

# A Case Study of French Immersion Stayers in an Ottawa High School: Cultural Capital, Investment, and Identification to French<sup>1</sup>

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## 1. Introduction

Many Canadians appreciate that linguistic duality does not just reflect our past. It is part of the future of a prosperous Canada in a world of growing trade where, increasingly, the ability to communicate in many languages is valued more and more. Canadians are aware that knowledge of another language gives them access to a broader cultural heritage and contributes to personal enrichment. That is why Canadians value their linguistic duality. They want to build on immersion, this Canadian jewel that has inspired so many countries. The Action Plan will help Canadians write the next of act of the fascinating adventure of Canada's linguistic duality.

(Notes of an address by the Honourable Stéphane Dion, President of the Privy Council and Minister of Intergovernmental Affairs, March 14, 2003)

This excerpt encapsulates the views of the Honourable Stéphane Dion, President of the Privy Council and Minister of Intergovernmental Affairs of Canada, on the importance of French immersion programs for nation building and the development of economic prosperity in the context of globalization. His discourse emphasizes the value of communicating in many languages, as it promotes a broader cultural heritage and personal enrichment. The Minister also characterizes immersion as a “Canadian jewel”, whose design personifies the ideals of official bilingualism by providing students the opportunity to maintain strong foundations in English while using French to learn academic subjects and for the purpose of everyday interactions with peers and teachers.

The need to build on French immersion programs is on the forefront agenda of the Federal Government who released the Canadian Action Plan for Official Languages in March 2003 (Government of Canada 2003). This Action Plan constitutes an important legacy of the current Prime Minister Jean Chrétien, who appointed the Honourable Stéphane Dion to oversee a \$751 million budget over the next five years towards the promotion of linguistic duality and official bilingualism in the country. A sum of \$137 million will be directed towards French second-language instruction, and funding priorities include the development of innovative French second language learning methods and the recruitment of new French teachers. The most pressing funding priority currently involves increasing student enrolments in French second language programs, as the Federal Government wants to double within ten years the number of Canadian high school graduates with a working knowledge of both English and French.

There however exists little ethnographic work that has focussed on the social conditions that make French immersion a realistic and positive experience for high school students. A greater understanding of immersion success stories remains vital for the development of the program, especially in light of the high attrition trends that characterize secondary French immersion classes across the country (Makropoulos 1998, Canadian Parents for French 2002). My research offers some insight into this matter by presenting a case study of three grade eleven immersion students in an Ottawa high school. The stories of these youth reveal how the pursuit of immersion secondary studies is intimately tied up to their social identities, their investment in French second language learning, and their cultural capitals. At the same time, the individual experiences of these students provide contrasting readings on how French immersion education allows them to develop a sense of personal enrichment, cultural

heritage and economic prosperity. The discourses of these youth also show how being schooled in French immersion plays a crucial role in their sense of location and identification in relation to official bilingualism and *la francophonie* in the Canadian context.

## 2. Canadian French immersion success in theoretical perspective

The Canadian French immersion model is generally portrayed as a successful approach to second language teaching, that has served as a pedagogical reference for many countries wishing to set up bilingual programs (Keith and Swain 1997). The first Canadian immersion program was implemented in the suburbs of Montreal in 1965, and gained enthusiastic reviews from parents and researchers (Genesee 1987, Ouellet 1990, Rebuffot 1993). As pointed out by Heller (1990), Anglophone parents felt that it was important to provide their children the opportunity to master both French and English, as bilingualism was becoming and increasingly valued linguistic capital needed to secure social mobility in the Canadian context.

During the seventies and eighties, French immersion education underwent nationwide expansion across Canada. Most studies conducted during this time period offered reassuring results that highlighted the advantages of learning French in immersion classes (Makropoulos 1998). It was shown that immersion instruction posed no risk to English language maintenance (Hylton 1982, Genesee and Stanley 1976) while allowing students to reach high levels of competency in French (Connors and al. 1978, Swain and Lapkin 1981). Some research findings also indicated that immersion students were more likely to excel in academic subjects (Morrison and Pawley 1983, Swain 1984).

This literature on immersion benefits was based on quantitative studies and remained for the most part, informed by cognitive theories of second language acquisition and bilingual development. Central to this perspective is the work of Cummins (1978, 1979) who developed the common underlying model of bilingual proficiency and the threshold level hypothesis, which suggest that threshold levels of mastery in languages and their cognitive effects are transferable in the acquisition of new languages. The application of this theoretical framework showed that immersion students usually possessed high threshold levels in English, and thus succeeded in French and reaped the cognitive and academic advantages associated with “additive bilingualism” (Cummins 1981, 1984, Cummins and Swain 1986, Lambert 1977, Swain 1984).

Early critiques of Cummins’ theories were instigated by sociolinguists (Edelsky et al. 1983, Martin-Jones and Romaine 1986) who called into question the socioeconomic and cultural inconsistencies existing between dominant and minority groups of bilingual children. They argued that the application of cognitive theories have discriminating consequences for minority children from less privileged family backgrounds, as well as those who speak linguistic varieties. Scepticism about the immersion success was also raised in the eighties by sociologists Olson and Burns (1981, 1983), as their research conducted in a northern Ontario community revealed that the gross family income of immersion students was significantly higher than the community norm. By quoting Bowles and Gintis’ correspondence principle, Olson and Burns further argued that the social selection process characterizing the French immersion educational track played a determining role in schooling a select student population for success in the program.

Another fundamental concept to the reproduction theory of education is Bourdieu’s notion of cultural capital, which consists of the body of knowledge, belief systems and skills that are acquired through family upbringing, and are transmitted within distinctive social classes (Bourdieu 1977, 1986). As Bourdieu explains, the school system reproduces social inequalities through the valorisation and legitimization of middle and upper-middle class cultural capital. The notion of habitus is central to this theory, as students’ interiorized belief system plays a determining role in their actions and chances of securing educational success and social mobility.

On a critical note, the prevalence of class in Bourdieu’s understanding of cultural capital does not pay much attention to the factors related to the scholastic success of students from underprivileged and minority backgrounds. A growing literature on the ideology of the American dream offers insight into this issue, through a critical discussion of the belief that all Americans have a reasonable chance to achieve educational success and social mobility through their own efforts (Hochschild 1995,

Hochschild and Scovronick 2003, Perrucci and Wysong 2003). This body of research discusses the difficulty to reconcile a dream intended to benefit everyone which at the same time, promotes individual success. While American society is a highly competitive and hierarchal system, it remains sufficiently flexible for a select few to climb the ladder of success, which ultimately allows the dream ideology to perpetuate its legitimacy.

Ogbu (1991) also developed the cultural theory of school performance, which addresses why some minority students are more inclined than others to experience academic success. While all minority groups similarly experience discrimination and the job ceiling in society, Ogbu explains that involuntary and voluntary minorities generally interpret collective problems differently. On one hand, involuntary minorities usually compare their situation of economic and social disadvantage to the privileges associated with the dominant group, and interpret their condition of marginalisation is directly related to their status as a minority. Several involuntary minorities have learned from generation to generation that investment in education for self-advancement does not work for them, and thus may try to change the rules or can loose hope in the system. On the other hand, immigrant voluntary minorities often interpret economic barriers against them as temporary problems, and maintain a positive frame of reference by comparing their present situation with the conditions in their country of origin. Ogbu argues that immigrant minorities generally place a great deal of trust in the American system of social mobility, which they believe is there for all to climb as long as they play by the rules of the game through hard work and investment in education.

Ethnographic research conducted by Dagenais and Day (1998, 1999) offers empirical evidence that voluntary minority parents who immigrate to Canada and who chose immersion for their children, share the common belief that bilingualism is an advantage for social advancement in Canada and internationally. The three set of immigrants parents who participated in this study were residing in Vancouver, and lived in modest to middle-class dwellings. While all of these parents taught their children to speak their first language, they did not all attribute equal importance to have their children read and write the language of their country of origin. However, these parents all had some previous contact with French and possessed social and economic incentives for fostering trilingualism among their children. In this respect, some immigrant parents appear engaged in an integrative strategy of social mobility which recognizes the value of French immersion, and the importance of the minority identity and language. These dispositions play a key role in their children's ability to capitalize on their multiple linguistic and cultural resources, and develop positive experiences of themselves as trilinguals in immersion. The nature of these ethnographic results bring Dagenais and Day to argue for the need to further examine the relationship between immersion learning and the construction and reconstruction of identity (Norton 1997), and to explore whether these students are forming a culture of hybridity (Hall 1997, Leung et al. 1997).

Pierce (1995) similarly insists on the importance of examining second language acquisition (SLA) in relation to the multiple and evolving social identity of learners. She argues that SLA has heavily relied on theories of motivation, such as individual theories which explain motivational levels independently of social contexts (Krashen 1981, 1982) and social theories, which focus more on group differences between the language learner and members of the target group (Shumann 1976, Gardner 1985). According to Pierce, these motivational theories do not sufficiently integrate the language learner with the language learning context, and fail to address power relations in the social world that affect language interactions. In response to these limitations, Pierce calls for the need to examine the notion of investment to capture the evolving social identity of language learners as they acquire the target language of instruction. By drawing on an ethnographic study of five immigrant women in Ontario, Pierce shows how the participants' investment in learning English as a second language was reflected in their social and linguistic interactions with speakers of the target language. Her analysis of these findings also reveal that language learners constantly organized and reorganized their investment in the target language which in turn, affected their social identity which changed over space and time and often coexisted in multiple and contradictory ways.

The relationship between English second language learning and identity formation is also addressed by Ibrahim (1998, 1999), who deploys an ethnography of performance to examine the process of learning and becoming among continental francophone African youth in a Franco-Ontarian high school. The results of this study offer compelling evidence that learning and performing stylized

Black English allows francophone Africans to become Black, as they adopt race as a site of identification rather than having it imposed upon them. By drawing on the notion of Old and New discourses of identity (Hall 1990), Ibrahim suggests that African francophone youth who learn Black English and take up its cultural forms and identities produce a third space (Bhabha 1990, 1994), which combines the Old with the New.

The concept of crossing developed by Rampton (1995) offers further insight into the politics of race and ethnicity in the identity formation of adolescents and in particular, those who do not obviously belong to the language which they are learning. Rampton conducted sociolinguistic fieldwork among ethnically diverse groups of adolescents living in urban areas of Britain. Members of these groups often moved out of their own ethnic boundaries to cross into their friends' identity by switching into the language of their peers. For instance, the use of a Panjabi word or the use of Indian English would allow White British youth to cross into their friends' ethnic identity, and would similarly allow different ethnic minorities to cross over to each others' identities. In this regard, Rampton shows that language serves as a symbolic resource and capital that facilitates youth participation in multiethnic social networks in school and in the community. While crossing in and out of the ethnic boundaries among peer group members appears relatively flexible, Rampton points out that sharing ritualized expressions and idioms in friendship networks is an ongoing process that remains constantly open for negotiation and manipulation.

The social concepts which link second language learning with identity formation and cultural capital are useful in examining the issue of French immersion retention at the secondary level. Research conducted by Hart and Lapkin (1994) offer some insight into this issue, by showing that Ontario immersion stayers are more likely to possess intrinsic motivations for learning French, such as the love of learning another language for personal and cultural enrichment. While some studies have examined the issue of social class bias (Olson and Burns 1981, 1983) and immigrant participation in French immersion (Dagenais and Day 1998, 1998), little is known about the secondary student perspective on why they have remained in French immersion programs. The contribution of this paper lies in the ability to further examine the notion of secondary immersion success, by relying on an ethnographic case study informed by sociolinguistic and sociological understandings of second language learning and education.

### **3. Context of study and methodology**

The findings presented in this paper were obtained as part of a larger ethnographic study that I conducted from October 2001 until June 2002, in an English catholic high school located in the urban core of the city of Ottawa. This relatively small inner-city school predominantly caters to youth from middle and working-class family backgrounds, and a significant number of students with limited knowledge of English who recently arrived in Canada. Since the school is a religious minority Catholic school, the vast majority of the students identified as Roman Catholic and in some instances, as Christians of other denominations such as Protestant or Anglican. In spite of the relative religious homogeneity, the student population was quite diverse in terms of racial, ethnic, cultural and linguistic backgrounds.

The local setting of the school had a significant impact on the stories of French immersion success, told from the perspective of immersion stayers. The city of Ottawa is the National Capital of Canada, an officially bilingual country (English and French) that promotes linguistic duality and multicultural diversity as central elements of Canadian identity. The National Capital is currently the fourth most populated municipality in the country and the 2001 census (Ottawa Social Planning Council 2002) registered a continual population growth, largely fuelled by net international migration. Immigrants constitute about 20% of the city's total population and Ottawa residents reported that they belong to more than sixty-one ethnicities and speak over seventy languages (Mohamoud 2003). Chinese is currently the most spoken non-official language in the city of Ottawa, followed by Arabic, Italian and Spanish.

English and French however remain the most spoken languages by the population residing in the National Capital. The analysis of the 2001 Census (idem) indicates that English is the first language

spoken by 64% of the residents in the city, followed by French which is the mother tongue of 15% of the Ottawa population. In spite of the presence of native speakers of both linguistic communities, the promotion of official bilingualism in the National Capital remains a mitigated success. Even though 37% of Ottawa residents reported knowing both official languages, another 60% declared they spoke English and did not know any French while only 1% of French speakers declared not knowing any English. Official bilingualism is nonetheless considered a key asset for employment in the city, especially for the Federal Government, the tourism industry, the domain of education, and in sales and services (*idem*).

The experience of having grown up in Ottawa provided me with personal interest in conducting an ethnographic study into the lives of youth residing in the city. More specifically, I was interested in learning more about the stories behind the ongoing participation of students in the French immersion program that I had myself attended as a teenager. Even though I could have attended a minority French school, my parents decided to send me to an early French immersion program which offered children the opportunity to learn both official languages at the primary level. My Francophone mother knew that French schools would have provided me a better education in French, but she worried about the fact that English would only be introduced in Grade four and was only taught for a few hours a week. My Greek father was also apprehensive about sending me to French school since he did not understand this language, and feared that Francophone teachers would be reluctant to use English with him. French immersion thus appeared to them as a natural compromise, as it would allow me to simultaneously learn both languages at school. Since I regularly spoke French with my mother and extended family members, I never considered dropping out of French at school. The opportunity to develop my abilities in French was especially important for me, as it played a central aspect in my social positioning as a Francophone Canadian of Greek origin.

Given my personal interest in this study, I decided to conduct my research in the high school that my younger brother and myself had attended as teenagers. My status as a former student helped me gain access to the school and secure the trust and participation of several teachers. The ability to develop good working relations with the school staff was essential for this study, as I conducted interviews with some teachers (n=6) in order to learn about the ideological orientation of the school and academic programs. I also required the consent and support of their teachers who on the whole, allowed me to conduct a survey with the Grade 11 student population (n=185), and interviews with a sample of these youth (n=35).

Most of the Grade 11 students who participated in the study were under the age of 18 and subsequently, provided me a signed parental consent form prior to completing the survey or the interview. The bilingual survey took about twenty minutes to complete and was generally conducted in class, where students answered questions on their overall background and educational profile. I conducted the student interviews on school grounds during class hours and occasionally, during the lunch period of after school. The interviews lasted an average of fifty minutes, and I addressed students in French to invite them to conduct the interview in French, English or both. Students asked about their schooling experiences and language practices, and how they define and position themselves in relation to the Canadian nation.

For the purpose of this paper, I will present the stories of three Grade 11 students who were enrolled in the French immersion program at the time of the study. All names that follow are pseudonyms in order to protect student confidentiality and privacy. I referred to the student surveys in addition to the full interview transcriptions<sup>2</sup> to prepare a brief introduction for each of the participants. By referring to the discourses of these youth, I will discuss how their cultural capital, their investment in French second language learning and their social identities are intimately tied up to their ongoing participation and personal sense of success in the immersion program.

#### **4. Emily's early immersion start to a balanced sense of bilingual identity**

Emily, a white sixteen year old girl of Irish and Scottish descent, learned English as her first language while growing up in New-Brunswick. Her mother only knows English and works in the area of customer service, whereas her father occupies a bilingual position in the Federal Government where

he mostly speaks English and some French. As both parents believe in the merits of communicating in French and the economic value of official bilingualism, they enrolled their daughter in an early French immersion program from Kindergarten until the end of Grade 6. In this vein, Emily comments:

Because they thought it would be a good opportunity for me to find a job or communicate with people, (uhum), and ahh, I just went along with it, and stuck with it, and I think that,

When Emily moved to Ottawa with her family in 1997, she enrolled in the late immersion stream offered by her current high school and has remained in the program since then. In many ways, Emily possesses the qualities and values of a model Catholic student. She is not only dedicated to her school work, but is also involved in extra-curricular activities with her Church. In addition to her work as a Sunday school teacher, Emily sings in her Church choir and is actively involved in a youth group which organises charity drives and at the time of the interview, was planning to participate in the 2002 World Youth Day events hosted by Pope John Paul II in Toronto. In terms of occupational aspirations, Emily wants to become a teacher or a lawyer and plans to attend the University of Ottawa or Moncton University which both offer the opportunity to study in English and in French. In order to realize these objectives, Emily is enrolled in the academic high school program and takes almost half of her subjects in French immersion. Emily accepts her parents' views on immersion education, which provide her with a vital sense of support and motivation to stay in the program in spite of high attrition trends:

Yeah, a lot of people, are, like, LEAVE, like just because, when you go to Extended, your average goes up, (yeah), but I stayed because I really liked speaking French, with my friends, and from New-Brunswick, and so, (...), and my parents are pushing me, like they feel that I've stayed in so far, and then just drop, you know what I mean?

In her narrative, Emily establishes a social distance from her peers who dropped out of French immersion at the high school level. While she understands the appeal of obtaining higher grades in Extended French, Emily explains that she has already invested considerable time and effort in her immersion studies that she began at a relatively young age. The idea of giving up on the program also enters in conflict with the intrinsic values Emily associates with her evolving social identity as a French second language learner, which she summarizes as follows:

Well, for me, it's the fact that somebody needs help, and they only know French, then I could just help them, (yeah), like, even like at the bus stop, when they're asking me a question in French, like, it's just, I feel so happy that I know the answer, like I know the answer and other people don't, like they only know English, (uhum), and I guess it's just the fact, like I have opportunities to help, (...), like there are a lot more opportunities, (uhum), and it's just cool to have a second language,

Emily articulates a set of ideals in relation to her status as a French immersion student. She believes that French knowledge is necessary to contribute to a more helpful society, where bilingual speakers can come in aid to Francophones who need guidance and direction as a result of their limited understanding of English. Emily argues that her ability to communicate in French provides her a sense of purpose and accomplishment, especially since she is among a handful of people capable of interacting with Francophones in their language and culture. For Emily, French appears to be a "cool" commodity which provides her a location of advantage in her ability to participate and contribute to Francophone life.

Emily's discourse provides her a contradictory space where she validates her personal investment in French immersion by dissociating with the familial belief system that orient her aspirations, at least subconsciously. When asked about her motivations to learn French, Emily does not explicitly refer to the economic advantages of bilingualism even though she is aware that her parents took this factor into

account when they enrolled her in an early immersion program. Emily's father also received some French language training as a public servant, and Emily herself intends to pursue bilingual university studies to undertake a career path where the knowledge of both official languages will undoubtedly come in handy.

Another level of contradiction in Emily's discourse involves the considerate values she associates with French second language learning and in particular, with her role as a bilingual intermediary for unilingual French speakers. While many Francophones genuinely appreciate the opportunity to exchange with Anglophones in English and some want full access to French language services, the vast majority of native French speakers in Canada and especially those in Ottawa understand and speak both official languages (Mohamoud 2003). Emily insists that she really enjoys speaking French, but also indicated in her survey and interview that she mostly uses English in her everyday life when she is not in French class. This reality is exemplified in Emily's decision to conduct the interview uniquely in English, even though I addressed myself to her in French and provided her the option of speaking in French, English or both.

In spite of the predominance of English in her life, Emily is secure in her abilities in French. She preserves a positive image of herself and describes her balanced sense of bilingual identity as follows:

Emily: Well, I consider myself bilingual, but, like I'm not more English than French, you know, because English is my first language, so I'm English and I like it because I learned it first, but French, I like know equal amounts, (uhum), but, X, I know more French courses, so I'm just bilingual, and more, the English, (...)

Josée: How do you feel with French people, like your boyfriend?

Emily: In a way French, and sometimes, like, I don't know as much as him, (right), so, I know French but I know more English than him, so more bilingual.

For Emily, identifying as a bilingual is intimately linked to her social identity as a French second language learner who is romantically involved with a native French speaker. Emily explains that she knows both languages equally and possesses equivalent amounts of each, which provides her legitimate access to both worlds. Emily defends her entitlement to English space through the acquirement of English as her mother tongue and her ongoing mastery of this language. She perceives her abilities in English to be somewhat superior to those in French, especially in comparison to bilingual Francophones such as her boyfriend. Emily feels somewhat justified to cross into French space, as she participates in Francophone life and knows the language as a result of her ongoing dedication as an immersion learner. Emily however recognizes that her boyfriend possesses greater legitimacy to the French identity as a result of his higher proficiency in the language. While Emily does not explicitly discuss the issue of ethnic or cultural ties to French legitimacy, she views the bilingual identity as an appealing discursive space which allows her to combine her English self with her evolving sense of identification to French as a second language learner.

## **5. Romeo's late entry into French immersion opportunities in Canada**

Romeo is an Asian sixteen year old boy who was born in Ottawa and learned English as his first language, prior to picking up Filipino as his second home language. His parents are first generation immigrants from the Philippine, who speak Filipino as their mother tongue and learned English as their first official language which they both speak in their work environment. Both of Romeo's parents are employed in working class jobs, as his mother works in the food industry and his father works as a custodian in spite of his post-secondary education. Even though they do not speak French, both of Romeo's parents believe in the value of academic achievement and the importance of official bilingualism in order to ensure social mobility and success in Canadian society. They subsequently encouraged their son to accept a place in the late French immersion program which according to them, not only opens the door to bilingual opportunities but also provides better quality teaching and a more rigorous training than the regular English track.

- Josée: Pourquoi est-ce que tes parents voulaient t'envoyer en immersion ?
- Romeo: Car c'est, hum, c'est une meilleure chance dans la vie, (uhum), et comme, et pour mon futur,
- Josée: Quels types de chance ? A quels niveaux ?
- Romeo: Dans, dans les emplois, et comme, la qualité de l'enseignement en immersion, ils pensent que c'est meilleur, (que ?), que, comme dans les programmes réguliers en anglais, (...), les, les étudiants, (hah), dans la classe, comme le professeur d'anglais, vont ralentir X, dans l'enseignement, (...)
- Josée : Cela a influencé tes parents, ou toi, ou les deux ?
- Romeo: Non, j'ai choisi, XX, parce que le professeur en sixième année, (uhum) a envoyé une lettre avec, si elle veut que je me mets dans immersion, et elle a met un crochet pour moi, alors c'était ma décision.

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*Josée : Why did your parents wanted to send you to immersion ?*

*Romeo: Because its, hum, it's a better chance in life, (uhum), and like, it's for my future*

*Josée : What kind of chances ? At what level?*

*Romeo: In, in jobs, and like, in the quality of teaching in immersion, they thinks it better, (than ?), like, than in regular programs in English, (...), the, the students, (hah), in the class, like the English teachers, they will slow down X, their teaching, (...)*

*Josée : And this influenced your parents, you or both ?*

*Romeo: No, I chose, XX, because the teacher in grade six, (uhum), sent a letter with, and she want to put me in immersion, and so she put a check mark beside my name, so it was my decision, (translation).*

Even though Romeo benefits from a strong sense of family support and encouragement, he insists that it was his decision to begin the French immersion after being recommended into the program by his teacher. For Romeo, access to immersion is therefore not something to be taken for granted since he had to earn his place through his overall academic performance and commitment to French learning in primary school. Since his late entry into the Grade seven French immersion class, Romeo continues to display the characteristics of a bright and highly motivated student who assumes responsibility for his ongoing success and future. In addition to maintaining a high grade point average in all of his academic subjects, Romeo is a member of school clubs and holds down a part-time job to eventually help him finance his university studies. He intends to complete a humanities undergraduate degree in both official languages at the University of Ottawa, and eventually wants to study Common Law. Romeo hopes to embark in a career in international law, where he believes that his multilingual repertoire will surely come in handy.

Romeo is convinced that the immersion program constitutes an important stepping stone in his journey for success in Canadian society. He does not believe in the idea of dropping out of immersion, even though he must work hard to maintain high grades in a competitive program where he is learning academic subjects in his third language. Rather, Romeo calls attention to his conception of the big picture:

Oui, il y a comme des personnes qui ont quitté l'immersion dans le 8<sup>ième</sup> année, le neuvième et dixième, leur moyen, (uhum), pour les notes, comme 85, mais en immersion, c'est comme 75%, (...), car je sais le bilinguisme est meilleur que les notes dans le secondaire, c'est vrai, mais vous pouvez voir que comme, si vous êtes plus intelligent,

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*Yes, there are like people who left immersion in Grade 8, Grades 9 and 10, their average, (uhum), for marks, like 85%, but in immersion, it's like 75%, (...), well, I know that bilingualism is better than marks in high school, it's true, but you can see this if like, if you are more intelligent, (translation).*

The long term benefits of an immersion education are abundantly clear to Romeo, who argues that the advantages of official bilingualism significantly outweigh the temporary benefits of higher grades in a less demanding program. He argues that students who leave the program to improve their grades are less intelligent since they are incapable of gauging their immersion investment for their long-term future. Even though Romeo did not himself benefit from a head start in the immersion game, he accepts the dominant ideology that barriers to immersion success are generally attributable to personal inadequacy rather than social and structural forms of disadvantage. By doing so, Romeo also takes sole responsibility for his ability to secure his social mobility and ongoing success in the ranks of Canadian society.

The aspiration of making it in Canadian society is imbedded in Romeo's evolving social identity as a French immersion learner of immigrant background. He claims that he prefers French to English on the grounds that French is a more aesthetically appealing language. While Romeo admits that official bilingualism is an asset to secure employment in the Federal Government, he focuses on the advantages his linguistic repertoire procures in terms of his ability to help others in a work environment:

Et j'aime le français plus que l'anglais, (oui ?), car, hum, comme les mots, et tout, et la nature de la langue, et c'est bon, c'est bon d'avoir plus qu'une langue, (...), comme, dans les travaux, si tu travailles pour le gouvernement, (uhum), tu peux aider, si bilingue,

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*I like French more than English, (yes?), like, hum, because the words, and all, and the nature of the language, it's good, it's good to have more than one language, (...), like, like at work, if you work in the government, you can help, if bilingual, (translation).*

Romeo's perceptions of French also reflect his sense of investment in the language and culture. Similarly to Emily, he believes that immersion learners can adopt the Francophone identity if they master French and interact with native speakers. While Romeo aspires to become Francophone, he currently feels that his lack of proficiency in French prevents him from legitimately crossing into this space:

Josée: How do you identify with respect to la francophonie?

Romeo: Well, I'm trying to be Francophone, trying, X, to be fluent in French, with perfect grammar, and X, (uhum),

Josée: Do you identify yourself as Francophone right now?

Romeo: No, (...), because, I, I wouldn't feel, like, talking to them, like another Francophone French, (...), like I make a lot mistakes,

Josée: But you'd like to consider yourself Francophone?

Romeo: Uhum, well, no, NO, like French is like, totally speak French, maybe bilingual,

Josée: So you feel bilingual? Or do you have other identities as well?

Romeo: Okay, I feel bilingual, (...) French and English and then Filipino, (...), like, if I'm surrounded with like, Anglophones, then, that is what I'll do, and if I'm with a Francophone, then I'll feel bilingual, but if I'm with my family, Filipino,

Romeo insists that he still makes a lot of mistakes in French and does not feel sufficiently comfortable to speak to other Francophone in this language. There however exists a certain level of contradiction on how Romeo views himself in relation to his overall performance as a French immersion learner. In spite of his lack of confidence about his oral abilities in French, Romeo opted to conduct most of his interview with me in French even though I am a native speaker of the language. He also indicated in his survey and during the interview that he speaks French for his part-time job and volunteer work. Romeo also distinguished himself as a talented spokesperson during the French

public speaking competition, as he represented his school board during the 2002 provincial competition which took place in Toronto.

Given his reservations about his abilities in French, Romeo adopts the bilingual identity which provides him a social position from which to articulate his sense of identification and belonging to Francophone space. By insisting that he feels bilingual with Francophones, Romeo distances himself from the notion of French linguistic purity and establishes the right to claim his legitimacy to both official languages as a unit. Romeo however feels comfortable about fully integrating English space when surrounded by Anglophones, given his mastery of English which constitutes the first language he learned at home. The willingness to adapt to the Anglophone and Francophone majorities remains an additive process for Romeo, who maintains his Filipino identity through his sense of belonging with his family.

## 6. Immersion as Jean's chance to learn the value of his French heritage

Jean, a white sixteen year old student of French and English ancestry, was born in Ottawa to two parents of Canadian origin. His father was born in Quebec and learned French as his first language, but is also proficient in English as he uses both official languages in his daily work as a bus driver for the city of Ottawa. Jean's mother is of mixed French and English heritage but no longer understands any French even though she had learned the language as a child. The only language his mother currently understands is English, which is the medium of communication required for her work as a caregiver in a retirement home.

In spite of his French origins, Jean learned English as his home language during his childhood. As his mother does not understand any French, she wanted Jean to attend an English school where she could easily converse with teachers and follow his academic progress. According to Jean, his mother dislikes French since she does not feel accepted by the Francophone community and was not well treated in French schools while growing up in Canada. His mother subsequently enrolled him in a Core French program where Jean learned some rudiments of the language during primary school. During these years, Jean benefited from some family exposure to French as his father occasionally talked to him in this language and his extended paternal family is predominantly French-speaking. His father would have nonetheless preferred to send Jean to a French minority school so he could be immersed in the language at a young age:

Josée: Ton père, est-ce qu'il voulait l'immersion?

Jean: Oui, il voulait que je, je rentre dans, dans une école de langue française, mais ahh, comme ma mère ne voulait pas, comme, donc, je ne suis pas allé, mais ahh, en septième année, je ahh, j'ai rentré en immersion parce que je voulais, X,

Josée: Alors c'est toi qui a pris cette décision ?

Jean: À douze ans.

Josée: Et pourquoi as-tu pris cette décision ?

Jean: Parce que je voulais apprendre le français.

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*Josée: Your father, did he want immersion ?*

*Jean: Yes, he wanted that I, I begin in, in a French language school, but ahh, like my mom did not want that, so, I did not go, but all, in grade seven, I ahh, I began immersion because I wanted, X,*

*Josée: So you took this decision ?*

*Jean: I was twelve.*

*Josée: Why did you take this decision ?*

*Jean: Because I wanted to learn French (translation).*

Jean explains that the decision to enrol in the late French immersion program was ultimately his own to make, and his mother respects his wish. His father is particularly pleased about Jean's decision to enrol in immersion, but does not pressure him to study French. It is important to note that Jean

opted for the late immersion program around the age of twelve shortly after his parents' divorce. Jean went to live with his father who remarried a Franco-Ontarian woman who speaks French with his father and the other children in the household. Even though Jean usually replies to his father and step-mother in English, the predominance of French in his new family undoubtedly plays a determining impact in his ability to keep up with the academic immersion cohort. Unlike his Grade 11 immersion peers, Jean is the only student who is taking all of his subjects taught in English at the college level rather than at the academic level. He nonetheless displays a high level of oral abilities in French, and was the only student out of a total of thirty-five participants from this school who conducted the interview with me uniquely in French. From this view, it is not surprising that Jean does not find the French component of immersion difficult:

Josée : Comment trouves-tu l'immersion ?

Jean : Ahh, c'est bien, je ahh, je voudrais que, heuh, non, ce n'est pas difficile, je veux que ahh, j'ai mon diplôme avec heuh, heuh l'immersion, alors je peux, pourrais avoir, X, (...),

Josée : Et ça veut dire quoi, pour toi, d'apprendre le français?

Jean : Ahh, parce que, ahh, pour avoir une meilleure job, dans mon futur,

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*Josée : How do you find immersion ?*

*Jean : Ahh, it's okay, I ahh, I would like, heuh, no, it is not difficult, I would like ahh, I have my diploma with heuh, heuh immersion, so I can, could get, X,*

*Josée : And what does it mean, for you, to learn French?*

*Jean: Ahh, because, ahh, to have a better job, in the future, (translation).*

The pragmatic benefits of French immersion play a central role in Jean's narrative. He aspires to obtain a bilingual immersion diploma, which constitutes a tangible credential to certify his knowledge of both official languages. Jean also stresses the economic value of French in terms of future employment opportunities and material prosperity. The knowledge of French has been somewhat profitable to Jean, as he serves a bilingual clientele in his part-time job in a grocery store and speaks French to some of the clients who require his landscaping services. However, the long term economic rewards of his investment in French immersion are not obvious. Unlike Emily and Romeo, Jean does not intend to pursue his studies at the university level in both official languages nor does he aspire to enter the credential class of bilingual professionals. Rather, Jean plans to begin a trade program offered uniquely in English at a nearby college, and pursue a career where his knowledge of French will probably be an asset but not particularly lucrative.

The faith Jean places in the economic rewards of French is intimately linked to his complex positioning in the social landscape of second language learning. Jean could have attended a Franco-Ontarian school, but his life experiences taught him contradictory lessons about the worthiness of French. While his father's strong identification to French helps offset his mother's oppositional stance to French, Jean was mostly left on his own to sort whether he should invest himself or not in learning French. Jean finds the immersion program reassuring, as it provides him tangible proof that French is a desirable linguistic commodity which is rewarded by economic benefits. By holding onto the belief that his French linguistic background is valuable, Jean develops a sense of confidence and purpose in his delayed enterprise of learning French which constitutes an integral part of his heritage.

Jean's social reality also affects his conception of Francophone identity and the politics of bilingual cooperation. In contrast to Emily and Romeo, Jean does not mention that his investment in French immersion involves the desire to help Francophones in their language. From Jean's vantage point, many Franco-Ontarians like himself are fluent in English and some even communicate more often in English than in French. In addition to growing up in English, Jean has direct contact with the process of assimilation since his mother no longer understands French even though she learned the language as a child. Jean therefore refrains from conceptualizing Francophone identity in terms of linguistic proficiency, as such a definition would exclude people of French background who do not master the language. Instead, Jean discusses his sense of place in Francophone space in terms of family lineage and ancestry:

Josée: Comment te sens-tu par rapport à la francophonie ?  
 Jean : Heuh, je me sens plus, plus francophone, parce que mon père est, est francophone et ses parents sont francophones (...),  
 Josée : Te sens-tu Franco-Ontarien ?  
 Jean : Oui, (...), je suis né en Ontario, et, (...), la plupart des mes ancêtres sont Français, et ils sont venus la plupart en Ontario,  
 Josée : Plusieurs Franco-Ontariens parlent plus l'anglais ?  
 Jean : Oui, (pourquoi ?), je pense que c'est, parce que l'anglais est plus facile, (uhum), et c'est, je peux m'exprimer plus en anglais, (...),  
 Josée : Est-ce que tu te sens Anglais ?  
 Jean : Oui, parce que je parle l'anglais la plupart du temps, (...),  
 Josée : Te sens-tu bilingue ?  
 Jean : Je me sens un peu bilingue, oui, on pourrait dire ça, (...), ahh, je peux parler les deux, (...), ahh, quand je, je ahh, change les deux langues, XX, ahh, comme au travail, je parle le français puis l'anglais, puis le français avec des personnes et l'anglais avec d'autres personnes,

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*Josée : How do you feel with respect to la francophonie ?*

*Jean: Heuh, I feel more, like francophone, because my dad is, is francophone and his parents are francophone,*

*Josée: Do you feel Franco-Ontarian?*

*Jean: Yes, (...), because I was born in Ontario, and, (...) most of my ancestors were French, and they mostly came to Ontario,*

*Josée: Do many Franco-Ontarians speak more regularly in English?*

*Jean: Yes, (why?), I think that, because English is easier, (uhum), and like, I can express myself more in English, (...),*

*Josée: Do you feel English?*

*Jean: Yes, because I speak English most of the time, (...),*

*Josée : Do you feel bilingual?*

*Jean: I feel a bit bilingual, yes, we could say that, (...), ahh, I can speak both, (...), ahh, when I, I ahh, switch between both languages, XX, like at work, when I speak French and then English, and like French with people and English with other people (translation).*

The complex nature of Jean's evolving identity is manifested in his contradictory use of social categories to define his sense of belonging to his various linguistic and cultural heritages. While Jean discusses his legitimacy as a Franco-Ontarian by referring to his family lineage, he does not mention his inheritance of English ancestry through his mother who is of mixed English and French descent. Nonetheless, Jean does not hesitate to cross into English space and assume its identity on the basis of his proficiency and general usage of English in his everyday life. Through his self-identification to French ethnicity and to the English language, Jean carves out spaces of belonging that do not overlap with the other. He therefore does not require the bilingual identity to fit into either French or English worlds. For Jean, feeling bilingual is of lesser importance and essentially involves the process of code-switching between both languages as well as the ability to speak either linguistic code with its language members.

## 7. Conclusion

The stories of these three immersion students in an Ottawa high school reveal that language learning, investment and social identity play an important role in their ongoing success in the program. These youth share similar ideals, insofar as they view French immersion education as a valuable educational investment for their respective futures even though they come from different social class, ethnic, linguistic and racial backgrounds. After all, these students overcame external influences which could have potentially dissuaded them from pursuing their secondary studies in French. They all

benefit from partial to full parental support to stay in immersion, which helps them maintain a positive outlook on the long-term benefits of the program. In addition to acquiring French literacy in school, these students have the opportunity to practice their everyday communication skills with native speakers of the language. Their ongoing success in immersion is also reflected in their social identities, as their abilities in both official languages contribute to a growing sense of identification to bilingualism and the French language.

While these students share some common characteristics, it is important to note that each immersion learner possesses a unique story about their initial enrolment and continued investment in the program. Each youth expresses a distinctive understanding on how they conceive bilingualism and their sense of self in relation to their multiple sites of identity production. This reality is reflected in the differences of opinion among the immersion learners regarding the significance of French knowledge versus ancestral ties and ethnicity in the conception of Francophone space in the Canadian landscape. Tensions appear in the student discourses concerning their sense of ownership of the French language, as they often apply different criteria to discuss their legitimacy to English space and bilingual opportunities.

On a critical perspective, the realities of these youth also challenge some of the political ideals underlying French immersion education in the Canadian context. While the benefits of learning French for personal enrichment occasionally surface in the student interviews, the central theme of these success stories revolves around the desire and ability to stay in the immersion program in spite of its competitive and academic orientation. The notion of personal gain and economic prosperity also constitutes an important place in the stories of these youth, even though they are not all planning to pursue a career path where bilingualism will be particularly lucrative. The dominance of English in the lives of these youth offer compelling proof that linguistic asymmetry is a difficult objective to achieve. The irony of linguistic duality between Francophone and Anglophone communities is further illustrated by the participation of an immersion student of mixed French and English heritage who is eligible to attend a minority French school.

The nature of these ethnographic findings calls for the need to broaden the scope of funding priorities of the Canadian Action Plan for Official Languages in the area of French second-language instruction. A pressing agenda is how to make secondary French immersion education more accessible to students who are discouraged by the competitive and academic orientation of the program which is not sufficiently inclusive and community-based. Another area of concern which deserves further attention is the participation of Francophone youth in immersion, especially since this program was originally designed for students of Anglophone and English-speaking immigrant backgrounds. These matters need to be addressed if the Canadian Government hopes to achieve linguistic duality via the immersion experience.

## Notes

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### <sup>2</sup> Transcription conventions (All names of the participants are replaced with pseudonyms)

- , Clause final intonation
- ! Clause final high-fall
- ? Clause final rising intonation

X	Brief unaudible utterance (under 5 seconds)
XX	Middle unaudible utterance (about 5 seconds)
XXX	Elongated unaudible utterance (over 5 seconds)
[ ]	Overlapping talk
(...)	Omission
(uhum)	Brief meta-discursive utterance
CAPS	Capitals used for emphatic stress (in keeping with standard orthography, I have capitalized "I" and the first letter of words beginning at the speakers turn).
<i>Italics</i>	Translations of French into English are in italics

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