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## **Standing Committee on Official Languages**

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**EVIDENCE**

**Tuesday, June 11, 2013**

—  
**Chair**

**The Honourable Michael Chong**



## Standing Committee on Official Languages

Tuesday, June 11, 2013

• (1540)

[Translation]

**The Chair (Hon. Michael Chong (Wellington—Halton Hills, CPC)):** Welcome to the 84th meeting of the Standing Committee on Official Languages. Today is June 11, 2013. Pursuant to Standing Order 108, we are studying second official language immersion programs in Canada.

[English]

Before we begin with our witness this afternoon, I want to deal with the second item on today's agenda, which is adopting a committee budget.

Monsieur Dion.

[Translation]

**Hon. Stéphane Dion (Saint-Laurent—Cartierville, Lib.):** Mr. Chair, I have before me the motion that you asked me to introduce. It reads as follows:

That a budget of \$20,900, for the study on second official language immersion programs in Canada, be adopted.

[English]

**The Chair:** We have a motion in front of us to adopt a budget for this study. It is for the amount of \$20,900. It is to pay for witness expenses relating to travel, for video conference expenses, and for any other expenses related to this study.

Is there any debate on this budget? Seeing none, I'll call the question.

(Motion agreed to [See *Minutes of Proceedings*])

**The Chair:** Thank you very much.

We have in front of us Professor Genesee, from McGill University. He's appearing via video conference from McGill in Montreal.

Before we give him the floor to make his opening statement, I'd just like to point out to members of the committee that there will be a vote in the House at 4:25. Bells will begin ringing at approximately 4 o'clock.

We'll receive an opening statement from Professor Genesee. We'll allow for two questions from members, and then we'll proceed to the House for votes.

My apologies, Professor Genesee. We are in the last weeks of the spring parliamentary session, and there are many unannounced votes. We just learned of this several minutes ago. But at the very

least, we'll receive your testimony, your opening statement. We'll entertain questions from two members before we adjourn the meeting.

Professor Genesee, you have the floor.

**Dr. Fred Genesee (Professor, McGill University, As an Individual):** Good afternoon. Thank you very much for inviting me and giving me this opportunity to speak to you.

I understand that I have 10 minutes for these comments. Is that correct?

**The Chair:** That is correct.

**Dr. Fred Genesee:** I'll keep my comments very brief.

I want to start by saying that as many of you probably already know, immersion programs in Canada, especially French immersion programs, have been a singularly effective innovation in Canadian education. From their beginning in the mid-1960s to now, they have become a standard feature of the educational landscape.

The effectiveness of these programs can be judged in a number of ways, but in particular, they're very successful, as indicated by research, with respect to student outcomes. We now know, after many years of research, that students in immersion programs attain very advanced levels of functional competence in the second language. At the same time, they attain normal levels of native language development in English, and also normal levels of achievement in their academic school subjects, such as mathematics and science.

This experience in no way impairs their normal educational development. At the same time, they develop high levels of competence in a second language.

The success of these programs can also be judged by their appeal to and popularity with the public at large and parents in particular. In most communities that I'm aware of, these are highly popular and very desirable programs. In fact, they may be more desirable than there are slots available.

Finally, I would judge these programs to have been successful in terms of serving certain national needs with respect to promoting Canada's two official languages.

A final indicator of the success of these programs is that they are widely recognized around the world. In general, people refer to the “Canadian model” of bilingual education. Many communities in diverse countries around the world have emulated the Canadian immersion programs to meet their diverse needs, whether it's in support of national bilingualism, official policies of bilingualism, or other needs.

There's a lot of documentation of the success of these programs. The brief summary that I made available to you outlines these successes, so I won't go into those in any detail.

What I thought I would do with my time is outline what I think are needs for future reflection and leadership. The opinions and suggestions I'm going to give here are based on my experiences in Canada as a researcher who has evaluated many of these programs, but also as a researcher and professional who has worked in a number of different countries around the world, including the United States, Europe, Asia, Central Asia, South America, and so on. It's these experiences that have motivated the comments I'm going to make.

These are suggestions that I believe would serve to help these programs evolve and remain world class. I think this is an opportune time to reflect on them, because they're now over 40 years old. In fact, in my opinion, reflecting on them is long overdue.

Where leadership is called for, there are several domains. I'm going to mention six of them very briefly.

One is that I think leadership is needed to open more spaces in immersion programs for parents who want their children in these programs. It's my impression, although I cannot back this up with empirical evidence, that there are many more parents who would like to have their children in these programs than there are spaces available. Often when I give talks in other communities around the world, I talk to frustrated parents who find that they can't get their children into immersion because there's a limit on how many children are allowed into these programs.

A second area where I think there's a particularly critical need for leadership is the need to promote the development of the pedagogies that underlie these programs. Despite the success of these programs, which has been well documented, the pedagogical practices that underlie this success have not been well documented.

In fact, it's my opinion, from having worked in many different countries, that the pedagogical practices in Canadian immersion programs are falling behind those of other countries that have instituted these programs. In many communities around the world that are introducing these programs, they've embarked on fairly systematic and vigorous professional programs to look at the best way to teach through a second language and the best way to train teachers to do that.

• (1545)

These kinds of activities are really lacking in Canada, for the most part, and where they do exist, they are at a local level, or at a provincial level at best. In general, we need more focus on effective educational practices in these programs if they are to continue to remain state-of-the-art.

A third area where I think leadership is called for, and which is related to the point I've just made, is in providing resources for communities, for school boards, and particularly for teachers who are involved in the implementation of these programs. At the moment, these programs, for constitutional reasons, are under the jurisdiction of provincial ministries of education, so it's the provincial ministries that provide any resources that currently exist.

However, there's a startling lack of collaboration among the provinces, as far as I can tell, in the creation and provision of these resources. As a result, teachers and school boards in each province are in a sense reinventing the wheel over and over again, because the things they're doing may have already been done somewhere else, but there are no mechanisms by which these efforts actually are coordinated.

Many other countries where I've worked, and where there's an interest in bilingualism and bilingual education, support national centres where resources for bilingual programs and bilingualism are provided. Canada is unique in some ways in being an official bilingual country, but it has no national resource centre that actually facilitates the promotion of bilingualism within the school systems. I think this is a critical issue, because ultimately the success of these programs and the competence of the children really rely on the resources that teachers have. At present, I think there are far fewer resources than there could be, and this gap could be filled by somehow or other, within the constraints of our Constitution, providing such resources.

My fourth point is that I also think a greater effort needs to be undertaken to promote immersion programs so that they are more inclusive. At the moment, in many communities—not all, but many—there is a tendency for these programs to be somewhat elitist insofar as students who might have learning challenges, or who have been diagnosed with a learning challenge, being either precluded from being in these programs or excluded once they get in. No school system has an official policy of this sort because this would be unacceptable, but unofficially and informally, many students who have difficulties in school are not participating in these programs, even though many years of research have shown that these kinds of children can succeed in immersion just as well as they can in a monolingual program, and at the same time be bilingual. I think for the sake of promoting official bilingualism we should be encouraging immersion programs to be more inclusive, and we need leadership in making that happen.

A fifth point I would like to make is that I think the efforts of the immersion programs could be supported at a national level were there expanded and perhaps innovative second language learning opportunities outside school for students who are learning French as a second language in school, such as, in other words, exchange visits and certain kinds of activities that would allow students to expand their competence in French outside the school context. I think this should include not only students at the elementary and secondary levels, but also students at the university level. I realize that some of these opportunities are available, but I think there should be renewed energy put into this to promote them.

Finally, as a general point, I feel that the immersion programs were created in the mid-1960s in response to some very pressing national needs around unity, official bilingualism, and so on. While these needs are still very important, the world has changed in the last 50 years. Most noticeably, it has become much more global. I would argue that in this global world students will need competence not only in two languages but arguably in three or more languages, and they will also need competence in other cultures. The Canadian immersion programs were an excellent start in meeting these global needs even before the global needs were apparent, but I feel that we're fast falling behind in meeting this challenge because we have not renewed our interest in these programs.

• (1550)

There is a very interesting statistic that I think is worth ending with. It's estimated that there are more second language speakers of English in the world than there are native speakers of English. This is really important from a policy point of view and from an educational point of view. It indicates that while English is indeed a world language, and a language worth knowing, knowing only English is probably not enough, because monolingual English speakers will be competing for jobs in the global marketplace with many people who know English and many other languages, including Chinese, Arabic, Spanish, and so on.

I think our conceptualization of immersion within the national context is a very valuable one and a very important first step, but I think we need to expand our vision of immersion in light of these kinds of global realities.

I'm going to end there, because I think I've reached my limit.

Thank you.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Dr. Genesee, for that opening statement.

We'll now begin with questions and comments from Monsieur Dubé.

[*Translation*]

**Mr. Matthew Dubé (Chambly—Borduas, NDP):** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

[*English*]

Professor Genesee, thanks for being here. It's always nice to see a fellow "McGillean".

Actually, a lot of the stuff you mentioned touches me a lot. I did French immersion, my mom is an English second language teacher, and my brother couldn't do immersion because he has a learning difference, or a learning disability, whatever you want to call it, which is exactly what you were just talking about in your presentation.

That whole elitist point I think is interesting, because it seems like immersion is always seen as a "cherry on a cake" kind of thing. There are a lot of questions around how well integrated it is into communities. You touched on that a little bit, and I was wondering if you could perhaps elaborate on that.

**Dr. Fred Genesee:** It's a complex issue. On the one hand, in an egalitarian society such as ours, I think public school programs should be available to everyone. At present, schools with immersion

programs struggle to work with students who have learning challenges, who as a result are often excluded—as I say, usually unofficially.

One of the needs is for resources for school districts, school boards, and teachers to work with students with learning challenges. In some respects, we need more research in that domain. But we also need leadership in getting the word out to parents and educators that students with learning challenges can succeed in immersion programs. They're not at greater risk in an immersion program than in a monolingual program. The research on that is very clear.

I think this message is really going to get out to the community at large if it's a message that comes out at the national level. I simply don't see it happening at a provincial level or at a community level.

My own personal opinion is that because we're an official bilingual country at the national level, it takes some national leadership to actually get that message out in order to meet that mandate.

[*Translation*]

**Mr. Matthew Dubé:** You are talking about success in other subjects, such as math. What happens if someone whose mother tongue is English has to take some subjects in French and some in English? Does that provide additional challenges? You are saying that studies show that that is not the case, but does that depend on how old students are when they start? Do students have to start at a younger age for the program to work and for them to do well in school in a situation like that?

• (1555)

[*English*]

**Dr. Fred Genesee:** Some of this is reviewed in the summary I sent out. There has been considerable research done on children, primarily in early French immersion programs, who are at risk for difficulty in school because of first language impairment due to cognitive difficulties, because they're from disadvantaged social class backgrounds. All of these factors usually are associated with students underachieving in school, in comparison with children who do not have these challenges. But when you look at the research results on these kinds of learners, you find that even children who have a language difficulty in their native language, or children who have below average intellectual ability, achieve just as well in immersion programs as similar students in a regular English program.

If you look at a child with language learning impairment in French immersion and compare them with a child with language learning impairment in an English only program, the immersion student does just as well in the first language and just as well in math and science as the student in the English program, and at the same time they are acquiring advanced competence in French.

There's not as much research on these children as we would like to see, and that's why I think we need more support to do that research. But so far, all of the research that has been done shows that children who have learning challenges in school are not more at risk for academic difficulty in an immersion program than in a monolingual English program.

[Translation]

**Mr. Matthew Dubé:** When you talk—

[English]

**Dr. Fred Genesee:** I'm not sure if that answered it.

[Translation]

**Mr. Matthew Dubé:** Great. Thank you.

You talked about education and a national vision. Are immersion programs more successful in some regions of the country than in others? Are there any shortcomings that could be corrected in some places?

[English]

**Dr. Fred Genesee:** That's an interesting question. There is simply no research on those issues, in part because the research efforts, like the educational efforts, are all localized. To do a national comparison would require some kind of national initiative, and that kind of initiative has never been taken.

[Translation]

**Mr. Matthew Dubé:** You are basically saying that the immersion program is perhaps lacking in leadership, which prevents us from actually seeing its reality across the country. Is that correct?

[English]

**Dr. Fred Genesee:** There is an organization called Canadian Parents for French, which was created by the first Commissioner of Official Languages, as far as I know, Keith Spicer. He actually created this organization.

Canadian Parents for French monitors the state of French immersion across the country, but there are limits on what they do, just because of the nature of the organization. Some of the questions you're asking are probably best answered by researchers in different provinces working in collaboration with one another. Canadian Parents for French is not primarily a research organization. They are limited in what they can actually do.

In general, there is a lack of research support for this kind of effort. For example, I applied to the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council to do research on children with reading impairment in French immersion. The grant was refused because... It was in response to a special initiative by SSHRC for research on official languages. It was rejected, in part because they said it wasn't relevant to the mandate of the grant.

It's very hard in Canada to do research of an applied nature, because our current granting agencies support primarily theory-based research.

**The Chair:** Thank you very much.

Monsieur Trottier.

**Mr. Bernard Trottier (Etobicoke—Lakeshore, CPC):** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, Professor Genesee, for coming in today.

Some of your recommendations are consistent with what some other witnesses have said before the committee in terms of providing some resources for the provinces, who really have to deliver French immersion programs, especially for school-age children. I'm

interested in what you said about post-secondary, and there are other opportunities for immersion that we need to look at.

One of the nubs of the whole question around French immersion is what the role of the federal government is in all this. Canada is a complex federation, in a way; we don't even have a federal ministry of education. You talked about the promotion of the development of pedagogies and providing resources for communities and school boards. You mentioned that you looked at places in the world, such as the U.S. and Europe, where they have a system where the federal government works collaboratively with lower levels of government and provides these resources in a form of shared service.

Are there some models we could look at to find something that seems to work well?

• (1600)

**Dr. Fred Genesee:** That's a very good question. I do appreciate that it is a complex issue in Canada because of the jurisdiction issue.

There are models that I am familiar with, primarily the one in the U.S. Interestingly, the U.S. has several national centres that are concerned with foreign and second language learning, many more than we have in Canada, even though they have no official language. Interestingly, in the models they provide, funding comes from either a federal agency—in their case, they do actually have a Department of Education, whereas we don't—or an agency like Heritage Canada or Official Languages. They have money to put out RFPs for research centres or service centres to provide certain kinds of research or support systems.

These centres I've seen in other countries around the world are usually initiatives of the federal government. They are not necessarily created in collaboration with the provinces, but in the final analysis they actually serve the needs of many of the provinces.

But clearly the big issue is partly money. Money needs to be available to create these centres. It makes a lot of sense that these centres might be located in universities, because there are in fact mechanisms for the federal government to provide additional support for universities to carry out research and professional endeavours.

My view is that the federal government, with some creativity, might be able to take some initiatives in this regard and not step on too many provincial toes by actually locating these centres either within existing university centres or through existing national associations, such as Canadian Parents for French, the Association canadienne des professeurs d'immersion, and CASLT, the Canadian Association of Second Language Teachers. Some of this centre type of work could possibly be provided through existing national centres if they were given financial support from the federal government.

I think the dilemma... This is maybe beyond my realm of competence, but if you try to create these centres through collaborative efforts with the provinces, it's going to be terribly hard to get consensus of any sort, even though I think if you talk to educators and researchers they know what needs to be done.

**Mr. Bernard Trottier:** Yes, I appreciate that comment. It's always a bit of a Jefferson versus Hamilton kind of situation in Canada when it comes to what should be the role of the provinces versus the federal government.

I think we have to wrap up pretty soon, but do I have time for another question?

**The Chair:** Just a quick question, yes.

**Mr. Bernard Trottier:** I appreciate your comment about there being more English as a second language speakers in the world than English only speakers or English first language speakers, and how that actually gives people a competitive advantage.

I noticed that in the document you provided you talked about the important links between creativity and second language and multiple language abilities. Obviously, there are some benefits when it comes to business, diplomacy, and all kinds of other things.

Could you expand on that? If there needs to be an argument made around the return on investment for really encouraging second language and multiple language abilities, what does that mean in terms of Canadian competitiveness?

**The Chair:** Thank you, Mr. Trottier.

Briefly, Professor Genesee.

**Dr. Fred Genesee:** Well, I think Canadians, monolingual Canadians especially, and Canadian businesses will be competing increasingly with individuals and companies around the world that have a multilingual advantage. We have the French-English thing in good shape, but we don't have competencies in other languages wrapped up.

I think for the sake of individual Canadians, but for the Canadian economy as well, we probably will be in a stronger position if we actually have a multilingual workforce, because the world is becoming increasingly global.

**The Chair:** Thank you.

We'll have just a couple of questions from Monsieur Dion. Then we'll adjourn.

Monsieur Dion.

**Hon. Stéphane Dion:** Professor Genesee, thank you so much for being with us and for the research you are doing on this file.

We have only a few minutes before we need to get to the House in order to vote, so at the risk of you having to repeat what you have said, I will ask you to focus on the necessary changes that you would like to see in federal policies in this matter. If you had to list them, what would they be?

**Dr. Fred Genesee:** Well, that's a tricky question, since I don't quite know how the federal government really works.

• (1605)

**Mr. Royal Galipeau (Ottawa—Orléans, CPC):** Join the club.

**Dr. Fred Genesee:** I feel that at a federal level there needs to be a change in policy or a reinvigorated application of current policies to support bilingualism. I think there are multiple ways in which the federal government, including the Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages and Heritage Canada, could support that.

It could support it simply through publicity that talks about the importance of knowing French and other languages in a Canadian context, within a global context. I think as English Canadians we are complacent about these issues because we think everybody knows English and therefore we don't have to worry. I think that's a really dangerous assumption.

I also think that the federal government could possibly either develop policies or enact policies that provide resources at a national level to tackle some of the issues that communities with French immersion are facing.

These are big issues and we have a lot of competencies in our various provinces, but there is no way in which those competencies are working together to provide support for French immersion programs, French immersion teachers, and French immersion students.

My sense is we could move forward if it were possible to create some kind of centre that would provide resources to support immersion education, because I see it happening in other countries.

**Hon. Stéphane Dion:** I'm not sure I understand the purpose of these national centres. Could you explain?

**Dr. Fred Genesee:** These are very mundane issues to you and me, but they're very important issues for schools. One is the dissemination of information to stakeholders in the community—parents, educators, and specialists who work with children on the current state of research on second language learning and immersion programs.

Materials to teach students through the medium of a second language are also needed.

We need assessment instruments to help us identify students who have learning disabilities and who need additional support.

We need resources that will help the specialists to provide resources to children who have special needs in immersion. This could possibly be done on an individual provincial basis, but I think we need to pool our resources to get more bang for our buck.

It's that kind of thing.

**The Chair:** Professor Genesee, I want to thank you for your opening statement and for the brief you've given us in both official languages, along with the bibliography of references for research materials that you've relied on.

I want to thank members for their questions and comments.

We value the testimony you've given us. Our research analyst will delve into it further as she writes our draft report.

At this point, because the bells have been going for 10 minutes, we will adjourn. Thank you very much.

The meeting is adjourned.







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