

# Comparing Dual-Track and Single-Track French Immersion Programs: Does Setting Matter?

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In 2007 a school board in Canada requested that I compile research examining the differences between dual-track and single-track (immersion centre) French immersion programs in Canada. An immersion centre is an entire school that is devoted to French immersion, and a dual-track model is one in which a school houses a French immersion program alongside a regular (English-medium) program.<sup>1</sup> At the time members of the school board were debating whether to move to the centre model for their elementary French immersion program. This school board provided an example of best practice by ensuring that their decision-making would be research-informed and data-driven.

As the external consultant hired by the school board, in this report I offer brief summaries of the research I compiled and presented. I concentrate this report primarily on research that addresses differences in academic achievement. It is worth noting that research in this area is limited. Finally, I briefly describe final outcomes and administrators' perspectives on the model currently in place.

## RESEARCH SUMMARIES

1. Lapkin et al. (1981) published a study comparing student outcomes in immersion centres and dual-track schools. The research was carried out for the Carleton Board (Ottawa, Ontario) and involved testing of grade 5 students in centres (six classes) and dual-track schools (four classes) in both French and English. A survey of the staff was also conducted. Results indicated that on two of the four tests (listening comprehension as well

as reading comprehension/vocabulary), immersion centre students outperformed dual-track students. No other differences in performance were indicated. The conclusion was that immersion centres led to superior achievement in French and some aspects of English language skills. The questionnaire data indicated that centre students were possibly using more French in out-of-classroom contexts than dual-track students and that they had more exposure to written and spoken French in the school environment than their dual-track counterparts.

Furthermore, teachers in centres appeared better satisfied with resources available in their schools and with their overall teaching situations. In interpreting the results, the researchers speculated that support for the French language was more pronounced in the centre setting where they found school corridor displays featuring more material in French, assemblies conducted in French, administration and other staff more likely to be bilingual and so on.

2. Lapkin (1991) cited examples of how the Lapkin et al. (1981) research was used to bolster opposing points of view and how research is often used as after-the-fact rationalizing of politically motivated decisions. Even though the 1981 study yielded important findings, Lapkin cautioned against the use of a single evaluation focussing on one grade as evidence that the centre proves optimal for immersion programs. She argued that this cannot be safely generalised without



## BEST PRACTICES

*In-service immersion teachers frequently explore new ideas for teaching and learning in the classroom. Sharing ideas that work is the emphasis of this regular feature, Best Practices.*

*In this section, teachers can read about tried and true, practical instructional techniques that immersion colleagues might also adopt for their classrooms.*



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ENVIRONMENTAL  
EDUCATION IN SPANISH

The Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources has translated a portion of their website into Spanish. EEK!, Environmental Education for Kids, is targeted at fourth through eighth grade native speakers of Spanish, but immersion educators may find uses for the site in their science lessons. The site has six sections, *Le rincón de los animales* (Critter Corner), *Notas sobre la naturaleza* (Nature Notes), *Nuestro planeta* (Our Earth), *Material interesante* (Cool Stuff), *Oportunidades de trabajo* (Get a Job), and *Teacher Pages*, currently only in English. Access the site at [www.dnr.wi.gov/EEK/espanol](http://www.dnr.wi.gov/EEK/espanol).

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replication studies and consideration of a host of other contextual factors. Nevertheless, she claimed that the 1981 study showed that the recipe for successful implementation includes not only actively encouraging the use of French outside of the classroom but also within the school "so that the language is perceived as an authentic means of communication for a social purpose that goes beyond academic learning within the class and pervades the life of the school" (p. 2).

3. A survey conducted in Manitoba of French immersion graduates in 1998 and 1999 revealed that the respondents viewed immersion centres more favourably with regards to resource materials and academic support services (Manitoba Education, 2001). In response to two survey items in particular: *School provided adequate French resource material* and *School provided academic French language support services*, the immersion centre graduates indicated much higher levels of agreement than the dual-track graduates.
4. Crawford (1995) conducted a study on dual-track programs. She examined in depth the culture of the dual-track elementary school by conducting seventy-six semi-structured interviews with parents, teachers, students and administrators in two different schools.

Crawford found that developing a shared school culture was a great deal of work, but well worth the effort. A dual-track school setting had its advantages: exposure to diversity, chance to teach and learn in two languages, better student and parent cooperation due to choice, good French as a Second Language instruction, elimination of neighbourhood cliques, development of cultural tolerance

and keeping community schools open. Furthermore, there was an implication that the development of subcultures within a school is not perceived as negative: subcultures can protect the integrity of groups and programs and thus facilitate overall cooperation and harmony.

5. Kissau (2003) did a study assessing the relationship between the school environment and program effectiveness. Two settings were investigated: an immersion centre and a dual-track school. The study consisted of questionnaires completed by grade 7 students and teachers in both settings. Results indicated that centre students were perceived, by both teachers and students, to be exposed to more French and less peer pressure than their dual-track counterparts.
6. In a socio-political analysis, Safty (1992) examined the organizational settings of immersion and the sociology of the school culture. He questioned the integration and effectiveness of dual-track schools with two different linguistic and cultural orientations. He quotes McGillivray (1984) stating that the two programs are not compatible and that they "co-exist with difficulty."
7. In a brief review of what has been learned from studies on French immersion, Cummins (2000) indicated that two problematic areas have been noted in the implementation of French immersion programs in Canada. One problem is the quality of French oral language and written proficiency attained by immersion students and the other being the relatively high attrition rate in Canadian French immersion since its inception. Students often lack interaction with native francophone students, and they also have few classroom opportunities to use French. He explained, "Expressive

skills tend to develop better in schools where the entire school is a French immersion centre rather than in schools where just one stream is taught through French; however, the latter organizational structure far outnumber the former as a result of the political difficulty of devoting an entire neighbourhood school to French instruction..." (p. 4).

8. Perhaps the most significant research recently conducted in this area was done in Alberta. Guimont (2003) reviewed prior research on single- and dual-track immersion schools including work by McGillivray (1984), who wrote that immersion centres often have administrative advantages because they devote all their staff, programs and resources to immersion, making the budget more manageable. He also explained how centres often have specialists for remedial services, which may in part account for the lower attrition rate in centres. In contrast, unilingual administrators in dual-track schools often lack pedagogical knowledge of second language learning, and have problems communicating about educational issues with, supervising, and evaluating French immersion teachers.

Guimont (2003) conducted a comparative analysis (dual/single track schools) of two sources of quantitative data provided by Alberta Learning: *provincial achievement test results from 1995-1996 and 1999-2000 for all grade 6 French Immersion students and a multiyear report of scores on the four core subjects taught in French*. He also gathered qualitative data through taped, unstructured interviews with six current and former principals of five of the top six schools where the students achieved the best overall results in the four subjects taught in French (Social Studies, Mathematics, French Language Arts, Science).

Results of the quantitative data showed that students enrolled in immersion centres achieved better results in all of the subjects, for each of the years that was reported in the study. Furthermore, the results in 1999-2000 showed a greater difference in mean scores than the results in 1995-96 in all the subjects in the years examined. It is interesting to note that French Language Arts is the subject that had the least difference in Total Test Mean results between the two immersion sub-populations.

Three themes emerged from Guimont's interpretational analysis of the data gathered from the principals' perspectives, reflections and explanations in light of the quantitative data results:

- Immersion centres function like francophone (French first language) schools. The principals talked about the students having more exposure to French, of the difficulty in ensuring that students speak French outside the classroom in a dual-track setting, how more exposure would enable them to remember more words and of the creation of a French community within a single-track setting.
- Common goals and resources directed at one program are best. In regards to resources, respondents felt that the establishment of common goals and allocation of resources was a key factor to the success of students in immersion centres.
- Immersion centres attract more committed parents. Principals felt that parents whose children have to travel outside the neighbourhood in order to attend an immersion centre are more committed. They also felt that families with one Francophone parent generally chose an immersion centre as opposed to a dual-track school.

## THE ACIE ARCHIVES:

### OTHER ARTICLES OF INTEREST

Arthur, G. (2004). *Partial Spanish Immersion Program Expands by Offering Academic Excellence for All*. The ACIE Newsletter, 7 (2), pp. 1-2, 12-13, 15.

*This article discusses how a popular strand program transitioned to a whole school program.*

Roldán, M. & Leclerc, D. (2005). *Challenging Choices: Immersion in One School or Multiple Sites?* The ACIE Newsletter, 8 (2), pp. 10-11.

*This article describes a district's choice to move a total immersion program from one building to multiple sites in order to offer the immersion option to more families in the district.*

Woodson, N.C. (2002). *Forest Glen Elementary School: An International Studies Magnet Program*. The ACIE Newsletter, 6 (1), pp. 1-2, 12-13.

*This article describes a dual-track school - immersion enrolls one-third of the school population and a global studies magnet program enrolls the other two-thirds.*

## TOUT À PROPOS DES ANIMAUX

The Northumberland (UK) Grid for Learning has a Languages Resources section that includes a "pictorial database with sound support" in French. Students can search the database alphabetically (make sure to spell the animal's name correctly including accents), by keyword, or by one of ten habitats for any of sixty-five different animals. Each entry contains an image and information related to the animal's habitat, size, appearance, young, and food as well as an interesting fact about the animal. As children click on the names and one-sentence introductory descriptions of the animals, they will hear a native speaker read the text.

Teachers can print out pdf or Word documents of each animal to create a class set. There are also two Smart Notebook Collections that teachers can download. A Teacher Manual and CD with audio of the full entry on each animal is available for purchase.

Information and links can be found at <http://ngfl.northumberland.gov.uk/languages>. There are two sample lessons available for viewing and printing. Although the site is geared toward students who are learning French as second language, the animal database is appropriate for primary immersion students studying animals and their habitats.

Guimont concluded with fourteen implications for practice including the following:

- Administrators in dual-track schools must be given more professional development opportunities to help them tackle the daily challenge of leading a bi-cultural staff, promoting and respecting cultural needs, building and maintaining team spirit among colleagues, and working toward the realization of school goals.
- Principals of dual-track schools must ensure that the school functions effectively as one school and that this is clear to all stakeholders.
- Principals must demonstrate the value of and strongly believe in the importance of the immersion model.
- In light of the results, school authorities must ask themselves how important it is to provide the best setting for their immersion students to achieve optimal results and to allow them to develop the best French language skills possible.

### SCHOOL BOARD DECISION AND ADMINISTRATOR PERSPECTIVES

Upon presentation of the research and recognition of a declining English-strand population in the school, the school board that requested the compilation of research decided to move to a centre model for the fall of 2007.

The two administrators who transitioned from the dual-track model to the centre model were interviewed in the winter of 2010 and asked to give their perceptions of the shift. After two years of the centre immersion model, they both felt strongly that the centre model was more beneficial for a number of reasons.

One benefit is the development of a common vision and school mission since it is substantially more difficult to lead a team whose goals represent two different populations. In addition, managing a dual-track school is significantly more complex because the needs of the two tracks are different. Politically, it is also more sensitive as one program cannot spend more than the other. Prior to changing to a single-track immersion centre, they had felt their French Immersion program was lagging. For example, they were unable to provide the same quality of services to students in French as in English,

*“ Results of the quantitative data showed that students enrolled in immersion centres [whole school programs] achieved better results in all of the subjects... ”*

nor were funds available to do so.

The transition to single-track has also had a profound impact on the culture of the school. Both administrators concur that the acquisition of the French language is more rapid in a centre model. Announcements, intramurals, choirs, library helpers, concerts and cultural events are all provided in French. Rather than French being only a language of instruction, it is now brought alive outside of the four classroom walls. They state that the students are proud of their ability to communicate in French with other people.

Teachers were initially hesitant and fearful of the change. Some were upset about losing friendships with colleagues teaching in the English track. However, since the transition, they recognize they are able to have their specific immersion needs met effectively and also have more opportunities to work in French professional learning communities.

It is the belief of the administrators that some schools should initially open as dual-

track programming, but with the intention of moving towards a single-track model when it becomes financially feasible for the school board. ○

**ENDNOTE:**

1. In the U.S. the "dual-track" model is commonly referred to as a "strand" program.

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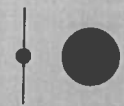
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