

Multilingualism in Ontario, Canada: An Educational Perspective

Este artículo se publicará en una recopilación de ponencias presentadas en el [Fórum. Gestión de la inmigración y la diversidad en Quebec y Canadá](#) organizado por la Fundación CIDOB (Centro de Estudios Internacionales de Barcelona) en octubre de 2008.

This article outlines some key policies and practices in relation to education in the multilingual and multicultural context that is increasingly typical of schools in Ontario, Canada. The article concludes with a brief discussion of the results in terms of educational outcomes for immigrant students in Ontario.

The use of the term “immigrant” in this article refers to students born in other countries; however, many of the policies and practices described in the article also apply to students born in Canada whose first language is other than English or French, the two official languages of Canada.

The Context

This article focuses on the education of immigrant children and youth and the acquisition of English as a second or additional language in English-language schools in Ontario. There is a different reality in the province’s French-language schools because only those students who already have a French-language background attend these schools: that is to say, students whose first language is French or who have received their education in the French language. All other newcomer students attend English-language schools, whether they have any knowledge of English or not. In Quebec, the opposite situation applies: Only those students who already have an English-language background attend English-language schools, and all others attend French-language schools.

This article describes some of the policies, initiatives, and programs related to the social, linguistic, and academic integration of immigrant students, as well as orientation of their parents to the new school system. Three levels of government are involved in this work:

- The federal government of Canada, the architect of immigration, has primary responsibility for the selection, admission, and resettlement of immigrant adults and families.
- The provincial government, in this case Ontario, has primary responsibility for education and for community and social services.
- At the municipal level, the district school boards, such as the Toronto District School Board, are responsible for implementing educational and social policies in local schools

and communities.

Other government-funded institutions are also involved in supporting immigrant families. For example, public libraries provide key services for newcomers, including children's books and other resources in the languages of the community. As well, various levels of government collaborate with many non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that provide direct service to immigrants. Many of these organizations receive funding from the federal or provincial government. Some examples of this collaboration will be provided as the role of each level of government is explained below, beginning with the federal government's role.

The Role of the Federal Government

The federal government provides funding and guidelines to the provinces and to various NGOs for the provision of programs and services for recent immigrants and for the promotion of multiculturalism within a bilingual context.¹

Citizenship and Immigration Canada

This department of the federal government is responsible not only for the selection and admission of newcomers under various categories of admissibility, but also for resettlement. A website funded by Citizenship and Immigration Canada is a communications, information, and research tool to support the work of the Canadian settlement community.² The department also provides funding, in collaboration with other government departments, for the Centre for Excellence in Research on Immigration and Settlement (CERIS),³ one of five research centres in Canada that are part of the international Metropolis project.

Collaboration with NGOs

Many NGOs that provide services for newcomers were established by various groups within the immigrant community. Many of these organizations serve specific linguistic and cultural communities in their own languages, and their contribution to the integration of more recently arrived immigrants is invaluable. For example, the members and clients of the Toronto organization Centre for Spanish-Speaking Peoples (Centro de la gente de habla español) are mainly from Latin America.⁴

With funding from the federal government, some NGOs employ settlement workers, a job category that perhaps does not yet exist in a formal way in Catalonia. Settlement workers are social workers whose role is to help newcomers with the many tasks and problems that they have to deal with in their first few months and years after arrival. Some settlement workers are located within schools to help orient newcomer families to the school system.

Collaboration with the provinces

The federal government also provides funding to the provincial governments for resources and services intended to help newcomers integrate, and to facilitate their employment in jobs

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Elizabeth Coelho: Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto

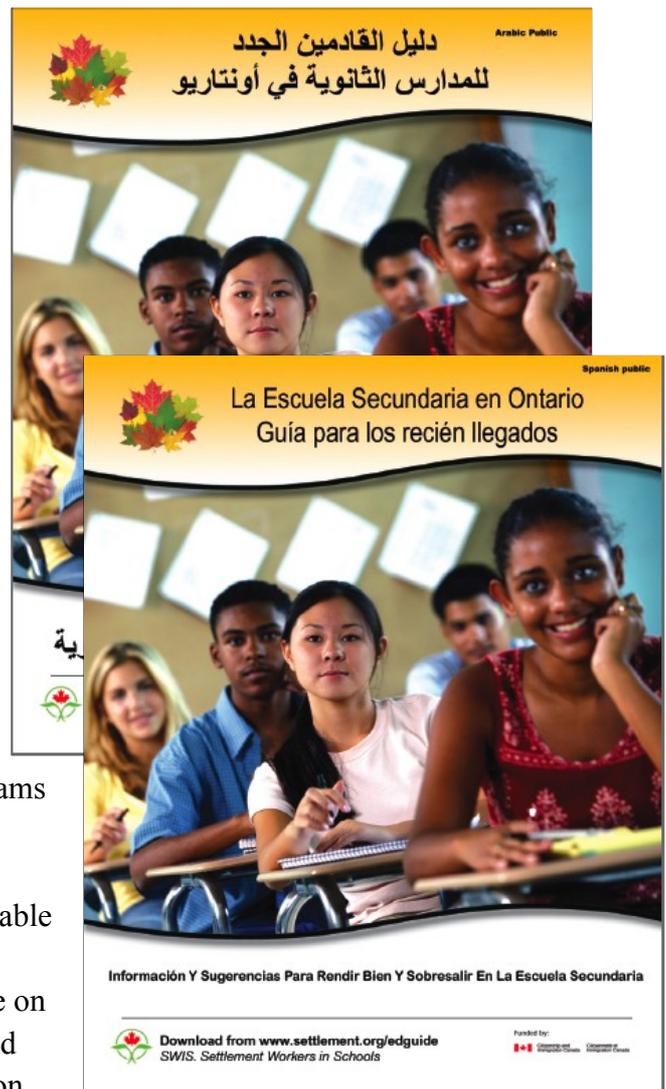
Forum: Managing Immigration and Diversity in Quebec and Canada: Barcelona, 22–23 October 2008

where they can use the skills and training they bring with them. Increasingly, such information and support are available online. An Ontario website that is jointly funded by the federal government and the government of Ontario provides many resources for recent immigrants and for the professionals that work with them, including social workers and teachers.⁵ The resources for professionals available on this site provide advice on working with new immigrants, such as guidelines for “Culturally Responsive Career Counselling.”⁶ There are also training materials, such as a [Tutor Training Kit](#) for English as a Second Language (ESL) tutors. There are also research studies, such as “Second Language Tutoring Programs: An Inquiry into Best Practices,” published in 2008, which examines language tutoring programs for immigrants settling in Canada.⁷

Many of the resources for newcomers are available in various languages, such as a “First Days Guide” that provides basic advice on topics such as housing, health, employment, and education.⁸ There is also a guide to the education system, which can be downloaded and distributed to parents when they first register their children in a school or during special orientation meetings with newcomer parents. There are different versions for the French- and English-language schools and for public and Catholic schools.⁹ There are also DVDs dubbed in various languages showing parents how to access local resources such as the public library, or how to become involved in their children’s education.

Language classes for adults

About 25 percent of newcomer adults have limited knowledge of English or French, or do not have a level of proficiency adequate for their intended employment. In order to ensure that all Canadian residents speak at least one of the official languages, the federal government funds full- and part-time classes all over the country, to enable immigrants over the age of 18 to develop their communication skills for everyday situations at work, in the community, and in use of media. Funding and guidelines such as the Canadian Language Benchmarks for assessing language proficiency¹⁰ are provided to public organizations such as district school boards, community colleges, public libraries, and NGOs as well as private (for-profit) organizations, which actually provide the classes. In many locations there are nursery



services as well, so that pre-school children can also begin their early learning of English or French.

- LINC, Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada, provides instruction in basic language skills for everyday communication and for work in contexts where a high level of language proficiency is not required. Information about these courses is available in various languages.¹¹
- ELT, Enhanced Language Training, is a new program offering special language training for those newcomers whose education and experience qualify them for employment in professional and highly skilled fields that demand a high level of language proficiency.¹² These programs include a practical component, such as work placements, mentoring and internships, cultural orientation to the workplace, and preparation for professional exams. This program was established about five years ago because it was evident that many immigrants were not able to find employment comparable to the work they had been doing in their own countries. This represents a waste of human resources, as well as a devastating loss of expectations, self-esteem, and socio-economic status for skilled and professional immigrants who chose to come, and were chosen to come, specifically because there is demand for employees in their fields in Canada.¹³



Support for official languages

Government policy in Canada promotes bilingualism in the two official languages within a context of multilingualism. However, most Canadians are not bilingual—at least, not in the two official languages—in spite of the federal government’s support for the teaching of French in anglophone communities and the teaching of English in francophone communities. Very few students actually achieve bilingualism in English and French by the time they graduate from secondary school, especially those in English-language schools.

The federal government has recently established a goal to increase the percentage of students who graduate from secondary school with a working knowledge of their second official language from 24 percent in 2003 to 50 percent by 2013.¹⁴ However, this relatively modest goal will be difficult to achieve because education is the responsibility of the provinces, and there are major differences in their approaches to the instruction of the second official language. There is evidence that across English-speaking Canada, the teaching of French is in decline.¹⁵ For example, the teaching of French in English-language schools is not compulsory in some provinces. Even in Ontario, where students must accumulate 700 hours of French instruction in order to graduate, the results have not so far been very positive.

Heritage language instruction

According to the Multiculturalism Act of Canada (1988), it is the policy of the Government of Canada to "facilitate the acquisition, retention and use of all languages that contribute to the multicultural heritage of Canada."¹⁶ In support of this policy, the federal government contributes funding for heritage language classes offered by schools and community groups, where students of various linguistic backgrounds study their own languages.¹⁷ In Toronto, thousands of students attend classes in more than 50 languages, normally outside regular school hours. There is ample evidence that maintenance and continued development of the first language provides cognitive, affective, and social benefits—indeed, immigrant students in the United Kingdom who maintain their first language do better academically than those who abandon their first language as well as those students whose first language is English.¹⁸

The Role of the Provincial Government

The provincial government is responsible for the education of children and youth in elementary and secondary schools. In the last three years, the Ontario Ministry of Education has been paying increased attention to the needs of immigrant students and Canadian-born children whose first language is neither English nor French. Key initiatives include the development of a new policy on the education of these students, as well as the distribution of funds to support implementation of the policy, and the development of resources for teachers.

The new policy

A new policy now in effect in Ontario directs English-language district school boards and schools to provide the support required to enable English language learners (recent immigrants and Canadian-born children in English-language schools whose first language is not English) to succeed in school.¹⁹ This policy was in response to community pressure as well as to a government report that was critical of the fact that the Ministry of Education had no way of knowing whether English language learners (ELLs) were achieving appropriate proficiency in English. In addition, although the ministry was providing funding to district school boards for the teaching of English as a second language, the ministry had no information on how much school boards were actually spending on ESL classes. Indeed, in

Federal Legislation and Policies on Heritage Languages

1969: The Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism

recommends that languages other than English and French be incorporated into the curriculum in public elementary schools.

1971: Canada's Multiculturalism Policy provides the framework for subsidies for out-of-school heritage language programs, support for materials development, sponsorship for national heritage languages conferences, and the establishment of a national heritage language centre.

1988: The Multiculturalism Act of Canada guarantees the continued existence of heritage language training and states that it is the policy of the Government of Canada to "facilitate the acquisition, retention and use of all languages that contribute to the multicultural heritage of Canada."

1991: The Canadian Heritage Languages Institute Act provides for the establishment of a national Institute "to facilitate throughout Canada the acquisition, retention and use of heritage languages." This legislation is not yet in force.

the Toronto District School Board, more than half of the funding was spent on other areas.²⁰ The report also noted the lack of a centrally coordinated process to develop ongoing training programs for teachers.²¹

Key components of the policy include the following requirements and expectations:

- All schools and district school boards are required to develop procedures for the reception, assessment, and orientation of newcomer students and their parents.
- There are clear requirements for the teaching of English as a second language, although models of program organization may vary depending on the context. For example, in schools with large numbers of recent immigrants, there is more likely to be an ESL teacher who works with them for part of the school day. In areas where there are few newcomer students, they are more likely to be integrated into the regular classroom for the whole day, where the classroom teacher is expected to adapt curriculum and instruction to meet their needs. There may be an itinerant ESL teacher who visits the school two or three times a week to work individually with students and to provide support to the teacher. In all cases, there is an expectation that all teachers will adapt the curriculum and their teaching methods so that ELLs can participate in classroom activities in a way that promotes their learning of English.
- ESL teachers in Ontario are required to have specialist training in addition to their regular teacher certification. There are three courses of 100 hours each, taught in faculties of education. All ESL teachers must take at least the first of these courses, while those who seek a position of responsibility, such as head of department or a program consultant, must complete all three. These courses are designed and accredited by the Ontario College of Teachers, the licensing body for the teaching profession in Ontario.²²
- Schools and school boards are responsible for monitoring and documenting the progress of each ELL over a multi-year period.
- There is an expectation that all teachers will receive training to enable them to support ELLs in their own classrooms.
- School boards are required to include in their annual plans a component related to the support of ELLs and to report to the Ministry of Education on the programs and services they provide for ELLs.

Funding

The Ontario government provides funding to enable schools and school boards to implement the requirements laid out in the policy. Most of the funding is used to hire ESL teachers and to provide additional professional development for classroom teachers. School boards may also use some of the funding to provide services such as reception centres, which will be described later in this article, as well as services for parents, such as translation and interpretation.

There is a formula for the distribution of funds, based on two components:

- Most of the funding is distributed according to the number of students in each school district who have arrived from other countries within the last four years. However, this

does not mean that all newcomers will receive support for four years, or that they may not receive support for longer. Some newcomers need little or no support, having received a good education and having learned English in their own countries, while others need more support over a longer period of time—especially those from countries where they have had limited opportunities for education.

- The second component of the funding is based on census data on the number of families within a municipality who report a home language other than English or French. This component is intended to recognize the needs of students born in Canada whose first language is other than the language of instruction.

Support for teachers

The Ontario government has developed the following curriculum and teaching guidelines for teachers working with ELLs in various contexts:

- A resource guide for Kindergarten teachers on how to teach young children who first start learning English when they begin school.²³
- A resource guide for elementary schools (Grades 1-8).²⁴
- A curriculum for English as a Second Language and English Literacy Development in secondary schools (Grades 9-12).²⁵
- An introductory guide for all educators on how to welcome students and parents of all backgrounds and how to incorporate linguistic and cultural diversity into the mainstream classroom.²⁶
- A resource guide on the education of students who arrive from countries where they have had limited opportunities for education.²⁷
- Web-based video and support materials on how to make an asset of linguistic diversity in the classroom.²⁸
- Research-based articles for teachers and school administrators.²⁹

Implementation at the Municipal Level

District school boards, schools, and educators are responsible for implementing federal and provincial policies related to linguistic and cultural diversity in schools. Key initiatives at the local level include reception centres, initial assessment and orientation services, and language instruction.

- **Reception centres**

Most of the larger urban centres in Ontario have established reception centres as the point of first contact for newcomer students and Canadian-born ELLs and their parents.³⁰ These reception centres are staffed with teachers and community workers with expertise in language assessment or immigrant resettlement and, in many cases, with knowledge of some of the community languages. The centres aim to provide:

- a respectful and encouraging welcome to newcomer families;
- an initial assessment of the student's educational needs;

- basic orientation to the school system.

Normally, the student spends one day, or a morning or an afternoon, in the centre before registering in the appropriate school. Teachers at the reception centre send a report to the school on the student's assessment, as well as recommendations for placement and programming.

A centralized process for initial assessment and orientation offers several advantages. For example, the concentration of staff with the necessary expertise and linguistic or cultural knowledge can be very time- and cost-effective. Also, an assessment process of several hours may be more in-depth or complete than an assessment carried out by busy teachers in the school, who may already have a full timetable.

▪ **Initial assessment**

The initial assessment process is intended to provide educators and parents with a profile of the learners- and his or her academic needs. A thorough and fair initial assessment, whether it is conducted at the school or at a centralized reception centre, consists of four components:

- information about prior schooling, based on documents that the students or parents may bring with them, as well as an interview in the family's first language if possible;
- an assessment of the student's level of proficiency in his or her first language, which may consist of a writing sample and an opportunity to read a text aloud;
- an assessment of the student's proficiency in the language of instruction (English), based on an oral interview and reading/writing tasks;
- an assessment of the student's background in mathematics, which, because it is less dependent on language than many other areas of the curriculum, may also be a useful indicator of general academic background.



This child is completing an assessment task at a reception centre.

▪ **Orientation to the school**

Newcomer families have travelled a long way, physically and psychologically, before arriving at the new school. The parents need reassurance that their children will receive good care in this strange new environment, and the students need reassurance that there is a place for them. A well-designed orientation program can help students get off to a good start and initiate a positive relationship between the parents and the school.

If there is an ESL teacher, he or she is usually responsible for providing the initial orientation. The ESL teacher meets with the parents and the student, providing basic information about the school day, important phone numbers, the names of key teachers, etc. Often there is information available in various languages. Sometimes there is a welcome gift for the student, such as a picture dictionary or a set of pens and pencils. The teacher also provides information to the other teachers so that the student's arrival will not come as a surprise the

next day.

Finally, in many schools, there are student guides who provide a guided tour, introduce newcomers to their teachers, help them with tasks such as getting a locker or a bus pass, and accompany them during lunch for the first few days. Often these guides understand the needs of newcomers, having gone through a similar experience themselves a few months or years earlier, and they may even speak the same language.

▪ **Language instruction**

In designing a language program for newcomer students, there may be a tendency to focus only their need to learn the language of instruction. While this is an immediate and obvious need, it is advisable to consider at least three languages:

- The language of instruction
- Heritage languages
- Additional language(s)

Language of instruction

In multilingual communities, some or all of the children begin learning the language of instruction when they start school, or when they arrive from other countries at a later point in their educational careers. The various models of language education that have been proposed and implemented in such contexts can be broadly categorized as the bilingual education model, the immersion model, or the second-language instruction model. Each of these models has advantages and disadvantages, as outlined below. However, for practical and political reasons, instruction in English as a Second Language is the prevailing model of education for language minorities in Ontario's English-language schools.



Bilingual education

Children learn best in the language they know best. This is not a new concept: More than half a century ago, a UNESCO report on the use of vernacular languages in education stated that “the best medium for teaching is the mother tongue of the pupil.”³¹ In a 2003 position paper, UNESCO reiterated that “Mother tongue instruction is essential for initial instruction and literacy and should be extended to as late a stage in education as possible... every pupil should begin his [or her] formal education in his [or her] mother tongue.”³²

Bilingual education programs use two languages of instruction: the home language of the students as well as the dominant language or the usual language of instruction. Bilingual education is practical where there are large numbers of students of the same language group in a local area, as is the case in some areas of the United States. Bilingual education is also offered in some Canadian provinces. For example, in 1978, the Saskatchewan *Education Act*

stated that a heritage language (mother tongue) may be used as a language of instruction 100 percent of the time in Kindergarten and up to 50 percent of the time in Grades 1 to 12.³³ However, in areas of Ontario where bilingual education might be a practical and common sense option in some schools, the use of languages other than English and French as languages of instruction is not allowed. The Ontario *Education Act* states that the curriculum may be delivered only in French and English, the two official languages of Canada.³⁴ So even if all the children in an English-language school speak Urdu, and have little or no knowledge of English, they will receive instruction in English only. So far, this legislation has not been challenged in the courts.³⁵

However, as the UNESCO report recognizes, it is difficult to provide bilingual classes in areas where students of a particular language group are spread over a large geographic area, or where students of many language groups attend the same school. While it may be possible to centralize programs for specific language groups in designated schools, there may be negative social consequences of separating students from those of other linguistic and cultural backgrounds.

Even where bilingual education is well established, and research studies have documented its benefits, opposing ideologies may prevail. Bilingual education has come under fire recently in some parts of the United States. Critics argue that bilingual education causes children to become dependent on their first language and may inhibit their learning of English. In 1998, California replaced bilingual education programs with one-year English-only programs, after which time most students are fully mainstreamed with little or no continued support for the acquisition of English. Similar legislation was passed in Arizona in 2000, and similar initiatives are under way in other states. The debate is often acrimonious, with language acquisition researchers pitted against organizations such as English First, which opposes the provision of services in languages other than English,³⁶ or U.S. English, which advocates for the declaration of English as the official language of the United States.³⁷

For practical and political reasons, then, the bilingual model is not always feasible. In communities where the language of the school is a minority language, as is the case in francophone Ontario or the Basque Country in Spain, the situation is even more complex.

Lessons from immersion

The immersion model, as used for French Immersion in anglophone communities in Canada, and for Basque immersion in Spain, has been extensively studied and has proved to be very successful. In such programs, the entire curriculum and instructional methods are adapted to meet the needs of children who are learning the language of instruction, beginning in preschool or Kindergarten. The success of French Immersion programs in Canada, where most of the learners are English speaking and most instruction is delivered in French, seems to belie the principle that learning in one's first language is more effective than learning in a second language. Although most instruction is not offered in their own language, anglophone students in French Immersion do at least as well as, and often better than, their peers in

monolingual English programs.³⁸

While there are many factors involved in the success of French Immersion, including educational background and socio-economic status of parents who choose French Immersion, a key factor is that the teachers are bilingual in English and French, are sensitive to the needs of their students as second language learners, and use second language teaching techniques to integrate language and content instruction.³⁹ This is an important lesson for teachers of students of all backgrounds who are learning the language of instruction through engagement with a curriculum delivered in that language. However, few teachers in English-language schools have been prepared through their initial training to teach in multilingual classrooms.

Another important factor is that in French Immersion programs, all the children start learning French at the same time. However, most immigrant children arrive later in their educational careers and are several years behind the other children when they start learning the language of instruction.

Finally, French Immersion programs do not deny the importance of validation, maintenance, and development of English, the first language of most of the students. On the contrary, the aim is to produce fluent bilinguals who are equally proficient in the two official languages of Canada, English and French. As well, like Spanish (castellano) in the Basque Country, English is not threatened as a result of participation in French Immersion programs. Most students are immersed in an English-speaking environment in the community and at home. English is usually the majority language of the local community, and it has status as an official language of the country. Moreover, students study “Anglais” as a subject and also receive some subject instruction in English, in order to foster the continued development of skills in English. In contrast, immigrant students in English-language schools receive scant recognition or support for their own languages in the school environment or in the wider community.

English as a Second Language (ESL)

Ontario’s ESL programs are designed for students in English-language schools whose first language is other than English. They may be Canadian born, or newcomers from other countries. They may speak one of more than 100 languages, including several Aboriginal languages, or an English-related Creole language such as Jamaican Creole or West African Krio.

About 20 percent of Ontario's students in English-language elementary schools are English language learners (i.e., their first language is other than English). More than half were born in Canada. These children enter a new linguistic and cultural environment when they start school in Ontario. Since literacy instruction in Ontario's English-language schools is in English, these children require particular attention, consideration, and support in order to overcome the mismatch between their first language and the language of instruction.

The most common model for organizing support for English language learners (ELLs) consists of a combination of ESL classes and integration in mainstream classes. In areas of high immigration, almost every school may provide an ESL program. In school districts where English language learners are distributed thinly across the district, making it difficult to provide ESL support in each school, newcomers may be congregated in one or two designated schools.

The ESL teacher often works with groups of students from several grade levels and/or at various levels of proficiency in English, depending on the school timetable. The amount of time that each student spends with the ESL teacher may vary, with newcomers spending a significant portion of each day in the ESL class, while others may receive only an hour or two of ESL time each week. Many secondary schools congregate English language learners in classes that combine language instruction with content from a specific subject such as Canadian Geography. In some school districts with very small numbers of English language learners distributed in a number of schools, an itinerant ESL teacher may provide resource support in several schools, meeting with each student or group of students for an hour or two each week.

The ESL class provides a low-risk setting for learners to begin speaking English, learn about their new environment, and make friends. The ESL teacher also has opportunities to assess the learners' needs and strengths and to select content and resources that are directly related to the learners' needs and backgrounds.

In the first year, students may spend most of the day in the language class, but even beginners are usually integrated into the regular class for part of the day. It is recommended that students

Why not offer self-contained programs?

It is sometimes suggested that self-contained ESL programs that provide an intensive full-day program for newcomers would enable them to adjust more quickly to their new academic and social environment and learn sufficient English after a year or two to join a regular class. Self-contained programs have the advantage of concentrating resources and providing an intensive language and orientation program specifically designed for newcomers. However, the disadvantages of this model outweigh the advantages. For example:

- Students may have no regular contact with their English-speaking peers; as a result, they may be denied valuable opportunities for language learning.
- It is simply not possible to learn a new language to the level required for academic success within a year or two. Newcomers will still require support from all their teachers when they join their age peers in the regular classroom.
- Students' engagement with the regular curriculum is delayed, and many parents are justifiably anxious that their children are falling behind in the mainstream curriculum while they attend the reception program.
- Students who attend a school other than their neighbourhood school may not have a chance to make friends with whom they can socialize out of school

remain in the mainstream classroom for those aspects of the program in which they can participate, such as physical education, the arts, and (in many cases) mathematics. The mainstream classroom offers opportunities for second language acquisition, social integration, and academic growth that the ESL classroom alone cannot offer. The mainstream classroom provides important opportunities for students to interact with English-speaking peers and experience the grade-level curriculum. It would be counterproductive to keep English language learners apart from the mainstream program while they learn English; a language is best acquired by using it to do something meaningful, such as learning how to play baseball, solving a mathematics word problem, creating a dramatic retelling of a story, planning a class outing, or working on a group project. A well-planned integrated model also fosters positive intercultural attitudes among all the learners.



Student artwork from a Heritage Language class (Tamil): Toronto District School Board

Integration does not occur simply by giving a student a desk in the classroom. Such an approach to “integration” might more properly be termed the “sink or swim” or “submersion” approach. Without carefully planned program adaptation and support, failure is the most likely result. In the multilingual school, where the learners are at various stages of proficiency in the language of instruction, from fully proficient to beginner, it is important that all teachers support second language acquisition and social integration by adapting curriculum and assessment, so that the learning outcomes are attainable and appropriate for students at various stages of proficiency in English.

Heritage Languages

Attitudes towards students’ first languages have changed considerably in the last two or three decades. Once considered detrimental to children’s cognitive development and social integration, first language maintenance is now recognized as an important factor in second language acquisition, and as a significant source of cultural pride and personal identity. Heritage Language programs are an important component of Canada’s approach to multiculturalism and are available in many school districts across Canada.

Heritage Language classes are usually offered by district school boards in local schools, outside regular school hours. Many community groups also offer heritage language classes. In these classes, students develop their skills in their own language (or the language of their parents) and learn about the history, important leaders and personalities, traditions, and values of their cultural communities. As well, students of secondary school age can take courses in their own language for academic credit.

Because they are usually offered outside the regular school program, heritage language

classes are often perceived to be less important than the “regular” school curriculum. Also, students may be reluctant to attend extra classes at times when they might otherwise be playing or socializing with friends. In many jurisdictions, heritage language teachers are not members of the teachers’ unions or licensing bodies, are not required to have the same qualifications and do not receive the same pay as “regular” teachers, have limited job security, and may have little contact with the other teachers. Some are relatively new in Canada, and their methods of teaching, while culturally appropriate in their own countries, may be quite different from the methods the learners are exposed to in the mainstream program. As a result, they may not be regarded as “professionals” in the same way as their mainstream colleagues.

In spite of all these difficulties, parents who recognize the benefits of maintaining their children’s proficiency in their home language are eager to enrol their children in heritage language classes. Heritage language programs flourish in school districts across Canada, often with little or no direct support from the school district or provincial Ministry of Education. In British Columbia, approximately 150 organizations offer heritage language classes outside the school system, attended by 30,000 learners. In Saskatchewan, 62 member organizations teach 25 languages. Forty-five languages are taught in Toronto public schools, mostly outside school hours.

Additional languages

Ontario students are required to develop some proficiency in Canada’s other official language, which means that students in English-language schools must study French. There is no requirement that Ontario students study a foreign language.

Many newcomers arrive in Canada with little or no knowledge of French, whereas their age peers may have already received several years of instruction. Because learning English is such a high priority, it often seems a “common sense” approach to delay instruction in French until the newcomer has a good grasp of English. However, in most cases, it is not necessary to delay instruction in French—as long as the French teacher adapts the program for students who are new to the language.

Many English language learners are competent language learners. Their experience in learning an additional language helps them to learn new sounds, acquire vocabulary, and perceive language patterns. Also, it must be remembered that many newcomers have already learned additional languages prior to arrival in Canada. For example, many Punjabi speakers also speak Hindi; many Ukrainians know Russian; and many Cantonese speakers have learned Mandarin. For many newcomers, English is not a second, but a third or fourth, language, and French is just one more.

In general, younger newcomers benefit from placement in the French class alongside their age peers, as long as the program is adapted for them. Some secondary schools provide a beginner-level French course for newcomers, many of whom are subsequently able to continue learning French alongside their grade-level peers. However, Ontario’s new policy

allows some flexibility for the small minority of newcomers who may benefit from delaying instruction in French, or in exceptional cases, from exemption altogether—as long as a more appropriate program is available in its place. For example, students who arrive with significant gaps in their schooling and limited literacy development in their own language might benefit from additional time in an ESL/literacy class, while students who have clearly identified special needs might receive Special Education support instead of French instruction.

The Results

Canada is often cited as a country with much experience of immigration and with well-developed programs for the support of immigrants and the education of their children. Educational outcomes for immigrant children, as measured by the results of provincial literacy tests in Ontario, and when viewed in the aggregate, appear very positive.⁴⁰ Key findings include the following:

- It takes an average of five or more years for both newcomer children and Canadian-born ELLs to achieve results similar to those of their age peers. The data are consistent with research from the United States.⁴¹
- Tracking students beyond the five-year period shows that immigrant children eventually outperform their English-speaking Canadian-born peers. These data are consistent with the 2006 PISA report on the academic achievement of immigrant children.⁴²
- Students who begin learning English later eventually do better than their younger siblings—even though they have more English to catch up on.

The Ontario assessment data seem to show that, given sufficient time, immigrant children do well in Ontario's schools. Unfortunately, the aggregate data on immigrant children do not show the great variability among children of different language backgrounds and from different immigrant communities. The fact is that while some subgroups of immigrant students do astonishingly well within their first year or two in Canada, others seem never to catch up. According to a recent study in the Toronto District School Board, students from some regions of the world, and from some language backgrounds, experience significantly more academic difficulty than others and eventually drop out in much higher numbers. For example, students from the English-speaking Caribbean, students from East Africa, and students from Latin America, as well as Portuguese- and Spanish-speaking students (immigrant and Canadian-born), have a dropout rate of 30 to 40 percent or more, compared with about 20 percent for Canadian-born English-speaking students and about 10 percent for students from Eastern Europe and East Asia.⁴³

Conclusion

Responding to the needs of immigrant children and the children of immigrants requires coordinated effort on the part of national and provincial governments. NGOs established by immigrant communities are an important resource, as are other institutions such as public libraries.

Schools and school districts need to be held accountable for the educational outcomes of immigrant children and the children of immigrants. This requires the tracking of student outcomes over a multi-year period.

English language learners take five or more years to catch up to their age peers in English language and literacy skills. Some achieve this in a much shorter period of time, while others take much longer. Some never do, and students from certain countries of origin or language backgrounds are at much higher risk than others. From this, we can infer that students from some linguistic communities and some groups of immigrant students are not deriving equal benefit from their schools at the present time. It is not that these students cannot learn; it is the school that has to learn how to serve them better.

Endnotes

In Canada, the terms “bilingual” and “bilingualism,” as used in official policy documents, usually refer to bilingualism in the two official languages, English and French. However, in educational contexts, these terms are more often used to refer to individuals who are proficient in any two (or more) languages. For example, students who arrive from other countries are already proficient in at least one language at an age-appropriate level when they arrive and then add English or French (or both).

Integration.Net: <http://integration-net.ca>

Centre for Excellence in Research on Immigration and Settlement <http://ceris.metropolis.net>

Centro de la gente de habla hispana: www.spanishservices.com

Welcome to Ontario: www.settlement.org

Culturally Responsive Career Counselling: http://atwork.settlement.org/sys/atwork_library_detail.asp?passed_lang=EN&doc_id=1004670

Second Language Tutoring Programs: An Inquiry Into Best Practices: http://atwork.settlement.org/sys/atwork_library_detail.asp?passed_lang=EN&doc_id=1004592

First Days Guide: A Newcomers' Guide to Their First Two Weeks in Ontario: http://settlement.org/sys/library_detail.asp?doc_id=1004559

Newcomers' Guides to Education in Ontario: www.settlement.org/edguide

Centre for Canadian Language Benchmarks: www.language.ca

Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada: www.settlement.org/sys/faqs_detail.asp?faq_id=4000331

Enhanced Language Training: www.settlement.org/sys/link_redirect.asp?doc_id=1004024

In Canada, as in most countries that receive immigrants, there are many taxi drivers, cleaners, security guards, and other service-sector workers with professional skills and qualifications who are unable to find employment in their fields. New immigrants face many obstacles in addition to the language barrier.

The Next Act: New momentum for Canada's linguistic duality. The Action Plan For Official Languages. Retrieved August 27, 2008, from http://www.cpfnb.com/articles/ActionPlan_e.pdf

The Depreciated Status of FSL Instruction in Canada. Retrieved August 27, 2008, from www.umanitoba.ca/publications/cjeap/articles/kissau.html

Canadian Multiculturalism Act. Retrieved August 27, 2008, from www.canadianheritage.gc.ca/progs/multi/policy/act_e.cfm

Harrison, B. (2000) Passing on the language: Heritage language diversity in Canada. *Canadian Social Trends*, Autumn 2000. Retrieved August 27, 2008, from www.statcan.ca/bsolc/english/bsolc?catno=11-008-X20000025165

CILT. (2006) *Positively Plurilingual: The contributions of community languages to UK education and society*. London, U.K.: CILT, The National Centre for Languages. Retrieved August 27, 2008, from www.cilt.org.uk/pdf/pubs/positively_plurilingual.pdf

English Language Learners / ESL and ELD Programs and Services: Policies and Procedures for Ontario Elementary and Secondary Schools, Kindergarten to Grade 12. www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/document/esleldprograms/index.html

Rushowy, K. (2007) ESL funds used to heat schools. Toronto: *Toronto Star*. Retrieved August 28, 2008, from <http://www.thestar.com/News/article/224604>

Office of the Auditor General of Ontario. (2005) *2005 Annual Report*. Toronto: Queen's Printer for Ontario. Retrieved August 28, 2008, from www.auditor.on.ca/en/reports_2005_en.htm

Ontario College of Teachers: www.oct.ca/additional_qualifications/schedule_d/?lang=en-CA

Supporting English Language Learners in Kindergarten: A practical guide for Ontario educators: www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/document/kindergarten/index.html

Supporting English Language Learners: A practical guide for Ontario educators, Grades 1 to 8, 2008. www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/document/esleldprograms/guide.html

The Ontario Curriculum, Grades 9-12: English As a Second Language and English Literacy Development, 2007: www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/curriculum/secondary/esl.html

Many Roots, Many Voices: Supporting English Language Learners in Every Classroom: www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/document/manyroots

Supporting English Language Learners with Limited Prior Schooling: A practical guide for Ontario educators, Grades 3 to 12: www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/document/manyroots/schooling.html

Teaching and Learning in Multilingual Ontario: www.curriculum.org/secretariat/december7.shtml

Cummins, J. (2007) Promoting Literacy in Multilingual Contexts. *What Works? Research into Practice*. Research Monograph #4. The Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat, Ontario Ministry of Education. Retrieved August 28, 2008, from www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/literacynumeracy/inspire/research/whatWorks.html

- 30 Newcomer reception centres in Ontario are not designed as schools or special classes for immigrant students. They may be located within a school building, but they offer only an initial assessment and basic orientation to the new school system before referring students to the most appropriate schools in their neighbourhoods. Ontario's newcomer reception centres are completely different from the "centro de acogida" model that has been proposed in Catalonia.
- 31 The Use of Vernacular Languages in Education: <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0000/000028/002897EB.pdf>
- 32 Education in a multilingual world: <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0012/001297/129728e.pdf>
- 33 Heritage Language Education: www.sasked.gov.sk.ca/docs/policy/multi/hert.html
- 34 Education Act: www.e-laws.gov.on.ca/html/statutes/english/elaws_statutes_90e02_e.htm#BK414
- 35 Presently in Ontario, two school districts are experimenting with the use of Arabic or Mandarin alongside English in Kindergarten. If the results are promising, there may be some pressure to change Ontario's education law to allow some form of bilingual schooling, at least in the early years.
- 36 English First: <http://www.englishfirst.org>
- 37 U.S. English: www.us-english.org
- 38 French-Immersion Education in Canada:
www.ccl-cca.ca/CCL/Reports/LessonsInLearning/LinL20070517_French_Immersion_programs.htm
- 39 Genesee, F. (1994) Integrating Language and Content: Lessons from Immersion. Retrieved August 28, 2008, from <http://repositories.cdlib.org/crede/ncredslleducational/EPR11>
- 40 Coelho, E. (2007). How Long Does It Take? Lessons from EQAO Data on English Language Learners in Ontario Schools. *Inspire, The Journal of Literacy and Numeracy for Ontario*. Retrieved August 28, 2008, from www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/literacynumeracy/inspire/equity/ELL_July30.html
- 41 Garcia, G.N. (2000). *Lessons from research: What is the length of time it takes limited English proficient students to acquire English and succeed in an all-English classroom?* (NCBE Issue Brief No. 5) Washington, DC: National Clearinghouse for Bilingual Education. Retrieved August 24, 2008, from www.ncela.gwu.edu/pubs/issuebriefs/ib5.htm
- 42 OECD (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development). (2006). *Where Immigrant Students Succeed— a comparative review of performance and engagement in PISA 2003*. Paris: Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), OECD. Retrieved August 24, 2008, from www.oecd.org/dataoecd/2/38/36664934.pdf
- 43 Brown, R. (2006) *The TDSB Grade 9 Cohort Study: A Five-Year Analysis, 2000-2005*. Toronto: Toronto District School Board. Executive summary available at www.tdsb.on.ca/wwwdocuments/about_us/external_research_application/docs/Grade9CohortVol2Iss1.pdf