

The Power of Persuasion: Parents, Political Decision- Making, and the Future of French Immersion

Lessons from New Brunswick

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Goals of this Presentation

- To describe the influences leading to the revision of FSL educational policy in New Brunswick from July 2007 to Aug 2008 (see timeline)
- To demonstrate that it was largely parents and their political influence that determined the final decision not academics or researchers or other experts.



The Players

The Minister of Education
The FSL Report
Commissioners
The Business Community
The Media
The Teachers' Union
The Universities
Second Language
Associations
The Parents

“Our understanding of language policy decisions must take into account the role of key individuals and interest groups.”

(Davies, 2009,p.46)

The Existing Policy (Before Revision)

- Policy 309: Established 1994, revised 2001; part of the NB Education Act
 - Core French – available to all students Gr. 1-12.
 - French Immersion – available entry at Gr. 1 or Gr. 6 FI where class size is comparable to English
 - Enrolment
 - 100% enrolled in FSL at grade 1 (33% in EFI)
 - 17% in LFI at Gr.6
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The Impetus for Change

- New Brunswick Minister of Education releases Terms of Reference for a review of French programming in New Brunswick (July 3, 2007)
- Key elements of the terms of reference:
 1. Streaming
 2. Limited school time
 3. Lack of FI grads in bilingual jobs
 4. Need for solid foundation in L1
 5. Difficult adjustment from Eng. K to Gr.1 FI



Original Decision: Changes to FSL Program Policy 309

- Recommended by the FSL Commissioners Feb 27, 2008
 1. No formal French instruction from Gr.1 to Gr.3 (EFI and Core French eliminated)
 2. Intensive French (1 semester) at Gr.5
 3. Late French Immersion Gr. 6 entry
- Sanctioned by the Minister 2 weeks later on March 14, 2008



Competing Groups: A Professional or Political Agenda?

There is always a tension between the political and the professional views of language in education decisions. (van Els, 2005)

“There’s a lot of folks who get a lot of research grants to study Early Immersion who for understandable reasons want there to be Early immersion. ”

- Kelly Lamrock,
Minister of Education, NB

"If you can't trust the research by the leading second language institute which is based at UNB here in New Brunswick ... then what can you trust from a commission that seems to me to be driven by a political agenda?"

- Walter Lee, President
CPF, NB

The FSL (Croll-Lee) Report – Academic Criticism

- Mathematics and Statistics Department (UNB):
 - “the data analysis in the Commission’s report is incorrect”
 - “we fail to see how the far-reaching recommendations of the report follow from the analyses”
 - Hamilton & Litvak (2008):
 - “it is a deeply flawed document which fails to provide valid evidence in support of the sweeping policy changes”
 - “errors in both analysis and interpretation”
 - Second Language Research Institute, UNB (Dicks & Kristmanson):
 - “We feel that the report submitted by the FSL commissioners is seriously flawed. We have serious concerns about the statistics related to drop out rates and are appalled at the one-sided reporting of qualitative data that focuses nearly exclusively on negative comments regarding Early French Immersion (EFI) .”
 - “(This report) deviates seriously from the standards of sound research practice”
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A French Agenda?

Dr. Jim Croll (the FSL Report co-author):

“It's unfortunate that those with a vested interest in French would attempt to discredit and manipulate accurate, vetted information.”

Conflicting Academic Agenda: Universality/Equality

- International Standardized Assessment (PISA)
“When children with lower ability or children from lower socioeconomic groups are concentrated in particular schools or classes, they tend to have much lower performance than when they are in mixed ability classes” (Willms, 2008, p.3).

Class composition (aka segregation)

“... the (EFI – English) divide is comparable to or larger than the divide between non-hispanic whites and African-Americans in the US.” (Willms, 2008, p.2)

A Cooperative Group at Work: The Parental Agenda

Citizens for Educational Choice

- Extremely well-organized
- Extremely well-informed group on SL
- Letters to the editor
- Face-to-face meetings (Minister, MLAs, Ombudsman)
- Internet Blogs, Facebook, YouTube, Live Media Events

[CBC Parent Story](#)

A Conflict Group at Work: Parents and the Legal Agenda

- Parents take Minister to court on two counts:
 1. Charter challenge: language rights
 2. Common law challenge: procedural fairness – aka due process



Charter Challenge

Court of Queen's Bench of New Brunswick

- The applicants say that the Minister's decision infringed their rights under the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, sections 16 (Official Languages), 16.1 (English and French Linguistic Communities in New Brunswick) and 23 (Minority Language Educational Rights).

- The Supreme Court of Canada has made clear regarding section 23(2) of the Charter that: "... it would be contrary to the purpose of the provision to equate immersion with minority language education."

- Thus in my opinion Early French Immersion for anglophones in New Brunswick, the linguistic majority in this province, is not protected by the Charter provision for Minority Language Educational Rights

Justice H.H. MacLellan

Common Law Challenge – Procedural Fairness

- The courts in many decisions have emphasized the importance of fairness by public decision makers.

Justice McLellan:

“.... In my opinion the disputed decision of the Minister in March 2008 was made in contravention of his own representation in July 2007 that the decision-making procedure would have time to ‘allow for a full debate’”

...

“Thus the decision of the Minister was unfair and unreasonable. The application for judicial review is allowed. The Minister’s decision to phase-out Early French Immersion is removed into the Court and quashed.”

The Legal and Political Aftermath

- Large scale inclusive consultation by the Minister with all stakeholders
- Small scale consultation with small group of parents, researchers, school administrators
- Considerable negotiation regarding entry point, alternative models
- A compromise resulting mainly from parental persuasion and political involvement and the legal challenge with limited professional advice



Revised Decision – Current Policy

Original Decision

1. Intensive French (1 semester) at Gr.5
2. Late French Immersion Gr. 6 entry
3. No formal French instruction from Gr.1 to Gr.3

Revised Decision

1. Intensive French (1 semester) at Gr.5 + Pre-intensive - Gr.4 .
2. Late French Immersion - Gr. 6 entry
3. No formal French instruction from Gr.1 to Gr.2

Gr.3 French Immersion entry



A Political Compromise

- Why grade 3? To address the concerns (whether justifiable or not) of those who wanted
 - a “good grounding” in English
 - streaming issues resolved (in grades K,1,2)
 - an early start to FI
 - “universal FSL” via Intensive French
 - A compromise resulting from political and legal challenges by parents
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The Role of Research?

- Decision not based on research about L1 or L2 literacy development or at-risk students ability to function in FI
 - Not based on research and understanding of delayed immersion, its cognitive demands and potential for streaming
 - Not based on evidence of success of Intensive French over the longer term
 - A gamble with an untested model
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Conclusion

- Parents saved the earlier entry FI program in NB - not SL experts or researchers despite our best efforts.
 - Role of the academic/researcher is limited:
 - highly political context
 - perceptions of bias
 - complexity of SL educational issues (e.g., early vs late)
 - lack of research on certain specific questions
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Implications for Parents

- Researchers have an important but limited role in political decision-making
 - To maximize influence of research, essential that it be
 1. More specific and more definite
 2. Accessible to parents
 - In this way parents concerned about bilingual education programs will be able to exert considerable political pressure, armed with sound research to support their arguments
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The 3 Ns

- Ontario parents and indeed all parents concerned about FSL in Canada should really take notice – if the elimination of immersion can almost happen in NB, Canada's only officially bilingual province, it could happen anywhere.
 - But, it does not have to!
 - Parental puissance was critical to averting a real disaster in NB because of the 3 Ns:
 - knowledge, networking, and not taking no for an answer.
 - Bonne chance et bon courage!
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Research Questions

- What is the current situation with regard to socioeconomic status (SES) and FI enrolment?
- Can all children regardless of SES or particular academic disabilities succeed in FI?
- What intervention strategies work with at-risk students in FI?
- What is the relationship between L1 and L2 literacy development in a delayed entry program?
- What are the long term results of intensive French?

