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FI Leave Here Tomorrow: Improving Inclusion in Canada's French Immersion Programs

by

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Abstract

This paper presents a synthesis of the literature on inclusion in French immersion (FI) programs in Canada from the last 20 years. A lens of *sociolinguistics for change* (Davis, 2024; Roy, 2020) is used to examine policies around inclusion in FI, compare these policies to the realities of inclusion in FI, and seek approaches for making FI more inclusive. The policy landscape of inclusion in Canada is explored through key court cases. The gaps between inclusion policy and practice are described in terms of themes identified in the literature: multilingual learners, special education, and colonialism. The identified approaches to making FI more inclusive are addressing the FI teacher shortage; increasing FI research; more research-informed FI educators, leaders, and decision-makers; more diverse and inclusive learning and teaching resources in French; using plurilingual pedagogy; and using a professional learning community approach.

Keywords: inclusion, French immersion (FI), Canada, multilingual learners, special education, colonialism, educational policy, sociolinguistics for change

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FI Leave Here Tomorrow: Improving Inclusion in Canada's French Immersion Programs

Over the last 60 years, French immersion (FI) programs for K-12 students in Canada have evolved in many ways, and some of the most significant changes have been related to inclusion (Garrett & Mady, 2024). Inclusion is defined as a "philosophy…which maintains that all students can find success in school with appropriate supports" (Mady & Arnett, 2009, p. 41). This will be considered in this paper within the context of French immersion, which is "a Canadian publicly funded school program where non-Francophones are taught the provincial curriculum in French" (Kunnas, 2023, p. 47). This paper will address how exclusion from FI has prevented equitable access to the program and its benefits (Kunnas, 2023; Ontario Human Rights Commission, 2022; Wise, 2011), how FI in Canada might become more inclusive, and the significance of inclusive K-12 FI programming to Canadian society.

The introductory sections that follow will explain the purpose, the search method, my positionality, the topics of inclusion and FI, and the theoretical framework of sociolinguistics for change. A literature synthesis will then be presented, beginning with policies around inclusion in Canadian K-12 education. The synthesis will then highlight gaps between inclusion policy and practice in FI, and this will be organized around the themes of multilingual learners, special education, and colonialism. It will then move into ways for making Canadian FI programs more inclusive through more research-informed FI educators, leaders, and decision makers; addressing the FI teacher shortage; more diverse and inclusive learning and teaching resources in French; using plurilingual pedagogy; and the potential of the professional learning community approach.

Purpose

This paper will present a synthesis of the literature around inclusion in FI, compare policies to the realities of inclusion in FI, and examine some potential approaches for bridging

the gap between policy and practice. It has been my experience — as a former FI student, family member, and teacher — that there are inconsistencies in how inclusion is implemented (or not) in FI, and many researchers have pointed out that in a myriad of ways these programs are often exclusionary towards students with special education needs, multilingual learners, and students from low-income families (Barrett DeWiele & Edgerton, 2020; Cobb, 2015; Davis, 2023; Kunnas, 2023; Wise, 2011). One of the anticipated gaps between policy and practice is that students needing support in FI are often excluded from the program due to educators' opinion-based recommendations that their learning would be better supported in English programs (Garrett & Mady, 2024; Wise, 2011). The following questions will be explored:

1. *In what ways might K-12 FI be made more inclusive?*
2. *What is the significance of inclusive K-12 FI programming to Canadian society?*

Search Method

The literature search began with a review of the literature I encountered through my coursework for the Master of Education in Studies in Educational Leadership. This included scholarly journal articles as well as policy documents, legislation, government reports, books, and court cases. Any such literature related to inclusion and/or French immersion was selected to be part of the body of work incorporated into this literature review.

A search for additional literature was then conducted using the Education Multi-Database Search (ProQuest) tool. ProQuest was used to search four databases: Australian Education Index, CBCA: Social Sciences, Education Database, and ERIC. Key search terms were *"French immersion"*, *inclus**, and *Canada*. The asterisk was used to yield results with variations such as *inclusion* and *inclusive*. The search was limited to peer reviewed articles published within the last 20 years. This search yielded 24 results, both in French and in English. As there were some

duplicate records within the search, and some of the results had been encountered during my previous coursework, this provided nine new papers to incorporate into the literature review.

A subsequent search of the University of Alberta library was conducted, with results from the following databases: ERIC, Education Research Complete, Communication & Mass Media Complete, MLA International Bibliography, Erudit, British Education Index, Canadian Reference Centre, Directory of Open Access Journals, JSTOR Journals, and Gale OneFile: CPI.Q. The same search terms (*"French immersion"*, *inclus**, and *Canada*) were used, and the search included a request for related words to be applied. The search was limited to scholarly journals published in the last 20 years. This second search provided 25 results, both in French and in English, with many repetitions from the first search. Five of these were new papers to incorporate into the literature review.

Positionality

I am a white settler of European ancestry and I identify as a neurodivergent, able-bodied, cisgender woman. I grew up in a low-income family and I am now in a middle-income family. My connection to the topic of inclusion in FI dates back to 1995 when I was enrolled in the program as a kindergarten student in British Columbia. A few years later, a member of my family left FI because it was recommended that the English program would better support their educational needs. I remained in the program and received a special education designation just before starting high school. By completing my K-12 education in FI, I became fluent in French. My French language skills have since proven to be a cornerstone of my career. Now I have nearly a decade of experience teaching in FI programs in British Columbia and Alberta as well as several years of experience working as a public servant.

French Immersion

FI programs started in Canada in 1965, and they "were first offered in Alberta in the early 70s" (Alberta Education, 2014, p. 1). Before 1968, French was not allowed as a full-time language of instruction in the province (Roy, 2010). The following year, French and English were declared Canada's official languages through the *Official Languages Act* (Masson et al., 2022). The goal of FI is to develop students' fluency in French, and it is "an alternative program as provided in Section 21 of the School Act" (Alberta Education, 2014, p. 1). The ages of students in the program varies by jurisdiction, but typically it is offered from kindergarten through grade 12 (Garrett & Mady, 2024). Completing the FI program is associated with learning an additional language and the resulting cognitive benefits as well as "enhanced career and life opportunities" (Barrett DeWiele & Edgerton, 2024, p. 116). FI can also be seen "as a means to unite Anglophones and Francophones through official-language bilingualism" (Davis et al., 2019, p. 29) so Canada stands to benefit from inclusive FI programming.

In the context of late capitalism, "multilingualism in important market languages, understood as the standardized forms of former imperial nation-state languages, is a signature of the cosmopolitan elite whose members compete for access" (Heller & McElhinny, 2017, p. 234). It is telling that federal language policy in Canada has shifted away from a discourse of "preservation of minority language and culture" (Heller & McElhinny, 2017, p. 243) to one focused on "economic development" (p. 243) and the "notion of French-English bilingualism as 'added value'" (p. 243). It is therefore not surprising that most families who enroll their children in FI do so for economic reasons (Kunnas, 2023). Because of the potential benefits to FI students, economic and otherwise, Arnett and Mady (2010) argue that "any form of discouragement or exclusion from FI, if interpreted through a critically conscious lens, is a tool

of oppression" (p. 24). Exclusion from FI adds barriers to certain career options (such as government roles requiring both French and English), disrupts learning, separates social groups, and harms students' mental health (Ontario Human Rights Commission, 2022).

Inclusion

Inclusion has been a complex, evolving, and debated concept in education in Canada and globally since the 1980s (Jahnukainen, 2015; Köpfer & Óskarsdóttir, 2019; Lupart & Webber, 2012; Young & Williams, in press). It is often described in terms of providing each individual student with "the *least restrictive environment*" (Cobb, 2015, p. 171). Despite the important distinction between the two concepts, school leaders in Alberta often equate inclusion with integration, which is "the idea that the child needs to be ready for being placed in a regular classroom" (Jahnukainen, 2015, p. 60). Inclusion, on the other hand, is about "children's right to be educated among the peer group and the school needs to be ready to serve everyone with or without disabilities" (Jahnukainen, 2015, p. 60). Overall, the implementation of inclusion in schools has been referred to as "piecemeal efforts" (Lupart & Webber, 2012, p. 21).

It has been argued that "the FI program was…created to be inclusive of students of varied needs" (Garrett & Mady, 2024, p. 65). However, in comparison to teachers in programs such as Core French, "FI teachers are less likely to practice inclusion" (Arnott et al., 2019, p. 72). Arnett and Mady (2017) conducted a survey of pre-service teachers and found a prevalent belief that students with special education needs and multilingual learners would be better suited for Core French than FI programming. This points to a need to enhance teacher education and professional development around inclusion in FI.

The available literature on inclusion in FI generally focuses on either special education (e.g., Arnett & Mady, 2010; Cobb, 2015; Mady & Arnett, 2009) or multilingual learners (e.g.,

Davis, 2023; Davis et al., 2019; Mady, 2016). Despite policies requiring inclusion, Kunnas' (2023) recent critical analysis found that FI promotes elitism both in its policy documents and in practice. Although FI has seen a recent "shift toward inclusion, particularly for students with special education needs and English language learners…, this inclusion has yet to be critically enacted" (Kunnas, 2023, p. 46). This is echoed by Garrett and Mady (2024) who point out that FI is considered elitist as some groups are excluded even though research indicates that their academic performance in the program can match or exceed those not experiencing exclusion.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this capping project is *sociolinguistics for change*. It emerged from *critical sociolinguistics*, which centres examination of inequality and power in "investigations into how language matters, socially, politically, and economically" (Heller et al., 2018, p. 2). Critical sociolinguistics is "a critical ethnographic approach to sociolinguistics research" (Flowers & Angelo, 2020, p. 1). This theoretical framework is being considered because the themes of inequality and hierarchy are also found in the research around inclusion in FI (Arnett & Mady, 2010; Arnott et al., 2019; Kunnas, 2023). For instance, Kunnas (2023) argues that "FI programs tend to reproduce social hierarchies around intellectual ability, language abilities, and socioeconomic status" (p. 48).

Roy (2020) advocates that a framework of *sociolinguistics for change* can be used to bring about necessary change in language education contexts such as FI by "questioning ideas from a personal point of view and as a group…especially when there [are] power dynamics and exclusion" (p. 23). Recently, Davis (2024) has applied this framework to a critical examination of Canadian educators' ideologies and perspectives on the inclusion of refugee-background learners in FI. Through this lens, inclusion in FI is fundamentally a matter of power and

language. As Bourgoin (2014) states: “denying some students the added advantages of learning a second language, based on their disabilities, brings forth major ethical and legal questions” (p. 5). The literature synthesis that follows will begin by describing the policy landscape of inclusion in Canada framed by three legal cases and the Ontario Human Rights Commission’s (2022) *Right to Read* inquiry.

Literature Synthesis

Policy Landscape of Inclusion in Canada

The disjointed understanding and implementation of inclusion reflect the nature of the legal milieu of disability rights and inclusion in education throughout Canada. Educational rights for students with disabilities, for instance, are impacted by laws and policies at both federal and provincial levels. At the federal level there is the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms* (1982) which prohibits discrimination based on disability. Provincial legislation in Alberta includes the *Education Act* (2012) and the *Human Rights Act* (2000). The first indicator of competency four of Alberta’s *Leadership Quality Standard* (*LQS*) explicitly mentions “equality and respect with regard to rights as provided for in the *Alberta Human Rights Act* and the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*” (Alberta Education, 2023, p. 3). Additionally, the *LQS* calls for “creating an inclusive learning environment in which diversity is embraced” (Alberta Education, 2023, p. 3). According to competency nine in the *LQS*, leaders need to understand and be responsive to political and legal contexts (Alberta Education, 2023).

Teachers, school leaders, parents, and judges across Canada have found themselves faced with a growing number of complex cases that call for them to make challenging decisions and interpretations of inclusion (Lupart & Webber, 2012; Maich et al., 2018). Class placement is at the core of the debate around inclusion and integration (Young & Williams, in press). It is also

the central issue in most of the "few human rights cases that address discrimination based on disability and accommodation in the context of public education" (Shah, 2010, p. 15). The Canadian cases of *Eaton v. Brant County Board of Education* (1997), *Moore v. British Columbia (Education)* (2012), the *Right to Read* inquiry by the Ontario Human Rights Commission (2022), and *Kahn v. Upper Grand District School Board* (2019) will be described and discussed in the following subsections.

Eaton v. Brant County Board of Education

In *Eaton v. Brant County Board of Education* (1997) (*Eaton*), the Supreme Court of Canada (SCC) heard the case of Emily Eaton, a student with cerebral palsy whose parents were appealing her placement in a special education class. Emily's parents argued that because of her disability, a prohibited ground under section 15(1) of the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms* (the *Charter*), her placement in a special education class was discriminatory. The SCC ruled that Emily's placement in a special education class despite her parents' wishes did not infringe her section 15(1) *Charter* right to equality. This was based on the finding that the placement recommendation was made based on careful consideration of Emily's best interests, particularly the extent of her needs that would be best met in a special education class. Emily's academic and social needs were not being met after three years of the integrated placement, and there was a concern about her physical safety. As part of the consideration of the student's best interests, her social, academic, and safety needs were addressed in the decision. Emily's social and academic needs were not being met by the integrated placement. They noted that the intensive, individualized supervision and instruction Emily needed would be best provided in a special education program.

Through the interpretation of the *Charter* in *Eaton*, the SCC emphasized the importance of being responsive to people with disabilities as individuals when accommodations are being made. This ruling highlights that it is not discriminatory to determine an individual student's unique educational needs based on their personal characteristics. Rather, the SCC ruling stressed that it is the very intent of section 15(1) of the *Charter* to ensure that any accommodations, and therefore any decisions around program placement, are individually appropriate.

The *Eaton* decision represented a significant step forward in how the courts conceptualize equality and the case "paved the way for movement away from the analytical norm of focusing on the group to instead focusing on the needs of the particular individual in a specific context" (Shah, 2010, p. 13). This significant precedent set in *Eaton* informed the decisions in the cases considered in this paper, and many others. Inclusion has increasingly become part of provincial education legislation and policies since *Eaton*, but implementation remains a challenge (Young & Williams, in press).

Moore v. British Columbia (Education)

In the 2012 case of *Moore v. British Columbia (Education)* (*Moore*), the SCC found unanimously that the North Vancouver School District (NVSD) had discriminated against Jeffrey Moore, a student with dyslexia. The discrimination arose from NVSD's failure to provide Jeffrey with the literacy instruction and support necessitated by his learning disability. The decision was based on the SCC's interpretation of the word *service* within the *Human Rights Code* (1996), which prohibits discrimination "regarding any accommodation, service or facility customarily available to the public because of … physical or mental disability" (s. 8). The interpretation of this wording has broader implications because the language in other provinces' legislation, such as Section 4 of Alberta's *Human Rights Act* (2000) uses the word *service* in a very similar way.

British Columbia's *School Act* (1996) played a central role in the interpretation, supporting the SCC's understanding of the province's education policy and the overall objectives of its education system. The *School Act* begins by stating the importance of education for all children. The SCC decided that the "service…customarily available to the public" (*Human Rights Code*, 1996) was general education, rather than special education. This meant that in the *Moore* decision, Jeffrey's case was compared not only to British Columbian students with disabilities, but to all students in the province.

In defining the service as general education, the SCC wrote "special education is not the service, it is the means by which those students get meaningful access to the general education services available to all of British Columbia's students" (*Moore v. British Columbia (Education)*, 2012, para. 28). The SCC explicitly states in this decision that when there is a question of whether a student with a disability has faced discrimination, their group for comparison of the standard of access and inclusion is not only other students with disabilities, but all other students in the jurisdiction. This was a precedent-setting decision that significantly impacted the legal expectations around educational services for students with disabilities. Prior to the *Moore* case, Shah (2010) noted a lack of clarity around "what constitutes discrimination in education on the basis of disability" (p. 11). The *Moore* case provided an illustrative example, and it came back into the spotlight recently as a key case referenced in the Ontario Human Rights Commission's (2022) report on their *Right to Read* inquiry into issues in Ontario schools related to human rights and reading disabilities.

Right to Read

The Ontario Human Rights Commission (2022) heard from students and parents during the *Right to Read* inquiry that students with reading disabilities, learning needs, and behavioural

needs are often streamed out of FI programs into English programs at the recommendation of teachers and school leaders. In some cases, families "were told that there would be no accommodations or support if the student enrolled or continued in French Immersion" (Ontario Human Rights Commission, 2022, p. 100). Leaving FI interrupted the students' social groups, routines, and learning, and "parents reported that this increased their children's school avoidance tendencies and mental health difficulties, and created a feeling of displacement" (Ontario Human Rights Commission, 2022, p. 101). Citing the decision in the 2019 case of *Kahn v. Upper Grand District School Board* (*Kahn*), the Ontario Human Rights Commission reported that based on the province's *Human Rights Code* "schools have a duty to accommodate to the point of undue hardship, regardless of whether students study in French or English" (p. 336).

Kahn v. Upper Grand District School Board

In the *Kahn* case, Grayson Kahn was suspended, expelled, and then placed in a new school after escalating violent incidents that injured staff and students. The expulsion was deemed discriminatory, as the student has autism and a learning disability which were a factor in his not having "meaningful access to…educational services" (*Kahn v. Upper Grand District School Board*, 2019, p. 81). The SCC's decision in *Moore* informed the determination around discrimination. The judge in *Kahn* ultimately ruled that because the student's parents rejected all of the accommodations proposed by the school board that would allow him to continue in the FI school without posing significant risk to others that the duty to accommodate had been satisfied to the point of undue hardship.

There are no clear universal best practices around student placement (Maich et al., 2018). That said, safety and the best interest of the student were at the core of the decisions in the *Moore*, *Kahn*, and *Eaton* cases. These considerations are common across many forms of policy

and legislation. For example, Alberta's *Education Act* (2012) prohibits anyone from acting "in a manner detrimental to the safe operations of a school" (s. 256d). The responsibility of school leaders to ensure a "safe learning environment" is echoed in both the *Education Act* (s. 197a.1) and the *LQS* (Alberta Education, 2023, p. 3). Additionally, an indicator of the first competency in the *LQS*: "acting consistently in the best interests of students" (Alberta Education, 2023, p. 3).

Many decisions around placement and support are out of the hands of school leaders because they take place at the district or provincial policy level (Young & Williams, in press). School leaders do, however, have opportunities to influence inclusive education practices and approaches within their schools (Harpell et al., 2010; Young & Williams, in press). The following section will describe the gaps between inclusion policy and practice in FI.

Gaps Between Inclusion Policy and Practice in French Immersion

Even with a variety of policies at multiple levels requiring inclusion, FI programs are often considered elitist "due to the exclusion of some learners from the program…despite research showing their performance to be on par with their peers" (Garrett & Mady, 2024, p. 67). Elitism and exclusion from FI has prevented students with special education needs, multilingual learners, and students from low-income families from having equitable access to the program and its benefits (Ontario Human Rights Commission, 2022; Wise, 2011). The following subsections address multilingual learners, special education, and colonialism in the literature on inclusive education in FI.

Multilingual Learners

The term *multilingual learner* is used "to refer to all students, Canadian-born and newcomers, who speak multiple languages" (Davis, 2023, p. 165). Across Canada "provincial policies create obstacles" (Arnott et al., 2019, p. 71) that prevent multilingual learners from

accessing FI programming. Mady (2013) recommends that implementing formal policies around inclusion of multilingual learners could provide school leaders with guidance, and overall lead to greater consistency in how such decisions are made. Other suggestions for addressing the issue of access include teacher education and professional development focused on including and supporting multilingual learners through plurilingual pedagogy (Mady, 2013).

FI programming was designed to create the opportunity for students whose first language was English to become bilingual by learning French (Garrett & Mady, 2024). From the outset, there was significant input from Anglophone families, and 60 years later policy documents and educator attitudes show a lingering bias that favours students whose first language is English and is exclusionary towards multilingual learners (Davis, 2023; Garrett & Mady, 2024; Mady, 2016). This is problematic, particularly as FI "programs are becoming increasingly culturally and linguistically diverse as a result of global migration to Canada" (Davis, 2023, p. 163).

This bias against multilingual learners can be seen in some of the most common wording used to describe FI programming in policy documents. For example, the term *French as a second language* (FSL) is commonly used to describe French education programming. FI is often said to fall under the broader category of FSL (Arnett & Mady, 2010; Arnott et al., 2019; Garrett & Mady, 2024). Davis (2023) points out that FSL is a problematic term and recommends more broadly applicable phrasing such as *multilingual learner*, which is being used here. As Davis notes, FSL is a commonly used program name that is often inaccurate given the diversity of students and families because it "presuppose[s] the number of languages students might speak" (p. 165). As suggested by the narrow and exclusionary naming convention of the programming, "policy for official-language bilingual education for multilingual learners is often overlooked at the provincial and territorial level in Canada" (Davis, 2023, p. 166).

Challenges and barriers to enhancing equity and inclusion in FI include a deficit lens being applied to multilingual learners as well as the dominance of the English language (Davis, 2024; Mady & Masson, 2018). The beliefs of principals and other educators can create significant barriers which ultimately lead to exclusion of many multilingual students from FI programs (Davis et al., 2019; Davis, 2023; Mady & Masson, 2018; Wise, 2011). Based on surveys and interviews with parents and educators in Saskatchewan, Davis et al. (2019) noted "vast discrepancies" (p. 58) in how policies are implemented around including multilingual learners in FI which amount to "tensions regarding the gatekeeping of French immersion" (p. 58). Davis et al. also suggested that the gatekeeping is likely underreported by principals as it is controversial. This controversy could be considered as an opportunity for school leaders to influence inclusion as "some educators refrained from discouraging families for fear of being reprimanded by school administrators" (p. 58).

Educator attitudes and the information they share with families have also provided evidence of bias against multilingual learners (Mady, 2016). Often principals' "decisions about gatekeeping in FI programs…were not based on policy or research but rather on personal experience and on myths pertaining to the ideal language learner" (Davis, 2023, p. 167). In a study of kindergarten FI teachers in an Alberta school division, "teachers revealed that a) French immersion is not for everyone, and b) may be disadvantageous to English language learners in particular" (Mady, 2016, p. 253). These teachers did not believe in inclusion for students whose first language was not English. This was indicated both in their questionnaire responses and in the parent information documents provided by the division. These beliefs were found to be based on "the importance of English on students' future endeavours" (Mady, 2016, p. 253). Based on this, Mady (2016) puts forth a recommendation that information needs to be shared with

administrators, teachers, and parents around multilingual language learning. Mady's analysis of both the informational documents and the teacher questionnaires presents a clear picture of exclusionary beliefs that have been formalized.

Mady and Masson (2018) present a critical discourse analysis of how principals in an Ontario school authority view and influence the inclusion of English language learners in FI programs. The study used a questionnaire, interviews with principals, and informational documents to collect information for the analysis. Few of the participating principals agreed with including English language learners in FI programs, and the majority abstained from responding to the question. Similarly, the Ontario Human Rights Commission (2022) reports hearing of many newcomer and multilingual students being excluded from the province's FI program because of the inaccurate "assumptions that students who struggle to read should not be learning English and French at the same time" (p. 236). Mady and Masson call on educators to confront the misconception that multilingualism requires a person to be equally fluent in all of their languages and to enact more meaningful inclusion in the FI program by moving towards multilingual approaches through professional learning and reflection.

Davis's (2023) critical synthesis of the literature on multilingual learners in FI recommends that further research is needed to explore two key areas: plurilingual pedagogy and the intersectionality of race, language, and migration in multilingual FI learners. In a more recent publication, Davis (2024) investigates educators' ideologies and perspectives regarding the inclusion and support of refugee-background students in FI programs through surveys and interviews of FI teachers, principals, and central office staff from eight school divisions across Saskatchewan, Manitoba, and Alberta. The results point to ideologies favouring English, deficit-based understandings of multilingual learners, and "tensions between inclusion and

support" (Davis, 2024, p. 96). Davis suggests additional resources for refugee-background students, professional learning for FI educators, and critical reflection on how their views and assumptions might contribute to exclusion.

Having worked as a teacher in FI for almost a decade in kindergarten through grade 5, I know that multilingual learners can succeed in the program. Research also indicates that multilingual learners can meet or exceed the academic achievement of their peers (Barrett DeWiele & Edgerton, 2024; Garrett & Mady, 2024). Multilingual learners may even be "more motivated to study FSL than their monolingual English-speaking Canadian-born peers" (Arnott et al., 2019, p. 71). I have also witnessed that there is not a universally held belief in the philosophy of inclusion among FI educators, as is also demonstrated in the literature (Davis, 2023; Garrett & Mady, 2024; Mady, 2016; Wise, 2011). It is of critical importance that we examine our beliefs as educators because unchecked they can steal opportunities from students (Davis, 2023; Garrett & Mady, 2024; Mady, 2016; Wise, 2011).

Many multilingual people experience "linguistic insecurity" (Byrd Clark & Roy, 2022, p. 253) due to the privileging of certain accents and varieties of French. This also has its roots in the hierarchical and purist thinking of European nation-building (Heller & McElhinny, 2017). Plurilingual pedagogy has been recommended by many FI researchers to work against these harms by creating learning spaces that are more affirming of student identities (Arnott et al., 2019; Davis, 2023; Mady, 2013; Troyan et al., 2021). Troyan et al. (2021) give an example of promising research in plurilingual pedagogy. Their ethnographic study centred around a teacher in FI using translanguaging "as a key pedagogical tool in a culturally sustaining immersion classroom" (Troyan et al., 2021, p. 569). Translanguaging is "the deployment of a speaker's full linguistic repertoire without regard for watchful adherence to the socially and politically defined

boundaries of named (and usually national and state) languages" (Otheguy et al., 2013, p. 283). Troyan et al. (2021) ultimately found that this approach "enabled his African American and other minoritized students to agentively take up the roles of genre analysts, language users, and bilingual community members" (p. 584). Translanguaging offers an approach to multilingual education that prioritizes "an inclusive classroom community" (Troyan et al., 2021, p. 567) and seems to be a promising pedagogical option to consider.

The pervasive myth that learning multiple languages is somehow damaging dates back at least as far as the 1840s (Heller & McElhinny, 2017). This is because "the construction of the nation-state led to institutionalized condemnation and punishment for bilingualism" (Heller & McElhinny, 2017, p. 105). Doctors, psychologists, and educators in France and other European nations spread the idea that "the use of nonstate languages in the home…lead to confusion, mental and emotional instability, and cognitive development delays in children" (Heller & McElhinny, 2017, p. 105). These claims are based in hierarchical understandings of nations and "what is now a long tradition of purism" (Heller & McElhinny, 2017, p. 106). Exclusion of students from FI is just one of the many ways that this misinformation has been harmful to multilingual learners, students with special education needs, and countless others.

Special Education

Special education is "a network of policies and procedures to support learners with identified special needs" (Cobb, 2015, p. 171). Cobb (2015) adds that "while the special education principle of equity purports that every learner has a right to equal educational opportunities, the principle of social justice seeks to provide a more inclusive learning environment" (Cobb, 2015, p. 171). Considering social justice and inclusion is particularly relevant when examining FI programs because they often have little or no special education

supports (Cobb, 2015). This has contributed to extremely high "attrition rates…especially high among children and adolescents with learning disabilities" (Cobb, 2015, p. 171). Student attrition rates in FI are particularly high in the elementary grades (Bourgoin, 2014). Cobb suggests that funding limitations and "the widely held misconception that bilingualism will cause confusion and delay in children's language development and academic achievement" (p. 173) both contribute to the shortage of special education supports in FI.

There is enormous potential for students, with and without special education needs, to benefit from inclusive education as they "may gain increased confidence and other affective benefits associated with feeling included" (Mady & Muhling, 2017, p. 20). A review by Mady and Muhling (2017) of 15 years worth of Canadian literature on supports for students with special education needs in FI indicated "that in-class peer support, peer tutoring, the use of technology, and instructional choices such as the use of feedback and vocabulary instruction" (p. 20) can be highly effective supports for many students.

While the research has indeed been limited, the available research clearly points out widespread elitist beliefs that FI programs are not suitable for students with special education needs (Arnett & Mady, 2010; Kunnas, 2023; Wise, 2011). Mady's (2013) survey of Canadian FI teachers reveals that many have great difficulty accessing and applying research to support inclusion of students with special education needs in FI. Some have argued that the FI research itself has contributed to the spread of inaccurate and limiting beliefs (Cobb, 2015; Mady & Arnett, 2009). There has been a significant emphasis on reasons that students face challenges in FI and whether this means that they should be excluded: "this near-exclusive focus on students and their (lack of) potential has limited research, practical, and political understandings of inclusion within the context of FI" (Mady & Arnett, 2009, p. 37).

The preoccupation with what students are unable to do has been referred to as the *deficit model* (Arnett & Mady, 2010). It is pervasive, not only in FI but also in special education contexts more broadly, and it leads to elitism by constructing "at least a conceptual hierarchy of students" (Arnett & Mady, 2010, p. 24). Based on their literature review, Arnett and Mady (2010) advocated for improved teacher education to better meet the learning needs of students in FI. They argue that "the burden of change lies with those in power" (Arnett & Mady, 2010, p. 28), and because teacher education programs hold considerable power in education, these programs should be dismantling the oppressive and exclusionary structures affecting students with special education needs.

A lack of special education support in FI is an ongoing issue that has been largely ignored by governments and school jurisdictions (Cobb, 2015). It has also been all but ignored in the research literature: Cobb (2015) only happened upon this topic by coincidence as part of another study. However, students and families affected by this reality, are unable to ignore it (Cobb, 2015). Students can face compounding challenges as a result, such as disruptions to learning and negative impacts on mental health (Cobb, 2015; Ontario Human Rights Commission, 2022).

Mady and Arnett (2009) present a document analysis of a mother's journals about her child's difficulties with academics and getting a diagnosis in an FI program. They conclude that perceptions of elitism in FI as well as a lack of research about how to support students in FI make it inaccessible to many. The authors point out that "because the mother herself was an experienced second language teacher and teacher educator when this unfolded, it underscored how even intimate knowledge of "the system" was not enough to satisfactorily navigate the experience" (Mady & Arnett, 2009, p. 38). Even a student whose parent had experience with language education and teacher education had deep struggles to get what they needed in the FI

program. This highlights how “the processes and policies shaping the identification/diagnosis of learning disabilities contradict the ideals of the inclusion movement” (Mady & Arnett, 2009, p. 37).

The coincidental nature of so much of the research exploring inclusion in FI points to a need for further research that focuses specifically on the inclusion of students with special educational needs in FI. Efforts to make FI more inclusive for students with special education needs have been increasing in recent decades (Mady & Muhling, 2017). However, there is still a noted sparsity of research on this topic, and concerns around elitism and inaccessibility of FI remain (Davis, 2023; Kunnas, 2023). This is neatly summarized by Garrett and Mady (2024): “additional research is needed to enhance knowledge as to the most effective supports to be used in the context of exceptionalities in the FI setting” (p. 77).

Educational leadership programs at Canadian universities do not require coursework in special education (Lunde, 2020). While special education electives and professional development opportunities are available, there is no guarantee that school leaders have formal training that equips them for this aspect of their role (Lunde, 2020). This means school leaders must take the initiative to do their own professional learning about special education in order to fulfill their professional duty to supporting inclusive education. Pursuing professional learning opportunities related to inclusive education would also be a way for school leaders to signal to their teachers that they value inclusive education, thereby promoting inclusion as part of school culture (Lunde, 2020). It would also be an asset to school leaders when faced with challenging student placement decisions.

Offering professional development that would support teachers in providing “appropriate identification, assessment, and interventions for all learners” (Garrett & Mady, 2024, p. 76) has

the potential to enhance inclusion in FI. Garrett and Mady (2024) point out that supporting "inclusion, retention, and success of students with learning difficulties in FI represents a return to the origins of the program that was meant to be open to all learners" (p. 76). They note that while there has been progress, a recurring theme in the research literature is that there is a "need for major innovations" (Garrett & Mady, 2024, p. 76) for FI to be in alignment with inclusion policies.

Professional learning communities (PLCs) may have potential to facilitate such innovation. Raymond et al. (2024) detail the work of a PLC at a FI school in Manitoba to design and implement an intervention program to support students learning to read. Information was collected through student assessment data and semi-structured interviews with the principal, psychologist, teachers, and speech language pathologist who were part of the PLC. The PLC was described as "a process of individual and collective learning to enhance their understanding of the role of phonological awareness in reading development" (Raymond et al., 2024, p. 17). The PLC members' learning transformed teaching, assessment, and collaboration practices throughout the school. The paper by Raymond et al. offers a potentially useful model that could be tried by other schools' FI programs. It worked towards a shared vision of supporting students in developing their phonological awareness skills to help them in learning to read, which intentionally addresses a common reason why students leave FI programming (Raymond et al., 2024). The following subsection moves into another facet of FI which also needs to be further researched and addressed: colonialism.

Colonialism

As Mignolo (2018) points out, human beings "are all today in the colonial matrix of power" (p. 108). Mignolo defines *decoloniality* as "the exercise of power within the colonial

matrix to undermine the mechanism that keeps it in place requiring obeisance" (p. 114). In terms of the research literature on FI, this decolonial exercise has been largely ignored (Kunnas, 2023). For a program that is "essentially colonial" (Kunnas, 2023, p. 48) and so steeped in colonial influences and power structures, there is a sparsity of literature available on the program's relationship to colonialism and Eurocentrism.

Kunnas (2023) describes FI as having a "Eurocentric focus and colonial lens" (p. 46). Kunnas also highlights a significant gap in research: "understanding and reconciling the past and present colonial violence associated with French is a necessity within French programming across the country, one that has not been adequately addressed" (p. 48). There is a need for significant further research to examine FI's connections to colonialism and the complexities of decolonizing FI. In one of the few papers related to this topic, Côté (2021) highlights the importance of non-Indigenous FI teachers learning from Indigenous people and engaging in experiential learning as they seek "to include Indigenous perspectives in their practice" (p. 15). Côté's work was based around interviews with non-Indigenous FI teachers in British Columbia.

As a settler FI educator in the Métis Homeland, I recognize that I have worked in a deeply complex sociolinguistic context. Although "French was…the first European language spoken in Alberta" (Government of Alberta, 2024, para. 1), Indigenous languages were spoken here first. It is important to acknowledge that "the Canadian educational system, via English and French, has played a major role in Indigenous linguicide" (Kunnas, 2023, p. 48). It is also true that the Métis Nation includes many families with deep and ongoing ties to the French language. French is one of the four languages traditionally spoken by Métis, and "multilingualism has long been an important attribute of Métis identity" (Rupertsland Institute, 2022, p. 4). It holds such a place of significance within the history of Métis ethnogenesis that when defining *Métis*,

Rupertsland Institute (2022) begins by stating that "this term has origins in the French language" (p. xi). To this day, some "Métis families…call their language 'French-Cree'" (Rupertsland Institute, 2022, p. 5) when referring to their Indigenous language, Michif.

Métis leaders such as Louis Riel fought for French language rights to be protected in the Métis Homeland (Ens, 1994). Rupertsland Institute (2022) describes knowledge of French as a tool for decoloniality: "Riel and many other Métis people…were equipped with languages they used to challenge and interact with the Dominion of Canada's authorities and colonial leaders" (p. 7). As a program that teaches both French and English, FI has an opportunity to empower Métis students and others with languages to engage in decolonial projects.

Making French Immersion More Inclusive

This final section of the literature review will outline the potential approaches for bridging the gaps between inclusion policy and practice in FI. Some approaches have been briefly mentioned in connection with the literature on multilingual learners, special education, and colonialism in the previous section, and those will be discussed further in the following subsections. The strategies that have been identified in the examined literature are research-informed FI educators, leaders, and decision makers; addressing the FI teacher shortage; more diverse and inclusive learning and teaching resources in French; using plurilingual pedagogy; and the potential of the professional learning community approach.

Addressing the FI Teacher Shortage

The ongoing shortage of teachers in FI programs across Canada is impacting both quality and viability of FI programs (Barrett DeWiele & Edgerton, 2024; Bournot-Trites, 2008; Ryan & Sinay, 2020; Veilleux & Bournot-Trites, 2005). While there is growing demand for FI, divisions struggling with teacher retention in FI programs have considered cancelling them altogether

(Ryan & Sinay, 2020). Ryan and Sinay (2020) point this out among other "mixed messages surrounding the significance of official bilingualism in Canada and the actual reality of it within Canadian society" (p. 326). Ensuring access to quality education in both official languages through FI programs requires retention of qualified FI teachers. Barrett DeWiele and Edgerton (2024) conclude that "the paradox of publicly funded FI in Canada is that as long as the demand for it outstrips supply, its benefits will be unequally distributed" (p. 124). Moreover, high teacher turnover worsens inequities, and disproportionately affects certain communities, such as those with lower income (Podolsky et al., 2019; Ryan & Sinay, 2020).

Migration to Canada is bringing increasingly diverse teacher candidates to FI programs, and considering how to support these teachers presents another opportunity to enact the philosophy of inclusion in FI (Jacquet, 2024; Prophète, 2022). Despite their ability to speak French, Francophone teachers who immigrate to Canada often face significant challenges, including alienation and discrimination, when seeking employment as FI teachers (Prophète, 2022). Dismantling the barriers faced by these professionals could help make staffing more inclusive and representative, while also addressing the significant teacher shortages occurring in FI programs across Canada. For example, collaboration and mentorship from experienced teachers can have a positive impact on the experiences of Francophone teachers from abroad as they navigate the transition into teaching in Canadian contexts such as FI (Jacquet, 2024).

Increasing FI Research

There is widespread agreement among researchers across Canada that there is very little available research regarding FI (Ewart, 2009; Lapkin et al., 2009; Ryan & Sinay, 2020; Veilleux & Bournot-Trites, 2005). Lapkin et al. (2009) point out that "while the official discourse promotes bilingualism in Canada, the study of French in schools is often paradoxically

marginalized" (p. 8). More specifically, there is a need to deepen the pool of research into supporting students with special education needs (Cobb, 2015; Garrett & Mady, 2024) and multilingual learners (Davis, 2023; Davis et al., 2019). For example, more research is needed to explore the enactment of plurilingual pedagogy in FI (Davis, 2023).

There is also a need to broaden the horizons of inclusion research in FI to make the research itself more inclusive and account for intersectionality. Davis et al. (2019) point out a lack of literature regarding inclusion of First Nations, Inuit, and Métis students in FI. Kunnas (2023) calls on researchers to approach the critical study of inclusion in FI through a decolonial lens and address "questions of race, gender, sexuality, social class, and more. It is past time to diversify and decolonize immersion education" (p. 62). Davis (2023) echoes this call for more intersectional research, particularly with respect to the intersectionality of race, language, and migration in the experiences of multilingual learners. Hakeem (2024) notes an absence of research on sexual and gender diversity in research around K-12 French education. A more inclusive and decolonial body of literature around inclusion in FI would be an important step in moving towards a more inclusive future for FI policy, programming, and teacher education (Arnett & Mady, 2010; Kunnas, 2023).

More Research-Informed FI Educators, Leaders, and Decision-Makers

It is similarly important that there are more research-informed FI educators, leaders, and decision makers with sufficient awareness of the available research on inclusive practices and policies. Otherwise, educators and leaders may act as gatekeepers due to their misconceptions (Arnett & Mady, 2017; Bourgoin, 2014; Davis, 2023; Davis, 2024; Mady & Masson, 2018; Wise, 2011). Conversely, informed school leaders may be able to encourage inclusion by educators who might otherwise exclude students such as multilingual learners (Davis et al., 2019). Since

special education courses are electives in Canadian educational leadership programs, school leaders would need to take individual initiative to pursue learning opportunities in this area to fulfill their professional duty to supporting inclusive education (Lunde, 2020).

Many researchers point to a need to enhance teacher education and professional development around inclusion in FI to align with research (Arnett & Mady, 2010; Arnett & Mady, 2017; Davis, 2024; Garrett & Mady, 2024; Mady, 2013). Specifically, Garrett and Mady (2024) call for professional development that would support educators in providing "appropriate identification, assessment, and interventions for all learners" (p. 76) in order to make FI more inclusive. Professional learning should also incorporate and encourage critical reflection by educators on how their views and assumptions might contribute to exclusion in FI (Davis, 2023; Davis, 2024; Garrett & Mady, 2024; Mady, 2016; Wise, 2011). Additionally, it is important for educators to learn from Indigenous people when it comes to Indigenous perspectives (Côté, 2021).

Formal policies around inclusion of groups experiencing exclusion, such as multilingual learners, could provide school leaders with further guidance towards making research-based decisions regarding student placement in FI (Mady, 2013). In moving towards more inclusive FI programming, it would also be beneficial for educators, leaders, and parents to be informed about multilingual language learning (Mady, 2016).

More Diverse and Inclusive Learning and Teaching Resources in French

There is a need for more diverse and inclusive learning and teaching resources in French to make FI programming more inclusive. Educators and school leaders could support this by examining and intentionally working against the tendency toward using texts by white European authors in FI (Kunnas, 2023). There are additional costs associated with procuring and

developing the necessary learning and teaching resources to support FI programming (Barrett DeWiele & Edgerton, 2024). While this is a barrier, it can also be seen as a reminder to be intentional about what is purchased and developed to ensure that any funding is used in ways that contribute to inclusive FI programming.

The funding factor also contributes to the shortage of special education support in FI (Cobb, 2015). FI programs also tend to have few resources for supporting multilingual and refugee-background students (Davis, 2024). Even with limited funding, FI educators can use intentional feedback, explicit teaching of vocabulary, peer support networks, and peer tutoring in their efforts to set up more inclusive and supportive learning environments (Mady & Muhling, 2017). Technology can also be leveraged as a tool for scaffolding and differentiating for students in FI (Pellerin, 2013; Mady & Muhling, 2017).

Using Plurilingual Pedagogy

Another potential way to make FI more inclusive is through plurilingual pedagogy (Arnott et al., 2019; Davis, 2023; Heller & McElhinny, 2017; Mady, 2013; Mady & Masson, 2018; Troyan et al., 2021). Plurilingualism is "a capacity and practice of using/be familiar with more than one language and culture in a variety of contexts, but without the emphasis on native-like proficiency in each language" (Masson et al., 2022, p. 3508). Canadian schools tend to teach and use languages separately from one another, even in bilingual education contexts such as FI (Masson et al., 2022). Masson et al. (2022) suggest that FI educators listen to multilingual immigrant parents who could teach them a great deal about plurilingual pedagogy. A plurilingual pedagogy approach seems to align with what is being called for by some Métis parents and educators as well: "making space in the classroom for languages traditionally spoken

by Métis creates pathways enabling students to learn more about themselves and their culture and…express their being" (Rupertsland Institute, 2022, p. 14).

Shifting FI educators' practice towards plurilingual pedagogy will require professional development opportunities (Mady, 2013). These professional learning opportunities should also challenge longstanding misconceptions around multilingualism being somehow damaging or confusing, because these notions are rooted in problematic purism and hierarchies constructed during European nation-building in the 1800s (Cobb, 2015; Heller & McElhinny, 2017; Mady & Masson, 2018). Such ideas make bilingual learners question their legitimacy and their identities (Roy, 2010). They have also contributed to the exclusion of multilingual learners (Davis, 2023; Davis et al., 2019) and learners with special education needs (Cobb, 2015) from FI programs .

Plurilingual pedagogical practices such as translanguaging have the potential to enhance inclusion by creating more affirming FI programming for students with special education needs and multilingual students (Arnott et al., 2019; Davis, 2023; Heller & McElhinny, 2017; Troyan et al., 2021). In other words, plurilingual pedagogy could enhance inclusion in FI programs as part of the "*least restrictive environment*" (Cobb, 2015, p. 171) to support student success. Prasad (2016) shares examples of multilingual texts created by students as a way to holistically celebrate the multiple languages they use in their lives. By using multiple languages and looking for comparisons and connections between languages, students were able to show their pride in their various linguistic competencies instead of feeling pressure to have the same level of fluency in all of their languages (Prasad, 2016). On a hopeful note, "educators are starting to acknowledge and value the linguistic and cultural diversity of students to support students" (Garrett & Mady, 2024, p. 74) through plurilingual pedagogical practices.

Using a Professional Learning Community Approach

Raymond et al.'s (2024) recent study at a FI school in Manitoba shows that using a professional learning community (PLC) approach, FI educators, leaders, and support staff can work together to enhance inclusion in their programs. The PLC was able to transform teaching, assessment, and collaborative practices within the school (Raymond et al., 2024). PLCs could potentially serve as spaces to implement many of the approaches to enhancing inclusion in FI mentioned here. They could provide spaces for sharing and enacting research-informed inclusive practices in FI, collaboratively seeking out or developing more diverse and inclusive learning and teaching resources in French, and enacting plurilingual pedagogy.

Findings and Conclusions

The literature on inclusion in FI programs in Canada from the last 20 years shows these programs to be elitist and exclusionary towards students with special education needs, multilingual learners, and students from low-income families (Barrett DeWiele & Edgerton, 2020; Cobb, 2015; Davis, 2023; Kunnas, 2023; Wise, 2011). This exclusion is often due to incorrect assumptions on the part of educators and school leaders which are not based on research about learning multiple languages (Davis, 2023; Davis, 2024; Garrett & Mady, 2024; Mady, 2016; Wise, 2011). Rather, ideas such as multiple languages leading to confusion can be traced back to misinformation that was popularized during 19th century European nation-building (Heller & McElhinny, 2017). Research and shifts in practice are needed to move Canadian FI programs towards "inclusion of all learners of French with varying linguistic and cultural competencies in schools and workplaces so they can contribute to Canadian political, societal, and social spheres" (Roy, 2010, p. 541).

Implications for Field of Study

Further research is needed around ways to support students with special education needs (Cobb, 2015; Garrett & Mady, 2024) and multilingual learners (Davis, 2023; Davis et al., 2019) in FI. The enactment of plurilingual pedagogy in FI seems to be a promising avenue to explore (Davis, 2023). Research is also needed into inclusion of First Nations, Inuit, and Métis students in FI (Davis et al., 2019) and bringing a decolonial lens to FI programs (Kunnas, 2023). FI researchers studying inclusion have also noted the need to examine factors such as race (Davis, 2023; Kunnas, 2023), sexual and gender diversity (Hakeem, 2024; Kunnas, 2023), social class (Kunnas, 2023), and intersectionality (Davis, 2023; Kunnas, 2023).

Implications for Practice

The available research points to a few ways in which FI programming may be made more inclusive. Avenues for doing so include having more research-informed FI educators, leaders, and decision makers (Arnett & Mady, 2017; Bourgoin, 2014; Davis, 2023; Davis, 2024; Mady & Masson, 2018; Wise, 2011); addressing the FI teacher shortage (Podolsky et al., 2019; Ryan & Sinay, 2020); having more diverse and inclusive learning and teaching resources in French (Cobb, 2015; Davis, 2024; Kunnas, 2023; Mady & Muhling, 2017; Pellerin, 2013); and using plurilingual pedagogy (Arnott et al., 2019; Davis, 2023; Heller & McElhinny, 2017; Mady, 2013; Mady & Masson, 2018; Troyan et al., 2021). Those looking to make Canada's FI programs more inclusive could work in professional learning communities (Raymond et al., 2024) to share and enact research-informed inclusive practices in FI, collaboratively seek or develop more diverse and inclusive learning and teaching resources in French, and enact plurilingual pedagogy.

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