

FRENCH IMMERSION TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS OF ISOLATION:

TEACHING IN SMALL NORTHERN PROGRAMS

by

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Abstract

This key informant study looked at the experience of French Immersion (FI) teachers in small (fewer than 150 students) northern programs to develop an understanding of their opinions about and attitude towards their sense of isolation. I investigated, through interviews, their opinions, attitudes and feelings about teaching FI in the north. The participants were three elementary FI teachers from three different communities in northern British Columbia. They were selected through personal contact at FI workshops and through colleague contacts. I found that these three teachers felt a sense of isolation in the areas of professional development and collegial relationships.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract		ii
Table of Contents		iii
Chapter 1	Introduction	1
Chapter 2	Review of the literature	6
Chapter 3	Methodology	10
Chapter 4	Findings of the study	13
Chapter 5	Conclusions	25
References		27
Appendix A	Letters of Introduction	28
Appendix B	Letter of Informed Consent	30
Appendix C	Interview Guide and Questions	31
Appendix D	Sample Case Study Narrative	32

I. Introduction

Background to the Problem

My 13-year teaching career has been spent in a small French immersion (FI) program in the British Columbia (B.C.) Interior. I have reflected on these years and I recognize that there is a common thread of experience that wends its way through the areas of collegiality, professional development, and resources. In each of these areas I have felt the stress of professional isolation. Dussault (1997) found that there is a positive correlation between feelings of professional isolation and teacher stress. I attribute the professional isolation I experience to the small size of the program in which I teach, its geographical location, and the fact that I was not trained as a French immersion (FI) teacher.

I was trained as a French as a Second Language teacher in southern Ontario. Due to limited job opportunities there I searched elsewhere and “fell into” teaching French immersion in B.C. This experience is not uncommon. Based on a national survey completed in 1992, Day and Shapson (1996) state, “Two-thirds of respondents to this survey (67.1%) indicated that they had not received specialized preparation for teaching French immersion during their preservice education” (p. 254). A further example of this is that out of our present staff of seven immersion teachers, none completed their education degree in FI. We have all had to learn on the job how to teach in an immersion setting.

I arrived in the B.C. interior in 1989 to take the lead class, which was then in Grade 5. I was a new teacher and came to the area very excited about beginning my career. I had actually visited the town in which I was going to teach a few years earlier while travelling, so I knew the type of community into which I was moving. The population at the time was around 10,000 in the town proper and 23,000 in the trading area. While there were 15

elementary schools in the district, the FI program was accommodated at one central school and consisted of one class at each grade level from Kindergarten to Grade 5.

When I was hired I was asked if I would like to attend a three-day orientation being offered in Abbotsford, B.C. to new French immersion teachers. During those three days we were given a quick overview of the provincial Grade 5 curriculum and an experienced teacher gave us a synopsis of her year-long previews as well as her expectations of students' work. That workshop served as a touchstone to me for my first year of teaching. Although I had five colleagues who taught FI, none of them had ever taught Grade 5. Also, they were all relatively new teachers themselves with two to four years of experience. Being a first year teacher was hard enough, and added to that was the fact that I could not talk to anyone with real experience in my situation.

During the first few years of my teaching there was a continuous turnover of FI staff. For example, during my third year of teaching four out of seven teachers resigned. All of those teachers left to teach in larger centres. Due to economic reasons the employment situation in rural teaching has been relatively stable since the mid-1990s (Boylan & Bandy, 1994). However, there is a countrywide shortage of FI teachers and recruitment and retention could again become a challenge. Boylan and Bandy (1994) state, "One frequently cited concern that rural communities must acknowledge and address in their recruitment and retention practices is isolation" (p. 3). Many small communities find it difficult to attract and retain professionals.

My sense of isolation in the area of collegial support has continued over the years. After teaching Grade 5 for one year I moved into teaching the primary grades and have mainly been teaching Grade 1 for the past 12 years. I have been the sole teacher at the Grade

1 level in FI in the district for 9 out the last 10 years now. Although any teacher may feel isolated, what I believe I have really missed out on is the opportunity to discuss classroom experiences with someone who has shared a similar situation.

When I have attended FI conferences in the past there has been a collective sigh of relief in the room when a presenter speaks about common student errors or discusses grade-appropriate goals. I get the sense from these experiences that many other FI teachers experience the same frustrations as I do around lack of collegial support in their programs.

I have always looked wistfully at my colleagues in the English program as they are able to share resources and plan units together. They are always very happy to share resources for students with me but in the end it means more work for me due to translating. I believe that many FI teachers in small programs are constantly “reinventing the wheel”.

During the first few years of my teaching career I was able to attend a yearly FI conference. This professional development opportunity was very important to me as I was not trained as an FI teacher and I wanted to be able to be more reflective about my teaching. The conferences gave me the chance to attend workshops that helped me gauge if what I was doing in the classroom was good practice. These conferences always involved travel to Vancouver or Edmonton, which is both time consuming and costly. Over the years, budgets have been continually cut and the opportunities to travel to these conferences has diminished.

Professional development offered in my school district is almost always for English programs. In 13 years I can recall only five workshops that both were offered specifically for FI and were presented in French. French Immersion teachers greeted these workshops with enthusiasm because the materials that were presented were readily usable in class. We would not be required to translate an English handout.

During the last two years I have become very interested in using a Balanced Early Literacy approach in FI. I find myself revisiting the same feelings I had when I first began teaching. This is something very new to me. I have had no formal training in it and there is no one in my district that is able to share my experience of being a Grade 1 teacher in FI embarking on this road.

I have attended our district's Early Literacy group meetings and have found these helpful. Learning the strategies to use is helpful in any language but when it comes to student resources I find myself back to square one. Any student materials I receive have to be translated and many of these are not amenable to translation as they are poems or rhyming stories.

I attended a Reading 44 workshop in a neighbouring district in the summer of 2001. It was given in English and when I questioned the presenters about Early Literacy in FI they were able to point me in the direction of some valuable resources. The eye-opening fact for me was the amount of co-ordinated French resources available in a large district. They had committees that produced several resources appropriate for FI from book levelling to reading placement tests. I was envious of the teachers who were able to gather together and discuss and create resources.

When I arrived in this district there was a full time French Language Co-ordinator. The co-ordinator was able to keep us up to date on current trends and professional development opportunities. Over the years, with many budget cut-backs, this has dwindled to a .25 position. At this percentage we do not get much opportunity to gather together and create concerted efforts for our program. Collegiality and collaborative planning are mentioned as rejuvenating factors in many studies on professional isolation (Dussault, 1997).

Conversely, DiPardo (1999), in writing about the importance of collaboration cites research by Johnson and Lortie (1992) that argues that “isolated teachers are unduly limited in imagination and reach – narrowly conservative in their pedagogic thinking and approaches” (p. 2). Teachers who do not have the opportunity to engage in meaningful collaboration with peers may tend to rely on a limited repertoire of approaches. Without the modelling and feedback of peers, teachers can become stale in their pedagogical approach.

In my experience, professional isolation has increased my level of stress as a teacher. The main problems I associate with this isolation are: (a) the lack of opportunity to have consistent professional development in FI topics; and (b) the lack of opportunity to collaborate with FI peers. In my reflection on my experiences I began to wonder whether my feelings about teaching FI in the north were unique to me or did other FI teachers hold similar experiences and feelings. In this study I intend to explore what feelings of isolation, if any, other FI teachers have experienced while teaching in small northern programs.

Statement of Problem Area

Teaching in a small northern program has its challenges. From the literature it is clear that all teachers may be vulnerable to feeling a sense of isolation. The literature supports the belief that teachers who teach in a rural setting face more specific challenges in overcoming professional isolation due to geographic distance and fewer numbers of colleagues. For the purpose of this research there is also the added component of being an FI teacher. As is noted in Day and Shapson’s (1996) report, FI teachers have special and unique professional development needs. As an FI teacher teaching in the north I have experienced a sense of professional isolation in the areas of collegiality, professional development and

resources. And, this isolation has lead to what I perceive as an increased level of stress as a teacher.

My research question is: What experiences, and the beliefs, opinions, and feelings about these experiences, lead to a sense of isolation in FI teachers in small northern communities?

II. Literature Review

To my knowledge there is no available research on the specific question of the professional isolation FI teachers feel in small programs. My queries lead me to a handful of articles dealing with professional isolation in general and the isolation experienced by teachers in small rural schools. Even in this field, Miller and Hull (1991) point out that “research literature on rural education is sparse, but research focusing on rural staff development appears nearly non-existent” (p. 10). And as Dussault discovered, “few studies assess teachers’ professional isolation and, to our knowledge, no study assesses its link with teachers’ occupational stress” (p. 4).

Throughout the literature dealing with isolation there is one central theme: the difficulties encountered by isolated teachers in seeking professional renewal. As well as the articles dealing specifically with isolation, Day and Shapson (1996) discuss the findings of a national survey concerning the professional development needs of French Immersion teachers.

Several researchers describe teaching in and of itself as an isolating experience. For example, Dussault (1997) completed a study that found a positive and significant correlation between teachers’ occupational stress levels and their perceived sense of professional isolation. He quotes many other studies that determined “professional isolation is a

widespread characteristic of the teachers' life in schools" (p. 4). Goodlad (1984; cited in Scott & Smith, 1987) describes the classroom as a cell that separates teachers from any ideas other than their own. Scott and Smith suggest this is similar to each teacher reinventing the lightbulb on his or her own.

Miller and Hull (1991) prepared a report looking at the issues that had an impact on staff development and renewal in small rural schools. Their data was obtained from three different sources: a survey, focus work groups, and case study interviews from two rural schools. In addition they provided a review of several professional development programs aimed at overcoming professional isolation. As a result of the survey and forum group work, nine general areas of professional renewal needs of teachers in small rural schools were identified.

The results of the survey indicate that teachers feel it is important to be able to stay current and informed of new knowledge and trends. It also found that teachers believed that geographic isolation was a limiting factor in their professional renewal. Based on their findings, Miller and Hull (1991) argue that "isolated teachers can easily feel 'stuck in the woods' because of limited opportunities for growth" (p. 3). As one respondent from the focus work groups stated, "Geography often distances us from getting the professional renewal we all need to stay current" (p. 5).

Teachers want the support and opportunity to develop new skills. They feel that protected time to collaborate within and across schools should be encouraged and protected. In addition, teachers feel the need to have their current teaching practice reinforced and validated. As one respondent noted, "We need more contact with other professionals of similar interests to reinforce each other" (p. 4). The participants of the study reported that

“isolation and the development of collegial teams has been difficult as a result of time factors and distance” (p. 6).

The participants also cited fiscal resources and irrelevant opportunities as limiting factors. They acknowledged that “it is difficult for small districts to send people to meetings or afford to bring in expensive experts” (p. 6). They also expressed their frustration that the professional development opportunities do not always match their needs. Miller and Hull (1991; citing Tyack, 1974; see also, Nachtigal, 1982) state, “The long-time research emphasis on urban education has led to staff development approaches that reflect an ideology often referred to as the ‘one best system’. Because of the diverse nature of rural schools, the urban school models of staff development often fail to meet the needs of rural school districts” (p. 11).

The Canadian Association of Immersion Teachers (CAIT/ACPI) commissioned Day and Shapson (1996) to complete a national survey in 1993 that looked at the special professional development needs of FI teachers. In their report, Day and Shapson echo Miller and Hull’s (1991) notion that there is not one best system of professional development. They state several times that the professional development needs of FI teachers are unique and need to be acknowledged as such. They recommend that “ministries of education and universities need to be made more aware of the unique professional development needs of French immersion teachers and should be pressured to increase their commitment and support to professional development activities for immersion teachers” (p. 260).

Teachers in the Shapson and Day (1996) study rated opportunities for collaborative planning, work, or teaching in the school, district, or province as the most important activity

for professional development. In responding to open-ended questions on the survey, teachers frequently commented on the importance of peer collaboration. They stated that they often found sharing sessions with other teachers a very useful experience. They felt that teachers often have the same concerns or ask themselves the same questions and through face to face dialogue they can gain insight and moral support.

One teacher commented specifically on the need for professional collaboration when teaching FI in isolation by stating, “Je propose qu’il y ait plus de rencontres entre professeurs d’immersion dans les régions. Nous nous sentons très isolés surtout quand il n’y a qu’une école d’immersion dans le territoire” (p. 258). This teacher definitely felt that the opportunity to collaborate with peers would ease the isolation he felt from teaching in the only Immersion school in the area. It is clear from Day and Shapson’s survey that FI teachers want the opportunity to collaborate with their FI peers.

Day and Shapson (1996) also report on the needs of FI teachers in the area of materials and resources. Teachers rated this as the second most important area of need after teaching French language arts. Day and Shapson (1996) comment on the unique challenges faced by FI teachers in this area. They state that teachers need curriculum materials that help them give students the extra support needed to learn in a second language. Students do not only need to cover information as it is offered in the corresponding English grade level; it is also important that they be offered the information at a level of equivalent conceptual complexity. In order to do this, teachers need material and instruction in approaches that help mediate between written materials and students.

Day and Shapson (1996) acknowledge that all teachers are responsible for developing curriculum and that teachers do this by drawing on many resources. However, they

emphasize that in this area of resources, FI teachers “have special challenges and face unique problems (e.g., difficulty of access to original French resources from which to develop materials, lack of availability of bilingual librarian in the school, etc.)” (p. 263). They recommend that “collaborative networks among teachers should be encouraged so that they can share, build on their work, and develop strategies that enable students to gain access to French language materials” (p. 263).

Wideen and Andrews (1987; cited in Day & Shapson, 1996) acknowledge the importance of finding a balance between teacher development and staff development. This may sometimes be difficult in a dual-track school in which there exists a minority of FI teachers. However, it is just as important that FI teachers do not become an island within the larger school. Day and Shapson state that it is important to communicate and discuss the needs of the FI teacher at the school and district level. FI teachers have a dual role to play in their professional development because they “need not only work together to address the needs of their own teaching context but also to collaborate with all teachers regardless of language of instruction” (p. 260).

Overall, the importance of the opportunity for collaboration is reiterated throughout Shapson and Day’s (1996) report. As they state in their conclusion, “Some immersion teachers are isolated, some receive more support than others, yet all immersion teachers need to connect” (p. 267).

III. Design and Methodology

Site and Social Network Selection

This key informant study looked at the experience of three FI teachers in small (less than 150 students) northern programs to develop an understanding of their opinions about and attitudes towards their sense of isolation.

Research Role

My main role was that of interviewer. As the problem statement emerged from my personal experience several steps were put into place to reduce researcher bias in this project. Prior to the interview, the participants were advised of the nature of the study. Participants were told this was a project about their experience as FI teachers. The ethics of research generally dictate that participants should be informed about all aspects of the research. In this study, however, full disclosure before the interview would have affected the validity of the results. There is support in the literature for withholding information as long as ethical standards are maintained (McMillan & Schumacher, 1997; see also Patton, 1987). Following the interview, participants were debriefed and the purpose of the study was fully described.

Also, I used a standardized open-ended interview style. This style of interview helps reduce interviewer effects and bias because the same questions are asked in the same order (McMillan & Schumacher, 1997). The questions were modeled on a set of questions that were successful in a previous Master's study (Chasteauneuf, 1993) looking at experiences, beliefs, opinions, and attitudes. The questions were also reviewed by the project supervisor. This review helped guard against leading questions and personal bias on the part of the researcher; that is, imposing my reality on the participants.

Purposeful Sampling Strategies

The participants were three elementary FI teachers from three different communities in northern B.C. I sought volunteers through personal contact at a FI workshop and through colleague contacts. Potential volunteers were asked if they were willing to participate in a research project that looked at the experience of FI teachers in small northern communities. They were told that the project took the form of interviews and anonymity was ensured. Once approval was obtained from the UNBC Ethics Committee a letter of informed consent (Appendix A) was sent to the three participants. Also, a letter was sent (Appendix B) seeking permission from the school districts to interview their teachers.

Data Collection Strategy

The goal of this project was to explore experiences, opinions, attitudes, perceptions and feelings; therefore, an interview format was appropriate. As Patton (1987) states, "The purpose of interviewing....is to allow us to enter the other person's perspective" (p. 109). The location and time of the interviews was decided in consultation with the parties involved. The interviews were completed by the end of September, 2002.

The interviews were tape recorded and later transcribed. Tape recording the interviews increased the validity of the data (McMillan & Schumacher, 1997). And as Henerson (1978) notes, transcribing allows one to use exact quotes, which is "the fairest way of reporting information" (p. 99). The tape was erased after it was transcribed. The transcriptions are locked in a filing cabinet in the researcher's school. Transcriptions will be kept for a 2-year period and will then be shredded.

Inductive Data Analysis

I analyzed the transcriptions and the data was divided into relevant themes concerning professional isolation. I also looked for any other patterns or themes in the data.

As Patton (1987) states, “Categories or dimensions of analysis emerge from open-ended observations as the evaluator comes to understand the existing program patterns” (p. 15).

The experiences of the participants were then synthesized and reported upon.

Limitations of the Design

The main limitation of the design is the potential for researcher bias. Henerson (1978) includes this threat to validity under the heading *Lack of Objectivity of Administration*. As he points out, “The interviewer is, in effect, the evaluation instrument. And the more likely it is that he or she will inhibit the respondents or cause them to modify their answers, the less you can depend on the information you receive” (p. 27). In this research several steps have been put into place to reduce this bias. First and foremost is the fact that I am aware of my bias and with this knowledge I am able to monitor my questions and comments. Also, the questions I am using are modeled on a set of questions from a previous Master’s project. Thus, they have been reviewed and field-tested. According to Patton (1987), “Good questions should, at a minimum, be open-ended, neutral, sensitive, and clear” (p. 122).

IV. Findings of the Study

The purpose of this chapter is to analyze and interpret the interview data from the perspective of the research question. During the interviews, I questioned participants about their experiences as an FI teacher in a small northern community. I used the case study narrative as it is an effective way to analyze patterns, categories and basic descriptive units. (An example of an individual case study narrative has been included as Appendix C.)

The research question

What experiences, and the beliefs, opinions, and feelings about these experiences, lead to a sense of isolation in FI teachers in small northern communities? The research question looked at the experiences of FI teachers in small northern communities that lead to a sense of isolation. I further sought to explore what they thought and how they felt about these experiences.

The Participants

The participants were solicited from among three different northern school districts. Their experience as FI teachers ranges from 5 to 14 years. To ensure anonymity, pseudonyms were used throughout this study. The following profiles were drawn from the participants' responses to questions about their background and how they came to teach FI.

Julie is a francophone and was an experienced high school teacher before she made the move to elementary FI. Although she knew there was a FI program in her district she had not really given it much thought until "my administrator of the day said, 'you know, there's a Perfectionnement des Maitres, a program at SFU that you might be interested in going to because we really need people like you, francophones, in the Immersion program.'"

She looked into the program and decided to pursue it. It lasted one full year and targeted existing teachers wanting to develop their French language skills to meet Immersion expectations. For Julie it was not the language development that was important. As she stated, "I already had that so for me it was more for how to teach in elementary and that, because I came from older kids."

Although Julie was prepared to make the transition from teaching high school French as a Second Language to elementary FI, she had envisioned taking on an intermediate class. Julie faced a surprise when she was assigned to the Grade 1 FI class in her school. She found

out in the spring that “they wanted to put me in Grade 1. It was a bit shocking at first because the thought of teaching kids how to read and write really scared me. I didn’t think I’d be able to do that. But I had no choice so I decided to go for it.”

Since that first year Julie has continued teaching FI. She recounted her experience at different levels by saying, “Since then I’ve done primary, Grade 1, K/1, Grade 1-2, and Learning Assistance for a few years, part-time, that allowed me to be part-time, yes.” After a few years of part-time work Julie returned to the classroom full time.

Nicole is an anglophone who studied to teach French at the secondary level. She never taught in high school and held many other positions in elementary education before teaching in FI. She described her experience in the following way: “I taught learning assistance, English, and Kindergarten for two years, in English, and then I started, I subbed a little bit in FI.” Although she received no training to teach FI, Nicole felt that the work as a Teacher on Call gave her the experience she needed. She said, “Having done that half-time subbing gave me enough confidence to apply.” Also, Nicole had experience teaching ESL and she felt that experience helped her in FI. She said that FI “was more like ESL because people are all from like different countries, they hardly knew any English but you just talk away in English and they pick it up or not and it’s the same thing with FI.”

Carol is a francophone from Quebec. She received her degree in Special Education but the job market in Quebec was not very hopeful. After seeing an advertisement at her university she applied to three districts in B.C. Upon receiving a call from one northern district, Carol faced a challenge. As she said, “I couldn’t speak English so I made my sister phone back the school district.” Carol then had an interview with the Language Coordinator. She remembered, “We talked for about 5-10 minutes and she asked me to wait on

the phone and she came back and told me my contract was signed. So then I just went ahead, and I got on the plane and that was it.”

Experiences, beliefs, opinions, and attitudes

Beginning to teach FI in an anglophone province was very difficult for Carol because of her limited English. At the beginning, “it was actually the most difficult thing I ever had to do. I did not understand a thing, not a word, I mean I understood words and I could read some words but to put it all together and people speaking really quickly, I was, I smiled a lot.”

Carol faced other challenges besides language. One was her lack of knowledge of B.C. curriculum. She had “basically very, very little knowledge of curriculum.” Another challenge was the fact that she had been trained to deal with students in a one-on-one situation. She explained, “But we looked at individual cases as Learning Assistance. And this time it was a class and it was difficult because I wanted to solve every little problem and it wasn’t there and I didn’t have a good knowledge of the curriculum. So that was lacking I think.”

When asked if she felt that she received any support to help her in her transition to teaching in a new province and a new situation Carol said, “I think not from the School District. I’d say, to give me training, I don’t think it was their job anyway.” Carol then went on to say that she felt she needed the support when beginning teaching and that outside conferences provided that. Referring to conferences she said, “We actually, at that time, we went to a lot, to all the conferences we could. We went to Edmonton a lot, just so we could meet. Even the first and second year we went in the fall and in the spring, we went to

Vancouver so we could meet other people. But that's about it really. We were kinda just on our own."

All three teachers agreed that there were good Pro D opportunities for FI in outside conferences. They differed in how they felt about attending them. Carol enjoyed the opportunity to be in a French Immersion environment. She said, "I really liked when we did it more often at the beginning, when we went to Vancouver or Victoria or Edmonton because it was really, the focus was French. Everyone going over there they had one idea on their mind and it was to promote French, to speak French, to meet people with French backgrounds, to buy French resources"

Nicole found that attending a conference was often more work than it was worth to her. She stated, "I wish there were Pro D things closer. Because I went to a conference in Vancouver ... I had to fly there ... it was just, you know it wasn't that easy to get there or anything. And then I went to one in Edmonton. Anyway it's just expensive and far away and it's really hard to leave and leave a TOC in your class and prepare everything and go away for 3-4 days and then come back and have to teach right away. If there were something closer it would be a lot better"

Nicole also felt that the intensity of a big conference was overwhelming. She said, "But I have an overload of materials that I've gotten. Handouts and everything from many Pro D days over the past 10 years or something and I just can't really take it all in." When I asked her if she felt that the conferences were helpful she reiterated this last point, "Yes they were. But then again, it's overload of ideas in a way. Like it's very hard to use them all. It's very intense. You still have to come back and figure out what, how to do it on your own."

Nicole then added that she liked the collegial aspect of the conferences. She said, “But it is encouraging to go and meet other teachers and hear their experiences.”

Nicole spoke about a Pro D workshop that was offered in her district. Neighbouring districts were invited and a presenter was brought up from the Lower Mainland. She said she felt that this approach was more helpful to her. She explained, “He came two times during the year for a day each and I liked that better. I didn’t have to travel and he talked just about one topic. We had a whole day on reading and just talking about reading. It was good, too, because our whole FI staff was there and we could talk about the ideas later.”

Julie, when speaking about in district Pro D opportunities for FI simply rolled her eyes and said, “No, not a whole lot. It’s the same old thing, you know.”

Carol desired to have Pro D opportunities closer to home. She stated, “If we could have even one big conference that they have up north instead of doing it in Vancouver or having two, having a big association up north that we would do every spring or fall, a conference and we could meet and have a few sessions, to get together and all that.”

All three teachers spoke about the need to have support from other teachers around them. Nicole spoke about a difficulty she has encountered in a small FI program. She said, “I don’t really feel that there’s anybody to help me. Well, the other teachers in the school are good to talk to, you know because I can get ideas of how they do things. In a way ..., we’re a fairly small group and we’re sort of limited to the expertise we can impart to each other.” She thought that establishing collegial relationships with other districts would feel supportive to her. She said, “Well, if we ever got the chance to observe other classes in other communities that might be helpful.”

Julie felt that in her district collegiality was strong among primary teachers. She said, "Primary teachers pretty much work together." And she felt that the challenges she faced around getting support from peers were a result of individual teachers and teacher turnover. As she explained, "Some teachers don't like to collaborate a whole lot. Some teachers are only there for a couple years."

To help with establishing more collegial relationships Julie felt there was a need for co-ordination. She said, "When there's a need or something somebody calls [a meeting], usually just with [similar] grades, ..., we share lots of things like that, themes, little booklets for the kids. But when there's a need, there's not a whole lot of co-ordination and I think there should be more sometimes."

Carol felt that as she gained more experience teaching, her desire for more collegiality rose. At the beginning of her career she felt, "Well, it's funny because I didn't really realize that I was so on my own. I kind of, you know, I was doing my thing and there was no one to question what I was doing." As she gained experience her feelings changed. She said, "Now it's different because now I want, I want to hear more about other classes at my level. Am I doing what I'm supposed to do? Am I asking enough? Am I, are my expectations high enough?"

Carol found that teaching in the north has led to some challenges in establishing collegial ties. She said, "So I find the distance is hard to [overcome], and there doesn't seem to be connections, like all over. And I don't know how to get past that. Even when we have conferences very few people come, even when [a large nearby urban centre] has something we don't go and I don't really know why. I think it's just the drive, the distance." Carol continued, "Now, what I'm seeing, other people doing other things, now I'm really starting to

question more. Am I doing the right thing? Okay, I'm following what the English program is doing, but what could, how can I apply it to French? And that's now why I want to know more about other teachers, like how they're doing it. Now I've got enough experience to feel comfortable to ask."

Carol also found a difference in the collegiality level between herself and English teachers. That area of support has been important to her. As she explained, "I've found that especially in the last two years in Language Arts there have been a few people in the school district that have made an effort to find French materials for me"

Carol attributed this shift to a change of schools. She said, "I think that's because we moved into a new school. When it was just us we were so isolated, even more isolated. Now the other teachers at my level are starting to include a little bit more us in their discussions. Maybe to understand that it's there. And that we're doing the same thing just in a different language. I feel better about that, I feel supported"

When I asked Carol who or what she felt could help to establish contacts with other FI teachers she responded, "I wouldn't know where to start actually. I'm wondering if we could get a list of who's teaching where in the north, especially starting at 100 Mile and all the way up."

She felt that she would appreciate the support of other FI teachers at her grade level. She said, "So that I know who's teaching in Vanderhoof and I can ask questions or send them samples and say- this is what we've been doing, and getting the performance standards that we've got, you know, 1,2,3,4- and say-I think it's a 4, if I send it to Vanderhoof to that teacher over there, what do they think it would be? So that I might be able to see, okay, my expectations were dead on, or not high enough." I asked who she thought could help and she

answered, “And it would probably be BCTF or the French co-ordinators, probably not every district has one. I think that’s where the problem is, we don’t know where to start.”

The main refrain when questioned about resources was the necessity to do a lot of translating. Nicole frequently commented, “The unit was in English and I translated it into French.” When I asked her how she felt about that she answered, “Well, it’s a lot of work, a lot of work. You know, and sometimes I wonder if my translation is quite correct. Because, you can look things up in a dictionary and then maybe it’s not quite what it should be, a word here and there. But, it’s a lot of work to have to do that.”

Julie felt she had lots of resources but they weren’t always at the level she wanted. She frequently had to create her own versions. She explained, “So there’s lots of reading material that I introduce into my class and into my program but I still find that I write a lot of stuff that we read. I write it myself and I’ve been known to rewrite a lot of those little stories because I find that they are not wordy enough. So for example, I find that there’s not enough repetition. I’ve been known to rewrite the text at three different levels for each group.”

Julie found it difficult to order new materials without a good preview. Her district moved more towards Guided Reading but she found “Guided Reading and kits and we could get it all and some of the books weren’t that great, you know you really have to watch what you get.” She also found it frustrating to level the books. She said, “And how do you level them? And you know we levelled our books and everything and I don’t know how they measure to other levels in other districts, you know, and that’s all a little bit up in the air.”

Another resource Julie spoke about was the availability of support for French in the community. She lamented about the lack of field trip opportunities by saying, “I sometimes get green with envy when I see what they have for field trip opportunities and everything in

the Lower Mainland. Where a lot of things are done in French and where there's a lot of opportunity for them." She added, "So I guess in the north we have fewer of those opportunities and fewer people in the community as well who speak French. And we work in isolation."

Interpretation of the Data

I set out to discover if FI teachers in small northern programs experienced any sense of professional isolation. Limited professional development opportunities and lack of collegial support were the common themes running through the interviews.

Each teacher commented on the lack of local workshops specifically designed for FI. Julie seemed resigned to the fact that there would be no Pro D specifically for FI in her district. When I asked her about her local opportunities she rolled her eyes and said, "No, not a whole lot. It's the same old thing, you know." Nicole said that she wished there were Pro D opportunities closer to her home district. Carol echoed this sentiment when she said that she wished there could be a northern conference for FI teachers. These comments reflect the findings of the Shapson and Day (1996) survey. They made the case that the professional development needs of FI teachers are unique and, therefore, need to be addressed in that manner.

Nicole was the only teacher to speak about a local Pro D opportunity. She spoke very positively about an FI workshop her district sponsored. An outside presenter was brought in and he conducted two one-day workshops. Teachers from nearby districts were invited to attend. Nicole enjoyed not having to leave her district, having her whole staff there and the opportunity to meet other FI teachers. Miller and Hull (1991) also reported on the importance of teachers having the time to collaborate within and across schools. As one of their

respondents noted, “We need more contact with other professionals of similar interests to reinforce each other” (p. 4).

When discussing the benefits of attending outside conferences, Carol and Nicole differed in their opinions. Carol enjoyed attending conferences in Vancouver and Edmonton. She liked that the focus was on French. She enjoyed meeting with many other FI teachers. And, she found it helpful that there was the opportunity to look at and buy French resources. Nicole, however, found the whole experience overwhelming. She did not like having to leave her home or classroom. She said that she found it was more work than it was worth. She did not like the intensity of going to several workshops over a two-day period. She said that she would receive several handouts and not really have enough time to digest any of the information. The one aspect of attending outside conferences that Nicole enjoyed was the opportunity to meet with other teachers and hear about their experiences.

All three teachers talked about the importance of collegial support. The feelings they expressed were similar to the findings reported in both Miller and Hull (1991) and Day and Shapson (1996). Miller and Hull (1991) found that teachers felt it is important to be able to create and maintain collegial ties. They also reported that their respondents found that “isolation and the development of collegial teams has been difficult as a result of time factors and distance” (p. 6). Miller and Hull (1996) found that teachers frequently commented on the importance of peer collaboration. Their conclusion was that teachers often have the same questions and through face to face dialogue they can gain insight and moral support.

Julie felt that the primary teachers in her district worked well together. She noted that teachers called on each other when they felt the need for support or to share resources and

ideas. She felt fairly satisfied with this approach. Although, she did mention, in ending, that she thought there should be a more formal co-ordination of collegial relationships.

Nicole felt that her opportunity for collegial support was very limited due to the small size of her staff. She explained that because the FI staff was so small, the opportunity to share expertise was also limited. She thought that looking to outside districts was the answer. She said, "Well, if we ever got the chance to observe other classes in other communities that might be helpful."

Carol spoke the most about her feelings and opinions around collegial support. She felt that as she gained experience as a teacher her desire for outside support also grew. As she gained experience, she questioned more and sought more feedback around her teaching. As the only teacher at her grade level in her district she found her opportunities to discuss her specific queries limited. Like Julie, Carol expressed her desire for more co-ordination in collegial relationships. She talked about the role the BCTF or district Language Co-ordinators could play in this. She said that she would like to see a list of FI teachers and their respective grade levels. With this, she felt that she would have the opportunity to contact other teachers at her grade level and engage in meaningful discussions. Her main concern was around the universality of her expectations. She wanted to be able to compare her expectations against other FI teachers at her grade level.

Julie, also, spoke about the importance of being able to compare expectations when she mentioned her frustration in levelling books. She said that they had gone through the process of levelling their books but they were not sure how they measured up to other districts. Like Carol, Julie wanted the opportunity to be able to compare her expectations against those of other FI teachers. And, in essence, this is what Nicole was expressing when

she said that she wanted the opportunity to observe in other classrooms. All three teachers expressed their desire to continue growing as FI professionals through the feedback of other FI professionals. And, as Shapson and Day (1996) state in their conclusion, "Some immersion teachers are isolated, some receive more support than others, yet all immersion teachers need to connect" (p. 267).

V. Conclusions

The purpose of this research was to explore what experiences, and the beliefs, opinions, and feelings about these experiences, lead to a sense of isolation in FI teachers in small northern communities?

The data in this study suggested that these three FI teachers felt a sense of isolation in the areas of professional development and collegial relationships. They all spoke of their desire to have professional development opportunities specifically for French Immersion. They also spoke about the need for stronger collegial ties. They expressed the difficulties they found in trying to establish relationships with other FI teachers. They found that the lack of a co-ordinator, time and distance limited their opportunities to forge ties with FI teachers in other districts. Like all effective teachers, they wanted to be reflective in their practice. In order to do that they felt the need to be able to dialogue with other FI teachers.

Implications for further research

The data in this research reflects the experiences, feelings, opinions and attitudes of three FI teachers. The respondents' feelings of isolation in the areas of professional development and collegial ties support the findings of previous studies (Miller and Hull, 1991, and Day and Shapson, 1996).

Comments made by the respondents during the interviews suggest that it would be worthwhile to investigate the feasibility of setting up a northern FI teachers' network. And associated with this would be investigating how FI teachers think this network could function. The study would benefit from using a triangulation approach. A survey could ascertain the feelings and thoughts of a large number of FI teachers. And an interview approach could provide a deeper picture of what FI teachers want in a network.

It is generally acknowledged that there is a shortage of FI teachers in Canada (Richmond, 2002; Steffenhagen, 2003). Northern districts may find it increasingly more difficult to attract and maintain FI staff. Understanding the needs specific to FI teachers and providing appropriate support may help create stronger and more vibrant FI programs.

I found this investigation into FI teachers' experiences in small northern programs to have significance and be of value to me. It helped to normalize my own experiences of isolation. There truly is great relief in realizing that I am not alone. As a teacher it is important to me to be reflective about my teaching practices. Part of this reflection depends upon the feedback of other teachers. I want to be able to dialogue with teachers who are sharing some of the same experiences as I am. Teachers who may be asking themselves the same questions as I do around what are the best practices for primary FI. The participants' reflections helped me to start thinking more about creating stronger ties with my FI colleagues, both within my district and outside of it. For me, collegial support is an integral part of every teacher's professional vitality. It should be supported by all stakeholders in education.

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Appendix A

July 16, 2002

Dear Colleague:

RE: UNBC Research Project of Ms. Cathy Braun, Teacher.

I am a grade one French Immersion teacher in Quesnel, British Columbia. I am doing a research project on the experience of French Immersion teachers in small northern programs. I am asking you to participate in this project because I am interested in learning about your experiences as a French Immersion teacher. There is no risk to you in participating in this study. My hope is that this research project will give you a chance to tell your story about the successes and challenges of teaching Immersion in the north. What you tell me may help administrators and program co-ordinators gain a better understanding of how to support Immersion teachers in the north.

I would like you to tell me about your past and present experiences as a French Immersion teacher in a small northern program. This would take place in an interview lasting approximately one hour.

All your comments are confidential; you will not be identified in any way, and the audiotapes will be destroyed after the project is finished. You can stop the interview and leave at any time. If you choose to stop the interview and leave, the audio cassette and any notes will be immediately destroyed or turned over to you if you wish.

The tape-recorded information collected during the interviews will be transcribed following the interview and the tape will be erased once the transcription is complete. I will ask you to review your transcripts and my synthesis of the information. This will help to ensure that I have made an accurate representation of your experience. The transcription will be retained for a period of two years following my completion of the project and will be kept in a locked filing cabinet. After two years have elapsed, the transcripts will be shredded. Your name will not be included on the transcription, and any names mentioned in the interview will be changed so that no individual can be identified.

If you wish to obtain a copy of the research results (that is, a copy of the project when it has been completed), I will be happy to give one to you. If you have any questions about the interviews, or wish to obtain a copy of the study when it is completed, you may contact me at Ecole Baker, 992-8383.

Thank you for your time. Please fill out the attached sheet and I will contact you for times and dates. If you have any questions please do not hesitate to contact me. If there are any complaints about the project, please contact the Office of Research, UNBC, at 3333 University Way, Prince George, BC, V2N 4Z9 or telephone (250) 960-5820.

Sincerely,

Cathy Braun

Cathy Braun
1050 N. Fraser Dr.
Quesnel, BC
V2J 1Z9

School Superintendent
School District
City
Postal Code

Dear Sir or Madam:

As you are likely aware, I am currently a member of the Quesnel Master's cohort through the University of Northern British Columbia. I am planning a research project as my final step in completing the program.

I am writing this letter to request permission to conduct my study in your district. My intent is to interview three French Immersion teachers. I am interested in finding out about their experiences teaching immersion in a small northern program, the successes and the challenges. My hope is that the results of this study will lead to a better understanding of the needs of French Immersion teachers teaching in small northern programs. Participants will be volunteers and they will be informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time. The results of the study will be made available to the school district and to the participants if interested.

I would appreciate your response at the earliest convenient time. If you have any questions, please contact me at (250) 992-7270. Any complaints should be directed to the Office of Research at UNBC, at 3333 University Way, Prince George, BC, V2N 4Z9 or telephone (250) 960-5820.

Respectfully yours,

Cathy Braun

Appendix B

LETTER OF INFORMED CONSENT

1. I have discussed the purposes of the research with the researcher.
2. I understand that I am a volunteer and may leave at any time.
3. I understand that the interview is confidential and nothing of a personal nature will be discussed between the researcher and any other person.
4. I understand that I will remain anonymous and that a different name will be used in the written report.
5. I agree to the interview being taped. I understand that the recording will be erased after completion of the research.
6. The researcher has answered my questions and concerns about the research.

(Name of interviewee)

(Signature)

(Date)

(Name of researcher)

(Signature)

Appendix C

Interview Guideline for FI Teachers' Experience in Small Northern Programs

Part A: Establishing rapport

Q 1 How long have you been teaching FI? How long in (name of town or city)?

I'd like to hear your story of how you came to teach in (name of town or city).

Q 2 I'd like you to take me along with you on a typical day in your classroom. What would I see you doing? What experiences would I see you having?

Q 3 What's your opinion of this typical day? What word would you use to describe it?

Q 4 How did you feel about this typical day? How did you feel about the experiences you had? Why did you feel that way?

Q 5 You said this typical day was _____. Is there anything you would have liked to change about this day? What could help you make these changes? Who could help you make these changes?

Part B

Q 1 I'd like you to think back to a bad day you've had in your classroom. I'd like you to take me along with you on that day in your classroom. What would I see you doing? What experiences would I see you having?

Q 2 What's your opinion of this bad day? What word would you use to describe it?

Q 3 How did you feel about this bad day? How did you feel about the experiences you had? Why did you feel that way?

Q 4 You said this bad day was _____. Is there anything you would have liked to change about this day? What could help you make these changes? Who could help you make these changes?

Appendix D

Sample Case Study Narrative

Nicole

Respondent Background

Nicole did not start out as an FI teacher. She explained, “My training was secondary French. But I decided after that that I didn’t enjoy that age group.” She continued, “I taught learning assistance, English, and Kindergarten for two years, in English, and then I started, I subbed a little bit in FI.” She also had experience teaching ESL. Nicole believed that this experience helped her in teaching FI. She said, “And, I’ve taught ESL before too and it [FI] was more like ESL because people are all from like different countries, like Vietnam or whatever and they, they hardly knew any English but you just have to talk away in English and then they have to pick it up or not and it’s the same thing with FI. It’s more like when you learn your native language.”

I asked Nicole how long she had been teaching FI. She responded, “Oh about, I’d have to say, think back, and count this is the first year I’ve a full-time classroom. And I’ve had part-time classrooms and French Learning Assistance before. Dating back to, let’s see, it’s about five years anyway.”

Although she did not train in FI, Nicole felt confident in her skills and enjoyed the change from FSL. She said, “Actually I like it a lot better because you can speak in French all the time and you’re not always translating, you know.”

Experiences, Beliefs, Attitudes and Opinions

Nicole had a multi-grade class and she found it challenging to meet everyone’s needs. She said, “Near the beginning of the year I was trying to have about 5 different reading groups but it was quite, it was too hard to manage. And toward the end of the year I changed

it where I, I gave one text to everybody. And so I tried different things, I tried giving something more difficult to the kids who needed a challenge and something easier for the other kids. So I started off with reading in one form or another. And then when we got to Math that was pretty tricky because I felt they should all be doing work for their grade.... I'd have to juggle who I'd give my attention to. And sort of alternate so I didn't really feel that they always got everything they needed."

I asked Nicole to speak more about the reading program she was using. She said, "Well, I didn't really have a series, well there's Periscope 3 which I think I'll use more next year. This year I didn't use it a lot, I used it more last year. It's actually pretty good. But I was really in a quandary about what to use. There's also Contes roses and Contes verts which has controlled vocabulary, so I kind of like that one but it's quite old so..., but it has tapes that go with it. Actually they're using it in [a nearby district]. And so I, then we got some texts from [a workshop presenter] and I was using those towards the end of the year. So they were pretty interesting. Like there would be a little text about four sentences long and then some little exercise to do after, that wouldn't take them a whole lot of time. And even the kids who have trouble reading liked it."

I asked about the workshop presenter and Nicole responded, "He is a fellow who came and did two workshops with us. And gave us lots of helpful hints about teaching reading in FI. They were day long workshops and he's affiliated with SFU." Nicole she liked having the Pro D in her own district. She said, "He came two times during the year for a day each and I liked that better. I didn't have to travel and he talked just about one topic. We had a whole day on reading and just talking about reading. It was good, too, because our whole FI staff was there and we could talk about the ideas later." Nicole went on to explain

that other districts had been invited to this FI Pro D. She said, "It's encouraging to meet other teachers and hear their experiences.... And I liked that we were the same group talking [at both workshops]."

She continued speaking about the reading program in her class. Nicole said, "Well, I have Reading 44, that I'm going to read in the summer and you go to Pro D days and you get things like this but during the school year I just can't, I just don't have much time.

I asked if she found the Pro D days helpful. She responded, "I do. I do, but I have sort of an overload of materials that I've gotten. Handouts, and everything. From many Pro D days over the past 10 years or something and I just can't really take it all in."

Further on in the interview when speaking about Pro D, Nicole said, "Well, a lot of times I wish there were more Pro D things closer. Because I went to a conference in Vancouver and that was pretty...I had to fly there and then...and ... it was just, you know it wasn't that easy to get there or anything. And then I went to one in Edmonton anyway it's just expensive and far away and it's really hard to leave and leave a TOC in your class and prepare everything and go away for 3-4 days and then come back and have to teach right away. If there were something closer it would be a lot better."

Nicole said the Pro D. the conferences specifically for FI, were helpful. However, she also added, "But, then again, it's overload of ideas in a way. Like it's very hard to use them all. It's very intense. You still have to come back and figure out what, how to do it on your own."

She put forth her idea of what would be useful. She said, "Well, if we ever got the chance to observe other classes in other communities that might be helpful. Because that's probably better than just reading it in a book or something." She did have that chance when

she was a teacher's assistant. She explained, "I did it more when I was a teacher's assistant.... One thing it helped me with is how to teach Math in French. All the terminology and things, which I had never heard. You don't really learn that if you didn't grow up with it, like take FI in elementary. It helped with classroom vocabulary."

When speaking about wanting to make changes in her teaching approach Nicole lamented, "I don't really feel that there's anybody to help me. Well, the other teachers in the school are good to talk to, you know, because I can get ideas of how they do things. In a way we are quite, we're a fairly small group and we're sort of limited to the expertise we can impart to each other. The French program is pretty small so actually it's good to be in a dual track school because you can learn a lot from the English track teachers also. I've got ideas from a couple of other teachers. I used the Science ideas, I translated it all into French and the other teacher's doing it all in English."

Nicole then went on to talk about the amount of translating she did of class materials. She said, "Well it's a lot of work, a lot of work. You know, and, sometimes I wonder if my translation is quite correct. Because you can look things up in a dictionary and then maybe it's not quite what it should be, a word here and there. But it's a lot of work to have to do that." And later on in the interview Nicole commented on a unit an English colleague shared with her. She said, "[We did] the same unit except I had to translate it all into French. I mean I like translating actually. But it's pretty time consuming."