Learning Assistance for French-Second-Language Students with Learning Disabilities in British Columbia
French Immersion is a very popular program in which parents enroll their children to learn French as a second—sometimes even third or fourth—language. In fact, enrollment in the French Immersion program in British Columbia has increased for 14 years consecutively. As such, accessibility to the program has become an issue of increasing concern over the years, particularly due to reports of parents with children who have learning disabilities being discouraged from registering or being urged to withdraw their children from the highly popular and successful program.

Such actions stem from the common misconception of parents and school administrators that Early French Immersion and Late French Immersion are types of “enrichment programs”—that is, programs that are geared towards academically high-achieving students. However, there are no admission criteria for entry into FSL programs. FSL programs were conceived with the belief that all non-francophone students in Canada should have equal opportunities to learn both of Canada’s official languages and become bilingual—this includes students with learning disabilities. Unfortunately, there have been reports of a limited availability—sometimes unavailability—of learning support services for these students.

This report aims to present the state of learning assistance for students in FSL programs in BC and stress the importance of equitable access to an education that promotes bilingualism, a major asset in today’s work and recreational field. This report also provides a brief overview of research regarding the compatibility of French-Second-Language learning for learning disabled students and research done in the area of learning support for these students. Best practices currently in place in school districts are highlighted to suggest their implementation in school districts/schools in which assistance for FSL students is absent or limited. Policy suggestions and strategies for improving the state of assistance in FSL programs can be found at the end of the report, which also includes tips and references for parents and educators who have students with learning disabilities.

2 Callie Mady & Katy Arnett, Inclusion in French Immersion in Canada: One Parent’s Perspective

Definitions

There is a difference between a learning disability and a learning challenge:

According to HealthLink BC, learning challenges are cause by problems with seeing, hearing, or moving. Learning disabilities, on the other hand, are more cognitive than physical in nature; experts believe that learning disabilities are due to the child’s brain using and processing information in a different way, which causes children to have trouble in listening, speaking, reading, writing, spelling, or doing math. For more information on learning disabilities, their causes, their signs, treatment, and steps parents should take if they have a child with a learning disability, please visit HealthLink BC’s website: www.healthlinkbc.ca.

This report deals with services for students with learning disabilities that fall under the following Ministry of Education-defined categories:

Moderate to Profound Intellectual Disabled (C)
Autism Spectrum Disorder (G)
Some school administrators recommend parents whose child is learning-disabled transfer their child from the French Immersion program to a regular English-only curriculum. The main rationale is that the child’s learning disability combined with French Immersion would further hinder his or her progress or performance in English and other subject areas, as compared to if the child were to be put in an English-only program.

However, it has been shown that students with below-average academic ability and language impairment in French Immersion perform equally as well as their below-average peers in the English program in almost all subject areas. In fact, the only difference in academic performance is in French language acquisition: below-average French Immersion students have significantly superior French language proficiency than below-average students in the English program where French is only taught as a subject. In other words, going through the curriculum in an immersion setting does not hinder their academic performance at all and in fact presents them with a net benefit—that being an enhanced competence in French.

Another study showed that the reading comprehension skills and strategies of learning-disabled (and at-risk) students who were initially in an English-only program and subsequently registered into the French Immersion program actually improved.

Furthermore, research has found that transferring a student struggling in French Immersion to an English program due to learning disabilities might actually be detrimental to the student’s education/learning, in that it could harm the child’s self-esteem.

Research has noted that there have been reports of parents who state that their child’s academic performance, and thus their psychological well-being and confidence, improved after transferring them from the French Immersion program to the regular English program. However, researchers speculate that it is the additional support services provided in English that benefitted the students, not the transfer to the English program per se.

Early predictions of a child’s French reading ability in later elementary years, e.g. grade 3, is in fact possible in kindergarten by testing the child’s first-language capabilities (e.g. English). This is because research demonstrates that reading acquisition involves a great amount of cross-linguistic transfer. As such, reading skills such as print awareness, letter-sound knowledge, phonological awareness, decoding skills, vocabulary, and background-cultural knowledge do transfer from the first language to the second.

It should be noted that students with “special needs,” although they do include those with learning disabilities, also encompass children that are “gifted.” As such, the term “special needs” will not be used in this report.

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Fred Genesee, French Immersion and At-Risk Students: A Review of Research Evidence
Renée Bourgoin, De l’anglais à l’immersion française 3e année: Les expériences des élèves en lecture
Margaret Bruck, The Suitability of Early French Immersion Programs for the Language-Disabled Child
The Current State of Availability of Learning Support Services for FSL Students

Regarding Learning Resources and Pupil Services, the BC Ministry of Education states that:

“Having implemented an immersion program, school districts should provide equitable learning resources, library books and student services in the same manner they are provided for in regular English programs.”

81% of school districts reported that many parents, teachers, and/or school administrators think that French Immersion is not suitable for any students with learning disabilities.

95% of school districts have students with learning disabilities in French Immersion. One school district reported that they almost never have a learning disabled student in FI.

32% of school district administrators contacted would recommend students with learning disabilities transfer out of the French Immersion program. Four of these administrators state that a language-based disability specifically would justify a transfer.

15% of school district contacts do not know what the extent of the need for support staff for French Immersion students is because their district does not differentiate between students in the regular English program and students in the FI program.

100% of school districts recommend the need for more research specific to French Immersion students, as there is relatively much more research regarding learning disabled students in the regular English program.

81% of school districts reported that there have been students who transferred out of the French Immersion program due to their learning disabilities and/or lack of services for them. Three school districts did not respond to this question or did not know the answer. One school district reported no attrition due to learning disabilities.

38% of school districts reported that their French Immersion teachers do not feel confident or prepared to teach learning disabled students. The remaining school district contacts are unsure of how their French Immersion teachers feel.

81% of school districts have at least one staff member that provides support to French Immersion students in the language of instruction, i.e. French. Their availabilities range from one part-time employee in the district to a few full-time employees. However, some districts only have support staff who are fluent in French for elementary schools, and not middle schools or high schools.

95% of school districts would like to have more services for FI students, since there is not enough. One school district does not feel the need for these services, since they almost never have learning disabled students in FI.

The Current State of Availability of Learning Support Services for FSL Students (cont.)

In many school districts, school district administrators and school principals are fully aware that French Immersion is for *every* student, regardless of academic ability, and do make note of that at FSL information sessions. However, this has not completely prevented the spread of the common misconception that French Immersion is not suitable for children with learning disabilities. This may be due to the fact that parents with children who are learning-disabled may not be at those French Immersion information sessions in the first place to be informed of the facts due to prior word-of-mouth misinformation that French Immersion may be inappropriate for their children.

It has been noted in some districts that another reason for which parents withdraw their students from FSL programs is that they are recommended to do so by some teachers. Sometimes, French Immersion teachers do not feel entirely prepared and/or confident to teach learning disabled students and thus recommend a transfer to the regular English program. It has been expressed that it is because they are aware of more learning support services in English or because they simply do not feel like they have been trained to provide the learning-disabled child with the best education possible. Another reason is that they believe that in an English milieu it is more important for a child to focus on English, not realizing that children can be successful in both languages.

Regarding Administrators, the Ministry of Education states that:

> “The administrators of immersion schools should be functionally bilingual; this should be a consideration when districts are seeking new administrators. Whether or not they are bilingual, at the very least, administrators should be knowledgeable about, and supportive of, the immersion program.”

However, when asked about learning disabled students in French Immersion in their district, one district administrator asserted that “they try not to have any.”

On the other hand, there are school districts that state on their website that French Immersion is for all students, even referring web page viewers to research and official documents that support their statement.

16% of school district contacts are sure there are teachers in their district who recommend parents of learning disabled students switch their child into the regular English program, even though district administrators and school principals stress to parents that French Immersion is suitable for these students.

16% of district contacts brought up the following point: there needs to be a way to assess French Immersion students early on, e.g., in grade 1.

Of the 43 BC school districts contacted that offer French Immersion, 23 responded to requests for information. Of those 23 school districts, one district withheld all information regarding learning support services for French Immersion students, stating that this information is confidential, and another district stated they could not assist with this research because they do not delineate between students in the regular English program and students in the French Immersion program. As such, all percentages are relative to 21 school districts.

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Some Best Practices Currently in Place

It is encouraging to find that there are practices put into place that encourage students with learning disabilities to stay in French Immersion. In high school, the subjects that are taught in French are traditionally academic in nature, such as mathematics, social studies, sciences, and of course French. In one school district, for example, Physical Education is actually offered in French. Therefore, students who are struggling in their academic courses can still acquire French language proficiency in subjects in which they perform better—the French they learn in P.E. is of course easily applicable to everyday conversations and can even help students express themselves in French in other courses and thus improve their academic performance.

It should be noted that the availability of learning support teachers, etc. for secondary French Immersion students was not always the case in some school districts. For example, in one school district, this came in part as the result of a parent’s relentless pushing and determination to get her learning disabled child the support she needed in high school, since only the elementary schools had the much needed support staff. Unfortunately, many parents with learning disabled children in French Immersion are not aware that they are entitled to support services in French and thus do not advocate for the needed services when these services are not available in their district. However, the success story of this parent has disseminated, spreading awareness of this issue.

In another school district, to address the issue of teachers feeling not adequately trained to teach students with learning disabilities, those who cannot immediately secure a classroom teaching job are suggested to become Educational Assistants (EAs). Therefore, when a teaching opening arises, this professional not only has teacher training, but special education training as well.

Policy Recommendations and Strategies

If possible, non-academic subjects such as PE, Drama, etc. should be taught in French. Some assert that the vocabulary acquired in non-academic courses could in fact be more useful in different contexts in everyday conversations than that gained from courses such as mathematics. Of course, that is not to say that academic courses should cease to be taught in French—the opposite is asserted: the more subjects that are taught in French, the greater the student’s proficiency in French will be. This in turn could lead to a reduction in the number of students transferring out of the French Immersion program.

Change brochures/pamphlets that describe what an “ideal” FI student looks like. Dr. Callie Mady, Researcher and Professor at the Schulich School of Education in Ontario, addressed how language on French Immersion promotional materials describing a “successful child in French Immersion” such as “strong skills in his or her first language, is verbal and likes to talk, has a good memory,” etc. is not only five times more likely to describe females than males, but also deters parents with children having difficulties in school\(^1\).

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\(^1\) Canadian Parents for French, The State of French Second Language Education in Canada 2012
Policy Recommendations and Strategies (cont.)

❖ Let parents know at parent information sessions for students with learning disabilities that French Immersion is an option. It is perhaps not enough to say that FI is for all students at FI information sessions, since parents with learning disabled children are most likely not at those information sessions anyway, due to the circulating myths that FI is not for struggling students. Some argue that if there are few or no services for FI LD students, why should parents enrol their children in FI? If the numbers of LD FI children increase, there would be more demand for services, which would push for more services in this area. Since the student population is becoming more and more diverse, classrooms, including French Immersion ones, should become more accommodating to this diverse group of children.

❖ As it has been alluded to numerous times, some school administrators (including teachers) are not aware that FSL programs are not enrichment programs or programs specifically tailored for academically strong students. As such, (new) school administrators and French Immersion teachers should be informed of the state of learning assistance for French Immersion students and of the research out there that lends heavy support for equal access to FSL programs for all students.

❖ Numbers of students with learning disabilities in French Immersion should be tracked. It has been noted that sometimes neither the learning support staff nor the French immersion staff have data regarding those in FI with learning disabilities.

❖ Address special education more in professional development programs for French Immersion teachers. Although they should not replace a learning support aide, the small accommodations teachers perform for the student would make a significant difference for the student in the classroom. Researchers Dr. Callie Mady and Dr. Karty Arnett assert that “teacher education programs should work to ensure that teachers feel prepared and supported in meeting the needs of an increasingly diverse classroom.”

❖ More research is needed on learning assistance for FSL students. Although research so far has lent great support for FSL education for learning-disabled students, more studies in this area is needed in order to determine the best ways to help these children.

❖ The BC Ministry of Education should release a publication specifically addressing French Immersion students with learning disabilities, like the ministries of Alberta and Manitoba have done. The Alberta Education has at least five documents pertaining specifically to French Immersion students with learning disabilities and refers to research done in this area. As such, educators and parents in Alberta may be more aware of this topic, since this information is so easily found online.

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12 Callie Mady & Katy Arnett, A critically conscious examination of special education within FSL and its relevance to FSL teacher education programs
Resources for Parents and Educators

Yes, You Can Help!
http://education.alberta.ca/media/3091402/
yesyoucanhelp.pdf
Alberta Education

Inclusion in the French Immersion Program
Manitoba Education, Citizenship and Youth

L'inclusion en Immersion
http://education.alberta.ca/media/720116/inclusionweb.pdf
Alberta Education

Diversity in French Immersion Classrooms: A Quick Inclusion Guide for Teachers
http://www.education.alberta.ca/media/1260545/diversityfrenchimmersionnew.pdf
Alberta Education

Strategies for Helping Underperforming Immersion Learners Succeed
Dr. Katy Arnett, Dr. Tara Fortune

Can French Immersion offer an appropriate quality education for students with diverse learning needs?
http://education.alberta.ca/media/1260549/depliantall.pdf
Alberta Education

It’s not as hard as you think: including students with learning difficulties in Core French
Dr. Katy Arnett

Understanding Language and Learning Disabilities in Immersion Education
Dr. Tara Fortune, Dr. Mandy Menke

Predicting Risk for Oral and Written Language Learning Difficulties in Students Educated in a Second Language
Dr. Caroline Erdos, Dr. Fred Genesee, Dr. Robert Savage, Dr. Corinne Haigh

Identification of Reading Difficulties in Students Schooled in a Second Language
Dr. Fred Genesee, Dr. Robert Savage, Dr. Caroline Erdos, Dr. Corinne Haigh

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