
Overcoming barriers to access in French immersion: Special education needs and socioeconomic status

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Abstract

Canadian French immersion (FI) programs have increased in popularity due to the social and developmental benefits of English–French bilingualism. However, several studies have shown that FI programs do not provide equitable access to diverse students, nor do they provide adequate support to these students once they gain access to the program. To examine these issues in finer detail, the current study interviewed eight parents on their child(ren)’s enrollment and participation in FI programs. We specifically queried the impact of special education needs (SEN) and socioeconomic status (SES) on these families’ experiences. Results showed that parents encountered barriers on multiple levels while supporting their children in the FI program. These barriers increased significantly for children who had SEN, and/or for children and families from low SES communities.

Keywords: bilingualism, French immersion, special education, socioeconomic status


Résumé

Les programmes canadiens d’immersion française (IF) ont gagné en popularité en raison des avantages sociaux et développementaux du bilinguisme anglais-français. Cependant, plusieurs études ont montré que les programmes IF n’offrent pas un accès équitable à divers élèves, ni un soutien adéquat à ces élèves une fois qu’ils ont accès au programme. Pour examiner ces questions plus en détail, cette étude a interrogé huit parents sur l’inscription et la participation de leur(s) enfant(s) à des programmes IF. Nous avons spécifiquement interrogé l’impact des

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besoins éducatifs particuliers et du statut socio-économique sur les expériences de ces familles. Les résultats ont montré que les parents rencontrent des obstacles multiples lorsqu'ils souhaitent accompagner leurs enfants dans le programme IF. Ces obstacles augmentent de manière significative pour les enfants ayant des besoins éducatifs particuliers, ainsi que pour les enfants et les familles qui venaient de communautés à faible statut socio-économique.

Mots-clés : bilinguisme, immersion française, éducation des élèves aux besoins particuliers, statut socio-économique

Introduction

Canada is currently one of only 55 countries in the world that has at least two official languages (Jezak, 2021). However, while English and French have the same official status, their real-world usage is significantly different. Seventy six percent of Canadians speak English as their first official language (up from 74.8% in 2016), whereas only 21.4% speak French as a first official language (down from 22.2%; Statistics Canada, 2022). While not a dramatic change, the decrease in Francophone speakers over time threatens the linguistic security of French in some provinces of Canada. This is especially true in Canada's most populated province, Ontario, where only 9.5% of Ontarians are English–French bilingual, and this number has been steadily decreasing since 2001 (Statistics Canada, 2022). While this decrease in English–French bilingualism may be attributed to many factors (e.g., Ontario attracts fewer French speaking immigrants), it suggests that steps should be taken to promote English–French bilingualism in Ontario. One of the protective factors against declining English–French bilingualism is French immersion (FI), which has sharply risen in popularity due to its reputation in producing English–French bilingual graduates (Barrett DeWiele & Edgerton, 2021; Lazaruk, 2007).

While Canadian FI is lauded as a highly successful language immersion program, it has also been characterized by persistent systemic barriers which have created an inequitable system (Barrett DeWiele & Edgerton, 2021; Davis et al., 2021). While much progress has been made in recent years, some authors have highlighted the difficulties in accessing support for students with special education needs (SEN) in FI programs (Kay-Raining Bird et al., 2021; Selvachandran et al., 2022). However, several studies have shown that students with SEN in FI perform at least as well as their peers in the monolingual English program (Kay-Raining Bird et al., 2021; Wise & Chen, 2010). In addition, the participants in most FI studies have largely come from middle to high socioeconomic status (SES) families and communities due to the overrepresentation of high SES students in FI programs (e.g., Arnett & Mady, 2010; Bourgoin, 2014; Cobb, 2015; Mady, 2018; Mady & Arnett, 2009; Wise,

2011). While this has started to change, several factors (e.g., a shortage of French teachers) have limited the scope of this change (Arnott et al., 2019). Proxy measures for SES include parental education, income, employment, or a combination of these (Mueller & Parcel, 1981).

According to a recent report by the Toronto District School Board (TDSB), 74% of students in FI have university-educated parents, compared to just 50% of students in the English-stream program (Sinay et al., 2018). Furthermore, only 10% of students in the program have SEN (compared to 22% in the English stream). In light of these statistics from the TDSB, the underrepresentation of marginalized students in FI such as students with SEN and/or students from lower SES backgrounds requires further study. The present study therefore examines what barriers are likely to prevent participation in FI programs for students with SEN and/or from lower socio-economic backgrounds, by conducting thorough interviews with a group of eight parents. A qualitative semi-structured interview method was chosen since this study is an exploratory investigation into the barriers faced by these families.

Canadian French immersion programs

Canadian FI, in this context, refers to a publicly funded Canadian content integrated language learning program where children enrolled in the English language system learn French at least 50% of the time from a young age. Early FI is a program in which students are instructed mostly (i.e., 50%+) in French in the primary years until they have a solid foundation in the language (typically K–3; Ontario Ministry of Education, 2013). In the following years, instruction in English is gradually increased until students achieve and maintain an even balance between the two languages across school subjects. For example, in the Toronto District School Board, instruction is in French 100% from grades K–3, and 50% English and French in grades 4–8 (TDSB, n.d.). While this is the general design, it is important to note that each province and school district implements this program with significant differences (e.g., 50% immersion vs. 100% immersion; Genesee & Jared, 2008).

FI is intended to promote additive bilingualism wherein students acquire a second language (L2; French) while maintaining proficiency in the main school language (English) (Johnson & Swain, 1997; Swain & Lapkin, 2014/1991). The FI program was originally designed for students who spoke English as their first language (Lambert & Tucker, 1972). These students therefore experienced two separate language learning contexts: English at home and in the community, and French at school in the classroom. These students are considered sequential bilingual speakers, since their English was acquired first and is much stronger upon entry to the program. Since

the program's inception in 1965, a body of literature has demonstrated the effectiveness of FI programs for English-speaking, typically developing students (see Arnett et al., 2019 for a review). While FI programs originally were designed with English monolingual families in mind, the program has now become more diverse and includes higher numbers of multilingual children as well as children from low SES households (Davis et al., 2021; Sinay et al., 2018).

Special education needs in French immersion

In this study, special education needs (SEN) refer to any support that a child might need outside of the regular FI programming (e.g., to address attention, language, or learning difficulties). Students with SEN may or may not have a clinical diagnosis by a professional (e.g., psychologist, speech-language pathologist) since the wait for an educational assessment can be several years. Several studies have raised concerns about the lack of inclusion of students with SEN in FI programs (Arnett & Mady, 2010; Bourgoin, 2014; Cobb, 2015; Kay-Raining Bird et al., 2021; Mady, 2018; Mady & Arnett, 2009; Selvachandran et al., 2022; Wise, 2011). Currently in the Toronto District School Board, only 10% of FI students have SEN, whereas 22% of students across all programs in the TDSB have SEN (Sinay et al., 2018). Research on students with SEN in FI has focused on the perspectives of parents (e.g., Cobb, 2015; Kay-Raining Bird et al., 2021; Mady & Arnett, 2009; Selvachandran et al., 2022), teachers and administrators (e.g., Mady, 2018; Mady & Masson, 2018), as well as policy and program reviews (e.g., Bourgoin, 2014; Wise, 2011). These studies have found that FI students do not have access to timely special education assessments and intervention (e.g., Selvachandran et al., 2022), nor does the system have timely and evidence-based responses to students with SEN, as shown by the *Right to Read* report from the Ontario Human Rights Commission (OHRC, 2022). As a response to the difficulty accessing in-program support, parents often consider withdrawal from the program as a primary solution when their children struggle (e.g., Kay-Raining Bird et al., 2021). It should be noted that, in the majority of these studies, the parents and communities participating in these studies were from higher SES households and communities due to the overrepresentation of this demographic in the program (e.g., Kay-Raining Bird et al., 2021; Selvachandran et al., 2022).

When students with SEN are included in FI, emerging research shows that most students with SEN may not be disadvantaged by being instructed in French. Kay-Raining Bird et al. (2021) found that, while there were fewer students with SEN in FI, a greater proportion met the provincial standard for academic skills tested in English compared to their peers in non-immersion

programs. The authors posited that children with milder forms of SEN, and/or those with SEN from higher SES families might tend to enroll in FI. This would be an important area for future study since it is beyond the scope of the current study. A second study conducted with at-risk readers in FI furthermore showed that these children were very responsive to intervention, performing significantly higher than their control group peers (i.e., typically developing students in FI who did not receive intervention) and reducing the gap with typically developing children (Wise & Chen, 2010). Moreover, de Bree and colleagues (2022) found that word reading deficits in bilingual children were due to their diagnosis (i.e., developmental language disorder), not bilingualism. These benefits occur in addition to the general program benefits: higher intercultural awareness (Sinay, 2010), being able to communicate in at least two languages (Davis et al., 2021), as well as increased job opportunities (Barrett DeWiele & Edgerton, 2021).

Socioeconomic status in French immersion

Socioeconomic status encompasses two sources of information in this study: the reported income of each family participating in the study, as well as the average family income represented in the community surrounding the school. Since its inception, FI has received criticism as an inequitable program due to the underrepresentation of students from low SES backgrounds (Barrett DeWiele & Edgerton, 2021; Delcourt, 2018). Scholars have highlighted this inequity at the policy level (e.g., Gerbrandt, 2022; Kunnas, 2019) and at the school district level (e.g., Ryan & Sinay, 2020; Yoon et al., 2022). At the policy level, Kunnas (2019) found that FI programs were biased against low SES families due to a combination of factors such as location of programs, a lack of advertising, transportation, and resources. Yoon et al. (2022) found that FI programs are more commonly offered in the highest income areas in their analysis of Canadian critical district geography (i.e., investigating the demographic characteristics of certain groupings of schools). In the Toronto District School Board, 63% of families in FI have a family income of \$100,000+, while only 35% of families in the rest of the board are at this level (Sinay et al., 2018). These statistics show that the majority of families in FI are well above the median household income of Toronto, which is \$84,000 (City of Toronto, 2022). Furthermore, struggling students from low SES backgrounds are more likely to drop out of the program compared to those from high-SES backgrounds due to a lack of support and resources from the school (Bourgoin, 2014; Kay-Raining Bird et al., 2021; Selvachandran et al., 2022).

These issues of inequitable access are crucial to investigate because FI could be highly beneficial to students from low SES backgrounds. An innovative study from a German-English immersion program showed that

immersion education reduced the impact of SES on language and cognitive variables, meaning that early immersion programs could help level the playing field for these students (Trebets et al., 2022). While the mechanism behind this finding is unclear, this study adds nuance to previous studies in immersion education in the US which showed that high SES students outperformed their low SES peers on measures of L2 acquisition (de Jong, 2014; Thomas et al., 2011). However, to my knowledge no studies have qualitatively investigated the effect of low SES and SEN for students in the FI program.

The present study

As evidenced by the research reviewed above, scholars have been raising the alarm in regard to the lack of accessibility to FI programs for at least a decade. While research has examined children with SEN in FI, little of this research has been conducted in partnership with low SES families or communities. Therefore, the present study seeks to highlight the experiences of children with SEN, families coming from low SES backgrounds and communities, or both. In order to achieve these goals, we conducted semi-structured interviews with eight families who varied on SES (i.e., low to high) and who had children, with or without SEN enrolled in FI (see Table 1). Thus, the demographics of the families included in this study allowed us to directly contrast the lived experiences of these families.

The research questions were:

1. What is the enrollment and participation experience of families enrolled in early FI programs?
2. How might SEN influence the early FI experience for these families?
3. How might SES influence the early FI experience for these families?

Method

Participants

The participants in this study were recruited from a larger Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) funded study. While guardians from 14 families were interviewed, we included only eight of these families as those eight parents represented the saturation point, after which no new codes or themes were added during analysis. Participants filled out a demographic questionnaire created by the authors of this study. According to the questionnaire, three families spoke a first language other than English, as listed in Table 1. Socioeconomic status was queried, bracketed in the following way: high income \$100,000 or higher; middle income \$50,000–\$99,999; low income \$49,999 or less. These categories reflected the TDSB census information outlined in Sinay et al. (2018). Family SES was directly reported

by the parents, whereas school SES was determined through the Toronto District School Board Learning Opportunity Index (TDSB Research and Development, 2020). SEN was reported as either diagnosed (i.e., assessment had been completed) or suspected (i.e., issues were noted by parents and/or teachers but families were still waiting for assessment). Given that families often wait between one to three years to receive a formal assessment (OHRC, 2022), children with suspected SEN were included in our SEN group. However, due to the vulnerable nature of our participants, we did not collect information on the specific diagnoses. Table 1 provides demographic information, collected through the questionnaire and in the interview, about the participants' SES, SEN, as well as family composition.

Table 1

Demographic information of the participants (N = 8)

ID	School SES	Family SES	Adults(s) born in Canada	Adults in the home	Children in the home (#SEN)	Minority home language
Parent 1	Mid	High	Yes	2 parents	2 (1)	No
Parent 2	Mid	High	No	2 parents	2 (1)	Yes (Serbian)
Parent 3	High	High	Yes	2 parents	2 (0)	No
Parent 4	Low	Mid	Yes	2 parents	3 (2)	No
Parent 5	Mid	Mid	No	2 parents	2 (0)	Yes (Russian)
Parent 6	Low	Low	Yes	1 parent	1 (1)	No
Parent 7	Low	Low	No	2 parents	4 (1)	Yes (Twi)
Parent 8	Low	Low	Yes	1 parent	1 (1)	No

Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were conducted using an interview guide constructed to address the research questions. The interview protocol was piloted with two parents and further adapted as a result of the pilot interviewing (i.e., rewording to improve understanding, adding prompts). For the full protocol, see the Appendix. The first and second authors conducted all eight interviews. All interviews were conducted virtually using videoconferencing software that the participants chose (Zoom, TEAMS or Google Meet). Parents participated from an isolated and quiet area of their home so that the children in question would not overhear their answers. This was an important criterion since parents were discussing their child's abilities and experiences, and we did not want the children to be negatively affected. All interviews were conducted in English. The interviews were audio recorded with the permission of the participants.

Analysis

The recorded interviews were initially transcribed verbatim using Otter.ai, and thereafter checked for accuracy and anonymized (i.e., all identifying information removed and replaced with generic words such as NAME) by a trained research assistant using the audio-recording. The first or second author then did a final accuracy check of all the written transcripts including use of the transcription conventions (Dresing et al., 2015). Transcribed interviews were then thematically analyzed. To develop themes, the research team used an iterative process modeled after Clarke et al. (2015). First, all four authors independently read a single transcript, highlighted content, and made initial notes in the borders regarding possible themes and subthemes that captured the content, guided by the research questions. The group then came together to share notes and developed a draft coding scheme by consensus to capture the interview content. The same process was used to analyze a second transcript, and the draft coding framework was revised to accommodate convergent and divergent content from this second transcript. Once consensus was reached for two transcripts, the first two authors (D.B. and R.D.) worked together to apply the process to the rest of the interviews—first highlighting relevant content and making marginal notes, then modifying the coding scheme to capture divergent content. As the analysis proceeded, the first three authors (D.B., R.D., and E.K.) met regularly to discuss the evolving framework and representative quotes and deduce superordinate themes and subthemes that could be derived from the data. During this process, the five criteria of analysis trustworthiness (i.e., credibility, transferability, dependability, confirmability, and audit trials) were implemented by the first two authors (D.B. and R.D.) according to the rigorous scientific conventions established by Nowell et al. (2017). NVivo 12 was used to apply the final coding scheme to each transcript. NVivo 12 was used to calculate the number of parents who discussed each theme and subtheme, as well as the total number of references to each theme and subtheme since many parents discussed themes multiple times throughout the interview.

Results and discussion

Table 2 shows the themes and subthemes that emerged from the content of the parents' interviews. First, three broad themes were identified, based on the research questions. Within these themes, several sub-themes were identified using the method described above. Each of these is discussed next.

Table 2*Thematic Coding Scheme*

Theme 1	Enrollment and participation
Subthemes:	Perceptions of the FI program; Bilingualism opens doors/opportunities; Cognitive benefits and early exposure; Supporting French acquisition at home; Learning multiple languages at home; The onus is on parents; Involvement in the school; Impact on family life.
Theme 2	Special education
Subthemes:	Child behavior/learning abilities; Attrition; Access to services; Communication; Assessment; Intervention.
Theme 3	Socioeconomic status
Subthemes:	Cost and financing; Access to French resources; Diversity; Process and access; Teaching and staffing; French vs English programs; Differences across schools; Administrative support.

Theme 1: Enrollment and participation*Bilingualism opens doors/opportunities (6 parents, 9 references)*

Six parents spoke about the societal benefits that they hoped their children would experience as a result of learning a second language. For example, Parent 8 said that she felt the pay would be better, “especially if she gets a government job.” Other parents spoke about their own missed opportunities due to not being bilingual. For example, Parent 6 said, “I myself have not been able to apply to really awesome opportunities because I’m not bilingual.” Parents 7 and 1 similarly spoke about the “doors open[ing] even wider if you’ve got a certain level of French” (Parent 1). Our low-SES families spoke most strongly about financial and job benefits, as can be seen through the quotes from Parents 6, 7, and 8 above. Four parents spoke to the importance of learning French because it was one of Canada’s official second languages: “We’re in Canada, so I thought [they should] use the opportunity of two languages” (Parent 5). This pragmatic discussion of bilingualism has a long history, and other studies have highlighted that learning French is often thought of as an individual investment as opposed to collective belonging and cultural exchange (Heller, 2002).

Cognitive advantages and the importance of early exposure (6 parents, 17 references)

Most parents referenced either cognitive or developmental benefits when speaking about the reasons to enroll their children in FI. The cognitive benefits included improved brain development, problem-solving skills, and adaptability. For example, Parent 1 mentioned that “we know from a child development perspective, the more they’re exposed to a second language when they’re younger, how that affects brain development.” Parents also talked frequently about how bilingualism could lead to improved social skills, intercultural awareness, and an expanded worldview. Parent 6, for example, felt that the FI program led to “more social well-roundedness; being able to understand other people and cultures,” while Parent 3 stated it would be “something else to stimulate them and make them grow in a different way.” While the possible cognitive advantages associated with bilingualism are still under debate (see Gunnerud et al., 2020 and Tao et al., 2021 for a review), the benefits of language learning for intercultural awareness are well-established (Fox et al., 2019).

Perceptions of the French immersion program (5 parents, 11 references)

Five parents discussed how their own experiences provided an impetus for enrolling their children in FI, stating they either benefitted from FI themselves or were denied access to FI. For example, Parent 6 (who was low SES) said that she “really wanted to go to FI as a child, but [her] parents didn’t give [her] that opportunity.” Parents also spoke about the reputation of the FI program as an enrollment motivator. Parents also expressed the belief that “only the elite put their kids in FI” (Parent 4), while others thought, “this education program within FI should be better or stronger than what they do in the English curriculum” (Parent 2). Parents also expressed the belief that students who attended FI were different from those in English: “There seems to be less troublemakers in the French classes than in the English classes” (Parent 1). However, we mainly heard perceptions of FI as an elite program from our high-SES parents (Parents 1, 2, and 4). Perceptions of FI as an inequitable program have been demonstrated in other studies, such as that of Barrett DeWiele and Edgerton (2021), who showed that higher SES parents are more likely to both enroll their children in FI and for their children to benefit more strongly from the program. Our third research question, below, will investigate this theme more thoroughly.

Supporting French acquisition at home (7 parents, 19 references)

When parents spoke about how they supported their child(ren)'s French acquisition at home, they situated their answers within their own personal knowledge of French. Some parents had some French knowledge which both helped them support their child's learning and allowed them to refresh their skills and learn alongside their child. However, it was mainly our high-SES parents who had the time to support their children this way, as can be seen in the quotes below. Parent 3 for example said, "I would say I can help them. I did FI. I'm not speaking French on a daily basis. A lot of that was gone. It's coming back for sure with their help." Similarly, Parent 1 mused:

It's funny, I'm the one who does all the reading with them, and I've done a bit of a crash course learning with them as we go. And so, I will read books to them when they're just learning and I will mispronounce words, and they will correct me. So, I'm learning as I go.

Parents also spoke about resources they used to support their child's French acquisition, including family and family friends, summer camps, neighborhood and community groups, and physical resources such as French books. However, as will be discussed more fully below, the degree to which parents could afford these extra resources varied greatly.

Learning multiple languages at home (6 parents, 11 references)

The parents in this study varied in their home languages. Three (Parents 2, 5, and 7) spoke languages other than English at home. These parents discussed supporting their minority home language along with English and French. For example, Parent 7 spoke about balancing three languages:

You see, we're from Ghana so we try to teach them our language too. We speak English at home, and we speak Twi. We speak both English and Twi. When she goes to school, she's doing French over there. So, it is very active.

Parent 5 discussed challenges they experienced in trying to promote the minority home language, but not French:

We tried to push him in Russian. That was a challenge for him. But because French started from SK [Senior Kindergarten], he kind of assumed it's normal. So, there was never a point where he said, 'I don't want to learn French, I want to go back to English.' He just assumed it's the normal way of things.

Research also shows that multilingual children acquire language flexibility at a very young age (García & Sylvan, 2011).

Several parents who spoke a minority language at home also mentioned that their children seemed to acquire English and French without confusion

because they started learning them at a young age. The success of multilingual students in acquiring three languages in FI has been confirmed in other studies. For example, Au-Yeung et al. (2015) showed that primary-level FI multilingual students' performance was comparable to their English first-language peers on English and French reading measures. Although they were initially lower on receptive English vocabulary, this gap decreased over time.

The onus is on parents (5 parents, 10 references)

When children experienced learning difficulties in FI, parents expressed concerns that too much responsibility was being placed on parents to manage their child's progress. This theme was especially prevalent for parents who had children with SEN. For example, Parent 1 stated that a parent conference:

emphasized for me that we really needed to give it some serious focus, or she was going to get so far behind that it was going to be a lost cause. So, I came away with that very clear understanding that if we wanted anything to happen, we're going to have to do it ourselves.

A few parents clarified that this became worse during online learning as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Parent 6 mentioned that:

I feel like [the problem is] more her grade two teacher right now, I feel like she's not learning anything, even with the homework. It's not very clear what to do. There are all these words but every single word I have to Google translate it. She doesn't know what to do.

Overall, parents communicated that they felt they were forced to take a more active role in their child's education in order for their children to successfully complete their schoolwork. This finding was consistent with LeFevre and Sénéchal (2002), who also reported that parents' ability and willingness to provide French support at home in FI directly related to their child's proficiency in French.

Involvement in the school (4 parents, 10 references)

Half of the parents discussed their involvement with the school, and the sentiments were mixed. Some parents felt strongly that they wanted to be a voice for change in the school, like Parent 4, who said:

I have a voice for my kids, what about all those kids whose parents are working two to three jobs and just don't have the time because they're just trying to make ends meet. So, I feel very privileged. And so, I want to be the voice for my kids and for other kids.

Other parents stated that it was difficult to be involved with the school. Parent 6 elaborated that, "My relationship with the school is strained, just

different things they've done with respect to CHILD [name redacted] and her learning have really affected my willingness to be involved and to reach out." In the examples above, it should be noted that Parent 4 came from a middle-class background while Parent 6 was from a low-income household. Other parents discussed the contextual challenges that made it difficult to be involved, such as the hours required. Overall, parents spoke of their involvement (or not) in terms of whether they felt they had the ability to contribute (financial, emotional, time).

Impact on family life (3 parents, 7 references)

Three parents discussed the impact that their child's education was having on their family life overall, which was not always positive. When speaking about the child's schoolwork they were doing at home, Parent 1 mentioned that "There's a lot of battles and struggles that take place at home. To try to keep the momentum moving along without crossing a threshold that becomes kind of inappropriate from a parenting perspective. So that's a tricky balance." Parent 6, on the other hand, discussed how her difficult relationship with her child's teacher was affecting her relationship with her daughter. She stated that:

this particular teacher that she has this year, I had to take a very big step back. It was affecting my relationship with CHILD [name redacted]. It was affecting my ability to help her. I just couldn't do it and maintain my own sanity in a way that was conducive to our relationship as mother-daughter.

The other quotes in this area similarly talked about balancing home life and education, as well as the emotional toll that educational difficulties had on family life. The parents who spoke strongly about the negative family impacts were also families who had children with SEN, regardless of their SES levels. This mirrors the study by Selvachandran and colleagues (2022), where families underwent stress due to a lack of support for students with SEN in FI programs.

Theme 2: Special education

It is important to note that only parents who had at least one child with SEN were specifically asked about their SEN experiences. For that reason, the majority of the quotations in the Special Education section come from the six parents who had at least one child with SEN.

Child behavior/learning abilities (3 parents, 9 references)

Several parents of children with SEN discussed how their individual child's behavior and learning abilities affected their participation in the FI program. While Parent 3 did not report that she had a child with SEN, she did say that one of her children struggled more when learning English. She said while

he initially seemed to do well in FI, as he got older, he seemed to encounter more challenges. She wondered if “the focus on French and learning French” exacerbated these early language-learning challenges for him. Parent 4, who had two children with SEN, mentioned that her children’s experience was different from that of a friend’s children for whom FI “came naturally,” and who “are like wizzes . . . and never had any problems. They didn’t need any tutoring.” In reading research, studies on *The Matthew Effect* show that normal readers continue to perform well, while struggling readers will improve at a slower rate and fall further behind without timely intervention (e.g., Kay-Raining Bird et al., 2021; Pfost et al., 2012; Selvachandran et al., 2022). This effect seemed to be observed by the participants in our study as well.

Attrition (5 parents, 8 references)

The parents in this study spoke very candidly about their family discussions around removing their children from FI. This conversation usually started when parents were notified that their children were struggling to read. For example, Parent 1 said that learning her daughter was struggling was “a shock, and then a panic, and it’s been a panic ever since to try to get them to catch up.” This parent actually quit work to help her child catch up, but she acknowledged “A lot of families haven’t been able to do that. I know a lot of families have had to drop out of the program because . . . what it takes to get them up to grade level is pretty intense.” Other parents knew that their children would continue to fall further behind if they weren’t able to close the gap and wondered whether their child would be more successful in an English program. Parent 2 said, “So my husband and I actually have conversations around ‘do we pull the plug and actually take him out of FI? Or do we give him an aggressive shot this year [and] try to throw more resources at him?’”

Parent 4, who had already removed one out of her two children from FI when she began to struggle, described why they made this choice and the impact it had on their child:

I can strongly say that, if I knew that there were resources in place, proper resources in the special education department, that I would probably keep [CHILD 2] in French. Because it broke her heart, taking her out of French. Even though she’s dyslexic . . . I feel like if there were proper resources in place, she would have been okay. I understand I would have still had to get her help for her dyslexia outside of the school privately. But I do think she would have succeeded.

Research confirms what Parent 4 suggested, that with proper assessment and intervention struggling readers are able to close the gap compared to control groups who do not receive intervention (e.g., Wise et al., 2016). Furthermore, research shows that students with SEN within and outside of

FI do equally well (Kay-Raining Bird et al., 2021). This issue is critical to investigate in future studies, since currently 70% of Early FI students have left the program by Grade 9 (Sinay et al., 2018). While it is unknown how many of these students left due to insufficient SEN support, this is an important area of future research.

Access to services (2 parents, 9 references)

A few parents spoke specifically about access to special education services as established by the current education system. For example, Parent 1 said that:

And my understanding was that they can't officially request an Individualized Educational Plan until they're in grade three ... But there was never any guarantee, and it was like kids who have a greater priority would get those resources before she would. But I never really understood like, what's the benchmark for that?

This quotation shows the lack of accurate and transparent information that parents receive. An Individualized Educational Plan (IEP) can be implemented in any grade, and there is a clear process for referral (OHRC, 2022). Another parent (4) spoke about not receiving an IEP for months after she had been promised one within 30 days, as is written in the referral process. However, when she contacted the teacher to ask about updates, "The teacher exploded on me ... That teacher never came back. I later found out that she had screaming matches with a couple of other parents. It was just horrible." These parent experiences are confirmed by the OHRC *Right to Read* report (2022), which found school boards to be negligent when it came to timely and evidence-based responses to SEN in their schools in both English and French programs. Similar findings were reported in previous research studies (Mady, 2018; Mady & Arnett, 2009; Mady & Masson, 2018; Selvachandran et al., 2022).

Assessment (6 parents, 16 references)

When it came to assessment, parents often spoke of barriers and breakdowns in the system which led to prolonged wait times. For example, when Parent 1 sat down with her child's teacher to discuss further support, she said, "And even at that stage, I felt like she probably was going to fall through the cracks." Parent 4, who had been through the entire assessment process once, spoke of the timeline to get her child assessed. In a conversation with her school administration, she was told, "you should get her assessed privately because there's a three-year waitlist ... And it was always, you know, we don't have enough support and resources from the TDSB." Parent 4 paid for a private assessment of approximately \$3,500. However, even with that assessment, it took months to receive an IEP when the process is supposed to take no more

than 30 days. This was exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, as the teacher writing the IEP “disappeared” and was replaced by a new teacher.

Intervention (2 parents, 7 references)

Most parents who had children with SEN in this study were still waiting for assessments, even though their children were in grades 1-5. This meant that parental knowledge of school intervention was limited. However, Parent 1 spoke strongly that intervention should be happening as early as senior kindergarten, which is supported by research (e.g., Wise & Chen, 2010) and the OHRC *Right to Read* report (2022). Parent 4 said that one of her children saw a special education teacher who spoke French, which is not common. However, that teacher moved during the COVID-19 pandemic. Afterwards, Parent 4 reported that special education services were only available in English, even though her child was attending FI.

So we have one special education teacher for both the English and French program. So, CHILD [name redacted] goes to see her but it's in English. So, she's not getting any of that extra support in French.

This parent was highly concerned that no special education support was available in the language of instruction for students in FI unless by chance.

Communication (3 parents, 10 references)

Three parents also spoke about communication, or lack thereof, between their family and the school. Parent 8 said that she stopped communicating with her child's teacher directly because she felt as if there had been a breakdown in communication. Instead, she would call the secretary and set up a meeting with the principal to ask for advice, asking, “do I pull her out, because I feel like she's failing in school?” Parent 1 spoke of not being notified that her child was struggling until midway through first grade, two and a half years into their child's schooling. She said that “all of a sudden, you're sort of brought into that understanding ... And there were a lot of conversations that happened before I felt like I as a parent started to get a better handle on that.” This mirrors the findings in Selvachandran et al. (2022), who reported that parents of students with SEN found that communication was challenging. Some parents in both that study and the current study talked about communication breakdowns and barriers.

Theme 3: Socioeconomic status

Access to French resources (7 parents, 19 references)

Almost every parent in this study discussed their access to French resources in their interview. Specifically, parents discussed a few pain points which made

accessing French resources difficult. Parent 6, who was a single parent from a low-income community, said that due to her work hours and commute, “even if there are resources available physically at the school, the likelihood I could access them without taking time off work, next to none.” Parent 5, who was part of the mid-SES group, elaborated on this point, saying that they “have maybe 10 books in French” because French books are expensive and “not really accessible compared to English.” In general, while French resources were difficult to acquire across SES levels, we saw that mid-high SES families, especially in two-parent households, were better able to gain access to French resources outside the school.

Cost and financing (6 parents, 23 references)

Most parents also discussed the cost of supporting their students in FI. Some could afford these costs more than others. We asked all parents what they would do if their child struggled significantly in French, and almost all parents mentioned external tutoring as one of the only options available. Parent 2, who was on the higher end of the SES scale, said, “We would need to get more French tutoring. I don’t see any other options. That’s the other thing, you are doing this as a luxury of your finances, right? And certain people can afford it, but certain people can’t.” Some lower SES parents, like 4, discussed the toll financing an educational assessment took:

I’ll never forget it, having that [school support team] SST meeting. I’m in front of the psychologist and all these different people and I literally lost control. The head of special education, she was like, ‘It’s okay.’ I’m like, ‘I’m not crying because my daughter has a learning disability. I’ve come to terms with that.’ I said, ‘I’m crying because I had to pay \$3500 to get your audience.’ I said, ‘That’s why I’m crying. How many kids are falling through the cracks?’ That was very disconcerting for me. I was heartbroken.

Diversity (4 parents, 15 references)

In this study, we focused upon SEN and SES. However, our parents varied in other ways, notably three spoke a minority language at home. Thus, it is not surprising that several parents spoke about other forms of diversity in FI programs. For example, Parent 5, whose family spoke Russian at home, said that having diversity in FI was comforting for them: “It also gives us some self-confidence and self-esteem because in Canada, there are so many kids who speak different languages because parents came from different countries.” Parent 4 said that the gentrification of her school neighborhood was occurring, leading to many changes. She went on to say that one change was increasing diversity in the FI program, which was positive: “The diversity I’m seeing in my kids’ classroom at School 1 is very different ... half the students

were black, so there is more of a mix.” However, despite these promising improvements, she continued to feel that “there’s a huge problem with equity within our school board . . . there is still that stigma that FI is more for people who have money, who can afford it.” These parental perceptions of inequity are supported in research through analysis of current educational policies (Barrett DeWiele & Edgerton, 2021) and through analysis of access to specialized programs by geographic location (Yoon et al., 2022).

Process and access (7 parents, 9 references)

When asked about the enrollment process, parents reported very different experiences depending on their respective schools and SES. For example, Parent 3, whose child attended a school in a high-SES community, said that the process for them was simple and straightforward. This same parent reported that there was no random selection system or waitlist at her school: “We never had that experience. But I think not necessarily everyone could get in that maybe wanted to. [For us] it was simple” (Parent 3). In contrast, Parent 7, whose child attended school in a low-SES neighborhood, reported, “They put us on the waiting list. In fact, it was very challenging for her to get there. Later on, they said they have already picked the children.” This division was mirrored for the other parents who discussed this: students from high-SES communities were able to more easily access the program, whereas students from lower-SES communities reported more difficulties and waitlists. Three parents spoke about communication with the school board, school administration, and teachers during the enrollment process. These parents felt that there was a lack of transparency regarding the lottery process (i.e., the process wherein children are placed on a list and some are randomly selected), as well as the requirements for parents in FI. Whether through the aforementioned lottery system or through a first come, first serve line for FI enrollment, research has shown that most enrollment processes seem to pose barriers to enrollment for low SES families (Barrett DeWiele & Edgerton, 2021).

Teachers and staffing (5 parents, 15 references)

Parents spoke often about their child’s teachers and the importance of teacher quality and consistency for their child’s learning. Parent 8, who was in a low-income community spoke about her child’s teacher switching mid-way through senior kindergarten. Since her child connected with the first teacher, she “felt uncomfortable [with the] new teacher that she couldn’t really understand.” She further said that her child “just wasn’t motivated as much anymore.” Parents such as Parent 3, who were in a high-SES community, saw less teacher turnover. Parent 3 had multiple children and was able to observe differences in teacher

quality more keenly. She mentioned that one child's teacher was "strict, but in a good way, had very high expectations, and was very structured. There was stuff he needed to do every week and homework." However, the other child had a less structured teacher and that child "wouldn't have anything [to do]." A recent review by Burroughs et al. (2019) confirms that teacher quality greatly impacts student outcomes, including the teacher's relevant experience, professional knowledge, and their ability to provide learning opportunities. While this research has not been replicated in FI, this would be an interesting area for future research.

French vs. English programs (6 parents, 14 references)

While many parents spoke about the differences between French and English programs, they had different perceptions of what those differences were. More privileged parents like Parent 3 made statements like, "there seems to be less troublemakers in the French classes than in the English classes." Parent 1, on the other hand, said that "the [FI] program itself has a very negative association from the [parents of the] English stream associated with it . . . I don't know how that affects the kids in their learning of French." Parent 1 was explaining that parents who have their children in the English stream often think negatively about the FI program due to the aforementioned inequities. To the best of our knowledge, no studies have examined in detail the tensions that arise in dual-track schools where both English and FI are offered. Future studies may want to investigate the tensions mentioned by these parents, and how they affect the students in the programs.

Differences across schools (5 parents, 11 references)

Only some of the parents had experience with multiple schools and were able to discuss those differences. Parent 8, whose child switched schools between junior and senior kindergarten, described the first school as a "warm environment with compassionate teachers." The current school, she said, was "too serious. I don't feel like anyone is really compassionate except for the librarian." Other parents talked about the status of their school. Parent 6, who was in a school in a low-income community, said her school was "an often-forgotten school, it's like the little school that could. The principal is amazing . . . but you can only do so much as one person." Parents from low SES schools, such as the two highlighted here, were more aware of the challenges facing their schools in their interviews. While school boards distribute resources based on neighborhood income and school need (TDSB Research and Development, 2020), a recent policy analysis by Kunnas (2019) showed that the included students and neighborhoods in FI still have a middle-

class bias despite these efforts. This bias likely exists due to the lack of resources available in low-SES schools, leading to lower enrollment and higher attrition in such communities.

Administrative support (4 parents, 7 references)

Finally, parents talked about the administrative support that they received in the FI program. Parent 3, who was in a high-income neighborhood, said her administrative team was “caring, they want to be there, they care about the kids. So yeah, it is a nice community.” Parent 4, who was in a lower-income neighborhood, said, “We had some horrible teachers. And [the principal] said sometimes we just have to hire that teacher because they need a job [even though] they might not be the best fit.” While teacher quality has not been studied relative to SES in FI programs, a body of research has shown that public high-SES schools often have more effective teachers (e.g., Jencks & Mayer, 1990).

Summary

The current study investigated the experiences of families whose children participated in FI programs in Toronto, Ontario. More specifically, this study explored the influence of SEN and SES on these experiences. Eight parents of children attending FI were interviewed. The first research question queried the experiences of enrollment and participation in the FI program for these families. All participants spoke about the benefits of enrolling their children in FI, discussing the developmental benefits (i.e., early exposure and cognitive benefits), societal benefits (e.g., bilingualism opens doors and opportunities) and their perception that FI was a better academic program and was attended by students with a stronger academic family background and focus than programs taught in English. The increasing popularity of FI programs has been confirmed by research, school board statistics, and in the media (e.g., Barrett DeWiele & Edgerton, 2021). When it came to participation in the program, participants primarily discussed the barriers they faced in trying to support their children’s acquisition of French. For example, parents discussed that not speaking the language of instruction made supporting their children more challenging. Finally, parents felt that there was a lot of pressure on them to ensure their children’s success in the program.

Our second question queried the particular barriers faced by students with SEN. While parents briefly addressed their children’s learning difficulties (i.e., ADHD, dyslexia) and how they affected their children’s progress in the program, systemic barriers were a much larger focus of the discussion. Parents raised concerns about access to special education services and problems with communication around those services. For example, parents

were given inaccurate information (e.g., IEPs cannot be written until Grade 3) or experienced excessive delays in accessing services (e.g., 3-year waitlists for psychoeducational testing). Stakeholders have been raising the alarm for years around barriers to access to support services for students with SEN in FI (see Mady, 2018; Mady & Arnett, 2009; Mady & Masson, 2018; OHRC, 2022; or Wise, 2011 for a review). This study confirmed that these barriers still exist, and that families often consider leaving the FI program as a result.

Our final question queried the experiences of students and families from low SES communities and/or homes. Consistent with previous research (Kunnas, 2019; Yoon et al., 2022), our research identified that parents from low-income communities faced more barriers when enrolling their children in FI. On an individual level, parents felt they needed to provide expensive French language resources such as books, tutors, and other materials to support their child's acquisition of French. Financial barriers were particularly pronounced for students with SEN or students from single parent families in our study. While not queried in our study, research suggests this is also true for students from immigrant families (Davis et al., 2021). These complex challenges faced by families from low SES communities might be contributing to the middle-class bias found in several research studies (Kunnas, 2019; Yoon et al., 2022).

Limitations and future directions

This study had several limitations which are important to acknowledge. First, we interviewed only mothers from the same large urban city in Canada. Future studies would benefit from involving various other family members and stakeholders from across the country. However, including families from the same large urban city revealed inequities that can be addressed at the municipal and school-board level. Furthermore, the scope of this study focused on SEN and SES. However, parents in this study also made reference to barriers faced by multilingual students, which has been corroborated in other summaries (e.g., Davis et al., 2021). This should be investigated further in future studies to elaborate on our current understanding of diverse students' participation in FI. Finally, this study did not explore the perspectives of teachers, principals, and children in FI. Future studies should investigate these stakeholders and participants to better understand barriers to access in FI.

Implications

In sum, we saw that the families that were involved in the current study were highly in-favor of FI programs and did everything in their power to help their children succeed. However, the degree to which they were able to do so varied and was influenced by whether they faced barriers to accessing support for children with SEN, to obtain more resources for children from low-income

homes and communities, or a combination of both. There are several important policy implications that can be drawn from this study. The high demand for FI and the limited number of slots available require a more equitable enrollment and recruitment policy, and/or an expansion of the programs available.

Specifically, equitable policies are urgently needed for students with SEN and students from low SES families in FI. For students with SEN, access to timely assessment and intervention is critical as it ensures children are able to learn as effectively as possible and protects parents from the expense of having to seek private help. In particular, parents should be made aware that they can request an IEP as soon as their child begins to struggle. Transparent and clear communication between the school and families would also make the education system more navigable for parents of students with SEN. Despite the current policies which provide additional support to low SES schools, it is clear that resource inequities still exist in FI for low-income families and communities (e.g., TDSB Learning Opportunity Index, in TDSB Research and Development, 2020). These policies need to be revised to be more equitable towards schools in low-income communities. Outside of resources, this study also found that living in a low SES community can be related to teacher quality and retention. Efforts should be made to recruit strong teachers, and to provide additional support to administrators working in under-resourced communities.

Recently, efforts have been made to recruit diverse groups of students (e.g., creating programs in areas with a high proportion of racialized and newcomer students) (Alphonso, 2022). While this is certainly a step in the right direction, these efforts have been undermined by administration errors, such as the exclusion of marginalized students from the French immersion lottery (Kennedy & Teotonio, 2023). Furthermore, once children are admitted into the program, efforts should be made to alleviate the financial and emotional stress marginalized families experience in trying to support their children.

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Appendix:**Evaluating the strengths and challenges of French immersion through interviews**

The following questionnaire looks at the intersectionality between SES and children with disabilities in Ontario French immersion

Allowable prompts

1. You briefly mentioned (_____), could you tell us a bit more about it?

Introduction

Hello! Thank you so much for agreeing to participate in this interview. It should take around 60–90 minutes. I know you filled out the consent form, do you have any questions before we get started? (Answers questions, if necessary). We also wanted to double check, are you still comfortable with this session being recorded? It will only be used for our purposes and will be completely anonymized (Wait for response). Okay great. START RECORDING.

Okay, we've started the session. [State what each interviewer is responsible for].

As we mentioned in the consent form, the goal of this project is to get your feedback on the French immersion program. As this is anonymous, we hope you'll be comfortable sharing your honest thoughts on the program. If you have multiple children in the program, please feel free to use all of them as a reference point throughout this interview.

Questions for Parents

1. Why did you decide to put your child(ren) in French Immersion?
 - (a) What other factors did you consider?
2. Describe how you enrolled your child(ren) in French Immersion?
 - (a) Please explain any difficulties you encountered.
3. How does your child's participation in French Immersion affect you, positively or negatively?
 - (a) Homework (not speaking French)
 - (b) Access to resources
 - (c) Transportation to school
 - (d) Extra support: financial burden (tutors, library, etc)
 - (e) Learning French along with their kids?
4. Describe the challenges of participating in French Immersion for your child(ren).
 - (a) Learning multiple languages at once
 - (b) Segregated from English stream
5. Describe the benefits of participating in French Immersion for your child(ren)?

- (a) IF NOT ALREADY ANSWERED IN QUESTION 1
 - (b) Official language
 - (c) Jobs
 - (d) Cognitive benefits
6. Could you tell me a bit about your school and the community it serves?
- (a) If asking for clarification: How do you feel when you walk into your child's school? What is it like to interact with the other parents?
7. Describe your child's progress in French Immersion.
- (a) How do you feel about your child's progress so far?
 - (b) Has your child experienced any difficulties learning French or academically in FI? Please explain.
 - i. Query parent's observations, child's feelings, report cards and teacher's feedback.
8. Has your child gone through a psychological and/or educational assessment in FI? If so, could you briefly describe the experience?
- (a) Why was the testing done?
 - (b) Was there anything you would have liked done differently? Please explain.
 - (c) What changes do you think should be made to improve the process?
 - (d) How did your child's situation change as a result of this process?
9. Please describe the supports the school provides for students in FI if they struggle to learn French or academically.
- (a) Do you have any concerns about the supports that are provided?
 - (b) Are the supports different for children in FI versus the English program?
 - (c) Under normal circumstances (pre-Covid), what do you do outside of school to help your child learn?
10. If your child started to struggle with the French language, what do you think you would do?