A Critical Commentary

Revisiting the Olson-Burns Debate on Student Access to Early French Immersion Programs in Canada

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Early French Immersion (EFI) programs were introduced in Canada in 1965 for students from Anglophone families where neither one of their parents spoke or understood much French. Unlike other bilingual programs, the immersion approach introduces French for the instruction of academic subjects and promotes the use of French as the language medium for classroom interactions. The EFI option is usually offered from the onset of elementary school, in Kindergarten or Grade One, and provides equal instruction time in English and French after primarily exposing students to the target language of instruction. Middle French Immersion (MFI) and Late French Immersion (LFI) are geared for older children who did not begin EFI programs, and respectively begin in Middle School (Grades 4 or 5) and at the Intermediate Level (Grades 7 and 8). By the 1980s, optional French immersion programs were available across Canada to families wishing to provide their children access to bilingual instruction passing through English first and French as the second official language.

While French immersion education was gaining considerable popularity in the early 1980s, Olson and Burns (1983) sparked a national debate by bringing up the issue of social class bias in EFI school choice. The two university professors, who were affiliated with the Department of Sociology of Education at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education in Toronto, conducted a study revealing that EFI families in an Ontarian community had higher gross incomes and educational levels than reported in the general local population. According to Olson and Burns, their survey and interview evidence showed that EFI programs were not equally accessible to all students and thereby, called into question the validity of an overwhelmingly positive body of EFI evaluation studies (for a critical review, see Heller, 1990).

The Debate

The social class bias theory advanced by Olson and Burns was heavily criticized by various stakeholders across the country. For instance, the Canadian Parents for French (CPF) (1982) association promptly responded that access to EFI programs was open to all Canadian students regardless of their class origins. In the same vein, Guttman (1983) argued that the optional orientation of the program meant that it could attract motivated and committed parents but did not discriminate along class lines.

The methodological validity of Olson and Burns’ research conclusions were also called into question. Hart and Lapkin (1998) argued that while children from higher SES backgrounds were overrepresented in EFI programs, that there was also a significant level of class and ethnicultural diversity among older student populations in Middle French Immersion (MFI) and Late French Immersion (LFI) programs. Similarly, the research conducted by Dagenais and Jaquet (2000) in the late 1990s showed that immigrant parents from various class backgrounds were choosing EFI in Vancouver.
As Lamarre (1997) has pointed out, the study conducted by Olson and Burns reflects the reality of a specific community and subsequently, cannot be generalized. The results of her comparative study in two French immersion settings (Montreal and Vancouver) in the early 1990s suggest that class difference in the EFI selection process tend to be more prevalent in communities where there is little contact between members of the two official language groups, and where the program has a strong optional orientation. In Montreal, where the EFI program was very popular, an equal proportion of parents from middle and working-class backgrounds were using the program. Many of these families were linguistically mixed --- meaning that they included a predominantly English-speaking parent and a Francophone parent. In Vancouver, where EFI programs were less prevalent, parents tended to come from Anglophone middle and upper classes.

A Case Study on Early French Immersion School Choice

I had the opportunity to explore how class dynamics inform how and why parents choose EFI programs for their children in the context of my doctoral fieldwork (2001-2004). I conducted my study in an English Catholic High School in Ottawa, the National Capital of Canada, which distinguishes itself as a bilingual and multicultural city (see Makropoulos, 2007) I studied the Grade 11 student cohort (between 16 and 18 years of age) since they were old enough to provide detailed information about their French immersion histories and unlike more advanced peers, had begun the four-year secondary program implemented in 1999. The results of my survey of 145 Grade 11 students (87% response rate) highlighted the following enrolment trends:

- 52% of respondents claimed to have studied in French immersion programs at some point over the course of their primary and/or high school studies;
- This student population consisted of: (1) 4% from MFI programs; (2) 45% from LFI programs and; (3) 51% from EFI programs;
- Students from the EFI cohort predominantly came from White Catholic families that included at least one Canadian-born parent. Almost half of the EFI students came from families which included a French-speaking parent who was eligible to minority French instruction as outlined by Section 23 of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms. A little over half of students came from Anglophone or immigrant families that did not include a Francophone parent.

As a result of the ethical guideline regulations set forth by the local school board, I was unable to survey the social class backgrounds of the Grade 11 student population. Nevertheless, I gathered information on the employment and educational profiles of the student parents via semi-directed interviews with a sample of 23 Grade 11 students who had taken French immersion, with a little over half (12) from EFI cohorts. Like Lammare’s EFI student clientele in Montreal, I found that Ottawa students who had begun EFI programs came from a wide range of class backgrounds. My interview data also revealed that class dynamics informed why parents saw EFI as a suitable educational choice on the one hand, and how they approached the EFI selection process on the other.

Students from middle-class families said that their parents viewed EFI as an advantageous long-term choice since the program seemed to meet their linguistic and marital interests. The question of economic advantages regularly surfaced in the interviews conducted with students from Anglophone families and to a lesser extent, the need to learn French for communication purposes. Students with a Francophone parent were, however, more worried about non-material factors such as gaining access to an
inclusive school or securing long-term educational success. In professional middle-class families, fathers were almost as involved as mothers in the EFI decision-making process.

Students from working-class families suggested that their parents approached the EFI choice from a short-term perspective for reasons having to do with necessity and convenience. To a certain extent, mothers played a more active role in school-choice than fathers. While the question of jobs often came up in Anglophone families, they saw French as a necessity to find work rather than an advantage for mobility purposes. Many previously lived in close proximity with Francophone people. The view that an EFI placement made sense for non-material reasons was prominent in the discourses of students from linguistically-mixed families. Common concerns expressed by this group had to do with issues such as school proximity, perceived difficulty of French schools, and the view that English is a more valuable language than French.

**Strategic Planning: What Three Decades of Research Evidence Suggest**

In spite of some controversy surrounding the extent to which social class bias affects student access to EFI program in different parts of Canada, and how class influences how and why families approach the EFI selection process, three decades of research evidence unmistakably show that social class is intimately bound to who begins EFI programs and for what purposes. In many ways, this literature however raises more questions than answers regarding how we should envisage EFI strategic planning. I have identified the following three priority areas which deserve further consideration:

*The Need to Build a Cross-Comparative Body of Research*

We need to build a cross-comparative body of research in order to address the class connection to EFI access in different parts of Canada, particularly in rural and remote areas. We also know very little about ways that class interacts with other variables (such as race, immigration, language background, gender, etc) in the context of EFI selection processes. Moreover, few studies have compared the social class origins of EFI students with student populations in Extended and Core programs or French language schools.

*The Need to Examine Student Access to EFI Programs from a Longitudinal Perspective*

There exists a need to examine student access to EFI programs from a longitudinal perspective in both quantitative and qualitative terms. It would be useful to document the class realities of students who begin EFI programs as they navigate through the educational system and into economic markets. In addition, we would benefit from studies looking at language practices and social realities of students in their adult lives and in their roles as parents of school-age children.

*The Need for Increase Coordination in the Promotion of Bilingualism*

We could greatly benefit from increased coordination between various stakeholders in the promotion of official bilingualism in the Canadian context. Continual dialogue between federal and provincial/territorial governments, policy-makers, researchers, teachers, lobby groups, parents, and students could help promote a ground-up approach to language policy-making while ensuring that research continues to inform
strategic planning in the areas of bilingual education and the promotion of linguistic duality.

As a final note, I want to commend Olson and Burns for drawing our attention to the question of universal access to EFI programs. In light of the March 2008 announcement of the Minister of Education of New Brunswick to eliminate EFI programs in the province (see Dicks, 2008), it nevertheless appears evident that we must remain vigilant in our continued efforts to ensure equal educational opportunities in Canada.
References


* The views expressed in this document are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of Canadian Heritage.