

Systemic Barriers to French Immersion in New Brunswick

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Abstract: French Immersion is a popular program in New Brunswick; however, a growing body of research warns that it might contribute to inequities in public education. My experiences as an elementary French immersion teacher have prompted me to question the barriers to accessing and succeeding in the second language program. I begin by describing the history of FI in Canadian schools before identifying the systemic barriers that limit participation in the program. I will then explain how Bourdieu and Passeron's theory of social reproduction might help us to recognize the underlying social forces that predetermine one's likelihood of access and success in the popular program. Meaningful change requires a paradigm shift in thinking about what constitutes a good candidate for FI.

Keywords: French Immersion, Bourdieu, Equity

Introduction

French Immersion (FI) is a popular educational program in New Brunswick, where 36.8% of eligible students are registered (Canadian Parents for French, 2019). As FI has increased in popularity in New Brunswick and elsewhere in Canada, a growing body of research warns that it might be a source of inequity in public education (e.g., Bourgoin, 2014; Barrett DeWiele & Edgerton, 2021; Parekh et al., 2011, 2016; Wise, 2011). Studies suggest that some students are excluded (Mady, 2011; 2018; Parekh et al., 2011) and others are encouraged to withdraw (Cobb, 2015; Wise, 2011). As an elementary FI teacher, I have participated in a program that marginalizes and ultimately excludes some students from participation. This experience has prompted me to question the barriers to accessing and succeeding in FI. I begin by examining the history of FI in Canadian schools before introducing Bourdieu and Passeron's (1977) theory of social reproduction as a relevant framework to explain the systemic barriers that limit participation in the program. I will then share how a typical literacy block in my grade three FI classroom illustrates the relationship between social reproduction and the underlying social forces that predetermine one's likelihood of success.

French Immersion in Canada

French Immersion emerged during the Quiet Revolution in Quebec, at a time of tension between anglophones and francophones in the province and Canada at large. In 1965, a small group of English-speaking middle-class parents in a suburb of Montreal began lobbying for better access to French language instruction for their children (Safty, 1991). They worried that a growing emphasis on the French language in Quebec society and economy would isolate their children from future success. The spread of FI began shortly thereafter, starting with the Official Languages Act of 1969, which named French and English as the official languages of Canada. FI then spread across the country through public school education.

Studies have consistently shown that certain demographics are associated with FI enrolment. French Immersion students are more likely to be female, with girls representing 60% of FI students (Allen, 2004). Racial background is another demographic indicator, as research in the Toronto District School Board revealed that FI students were nearly twice as likely to be white as compared to the district population as a whole (Parekh et al., 2016). A further notable trend is the persistent influence of wealth and socioeconomic status (SES) on FI registration. Parents who choose FI have higher incomes than the national average, and participation in FI might be used as a proxy for social status for the middle class (Olson & Burns, 1983). Despite evidence suggesting that FI was equally suitable for all students of any SES (Safty, 1991), middle-class students continue to be overrepresented (Parekh et al., 2011; Wise, 2011). Students are more likely to come from higher socioeconomic backgrounds than their mainstream English peers, and their parents are more likely to be in the top socioeconomic quartile and hold a post-secondary degree (Allen, 2004; Parekh et al., 2011).

Thus, the average FI student is female with at least one parent who holds a university degree. She is likely to come from a middle-class family who chose the program for its smaller class sizes (Wise, 2011). While these characteristics appear innocuous enough, the case of participation in FI programming is particularly interesting because the publicly funded program is optional, and places are scarce. There is no policy that mandates enrollment,

nor is there a guarantee of admission. A nationwide shortage of qualified FI teachers has resulted in demand that greatly exceeds the available supply of program placements (Barrett DeWiele & Edgerton, 2021). And yet, despite the widespread dearth of programme placements and uncertain access to the popular program, there remain certain demographics that influence the likelihood of access and success: SES and ability. Let us consider what this reveals about systemic barriers to FI.

Systemic Barriers

Systemic barriers in education can be understood as instances that prevent students from learning (Epp & Watkinson, 1997). One such barrier to FI programming is access. If parents cannot access the program, their children cannot participate. For instance, Parekh et al. (2011) found that Toronto schools offering FI programming are most likely to be located in affluent neighbourhoods, with only 30% of FI schools located in low-income areas. In areas where demand outpaces the number of available spots, school districts have devised a variety of solutions. Barrett DeWiele and Edgerton (2021) reported numerous approaches to enrollment restrictions, such as “computerised random selection lottery” (p.4), ever-changing programme entry points, or the use of a first-come, first-served approach. For instance, some school districts in British Columbia have opted for “the lineup method,” (Turcato, 2019, para 2), where parents are required to wait in line, sometimes for multiple days (Hutchins, 2015), to gain access to a coveted FI spot for their child. This approach to registration eliminates families who cannot afford to miss a day of work or who lack the necessary transportation to wait in line for registration. As a result, students from high-income families are more likely to have access to FI as compared to their low-income peers.

Another barrier to FI is the assumption that children needing special education support are better off learning in their first language. There is an outdated belief among some educators that bilingualism might delay a child’s language development (Baker & Wright, 2021), negatively impact their academic achievement, and lead to general confusion (Cobb, 2015). However, studies have repeatedly shown that FI does not negatively impact a learning-disabled child’s academic achievement (e.g., Bruck, 1978; Genesee, 2007; see also Arnett et al., 2014; Arnett & Mady, 2018; Bourgoin, 2014). Students with specialized learning needs benefit from targeted interventions (Bourgoin, 2014), and this is where FI might be outmatched by English Prime classrooms. In general, FI programs do not have the necessary resources to support special learning needs (Barrett DeWiele & Edgerton, 2021; Wise, 2011). As a result, parents of children with diverse learning needs are sometimes forced to choose between a program with the necessary services to support their child’s academic development and a program that would teach their child a second language.

Pierre Bourdieu: Habitus, Cultural Capital, and Field

After examining the underlying structures that contribute to persistent social inequalities, sociologist Pierre Bourdieu identified education as the primary tool for social reproduction (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). *Social Reproduction* can be understood as the system of social interactions and channels “which tend, behind the backs of the agents engaged in the school system—often *against their will*, to ensure the transmission of cultural capital across generations and to stamp pre-existing differences in inherited cultural capital with a meritocratic seal of academic consecration” (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977, p. ix, emphasis in original). Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) suggested that teachers are imbued with the pedagogic authority necessary to do pedagogic work, “a process of inculcation” (p. 31) that transmits the inherent values of the dominant social group to all members of society. These values are arbitrary and reflect the needs of the dominant. Both the dominant and dominated social groups are subjected to pedagogic work, but the difference between their experiences might be explained by the concept of *habitus*.

The *habitus* is “a system of schemes of thought, perception, appreciation and action” (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977, p. 40) that “explains how an individual is supposed to behave, think and feel” (DiGiorgio, 2009, p. 181). Bourdieu (1977) described the *habitus* as “that system of dispositions which acts as a mediation between structures and practice” (p. 487). Before entering a school for the first time, children acquire a *primary habitus* “through familial osmosis and familiar immersion” (Wacquant, 2014, p. 7). The primary habitus slowly develops during early childhood and “constitutes our baseline social personality” (Wacquant, 2014, p. 7). Children do not enter school as blank slates; rather, they enter with a set of dispositions that will inform how they respond to the new environment. Once in school and subjected to pedagogic work, a *secondary habitus* will begin to develop. The *secondary habitus* is “any system of transposable schemata that becomes grafted subsequently, through specialized pedagogical labor that is typically shortened in duration, accelerated in pace, and explicit in organization” (Wacquant, 2014, p. 7). In doing pedagogic

work, teachers impart more than subject knowledge. They methodically teach the habits, values, and practices that are valued by the dominant group. For children whose primary habitus is congruent with these ideas, navigating the school system might be done with a degree of unconcern. But for students whose primary habitus conflicts with the favored dispositions of the dominant social group, schooling will require more effort.

It is important not to mistake the primary habitus for genetic predispositions for success or failure. The concept of a habitus helps us to better understand and explain the supposed difference in aptitude among students without mistakenly resorting to biological explanations (Edgerton & Roberts, 2014). Public education “is the equivalent, in the cultural order, of the transmission of genetic capital in the biological order” (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977, p.32). Children who come from families that belong to the dominant social group are predisposed to more easily adopt the habits, values, and practices taught at their schools. This can account for the apparent head start some students enjoy when they enter school in kindergarten.

In addition to the primary habitus, students are also impacted by access to cultural capital. *Cultural capital* is the “symbolic appropriation” of the capacity for “material appropriation of the instruments of material or cultural production” (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 2013, p. 295). Bourdieu (1986) described three forms of cultural capital: embodied, objectified, and institutionalized. Embodied manifestations of cultural capital take the form of “long-lasting dispositions of the mind and body” (p. 17), such as when someone asks for a second medical opinion or writes a letter of complaint to their elected Member of Parliament. The objectified state takes the form of cultural goods, such as through the purchase of luxury cars or Broadway tickets. And institutionalized cultural capital “confers entirely original properties on the cultural capital on which it is presumed to guarantee” (p. 17). This might take the form of a completed sticker chart, the designation of high school valedictorian, or even adding a micro-credential to one’s LinkedIn profile. Whereas material wealth or economic capital is obtained as a result of economic input, it is often revealed in the forms of social and cultural capital (Grenfell & James, 2004). Bourdieu theorized that cultural capital is the body of knowledge, skills, and familiarity with societal norms that advantages individuals in the education system (Jæger, 2011). While a student’s primary habitus reflects their predisposition to the process of schooling, their access to the different forms of cultural capital influences how they will navigate it. Some students will remain outsiders, unable to complete the necessary pedagogic work of becoming educated. Put differently, guaranteed access to education can be understood as guaranteed access to an education befitting one’s place in society.

It is also important to briefly mention Bourdieu’s concept of the *field*, which he defined as “a network, or a configuration, of objective relations between positions” (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). Manifestations of cultural capital operate differently within different fields: what is valued in one field may be worthless in another. Bourdieu used a game analogy to explain what is meant by this concept, where each field (or game) has its own set of rules and relations between players. Those who know the rules of the game are those who have access to the right kind of

Applying Bourdieu to French Immersion

In an effort to expose the systemic barriers to FI, I will share a typical literacy block in my grade three FI classroom in New Brunswick. Instruction begins with listening to a French song, and students are expected to write down all the words they recognize. One student enters the classroom as the song begins, late for the second time this week. His desk is disorganized, and it takes him longer to find his pencil and begin. I then invite students to raise their hands and share which words they heard, and the most confident and extroverted students are the most likely to participate. When someone blurts out their answer, I remind them that we raise our hands to speak. Next, they move onto a review of the sound of the week and a list of high frequency words. Students read aloud the words in unison, and the loudest voices mask the mistakes of less confident peers. Everyone then moves into the story circle, where I introduce a reading comprehension strategy and demonstrate how to use it during a read-aloud. Every few pages, I pause to ask students questions about what has been read, and the same five or six hands are always up in the air. Some students sit cross-legged, with eager faces turned toward me. They are used to listening to stories and are eager to share their opinions. Meanwhile, a group of three students fidgets in the back because they could not stay focused. Once finished the read-aloud, round one of guided reading and literacy centres begins, where students split into their leveled groups to complete various literacy tasks. Students are expected to speak in French, though there is a correlation between those students who raised their hands most often during instruction and those most likely to speak in French with their peers. Indeed, those who participate the most are also more likely to be in the highest leveled groups and require less direct support from their teacher.

I have often wondered about the dynamics at play in my classroom. There appear to be some students who navigate schooling better than others, and one possible explanation is SES. Students from middle-class families come into school with a habitus that aligns with the expectations of their middle-class teachers (Bourdieu, 1986). When there is congruence of the primary habitus and the pedagogical practices of their teachers, students appear predisposed for success. It also means that pedagogic work is more likely to be successful. This relationship helps to explain the achievement gap between students from lower and higher socioeconomic backgrounds (Butler, 2019), and it can also explain why middle-class families are over-represented in FI classrooms as opposed to mainstream English classrooms. Middle-class parents are more likely to read to their children, to prioritize homework, and to remain engaged with ongoing communication with their child's school (Barrett DeWiele & Edgerton, 2016). And in my school, when parents fail to uphold their end of the tacit agreement to support their child's learning, the child rarely continues in FI.

In the FI context, an ideal habitus might include appreciation of Canada's second official language, as the FI program is professedly for the advancement of bilingualism. It would also place value on both reading and talking about what has been read, as FI pedagogy places considerable focus on developing oral literacy skills. The extent to which students speak in the target language is indicative of their proficiency, and so entering school with a predisposition to oral communication is a significant element of an ideal habitus. Following routines is also important, such as raising your hand and keeping your belongings organized. Independence is another asset in this environment; students are expected to be responsible for their own behavior and to need few reminders to stay on task. Students who walk into the classroom without these hidden prerequisites are less likely to be successful than their peers.

Discussion

Parents want to choose what they believe is best for their children. Some parents choose FI because of the smaller class sizes, believing that these smaller classes are made up of the brightest and best learners (Wise, 2011). I wonder: what about the students who are not in these classes? Perhaps FI classes are only smaller because they have excluded anyone who failed to fit the narrow definition of an ideal candidate. Parents of children with learning difficulties are sometimes informed that additional academic support is only available to students who register in mainstream English programs (Wise, 2011). As Edgerton and Roberts (2014) observed, a middle-class parent would be more comfortable advocating for their children in this situation; as a result of social reproduction, they would have a better understanding of the cultural norms, rules, and processes that enable them to be an effective spokesperson for their child. Put differently, they are more likely to have access to the necessary embodied cultural capital to help them navigate the field of education.

A more subtle aspect is the influence of power; children who are empowered to speak, ask questions, and voice their opinions are well-suited for the expectations of the FI classroom. As part of a larger study examining ability sorting within school mathematics, Jorgensen et al. (2014) observed a correlation between one's SES and confidence. The middle-class participant was encouraged to ask questions and did so assuredly, whereas the working-class participant was actively discouraged from asking questions or requesting help. Someone who is punished at home for asking too many questions might hesitate to raise their hand when they need help at school. While this study did not look at a FI learning environment, there are parallels between ability sorting and exclusionary practices in FI.

French Immersion is considered by many to be a covert means of academic streaming that leaves a disproportionate number of struggling students in the English Prime program (Arnett & Mady, 2010; Mady, 2018; Wise, 2011). This is problematic for several reasons. First of all, streaming is a form of systemic racism, where racialized students are prevented from accessing the benefits of social mobility that education is supposed to provide (Morvan, 2017). There is a problem when racialized students are repeatedly underrepresented in academic programs like FI and overrepresented in 'Applied' or 'Workplace' course options (Rigelhof, 2017). Secondly, ability sorting tends to reflect socioeconomic privilege more than innate aptitude for learning (Jorgensen et al., 2014). Racialized or not, students who are streamed tend to be sorted along socioeconomic lines.

If we were to reorganize school systems to be less about constraints, competition, and comparison, perhaps more students might be included in FI. Nobody wants to set children up for failure by including them in an optional program that might somehow contribute to their academic struggles. Unfortunately, many students who struggle in FI are struggling as a result of their social status. They lack the right forms of cultural capital to be successful in the FI classroom. For some, they lack the right embodiments of cultural capital, such as knowing how and when to participate

in the class discussion or being able to articulate why a particular story appealed to them. For others, they lack the institutionalized forms of cultural capital, such as having a strong academic record. And of course, there are some students whose lack of objectified capital means there is no school offering the FI program in their neighbourhoods.

As a teacher, I find the concept of social reproduction unsettling. We must look more closely at patterns of success and ask who benefits most from the status quo. The more we rely on students arriving at school with strong foundational skills, the more the onus is shifted to parents to provide the necessary head start for success. And since the dominant have always been able to define desirable characteristics, they are able to continue being rewarded and appear predestined for success. Someone without sufficient volume or type of cultural capital might feel “displaced” or “out of place” when walking into a FI classroom, which Bourdieu (1991) explained was because entrance does not equate appropriation. They did not have the same opportunities or experiences to develop the requisite dispositions for public schooling. If we think of schooling as a footrace, then everyone is beginning at a unique starting line that reflects their access to cultural capital. Some will have pristine running shoes, and some will be barefoot. And when a barefoot racer is beginning at the back of the pack, what hope do they have of catching up? While there are programs in place to support students, they require putting forth considerably more effort compared to what is required of their peers. Those who lack capital are “pushed away” either physically or symbolically, thus limiting their opportunities and access to the very institutions that ostensibly serve the general public.

Conclusion

French Immersion is a popular and effective second language education program in Canada, but there are persistent barriers that affect participation. So long as official language bilingualism is a powerful manifestation of cultural capital, every student should have equal access to the program. This means students from every economic background and academic ability deserve the opportunity to learn both English and French. Instead of equating high income with higher probability of success, we need to deconstruct what factors have led to the higher success rates. Furthermore, students with special educational needs must be included; less focus should be placed on the rate of learning and more placed on the learning itself.

Such changes require a paradigm shift in thinking about what constitutes a good candidate for FI. Educators need to confront their biases and preconceived notions about learning habits, attitudes, and aptitudes. And just as importantly, FI programs need sufficient resources to respond to the learning needs of students. If learning both official languages is celebrated in Canada, then every child in Canada should have a fair chance to learn them.

Further qualitative study is needed to better understand and expose the underlying structures in the FI program that disadvantage some students. One starting point is to look at the FI mathematics classroom. Scholars have already studied how cultural capital manifests in the mathematics context (e.g., Jorgensen et al., 2014), and I see parallels between these two subjects. First, it is common practice for mathematics courses to sort students according to their academic ability. Though FI does not officially exclude students with lower academic abilities, we have seen that this is a continued practice. Second, a relationship has been drawn between socioeconomic status and likelihood of success in both of these programs, something that bears further exploration. And finally, I am curious to analyze the intersection of language and mathematics through a Bourdieusian lens. Perhaps by exposing the systemic barriers to FI programming we can fulfill its promise of bilingualism for all Canadians.

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