Effectiveness and French Immersion: A Socio-Political Analysis

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In the American view of educational effectiveness, a school is "effective" if it provides all children, regardless of social background, with an education. For over two decades, the effectiveness of the French immersion program in Canada has been measured almost solely in terms of the linguistic and educational achievements of its population. French immersion programs are educational and should be submitted to the test of effectiveness under educational criteria. We must learn what French immersion is, examine its organizational setting, probe its social environment, consider the program's academic and linguistic leadership, examine the responsibility of administrators and educators in ensuring accessibility to the program, and study the relationship between traditional unilingual programs and the growing alternative.

Selon la vision américaine de l'efficacité pédagogique, une école est "efficace" si elle fournit une éducation à tous les enfants, peu importe leur milieu social. Depuis plus de deux décennies, l'efficacité du programme d'immersion française au Canada est évaluée presque exclusivement en termes des acquis linguistiques et pédagogiques de la population qui y participe. Les programmes d'immersion française sont pédagogiques et devront donc être soumis à des tests d'efficacité fondés sur des critères pédagogiques. Nous devons cerner la définition même de l'immersion française, nous pencher sur son cadre organisationnel, préciser son environnement social, tenir compte du leadership pédagogique et linguistique du programme, examiner la responsabilité des administrateurs et des éducateurs eu égard au maintien de l'accessibilité au programme et étudier la relation entre les programmes unilingues traditionnels et la solution de rechange de plus en plus répandue que constituent les programmes d'immersion.

INTRODUCTION

In North America, school districts continue to accept the underlying assumptions and prescriptions of "effective" schooling. The message of the school effectiveness movement was and is that schools can and do make a difference, and this on three grounds: first, certain American urban schools have been unusually effective in helping poor children and minority children to master basic skills as measured by standardized tests; second, these "successful" schools exhibited common characteristics highly correlated with

instructional progress; and third, these characteristics could form a prescriptive basis for school effectiveness programs (Bickel, 1984, p. 3).

The movement began as a counter-reaction to studies in the 1960s, particularly that of Coleman et al. (1966), that claimed inherent disabilities among the poor accounted for poor children's low educational achievements (Clark, Lotto, & Astuto, 1984). Weber (1971) studied four urban schools attended by poor children who had achieved a national grade norm score as a median. He found all four had strong educational leaders, high teacher expectations of student achievement, an emphasis on acquiring basic skills, a system for regular evaluation of student progress, and an orderly and pleasant atmosphere. In 1974 the State of New York's office of Education Performance Review confirmed Weber's major findings on effectiveness and reinforced the strong correlation between student achievement and the elements of leadership, teacher behaviour, and school climate. Other studies reached similar conclusions (Edmonds, 1979, p. 20).

Edmonds (1979) defined effectiveness so as to link education to social progress. He argued schools should contribute to a more equitable social order and to making a just society. "I measure our progress as a social order," he wrote, "by our willingness to advance the equity interest of the least privileged among us" (p. 15). He cogently formulated what became the central assumption of the school effectiveness movement, namely that "All children are eminently educable and that the behaviour of the schools is critical in determining the quality of that education" (p. 20).

I argue that this central assumption is appropriate in studying the effectiveness of French immersion. French immersion effectiveness, defined in linguistic and academic outcomes, has usually excluded school organization and level of integration (defined as the cohesiveness of school culture in pursuit of common goals), teachers' behaviours, and principals' leadership. Indeed, most researchers in French immersion were preoccupied with second-language achievements, the possible negative impact of the program on first language development, and academic achievements in subject matters taught in French.

As I have shown elsewhere (Safty, 1988), French immersion evaluation and research studies generally produce positive findings. French immersion students readily develop in their first language as a result of being in a French immersion program; their intellectual development and educational achievements are comparable to those of their counterparts in regular English programs, and in the case of early total French immersion, these pupils' learning may even be enhanced by immersion. French immersion methods have succeeded in promoting acquisition of advanced French language skills and in imparting functional bilingual competency. Social and psychological findings on French immersion (Edwards & Smyth, 1976, cited in Swain & Lapkin, 1982; Lambert & Tucker, 1972) suggest French immersion students are satisfied with their programs, adjust readily to its challenging environment, and see less social distance between themselves and French Canadians, particularly bilingual French Canadians.

The effectiveness of French immersion programs should, then, be evaluated in part by considering accessibility to the program, its organizational setting (especially the degree of its integration with other school programs), teachers' behaviour in bilingual classes, and the principal's leadership role. In short, I propose French immersion education be redefined.

A NEW CONTEXT FOR EXAMINING FRENCH IMMERSION EFFECTIVENESS

The Canadian Education Association study *French Immersion and School Boards* (1983) identifies difficulties in establishing and maintaining a French immersion program. These include school boards' reluctance to meet parental demand for French immersion, indifference, the occasional resentment of regular program teachers and school and district administrators toward the program, and scarcity of qualified teachers and suitable instructional materials. Some researchers claim that "as it has been implemented French immersion has functioned as a service to the elite" (Olson & Burns, 1983, p. 7). All these factors show how important context—social, political, legal—is in a study of immersion programs.

In a case on school boards' legal obligation to offer French immersion, The Supreme Court of British Columbia ruled on 2 September 1987 that French immersion enjoyed no constitutional protection. Ruling on a suit brought by parents against the Saanich school board, Madam Justice Proudfoot argued that only programs for the minority have constitutional protection, "The English majority in British Columbia has no such rights. . . . Optional programs, such as French immersion, carry no constitutional rights." The decision shows that access and social accountability in French immersion do not have the same legal and social meanings as in regular programs.

An effective French immersion program would, then, be recognized as complete and bilingual. Its accessibility would be measured in part by the extent of school board intervention to ensure that invisible restrictions do not hinder parents wishing to enrol their children. Its integration into the school culture would be measured by the degree to which teachers from the regular and the bilingual programs cooperate, collaborate, and show commitment to the school's mission. (The level of integration of a bilingual program may also be measured by the degree to which regular program teachers' perceptions of professional threats and related resentments have been successfully dealt with. The tone of the school and its prevailing ethos will be a good indicator of the level of integration achieved by its various members and school programs.)

Integration into the mainstream of professional development would increase professional benefits to immersion teachers and enhance their accountability to the school mission. It would also encourage administrative and curricular leadership at the school. The principal's leadership role is crucial in deciding level of staff integration as well as school climate,

teacher effectiveness, and the quality of education children receive. In bilingual education, unilingual administrators will necessarily be handicapped in providing effective curriculum leadership.

I come to the question of school boards' responsibility to provide universal access to bilingual education, and to do so effectively. Boards have escaped tests of organizational and social accountability partly because of such organizational difficulties as shortages of qualified teachers and administrators, and partly because of political considerations (the power of representatives of established unilingual educational programs who fear expansion of bilingual programs would be detrimental to their professional interests). French immersion has not yet enough allies among parent groups to compel more democratization.

FRENCH IMMERSION AND INTEGRATION

Schools are dynamic social institutions (Purkey & Smith, 1983) whose effective functioning depends on adaptability to the changing environment and social demands, academic goals, and level of integration (cooperation and collaboration among staff and administration and personal commitment to the general mission). The introduction of a French immersion program in a school previously operated as an all-English school raises especially the question of integration.

First, most French immersion teachers in English Canada are Francophones whose degree of integration into the school culture depends on their ability to adapt to the prevailing environment, and on the attitudes and perceptions of teachers and administrators in the regular English program (Heck & Williams, 1984). The Canadian Education Association study mentioned above showed that 23% of the boards with immersion programs said teachers' layoffs were caused by French immersion (p. 23). Supporters of French immersion argue this is inevitable given the tremendous changes consequent upon introduction of this popular program, but critics prefer to emphasize a French immersion "threat" to teacher employment in regular programs.

Other possible sources of resentment, and therefore obstacles to integration, include the general belief that French immersion programs attract the brightest students and leave regular English programs with average to below-average students, with the resulting charge that French immersion is elitist. There is also class-based resentment fostered by the perception that middle- and upper-class children are learning to speak French, and thus acquiring more socio-economic mobility. As a professional class, regular program teachers benefit from the established order; the arrival of a new professional class with interests of its own, a growing constituency, and the potential to cause dislocation and to disrupt the established order, cannot be expected to leave the established professional class indifferent.

French immersion is also perceived as a threat to the established social class hierarchy through its cultural and economic valorization of bilingual-

ism. Although teachers as a social group are middle class, divergence of interest and conflict within the group will result if a segment is perceived as having acquired prestige and social mobility not previously available or accessible to the rest. A relationship once based on socio-political solidarity will become under these conditions, as Weber's analysis of the subjective meaning of social relationship would suggest, a relationship of conflict. Francophones, traditionally an underclass in the historic Canadian context, benefit economically from French immersion through greater employment opportunities in English Canada, and benefit culturally from recognition of French culture, language, and contributions to Canada. Bilingualism is thus perceived, socially speaking, as disturbing the established social order, reshuffling its hierarchical structures by acting as a mediating agent of social mobility both for learners and their families, and for Francophone teachers in the program.

Thus the sociology of the French immersion culture puts French immersion teachers, Francophones and others, in a privileged and envied position in the micro-social environment of an immersion school. This is reinforced by uneven distribution of resources, differences in class sizes, and the availability of "French money" in the form of federal grants. But in truth, distribution of power between French immersion teachers and regular program teachers is unfavourable to immersion teachers, since most French immersion programs and schools are controlled and administered by non-French–speaking Anglophone administrators (Guttman, 1983; Singh, 1986; Wilton, Obadia, Roy, Saunders, & Taffler, 1984). These administrators set the tone of the school and decide the distribution of power in the school.

All these factors stand in the way of integration, leading, for example, to out-of-province Francophone teachers' first-year "drop-out" rate of 25% to 30% (B. Sherrington, personal communication, 1988).

Questions of integration and effectiveness acquire crucial relevance in dual-track schools offering education with two functional-linguistic orientations served by two identifiable cultural groups. Such groups are expected to subordinate their individual preferences, political beliefs, professional interests, class loyalty, and group relationship with the social environment to the larger imperative of an integrated school culture. McGillivray (1984) advocates, in light of these forces, the establishment of French centres in which only French immersion would be offered, for "the two programs are not compatible, and they co-exist with difficulty" (p. 27). Others, in particular Lapkin and Swain (1984) favour immersion centres because of their potential to enhance immersion students' linguistic skills.

THE IMMERSION TEACHER

Few researchers have concerned themselves with French immersion teachers—their linguistic and academic training, their integration into the school culture, or their professional and socio-emotional needs. Some school

boards have introduced a linguistic competency test in response to criticisms of the French language proficiency of some immersion teachers. But many school boards have no way of determining the linguistic competency of teachers they hire, either because recruiters are unilingual, or theoretically bilingual but with poor effective command of the language, or because the competitive environment forces on them measures of expediency. Moreover, considerations of teacher preparation, pedagogical training, methodological approaches, and teaching skills are either lost in the search for linguistic competency, or are thought to have been covered with vague references to "the communicative approach." French immersion, in the eyes of many practitioners and administrators, is nothing more than a second language learning methodology with primary emphasis on acquisition of linguistic skills in the second language.

Inadequate human and material resources, poor planning, and absence of a guiding vision at the district and at the school levels have helped to create an unfavourable intellectual environment. This environment is usually characterized by a want of leadership, by reactive approaches to problem solving, by improvisation, and by absence of adequate recognition of individuals' initiatives and achievements. Besides making it hard to diagnose weaknesses, to provide appropriate support, and to promote talented leaders, the unfavourable environment encourages research on programs—but not on human resources or ecological and socio-organizational support.

Although most school districts in North America try to keep abreast with issues in school effectiveness, school ethos, critical thinking, and direct-versus-indirect teaching, the French immersion culture is still groping with the communicative approach and with split-grade teaching. Questions of teachers' expectations, time on task, emphasis on cognitive objectives, and similar aspects of effective teaching have yet to be discussed, absorbed, and subjected to a critique in the French immersion movement. Perhaps more significantly, given the emphasis on oral expression in immersion, no one has defined or measured effective teaching in the French immersion classroom.

THE LEADERSHIP ROLE OF THE PRINCIPAL

Researchers agree leadership plays "a catalyst role in what was felt to be the breakthrough in effective school research" (Mackenzie, 1983). There is also agreement on the significant influence a principal can have on the school (Lortie, 1975). The effective administrative and educational leader is expected to involve teachers in decision making, provide curriculum leadership and facilitate successful implementation of school programs, while attending to staff personal needs.

Few boards, however, have asked how non-French–speaking school administrators can provide effective instructional leadership for French immersion teachers, the majority of whom are Francophones. Olson and

Burns (1983) argued the school leadership role of unilingual French immersion principals is jeopardized by their inability to understand and communicate in French. Guttman (1983) spoke of a leadership crisis in French immersion caused partly by the fact that most boards "have placed the traditional school principal without any French language skills or specialized training" (p. 20) in charge of French immersion programs. In evaluating teachers, the non-French–speaking principal often has to rely on non-content based observation clues such as class tone, time on task, variety of activities presented to the students, and so forth. But the nature of the task and the quality and pedagogical usefulness of teaching activities are subordinated to an artificial observation of students and of teachers "doing" something. Observations of conceptual clarification, tasks, analysis, questioning techniques, and varieties of communication are necessarily deduced.

Since many a conflict is the result of misunderstanding and poor communication between people speaking the same language, one can easily imagine the potential for conflict in a power relationship between two individuals having different cultural codes, different social status, different professional interests, wielding unevenly proportioned power, and speaking two different languages.

Parents' sustained and active interest in the program encourages the unilingual administrator's alertness to situations of potential conflict. To the immersion teacher this means greater politicization of evaluation, since parents become indirect participants in evaluation. Good classroom immersion teachers may be judged political liabilities because of poor public relations skills.

Immersion teachers have little or no independent political power as a group. Although they are members of their local and provincial associations they do not get wholehearted support since it is thought that advancing the interest of immersion teachers as a group—for instance, hiring more immersion teachers or promoting immersion teachers to leadership positions—would not be compatible with the associations' collective interests. All of this contributes to a situation where French immersion teachers operate in a politicized environment, with more than usual potential for conflict, but without significant power.

Although most school boards are by policy wedded to the principle of formative evaluation (that is, an evaluation procedure that will improve performance rather than pronounce a summative judgement), the unilingual principal and the immersion teacher teaching entirely in French approach evaluation with trepidation. Although most unilingual administrators would try to be useful and helpful to the immersion teacher, there are instances when feelings of lack of qualifications and of linguistic competency would make it expedient to rely on political ingredients of the power relationship.

One teacher told me that on the recommendation of her high school unilingual principal, her contract was not renewed after four months of successful classroom immersion teaching. During that time the principal did

not set foot in her classroom to observe her teaching but was allegedly sensitive to complaints about excessive amounts of homework. At the other extreme, a recently arrived Francophone teacher was subjected by his unilingual high school principal to 17 evaluation visits in the space of three weeks only two months after he started his first teaching assignment. Three people participated in this unusual evaluation process, the unilingual principal, a unilingual district consultant, and a theoretically bilingual language coordinator (the School Act in British Columbia does not provide for participation of the latter two in evaluation).

The three people involved did not meet with the teacher to coordinate overall strategies or to explain the reasons for their frequent visits. The result was tragi-comical. I quote from the teacher's letter of complaint addressed to his principal and carbon-copied to the superintendent, upon learning of the final negative report. The passage is indicative of pitfalls that characterize the immersion teacher–unilingual administrator relationship. The names have been modified to protect the identities of the people involved:

> You explained to me that the three of you did not meet with me because you felt that there was no need to do so since you, Mr. Smith and Mr. Boileau were "all heading in the same direction." This information came as yet another surprise to me, and I daresay that it would not have occurred to me that you were all going in the same direction. . . . Don't you think that I would have benefited from knowing what that direction was anyway? This way I would have known that Mr. Smith's advice to me to ask the students to stand up when answering questions would displease you; that Mr. Boileau's injunction to do more direct teaching would be dismissed by Mr. Smith who wanted indirect teaching. I would have realized that Mr. Smith's silent sponge activity would not go very well with Mr. Boileau who wanted an interactive sponge. And I would have learned that Madeleine Hunter was a controversial persona.

The unilingual principal's negative report found this teacher's knowledge of French language and French literature just "acceptable," although the teacher held a Masters' degree from a French university in French literature. The teacher had a nervous breakdown and left the profession. The principal was promoted a year later as district principal in charge of providing leadership to immersion and non-immersion schools.

My interviews with Canadian immersion teachers suggest that non-French–speaking evaluators of French immersion teachers feel ambivalent about their situation. They have mixed feelings not only about the logic of the situation but also about their competency to exercise leadership responsibility.

Stephen Krashen (1982) argues that the success of French immersion is largely the result of putting methodological emphasis on the message, not on the form; on what is being said, not on how it is being said. French immersion is successful because it offers "a comprehensible input." In their present forms, most French immersion programs deprive immersion teachers of

adequate supervisory help because unilingual principals are unable fairly to judge and to evaluate. The comprehensible output of the program is largely incomprehensible to the majority of those whose responsibility it is to evaluate the teaching in, and the effectiveness of the program.

CONCLUSION

Ten years ago the dangers facing French immersion came from opponents of bilingualism, who saw in it a Trudeauian "master plan" (Andrew, 1977) to Francize Canada through the accumulation of "French power" (Allison, 1978). It was a socio-political danger of possible rejection of bilingualism by the Canadian people. Although there remain questions about the nature and direction of official bilingualism, as well as about the constitutional nature of the socio-political co-existence of the two largest cultural groups in the country, French immersion is acquiring momentum. When it comes of age as an educational program, it will have to be considered as a bilingual educational program subject to effectiveness criteria commonly accepted in the field. In summary, the effectiveness of a French immersion program must be measured by broader educational criteria. Measurement should take into account the degree of accessibility in the bilingual program, organizational setting and integration, teacher behaviour in bilingual classes, and the leadership role of the bilingual school principal.

French immersion meanwhile continues to face obstacles to integration as a "regular" bilingual program. We should not underestimate the power of educational bureaucratization and compartmentalization, and what Marx perceptively called the sordid materialism of bureaucracy. French immersion should be understood in a new context, an organizational and socio-political context that recognizes French immersion's character as a complete bilingual education and that links education to social progress. Effective French immersion programs could then expand to offer bilingual instruction to students of all social class backgrounds, providing teachers with rewarding professional opportunities in an environment free of anxiety, effectively and bilingually led, placing people before the organization. The effective school of the not-too-distant future may not be called an immersion school, but rather a bilingual or even multilingual school, offering bilingual education in English and French, and providing an immersion program in one of the many heritage languages that enrich this society's cultural diversity.

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