

The Rich Get Richer

French immersion is a socially-acceptable way of streaming advantaged children.

By Hymie Rubenstein

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A third Liberal majority government in a row has been bought with the chronic electoral bifurcation of Quebec between the federal Grits and the nationalist Parti Québécois. This ongoing split is a painful reminder of Pierre Trudeau's failed vision of a bilingual Canada.

In Ottawa, high-paying government jobs have so disproportionately favoured English-speaking Francophones, even for positions where the use of both official languages is not really required, that it has created bitter resentment among monolingual Anglophones who feel that their careers have been blocked for no other reason than an accident of birth.

What is less well known is that official bilingualism in the form of French immersion programs has created its own system of differential privilege between monolingual and bilingual Anglophones. This is because French immersion has disproportionately attracted the children of the upper ranks of the working class and lower ranks of the gentry — relatively well off or well-educated people — unwilling or unable to enroll their offspring in a private secular or parochial school.

These parents know, intuitively or through observation, that French immersion tends to attract people like themselves. French immersion parents tend to be knowledgeable and future-oriented parents who believe that a bilingual education will give their children an edge in an increasingly competitive society.

Conversely, many such parents also want to sequester their children from the offspring of less sophisticated or ambitious parents, but without giving the class or sectarian offence of enrolment in a non-denominational

private or religious school. Still others would prefer to send their children to a private school but cannot afford to do so. For these parents, French immersion is a good second-choice education paid for by the state.

"It would be a terrible mistake to think of French immersion as a romantic gesture towards Canadian unity or a form of citizen love for one another. The primary beneficiary of bilingualism is the one who becomes bilingual."

John Ralston Saul

French immersion also operates, whether most participating parents recognize it or not, as a Darwinian-like mechanism for weeding out less well-adapted parents and children.

For reasons ranging from peer pressure to fewer course options, many students who would rather be in the English stream are able to persuade their wobbly parents to let them drop out of immersion.

Many students also transfer to the English program because they lack the brain power or motivation to handle a variety of different subjects in two languages.

Students with emotional and behavioural problems are likewise encouraged to join the masses in the English program. Especially for those with even mild cases of mental disabilities such as Down's syndrome, there is little place in French immersion.

For all these reasons, French immersion has an attrition rate of over 60% and an overall participation rate of only 6% of those attending school. These six percenters are among the cream of the crop of Canadian students.

Since females generally do better in school than males, they are also disproportionately represented in French immersion. Since high-achieving French immersion students generally outperform their English-only counterparts, they are awarded a disproportionate number of university entrance scholarships in schools where both streams are represented.

I am aware of these things because my daughter is a French immersion graduate. Like all other parents I know, I selected French immersion not because I wanted to help fulfill Trudeau's vision of a bilingual and bicultural Canada, but because I wanted to give my child a head start in life.

The choice I forced on our daughter has paid off. Now in her early 20s, she has a challenging and rewarding job that demands fluency in both official languages.

Is this barefaced and selfish élitism? Of course, it is. Even Canadian Parents for French, the anglophone French-as-a-second-language lobby organization, admits that "immersion allows the children of privileged parents to have the socially differentiating asset of bilingualism and that immersion causes de facto streaming by taking the best students [and] leaving behind the less academically capable."

The federal Department of Canadian Heritage calls French immersion a 'glamour story.' But it is a glamour story that promotes both élitism and selfish individualism, and that further marginalizes traditionally disadvantaged groups.

Like so many other of Trudeau's attempts at national-building, French immersion has strengthened rather than weakened existing social, cultural, and economic divisions in Canadian society.

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