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**THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF SEVEN SENIOR HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS
IN A FRENCH IMMERSION PROGRAM**

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**A THESIS
SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE OF
MASTER OF EDUCATION**

**FACULTY OF EDUCATION
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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study investigated the lived experiences of seven senior high school students in a French Immersion program. The participants, four females and three males in grades eleven and twelve in a dual-track composite high school, provided insightful and compelling phenomenological descriptions which reflect the nature of this educational alternative. The semi-structured interviews focused on the main research question: *What is your lived experience as a senior high school French Immersion student?* Findings indicated the strong sense of “family” that characterizes the immersion experience, the factors that have contributed to the participants’ success in the program, the participants’ reasons for remaining committed to the program, perceptions of French Immersion students, and challenges that are unique to the immersion experience.

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CHAPTER ONE

Introductory Background

As a teacher of French Immersion at the secondary level, I often commend those students who choose to remain in the program. They have decided to take advantage of this enriched educational opportunity by continuing their secondary studies partially in a second language. For some students, the academic pace seems accelerated and the workload abundant, but still these students triumph with a positive attitude. Others struggle, but persevere, driven by some force and commitment to obtain their bilingual certificate at graduation. Questions of significance include the following: What are the experiences of French Immersion students in a French Immersion program in a dual-track composite high school? Why do these students see this experience as valuable? As well, I was concerned with knowing what it is like to study with the same classmates all through elementary and secondary school. An additional interest was whether the students' ultimate life goals are somehow related to the French Immersion experience.

In the preliminary stages of this study, I believed that an extensive review of the literature was inappropriate since the qualitative design is characterized as "emergent". Selinger and Shohamy (1989) claimed that "as the research progresses, each successive stage of analysis may lead the researcher to focus on a different aspect of the phenomenon for observation as the picture becomes

more focused” (p. 121). Bogdan and Biklen (1992) also forewarned that “reviewing the literature might be too influential in determining themes and a focus and thus curtail inductive analysis - an important advantage of qualitative research” (p. 75). I soon realized, however, that I needed to become informed about what had already been researched in the area of French Immersion in order to ensure that this study be a valuable contribution to the existing body of research in French Immersion education.

As I began reviewing the literature, it soon became apparent that French Immersion has become one of the most intensely researched and evaluated programs in education (Canadian Education Association, 1992, p. 2). Over the last three decades, French Immersion has inspired research that focuses on program outcomes, program and student evaluation, pedagogical aspects of immersion programs, and bilingual education (Tardif & Weber, 1987). In the late 1980's, most research continued to accentuate outcomes rather than process or understanding the complexities of the experiences of life as an immersion student. Tardif & Weber confirmed that “while the body of literature on second language acquisition and bilingual education is large, many of the studies are theoretical in nature and many do not focus specifically on the French Immersion school experience” (p. 69). Edwards & Rehorick (1990) noted that

the more recent years have seen a shift in interest, and educators, in particular, have become more interested in finding out what happens in an

immersion class . . . Questions are being asked about the process of immersion education as [about] the outcomes of the program. (p. 295)

Although more qualitative studies have emerged recently, there is still a dearth of descriptive studies on French Immersion education. Tardif and Weber established that “although there have been some calls for more qualitative studies of the French Immersion classroom, with some exceptions, such studies have not generally been forthcoming” (p. 69). By inviting seven senior high school French Immersion students to share their experiences, this study was designed to contribute to understanding what it is like to be a student in a French Immersion program.

Other studies of cohesive groups exist. For instance, Hebert and Reynolds (1998) compared the learning achievements of adult students in cohort and non-cohort groups. They discovered that the cohort groups scored higher academically and had higher affective learning. However, while other studies on cohort groups exist, it is beyond the scope of this thesis to examine cohort groups beyond the topic of French Immersion.

Purpose

This study aimed to understand more fully the meaning or essence of the experiences of seven students who decided to remain in a French Immersion program. The main question that directed this study was: What are the lived

experiences of seven senior high school French Immersion students? As a high school French Immersion teacher, I also was intrigued by certain observations in my experiences in the classroom. For example, I wished to discover more about the commonalities shared by French Immersion students who have chosen to remain in the program, the students' attitudes toward learning a second language, the reasons for the students' commitment to the program, and the students' self-assessment of their competence in French. By focusing on the experiences of the learner, I believe it may be possible for administrators, curriculum advisors, educators, and parents of students in French Immersion to understand the strengths and limitations of the French Immersion program.

This study was qualitative in nature and was approached phenomenologically through interviews and conversations focusing on the lived experiences of seven senior high school French Immersion students. The participants were enrolled in grades eleven and twelve in a dual-track composite high school in Northwestern Ontario, Canada, during the 1999 - 2000 school year. The participants were anglophone participants in the Early Immersion Program, that is, students of French Immersion since senior kindergarten. They were recommended by the French Immersion teachers in the school so that they represented a range of academic levels. Data were gathered primarily through semi-structured interviews and included student diary entries by one participant. These research data were gathered until saturation was reached.

Rationale

My reasons for conducting research in the area of French Immersion were primarily inspired by my personal experiences and interests. As a teacher in the secondary French Immersion program, I had asked myself many questions pertaining to the level of motivation of the students, their degree of commitment to their French Immersion studies, their perceptions of their writing, reading, comprehension, and speaking capabilities in French, their reasons for continuing in the program, and common personality traits possessed by French Immersion students. I asked myself, "What makes this experience a positive, nurturing, and successful one?" In order to gain a deeper understanding of the nature and meaning of the everyday experience of being a French Immersion student, I adopted a phenomenological approach. To understand the events in the daily lives of French Immersion students, I pursued the "universe of immersion as it is perceived by a few of those who have seen it as first hand, and, more importantly, who have lived it" (Sloan, 1991, p. 38). There are, according to Safty (1989), "lived experiences that researchers and evaluators, in their preoccupation with the cognitive aspects of the program, have simply overlooked" (p. 9). Tardif and Weber (1987) indicated the need for qualitative research in French Immersion in order to address second language acquisition processes in the French Immersion classroom context. They attested to the "dearth of good descriptive and qualitative material to provide the necessary

background for a more rigorous and useful interpretation of the bulk of quantitative, product-oriented studies” (p. 67). Tardif and Weber illustrated the issues that have not been adequately addressed in French Immersion education: “The Role of the Language Learning Environment”, “Language Learning Strategies/Tactics used by Children”, “Characteristics of Classroom Communication”, “Language for Learning”, and “Effective Teaching Strategies” (pp. 72-73).

According to the Commissioner of Official Languages (1996), French Immersion enrollment in Canada is stable. The findings of the Canadian Education Association study also demonstrate that French Immersion enrollments have stabilized in a majority of school boards (Canadian Education Association, 1992, p. 7). The attrition and retention of students in French Immersion programs has been a focus of study among many educational researchers (Lewis & Shapson, 1989; Obadia & Thériault, 1997). Because my intent was to discover what makes French Immersion an enriching and stimulating experience, I was particularly interested in the studies that address the issue of retention in the program. Halsall’s (1994) research, for example, provided suggestions for activities designed specifically for the retention of French Immersion students, particularly at the high school level. Foster (1992) also examined high school student retention in French Immersion by investigating successful students’ perceptions of the program and their

experiences. She identified the need for “further investigation of programs with elevated rates of retention” (p. 12) since this type of inquiry may be beneficial to administrators, educators, curriculum planners, and parents in understanding why students choose the French Immersion alternative. By examining the lived experiences of seven senior high school French Immersion students, this study may provide additional perspectives in understanding why students are encouraged to choose the French Immersion high school program alternative.

Definition of Terms

For the purposes of this study, it is necessary to define the terms lived experience, phenomenology, senior high school student, French Immersion, successful, and integrative and instrumental motivation. In this study, the following definitions apply:

Lived Experience

Lived experience refers to a “certain way of being in the world” (van Manen, 1994, p. 39). In investigating the lived experiences of seven senior high school French Immersion students, I attempted to discover the nature of what it means and what it is like to be a student in this program.

Phenomenology

Phenomenology explores a particular experience as the subject(s) of the study live it. This phenomenology captured the essence of the lives of seven

senior high school French Immersion students. I asked the participants to recall, reflect on and richly describe their personal experiences as students in a French Immersion program. Phenomenologists “attempt to gain entry into the conceptual world of their subjects in order to understand how and what meaning they construct around events in their daily lives” (van Manen, 1994, p. 34).

Senior High School Student

A senior high school student is defined as a female or male anglophone in grade eleven or twelve in a Northwestern Ontario high school. The senior high school student has been enrolled in French Immersion since senior kindergarten.

French Immersion

In the French Immersion program, the French language is the vehicle of communication. Students use the French language to study the curriculum while simultaneously developing and consolidating competence in the second language. In senior kindergarten, French Immersion students are totally immersed in the French language by being exposed to all curriculum areas in French. In grades one and two, English is introduced and French is the language of instruction for ninety percent of the school day. By grade three, the instruction in French decreases to eighty percent. In grade four, the French language comprises seventy-five percent of the program. By grade five, students continue to learn and experiment with the second language for sixty-seven percent of the program. Students are immersed in French for fifty

percent of the school day by grades six, seven, and eight. In high school, students fulfill course requirements for eleven French Immersion courses - four courses in grade nine, three in grade ten, two in grade eleven, and two in grade twelve / OAC (Ontario Academic Course). By the end of secondary school, French Immersion students will have had approximately five thousand hours of instruction in French. The curriculum content of the French Immersion program corresponds to that of the English program.

Successful

The senior high school participants interviewed for this study were characterized as successful based on the fact that they had chosen to remain in the French Immersion program. The participants had attained an academic level of fifty percent or better which allowed them to remain in the French Immersion program. The decision to continue their studies in the French language through selected courses is a reflection of their commitment to this bilingual alternative.

Integrative and Instrumental Motivation

The integrative-instrumental approach to measuring motivation to learn a second language was proposed by Gardner and Lambert (1959). The integrative motive is based on the individual's desire to learn a language "mainly because he or she appreciates the other culture and wishes to know and communicate with its members" (Van der Keilen, 1995, p. 289) while the instrumental motive reflects the determination to study and master a second

language in order to achieve socioeconomic goals, such as obtaining a good job or gaining social recognition (Ramage, 1990).

Methodology

This phenomenological study explored the lived experiences of seven senior high school students in a French Immersion program. The main objective of this research method is to discover the meaning of human experiences from unexamined preconceptions and presuppositions (Spiegelberg, 1982). In conducting phenomenological research, it is not sufficient to recall experiences others may have had with respect to a particular phenomenon. Instead, van Manen (1984) asserted that one

must recall the experience in such a way that the essential aspects, the meaning structures of this experience as lived through, are brought back, as it were, and in a such a way that we recognize this description as a *possible human experience*, which means a *possible interpretation* of that experience. (p. 44)

For example, Beck's (1992) study, *The lived experience of postpartum depression: A phenomenological study*, described postpartum depression as it is experienced in everyday life and offers insight into understanding the world of women who experience postpartum depression. Fundamentally, phenomenology attempts to "borrow other people's experiences and their

reflections” in order to understand the “significance of an aspect of human experience, in the context of the whole of human experience” (van Manen, 1986, p. 55).

This phenomenology followed an emergent design which allowed me to narrow the focus of my research scope as the research progressed. As I read through the interview transcripts, I analyzed the data to find recurring patterns emerging from them. Accordingly, more specific questions about the lived experiences of senior high school students in French Immersion came into focus.

Limitations

This phenomenological study does not represent the lived experiences of all senior secondary students enrolled in French Immersion programs. However, some qualitative researchers assume “that human behaviour is not random or idiosyncratic” (Bogdan and Biklen, p. 45). Their focus is “not with the question of whether their findings are generalizable, but rather with the question of which other settings and subjects they are generalizable” (p. 45). This study was an attempt to describe through language the meaning embodied in the actions, reflections, and experiences of seven students in one French Immersion program. The goal in this study was to “construct a possible interpretation of the nature of a certain human experience” (van Manen, p. 41). Phenomenologists

conceive that “the nature and number of possible human experiences are as varied and infinite as human life itself” (van Manen, p. 40). My goal was not to assume or judge but to describe and explore what it means to live the particular life of a senior secondary school student in French Immersion.

CHAPTER TWO

Review of Literature

The review of literature presented in this chapter is divided into four areas. The first section provides a brief overview of the French Immersion program in Canada. French Immersion enrollment is addressed in the second section. The third part summarizes the few qualitative studies based on French Immersion students' experiences and perceptions of the program. Finally, research that has centered on reasons for attrition and retention in French Immersion programs comprises the last section.

Brief Overview of the Nature of the French Immersion Program

Although Stern (1984) described French Immersion as a “quiet language revolution” (p. 506), this alternative to traditional unilingual education proves to be one of the most researched programs in the history of Canadian education. An overview of studies conducted over the last decade provides an understanding of some of the current issues concerning the present state of the “most successful language teaching program in the annals of Foreign language teaching” (Safty, 1990, p. 12).

Since the launching of the first program at the South Shore Protestant Regional School Board in St.-Lambert, Québec in 1965, all provinces and territories have made great advances in French Immersion (Canadian Education Association, 1992, p. 3). French Immersion has proven to be an effective way of

learning French as a second language (p. 2). In fact, Safty (1989) described the program as “much more than an innovative and successful teaching methodology” (p. 1). The objective of French Immersion programs is the achievement of a high level of fluency in the French language. Genesee’s (1987) contention is that proficiency in the second language increases the longer a child is exposed to the language. Parents view this as an attractive educational alternative for their children especially since French Immersion students have proven to be equally successful in both French and English tests (Canadian Education Association, 1992, p. 7). Indeed, Lapkin, Swain, and Shapson (1990) asserted that a learner’s involvement in French Immersion has no negative impact on the development of English skills. Equally important, Harley, Hart, and Lapkin (1986) found that there is a relationship between a high level of proficiency in French and stronger performance in English. The goal of the program is to provide students with the opportunity to achieve functional biligualism while still holding the same academic qualifications as their peers in the regular English program. Since biligualism promotes employment opportunities and helps learners “become more competitive in the global market”, parents conceive that learning a second language is an asset - an “enriched educational opportunity that will challenge the child” (Canadian Education Association, 1992, p. 7).

In March 1992, the Canadian Education Association (CEA) distributed a

questionnaire to French coordinators and senior administrators in one hundred and eighty-four school boards across Canada. One hundred and four school boards responded to this survey that focused on enrollments, entry levels of the program, the availability of qualified teachers, and estimable developments of the program since 1988. The results of this study succinctly summarize the state of French Immersion in Canada.

French Immersion is a unique opportunity and an effective way to acquire a second language. It has widened the view of school boards about language learning in general and encouraged them to recognize the bilingual nature of the country. Over the years the program has been expanded and improved, curriculum and resource materials have been produced, and there has been an important emphasis on training and inservice of immersion teachers...The number of students in immersion may have stabilized and in some cases decreased, but there is little doubt that the demand for immersion by a significant percentage of parents will remain constant. (p. 28)

The seven students in this study were invited to reflect on how French Immersion has shaped their attitudes and perceptions towards learning a second language and how the nature of this experience has played a significant role in their lives.

French Immersion Enrollments

The findings of the Canadian Education Association study demonstrate that French Immersion enrollments have stabilized in a majority of school boards (Canadian Education Association, 1992, p. 7). The 1995 Annual Report by the Commissioner of Official Languages validates that “French Immersion enrollments appear to be stable across the country at a little over 300,000 students nationally” (1996, p. 91). There are plausible reasons that justify this recent balance after three decades of dramatic increases. For example, during the 1980's, French Immersion flourished since the lead class moved through the system thus adding a new class each year. By the early 1990's, many of these pioneering classes reached graduation, therefore stabilizing the distribution of classes. In a 1995 lecture at the National Conference of Canadian Parents for French, the Commissioner of Official Languages discussed the equilibrium of French Immersion programs and the fact that immersion programs have become an integral part of education in this country:

The fact that the mushrooming growth in [French second-language] enrollments [at the elementary level and particularly in the immersion program] in the 1980's has not been followed by a decline means that we are not talking about a fad. We are talking about something that responds to a real objective that parents feel on behalf of their children. The fact that enrollments maintain themselves year after year means that the word

of mouth from parent to parent, from generation to generation, is positive, and that people whose children have gone through this experience are telling other parents it has been good. (p. 91)

In my personal experience, parents of French Immersion students are enthusiastic and committed to the program. They display a positive attitude about bilingualism and often inform other parents of the benefits of French Immersion education. Because they take an active part in their child's education, these parents can play a crucial role in the survival of the program. The seven participants were encouraged to reflect on the impact parental involvement has had on their experience as French Immersion students.

French Immersion Students' Experiences and Perceptions

Harley (1998) stated that "the immersion experience was having an additive, and not a subtractive, impact on students' learning" (p. 3). The few qualitative studies summarized here aim at understanding the successes and challenges of this established educational alternative by focusing on the perceptions and experiences of students.

Five French Immersion graduates interviewed by Sloan (1991) evaluated their French Immersion experience as positive and valuable. One participant claimed that learning French "was just a natural part of the process" (p. 39). All five graduates continue to use both French and English in the job market or as

an integral part of their post-secondary education.

Husum and Bryce (1991) also were interested in immersion graduates' perceptions. They asked graduates from a French Immersion high school in Saskatchewan if they would repeat the experience if given the opportunity. Furthermore, the graduates were asked if they would place their own children in a similar program. The results of the survey indicated

a strong positive feeling towards the program where the graduates expressed confidence in both their receptive skills and their speaking capabilities. The majority were satisfied with their experience and would enter their own child in the same program. (p. 135)

As well, the former students were invited to offer suggestions for improvement of the program. Most students commented on the need for an improvement in the qualifications and skills of the teachers, both in specialized content areas and in the French language. Additionally, several graduates specified that teachers should place less emphasis on grammar and more on helping students develop conversational skills. Husum and Bryce (1991) reported that the "graduates felt that the ability to create effective teaching/learning situations was deemed as important as fluency in French" (p. 141). Because the seven participants of this study had been enrolled in French Immersion since senior kindergarten, they also were able to draw from diverse experiences. They were invited to comment on their own bilingual competencies

and to share the reasons supporting their commitment to completing the program.

Edwards and Rehorick (1990) analyzed what happens in the immersion classroom by investigating perceptions which immersion and non-immersion students have of their learning environments. Although there were no differences in perceptions of classroom environment at the grade six level, immersion students in grade seven displayed a more positive perception of their learning environment. At the grade nine level, both immersion and non-immersion students displayed a high degree of similarity in the perceptions of classroom social climate. However, the immersion students showed a slightly more positive perception of the level of friendship among classmates.

In her 1992 study *The French Immersion choice at high school*, Foster explored perceptions of the French Immersion experience via students' and parents' perspectives. The purpose of her study was to analyze the reasons why six students in an Alberta high school chose to continue in French Immersion after grade nine. She ventured to understand "how French Immersion students viewed and interpreted their immersion experience and how this experience had led them to make the choice to continue in the program after grade 9" (p. vi). An investigation of parents' perceptions also was integral in understanding the students' experience. The categories that emerged from Foster's data include students' and parents' reasons for initially choosing the French Immersion

program, the criteria that students and parents used to evaluate the French Immersion experience, the commitment to continue in French Immersion at the high school level, the value of the French language culture in the French Immersion setting, the impact of the French language and culture in the students' lives after leaving the program, the students' and parents' recommendations for the French Immersion program, and students' perceptions of the immersion experience as it relates to classroom instruction and peer relationships. These categories generated three themes: commitment to the immersion program, a profile of a French Immersion secondary student, and limitations of the French Immersion experience.

The students and parents involved in Foster's study revealed benefits resulting from continued participation in the program. For example, they emphasized the significance of academic, intellectual, social and personal benefits, including the importance of fluency in the French language. Foster added that the students' sense of commitment seemed to have emerged from their feelings of success and pride in their accomplishments as participants in immersion. The students and parents in Foster's study also recognized the limitations of the immersion program. They characterized these as a shortage of qualified teachers, lack of variety in course selection, limited support for students with special needs, and the fact that French Immersion exists as a less prominent program within a dual track high school.

From the rich qualitative data gathered during semi-structured interviews with six high school students, Foster created a “working profile” of a French Immersion student. She observed, however, that

a further examination of students who have been successful in the immersion program at the secondary level might be beneficial at providing a more comprehensive understanding of those who continue in the program to its completion at the end of high school. (p. 165)

By focusing on the same notion of understanding French Immersion qualitatively, Riva (1996) explored the perceptions of grade six French Immersion students. Her research focused on students’ perceptions of the French Immersion environment, teaching strategies, and their own knowledge and abilities in the French Immersion context. Riva contended that investigating students’ perceptions of their French Immersion experience “will bring an added dimension to the current body of research” (p. 5), namely the students’ descriptive and personal testimony of what it is like to live as a French Immersion student so that we can better understand the meaning of this experience. In Riva’s study, students freely shared their opinions on several aspects of the French Immersion program. For example, they considered the teacher as a “model of attitude” and as a “model of language” and regarded the teacher’s teaching style and personality a motivational factor (p. 94). Also, the students wished they had more of an authentic French accent and improved French

language skills. The students derived many advantages from being in French Immersion. For instance, they felt that bilingualism will lead to enhanced employment opportunities. The students felt that they possess a valuable skill that their friends and family members lack. They also expressed pride in the fact that they can communicate with Francophones. Riva concluded that “in spite of an understanding and appreciation of the French Immersion program’s rationale and of the known benefits of speaking French, these students experienced many frustrations and difficulties” (p. 93). This thesis has added to the body of literature by extending Riva’s research and the understanding of the French Immersion experience to the senior high school years. Because my study attempted to understand the French Immersion experience from the students’ own frame of reference, the students were invited to elaborate on the concerns, challenges, and personal success stories that characterized their experiences.

Students’ Attitudes and Motivation Toward Learning a Second Language

The motivation to learn a second language, as outlined by Gardner (1985), “is seen as referring to the extent to which the individual works or strives to learn the language because of the desire to do so and the satisfaction experienced in the activity” (p. 10). Noels, Clément, and Pelletier (1999) investigated the relationship between French Immersion students’ perceptions of teachers’ communicative style and students’ extrinsic and intrinsic motivation.

They found that students are more likely to be intrinsically motivated to learn a second language if they perceive their teachers as supportive of students' freedom and as diligent in providing constructive feedback regarding students' learning. Equally important, they reported that

the more students feel that they personally have chosen to learn the language and the more they are learning it because they enjoy the learning process, the more effort they make and the more they intend to pursue their studies. (p. 30)

Van der Keilen's 1995 study Use of French, attitudes, and motivations of French immersion students, the purpose was to compare the attitudes and motivations of students in immersion and students in the English program with respect to the French language and the French culture. Van der Keilen also explored the relationship between the learning of French of immersion students and the contacts made with native French speakers. Pupils in grades five to eight attending French Immersion and regular English programs were asked to answer questions on the Attitude Questionnaire, the Desire to Learn French Scale, the Self-Rating Form of French Writing, Reading, Understanding, and Speaking, the Social Distance Scale, and the Interaction Survey. Certain elements from the results of these surveys amalgamate to form another descriptive profile of a French Immersion student. French Immersion students "have a more positive attitude towards various aspects of the French language"

(p. 296), “their motivation to learn a second language...was significantly higher” (p. 296) and “they were generally more accepting of other ethnic groups” (p. 296). An examination of Van der Keilen’s results not only depicts a qualitative portrayal of a French Immersion student, it reveals the intricate relationship between having a positive attitude and the motivation to learn a second language:

More positive attitudes and motivations generally facilitate second language acquisition in FI programs and are associated with more positive self-evaluations of language competence, and reciprocally, higher performance in the second language, as found in FI students, improves attitudes and motivations towards language and target groups. (p. 301)

Other qualitative studies have highlighted the issue of attitudes and motivation toward learning a second language. From the verbal data collected during in-depth interviews, Buonomo (1990) identified certain characteristics that are typical in the motivated foreign language student. He asserted that successful middle school foreign language students have high self-esteem and are very confident. The students involved in Buonomo’s study appreciated the long-term benefits of learning a second language. Furthermore, the students demonstrated that they are responsible individuals and that they take their foreign language studies seriously. Ramage (1990) maintained that highly motivated second language learners show a high interest in the target language

and in all aspects of the language, namely reading, writing, and speaking. Dodick (1996) investigated the attitudes and motivation of high school foreign language students through classroom observation and loosely-guided interviews with his grade nine core French students. He found that American students' lack of motivation in learning French as a second language was attributed to their lack of exposure to foreign language and culture. He recommended that foreign language teachers develop a more culturally oriented curriculum. Dodick added that a greater cultural awareness is the key to increasing students' motivation to learn a second language. Safty (1990) further supported the vital role of culture in second language learning. She declared that "learning a second language needs to be viewed no longer as a window through which the culture can be observed but as a wide open door through which the culture makes itself accessible" (p. 13). Is French culture a motivational factor in the lives of French Immersion students? My personal experience lead me to ponder the reasons for senior high school French Immersion students' high and low levels of motivation and interest for learning French.

Attrition and Retention

For this study, low enrollment in the grade twelve French Immersion class influenced my decision to include participants from the grade eleven class. Combining the two classes increased the pool of possible candidates for

interviews.

Attrition and retention have been the subject of many studies in French Immersion. Nancy Halsall (1994) aimed at developing an understanding of the reasons for retention and attrition of students in French Immersion, particularly at the secondary level. Her study was divided into two sections. The first section synthesized the information in the literature and identified factors influencing attrition and retention in elementary and secondary programs. The analysis of a questionnaire distributed by Canadian Parents for French (CPF) to French Immersion coordinators in school boards across Canada comprised the second part of Halsall's study. According to Halsall, the literature reported that attrition rates in secondary French Immersion ranged from 20% to 82%. For example, Adiv's (1979) survey (as cited in Halsall, 1994) found an attrition rate of 20% in a grade eleven immersion group in Montreal. An attrition rate of 54% was found by Lewis (1986) within a group of grade twelve students from four school districts in British Columbia. Further, in her investigation of attrition for eight years of graduating classes, Halsall (1989) reported a transfer rate ranging from 56 to 82%. Halsall (1994) summarized numerous causes for attrition. These causes were: lack of attractive course choices for students; a demanding workload; students having to choose between immersion and alternative programs; a belief that higher marks are more attainable in the English program; limited opportunities to speak French in and outside class; achievement of satisfaction

level of French language skill; boredom with the program; concerns about the quality of the program and lack of qualified teachers; and the students' reluctance to change schools so that French Immersion studies could be continued.

The focus of the Canadian Parents for French (CPF) survey was to explore further the reasons for attrition in French Immersion, particularly in high school (Halsall, 1994, p. 313). Results of the questionnaire sent by CPF to school boards indicated that attrition was considered a concern predominantly at the secondary level. Few school boards have probed into the reasons for attrition in their secondary schools, adding that it is difficult to track students who have left the program. The results of the questionnaires suggested that there is a strong belief that granting bilingual certificates could be an incentive to encouraging students to complete their studies in immersion. Respondents in the CPF survey also trusted that more support for students with special needs and training for immersion teachers teaching in specialty areas could elevate retention in immersion. Finally, the survey respondents believed that the combination of immersion and gifted programs would be an encouraging factor in retaining students since students wouldn't have to choose one program over another. Halsall recommended that "the focus of future work be placed on improving secondary programs regardless of whether improvement leads to increased retention" (p. 328). This study has not attempted to explain attrition in

French Immersion. However, by individually inviting seven French Immersion students to engage in dialogue about their experiences, it has lead to a better understanding of the reasons why they chose to remain in the program until their senior high school years, grades eleven and twelve.

As a follow-up to her 1992 study The French Immersion choice at high school, Foster (1997) discovered that all six of her student participants graduated with a bilingual certificate. Her intent was to contribute to the knowledge about student retention in French Immersion programs by focusing on the reasons why students have chosen to continue in high school. Since “feelings of success” seemed to be central to the students’ reason for staying in the program, Foster believed that feelings of success and retention in French Immersion were highly correlated. The profile

suggests that these bilingual students were retained in this high school French Immersion program because of the intellectual, academic, personal, and social benefits which they derived, fueled by feelings of confidence and success evolving out of their individual and shared experiences. (p. 12)

Conclusion

The review of the literature demonstrates that researchers are examining and describing aspects of students’ experiences in French Immersion. Most

students derive pride and satisfaction from their education in immersion, adding that their lives have been enriched by the program. Perhaps the nature of this experience could be characterized by the invitation to “enter and ‘feel’ the creative energies . . . which collectively are enabling a group of people to make sense of, to give meanings to, and point to new directions in their common existence” (Safty, 1990, p. 11). Since there is little research that examines the nature of being a student in a French Immersion program, the purpose of this study was to contribute to the studies that have already begun the process of “insightful invention, discovery, or disclosure” (van Manen, p. 79) of the existential meaning of the French Immersion experience. The next chapter focuses on research design, descriptions of the seven participants, data collection, the interview process, data analyses, and a summary of themes and sub-themes representing the participants’ lived experiences.

CHAPTER THREE

Design of the Study

This is a qualitative study based on interviews with seven senior high school students in a French Immersion program. A phenomenological approach to the interviews was taken in order to gain insight into the lived experiences of the participants. Phenomenology always asks about “the nature or meaning of something” and “offers accounts of experienced space, time, body, and human relation as we live them” (van Manen, 1990, p. 184). It was an ideal approach since my intention was to “encourage a certain attentive awareness to the details and seemingly trivial dimensions” of the everyday lives of seven high school French Immersion students (p. 8). The semi-structured interview, an effective means to understand lived experience from the participant’s own frame of reference, was chosen as a means of collecting accounts of seven immersion students’ personal experiences.

Field Entry

The right to conduct this phenomenological study was granted by the Research Ethics Board, Lakehead University (Appendix A). After providing the Director of Education with a copy of my approved proposal, I was granted shortly thereafter permission to implement my research (Appendix B). Next, the Principal of the high school granted verbal authorization to proceed after being

presented with a letter of permission outlining the purpose and nature of the study (Appendix C). In addition, the French Immersion teachers were provided with a letter of invitation that requested their assistance in selecting participants (Appendix D). Finally, the parents of the participants received a cover letter outlining the purpose and nature of the study as well as guarantees of confidentiality and anonymity. The parents returned a signed consent form giving permission for their son or daughter to participate in the study (Appendix E and Appendix F).

Time Frame

Twenty-one interviews were conducted between January and June, 2000. Interview times ranged from twenty to forty minutes. Data analyses, including uncovering themes and sub-themes, supplementary literature review, and revisions were ongoing.

Sample Selection

Seven participants, four females and three males, enrolled in grades eleven and twelve in a dual-track composite high school, participated in this phenomenological study. Six of the seven participants were recommended by the French Immersion teachers. The seventh participant approached me in my classroom several weeks after I had begun the interview process with the six

other participants. In indicating how much she wanted to describe her positive experiences as a French Immersion student and how strongly she wished to participate in the study, she impressed me with her vitality and exuberance. She genuinely believed that she had a valuable contribution to make to research in French Immersion education. In fact, all of the participants were eager to contribute to a qualitative study in French Immersion. Naturally, I was delighted that they all possessed the same excitement, openness, and willingness to share their experiences with respect to their education in a French Immersion program.

Participants in the senior grades were chosen for this study because they had remained in the program until at least grade eleven and were able to draw on a multitude of experiences that characterized the essence of being a student in French Immersion. All participants are anglophone students in an Early Immersion Program. Pseudonyms were used to ensure anonymity.

Risks and Benefits

Participation in the study was voluntary and did not pose any physical, psychological, or social risk. The participants had the right to withdraw from the study at any time regardless of the reason. Participants may have benefitted from the opportunity to reflect on the nature and meaning of the everyday experience of being a French Immersion student.

Brief Descriptions of the Seven Participants

Hoju is a friendly and curious student in grade twelve who values the intimate peer community that evolved from his French Immersion experience. He believes that a major positive dimension of being in the French Immersion program is the employment opportunity afforded by bilingualism. Furthermore, he foresees other personal post secondary benefits involving the use of French in real-life situations such as the ability to communicate in French while traveling or the chance to study culinary arts in France. He recalled the support his parents extended to their three children, all students in French Immersion. “They just never let us give up,” he declared. Similarly, he acknowledged the support offered by his current French Immersion teacher, stating that “she knows who we are and what we’re good at.”

Julie, a good-natured and ambitious grade twelve student, was interviewed days before departing on a three-month student exchange to France. Although she would be expected to fulfill course requirements for classes missed during her absence as well as for classes she attended in France, she described this out of school French Immersion experience as “worth missing a whole semester of school for.” Julie considers herself an active and hard-working student who strives for perfection. In her interviews, Julie elaborated on the confidence and success that developed from her immersion experience. She credited the French Immersion program for making her a more well-rounded

person and ultimately thanks her parents for believing in the immersion option.

Kelly struck me as a dynamic individual from the moment she appeared in my classroom to ask about the possibility of volunteering as the seventh participant in this study. Indeed, she assured me that “as long as you find something interesting to talk about - something you feel passionate about - it’s really, really, easy to talk.” An independent and assertive grade eleven student, Kelly reported that she would have preferred a wider choice of courses in high school. She believes that French Immersion students are more motivated and dedicated to achieving high marks than their English program peers. She asserted that higher expectations and more academic pressure are part of the challenge of being in French Immersion.

Michael, a conscientious grade eleven student, reported a positive self-assessment of his capabilities in French. The benefits which Michael perceived to be important were the close-knit friendships that developed among immersion classmates, fluency in the French language, the ability to express oneself and conceptualize ideas differently than his English program peers, and the experience of learning about the French culture. Although Michael plans to major in aerospace engineering at the University of Manitoba, he intends to maintain his French by studying the language as a minor. According to Michael, his bilingual status will be beneficial since “Manitoba has the second largest Francophone population outside of Quebec.”

Natalie, an outgoing and energetic grade eleven student, cheerfully offered numerous examples to illustrate her high level of commitment to the French Immersion program. In particular, she has motivated some discouraged immersion classmates to persevere, especially during the first month of school after students have had a two month hiatus from any French language communication. She indicated a positive attitude toward the French culture. Moreover, she described herself as a “people person” who takes great pride in her ability to communicate in French. According to Natalie, a bilingual education provides a better education. She approached me recently on two occasions to inquire about the completion of this study. Of course, I was pleased not only in her sincere interest to read about the lived experiences of seven French Immersion students, but in the fact that she felt proud about making a valuable contribution to research in immersion education.

Rob indicated that knowledge of French has considerable influence on employment opportunity. This was evident in his second interview when he said, “If I have the same qualifications as someone else, and he doesn’t have French and I do, I might have a better chance of getting a job.” An outgoing and imaginative grade eleven student, Rob is committed to receiving his bilingual diploma despite the challenges he has faced. He particularly emphasized the extra effort required of French Immersion students in order to be successful in both immersion and English program courses.

Finally, **Tiffany**, a kind and friendly grade eleven student, cited one of her immersion teachers as a strong influence in her decision to persevere in French Immersion. A loyal friend, Tiffany discussed the value of the friendships which had evolved out of the immersion experience. For example, she commented that her “best friends are in French Immersion.” She maintains a positive attitude toward her immersion courses and toward the language, feeling that speaking French is fun. Equally important, Tiffany attributed her love for learning Spanish and her aptitude for acquiring a third language to her French language background.

Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, and the diary of one participant. Each participant was interviewed until data saturation was reached. The information gathered in the interviews was “incidental and [came] out as the interview proceed[ed]” (Selinger & Shohamy, 1989, p. 166). By allowing the participants to express themselves freely in the interview, “ample and often unexpected information emerge[d]” (Selinger & Shohamy, p. 167). Through diary writing, one participant was “encouraged to continue reflecting on [her] learning experiences and to try to discover relationships that [she] might otherwise not see” (van Manen, p. 73). Julie volunteered to record her feelings and attitudes toward her experience through a diary. Diary entries were free-

flowing and unstructured and focused on French Immersion experiences in and out of school.

The Interview Process

The interviews were guided by the following questions:

- 1. What is your lived experience as a senior high school French Immersion student?**
- 2. What do you value from this experience?**
- 3. Why have you decided to remain in this program?**
- 4. Describe some of your out of school French Immersion experiences.**

The participants were interviewed immediately after school in a classroom with which they are all familiar. In order to create an atmosphere of trust, reassurance, and support, all interviews were preceded by informal conversations. The interviews, although semi-structured and open-ended, focused around the main research question: What are the lived experiences of senior high school French Immersion students? My goal was to understand the French Immersion experience from the participants' point of view. I interviewed Kelly and Rob twice. Three interviews were conducted with Julie, Michael, and Tiffany. Hoju and Natalie met with me on four occasions. A total of twenty-one interviews took place.

Each participant shaped the content of the interview allowing me to

refocus and probe the participant to expand on issues which he or she had initiated. Tapes were transcribed immediately following each interview and available at subsequent interviews so that both I and the participant could refer to a written record. As the interviews progressed, I learned what the important questions were. I bore in mind that "information in the qualitative interview project is cumulative, each interview building on and connecting to the other" (Bogdan and Biklen, 1992, p. 98). I often began subsequent interviews with questions and statements taken from topics that emerged during previous interviews. For example, propositions such as "I'd like to hear more of your views on ..." or "Tell me more about what you mean by ..." invited the participants to recall the meaning, description, and interpretation of a particular experience. Also, comments like "An example might help me to understand what you mean" encouraged the participants to include memories, personal anecdotes, and examples to clarify a point.

Data Analyses

Initial data analysis for this study was concurrent with data collection. By making a summary of the topics discussed in each interview, I was able to analyze the content for words and phrases which represented regularities and patterns. My goal was to highlight patterns which were suggested by the data themselves. More precisely, the data for this study were analyzed inductively.

Bogdan and Biklen (1992) hold that “theory developed this way emerges from the bottom up (rather than from the top down), from many disparate pieces of collected evidence that are interconnected” (p. 31). After taking long, undisturbed periods of time to examine each transcript several times for recurring topics, I developed a preliminary list of themes and sub-themes. Of course, this initial list of themes had been modified several times and new themes were added with subsequent interviews. Eventually, recurring themes and sub-themes for which I had most substantiation were recovered as a result of analyzing the meaning of each lived experience. Although lived experience cannot simply be represented in conceptual frameworks, it is still necessary to try “to determine what the themes are, the experiential subjects that make up that experience” (p. 79).

This chapter emphasized the qualitative approach used to understand the lived experiences of seven senior high school students in a French Immersion program. A brief description of each participant was presented and details concerning data collection, the interview process, and data analyses were discussed. The findings presented in Chapter Four will reflect on the themes and sub-themes that characterize the nature of the lived experience of being a senior high school student in a French Immersion program.

CHAPTER FOUR

Presentation of Findings

Introduction

Presented here are the findings of this study on the French Immersion experiences of seven senior high school students. Phenomenological in nature, this study aims at understanding the meaning or essence of being a French Immersion student. Conducting a phenomenological study of the lived experiences of senior high school French Immersion students provided insight into which experiences are viewed as rewarding, constructive, motivational, and positive. Although no conceptual framework can capture the multi-layered nature of each participant's experiences fully, the findings from each narrative are presented according to five themes: *The French Immersion "Family", Achieving and Maintaining Success in French Immersion, Reasons to Stay in French Immersion, Perceptions of French Immersion Students, and Challenges Unique to the Immersion Experience.*

The French Immersion "Family"

Although all themes and sub-themes established in this study offer a deepened and more reflective understanding of the lived experience of being a high school student in French Immersion, one theme that most frequently embodies the evolving meaning of this experience is that of the French

Immersion “Family”. The French Immersion “Family” incorporates three sub-themes: Friendships, Comfort Zone, and Memories. First, numerous statements, anecdotes, and descriptions seem particularly insightful and revealing about the importance of friendship that characterizes the French Immersion experience. Second, the participants expressed that the French Immersion classroom consistently remains a retreat that encourages feelings of comfort and security. Finally, memories of the French Immersion experience are common threads that unify French Immersion students of a particular class. Family members share a history together. Similarly, French Immersion students share the familial bond of past events.

Friendships

The seven participants attributed great importance to the meaningful relationships within their peer group. They emphasized the close-knit friendships that evolved from their French Immersion experience. Furthermore, they reported that friendships and camaraderie with their French Immersion peers is what they value the most from the program.

In his interviews, Hoju described how close-knit friendships have been personally significant in his life as a student in the program. According to Hoju, the interdependence amongst the students has strengthened over the years and has been a positive factor in the development of peer relationships. For

example, Hoju described his class as “an extremely well-woven fighting force” which benefits from the strengths and weaknesses of each student on an intramural team. One of the important factors that provides commonality to the French Immersion class is the concept of family. Hoju cited that being with your French Immersion peers is like belonging to a family.

I think being together for so long is a positive thing ... Let’s compare this to family ... You spend so much time with your brothers and sisters and your parents that you know them, you understand them and trust them, and by being with other members of the French Immersion class, we’ve gotten to know each other, understand each other and we trust each other, so they’re just like another family that we can go to and belong to in society.

Equally important, Hoju is confident that his relationships with his best friends from the immersion program will extend beyond the high school experience.

I could see some of us sticking together forever ... most definitely maintaining contact ... Some of us will go out every week outside of school, spend whole weekends together ... I would most definitely stay in contact with most of my friends from French Immersion. I can’t see any reason not to.

Julie asserted that she and her classmates had an exceptional connection

that students in an English program do not experience. The perception that French Immersion students confront similar challenges and experiences reinforces friendships among classmates.

We are really close. We've gone on trips together and there's a strong bond between us just because we've known each other for so long and they're friends that ... I'll have for the rest of my life. Also, when our class first entered into our senior elementary school, we were brought even closer just because we were the different group and everyone was getting used to a new school and new experiences and we all had each other because we were all facing the same dilemmas.

It was not uncommon for the participants to make comparisons between the relationships of students in French Immersion classes and those of students in English program classes. For instance, Kelly compared her class to an English program class and characterized her group as having "something special".

We are really close-knit people that I'll think of all my life ... When we have a high school reunion, it won't be just be like a reunion, like, "Oh, that's Joe. He had a locker beside me." It'll be, "Wow!" These are the people that I know as well as my brother and sister. These are close people, 'cause it's a whole classroom of people

that have been together for so long, and that's something special.

Michael shared Kelly's view that the bond between students in a French Immersion class is unparalleled. More specifically, he enjoys the camaraderie, the comfort, the trust, and the familiarity inspired by relationships with peers in his French Immersion class.

We find it easier to talk ... It's easier to laugh ... You know what other people's weaknesses are, what their strengths are and you're just really comfortable around them. You're not uptight, you're not trying to really impress them too much or anything. It's just you being you.

Although Michael transferred to his present school in grade nine, he easily assimilated into a group of students that had been together since senior kindergarten. In fact, Michael asserted that his best friends are now from the French Immersion program.

Natalie, Rob, and Tiffany treasure the interpersonal relationships among the students in their French Immersion class. Natalie emphasized that the level of friendship classmates feel for each other can be attributed to the longevity of the relationships within her class since senior kindergarten.

We've been together since S.K. ... I value my classmates ... Not everyone can say that they have a close relationship with all the people they went to elementary school with ... I just think it's great.

Equally important, she noted that the sense of cohesiveness is not exclusive to long-standing members of her French Immersion class. In fact, she added that because all French Immersion students share the common bond of similar experiences and knowledge of the French language, newcomers readily integrated themselves into the core group.

Every time we'd get new people, it's like, "Hey, you guys have been together forever, so I might as well just be incorporated with everything." It's just fun being in the French Immersion class because we're all unique because we all speak French and we have all learned it. We just feel really comfortable around each other.

Rob acknowledged that friends are a reason to remain in French Immersion. He cherishes the spirit of friendly familiarity prevalent in relationships with lifelong peers.

The thing about the French Immersion class is that you're with your friends since S.K. so you know everyone ... It's kind of fun.

Similarly, Tiffany acknowledged friends as a main reason to remain in the French Immersion program. Indeed, Tiffany's best friends are her French Immersion peers.

I have been friends with most of them [French Immersion classmates] since S.K. so I'm really close to them ... My best

friends are in French Immersion.

The findings of this study reveal that French Immersion classes reflect a high degree of friendship among students, confirming the findings of Edwards and Rehorick (1990, p. 27). In their comparative study of the perceptions which immersion and non-immersion children have on their learning environment, Edwards and Rehorick hold that students “help each other with homework, enjoy working together, and generally get to know each other better than the children in the non-immersion classroom” (p. 27). According to the seven participants, the sense of security that occupies the French immersion classroom fortifies the friendships and unity among immersion classmates.

Comfort Zone

The French Immersion experience possibly offers students the opportunity to explore the world from a safe haven. The students interviewed for this study reported that the atmosphere in their French Immersion classroom proved to be supportive, open, and liberating. The French Immersion classroom was compared to a community and a retreat to a common ground. Ultimately, this secure ambiance would give French Immersion students the confidence to be themselves within a positive learning environment.

Hoju perceived a difference in social interaction between English program classes and French Immersion classes. According to Hoju, it is typical for French

Immersion students to spend a few minutes at the beginning of each French Immersion class to socialize as an entire group. In English program classes, students socialize, but on a smaller scale. In other words, in French Immersion, social interaction is a whole class activity. Hoju's French Immersion class is perceived as a safe and pleasant environment where everyone knows one another and where interaction occurs because everyone is relaxed and content to return to familiar common ground.

Sure, you'd ask your friends (in English program classes) what they did on the weekend, but you wouldn't do it as a class. In French, we do it as a class ... We could either talk about old times or ... new things and we enjoy hearing about what happened after a weekend. We usually take a chunk out of class and tell the teacher what we did during the weekend and it's kind of fun just to know what happens.

Hoju confirmed that conversation is a pragmatic exercise since it allows students to practice their French on topics of personal relevance.

Julie assessed her elementary French Immersion setting as a "unified place" where the students shared the comfort of comparable experiences. Additionally, she included students from all grades in the French Immersion homogenous community.

In the French Immersion school, everybody was kind of like a big

group and we were all learning the same things and kind of on the same level, like a family, sort of, and then we all went to the dual-track school in senior elementary and we were kind of like our own group of people just because we were different from everybody else by taking the French program ... In my elementary school, I thought the whole school was like a family ... It was kind of like a brother / sister system and we all had something in common.

Although Kelly's interests are different from those of her French Immersion peers, she still finds solace among her friends in the French Immersion classroom.

Something that is really special is that we have a special connection. These are close people 'cause it's a whole classroom of people that you've been together with for so long and that's something special ... it's like your neighbour that you grew up with when you were a kid. Maybe you don't hang around with that person, but you know that person quite well.

The relationships among students in Kelly's class support a classroom community environment conducive to an atmosphere of comfort, confidence, and trust.

Michael accentuated the feelings of comfort that dominate the French Immersion classroom milieu.

I think what I enjoy about it (French) is the camaraderie in the class with all the other students because you've been with them for a long time so you know them, you're familiar with them, you're comfortable around them.

Michael explained that French Immersion students behave differently in English program classes. More specifically, he credited the French Immersion classroom as a world in which students can truly be themselves and as a sanctuary where they can find themselves at home.

Last semester, I was with this girl who was in my French Immersion class and I was in all of her classes. She never says anything in all the other classes and then she's the loudest person in the French Immersion class - the most talkative person there ... I think it's just 'cause she's really familiar with everybody. They're her closest friends. It's just who she is.

Finally, Michael offered an overall opinion of the French Immersion classroom environment.

It's looser, it's freer - almost like you can say more things and get away with more things ... like friendly jabs ... like if it were somebody else, it would be an insult, but with them, it's like joking around and it's all in good fun.

Natalie and Tiffany asserted that the feelings of comfort in a French

Immersion classroom create a classroom environment which fosters communication and thus enhances opportunities for learning. Natalie said that because everyone knows one another, French Immersion students are uninhibited in saying what they really think during classroom discussions. In Natalie's opinion, this is a form of cooperative learning.

You learn things from each other ... it's a lot more comfortable with the class because we know everyone ... You'll say pretty much anything not caring what anybody thinks because you know everybody there.

It is evident that Natalie cherishes the openness and the invitation to share personal insight during classroom discussion.

Similarly, Tiffany perceived her immersion class as a safe and pleasant environment where interaction can occur with the least amount of anxiety. She explained that the students are very open and unreserved in whole group conversations.

If we're having a discussion in French Immersion we'll come out and say what we think, and we don't care what other people think, but if we're in another class, we might shy back from answers because there's people we don't know and we're more worried about what they think.

Tiffany attributed another social advantage to being with the same group

of immersion peers. Because French Immersion students maintain four out of eight courses in French in grade nine and remain together for half of their course load, Tiffany experienced a smooth transition from senior elementary to high school.

It was easier coming to high school ... knowing that you're going to have lots of friends that are already there ... being in the same class with all of them.

The results from this study indicate that the French Immersion classroom is a retreat that offers trust, support, security, and the freedom to be oneself. It is within this comfort zone that lifelong memories, a distinctive bond shared among French Immersion classmates, are created. A third important factor that provides commonality to a particular group of French Immersion students is common past experiences. These are described next.

Memories

Shared memories are the tools that French Immersion students sometimes use to maintain unity within their classroom culture. For example, Hoju and his peers enjoy talking about the past because they have such a large pool of memories to draw upon. It is typical for students in his class to discuss a funny incident that took place as early as their senior kindergarten year. Hoju stated:

We'll just turn around and talk to each other and reminisce about old times and it's fun 'cause you'll remember things and you'll just have a blast ... We were always together and we always did everything together in school and we have fond memories of each other.

Julie experienced a sense of familiarity and tranquility in recollecting events from her elementary school immersion experience.

Now that I am in high school, I see a lot of faces that I recognize that I used to read to when I was in elementary school and we kind of say hi and ask how we're doing and how's French going ... When you see other people when they get older ... it's nice to remember when they were young.

Even Michael, who joined his present French Immersion class in grade nine, explained that the memories created over the last three years have added a meaningful dimension to his life as an immersion student.

Another thing I get out of the program is just memories of what happened, something to draw on ... You get experience - experience dealing with people, experience dealing with people who speak another language.

For Natalie, memories of the French Immersion experience have value and significance. She asserted that the bond that French Immersion students

share is because of the long period of time they have spent together.

Our memories have more meaning to us just 'cause we always have sort of a relationship with these people ... We'll just start talking about all the things that happened in our French classes and I guess the English (program) people don't get the opportunity to do that. I'm not saying that's bad or anything. I just think I'm fortunate because we do get that.

For Hoju, Julie, Michael, and Natalie, reminiscing about past events is a significant ingredient of the French Immersion experience. They feel united and comforted by the memories that they created together not only as a group of French Immersion students, but also as a community of good friends with a common history.

Achieving and Maintaining Success in French Immersion

The second theme, *Achieving and Maintaining Success in French Immersion*, unveils evidence that is particularly revealing about the elements that contribute to a successful experience in this program. The participants in this study are considered to be successful in the French Immersion program since they have chosen to continue in this bilingual educational alternative, regardless of their scholastic achievement. Although “phenomenology does not allow for empirical generalizations, the production of law-like statements, or the establishment of functional relationships” (van Manen, 1990, p. 22), there are certain common factors that may have contributed to the success of the French Immersion participants involved in this study. First, the participants were retained in the immersion program because of their perseverance and commitment to the program. Second, the positive attitudes and feelings of pride outlined in the participants’ personal descriptions give them the energy required to capitalize on this enriched educational opportunity. Finally, the support offered by peers, parents, and teachers of the immersion program have proven to be the foundation upon which the seven participants are allowed to build these motivational characteristics.

Perseverance and Commitment

This section depicts the commitment of seven senior high school students

to the French Immersion program. All seven participants revealed an impressively high degree of commitment to their immersion studies, regardless of their academic standing. The inner motivation to put forth more effort and patience into learning a second language is extended to several areas of the immersion experience. For example, it is the tenacity of these participants and their goal of doing their best that nurtures the desire to complete the program. Also, encouraging classmates to continue in the program by emphasizing the time and effort invested over the years demonstrates a committed attitude toward the French Immersion program. Although the participants will be rewarded with a bilingual diploma upon graduation, it is their determination to continue in the program that fosters the feeling of success.

Hoju attributed his persevering nature to his competitive personality. He described himself as an assertive student who strives for his personal best. Also, he explained that competition gives immersion students the resiliency to be persistent in any situation.

We're always really competitive with each other ... We're always really strong. We always face adversity head on and we don't usually back down ... A little competition always pushes the competitors to try harder and be better than everyone else therefore everyone has to try to do better and better and better until you exceed, kind of, or make it to the point where you feel

comfortable ...

Julie depicted the qualities of perseverance and commitment in a description of an out of school immersion experience. During an eighth grade class excursion to Quebec, Julie ensured the effort she and her classmates made to speak French in an authentic setting.

We would go into restaurants and try to speak French but the waiters ended up speaking in English to us ... It was really disappointing just because we kind of thought that defeated the purpose of going there ... We tried to speak French as much as we could and when somebody started to speak English to us, we would continue to speak in French ... We did put forth a good effort.

Similarly, Kelly exemplified the value of making an effort in speaking French in an out of school environment. She encountered a French woman during a door-to-door fund raising endeavour, and although it was obvious that Kelly had an anglophone accent, she was commended nonetheless for communicating in her second language.

One time my friend and I were raising money ... we were going door to door and the person was French and they just moved here, and my friend wasn't able to speak French and ... I had said, "Oh, it's okay. I can speak French to you" and they were really impressed and they thought that was neat ... They could tell I wasn't

Francophone, and ... that I made that effort.

Further, the importance of perseverance and commitment in Kelly's attitude toward French Immersion is palpable in her unrelenting conversation about a friend who had recently chosen to drop out of the program. Kelly has never considered forsaking her immersion education, especially since she is so close to receiving her bilingual diploma.

Why put forth so much work and then just leave it and ditch it? ... It doesn't make any sense ... One of my friends left last year and I couldn't believe it ... I said, "I don't understand why you're leaving. You've put so much time into this."

Although Kelly mentioned the heavy workload as the reason for her classmate leaving the program, she deemed that an impending bilingual diploma should have inspired her friend to overcome her academic difficulties.

In the same way, Michael has been the voice of reason with a discouraged classmate who speaks about the possibility of dropping out of French. According to Michael, "it would be a waste of all those years you spent in French Immersion." Generally, Michael sets high standards for himself. He is committed to above average marks in all subject areas, including French.

I'm a good student. I have homework done probably about 90% of the time. I do very well on tests. I'm not afraid to participate in class. That's really how I learn - by getting involved. I'm not afraid

to make mistakes ... There's always been pressure to get an A in the (French) class ... That's pretty much my own motivation.

Natalie was a particularly admirable example of a committed and persevering young woman. For example, Natalie addressed the fact that communicating in one's second language is never easy. It requires more effort and patience.

If you're trying to explain ... it's easier to say it in your first language, but if you work a little harder ... you just have to think a little longer ... to be able to explain it in ... French.

Although Natalie considers herself a satisfactory student, she believes that persistence is the key to her success.

When you start something, it's probably better to finish it ... My marks aren't particularly the greatest now, but ... at least I'm not dropping out of high school ... A lot of people just give up.

Natalie has experienced the rewards of persistence. Specifically, she recounted the feelings of pride once she mastered one grammatical aspect of French class.

It took me a while to pick up conjugating the verbs, but I finally got a handle of everything ... and this year, I tried even harder and I got the second highest percent in the class for the verb section ... I was so happy.

Finally, Natalie's commitment to math echoes her attitude to persevere until one

fulfills a necessary task. Although math is her most difficult subject, she is ambitious to complete the course.

I hate it (math) so much ... but I want to finish it even if I don't need it ... I have to say that at least I tried to get through it ... It's hard getting committed to something but once you are, you're determined to finish it.

Rob's sense of commitment to continue in French Immersion until completion of the program was a prominent topic in his conversations with me. For example, on three separate occasions, at the end of grades three, six, and eight, Rob considered dropping out of the program. According to Gardner (1985), "motivation is the combination of effort plus desire to achieve the goal of learning the language plus favourable attitudes toward learning the language" (p. 10). Each time Rob felt discouraged about the increasingly difficult workload, he regained his sense of encouragement to persevere to fulfill a goal that, over the years, has required exceptional effort. Further, Rob proposed that students who abandon the program are taking "the easy route out" since studying in the immersion program is a double responsibility:

It's extra effort to learn English and French at the same time ... the English (program) kids are just learning English and they're concentrating on just one language ... In immersion, you're concentrating on more than one (language), so that's extra effort.

According to Rob, it is that personality trait, the will to extend more effort to achieve a goal, that distinguishes persevering immersion students and those who have chosen the English program path.

Maybe that (effort) separates people who stay in French from the people who can't or didn't even try ... It shows that they have the motivation.

Also, because striving for the bilingual diploma demonstrates commitment, the persevering immersion student may be a more attractive job applicant to prospective employers, according to Rob.

Tiffany highlighted the perception that French Immersion students' success is due to their impressive academic achievement. Instead, she attributed immersion students' sense of commitment to the program as the base of their accomplishment.

They figure just because we're in French Immersion and we are able to stay in it without dropping out that we have to be really smart for some reason.

Tiffany admitted that one of her personal goals was to complete the French Immersion program in its entirety. She added that the lament expressed by peers who left the program was a major incentive to persist in her immersion studies.

I see other people that already dropped it and they regret it, so I

don't want to drop it and find out I didn't want to after ... They're always interested in what we do in French ... They just tell me that they regret it.

The seven participants interviewed for this study provided evidence which established their sense of perseverance and commitment to their immersion studies. This supports Ramage's (1990) contention that students who choose to continue studying a second language display high levels of commitment to foreign language study. Indeed, the success that unfolds from this dedication nurtures the positive attitudes and feelings of pride experienced by the seven participants.

Positive Attitudes and Feelings of Pride

Ramage (1990) affirmed that "continuing students indicated more positive attitudes towards the learning situation and higher levels of commitment to foreign language study than did discontinuers" (p. 211). Indeed, the seven participants interviewed for this phenomenological study constructed vivid descriptions of their own positive attitudes and feelings of pride that emerged from the achievement of personal goals in their immersion experience.

Hoju, Julie, Kelly, Natalie, Rob, and Tiffany described feelings of pride that grew out of successful experiences in the French Immersion program. For example, Hoju anticipated that once he graduates from French Immersion, he

will experience “a big revelation” that “it’s all been more than worth it.” He feels proud of his accomplishments and fortunate to have had the chance to participate in this second language program.

I think about all the time and effort ... thirteen years of my life that ...
I’ve learned twice as much as everyone else ... I’m proud of what
I’ve done and not many people get the opportunity that I’ve had.

Much of the content of Julie’s interviews reflects the feelings of pride that originate from a diversity of French Immersion experiences. She is beginning to perceive the rewards that emanate from her diligent commitment to French Immersion.

It feels good to be able to be successful in a different language ...
When you have been working at something for so many years and
then you actually get to put it into use and to practice, it’s a really
good feeling ...

Once in France, Julie impressed me with two e-mail letters. She was elated that the French complimented her on her proficient level of fluency in the French language.

I’ve been asked a few times why I came because I can speak so
well! ... La majorité des profs croyaient que j’étais québécoise à
cause de mon niveau de connaissance de langue.

Kelly recalled two memories that reflect her proud feelings of being able to

communicate in her second language. Kelly recounted a childhood incident that allowed her, for the first time, to use her French outside of school.

My aunt called and I was able to say, “Hi Aunt. How’s it going?” ... and it was so neat that I could do that ... My friends ... were in the room and they said, “What’s she saying?” ... and I thought ... I had something they didn’t have.

On another occasion, Kelly was able to help a friend communicate with her French exchange partner. Because Kelly bridged the communication barrier that existed between her friend and her partner, she experienced a heightened sense of pride that she characterized as one reason for a stronger motivation to learn French.

In describing her two week exchange to Quebec, Natalie confirmed a sense of pride in her bilingual status.

I remember a lot of kids there were in Core French, so I did a lot of translating. I wasn’t as fluent as the people in Quebec, but the English students would be kind of scared to talk to the French people, so I’d translate or tell them what to say and I felt kinda good about that ...

Similarly, Natalie derived a feeling of accomplishment in her third place finish in an eighth grade French oral communications contest. She took pride in her ability to independently research a difficult topic in her second language.

Rob outlined the feelings of pride he experienced the first time he used his French in an authentic setting.

We drove to Ottawa ... My parents visited these people who can't speak English ... so I translated for them ... It felt good and my parents were impressed ... I was ... only in the third grade.

Tiffany's sense of pride in her French language capabilities and self-confidence were augmented tremendously during a two week exchange to Quebec. Feeling intimidated about speaking French with members of her host family, she was surprised to see that she had underestimated her French language capabilities.

I went to Quebec for two weeks ... and I lived at somebody else's house and they only knew French ... so I had to speak it ... Then it was a lot easier than I thought it would be ... In movie theatres, I thought I wouldn't understand but it was just like it was in English.

Successful French Immersion experiences also inspired positive attitudes in Julie, Michael, Rob, and Tiffany. For instance, Julie was enthusiastic, energetic, and positive in her outlook on her impending three month overseas experience in France.

Because I'm leaving for France, I see that as one of my greatest successes ever ... and I am confident that I will be able to cohabit with the actual real French people ... I am bilingual and I can do

mostly anything in both languages ...

Although positive attitudes toward second language learning have been found dwindling at the high school level (Van der Keilen, 1995, p. 301), Michael displayed an optimistic attitude with respect to the French language and his linguistic competencies. For example, Michael reported that a conscientious effort to participate in activities and situations involving use of the French language have contributed to his success in the program.

I'm not afraid to participate in class. That's really how I learn - by getting involved. I'm not afraid to make mistakes ... I often help students that are having trouble and I like sharing my knowledge ... I have a lot of confidence in my abilities.

Successful French Immersion experiences have been instrumental in Natalie's positive perception of her progress as a student. For instance, she characterized her two week exchange to Quebec as a fun and enjoyable learning experience that allowed her to become more independent. She recounted a renewed appreciation of various aspects of the French language as well as towards French people and their culture.

Rob's positive outlook regarding the benefits of immersion is evident in his belief that French Immersion is the route to personal growth and a well-rounded education. According to Rob, French Immersion "builds character" since immersion students are obligated to make a more concerted effort in maintaining

marks and workload in both French and English.

It (the French Immersion program) allows you to learn ... to pick up things more quickly ... You learned more than one thing so that way you'd be able to handle more on your plate when you're older too.

Finally, Tiffany conceded that she developed a more favourable attitude towards French Immersion after experiencing the French language and the culture during her two week student exchange to Quebec.

Certainly, the positive attitudes and feelings of pride that stem from the participants' successful French Immersion experiences have shaped the nature of their involvement in this bilingual program of choice. In fact, in the CBC radio broadcast *French Immersion: 30 Years Later*, Elizabeth Murphy commented that the successful immersion students are the ones "who are really motivated, willing to take a risk, who have a positive attitude" (January 24, 2000). The next sub-theme illustrates that the success in French Immersion relies on the support of parents, teachers, and peers.

Support Systems: Parents, Teachers, and Peers

The sub-theme of support proved to be a recurring pattern that emerged from the data. The participants cited that support from parents, teachers, or peers directly influenced their skills, attitude, and achievement, and in many cases, became essential components in their success in the program.

Parents. “Immersion parents, by their very nature, are committed, enthusiastic, and take an active part in their child’s education” (Canadian Education Association, 1992, p. 25). The parents of the seven participants made the initial choice for French Immersion. According to the participants, parents have stressed the importance of learning French and have demonstrated their commitment by guiding their children as they progressed through the program. Their unceasing devotion and positive influence have been integral in the empowerment felt by some students to complete the program.

Hoju expressed his gratitude for his parents’ decision to enrol their three children in the immersion program. Additionally, he reported that his parents have always been inspirational, particularly in the area of promoting second language educational activities. Because bilingualism is an invaluable asset in the competitive job market, he is glad “now more than ever” that his parents made this decision for him. He identified his parents’ support as unrelenting.

For a long time, it was my parents telling me “stay in, stay in, stay in” ... Once we got to grade eight and we went through our high school plan to see what we were doing, we actually finally realized why our parents put us in it ... They just never let us give up.

Hoju displayed confidence in his parents’ choice for enrolling him in French Immersion.

You’ll have to have two languages, maybe three, to get anywhere in

the world, and I wouldn't want anything less for my kids than my parents did for me.

Evidently, his parents have been influential role-models and advocates for French Immersion education.

Similarly, Julie feels very fortunate that her parents opted for the immersion alternative. Her father, in particular, has been, beyond doubt, an incontestable influence in Julie's positive outlook in regard to second language learning.

I think it was mostly my dad that encouraged me ... He's a great speaker and he can speak a few different languages and he really wanted me to have the same opportunity as he did ... It really helped him in his life ... He valued that a lot, so he decided to put us in it.

Julie's father promoted the social and personal benefits of being bilingual as well as the academic advantages. Certainly, his attitude has not only been exemplary, but also formative in ameliorating Julie's French language skills and in fostering a healthy perspective on second language learning.

He helps me a lot with my homework and ... sometimes we talk French ... I'm kind of striving to get my dad's knowledge as I grow up ... It's amazing how much he knows ... Just because he knows so many languages, he was able to pick up the other ones really

easily.

Kelly recounted the frustrations that she felt as a senior kindergarten student new to the immersion program. Because Kelly believes that parental encouragement is very important for students attempting to learn a second language, she identified this incident as a critical moment and a prominent memory in her immersion education.

One time ... I was just really angry and I said, "I don't like this and I don't know what they're talking about and she (the teacher) won't speak to me in English" ... I found it really hard when I was young ... and my mom kept saying, "Well, try it out. It'll get better ... she just does that so you'll learn quicker."

Although the decision to enroll him in French is a consequence of his parent's vision, Michael is now beginning to appreciate the spectrum of benefits of being bilingual. Parental involvement has been beneficial in reinforcing Michael's intrinsic motivation to continue his immersion studies.

Unlike a lot of parents, my parents have never really offered rewards for good tests ... It's always been encouragement like "well done" or ... the joking if you get a 98% "well what happened to the other two?"

Also, in order to help Michael fulfill his goal of proficiency in the French language, Michael is expected to put forth a productive effort to achieve his best. Indeed, it

was because of his parents' overall favourable view of French Immersion that Michael was encouraged to remain in the program beyond grade eight.

Natalie reported that French language study has always been strongly supported in her home environment. Natalie's mother advocated French Immersion because she anticipated enhanced employment opportunities for her daughter. Natalie has learned an important lesson from her mother's experience:

My mom told me that when she was applying for jobs, they always asked, "Do you speak French?" and she found that kind of troublesome because she noticed ... the person with the French ... had an extra foot in the door.

Although Rob's parents do not have a working knowledge of French and have not been able to assist with French homework, they have instilled the value of good work habits and perseverance as the route to success in second language learning. Rob, who considered dropping out of French Immersion on three separate occasions, attributed his parents' relentless involvement and encouragement to persevere as the key reason for choosing to complete the program.

If your parents supported you with it, you'd stay in, but if your parents said, "It's your decision" usually a kid's going to take the easier way out ... They helped me make the right decision.

Teachers. Teacher support was also reported as intrinsic in establishing supportive relationships in the immersion experience. To illustrate, Hoju, Julie, Natalie, and Tiffany revealed that the nature of the relationships with their French Immersion teachers has fostered a sense of openness, trust, and confidence that has helped them develop into mature and independent young adults. The participants emphasized the high academic expectations placed upon them by their immersion teachers as well as the mutual respect, friendliness, and support that flavours the French Immersion experience.

Hoju perceived that French Immersion students are special to their immersion teachers.

The best one (support system) would probably be teachers because they're the ones who are instructing us ... They're able to help us ... We can always go back to any one of them and they'd be willing to help us just because we're all so special to them.

In addition, more time spent with the same immersion teacher meant more of an opportunity for teachers to help students achieve academic goals and more time to establish long-lasting relationships.

You'd have the (French) teacher more often than any other one ... and you'd form a friendly relationship ... and if we needed help even outside of school, we could always ask them for help because they knew where we were coming from, because they'd spend

more of the day with us than ... our parents would.

In Hoju's experience, he had the same teacher in grade four, grade eleven and now in his final year. Although he admitted that being with the same teacher can sometimes be predictable, he indulges in the benefits that evolve from teachers really knowing students' abilities and personalities.

She knows who we are and what we're good at and she'll try to focus in on some of our problem areas that she recognizes and helps us ... because she's seen us grow she's seen our abilities change ... She's trying to help us so that we can pass the course with flying colours, so we can achieve more.

As Julie attested, her teachers created a safe atmosphere conducive to second language learning, especially early in her education. Even though the language was foreign, she remembered that the teachers promoted a relaxed ambiance.

I was fairly comfortable because the teachers were very friendly and patient and everybody in the class was basically in the same boat as I was and we all kind of had fun and learned together. It wasn't uncomfortable or I wasn't nervous or anything.

Natalie appreciates the atmosphere that invites communication in the classroom. This milieu of self-expression is partially due to the teacher who strives to motivate students to value their second language. Also, the dedication

Natalie's immersion teacher has to her students when they are challenged with difficult content was noted as a praiseworthy trait.

In the past, we've done group things ... and if we don't understand something, the teacher explains it and she knows exactly what we're doing ... and sends us in the right direction ... She really loves what she does. That makes us love what we're doing too.

Tiffany recounted that immersion teachers have been a positive influence in her second language experience. Tiffany characterized one of her immersion teachers as motivational and inspirational.

She keeps telling me to go further ... You see how much fun she has teaching and you want to be like her. She's your role-model ... She's one of my best teachers ...

In fact, this particular teacher has prompted Tiffany to seriously consider a career in teaching.

Edwards and Rehorick (1990) hold that "immersion children see their teachers as being friendly and supportive" (p. 27). Hoju, Julie, Natalie, and Tiffany certainly confirm this assertion. This section does not attempt to isolate immersion teachers as the sole educators who encourage students to be active participants in their learning. It does, however, seek to manifest through a few examples that French Immersion teachers have been emotionally and academically supportive for at least four participants in their journey through the

program.

Peers. Hoju, Kelly, Natalie, and Tiffany referred to support within their peer group. Peers' influence can play a significant motivational role in supporting the French Immersion student. For instance, Hoju described the interdependent network established among his immersion peers. This bond reinforces the cohesiveness among his peer group.

As friends, we would help each other correct our work, like essays or grammar ... One of us might be stronger in one subject than the other ... We could study for exams together and read our novel together ... It was just a lot easier having the support from our peers as well.

According to Hoju, the academic support provided by peers reinforces the sense of community that is prominent in his classroom environment.

Kelly, Natalie, and Tiffany illustrated the importance of support for immersion peers who considered exiting the program. Their attempt at inspiring their discouraged peers originated in their belief that there is tremendous value in this alternative program. Kelly, for example, tried to persuade one of her peers to complete the three courses she had left to finish the program.

One of my friends left (French Immersion) last year and I couldn't believe it. I said, "I don't understand why you're leaving. You've

put so much time into this.” I told her, “If you think about it, we have three classes left in French and ... it’s not hard at all.”

Similarly, Natalie communicated a positive attitude toward various aspects of studying French and consequently encouraged classmates to maintain their French Immersion status beyond senior elementary school.

When we came to high school, some people left (French Immersion). We tried to encourage them to stay in French Immersion ... I think we lost three students that year ... We could have lost more ... We told them, “We’ve been in it for nine years already ... You only have what ...Five more years? Four more years actually. Why would you give up now?” ... I kind of wish we were still together.

Further, because the participants perceived that students who exit the program are unhappy about their decision, Tiffany “suggested that they go back,” especially since leaving the program can ultimately affect career goals.

One of my former classmates wants to be a French teacher ... and she dropped it and now she regrets it ... She talks about how she wants to be a (French) teacher but she can’t because she doesn’t have French anymore.

Huju, Kelly, Natalie, and Tiffany have provided evidence that a supportive network certainly exists within the French Immersion peer group. In particular,

Hoju affirms that this peer support can motivate students to collaborate in order to succeed academically. In addition, Kelly, Natalie, and Tiffany encourage their classmates to persevere when they consider dropping out of the program. Their constant emotional support emphasizes not only the value they place on the French Immersion program, but also their commitment to the success of their classmates, friends with whom they share a special bond and history.

Reasons to Stay in French Immersion

The third theme, Reasons to Stay in French Immersion, defines why the seven participants chose to continue their studies in French Immersion. First, the seven participants interviewed for this study identified integrative and instrumental reasons to continue in this language program of choice. Second, knowing the French language has proven to be purposeful and meaningful in their lives. Finally, worthwhile out of school French Immersion experiences, such as student exchanges and class excursions, reinforce the value of remaining in the program.

Integrative and Instrumental Motivation

Hoju, Julie, Michael, Natalie, and Tiffany attributed importance to integrative reasons for continuing their immersion studies in high school. For example, Hoju's wish to travel to France to study culinary arts is inspired by his intrinsic desire to learn about the language itself.

I want to go to France. I want to learn where it came from ... the French language ... and use it on my own without ... school being involved ... and just have the ability to go off and practice what I've learned.

Julie asserted that "being successful in a different language is ... being able to understand things from a different culture and a different point of view."

Also, she explained that traveling to France has always been a personal goal.

I really wanted to go to France and practice my French and see their culture and all the architecture ... It was something I really wanted to do.

Michael and Natalie also believe that their French Immersion experience has enabled them to appreciate the French culture. According to Michael, being in French Immersion “helps to understand other cultures.” Similarly, Natalie remarked that her immersion experience has made it easier for her to communicate with people from other cultures. In fact, she asserted that her two week exchange to Quebec “was an advantage because you get more insight into another culture.”

For Natalie and Tiffany, the desire to learn French is due simply to the fact that they enjoy it. For instance, Natalie’s intrinsic interest in the French language helps explain why she chose to continue in the program.

I just really like the French. It’s like a personal preference, I guess ... I just like languages ... Expressing yourself in languages, like in stories and stuff, is one of my favourite things ...

Similarly, Tiffany’s intrinsic motivation is derived from her positive attitude regarding French.

It’s fun ... I like to speak another language.

The seven participants also accentuated their desire to learn French in

order to reach practical or socioeconomic goals. They acknowledged that obtaining a bilingual diploma upon high school graduation will broaden their career options and enhance job opportunities. For example, Hoju contemplated the reasons his parents decided to enrol him and his two sisters in the program.

We finally realized why our parents put us in it (French Immersion) - so we could receive our bilingual diploma, which opens up a lot of job opportunities.

Julie also asserted the instrumental advantages of bilingualism.

It makes me confident in the job market just because I have that extra ability and knowledge in the French language.

The bilingual diploma has been an incentive for Kelly to persevere in the program.

I've been in this since S.K. ... it'd be ridiculous for me to be in French 12 years and then drop and not get a bilingual diploma ... That was the goal when I went. I could see if I was in grade three and I dropped out, but now that I've been able to make my own choice, I've never thought of it personally.

Michael explained that his bilingual status surely will be beneficial.

In Canada, it could always help to have that on your resume ... If you have the ability to speak both languages, it sets you apart from people ... it might help when you're applying for certain jobs.

According to Natalie, employers are impressed when they discover that prospective employees are bilingual.

When applying for jobs ... they'll notice, "Oh, French Immersion.

So you speak French? Do you speak any other languages?" I

think they find that's pretty good and you just know that in the future

it's going to help you out.

Rob especially emphasized his instrumental reasons for continuing his immersion studies. He foresees the advantages of the bilingual diploma, namely better job prospects.

It just might be the little edge I need to get a job like if I have the same qualifications as someone else, and he doesn't have French and I do, I might have a better change of getting a job.

Finally, Tiffany was pleased about having only two French courses left before achieving her goal of receiving her bilingual diploma.

Within the group of participants represented in this study, it became evident that integrative and instrumental reasons were both important in influencing their choice to stay in the program. Indeed, the findings of this study support Richard-Armato's (1988) contention that the two types of motivation are not mutually exclusive and they cannot be isolated. Yet, based on the descriptions provided by the participants, it is clear that French Immersion students choose to persist in the program for practical reasons too.

French for a Purpose

The seven participants interviewed cited that French has served multiple purposes in their lives. All reported involvement in activities and situations requiring use of the French language. For the participants of this study, French is not simply a language to study but a language to use in real-life situations.

To illustrate, Hoju applied his knowledge at an aerospace technology training camp where his task involved conducting oral presentations in French. Equally important, Hoju's immersion experience has offered the opportunity to make connections between history and concrete situations. Specifically, he recounted the value of learning about history in its original setting on a grade eight excursion to Quebec.

(At) the Fields of Abraham, we'd take the tour of the prison cells there ... 'cause we'd learned about it in ... history class and this was more of a practical view ... It was a better experience than just reading a textbook ...

Julie's positive feelings towards her French Immersion experience are greatly due to her conviction that bilingualism is an invaluable and pragmatic skill.

It (French Immersion education) has genuinely enriched my life. I put my knowledge and skills in French to use practically everyday. I feel so privileged to have been enrolled in the program and to have the ability to read, write, and converse in another language.

According to Kelly, learning a second language means learning how to use that language for communicative purposes.

Sometimes, we get phone calls and it will be my mom's friends (she's part of the French Club) and I can tell they're having a hard time in English and the fact that I can say "Oh, je parle français" makes them so at ease ... It really makes a difference that I can communicate.

Although Kelly does not intend on pursuing a career which will involve use of the French language, she does perceive that her French could "come in handy" for traveling. Also, French has been useful because it has helped with understanding content in other subject areas. For example, Kelly identified considerable vocabulary similarities that have been advantageous in her English course.

French is really an old language and sometimes Shakespeare will use it ... His characters will use it to describe things ... A lot of times, questions will be related to that and I could answer them in a blink of an eye just 'cause I know what it means in French ...

Michael also claimed that French is useful because it helps one understand English. For instance, Hammer (1976) established that there are nearly 11,000 English-French cognates that share similar or identical meanings in both languages. Michael asserted that these commonalities can help

vocabulary acquisition in the French language. Although Michael plans to pursue a university degree in math or science, he has confirmed that he intends to study French as a minor. Michael reported that French is pragmatic for various reasons. First, he perceives that having the ability to speak both languages “is really helpful.” For example, he believes that maintaining his French could enhance opportunities for better employment. Second, he ascertained that French has been useful for “just doing ordinary things like helping get groceries” during a trip to France. He foresees that his second language will serve a constructive role when he travels to a country where French is the primary language of communication. Finally, Michael described a more global interpretation of his practical need for French. For instance, he has remained in the program because he “might have a need for it.”

Like with any skill, you’re not going to use that skill all the time, but you have that skill when the need for it comes up and you can use it.

It is evident that Michael maintains a matter-of-fact attitude toward participating in activities where French might be used.

Natalie shares the view that the French language is an important tool of functional communication. For example, Natalie realized first-hand that French “comes in handy” when translating for English program students during an exchange program experience to Quebec. Similarly, Natalie views French as

useful because “It gives people an upper hand in certain situations.” To illustrate, Natalie described how her knowledge of French was fundamental in helping a lost child find her mother.

I remember when I was younger. There was a little girl ... who only spoke French ... and she couldn't find her mom, so I spoke to her in French. She sort of understood because I was a little bit slower than she was but I helped her and I felt good about that.

A further example illustrates that Natalie has used French in other authentic and varied language situations. For instance, her knowledge of the French language has been instrumental in helping her overcome communication barriers with customers in the workplace.

When people say they speak French and they're having a difficult time explaining to one of the other girls ... what they want ... I ask, “Oh, do you speak French?” and then I can communicate with them ... I don't like having not to talk to them on a personal level ... and pointing to things ... When I'm done serving them, I like to be able to think, “Oh, I had a good experience there ... I had a good day.”

Although Rob acknowledged enhanced job opportunities as a major benefit of a bilingual program, he outlined how French has been meaningful outside of the immersion classroom. To illustrate, he described how his knowledge of the French language has enabled him to translate for his parents

while on trips to Ottawa and Quebec. In addition, Rob attested that his exposure to a richer language environment has helped him become a more creative dramatic arts writer.

Tiffany also considered French to be practical in her life beyond the immersion classroom. In particular, during her student exchange to Quebec, she declared that “you learn a lot more vocabulary that you don’t normally use.” The acquisition of new vocabulary evolved from verbal exchanges with her host family, experiences buying food in grocery stores, and watching movies in French. Further, the French language was the sole language of communication between Tiffany and some unilingual relatives from Montreal.

The perception that bilingualism will enhance employment opportunities was reported by Hoju, Julie, Natalie, Michael, Rob, and Tiffany. Hoju, for example, conveyed that his parents have provided him with an invaluable career asset: bilingualism. He has considered two careers that require knowledge of the French language. His first choice is that of chef in France. He established that training in an authentic setting would lead to a greater level of fluency in his second language. Hoju also is inclined to pursuing a career as a government pilot. He expects that his bilingualism will be a career advantage if he decides to apply for government positions.

Although Julie does not have definite career plans at this stage in her life, she relishes the expanded career opportunities offered to her as a functionally

bilingual citizen.

If I wanted to move out of a mostly Anglophone society, I would have the ability to do that ... like take job in Ottawa where you should know both of the languages or Quebec or maybe even France ... I can do that with confidence.

Undoubtedly, Tiffany's career choice has been influenced by her experiences as a second language learner. She will continue with French and Spanish courses in college or university in order to prepare for a career as a teacher of French and Spanish. Moreover, she highlighted that her linguistic skills in the French language have facilitated the acquisition and development of linguistic skills in the Spanish language.

Spanish is easier to learn because I already know the French and I can relate it to French words ... A lot of Spanish words are spelled or they sound just like French words so I could kind of guess what they mean ... In Spanish, we're starting to take all the tenses and you can relate it to French ... In English, we're not used to all these tenses ... I like it (Spanish) way better than French.

No doubt, French has been the base to ignite Tiffany's love for Spanish.

Hoju, Julie, and Natalie also deem French as useful in facilitating the acquisition of a third language. For example, Hoju indicated that French has allowed him to develop linguistic skills in the Italian language. Indeed, he

appreciates the considerable commonalities shared between the two languages.

I find my Italian course very easy because I can transfer the languages. They're both romance languages. They're so close ...

All the nouns have to be masculine or feminine like in French ...

Julie anticipates her upcoming Spanish course with assurance. Having been exposed to her father's Spanish cassettes, she noticed the similarities between Spanish and French and foresees an enjoyable experience learning this third language.

I'm confident now that I can pick up languages easier ... I'm also going to start Spanish this semester and I'm confident that I won't have a problem with that just because ... French is similar to a lot of those types of languages.

Further, Natalie emphasized that French has been instrumental in helping her understand the Italian language. The similarities among the Romance languages have reinforced her desire to learn a third language, namely Spanish. Finally, whether Natalie decides to pursue a career in French or not, she stressed that "in the future, it's going to help me out."

In the opinion of the seven participants, French has proven to have meaning and purpose in their everyday lives. In addition, Hoju, Julie, Michael, Natalie, Rob, and Tiffany trust that knowledge of the French language will prove beneficial for career purposes. Further, Hoju, Julie, Natalie, and Tiffany

attributed their knowledge of French as an avenue toward learning a third language. Because French Immersion has been a meaningful experience, the participants esteem the value of second language learning on their daily lives. In the same way, positive out of school French Immersion experiences have influenced the participants' choice to remain in the program.

Out of School French Immersion Experiences

Out of school French Immersion experiences such as excursions, student exchanges, and travel have provided more opportunity for the seven participants to interact in communicative exchanges that have direction and meaning. Hoju, for instance, has taken part in several out of school French Immersion experiences that give the French language relevancy. Hoju's parents' desire for their children to communicate with French Canadian family members supports Van der Keilen's (1995) position that "long-term involvement in an intensive second language program ... promotes valorization of the target group by the pupils" (p. 300). For instance, Hoju's trips to Montreal to visit his grandparents have been instrumental in reinforcing the communicative benefits of the immersion program and an appreciation of the second language culture. Also, he reported that his grade eight class excursion to Quebec City offered meaning and relevancy to his French Immersion experience. Furthermore, he had the opportunity to experience the milieu and develop relationships with members of

the second language group.

We got to use our French language skills in the actual environment ... We'd understand and we'd go in the community and participate ... I felt pretty good ... Everyone knew you weren't primarily French because you had those little anglicisms in your voice ... but we understood what they were saying, they understood what we were saying and it made us much more excited ... We were all using our skills for an actual purpose this time.

Although Hoju had not reported having participated in a student exchange, he did describe other circumstances that allowed him the chance to use his second language in an authentic context. For instance, his membership in a summer training camp that included a session in Laval, Quebec promoted socialization with members of the French community. Also, his friendship with a French exchange student afforded him additional opportunities for verbal exchanges with a French speaker.

Julie's contact with and exposure to a francophone milieu have allowed her to experience the French language and have reason to use it in a meaningful context. First, her grade eight class excursion to Quebec promoted greater cultural awareness and varied opportunities for extended language use. Julie's excursion experience resonates with Safty's (1990) claim that the appreciation of another culture "requires the establishment of bridges of empathetic interactions

between two cultures” (p. 11).

We got to live in a French society and see their arts and churches and hear them speak and ... immerse ourselves in their way of living ... learning the background of authors that we read ... It was an advantage because you get more insight than to just one culture.

It is also worthy to note the pride Julie and her classmates felt when Quebec residents celebrated their functional bilingual competencies.

They realized ... why we were there so they would hold a French conversation with us ... We were pleased that we could carry on a discussion with them ... They actually praised our French a lot just because they didn't realize the extent of our vocabulary ...

Julie was inordinately enthusiastic when she spoke about her pending three month student exchange to France. In fact, her sense of achievement as a French Immersion student was evident when she described this experience as one of her “greatest successes ever.” At the time of Julie’s interviews, her “twin” had already fulfilled her three month sojourn in Canada. It would soon be Julie’s turn to experience France first-hand. In Julie’s opinion, knowledge of the French language is an invaluable and purposeful communication tool that now has personal and practical relevance.

I'm not worried about not being able to understand or having

difficulties communicating with French people ... I'm confident that I'll be able to get along ... to be able to go to a museum and read about an artist or ... go into a restaurant or to a school and not be lost or afraid to ask a question ... If I didn't know French, I would never be able to do this ... I'm excited because I think this will further my knowledge in French and I'll be able to speak with the accent and speak more fluently.

In Kelly's opinion, the functional French language skills acquired in her French Immersion experience serve as a foundation for developing native-like fluency in the French language. For example, travel has provided Kelly with several opportunities to improve the quality and accuracy of her French language skills. Kelly explained how a two month visit to Quebec helped her overcome initial communication barriers and how this contact in a French language milieu challenged her abilities at higher levels.

For the first few days, I was really searching for words ... I couldn't keep on a quick conversation ... but I was getting along fine ... By the end of that second month ... I felt like I'd spent a year there ... There was a huge improvement ... Because I can communicate, I can take that first step ...

Although Kelly has had many opportunities for applying her French on a practical level, her sentiment on the prospective benefits of speaking a second

language was further enhanced by her mother's fulfilling travel experience in Switzerland and France. Moreover, Kelly asserted that she would like to travel and that her bilingualism serves as an advantage since "Europe is so full of a variety of languages." Equally important, she has considered working in Europe in order to maintain and strengthen her French language skills.

Michael included his family vacation to Brittany, France as a significant out of school French Immersion experience. His brief encounter with the second language culture has given him the incentive to further explore Monaco and France. He stated that immersion in an authentic French environment encourages active and purposeful communication. Also, Michael's exposure to the depth and complexity of the culture of Brittany provoked a more relevant and immediate understanding of history.

It was a beautiful countryside. I was actually amazed at how uniform all the houses were, but it was explained that because of the war, they had to make lots of houses really fast, so they all made them the same and to me that was interesting because here it's not at all like that.

Michael's enthusiasm for this practical history lesson supported Safty's (1990) affirmation that "these cultural interactions will leave the students marveled, intrigued, and curious" (p. 12).

Natalie reported diverse benefits associated with her two week exchange

experience to Quebec.

We went to Quebec City and did a bunch of touring around there. They just told us a little bit about the history ... The people there I noticed they're really, really friendly ... They're like, "Oh, hi!" even if they don't know you ... I learned a little bit of slang, a little bit of an accent. I just really enjoyed it. I just had a ball there.

In addition, she confirmed that having the opportunity to use a dialect of the French language brought her one step closer to developing functional language proficiency.

Although Rob's use of French outside of the immersion classroom has been limited to a short family trip to Ottawa and Quebec, he maintains a positive attitude toward French language and culture. In fact, he affirmed that "eventually it would be good to travel to French speaking countries."

Tiffany described significant participation in excursion and travel situations involving use of the French language. To illustrate, a two week exchange program to Quebec allowed Tiffany and other French Immersion students to build on one another's strengths and to experience the French language as purposeful communication. In Tiffany's case, immersion in the French language and culture meant viewing movies in French, sightseeing in Montreal, communicating with French-speaking shopkeepers, and being challenged with new vocabulary not typically used in classroom textbooks. Also, Tiffany reported

her annual summer visits to Geraldton as significant out of school immersion experiences because she was exposed to the French language as much as possible.

In investigating the degree to which French Immersion and English program students have developed activities that rely on the use of French and contact with French people, Van der Keilen (1995) contended that French Immersion students “have a more positive attitude towards various aspects of the French language and its acquisition as well as towards French people and their culture” than their English program peers (p. 296). The positive feelings towards the French Immersion experience is due in part to the participants’ greater participation in activities involving use of the French language as well as involvement in French culture and experiences. The favourable comments reported by the participants interviewed in this study support Van der Keilen’s assertion that “exchange programs, visits, and excursions have been organized in order to improve attitudes and motivations of pupils learning French” (p. 290). Indeed, the participants of this study “realized the potential benefits of learning a second language, even if they could not apply this knowledge to their immediate situation” (Dodick, 1996, p. 581).

Although the participants referred to integrative and instrumental motives as incentives to persist in immersion, the data suggests additional motivational and attitudinal factors that may explain why the participants have persisted in the

program. Some of these reasons already have been highlighted: the strong friendships that unite French Immersion students, the feeling of comfort that emanates from relationships established in the French Immersion milieu, feelings of pride and confidence that evolve from the immersion experience, positive attitudes toward the French culture and the learning of the French language, and the support offered by parents, teachers, and immersion peers.

Even though “the perfect explanation of motivation has not yet been discovered” (Dodick, 1996, p. 581), the seven participants identified the practical applications of the French language and the value of out of school French Immersion experiences as exigent in sustaining their commitment to the program. For instance, Hoju, Julie, Natalie, Tiffany, and Rob alluded to the possibility of pursuing a career that requires use of their second language. Hoju, Julie, Natalie, and Tiffany have attested that French has opened doors to learning a third language. Also, the participants are interested in the French culture and strive to learn the language for the purpose of communicating in it. Furthermore, the immersion experience has fueled the participants’ desire to visit or study in a French-speaking country after high school. Finally, positive excursion and exchange experiences have promoted both the formal and emotional aspects of the French language and have encouraged relationships with members of the French community.

Perceptions of French Immersion Students

The fourth theme, **Perceptions of French Immersion Students**, is embodied in the meaning of the descriptions made by the participants. The first sub-theme, **Self-Perceptions**, focuses on how the participants perceive themselves, as individuals or as a whole class. **Attitudes and Perceptions Toward Immersion Students**, the second sub-theme, emphasizes how the participants believe they are perceived by those who have not lived the immersion experience. In reflecting on perceptions, the participants have demonstrated an attentive awareness to an insightful dimension of their lived experience.

Self-Perceptions

In reporting on their experiences in the French Immersion program, the participants revealed how they perceived themselves as French Immersion students and how they viewed their immersion classmates. They attributed their success in French Immersion to specific personality characteristics: persistence, commitment, a willingness to work hard, an outgoing nature, and simply a genuine interest in school and in learning. In spite of the participants' high level of confidence and serious attitude about their work, they honestly acknowledged weaknesses in their own language proficiency or that of their peers.

Hoju admitted that he must improve in the area of French grammar. Julie

described herself as a hard-working, school-oriented student who considers her bilingualism advantageous because she “can do mostly anything in both languages.” In fact, she feels that she has more knowledge of the world compared to her English program peers. Kelly, who said she could improve in her writing skills, gave herself a general rating as a French Immersion student: “On a scale of one to 10, I’d probably be about a seven, which isn’t bad considering I’m Anglophone.” Michael contended that his success is partly due to the fact that he faithfully completes all homework and he actively participates in class. Natalie’s sense of perseverance surfaced when she spoke of her efforts to overcome her difficulties when making the transfer from math in French to math in English. Contrarily, she finds French grammar easy and she enjoys writing stories in French. Finally, despite Rob’s conviction that “grade nine French was hard,” he remained committed to his immersion experience.

The participants also disclosed phrases that revealed their perception of their immersion peer group. For instance, Hoju commented:

**We were a very smart class ... We were good at math (in French)
... We excelled pretty much at everything ... We’re always really
competitive ...**

In Kelly’s opinion, there is a distinction between immersion and non-immersion students:

There’s something different about how we view things ... A lot of

people who excel at anything come from the French Immersion system ... We have a little more academic pressure. Maybe we're stimulated more as kids.

According to Natalie, "all French Immersion classes have a unique personality." Michael stated that the members of his immersion class "have a certain respect for one another." Finally, Tiffany commented on the receptiveness among her French Immersion classmates.

In class when we're all together, we're very open with each other. We don't care what anybody else thinks of us and whatever we think, we say.

The results of this study show the participants' perceptions of themselves as French Immersion students and of their French Immersion class. In evaluating their strengths, they emphasized hard work, confidence, active class participation, and a sense of perseverance. Areas of improvement included French grammar and writing. Also, the participants think very highly of themselves as a group. For instance, they believe that in general French Immersion students are intelligent, motivated to excel, unique, respectful, and open. The next sub-theme considers attitudes and perceptions that the non-immersion community has toward immersion students.

Attitudes and Perceptions Toward Immersion Students

Although the participants interviewed for this study reported that their non-immersion peers perceive them as threatening and different from the mainstream school population, they celebrated these differences. They considered the term “Frenchie” more of a reason to praise their uniqueness and special ability to speak French. There is also the perception that employers consider French Immersion students more successful employees. Furthermore, the perception that a student must be gifted to be in French Immersion prevails.

Hoju believed that non-immersion students observed the immersion class to be a threat, especially in the competitive arena of sports where immersion students advantageously played on one another’s strengths. Also, although Hoju affirmed that non-immersion students viewed the immersion class as “outcasts” and “different”, he proudly considered these to be qualities of strength.

We were always just a big gang that was seen as a threat because we’d always been together ... We were always considered pretty much outcasts as well ‘cause we were all very different ... We would always be called Frenchies but we had no problem with that.

In the same way, Julie took pride in the uniqueness that non-immersion students acknowledged about her immersion class. It was evident that the term “Frenchie” was more complimentary than insulting.

We were like our own group of people just because we were

different from everybody else ... People noticed that we took French and they called us “Frenchies” ... It didn’t really bother me. I’m a person who likes to be recognized for her differences rather than being part of the crowd.

So too, Julie enjoyed the extra attention by her non-immersion peers, especially when they asked Julie to “teach them stuff they hadn’t learned yet.”

Michael believes that preconceived notions and stereotypical beliefs about French Immersion students do not exist. In Michael’s experience, others view his participation in the program as “just something to talk about.” Michael declared:

It’s kind of a conversation piece, a novelty ... It doesn’t make me that different from anybody.

In reflecting on immersion experiences in the senior elementary years, Natalie described the attention accorded to her French Immersion class by the non-immersion students. More specifically, her class was often centered out as “The French Class” or “The Frenchies”. Like Hoju and Julie, Natalie held this distinction as complimentary.

They were trying to make it seem like they were superior to us when I thought, “Hey, we have an extra quality. How are we less superior than you?” ... They were trying to insult us but I didn’t take it as an insult.

Natalie’s positive interpretation of these labels reveals the pride she

embraces as a member of the French Immersion class community.

In assessing the benefits of having studied in French Immersion, Rob adamantly supported his opinion that employers view French Immersion students as favourable employees because of their ability to think in different ways and because of their demonstrated commitment to the immersion program. Further, he perceived that prospective employers find immersion students more attractive as employees because they have proven that they can succeed in a program with a heavier workload.

Even if it (the job) doesn't need French, it shows that you can ... put a little more effort into life ... You learned more than one thing (language) so ... you'd be able to handle more on your plate when you're older too.

Even though French Immersion students are defined as "a heterogeneous group with varying abilities and levels of achievement (Canadian Education Association, 1992, p. 27), Tiffany believes that the perception that immersion students are gifted continues to be reinforced.

Everyone else who's not in French Immersion thinks that everybody who's in French Immersion is really smart for some reason and it's not true ... We're not really smart people. We're just used to it because we've been in it all our lives.

According to Tiffany, her non-immersion peers do not realize that French

Immersion education includes students that represent a range of academic levels. Indeed, her outlook supports Safty's (1989) conviction that "contra the critics, experience shows that all children of all social class backgrounds and academic abilities can successfully be taught in French Immersion" (p. 10).

Tiffany suggested that immersion students' commitment to continue and complete the program gives others the impression that they must be of above average intelligence.

The major thrust of research regarding perceptions in French Immersion education has been in the area of immersion students' perceptions of themselves, their learning, and the program, immersion students' feelings and attitudes toward the second language group, and teachers' and parents' views of the immersion program. Although Tardif and Weber (1987) indicate that "researchers are increasingly turning toward qualitative methods to gather information about human behaviour that is inaccessible to the more quantitative methods" (p. 69), a review of the literature reveals a lack of interest in qualitative research that considers attitudes and perceptions toward immersion students, particularly by their non-immersion peers. It is important to note that any discussion of attitudes is subjective. Furthermore, non-immersion students were not interviewed for this study, and therefore the findings reported in this section do not consider their attitudes and perceptions. Instead, I have focused on the reflections of the seven immersion participants and how they thought their non-

immersion counterparts perceived them.

Challenges Unique to the Immersion Experience

The fifth and final theme, Challenges Unique to the Immersion Experience, encompasses the personal and program challenges experienced by the participants. For example, five of the seven participants considered speaking and writing in French personal areas of improvement. Also, all seven participants offered lived experience descriptions that highlight the demands, and in some cases, the disadvantages of the French Immersion program.

Personal Challenges

Five of the seven participants interviewed for this study identified personal challenges within their immersion experience which lie in the productive language skills such as speaking and writing. It is important to realize, however, that phenomenology never attempts to generalize and that personal examples offered by these five participants do not typify the experiences of all immersion students.

Although Hoju, Kelly, Rob, Natalie, and Tiffany offered examples that illustrate a sense of disappointment in certain aspects of their writing and speaking skills, they accepted these as natural experiences that would occur in any learning situation, but even more so in the journey towards becoming functionally bilingual. To illustrate, Kelly and Rob noticed English spelling weaknesses that they believe are a result of fewer hours of English instruction in

their primary years. Kelly claimed to be a poor English speller up until grade eight but has made efforts to remedy her weakness by reading more on her own. Again, she enforced the idea that French Immersion students need to put forth the extra effort in order to be successful.

All that I have to do is pay a little more attention in English or read a bit more ... My (English) essays are up there with the rest of the class, if not maybe a bit higher ... I really do my homework and I participate in class.

Similarly, Rob reported a lag in the development in his English spelling skills but admitted that extra work in English has helped him overcome this challenge. Nevertheless, the English spelling difficulties described by Kelly and Rob are contrary to the results of numerous studies which have addressed the concerns of parents and administrators who feared that participation in French Immersion might have a negative effect on the development of immersion students' English language skills. In fact, in their 1990 paper, French Immersion research agenda for the 90s, Lapkin, Swain, and Shapson reported that

the use of standardized tests of English achievement in hundreds of program evaluations conducted over the past twenty years has permitted researchers to dispel fears of the possible negative impact of French-medium instruction on the first language development of anglophone students. (p. 394)

Hoju stated that French grammar has always posed some difficulty. Contrary to the belief that French Immersion students hold a “charmingly self-assured and oblivious attitude toward their mistakes” (Safty, 1989, p. 3), Hoju indeed acknowledged that his poor grammar skills affect the quality of his writing. Consequently, he attempts several remedial strategies such as use of a computer’s grammar check or asking a friend to edit his work. By paying special attention to the reasons for his grammatical errors, Hoju is consciously engaging in corrective exercises. The daily in-class grammar lessons from which Hoju benefits support Safty’s (1989) recommendation that “the most effective approach was to set aside a specific amount of time per week for structural exercises” (p. 4). For both Natalie and Tiffany, feelings of disappointment developed from situations which required native-like speaking abilities. For instance, Natalie stated that in spontaneous classroom discussions, she occasionally finds it frustrating when she cannot find the exact French word to fully express her intent. Also, during a trip to Montreal, Tiffany avoided speaking French with certain relatives because she found that they spoke too quickly and that they used a lot of slang expressions with which she was not familiar. Practically speaking though, these two incidents have not influenced the participants’ overall positive attitude toward their experience. Like the immersion graduates interviewed in a study by Husum and Bryce (1991), Natalie and Tiffany maintain that the immersion experience has been a valuable one.

Although three of the seven participants interviewed for this study identified areas of personal improvement of their productive skills in French, they felt that they have attained functional bilingualism via the French Immersion experience. The communicative ability achieved by immersion students is summarized by Genesee (1987):

IM (immersion) students demonstrate high levels of functional language proficiency in reading and writing, and they are effective communicators in both oral and written language, even though there are often linguistic errors in their phonology, vocabulary, and grammar. Their evident linguistic deficiencies do not appear to be a serious impediment to their effective functional use of French for academic or interpersonal purposes. (p. 60)

Harley, Hart, and Lapkin (1986) discovered that participation in early immersion programs has had some positive effects on English skills. Indeed, the participants in the present study outlined the beneficial impact that French Immersion has had on their learning in other areas, including English. Many advocates of French Immersion education believe that the program provides the opportunity for students to develop a high level of proficiency in French while maintaining and developing English language skills. Other supporters emphasize that "French Immersion is successfully imparting a proficiency in a second language that no other methodology has achieved before" (Safty, 1989,

p. 10). Because the seven participants have enjoyed a lived experience that has been enriching and productive, they would undoubtedly go through an immersion program again. Yet, despite their strong positive feelings toward the program, the participants described personal challenges that are unique to the immersion experience. By expressing their concerns, they have presented a “more complete understanding and a richer insight into the immersion phenomenon” (Sloan, 1991, p. 38). Equally important, this study has responded to the call for more qualitative research that contemplates immersion students’ frustrations, needs, and recommendations for immersion education (Riva, 1996, p. 92).

Program Challenges

From the perspective of the participants, the French Immersion program is a challenging educational option that is characterized by high expectations and a heavy workload. Having a good memory is helpful as is the will to extend the extra effort in order to balance an English and French curriculum. The issue of learning math in French was viewed as an advantage as well as a disadvantage. Finally, the difficulty in making new friends outside the immersion peer group, the need to expand the course options in high school, and the need for an increase in the availability of French research materials were perceived as program limitations.

Michael and Julie believe that having a good memory is a desirable quality

when challenged by the demands of the immersion program. For example, Michael relies on his memory, especially for retaining French grammar rules.

French grammar is somewhat harder because there are far more rules in French ... There are a lot more rules to memorize in French and because they're different than your first language, it's a lot harder to keep them memorized ... All you can really do is repetition - just trudge through it and memorize.

Julie also commented that her excellent memory was an asset when timetabling restrictions that had not allowed for a balance between her French Immersion and English courses.

French Immersion really tests your memory just because you don't speak French everyday and then sometimes you don't get a French Immersion class for a year ... and coming back into a French Immersion class after not speaking for a year is kind of tough, but you catch it again ... It's a challenge, but it's worth it.

One of the most significant challenges facing immersion students is balancing a dual curriculum in English and in French. According to Julie, Kelly, and Rob, high expectations to succeed in both languages and a "dual workload" augment the academic pressure to achieve high marks. However, these students agreed that the extra effort is a fair exchange for functional bilingualism. Comments made by Julie, Kelly, and Rob illuminate the participants' views

regarding the demands as well as the twofold nature of immersion education.

Julie declared:

My greatest success is being able to be in an English class and a French class at the same time and being able to do the same kind of work in both languages ... Sometimes I'll be doing my homework and then I'll notice I'm doing practically the same thing in a different language.

Kelly expressed a similar opinion:

Just the fact that I was learning the same thing that all my (English program) friends were learning ... shows that it was just a little bit more pressure ... Picture English OAC class. There's a lot to read, lots to hand in - and we have to do the exact same thing, but in French.

Rob reflected on the commitment required in a bilingual educational alternative:

It's extra effort to learn French and English at the same time. Grade three was the make or break year ... That was a tough year for me. That's when you start learning two languages at once so that's why it's more challenging ... but I think it's a small price to pay.

One topic that drew comments related to program challenges was that of

learning math in French. Natalie, for instance, felt that studying math in French was difficult.

The only problem I probably ever had - and the only complaint - but it could just be a personal problem because I'm not particularly very good at math - I wish math was in English maybe after grade six. I had so many problems with that, like converting terms and doing word problems in French and then in English. But it's in English now, so it's getting a little bit better.

Hoju and Rob commented that making the transfer from math in French to math in English required additional effort but in the long term, had never been a problem. In Hoju's opinion, the transfer from French to English is simply an additional step in the process.

We were good at math but we had to transfer from French to English and they (English program students) would help us - explain it to us. Then once we figured out what it was, it would click.

Rob stated:

Math wasn't as hard (as history) because it's numbers. It's a universal language ... In grade nine, it was kind of weird hearing them (math terms like *polygons*) in English, but I caught on pretty quick, but I know some people had trouble with it.

Further, Kelly acknowledged that studying subjects like math in French is an advantage for French Immersion students as well as a form of enrichment.

The highest scholars tend to come from French Immersion ... The fact that we had to learn math and we had to speak French in that class and refer to all the terms in French was just a little more pressure - like stress in a good sense.

Another program challenge that emerged from the data included the problems associated with establishing friendships outside of the immersion classroom. Although Rob esteemed the value of the friendships established in his French Immersion experience, he also stressed the feelings of isolation and the difficulties of assimilating into other peer groups, particularly at the high school level.

Now at least you get mixed up in your other classes ... but before you were always with the same people so it was kind of tough when you got dumped into all of this ... in a new school and you're just clinging onto the friends you already have ... Finally, last year I started making new friends.

According to Rob, most of the students in the dual-track school he attended established friendships in their senior elementary school which continued in the high school setting. Furthermore, his French Immersion experience limited the opportunity of social contact with non-immersion peers not only in high school,

but also as early as the senior elementary years.

Finally, although the participants looked positively on the opportunity that immersion has provided them to learn French, they felt that expanding the French Immersion course options at the secondary level and increasing the availability of French learning resources would lead to an improvement of their immersion program. Kelly, for instance, expressed her frustration and disappointment in the lack of variety of courses offered for immersion students. She is disheartened that, in many ways, the immersion program has not offered a curriculum parallel to the English program. Also, she proposed that more mandatory courses, such as technical courses or sciences, be offered in French to avoid feeling “stuck in your immersion curriculum.” Moreover, Kelly emphasized that the unavailability of a grade 12 French Immersion language and literature course at her school was a major disappointment. In fact, she questioned the logic behind the mandatory French Immersion Language and Literature Ontario Academic Course (OAC) especially since some students have no intention of studying French at the post secondary level. Kelly considered the grade 12 course a more logical choice for the immersion program.

You shouldn't have to take an OAC if you don't want to take French in university. That's why you take an OAC class ... A lot of people were really angered.

Two participants made reference to a reliance on or a need for translating

from English to French. Tiffany, for instance, commented on the scarcity of appropriate resource materials for subjects learned in French.

Well, doing research projects was always a challenge because of the limited selection of books we have in our library and there's not so much resources available to us in French, so it's always kind of extra work to find what we need in French, or to get it in English and then translate it.

Further, she added that depending on English resources requires a lot of dictionary work when translating to French, which, she lamented, is more time-consuming. Both Tiffany and Natalie referred to the temptation of resorting to English resource materials when French textbooks seemed too difficult. Their observation supports Safty's (1989) argument that "most French textbooks have little to do with French immersion education as they were either written for Francophone students or represented translations, frequently in a contrived and uninspired style, of existing English materials" (p. 2).

The participants of this study candidly identified the reasons why French Immersion is a challenging program. First, having a good memory can prove beneficial when learning a second language. Second, the participants feel a lot of pressure to succeed academically, especially since they are balancing an English and French course load. Third, learning math in French until grade eight and then making the transfer to math in English for the high school years may

pose some comprehension difficulties. Fourth, making new friends requires more effort and can become exceedingly difficult, particularly since French Immersion students have less opportunity to mingle in the English program classes. Finally, giving French Immersion students more immersion course options and expanding the availability of appropriate French language resources could make the program more appealing to the participants, especially at the high school level.

Following is a summary providing an overview of the themes and sub-themes which emerged in Chapter Four, and which will be discussed further in Chapter Five.

Table 1
Summary of Themes and Sub-themes Representing
the Lived Experiences of Seven Senior High School Students in
a French Immersion Program

Themes	Sub-themes
1. The French Immersion “Family”	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) Friendships b) Comfort Zone c) Memories
2. Achieving and Maintaining Success in French Immersion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) Perseverance and Commitment b) Positive Attitudes and Feelings of Pride c) Support Systems: Parents, Teachers, Peers
3. Reasons to Stay in French immersion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) integrative and Instrumental Motivation b) French for a Purpose c) Out of School French immersion Experiences
4. Perceptions of French Immersion Students	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) Self-Perceptions b) Attitudes and Perceptions Toward Immersion Students
5. Challenges Unique to the Immersion Experience	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) Personal Challenges b) Program Challenges

CHAPTER FIVE

Conclusions

The purpose of this study was to understand more fully the nature and meaning of the experience of being a senior high school student in a French Immersion program. The main research question was: What are the lived experiences of seven senior high school French Immersion students? The seven participants provided insight into how they viewed and interpreted their immersion experiences. In summary, the results of this study show that all the participants have had a positive French Immersion experience which has left them with the perception that they have received a well-rounded education. Five themes uncovered in this study capture the multidimensional nature of this bilingual experience. Summary statements supporting the five themes and thirteen sub-themes are presented in Tables 2 to 6.

First, the participants revealed the importance they attribute to their immersion peer group. They commonly referred to their peer group as “family” because they have invested so many years together. Further, they have developed a sense of trust, openness, and comfort over the years. The feelings of security and belonging associated with common experiences also embody the sense of family.

Second, the participants' sense of perseverance and commitment has been paramount in helping them achieve and maintain success in French

Immersion. Their positive attitudes toward the French language and culture also have contributed to their success and to their commitment to the program. Moreover, the feelings of pride that evolved from early successful French Immersion experiences have motivated the participants to strive continually for their personal best, even when faced with challenges. In addition, the ongoing support provided by parents, teachers, and peers has been influential in the success experienced by the seven immersion participants.

Third, the participants identified reasons for continuing in the French Immersion program. For example, they cited integrative motives, such as studying French because of the intrinsic desire to learn about the culture or the language itself. They also revealed instrumental motives, like learning French as a means to achieve other goals, such as obtaining a job. Moreover, they discussed the opportunities they have had to use French in a meaningful and purposeful way, in and out of the classroom.

Fourth, the perceptions that the participants had of themselves and of their peers reflected an honest and realistic appraisal of their capabilities. They praised their strengths and positive personality traits, but also recognized areas for improvement. Interestingly, the participants shared what they believed were the perceptions that non-immersion students had of them. They regarded the differences accorded to them by their English program peers with confidence and pride.

Finally, the participants identified challenges that are unique to the immersion experience. Personal challenges, such as perceived weaknesses in spelling and grammar, have influenced their progress in certain areas of their learning. The desire to develop a more native-like fluency in French was cited as a personal goal. High expectations, a heavy workload, complications learning math in French, and difficulties making new friends outside the immersion peer group were acknowledged as challenges of the French Immersion program. Suggestions for improving the program included increasing the variety of course options in high school as well as expanding the availability of French resources for students.

The seven French Immersion participants who have been invited to contribute to immersion research have broadened our understanding and revealed new insights about the nature of this educational experience. By focusing on their story, this study has attempted to describe French Immersion education from the perspective of those who have lived through the experience. Tables 2, 3, 4, 5, and 6 summarize significant key statements made by the seven participants regarding what they value from their French Immersion experience, their reasons for remaining in the French Immersion program, and their French Immersion experiences beyond the context of the school.

Table 2

Summary StatementsTheme: The French Immersion "Family"

<p>Sub-theme: Friendships</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● "... by being together with the other members of the French Immersion class, we've gotten to know each other and we trust each other, so they're just like another family that we can go to and belong to in society." Hoju ● "... there's a strong bond between us just because we've known each other for so long." Julie ● "We are really close-knit people that I'll think of all my life." Kelly ● "My best friends now are from the French Immersion program. They're the guys I talk to, eat lunch with. On Saturday night we'll have a poker game or something." Michael ● "Not everyone can say that they have a close relationship with all the people they went to elementary school with ..." Natalie ● "The thing about the French Immersion class is that you're with your friends since S.K. so you know everyone ... It's kind of fun." Rob ● "I have been friends with most of them (French Immersion classmates) since S.K. so I'm really close to them ... My best friends are in French Immersion." Tiffany
<p>Sub-theme: Comfort Zone</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● "As we go off our different ways, we always have the one little French class that we always come back to." Hoju ● "... in my elementary school, I thought the whole school was like a family ... We would get older kids in our class help us learn to read and then as I grew up, I also helped the younger classes and it was kind of like a brother / sister system ... We all had something in common." Julie ● "These are people I know as well as my brother and sister ... These are close people 'cause it's a whole classroom of people that you've been together with for so long ..." Kelly ● "It's looser, it's freer ... you're with these people all the time ... You're very relaxed around them. It's not to say you're not relaxed in your English class ... it's just you're more relaxed with the people in your French Immersion class ..." Michael ● "It's like a family ... You'd walk around the house in ugly clothes and you wouldn't care, but when you go out in public you wouldn't want to dress like that. It's the same thing as when you're in class. You'll say pretty much anything not caring what anyone thinks ..." Natalie ● "We're very open with each other." Tiffany
<p>Sub-theme: Memories</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● "I think it's typical of our class to reminisce because we have so many memories of each other." Hoju ● "Now that I'm in high school, I see a lot of faces that I recognize that I used to read to when I was in elementary school and we kind of say hi and ask how we're doing ..." Julie ● "Another thing I get out of the program is just memories of what happened, something to draw on. You get experience - experience dealing with people, experience dealing with people who speak another language." Michael ● "Our memories have more meaning to us just 'cause we always have sort of a relationship with these people ..." Natalie

Table 3

Summary Statements

Theme: Achieving and Maintaining Success in French Immersion

<p>Sub-theme: Perseverance and Commitment</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● "If it's a challenge, then I'll do it just to prove that I can ... We're always really competitive with each other ... We always face adversity head on and we don't usually back down." Hoju ● "Coming back to French Immersion after not speaking for a year is kind of tough, but you catch it again ... but it's worth it ... I think most people who leave the program just aren't willing to put forth an extra effort ..." Julie ● "It would be ridiculous for me to be in this for twelve years and drop out and not get a bilingual diploma ... Why put forth so much work and then just leave it and ditch it?" Kelly ● "Whenever my friends say, 'Oh, I might drop French,' I say, 'It would be a waste of all those years you spent in French Immersion ...'" Michael ● "It's hard getting committed to something but once you are, you're determined to finish it." Natalie ● "Maybe that (effort) separates people who stay in French Immersion from the people who ... didn't even try ... It shows that they have the motivation." Rob ● "They figure that just because we're in French Immersion and we are able to stay in it without dropping out that we have to be really smart for some reason." Tiffany
<p>Sub-theme: Positive Attitudes and Feelings of Pride</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● "I'm proud of what I've done and not many people get the opportunity that I've had." Hoju ● "It feels good to be successful in a different language ... Because I'm leaving for France, I see that as one of my greatest successes ever ..." Julie ● "... other experiences? Just times when you interact with people and you can tell they're French because of their accent and you just get along with them ... it's really, really neat to be able to talk to them." Kelly ● "I like sharing my knowledge ... I have a lot of confidence in my abilities." Michael ● "Even if I don't pursue a career in French ... it just makes me feel a little bit smarter ..." Natalie ● "My parents visited these people who can't speak English ... so I translated for them ... It felt good and my parents were impressed ..." Rob ● "I went to Quebec for two weeks ... and I lived at somebody else's house and they only knew French ... so I had to speak it ... Then it was a lot easier than I thought ..." Tiffany
<p>Sub-theme: Support Systems: Parents, Teachers, and Peers</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● "They (parents) never let us give up ... I wouldn't want any less for my kids than my parents did for me." Hoju ● "He's (father) a great speaker and he can speak a few different languages ... He valued that a lot, so he decided to put us in it (French Immersion)." Julie ● "My mom wanted to make sure we were bilingual." Kelly ● "My mom made sure I stayed in French Immersion when I went to high school ... I've always been reassured that I'm smart and that's paid off ..." Michael ● "She (teacher) knows who we are and what we're good at and she'll try to focus in on some of our problem areas ... because she's seen us grow ..." Hoju ● "She (teacher) keeps telling me to go further ... She's your role-model ..." Tiffany ● "As friends, we would help each other correct our work ... It was just a lot easier having the support from our peers as well." Hoju

Table 4

Summary Statements

Theme: Reasons to Stay in French Immersion

<p>Sub-theme: Integrative and Instrumental Motivation</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● "... We actually finally realized why our parents put us in it - so we could receive our bilingual diploma, which opens up a lot of job opportunities..." Hoju ● "... I really wanted to go to France and practice my French and see their culture and all the architecture ... It was something I really wanted to do." Julie ● "... it'd be ridiculous for me to be in French 12 years and then drop and not get a bilingual diploma." Kelly ● "... in Canada of course it could always help to have that on your resume ... it might help when you're applying for certain jobs ..." Michael ● "I really just like the French. It's like a personal preference, I guess. I just like languages ... Expressing yourself in the languages, like in stories and stuff, is one of my favourite things ..." Natalie ● "It just might be the little edge I need to get a job." Rob ● "It's fun ... I like to speak another language." Tiffany
<p>Sub-theme: French for a Purpose</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● "(At) the Plains of Abraham, we'd take the tour of the prison cells there ... It was a better experience than just reading a textbook ..." Hoju ● "I put my knowledge and skills in French to use practically everyday." Julie ● "If I hear someone with an accent, I'll speak to them in French." Kelly ● "Like with any skill, you're not going to use that skill all the time, but you have that skill when the need for it comes up ..." Michael ● "...when I went away to SEVEC ... I remember a lot of kids there were in Core French, so I did a lot of translating ... so it comes in handy." Natalie ● "I've taken drama courses ... it (French) helped me to be more creative 'cause you have to write in French and English, so there are more possibilities with wording ..." Rob ● "I went to Quebec for two weeks ... I had no problem communicating with everybody ..." Tiffany
<p>Sub-theme: Out of School French Immersion Experiences</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● "... in Quebec City ... we got to use our French skills in the actual environment ... We were all using our skills for an actual purpose this time." Hoju ● "Well, I'm finally here (Nice, France) ... I've gone to a few parties already and they are very different. We go to the supermarket and buy pasta, bread, vegetables, sauce, some cake, wine ... and then all the teenagers set the table, cook, and eat together. It's unbelievable!" Julie ● "For the first few days, I was really searching for words ... By the end of that second month ... I felt like I'd spent a year there ... There was a huge improvement ..." Kelly ● "...in Brittany it was a little confusing because the language is a little different and it's a lot faster ... I enjoyed it. It was interesting to see how it is." Michael ● "... I notice a lot of (French) people enjoy it when you speak French to them ..." Natalie ● "I think eventually it would be good to travel to French speaking countries." Rob ● "They (host family in Quebec) spoke slow and I could understand everything they said." Tiffany

Table 5
Summary Statements

Theme: Perceptions of French Immersion Students

<p>Sub-theme: Self-perceptions</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● "I'm kinda bad at grammar ..." Hoju ● "We were a very small class ... We excelled pretty much at everything ..." Hoju ● "It amazes me when I think about the extensive knowledge of French I have and the education I received without missing out on anything the 'English' kids were learning." Julie ● "On a scale of 1 to 10, I'd probably be about a 7, which isn't bad considering I'm Anglophone." Kelly ● "A lot of people who excel at anything come from the French Immersion system ..." Kelly ● "I'm a good student. I'm not afraid to participate in class. That's really how I learn - by getting involved." Michael ● "I think I try pretty hard in my French classes ... the grammar in French - I find it very easy ... There's a pattern and if you don't recognize a pattern, you can't understand it at all." Natalie ● "All French Immersion classes have a unique personality." Natalie ● "Grade 9 French was pretty hard ... I didn't really get a good mark in that class ... I kind of wanted to drop out but I thought to myself ... 'Well, no. I put all this effort into it.'" Rob ● "We're very open ... We don't care what anybody else thinks of us." Tiffany
<p>Sub-theme: Attitudes and Perceptions Toward French Immersion Students</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● "We were always considered pretty much outcasts as well 'cause we were all very different ... We would always be called Frenchies but we had no problem with that." Hoju ● "We were like our own group of people just because we were different from everybody else ..." Julie ● "I don't think there are any real conceptions about who's in French." Michael ● "We were always 'The French Class' and people always called us 'The Frenchies' and some people were offended by that, but I kind of took it as a compliment." Natalie ● "... it might seem better to employers because they can say, 'Oh, this person can grasp something because they've learned a second language.'" Rob ● "Everyone else who's not in French Immersion thinks that everybody who's in French Immersion is really smart for some reason ... We're just used to it because we've been in it all our lives." Tiffany

Table 6
Summary Statements

Theme: Challenges Unique to the Immersion Experience

<p>Sub-theme: Personal Challenges</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● "We do grammar everyday in class ... I put it through the grammar check and try to figure out the reasons why it's being corrected ..." Hoju ● "In French Immersion, we don't really start reading English until later and probably until grade eight, I was really a bad speller ... Now that I'm reading a lot more on my own, it's not too bad." Kelly ● "I can't spell (in English) as well as I should ... I can see where I've lost a bit, but I think it's a small price to pay because I can still spell. It's just that when I go really fast, I make all these silly mistakes ..." Rob ● "During classroom discussions, something comes into your head in English, but you can't think of it in French ... You usually ask someone, 'How do you say this in French?' and then sometimes the topic's changed ..." Natalie ● "When family members from Montreal come to visit ... I avoid them ... A lot of it was too quick and I think they were using slang ..." Tiffany
<p>Sub-theme: Program Challenges</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● "French Immersion really tests your memory just because you don't speak French everyday and then sometimes you don't get a French Immersion class for a year ..." Julie ● "My greatest success is being able to be in an English class and a French class at the same time and being able to do the same kind of work in both languages ..." Julie ● "Just the fact that we were learning the exact same thing that all my (English program) friends were learning ... shows that it was just a bit more pressure ..." Kelly ● "It's extra effort to learn French and English at the same time." Rob ● "... I wish math was in English maybe after grade six. I had so many problems with that, like converting terms and doing word problems in French ..." Natalie ● "The fact that we had to learn math and we had to speak French in that class and refer to all the terms in French was just a little more pressure ..." Kelly ● "Now at least you get mixed up in all your other classes ... but before you were always with the same people so it was kind of tough ... you're just clinging onto the friends you already have ..." Rob ● "... I really found it frustrating how you had a lot less leeway with what (courses) you could choose and what you couldn't choose ..." Kelly ● "... You're pretty stuck in your immersion curriculum." Kelly ● "You shouldn't have to take an OAC course if you don't want to take French in university." Kelly ● "Well, doing research projects was always a challenge because of the limited selected of books we have in our library and there's not so much resources available to us in French, so it's always kind of extra work to find what we need in French, or to get it in English and then translate it." Tiffany

Suggestions for Further Research

This phenomenological study has examined the lived experiences of seven senior high school French Immersion students. A further investigation into a number of issues that emerged from the interviews conducted with the participants may prove to be significant in the area of French Immersion education.

- 1. This study established the tremendous value that seven participants placed on the friendships established within the immersion experience. An assessment of the level of friendship that immersion students feel for each other and how these close-knit relationships impact learning could be informative.**
- 2. The present study suggests that seven senior high school French Immersion students are committed to their goal of completing their studies in the immersion program. Although Foster (1997) has provided a descriptive profile of the “successful” bilingual high school student, further qualitative research focusing on the characteristics of students who choose to continue in the French Immersion program would be beneficial.**
- 3. In a study on the attrition of students in French Immersion, Lewis (1986) suggests that some immersion students drop out of the program in order to enroll in the International Baccalaureate Program. As the International Baccalaureate Program grows in popularity, we need to investigate whether or not more immersion students are opting for this alternative.**

4. The perception that student interactions within an immersion classroom are different from those in non-immersion classrooms was a prominent subject in the interviews conducted for this study. The seven participants proposed that there is indeed a unique culture that embraces the relationships established within the immersion classroom. Because an ethnographer shares “in the meaning that the cultural participants take for granted” (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992, p. 39), an ethnographic study that describes the classroom culture of the seven participants may add to the findings of this study.

5. Hoju, Kelly, Natalie, and Tiffany indicated that peer support plays a motivational role in the French Immersion experience. Generally, studies in immersion education have not paid attention to the influence that immersion students have on the retention of their peers. More data on this topic may explain the importance of peers to the retention of students in the program.

6. For this study, low enrollment in the grade twelve French Immersion class prompted me to include participants from the grade eleven class. An investigation into understanding the variables associated with the attrition at the grade twelve level may provide suggestions for future program improvements designed to retain students in French Immersion.

7. Finally, a follow-up study of the adult lives of the seven participants would be useful in understanding the lifelong impact of the French Immersion experience. Would the seven participants repeat this experience? To what extent will they

maintain their use of the French language? Will the French Immersion experience influence their career choice? Answers to these questions may reveal new perspectives in immersion research.

Reflections

Implications for Teaching

I chose to conduct research in French Immersion because of my commitment to exploring how immersion students make sense of their immersion experience. Van Manen (1990) advised researchers to pursue human science research by “turning to a phenomenon which seriously interests us and commits us to the world” (p. 30). As an educator, my interest in this phenomenological study was to gain a richer and deeper understanding of what it means to be a student in the immersion program in order to act responsively in my everyday relationships with my students. Recently, I came across my philosophy of education which I had written before I ever became a teacher. I wrote: “I will know that I am a successful teacher if I maintain my goal of striving to understand how my students think and how they view the world.” Nine years later, I am still convinced that being attentively aware of students' opinions, attitudes, victories, feelings, beliefs, and personal challenges will allow educators to understand more sensitively the meaning of their students' past experiences and how those experiences play a crucial role in their students' present lives.

I firmly believe that the French Immersion program provides students with the best opportunity for learning French within the framework of their formal educational experience. However, according to five of the seven participants, the immersion experience is not without personal and program challenges. Their testimony led me to consider the ways in which I can respond differently or more effectively to the needs of my own immersion students. First, I will need to continue to encourage students to challenge their abilities at higher levels, particularly those students who wish to improve their French conversational and writing skills. This means promoting high school student exchanges and integrating more advanced-level materials into the curriculum. Also, in order to expose my students to the French language as much as possible, I will continue to complement my lessons with authentic audio-visual learning material.

Second, because the participants revealed the dominant sense of “family” that permeates the French Immersion experience, it is now easy for me to understand and acknowledge the importance that my immersion students place on social activities, such as working in groups. By incorporating more cooperative learning activities into my daily lessons and by creating a more student-centred classroom environment, my students could collaborate to build on one another’s strengths. Consequently, by inviting everyone to participate, I would be creating a low-anxiety learning environment where students are using and experimenting with the French language. Also, it is worthy to note that more

frequent use of cooperative learning methods may illustrate my respect for the French Immersion “family” and, in turn, may help foster positive relationships between me and my students.

Finally, the results of this study indicate the importance that the participants place on the relevancy of French in their lives, in and out of school. I wondered if I provide my students with ample opportunity to learn the French language through communicative exchanges that are meaningful. In reflecting on my own teaching practice, I realized that I need to integrate more creative and exciting language activities which are appealing to the students. For instance, by exposing immersion students to popular French television and to French Internet resources, I could help them expand and diversify their linguistic and cultural awareness.

Ultimately, this study has prompted me to reevaluate my own thoughts, feelings, and actions with respect to my own classroom practice. As I hope to continue teaching in the French Immersion program, this research is merely my first step in understanding French Immersion from the perspective of those who are experiencing it.

Personal Reflections

As I listened to the seven participants talk of their close-knit friendships among immersion students, I was reminded of the camaraderie I experienced

with my own high school peers. I attended a small high school of about four hundred students which provided me with the opportunity to establish long-lasting friendships. We often took pride in the “family” feeling fostered within our small school community - a closeness which we believed did not exist in larger high schools. I do not doubt that the exceptional bond among friends in the immersion program will persist long into the future, as it has for me and my former high school classmates.

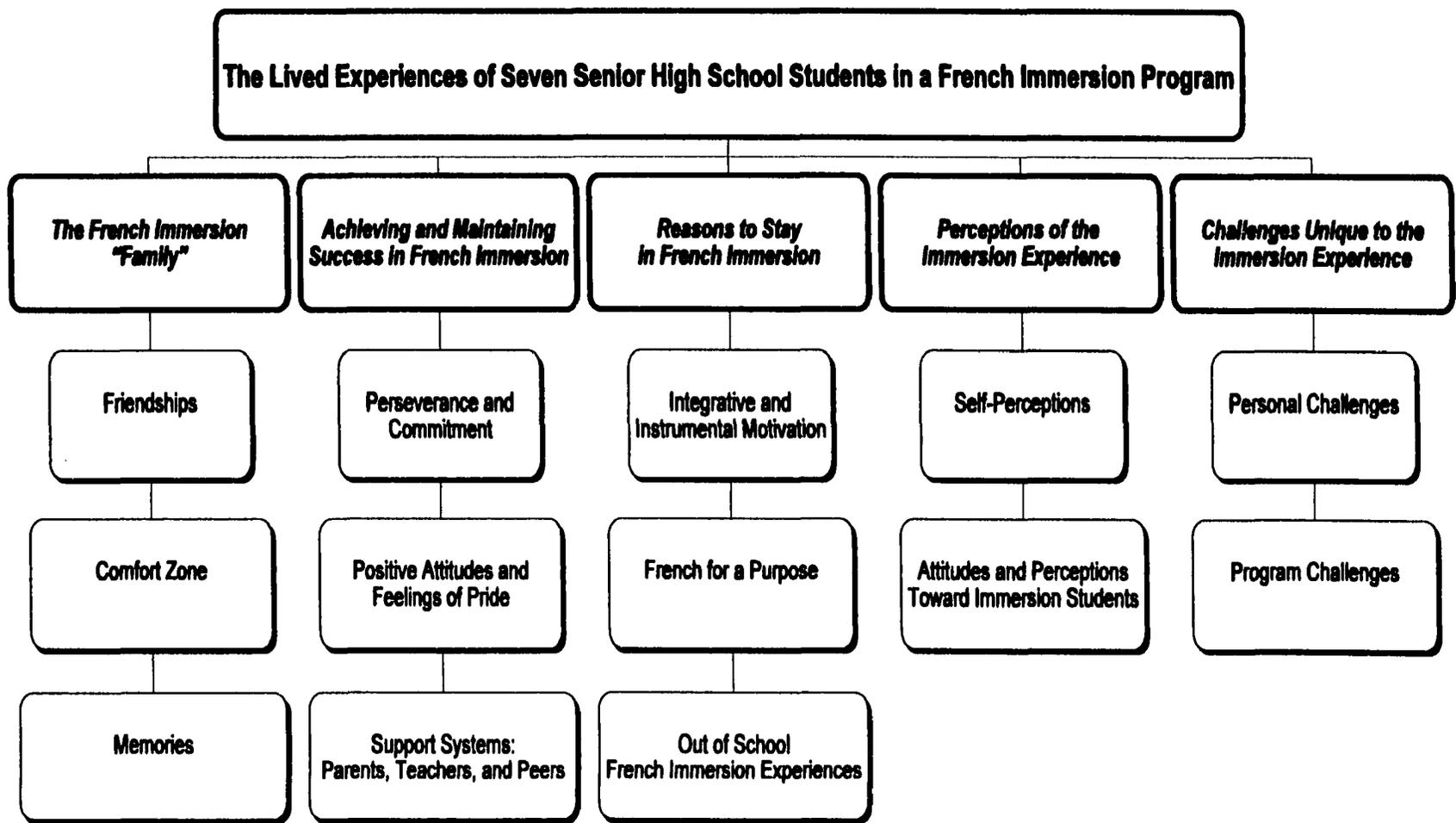
I would like to reflect on my five-year journey as a part-time graduate student and how I have grown as a teacher. Numerous challenges, rewards, and frustrating moments have defined my experience as an invaluable opportunity for personal and professional growth. Moreover, I have reaped a newfound appreciation for the perseverance required for bringing a seemingly overwhelming task, writing a thesis, to its completion. I can empathize with Natalie’s conviction: “It’s hard getting committed to something, but once you are, you’re determined to finish it.” Similarly, I have experienced the perseverance that exemplifies Natalie’s dedication to completing the French Immersion program. As a high school teacher of French Immersion and Core French, I have been striving to create a positive classroom learning environment which fosters second language communication. Promoting an appreciation for the French language and culture, encouraging active and purposeful communication, responding to students’ opinions, feelings, and points of view have been central

to my dynamic role as a French teacher. As a part-time graduate student, I have been challenged to grow intellectually - to observe, to reflect, to ask questions, and to make connections between my readings and life in the classroom.

Just as the seven participants are thankful that they have been given an alternative to a traditional unilingual educational experience, I appreciate the opportunity to conduct qualitative research that has compelled me to reflect on the profoundness of the nature of the immersion experience.

Table 7

Themes and Sub-themes of the Lived Experiences of
Seven Senior High School Students in a French Immersion Program



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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A
Letter of Approval
Acting Chair
Research Ethics Board
Lakehead University



8 December 1999

Ms. Teresina Lombardo Tassone
Faculty of Education
Lakehead University
THUNDER BAY, ONTARIO
P7B 5E1

Dear Ms. Lombardo Tassone:

Based on the recommendation of the Research Ethics Board, I am pleased to grant ethical approval to your research project entitled: "THE LIVED EXPERIENCE OF SIX SENIOR HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS IN A FRENCH IMMERSION PROGRAM."

Best wishes for a successful research project.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "L. Wilson".

Dr. Todd Dufresne
Acting Chair, Research Ethics Board

/lw

cc: Dr. F. Blaikie, Supervisor

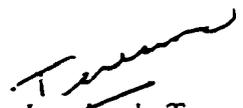
APPENDIX B

Letter of Permission

Director of Education

January 24, 2000

Ms. Teresina Lombardo Tassone


Dear Ms. Lombardo Tassone:

Please be advised that your request to implement your research project entitled, *The Lived Experiences of Six Senior High School Students in a French Immersion Program*, has been approved.

If you have any questions, please contact _____, Acting Executive Assistant to the Director,
at

Sincerely,

Director of Education

c.c. Fiona Blaikie Ph.D, Associate Professor

APPENDIX C
Cover Letter to Principal

December 6, 1999

Dear Mr. ----- :

As a graduate student enrolled in the Master of Education Program at Lakehead University, I will be conducting a study on the lived experiences of senior high school students in a French Immersion program. The purpose of this letter is to inform you of the nature of this thesis and to request your permission to conduct research at ----- High School.

There is a need for this type of descriptive research in French Immersion education. Researchers encourage investigating the French Immersion phenomenon by asking the students to share their perceptions and views since they have lived it first hand. The study will aim at understanding more completely the nature or essence of the experiences of the students who have chosen to remain in the program. This study may provide some insight into what experiences are viewed as valuable, constructive, motivational, and positive.

Six senior French Immersion students, three males and three females in grades eleven and twelve, will participate in this study. The participants will be selected by French Immersion teachers in the school and will represent a range of academic levels. The students must be anglophone and must have been in the program since senior kindergarten.

Data will be gathered in semi-structured interviews. The students will be interviewed individually once a week until all central questions have been covered. Interview sessions will take place at school after school hours and will be approximately thirty to forty-five minutes in length.

Participation in the study is voluntary. The participants have the right to withdraw from the study at any time regardless of the reason. Students may benefit from the opportunity to reflect on their perceptions and experiences of being a student

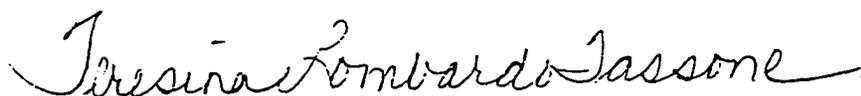
in French Immersion. Participation will not pose any physical, social, or psychological risk.

All data collected during the study will remain confidential. Pseudonyms will be used to ensure the anonymity of the students. The school and the school board will not be named. Once the research is complete, all data will be kept on file for seven years in the office of the thesis supervisor. A copy of the completed study will be available at the Lakehead University Education Library.

Parents will be provided with a letter and a consent form describing the study. They will indicate whether or not they give permission for their son or daughter to participate.

I look forward to meeting with you at your earliest convenience to discuss the possibility of interviewing six French Immersion students from ----- High School . If you have any questions or concerns, please call me at -----.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Teresina Lombardo Tassone".

Teresina Lombardo Tassone

APPENDIX D

Cover Letter to Teachers

December 6, 1999

Dear Ms. -----:

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this study on the lived experiences of senior high school students in a French Immersion program. The purpose of the research is to understand the experiences of being a student in this program. To help accomplish this goal, I would like you to assist in selecting student candidates to participate in this study.

Six senior French Immersion students in grades eleven and twelve will participate in this study. The students will represent a range of academic levels. They must be anglophone and must have been in the program since senior kindergarten.

There is a need for this type of descriptive research in French Immersion education. Researchers encourage investigating the French Immersion phenomenon by asking the students to share their perceptions and views since they have lived it first hand. The study will aim at understanding more completely the nature or essence of the experiences of the students who have decided to remain in the program. This study may provide some insight into what experiences are viewed as valuable, constructive, motivational, and positive.

Data will be gathered in open-ended interviews. The students will be interviewed individually once a week until all the central questions have been covered. Interview sessions will take place at school and will be approximately thirty to forty-five minutes in length.

Participation in the study is voluntary. The participants have the right to withdraw from the study at any time regardless of the reason. Students may benefit from the opportunity to reflect on their perceptions and experiences of being a student in French Immersion. Participation will not pose any physical, social or

psychological risk.

All data collected during the study will remain confidential. Pseudonyms will be used to ensure the anonymity of the students. The school and the school board will not be named. Once the research is complete, the data will be stored for seven years in the office of the thesis supervisor. A copy of the completed study will be available at the Lakehead University Education Library.

Parents will be provided with a letter and a consent form describing the study. They will indicate whether or not they give permission for their son or daughter to participate. If you have any questions concerning the study, I can be reached at -----.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Teresina Lombardo Tassone".

Teresina Lombardo Tassone

APPENDIX E
Cover Letter and Consent Form
(Female Participants)

January 25, 2000

Dear Parent/Guardian:

I am a graduate student enrolled in the Master of Education Program at Lakehead University. I am interested in researching the lived experiences of senior high school students in a French Immersion program. The purpose of the study is to understand the nature and the meaning of being a student in this program. The implementation of this research has been approved by the Research Ethics Committee at Lakehead University, the Director of Education, and the Principal.

There is a need for this type of descriptive research in French Immersion education. Researchers encourage investigating the French Immersion phenomenon by asking the students to share their perceptions and views since they have lived it first hand. The study will aim at understanding more completely the experiences of the students who have chosen to remain in the program. This study may provide some insight about what experiences are viewed as valuable, constructive, motivational, and positive

Your daughter will be interviewed once a week until all the central questions have been covered. Interview sessions will take place at school and will be approximately thirty to forty-five minutes in length.

Participation in the study is voluntary. Your daughter has the right to withdraw from the study at any time regardless of the reason. Although there will be no direct benefit to your daughter from participating in this study, this research will give her the opportunity to reflect on her perceptions which characterize the experience of being a student in French Immersion. Participation will not pose any physical, psychological, or social risk.

All data collected during the study will remain confidential. A pseudonym will be used to ensure the anonymity of your daughter's name. The school and the school board will not be named. Once the research is complete, the data will be stored for seven years in the office of the thesis supervisor. A copy of the completed study will be available at the Lakehead University Education Library.

If you agree to give permission for your daughter to participate, please indicate so in the appropriate space and sign the attached form. If you do not want your daughter to participate, please indicate this in the space provided and sign the form. Please have your daughter return the consent form to me at school by February 1, 2000. If you have any questions concerning the study, I can be reached at -----.

Sincerely,



Teresina Lombardo Tassone

✂-----

- () I *DO* give permission for my daughter to participate in the study described.
- () I *DO NOT* give permission for my daughter to participate in the study described.

Signature

Date

APPENDIX F
Cover Letter and Consent Form
(Male Participants)

January 25, 2000

Dear Parent/Guardian:

I am a graduate student enrolled in the Master of Education Program at Lakehead University. I am interested in researching the lived experiences of senior high school students in a French Immersion program. The purpose of the study is to understand the nature and the meaning of being a student in this program. The implementation of this research has been approved by the Research Ethics Committee at Lakehead University, the Director of Education, and the Principal.

There is a need for this type of descriptive research in French Immersion education. Researchers encourage investigating the French Immersion phenomenon by asking the students to share their perceptions and views since they have lived it first hand. The study will aim at understanding more completely the experiences of the students who have chosen to remain in the program. This study may provide some insight about what experiences are viewed as valuable, constructive, motivational, and positive

Your son will be interviewed once a week until all the central questions have been covered. Interview sessions will take place at school and will be approximately thirty to forty-five minutes in length.

Participation in the study is voluntary. Your son has the right to withdraw from the study at any time regardless of the reason. Although there will be no direct benefit to your son from participating in this study, this research will give him the opportunity to reflect on his perceptions which characterize the experience of being a student in French Immersion. Participation will not pose any physical, psychological, or social risk.

All data collected during the study will remain confidential. A pseudonym will be used to ensure the anonymity of your son's name. The school and the school board will not be named. Once the research is complete, the data will be stored for seven years in the office of the thesis supervisor. A copy of the completed study will be available at the Lakehead University Education Library.

If you agree to give permission for your son to participate, please indicate so in the appropriate space and sign the attached form. If you do not want your son to participate, please indicate this in the space provided and sign the form. Please have your son return the consent form to me at school by February 1, 2000. If you have any questions concerning the study, I can be reached at -----.

Sincerely,



Teresina Lombardo Tassone

✂-----

- () I *DO* give permission for my son to participate in the study described.
- () I *DO NOT* give permission for my son to participate in the study described.

Signature

Date

APPENDIX G**Excerpt from Diary Entry**

I have thoroughly enjoyed my French Immersion education. It has genuinely enriched my life. I put my knowledge and skills in French to use practically everyday. I feel so privileged to have been enrolled in the program and to have the ability to read, write, and converse in another language. It amazes me when I think about the extensive knowledge of French that I have and the education I received without missing out on anything the “English kids” were learning ... Being that I received the major part of my general education in French, I thought that my peers who were not in French Immersion would do much better in English classes than I would, but a lot of the time I surprised myself and most likely my peers too by getting marks equal to or better than theirs! All this time I thought I was missing out by being in French Immersion when in actuality not only do I have the advantage of being bilingual, I find myself with a better understanding of the English language, among others (Spanish, Italian, ...).

APPENDIX H

Excerpt from Interview Transcript

M ... at first glance, it would seem like the French would be a lot easier, because it's .. like the books are nowhere near as long, like in French you might get a novel and it's a hundred and fifty pages long, whereas in English, it could be three hundred or something like that. It's very rare to get a book that long for French Immersion. But actually, I think it .. it's actually easier in English, because it's your first language. You use it every day. But it seems like it would be less work in French Immersion.

T Why do you think it seems .. it appears to be less work?

M Just because ... it seems like everything would be shorter .. like 'cause you've got shorter novels, shorter stories. It's the grammar .. it's ... um .. I'm not sure how to say this .. um I don't know why the grammar would seem easier, but maybe the grammar would seem the same as English, but it's easier in English because the English you already half recognize it because it's what you use all the time, whereas the French grammar is somewhat harder because there are far more rules in French and there are a lot of things that are the opposite of English.

T I don't understand.

M Like, I mean, the rules would be different, like a verb might come first or that, but there are a lot more rules to memorize in French and because

they're different than your first language, it's a lot harder to keep them memorized.

T Have you found that knowing the French grammar has been helpful to you in understanding English grammar?

M Um .. a little bit. It does help, and when you see something in another language on TV or something like that, you might recognize something from French in that, that you wouldn't recognize just from English.

T Can you give me an example?

M Not off the top of my head, I can't.

T You said that usually the novels are a little shorter, or considerably shorter than the novels you study in English. How do you find the level of difficulty of the French novels?

M Actually I find it much harder to read in French than I do in English, because in English, I think in English, so I can read it in English. Whereas the French, I have to translate it to English and then think about it, and when you translate, you interpret and you lose something in the interpretation, rather than if I would just think in French, I'd get it.

T Do you find that is a lot more work?

M Yes, it is absolutely a lot more work.

T What kind of strategies do you use for learning for memorizing, for learning, for retaining information in French?

- M** Basically, all you can really do is repetition, just trudge through it and memorize.
- T** What works best for you?
- M** For me? When we're doing a lesson, I have to participate in it, and I find that I learn best that way. Like if I get involved with it, I'll understand it a lot better than if I just read it, or if I'm just told.

APPENDIX I

Excerpt from Interview Transcript

T Can you think of other success stories that characterize your French Immersion experience?

N Um ...when I went away to SEVEC, it was an exchange program .. I remember a lot of kids there were in Core French, so I did a lot of translating, like I wasn't as fluent as the people in Quebec, but the English students would be kind of like scared to talk to the French people, so you'd like translate or tell them what to say and I felt kinda good about that because it was like helping them out and stuff, so I felt kinda like, "Hey.... " So it comes in handy.

T Tell me more about SEVEC.

N SEVEC.....Well, we went to there for two weeks and we were signed up with like a .. I guess a twin, someone that had the same personalities and stuff ... Um .. we did a lot of things We went to Quebec City ... did a bunch of touring around there. Like they just told us a little bit about the history .. not too much .. just like, oh this is the wall from ... there was wars ... the people there I noticed they're really, really friendly. Like the people here are friendly, but if you walk down the street there's people everywhere, and they're like, "Oh, hi!" even if they don't know you.

T Did you get a chance to practice your French?

N Yeah, I spoke mostly in French the whole time, except to the people who spoke English. Everything there was in French. I was reading in French constantly. And it was kind of sad because I didn't know all the words, but it was really weird seeing all the street signs in French ... I learned a little bit of like slang ... a little bit of an accent. I just really enjoyed it. I had a ball there.

T Earlier, you mentioned that French came in handy for you. Can you think of other examples or incidents where French has been useful or purposeful in your life?

N It's happened a few times at work actually. I work at the movie theatre and people will come in and they'll try to point to which one they want, so I'd ask them, "Do you speak French?" and they're like, "Oui .." and I'd just start talking to them and explaining to them ... I'd say, "Sorry, I'm not as fast as you guys" but he's like "Alright, that's fine, it's helping me" so I think that's fun and the managers like that. They were surprised. They didn't know I spoke French, even though it says on my resume, but they just I guess didn't notice that.

T Do you think French will be useful on your resume in the future?

N Yeah. I don't ... I don't personally know by experience yet, because most of the jobs I've had .. they are looking at achievements on any .. clubs, leadership qualities, but my mom told me that when she was applying for

jobs, they always asked, "Do you speak French?" and she found that kind of troublesome because she noticed people that did speak French. They might have had the same qualifications, but the person with the French had an extra foot in the door. I know a lot of people have dropped out of it now, but I've been in it for so long, I figure "Why not stay in it?" I mean, when things get a little bit hard and stuff .. it's not *that* hard, it's just like .. just a matter of studying and understanding it.

T What are some other reasons why you decided to stick with it?

N I don't wanna like .. quit. Like when I was younger ... I remember people dropping out. Like every year we lost a couple more people and it was always something I never wanted to drop it. It was just something I always liked, and I just love communicating with different people. Like, it makes me feel better, because I hate having barriers between things. It's just better to be able to talk to people like that and just useful. I want to go to Quebec or France one day, even though their French is totally different, it would help me at least a little bit. Um .. I think that would be fun but mostly for the job thing ...