

French Immersion, Education, and Politics. Does Anyone Actually Care about the Evidence?

Ever since New Brunswick Education Minister Kelly Lamrock announced plans to scrap early French Immersion in New Brunswick schools there has been a virtual firestorm of controversy. Academics and politicians alike have waded into the issue, as have parent and community groups. In the spirit of partisan politics, the Provincial Liberal Government has stood by their beleaguered minister, as he continues to roll out one reform after another. We are told that it's all for the future of the children. Yet while debate has stirred pro and anti- French sentiment, pro- and anti- Liberal stances, does anyone really care about the scientific evidence behind education and child development? As a language and literacy researcher I would put forth that if reform is for the benefit of the children, and the very future of the Province, it is imperative that we step back and actually consider the empirical evidence.

Any evaluation of existing evidence would not be complete without reference to the very report that led to this decision. This document, commissioned by the Provincial government, was compiled by two individuals who despite their own skills and knowledge base, quite frankly lacked the credentials or expertise for the task assigned to them. They were no more qualified to evaluate the French Immersion program than I would be to evaluate applications of Kinesiology. Further, the very analyses behind the drawn conclusions have been reviewed and found to be erroneous. This review, compiled by colleagues here at Mount Allison University, has been made available to the Minister (and is available online: <http://hamlit2008.googlepages.com/>). Beyond the statistical issues, there remains this small, nagging detail: shouldn't a decision to overhaul the current education system be based on some empirical research?

While direct research into Canadian French Immersion programs is somewhat limited, there does exist a body of scientific research that clearly indicates that the earlier the exposure to a second language, the better the linguistic outcomes. While there may not be a critical period for the acquisition of a second language (after which learning becomes impossible), there is certainly a sensitive period in development marked by increased plasticity in the brain when language learning is most successful; this period occurs before the onset of puberty, which may be perilously close to the grade 5 entry point for intensive French instruction in the new N.B. plan. Consequently, delayed onset of second language instruction is statistically associated with lower outcomes in language proficiency. While the Minister of Education has directly stated that introducing intensive French in grade 5 "is the best way", this is simply not true. Early immersion (and middle immersion starting in grade 3) is the best known way to teach a second language.

But is the sole purpose of education to learn a second language? Even the most adamant supporters of second language instruction would likely concede that education has a greater purpose. In evaluating an educational approach, we need to look beyond scores on standardized tests of language proficiency. In this respect, there is now ample research from the disciplines of neuro- and cognitive- psychology that establishes benefits of second language learning beyond conversational proficiency. Importantly, immersion programs and second language learning have been associated with improved outcomes in reading and writing (in both languages), mathematics, and creative thinking. Cross language interactivity is proposed to account for cognitive gains in the areas of memory, flexibility in thinking, reasoning, and control of

attention. Impressively, these benefits have been found to persist into adulthood. Once more, the benefits of second language learning are associated with early exposure. One would think that these are the exact outcomes that would be desired from an education system; yet in New Brunswick, we apparently are striving for lower achievement (so long as students can write a standardized test!).

Of all the cognitive benefits associated with early immersion, perhaps none are as important as the effects on vocabulary knowledge. Early exposure to other languages has been shown to facilitate growth in vocabulary- in all languages. Oral vocabulary, incidentally, is among the most powerful predictors of long-term academic success and is intrinsically linked to linguistic intelligence, problem solving, and creative thinking. Proper assessment of children's vocabulary levels is time consuming, however, and this does not appear to fit in with the current obsession with standardized testing in the schools. In this respect, it is of interest to note that this most important developmental area has been overlooked in the new kindergarten curriculum implemented this year in New Brunswick. While this new cohort of kindergarten children will surely please the politicians by showing a short-term spike in standardized (pre)literacy testing, research and theory suggest these children may fare less well long-term. Eradication of early immersion will only serve to further disadvantage our students in this critical cognitive-linguistic area of development, for which the consequences will indeed be far reaching.

The final issue I would like to address is the contentious one of streaming. Unfortunately French Immersion programs are often seen as elitist and the cause of streaming in the school system. While this is certainly a valid concern in at least some districts, there is now ample evidence that streaming need not be associated with immersion programs. In fact, research has demonstrated that students who transfer out of French Immersion programs due to academic difficulty actually fare less well than do similar students who remain in the program. The benefits of immersion programs have been empirically shown to extend to children of all abilities, even those with Selective Language Impairments. While a recent policy document out of the Canadian Research Institute for Social Policy at the University of New Brunswick seems to suggest that the streaming associated with French Immersion justifies its demise, it should be pointed out that the research cited in that document is largely based on questionable standardized testing and confounded by issues of multiculturalism and immigration. Moreover, the evidence presented above suggests that French Immersion need not result in streaming at all. The benefits of French Immersion have been shown to persist even when academic ability and socio-economic status are controlled for in research. Further, a later onset of second language instruction may actually cause greater academic hardship to lower-functioning students and prove to exacerbate streaming.

In summary, the importance of decisions that impact the school system necessitates that there be careful consideration of the evidence and consultation with appropriate experts. The consequences are just too great to do otherwise. What does the evidence say? The report from which the recommendation to overhaul the French Immersion system has been found to be flawed to the extent that it is not valid. There is also ample evidence that early exposure to a second language is beneficial over later exposure. Importantly, the neurological and cognitive research clearly shows the advantages of an early immersion program, beyond language proficiency. Finally, the streaming issue that has been used to justify the government's actions

has been found to be a non-issue after all. This is not to contend that the early immersion system was perfect. The lack of support for students experiencing difficulty for instance, is an especially valid concern. By scrapping the program however, the curriculum has in essence been dealt an overall reduction in standards. The only scientifically valid concern of early immersion pertains to first language literacy, although there is mounting evidence that lags in first language literacy dissipate within the first few years of an immersion program. This concern can also be directly addressed, as is done in Ontario, by an early focus on first language literacy for the first year - or two- of schooling, before the onset of full immersion. Intensive second language instruction starting in grade 5, however, is simply not supported by any body of evidence.

Sincerely,

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