing about this now has helped me to understand what happened then and what I want to have happen in the future. My understandings of FI in my first years of teaching were strongly based in my own experiences as a student. They were provisional and in flux, continually shaped by new experiences. The same could be said of my present understandings, which will continue to be reshaped as I continue to inquire into them. My interpretations of what I have created here will surely change with time, as I experience new things and interact with new situations and people. There will continue to be ups and downs, but I'm sure it will be a rewarding journey.

Chapter 4: Final Reflections

The Effects of the Graduate Experience

Question: How have your experiences throughout your M.Ed. program influenced your beliefs and thoughts regarding education and your role as an education professional?

"We do not learn from experience. We learn from reflecting on experience." ~ Dewey

A little over two years ago I sat down in a classroom full of unfamiliar faces to begin this graduate program. I didn't really know what to expect, although in retrospect, I suppose I had some preconceived notions of what I might learn over the course of this degree. In the end some of those notions were met, others weren't, and there were some surprises along the way, but what I did learn has certainly influenced my beliefs and thoughts as an education professional.

We began on that first day with some discussion of what 'curriculum' is. To my mind, the term curriculum referred to the document prepared by the Ministry of Education that told teachers what content they were required to convey to students; the idea that curriculum could represent something much broader, to include even such things as what was posted on the walls of school hallways, was new to me and required some adjustment in my thinking. As a class we moved forward in the days that followed with what Jackson (1990/2013) referred to as the 'hidden curriculum.' I had never giving a name to all of the often unwritten institutional rules that students and teachers must generally follow in order to be successful, but Jackson's explanation that, "Many of the rewards and punishments that sound as if they are being dispensed on the basis of

academic success and failure are really more closely related to the mastery of the hidden curriculum" (p. 123) highlighted that curriculum encompasses more than what is written in prescribed learning outcomes. Many of our school 'rituals,' including such pedestrian actions as raising hands, take on an importance in our lives that I hadn't previously formalized in my own thoughts, or in Jackson's (1990/2013) words, "Certainly they represent a much larger portion of our experience than do those about which we talk" (p. 118). These points may seem painfully obvious to most teachers, but I always appreciate it when my formal learning reinforces or consolidates my classroom observations.

I was also relieved to discover a name for the tension that I had often felt between my 'curriculum-as-plan' and my 'curriculum-as-lived-experience.' Aoki's (1986/2005) description of these horizons and of the resulting 'dwelling in the zone of between' that teachers face as they attempt to reconcile the requirements of provincial curriculum documents with the unique needs of their individual students and situations resonated with me. While this concept also seems somewhat obvious in retrospect, reading Aoki's words validated the tension I felt when my well-laid plans didn't quite work out the way I wanted them to.

As I went back through my notes from that first course, I saw that I had underlined AND starred the following passage by Aoki (1986/2005):

> …Teachers are asked to be doers, and often they are asked to participate in implementation workshops on 'how to do this and that.' Teachers are 'trained,' and in becoming trained, they become effective in trained ways of 'doing.' At times, at such workshops, ignored are the teachers' own skills that emerge from

> reflection on their experiences of teaching, and, more seriously, there is forgetfulness that what matters deeply in the situated world of the classroom is how the teachers' 'doings' flow from who they are, their beings. That is, there is a forgetfulness that teaching is fundamentally a mode of being. (p. 160)

Although it has taken me quite some time to fully recognize it, if there is one idea that has circled through my thoughts over and over throughout this M.Ed. it has been this one.

When I began teaching in public education I put a lot of emphasis on published curriculum documents and did my utmost to faithfully 'cover' the material they laid out. However, upon reflection, I realize that my teaching practice has always been strongly guided by my own beliefs and attitudes and is probably even more so today than when I began. Some of these beliefs and attitudes have been reinforced by this M.Ed. program. For instance, my beliefs that computer-based technology should be used judiciously with students and only with defensible cause, and that nature-based education is becoming crucially important in schools, have been strengthened by my learnings in this program.

Other learnings, however, have caused me to question beliefs that I have long taken for granted. Our Indigenous Pedagogies class, for example, invited me to look critically at my own beliefs around science and science learning. As is often the case, all the theory in the world can be interesting, but not necessarily strike a real chord, and while I appreciated the readings concerning 'decolonizing my practice,' it was a particular example that caught my attention. In this specific story, a teacher was speaking with a science class and gradually teasing out that some of the students had felt confused and excluded from the lesson regarding living and non-living things because they had

previously been taught that a rock, imbued with a soul, was a living thing. It was at that moment that I became fully aware of how westernized my views of science and science teaching were. I loved science the way that I had learned it and I brought this aspect of who I was to my teaching practice. For the most part, this had worked very well, as my own passion for the subject made it easy for me to offer enthusiasm to students. However, I had little exposure to other ways of knowing; they were not part of my experience and I had limited comfort in sharing a point of view I knew so little about. I realized that this limitation to my practice may have been alienating some students in my classes and began to think about ways to attend to this issue.

During our second summer of courses, this concept of the importance of teacher identity was encapsulated by Dr. David Blades, who proposed that curriculum change is difficult largely because it is viewed as a *thinking* (epistemological) problem rather than as a *being* (ontological) problem. The idea that it is difficult to *be* different in the world resonated again with me and I wondered how what I believed affected my reactions to the myriad changes inherent in the education system. Sometimes I resist these changes and it was interesting to consider that this may have less to do with what I know and more to do with who I am.

This idea came full circle during my final project, when I was able to take the opportunity to examine some of the key components of my teaching practice, namely French immersion and inclusive education, and to consider how these two plotlines might intersect in my classroom. I came to realize through the course of this inquiry that this intersection is certainly influenced by what I know and what skills I have in these areas,

but also by my beliefs. These beliefs, in turn, have been shaped over many years by my own student experiences and teacher observations, but have more recently also been influenced by my formal learnings, particularly during the literature review for my final project.

Teaching in a public grade school is, by necessity, a pragmatic endeavour. Every day is filled to the brim with the practical needs of students, colleagues and parents, leaving little time for consideration of theoretical perspectives or even reflection. One of the most important roles this program has played has been by providing the space to consider which theoretical perspectives support my own beliefs and actions and to reflect on my own practice and how it may be changing over time and why.

Future Implications

Question: How do you plan to apply what you've gained from your graduate experience towards your professional career?

My graduate experience has offered me some practical tools that I have already begun to apply to my professional practice. In some cases these have quite simply been strategies modeled by various professors. As I have always found implementation of new techniques easier once I've seen them in action, this has been an excellent opportunity to pick up some new ideas. I can report, for example, that Dr. Wanda Hurren's 'morning pages' writing exercises have already been a bit hit with the Grade 7 crowd.

However, some more expansive concepts, while interesting, will require more thought before I may be ready to attempt their implementation. Although we participated in some intriguing examples of project-based and personalized learning with Dr. Monica

Prendergast, the mechanics of applying these practices to the reality of hundreds of students at a time while still assessing according to prescribed learning outcomes remains daunting. In the meantime, however, these experiences provide interesting fodder for discussion with colleagues.

Along this line, I am keen to discuss my learnings from my final project with colleagues who are also implicated in FI instruction. It's always a challenge to find opportunities for these types of discussions, but perhaps I will now feel more comfortable sharing what I know when the subject arises.

Another important experience that I've gained from this graduate experience is quite simply the experience of being a student again. There is no doubt that my background in the sciences left me feeling like a fish out of water for much of this graduate degree, with its foundations largely in areas such as the social sciences and arts-based research. These areas were new to me and at times seemed esoteric and difficult to understand. Some of the readings could have been in Japanese for all I could glean from them, and engaging in poetry and drama activities was not what I was used to. This was often interesting and exciting, but it was also mentally exhausting to be out of my comfort zone for such prolonged periods of time.

These experiences reminded me of what many of my own students likely go through every day. I was reminded that they may struggle with what they are learning, but that I can encourage them to take what they can from it. I was reminded that they may not be familiar with the method of delivery, but that I can make an effort to offer the method in question in relatively non-threatening ways. I was reminded that they may be

confused by what is important or how they are being assessed, but that open dialogue can go a long way to clarifying. I hope to be able to hold these impressions in my mind so that I can better understand where my own students are coming from as we go forward.

Recommendations for Educators Considering a Similar Topic

If I were to return in time, I'm not sure that I would attempt narrative inquiry as the methodology for my final project again given my lack of background in this area of research. Certainly, engaging with the corpus explaining the theoretical underpinnings of narrative inquiry was hard work and would have been easier, and likely more fruitful, within the context of some type of response group working through a similar process. In the absence of this collaboration, I found it essential to look carefully at existing narrative inquiry research projects, many of which seem to have been written by graduate students of Dr. D. J. Clandinin at the University of Alberta.

In a more practical vein, had I known that I would end up taking a narrative inquiry route, I might have kept a diary and other work samples for a period of time, as these would perhaps have offered more robust research texts.

From my own perspective, I found that my study of French immersion was enriched by the opportunity to work at a wide range of grade levels and in a variety of different schools. I was also assisted greatly by my formal study of inclusive education environments and my discussions with colleagues working in learning assistance.

Finally, if you end up a bit lost, as I did, consider the words of Michel Foucault:

> I don't feel it is necessary to know exactly what I am. The main interest in life and work is to become someone else that you were not in the beginning. If you

knew when you began a book what you would say at the end, do you think that you would have the courage to write it? (as cited in Davies & Gannon, 2006, p. 117)

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