Community Reaction to French Instruction
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Contrary to the impression one might receive from the newspapers, French language programs are not being thrust on the protesting or mildly acquiescing families of school aged children. The initiative for the first Canadian immersion classes, starting around 1965, came not from the government, and not from educational administrators, but from parents. These parent-initiated experiments in Montreal, Toronto, Waterloo, and Vancouver were successful, and even today immersion classes are often created as a direct result of formal petitions made to boards by parent groups.

A remarkable, but little publicized, outgrowth of such initiative was the founding in 1977 of Canadian Parents for French, a national association of parents who want the best possible French language learning opportunities for Canadian children. One might note that every group opposed to French manages to get an article in the newspaper, but a group like Canadian Parents for French, which supports French, seems to be treated like a national secret. The organization shares information with its 5000 members about how to get French classes started and how to keep them going, what funding is available for them, what makes them successful, and how children can use their French outside the classroom. Members support teachers, administrators and trustees responsible for the programs. They express the interests of the association to representatives of the federal and provincial governments.

Canadian Parents for French was created because people needed to have an organization through which Canadians could support all types of French language learning. In addition to promoting French in the school curriculum, this includes promoting opportunities to use French in the community by encouraging French story hours at the library, French scout groups, joint activities with francophone groups, and French summer camps and student exchanges.

The strength of Canadian Parents for French attests to parental enthusiasm for French in the schools and especially for immersion classes. In these classes students are clearly learning to speak, read, and understand French far beyond the level achieved by most of their parents - with no detrimental effects to the development of their English language skills and with the completion of a full elementary school curriculum.

Some Problems
While there are enthusiastic parents in each province, community reaction shows that difficulties remain. There is a kind of inequity in offering to younger children programs which are not available to older children. Similar considerations of
justice are raised against optional programs which create a group of children set apart from the majority. Others claim their children have been excluded because bussing is not provided. Still others feel that where an immersion program is not available in their immediate neighbourhood, the value of sending their children to the local school outweighs the value of giving them French.

The successes of immersion have stimulated people to ask that some of its benefits be more widely distributed throughout the system. The natural candidate is an expanded version of the already established core program. It is in the core programs that the majority of these children will have their only opportunity to learn some French; and the amount of French they learn can be increased by teaching more minutes a week or by starting to teach it to younger children. A 20-minute a day program in Grades 1 and 2, followed by a 40-minute a day program from Grade 3 gives the student, by the end of Grade 11, the number of hours of French instruction required to reach the basic level of fluency (1200 hours) as determined by the Ontario Ministry of Education.

This program, too, has been criticized. Some of the disappointment expressed about it is due to unwarranted expectations. Intended to give students a headstart in French that will improve their high school learning, the core program is not designed to achieve even minimal standards of fluency. In answer to accusations, occasionally justified, that students in core start anew each fall, the Ontario Ministry of Education is issuing core program guidelines which can be followed no matter at what grade the program starts. The Ministry now requires of every board an annual report on their French second language programs. The purpose of this report is to ensure that there is an overall rationale, that good texts are used, and that there is a clear sequence of material taught.

There are problems of attitude connected with the core program which those responsible for improving it should try to correct. The classes are usually taught by itinerant teachers, and therefore French is sometimes regarded as an “extra,” an enrichment course, not an essential part of the curriculum. A student's marks in French may not be included in his overall average and this reinforces the attitude that “French doesn't count.” The student has little opportunity to get to know the French teacher or the teacher to know each of the 100-200 students he must deal with each day. The classroom teacher may unconsciously let the children sense that he regards the French period as “time off”, and the students may adopt his attitude. Teachers have been distressed to see negative attitudes toward French developing when adolescent students are embarrassed by trying to imitate unfamiliar sounds in the presence of their peers. All these factors have led to expressions of disenchantment with the core program and to calls for its refurbishing.

Because the immersion programs were a drastic departure from traditional elementary school teaching practices, teams of researchers were hired to assess and evaluate them. The publication of their findings has made it clear that different teaching techniques can produce quite different results, and this, in turn, has led to more public interest in what constitutes excellent programs and excellent teaching.

People are now more vocal in wanting to be assured that adequate curriculum material is available to all French classes. Likewise they want assurance that teachers are well trained and have a good command of French. They want assurance that when a board of education starts a French program, it has clear aims and a firm commitment.

Parents with children in immersion programs at Grade 5 or 6 are asking about plans for high school. Bilingual high schools, and high school courses taught in