Teaching 100 Languages in a Second Language

Using an Inquiry-Based Approach in Early Childhood French Immersion

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Introducing the Researchers

**Paula Fortier**

My name is Paula Fortier and I have been a French immersion educator for almost 20 years. I currently teach kindergarten with the Greater Saskatoon Catholic Schools in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan where I live with my family. I am a mom of three children – Noah, Tristan, and Fabiola. I graduated from the University of Regina with a Bachelor of Education (Baccalauréat en éducation) and recently completed a master’s degree in early childhood education at the University of Saskatchewan. My passion resides with children of all ages, but I have an exceptional love and respect for early childhood and second language education.

**Marielle Hamon**

My name is Marielle Hamon. I have been a French immersion educator for eight years. I graduated from the University of Regina with a Bachelor of Education (Baccalauréat en éducation) and a Bachelor of Arts majoring in French language. All of my university and teaching years have been focused on early childhood, having taught French immersion in kindergarten, Grade 1, and Grade 2. My passion is teaching French as a second language and/or immersion to a variety of grade levels, but I appreciate and strive toward being successful in early childhood French immersion while creating a respectful learning environment that values all children’s creativity, natural curiosity and wonder.

Although this report is evidence of the research we completed together, at times we share our individual journeys, opinions and experiences throughout the document.
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Introduction

Drawing on their lived experiences, two colleagues and co-researchers reflected upon their teacher practice related to using an inquiry approach in their French immersion kindergarten and Grade 1 classrooms. While defining inquiry-based learning and the ideals of French immersion education, they recognized a tension. Using their own personal experiences, they examined how inquiry-based teaching led them to question some of their beliefs about French immersion early childhood education. Can a teacher use an inquiry-based approach successfully in a French immersion early childhood classroom? Although French immersion teachers are equally inspired by play-based and inquiry-based teaching philosophies, there are few, if any, examples of how successful inquiry can be supported and should be achieved in an early childhood second language environment such as French immersion kindergarten or Grade 1. These questions led the researchers on their own personal journey of change and generated an eagerness to learn from other teachers’ experiences. A research question was formed: What do teachers perceive to be the challenges and opportunities of using an inquiry-based approach when teaching in an early childhood French immersion classroom?
Teaching 100 Languages in a Second Language

The researchers met while teaching at École Sister O’Brien School in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan in 2008. Through many joint discussions and much self-reflection over the years, we recognized that although we cared very much for our young students and their families, marveled in the miracle of witnessing our students learning a second language, and enjoyed collaborating with staff as valued members of the school system for which we were teaching, we still felt there was something missing.

In our continual search for inspiration, we attended The Wonder of Learning exhibition in New Westminster, British Columbia in the fall of 2012. The Wonder of Learning was an exhibition of the infant-toddler, preschool, and kindergarten programs of the municipality of Reggio Emilia, Italy. As we viewed the panels on display for the exhibition, we recognized how the unique philosophy in Reggio Emilia was displayed through projects created by the children. The children involved were encouraged, as is the custom in Reggio, to express themselves through all of their hundred languages – their natural ways of expression such as words, drawing, movement, painting, dramatic play, collage, sculpture, music, and shadow play, among others. The idea was that children use these languages to understand the world around them.

We were particularly captured by Loris Malaguzzi’s poem, “Invece il cento c’è,” (translated to “No Way. The Hundred is There.” by L. Gandini), which was the inspiration behind the exhibit. As we read and reread his poem, we were envious of the passion and conviction that Malaguzzi had while speaking about his image of children – an image of children who are rich in potential, strong, powerful and competent.
No Way. The Hundred is There.

The child
is made of one hundred.
The child has
a hundred languages
a hundred hands
a hundred thoughts
a hundred ways of thinking
of playing, of speaking.
A hundred always a hundred
ways of listening
of marveling, of loving
a hundred joys
for singing and understanding
a hundred worlds
to discover
a hundred worlds
to invent
a hundred worlds
to dream.
The child has
a hundred languages
(and a hundred hundred hundred more)
but they steal ninety-nine.
The school and the culture
separate the head from the body.
They tell the child:
to think without hands
to do without head
to listen and not to speak
to understand without joy
to love and to marvel
only at Easter and Christmas.
They tell the child:
to discover the world already there
and of the hundred
they steal ninety-nine.
They tell the child:
that work and play
reality and fantasy
science and imagination
sky and earth
reason and dream
are things
that do not belong together.
And thus they tell the child
that the hundred is not there.
The child says:
No way. The hundred is there.

Malaguzzi (as cited in Edwards, Gandini, & Forman, 2012, p. 3)
While reading the poem and discussing our perspectives, we were affected both positively and negatively. We felt affirmed in our beliefs about children. We have always had a natural, positive image of children, as well as a deep respect for the culture of childhood. We have witnessed the “hundred ways of thinking, of playing, of speaking” (Malaguzzi, as cited in Edwards et al., 2012, p. 3) in all the children we have known in our lives, yet we were concerned. As French immersion teachers, have we played a part in telling children that “the hundred is not there?” (p. 3). We realized often as we planned and directed the teaching and learning in order to teach a second language, there were many times when we told our students “to think without hands” or “to listen and not to speak” (p. 3).

Malaguzzi’s inspiring example had us asking many questions about how we might guide children. Wouldn’t inquiry learning provide many more opportunities to explore in a variety of ways in order to hear the children’s hundred languages and to see their hundred ways of knowing? Wouldn’t being open to a curriculum created with our students produce an atmosphere where there would be a hundred ways to wonder and to think? Was it possible to achieve this type of philosophy of education in our French immersion kindergarten and Grade 1 classrooms? Was it possible to both teach using an inquiry-based approach in an early childhood classroom and to teach French to these young children who had no French language background?
The Research Journey

What is Inquiry? What is French Immersion? How Can They Fit Together?

Inquiry-based pedagogy places students’ questions and ideas, rather than solely those of the teacher, at the centre of the learning experience. Teachers using an inquiry-based approach encourage students to ask and to genuinely investigate their own questions about the world (Chiarotto, 2011). Inquiry is more than a simple instructional strategy – it is a philosophical approach to teaching and to learning, grounded in constructivist research and methods. Constructivists view learning as a process in which the learner actively constructs or builds new ideas or concepts (Tobias & Duffy, 2009). Constructivist methods engage students in investigations and in conversations that lead to a deeper understanding. The process of the learning is significant; rather than being a step-by-step journey, it is a circular process where discovery is revisited and rethought as students make new discoveries (Kuhlthau, Maniotes, & Caspari, 2007). Inquiry provides opportunities for students to become active participants in a collaborative search for meaning and understanding through discussions and project work.

Our studies into an inquiry-based approach to teaching started each of us on a journey of self-reflection. This reflection showed us how our beliefs about children, teaching, and learning – our educational philosophies – have paired with a new understanding of learning theories – in this case, constructivism – and have shaped a pedagogical approach centred in inquiry-based learning. As a result, our journey towards a more inquiry-based, pedagogical approach has encouraged us as educators to attempt to create a curriculum that is student-centred by being emergent – one co-constructed by the teacher and the students. However, as much as we are drawn to this new pedagogy and to emergent curriculum, we find ourselves wondering how exactly these ideals can be achieved in an early childhood French immersion classroom.

The goal of French immersion is to develop students’ proficiency in French while building mastery of English. Rather than replacing a first language with an additional one, the goal is to develop proficient communication skills in both languages (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2011). Researchers from the Ontario Ministry of Education (2011) suggested French immersion programs support success in meeting this goal because “the cognitive and linguistic component skills required for learning to read, write, speak, view and represent in a student’s first language support literacy development in a second language”
A study by Curriculum Services Canada (2012b) explained students in these programs are expected to achieve the same learning outcomes in all subjects taught in French as students learning in English, but at the same time they acquire a high level of proficiency in the French language itself. The study stated:

Teachers of French Immersion classes plan programs that consider the delicate balance between teaching French as a subject, and developing students’ French language and literacy skills as a vehicle for the demonstration of the knowledge and skills for a specific subject other than French. (p. 2)

One challenge in an early childhood setting is young students are not yet proficient in their first language communication skills while being introduced to a second language.

Another study by Curriculum Services Canada (2012a) suggested “The most effective strategy that can be used to ensure a language-rich second language classroom environment is the use of the target language by the teacher at all times” (p. 5). In order to provide students with a strong foundation in the language they are acquiring, the recommended model is that they be taught entirely in French. The teacher is called to create a French environment so the students develop the ability to communicate in French. Students are called to listen and to respond to the language in a variety of settings so they can become increasingly confident in their use of the new language.

Paula: I experienced this model as a French immersion student in the 1970s. My kindergarten teacher rarely, if ever, spoke a word of English. I felt I should not speak at all, unless I absolutely had to, because I could not yet speak French. As much as I liked and respected my kindergarten teacher, and did obviously learn to speak French, I don’t believe that my teacher truly knew me. How could she when I only spoke to parrot what she asked me to say? How was this teaching approach supportive of my “hundred languages”? Later, while I was completing my bachelor of education, I heard many teachers proudly state their young students did not know they could speak English. Although the students knew they could be understood when they themselves spoke English to their teacher, the teachers prided themselves on only speaking French. As a French immersion teacher myself, I engaged in this approach, using all sorts of methods to be understood when only speaking in French – sometimes acting out an instruction three or four times until my students got it. However, this only worked with regular routine and simple instructions. I can no longer imagine speaking only in French, especially at the beginning of the kindergarten school year, if I am to create a curriculum with my students and have those rich conversations that come from sharing personal experiences or searching for those deep questions that will lead us on an inquiry. I can no longer imagine being able to achieve this strategy of using the target language at all times when I am trying to cultivate a “hundred worlds to discover ... to invent ... to dream.” At the same time, I refuse to believe it is an either/or situation between French immersion principles and an inquiry-based pedagogy. I cannot imagine compromising the language modeling in French immersion either. If the students will not be having the French modeled for them at school, they will not be getting any exposure to the language at all.
Therefore, with these questions and struggles in mind, we took an opportunity to take a deep and thoughtful look at what is presently occurring in the lives of a group of teachers moving towards an inquiry-based approach. We believe there is much to be learned from the experiences and efforts being lived by teachers, so we share our stories, as well as the stories of other teachers, on this journey to a more constructivist and inquiry-based approach to teaching French immersion.
About the Research

Methodology
The purpose of narrative inquiry (Clandinin & Connelly, 1992; 2004) is to enable a close look at individual experiences situated in place, over time, and in personal and social contexts. The intention of this narrative inquiry is to better understand French immersion teachers, their questions, challenges, and celebrations from their own perspectives, and to have them give accounts of their experience in their own terms (Clandinin & Connelly, 1988). It is through our personal stories as well as the stories lived and told by a group of early childhood French immersion teachers that we hope to inspire and to affirm other teachers who are also on this journey towards a more constructivist approach to teaching a second language.

Gathering Field Texts
We chose four French immersion teachers as our participants – Brenda Dyer, Tanys Gareau, Andrea McKinley, and Maria Sander – whom we felt had the experiences we sought. All French immersion teachers in this narrative inquiry have chosen to use their real names rather than pseudonyms.

We worked to collect field text through participant stories – open conversations that were audio-recorded and then transcribed – and through keeping reflexive journals. We met with our participants three times over the course of the school year and, as co-researchers, on numerous other occasions.

McMillan & Schumacher (2010) stated this type of interviewing (open conversation) “permits an explicit focus on the researcher’s personal experience combined with the experiences of the interviewees to obtain multiple meanings of an experience” (p. 356). Kovach (2009) stressed the importance of building trust between researcher and participant because in asking others to share stories, it is necessary to share our own as an insider researcher.
Analysis and Interpretation

In narrative inquiry, narrative is both “phenomenon and method” (Clandinin & Connelly, 1992), both what is studied and the way in which it is studied. The phenomena, or what is studied, are the stories people tell of their experiences. The method, the way in which it is studied, is the storied inquiry into those experiences. As a result, we began to analyze our field texts and began to look for story lines: “story lines that inter[wove] and interconnect[ed], gaps or silences that [became] apparent, tensions that emerg[ed], and continuities and discontinuities that appear[ed]” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2004, p. 131). Having field texts from multiple sources enabled us to attend to details and particulars that became foregrounded over time, and with various people and situations.

In the analysis process, we spent many hours reading and rereading the field texts in order to gain a strong sense of what was contained within the vast amount of material we had amassed. In this process, we first read separately, each marking the transcripts for points we saw as significant, making notations in the margins, and keeping notes of our thinking. Then we met together to talk about our reading of, and thinking about, the transcripts. This pattern of reading separately and then talking together was repeated throughout the analysis. We then began the task of analysing and interpreting the field texts to make meaning of the knowledge arising from the stories, identifying such things as temporal rhythms and cycles, rules and practical principles, personal and shared philosophies, and narrative unities that provided insight into French immersion inquiry-based learning in early childhood. It is our hope that both what is similar and what is different in each participant's story and accounts will reflect an intimate, detailed understanding of inquiry in French immersion.

Narrative Threads

Three significant themes emerged in our analysis:

- The definition of inquiry and the ideal of French immersion.
- The benefits and challenges of using an inquiry approach in a second language environment.
- How our beliefs and philosophy of education affect our pedagogy or why we as teachers choose to accept the challenge of inquiry.
Inquiring Into Inquiry in French Immersion

When choosing research participants, our goal was to select willing French immersion teachers who self-identify as inquiry-based educators. Together we approached four of our colleagues in the Saskatchewan French immersion community: Maria Sander and Brenda Dyer who teach French immersion in kindergarten, and Andrea McKinley and Tanys Gareau who teach French immersion at Grade 1.

Maria is the youngest teacher participant in our research study, with almost 10 years of teaching experience, most of which have been in kindergarten classrooms in varied school communities. Maria expressed her specific interest in creating programming in which her students feel a part of the learning process because she felt there was very little that represented her Haitian/Filipino background and her unique blended family as a student in school. Brenda is the most experienced of our teaching participants, having been a teacher since 1987. She had the unique opportunity to travel to Reggio Emilia, Italy and see their example of inquiry teaching firsthand. Brenda is also part of a very strong French immersion school community and therefore French language development is at the forefront of her concerns. Andrea has taught a variety of grade levels in her almost 20-year teaching career and is the only one of our participants to have the experience of teaching prekindergarten. She has a strong, play-based philosophy from those years that she finds carries over well to an inquiry-based pedagogy. Tanys has also been teaching for almost 20 years, but is fairly new to French immersion; most of her teaching career has been spent teaching core French. This difference adds another interesting perspective on second language acquisition.

All of our participants have a love and respect for early childhood and second language education. While they are in different places on their journeys toward a more constructivist approach to teaching, they are all making an effort to use an inquiry-based approach reflective of the new interdisciplinary French immersion curriculum for kindergarten and Grade 1 (Ministère de l’éducation de la Saskatchewan, 2014a & b). In early discussions of our experiences and understandings of inquiry, we found we all seemed to be asking the same question: How is an inquiry-based approach to teaching enacted in a French immersion early childhood classroom?
Inviting the Teachers to Define Inquiry

“If inquiry is to continue to be useful, educators will have to press for clarity when the word enters a conversation and not assume they know the intended meaning” (Blanchard et al., 2010, p. 581). At one time, we believed inquiry to simply be the act or instance of asking or seeking information. As we talked to colleagues and did more reading, we found that inquiry, as a method of instruction, was defined in a variety of ways. Although we found ourselves in agreement with many of the definitions and examples we found, we were overwhelmed with the broad spectrum of ideas they seemed to cover. We were also overwhelmed by the depth of possibility we imagined, similar to when we read Malaguzzi’s poem.

Therefore, in the early stages of research, our focus was on understanding the teacher participants’ voices. We began our conversations by generating and refining the meanings of key concepts: What do we see as inquiry? What levels of inquiry do we invite in our classrooms?

Maria: I suppose inquiry for me and the way that I use it in my classroom would be more about wonders ... teaching more to my students’ level, not just academically, but what they are interested in. Because, especially in kindergarten, the way they view the world and make their way through the world is very different than an adult, and their experiences might be very different than mine. ... It’s about understanding my role as the teacher is more to facilitate ... to help the students to learn on their own and to give them plenty of opportunity to do so. ... I think using inquiry has given me more of an opportunity to take time to make better relationships with my students ... and to get to know more about them personally. (Recorded conversation, December 6, 2013)

Brenda: ... finding out what they know about things. It’s astounding what some of them know already and then they get the chance to shine! ... teaching them to question, to have those conversations and to be creative problem solvers ... to listen and then say, “Okay, let’s explore it.” (Recorded conversation, December 1, 2013)

Marielle: I think personal experiences, though, in kindergarten and Grade 1 especially, are what drive them to want to learn more ... maybe because it comes from within so they are taking ownership of their learning. (Recorded conversation, December 1, 2013)

Andrea: You have to start with the idea of asking questions. Do they know how to ask questions? Am I teaching them how to ask questions? What kind of questions do we want? And usually they are questions related to their own experiences. (Recorded conversation, December 4, 2013)

Tanys: Inquiry for me has changed over the last few years ... a big part for me is being able to integrate questioning techniques ... relinquishing some of the typical teacher-centred teaching style and allowing students to become part of the process. (Recorded conversation, December 6, 2013)
Each teacher participant has developed her own sense of what inquiry is that reflects a shift in thinking about her role as a teacher. Maria spoke about her new focus on emergent curriculum when she stated she is teaching more to her students’ interests. She noted such an understanding of curriculum positions her in the role of facilitator rather than instructor. While this was a change for her as an educator, she valued the opportunity such attention to students’ interests afforded her in getting to know her students more personally. Tanys also mentioned emergent curriculum and her role as teacher when she spoke of “relinquishing some of the typical teacher-centred teaching style and allowing students to become part of the process.” Brenda affirmed this positioning with her statement that an inquiry approach offers the teacher the opportunity to “[find] out what [the students] know about things.” To find out what students already know as well as what they want to learn about, both Andrea and Tanys highlighted the importance of questioning and teaching questioning techniques that include considering what kind of questions we want. The teacher participants seemed to agree that the focus of an inquiry-based teacher is to connect the emergent curriculum and questioning skills by being certain that the “questions [are] related to [the students’] own experiences.”

In our search for a definition that supported our teacher participants’ sense of inquiry, we found Chiarotto (2011) described inquiry-based learning as a dynamic and emergent process that builds on students’ natural curiosity. In another study, Wien (2008) investigated how Canadian educators’ engagement with the Reggio Emilia experience has acted as a catalyst to transform our practices in Canadian early childhood classrooms. Wien (2008) stated the message we receive from the Reggio example emphasizes relationality, reciprocity, collaboration, and, above all, holding an image of children as capable, competent, and naturally curious beings.

In listening to the teacher participants in our study, it is these principles the teachers expressed as they aimed to achieve an inquiry-based approach to teaching. Through building trusting relationships with their students, our teacher participants believe they can create an environment of open communication and questioning. Riley & Rich (2011) affirmed when teachers make the effort to reciprocate by sharing their experiences and learning stories, critically reflective classrooms can be achieved. Such classrooms are places where teachers and students share ideas about learning: what to learn, the ways in which to learn, and what they are curious about. This type of collaboration, described also by our teacher participants, is the type of collaboration that comes through being open to an emergent curriculum.

As the teacher participants in this study shared their definitions of inquiry, they each touched upon listening to the students in a new way – being open to the students’ questions and stories, seeing them as part of the process, and being sure to include their students’ experiences and interests in the curriculum they were developing together. They also mentioned how the role of the teacher in an inquiry approach is different than in teacher-directed instruction. In an inquiry approach, the teacher is called to be more of a facilitator, a collaborator with, and a supporter of, children in exploration. Within all these complementary definitions of inquiry and the teachers’ corresponding beliefs about why it should be enacted in their classrooms, there was an underlying and unanswered question of how to make it happen. The teachers all seemed to know what it could look like, but they were still questioning how to do it well in a second language.
The Ideal of French Immersion

As described earlier, an inquiry-based method of teaching relies on student engagement through oral interaction. Yet as experienced French immersion teachers, we know only too well how long it can take language learners to acquire the kind of fluency necessary to engage in abstract discussions in a second language (Cummins, 2000). How are French immersion teachers in Saskatchewan to balance a push towards inquiry-based instruction with the time required for language learners to be able to fully participate in the target language in our classrooms? What do French immersion teachers perceive to be the challenges and opportunities to using an inquiry-based approach while teaching a new language in an early childhood classroom?

After the conversations we had with the teacher participants in which we asked them to define inquiry, we recognized the tension for the teachers that came along with that definition. This tension seemed to be caused by the intention of inquiry being out of balance with the ideal that we had come to assume was absolute in French immersion. The pressures were obvious when the teacher participants continued our conversation with, “This is how I understand it should be done, but...” Aside from the challenges all teachers might face when implementing an inquiry-based pedagogy, such as class size or external expectations for standardized testing or screening, we focused on challenges specific to a French immersion early childhood classroom.
Challenges

**Brenda:** When you are teaching a second language and you are the only person who speaks that second language in the classroom, you do have those times when you are teaching them or telling them ... because how can I have those conversations when they don’t know the language and when I am called to speak French at all times in the classroom? Before, you weren’t asking students to share so much either, so there was not a lot of speaking on their part except for repeating what the teacher said; but then they weren’t sharing their deeper knowledge ... and now that I want them to share that deeper knowledge, of course it has to be in English because otherwise they couldn’t share it. That’s the challenge of it all. How do you get one without having the other? I think because teachers know the expectations for French immersion, they feel they are sacrificing the language. (Recorded conversation, December 1, 2013)

**Tanys:** I give them the opportunity to be part of the process, but at the beginning of the year it is definitely more difficult. ... I feel like I limit them more because the vocabulary is limited. ... I have to do direct instruction of vocabulary before I let them loose. ... I work on oracy at the beginning of the school year, lots on oracy ... by the time I am ready to work on an inquiry project, they have an understanding of what questioning should look like in French because I have modeled it and they have practiced it in more structured situations. (Recorded conversation, December 6, 2013)

**Andrea:** Normally, in my experience, a French immersion classroom tends to be super-structured because we have so much vocabulary and language to cover or to basically feed to our students. However, I don’t like the idea of not using an inquiry approach in my classroom because my students don’t have the language in French. They do have the language in English. They are curious. So why wait? (Recorded conversation, December 4, 2013)

**Maria:** ... the most difficult part is introducing a new language to students who are just being introduced to a new way of learning and to basically what it is to be a student ... we have to start with a lot of routine and repetition. (Recorded conversation, December 6, 2013)
In our prior discussions, when we defined inquiry, all of our teacher participants spoke of an emergent curriculum and their opinion on the importance of letting the children lead the learning through their interests and questioning. However, when our discussion focused more on the second language, it seemed to become an either/or between the ideals of inquiry and the ideal of French immersion. All of our teacher participants shared how, although they want their practice to include an emergent curriculum, the second language calls for more structured instruction so the vocabulary and language can be covered. All the participants were in agreement that to achieve this goal there has to be a lot of routine and repetition. These ideals seem to be at odds with each other. Brenda pointed out that in a French immersion kindergarten or Grade 1 classroom, the teacher is often the only person who can model the second language. Andrea suggested that although students in an early childhood French immersion setting do not have the second language skills, they are still curious and competent and should be encouraged to share their knowledge and ask questions in their first language. The challenge for a French immersion teacher seems to be between modeling the second language for their students while still encouraging them to share that deeper knowledge.

A brief survey of the approach known as inquiry-based learning revealed that very few studies have been conducted in the Canadian French immersion context. As we searched for answers to our questions about inquiry in French immersion, we found many studies exploring the early childhood constructivist-based/inquiry-based approach initially developed in Reggio Emilia, Italy, and we found studies exploring the process of second language learning in French immersion contexts. It was very difficult to find any research exploring the use of a second language in inquiry-based classrooms, especially studying a French immersion example.

“French Immersion and Extended French were established in the 1970s … to provide a unique opportunity for students in English-language school boards to acquire a high level of proficiency in the French language” (Curriculum Services Canada, 2012a, p. 2). We found research on the forms and function of language in classrooms dating back to the early studies of Cazden (1974/1976). There were also many studies on how students develop literacy skills in second language French immersion programs. From Lambert and Tucker (1973), with their study on the bilingual education of children, to the present-day research of Cummins (2000), who worked extensively to promote literacy in multilingual programs, researchers are in agreement that all students progress at various rates. It is important for teachers to create an environment that encourages language development while recognizing that students’ French language competencies and confidence to speak only in French develop at different rates. Continuous encouragement, modeling, and support help students at all levels make gains in language acquisition.

As we read and drew from our own personal experiences, we found that to achieve the optimal goal of having the teacher use the target language at all times, it is necessary for teachers to use a variety of strategies, such as visual cues, non-verbal cues, cognates, repetition, and rephrasing, to advance students’ comprehension and to eliminate or minimize their use of translation to and from English. (Curriculum Services Canada, 2012a, p. 5)

However, the question still remains: How is this optimal goal possible using an inquiry-based approach?
Inquiry-Based Learning and French Immersion

Genesee, Holobow, Lambert, and Chatrand (1989) explained:

Considerable evidence exists to support the contention that students can successfully master content-area outcomes through immersion-style, content-based language classrooms. Indeed it would seem that native-like competence in the language of instruction is not absolutely necessary for age appropriate academic development. (p. 262)

The clear intent of the French immersion program design is to promote and to support the concept of teaching language across the curriculum. Through this design, “students are not only learning to talk but also talking to learn” (Curriculum Services Canada, 2012b, p. 2). According to Genesee et al. (1989), it is not simply the amount of exposure, but also the quality of exposure, that influences children’s language development. By raising the quality of language exposure through an interdisciplinary and inquiry-based approach, students can see the interconnectedness of language acquisition and content exploration that is the essence of the French immersion experience.

Further findings in a study conducted by Stevens (1976), underscore the importance of pedagogical factors and quality of instruction in building language proficiency. Stevens found students in the French immersion programs achieved a high level of success when they participated in student-centred, activity-based programs, and when language use was embedded in interesting and engaging activities in meaningful contexts. In French immersion entry-level programs, such as early childhood classrooms, it is important that teachers provide strategies and the scaffolding required for students to use the language in authentic and functional ways to deepen their knowledge and gradual proficiency in French.

Staples (2014) captured Wachowicz’s thoughts on Alberta’s flagship program of educational renewal, Inspiring Education – a program based in a constructivist approach that includes inquiry or discovery learning. Wachowicz is the former director of curriculum for Edmonton Public Schools and is one of the key architects of the education system that shot Alberta to the top of world education rankings in the early 2000s. His opinion was stated very clearly: 
... Alberta Education is basing their curriculum redesign on the failed philosophy of constructivism (similar in definition to concepts labelled “discovery learning,” “inquiry learning” or “child centered”). ... This ideology assumes all students will be motivated to discover the few outcomes that remain in the curriculum. In fact, students in this process may arrive at erroneous conclusions that have to be identified, requiring the teachers to guide (not teach) them to explore another avenue. This is a hugely time-consuming process, severely limiting the quantity and quality of learning that parents are expecting for their children. (as cited in Staples, 2014, n.p.)

Although we do not agree with most of Wachowicz’s assertions, the following statement stood out for us, specifically in concern to the challenge of French immersion classrooms:

Forgotten is the truth that meaningful exploration requires a pre-existing knowledge base. Discovery can play a powerful role in a child’s learning, but it must be preceded by explicit subject-based instruction, enabling the student to ask the right questions and to analyze findings appropriately. (n.p.)

Although this particular debate is mainly discussing the acquisition of mathematic skills, we believe some of these arguments can be applied to second language acquisition. Does a constructivist approach call for no direct instruction at all? If an educator chooses to use a balance of structured instruction and emergent curriculum, is it no longer an inquiry approach?

### Inquiry in French Immersion Enacted

**Maria:** I think it’s important to note too that especially in French immersion, we have to remember that kindergarten is the base ... we are teaching the students the fundamentals of how to learn through inquiry, how to be part of the process, how to use those skills so that it can be applied deeper later on when they are doing more project-based work ... we are just laying the foundation of the vocabulary needed. ... I will always start with something very general, something with vocabulary that will be easy enough for them to learn in French. (Recorded conversation, December 6, 2013)

**Tanys:** I think there was a time when students were used to being given all the information – spoon fed – even at a young age, and now they are not only accepting the fact that they will be asked to participate more fully in their learning, but they are excited about it. ... It used to be that when I asked if anyone had a question, it would be like crickets in the room. Now I am finding, after they have had some experience with inquiry in kindergarten, that when I ask if anyone has a question, there’s 14 or 20 hands up in the air and they all want to participate as opposed to being afraid to add anything to the learning. (Recorded conversation, December 6, 2013)
Brenda: It gives me hope when I see the Grade 1 teacher at my school and how much further she can go with inquiry because students have that extra language in French ... it's sort of an inner struggle as a French immersion teacher because you know the expectations of French immersion and you feel like you are sacrificing the language at times, but at the same time you know they are learning more than just the language ... is it worth it or not? I think it is. As long as you get back to the French ... find out what they are interested in, what they want to learn about and teach that vocabulary as you focus on the inquiry or the project that comes from the inquiry, that's how you have to start to get somewhere deeper. (Recorded conversation, December 1, 2013)

Andrea: I am a constructivist. But I don’t believe that inquiry learning means that skills and concepts aren’t taught. Come and visit my classroom any time. You will see children who are learning about the world in a deeper way and are capable of communicating their learning using a variety of skills, and in a second language too. (Written communication, April 6, 2014)

As we invited teachers to define inquiry and to share some of what an inquiry approach looks like in a French immersion early childhood classroom, we recognized there were varied perspectives. Some participants seemed to see their new teaching role in inquiry as the most important piece of the French immersion inquiry puzzle. Other teachers were more focused on the development of a new emergent curriculum, on hearing their students’ stories, and on being open to their interests. All were concerned, to varying degrees, with being sure the inquiry projects covered the curricular outcomes and that the French language was appropriately developed. Regardless of their perspectives, we found all the teachers were very critical of themselves, thinking their idea or method of inquiry was not adequate, especially when comparing examples from French immersion early childhood classrooms to English-stream classrooms.

In trying to make sense of this dilemma, we were comforted by the comprehensive definition of inquiry given by Blanchard et al. (2010). The authors defined levels of inquiry, based on the descriptions of Abrams et al. (2007, as cited in Blanchard et al., 2010), which focus on the goal one has for the inquiry and the instructional approach one uses to engage students – starting with traditional verification and moving to structured, guided, and open inquiry (p. 581). These definitions focus on three key activities: the source of the question, the method of data collection, and the interpretation of results. At a level of verification, the teacher provides the students with the question to be investigated and the methods of gathering data. Although the conclusions may not be immediately obvious to the students, the teacher is there to guide them toward an expected conclusion and to interpret the end results. In a structured inquiry, students are still provided with a question and a method by the teacher, but they are responsible for interpreting the results. In contrast, in a guided inquiry, students are responsible to choose the method of investigation in response to the inquiry question posed by the teacher and to interpret the results. Finally, in an open inquiry, students create the questions as well as choose the methods of investigation and interpret the results themselves. Blanchard et al. (2010) suggested that in using this framework for inquiry, a teacher could also move outside of the four defined levels of inquiry, creating other combinations of teacher direction and student decision-making to suit their students’ needs.
Blanchard et al. (2010) also explained these designations may not always be clear-cut as the optimal level of inquiry will vary according to the classroom context, individual students, and, of course, the topic of inquiry. We found these descriptors supported our teaching approach and our view that all children and groups of children are unique in their learning, especially while learning a second language in a French immersion setting. As teachers honour their students as the unique individuals they are, as well as consider the unique situation in an early childhood French immersion classroom, they will work toward the goal of creating an optimal learning environment.

It is clear through the teacher participants’ experiences that they all recognize there is not just one pedagogical approach that will satisfy every learner or every type of classroom, nor is there one level of inquiry. More than that, they recognize it is ideal to use a variety of methods based on the concept and the context of the inquiry. Cobb (1994) described the idea that coordinating perspectives can be developed while addressing all students’ needs. He explained that teachers who act with wisdom and judgment are continually developing ways to cope with particular situations, including a French immersion situation. Just as the research of Blanchard et al. (2010) documented the relative effectiveness of various levels of inquiry methods, the authors also suggested it is important for teachers to understand that there is no singular “holy grail” of inquiry (Settlage, 2007, as cited in Blanchard et al., 2010, pp. 581 & 609). They remind us that teacher judgment is required to understand the optimal inquiry approach to use in any classroom context.

While researching and growing in a better understanding of constructivism and the use of an inquiry approach, we feel we are experiencing more moments of illumination that support our core beliefs and our identity as French immersion educators. While instructionists such as Kirschner, Sweller, and Clark (2006) or Wachowicz tend to believe that constructivists advocate for minimal guidance, that is not necessarily the case. Rather, constructivists believe “guidance should be more situated, flexible and responsive” (Wise & O’Neill, 2009, p. 101). The quantity of guidance is only one dimension of teacher direction as “context and timing are also important concerns” (p. 82). Herman and Gomez (2009) called for a well-specified instructional approach that incorporates questioning, reflection, and metacognitive development. In similar ways, teacher participants in our study believe that, although we provide many opportunities for discovery and hands-on activity in our classrooms, it is important we also include explanation, feedback, help, modeling, scaffolding, and direction to aid our students in their learning and performance, especially in a French immersion classroom.

Through inquiry-based teaching, French immersion teachers can provide opportunity for “accountable talk” (Green, Lundy, & Glass, 2011). Accountable talk is conversation that sustains learning. For classroom talk to promote learning, it must be accountable to the learning community, to accurate and appropriate knowledge, and to rigorous thinking. It takes time and effort to create a classroom environment in which this kind of talk is a valued norm.

To promote accountable talk, teachers create a collaborative learning environment in which students feel confident in expressing their ideas, opinions, and knowledge, and in exchanging ideas. Teachers support accountable talk in French by paraphrasing and repeating student responses in order to provide students with appropriate, precise language, prompting when necessary, and giving feedback. (Curriculum Services Canada, 2012b, p. 5)
Each of our teacher participants gave examples of how they prepare their students to have inquiry-based conversations using accountable talk. They spoke about how to practice asking questions – at times with lots of repetition – and how to use new French vocabulary on the topic of study. In so doing, they demonstrated they are thoughtfully preparing their students for those deeper discussions.

As made visible by the teacher participants, the benefits of a teacher are invaluable, particularly in an early childhood French immersion classroom, since the teacher is the only person speaking the second language fluently. As we learned through the levels of inquiry described by Blanchard et al. (2010), teachers facilitate the learning. In different situations, teachers help to organize the goals and the source of the question, to direct, as needed, the methods of data collection and the interpretation of results, as well as to model the second language. Therefore, even with open inquiry, which may seem minimally guided, a French immersion teacher is providing many supports.

Examples of Inquiry in Participants’ Classrooms

**Andrea:** ... it starts at the beginning of the year when you’re doing simple stuff like, “Je m’appelle Madame McKinley. Comment t’appelles-tu?” [My name is Mme McKinley. What is your name?] Well, then they have to turn and look at the next person and say “Je m’appelle Emma. Comment t’appelles-tu?” [My name is Emma. What is your name?] And you have to make them do it. I mean yes, you can’t have the super exciting stuff we do later in the year if you don’t do the work at the beginning of the year; it just doesn’t work. So, it’s the building blocks and building the vocabulary as in the questioning and all that. It’s the oral language that we have to concentrate on at the beginning of the year. I think they make better connections between reading and writing and speaking if you really work the speaking. So this year I did a couple interesting things using “les contextes” (the curricular contexts/themes) from the new interdisciplinary curriculum ... using the big questions that are recommended in the curriculum ... there were certain things that we touched on over the course of the year. How animals change each season is one of them. So, that’s something we touched on in each season: Are there animals you wonder about in winter? Or animals you wonder about in spring? Our inquiry projects often came back to those more science-based ideas with animals or plants or change of seasons, but I also used inquiry with “ma famille” [my family] and “ma maison” [my home]. We talked about what the students wanted to know about families. What did they want to know about each other’s families? And so they came up with questions. And we wrote down the questions and did our best to answer the questions. The vocabulary was always being reinforced. They were always seeing it in different ways. So, if it was a complex sentence, sure I guided them with that. And there was a lot of “comment dit-on?” [how do you say?]. But at least they knew they were supposed to be trying in French and they did the best they could. By the end, they had learned and were using the vocabulary we were practicing either orally or while trying to write sentences. (Recorded conversation, June 26, 2014)

**Tanys:** I started this last “contexte” (the curricular context/theme) in the spring. The theme was “le printemps et les papillons” [spring and butterflies]. I think it was the first real inquiry theme/context that we were able to do this year without my having to feed a whole lot of vocabulary step-by-step. I approached this “contexte” differently than I have in the past. I
used to explain the life cycle to them and I would explain what they would expect to see in nature. But we had never actually seen it happen. We had never done the inquiry. So, this butterfly kit arrived and I didn’t explain anything right off the bat. I just said “We’re going to try something different.” I explained I wanted them to write down or draw what they saw and we were going to share our discoveries. We did, however, talk about what happens in spring and two of the questions that came out of the SVA discussion [What I know, What I want to know, What I learned] were: What happens to the things in winter that go to sleep? When do they wake up? We had talked about how some animals hibernate in the winter time, so the natural next question was when do they wake up? What happens? Then there were other things. There were a few boys in the classroom who love bugs. This one little boy didn’t want to read and was not engaged at the beginning of the year, but he came alive in this “contexte”. He loved it! He has now decided he wants to be an entomologist. And he was at our discovery table every day with the little magnifying glasses and not just him, they all loved it. They wanted to know more. In fact, when we were at the point when I was thinking of assessment and thinking about how to assess this, we talked about the life cycle. And then we talked about which comes first. And is there a beginning or an end? Cause, it’s called a cycle. Then I found out that some of the kids had talked about the water cycle at home. One of the little guys knew about the clouds and how they evaporate. I don’t know how he got to talking about this at home, but he had that cycle in his mind when we talked about the life cycle. And he was talking about the water cycle. I was really impressed. I couldn’t believe I’d never done it this way before. Five years of teaching Grade 1 and this was the first time I’d really taught “les papillons” [butterflies] like this. I also took a lot of pictures and I would ask them to go in their groups to brainstorm how they could write a sentence to describe what they saw. We had already used a lot of the vocabulary in other sections so we would brainstorm the words together that they needed to use. But it was basically through the inquiry that we discovered these words, this new vocabulary. The words came up in real life so they had to learn them. And in their assessment they had to identify the four parts of the cycle and try to put them into order. It was great! I have to say, though, that I really don’t feel like I’m capable of inquiry as per definition until April, May, or June. This spring experience was great because they had so much more vocabulary and ability in French. (Recorded conversation, June 26, 2014)

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**Paula and Marielle’s Journeys and Examples of Inquiry**

Throughout our careers as French immersion elementary school teachers, and especially over the last few years, we have truly felt we were going through a process of change in our teaching philosophy, pedagogical approach, and practice. At times, we overcame new challenges or made discoveries through readings, conversations, and self-reflection which provided us with the ability to climb to a new level of teaching. At other times, we found ourselves slipping back into old habits or into a less student-centred curriculum that does not necessarily support our core beliefs. In sharing our stories of this journey of change, we were able to reflect upon the process itself. When we recognized we had in fact begun a journey of change in our pedagogical approach, we found ourselves pondering which came first – a change of practice or a change of philosophy?
Reflecting on Our Philosophies

Paula: What works in helping children to learn? is a question I have often pondered. I remember as a child watching my sister struggle in school when I seemed to succeed so much more easily. As a parent, I have watched my children face different challenges in their learning. This wonder about children’s learning has been one of the main reasons for my choice to become a teacher and why I make an effort to be a reflective practitioner, searching for new ways to help each one of my students learn. This self-reflection has brought me to the challenge of enacting a new pedagogy and a new curriculum for myself and for my students in our French immersion kindergarten classroom.

I am humbled to admit in the last 18 years of teaching, I have not, until recently, truly researched and questioned which learning theory and method I was using or would be best for my students’ learning. I was simply teaching the way I had been taught to teach. I had been taught by traditional teachers with modernist views in structured settings. Doll (1993) described this system of education as linear, sequential, and as an easily quantifiable ordering system – one focusing on clear beginnings and definite endings.

Although I have always valued teaching and my students, I was feeling somewhat stagnant in my practice. After the Saskatchewan Ministry of Education developed the document Play and Exploration: Early Learning Program Guide (2008), I was given numerous opportunities to rethink my current practices through professional development opportunities within my school division. I took part in everything that was offered and I was inspired by my school division’s early learning team. I have always had a natural, positive image of children, as well as a deep respect for the culture of childhood. However, this experience – learning about how others were teaching or guiding children using Malaguzzi’s inspiring example – transformed me, my teaching philosophy, and how I viewed both curriculum and my pedagogical approach to teaching and learning.

Malaguzzi’s poem, “No Way. The Hundred is There.” (as cited in Edwards, Gandini, & Forman, 2012) inspired me, and I felt its words were sadly true: “... The school and the culture ... tell the child: that work and play, reality and fiction, science and imagination, sky and earth, reason and dream, are things that do not belong together ... ” (p. 3). I also watched Sir Ken Robinson’s (2006) video in which he stated “schools can kill creativity” and I thought that I, too, may have been playing a part in taking the natural creativity out of our children. With this awareness, I began a new journey.
Marielle: Throughout my teaching internship in a K-1 classroom, I had the most amazing cooperating teacher who demonstrated to me many interesting methods, classroom management skills, programs, and resources. However, the aspect that continues to resonate with me today was how she brought her own creativity to her classroom. She created an atmosphere of learning with imagination by allowing the children to be creative through play. She communicated and listened to the children's ideas and responded to them in a manner that was very non-threatening, relationship-building, and promoted the French language at all times. She was truly inspirational.

After a few years of teaching Grade 2 French immersion in a school that allowed me to foster my own creative classroom, I started teaching Grade 1 French immersion in the fall of 2008. I was working alongside another teacher who had already taught Grade 1 for a number of years and understood the outcomes and expectation of the curriculum. She had all the resources and effective programming needed to ensure the Grade 1 expectations would be met. She helped me to develop the knowledge of how to teach reading and writing in a French immersion Grade 1 classroom. However, I always kept my own creativity and the children's interests at hand.

As two years in Grade 1 went by, I continued to witness the progress my students made in oral speaking, reading, and writing, but I also realized this age of students was very special to me – their ideas, wonders, stories, curiosity, and creativity made me want to come to work every day. During this time, there was much talk about a very appealing philosophy of education and new pedagogy. This new way of teaching started to make its way into my discussions with colleagues and into my heart. I learned it was a constructivist philosophy emulated in the city of Reggio Emilia, Italy. All I really knew about the approach used in Reggio Emilia at that time was the importance of the environment as the third teacher. I related to the beliefs about children and the ideal of incorporating nature and natural objects into my classroom. My curiosity was piqued. I wanted to learn more about this philosophy and how it connected to the way I had already been teaching.

In May 2009, I attended the first ever Reggio Inspired Care and Education Conference (RICE) in Winnipeg. I was truly affirmed in my practice. I had been teaching differently than my colleagues for years, feeling as if I was not really fitting into the mould of the regular French Immersion teacher. I was intrigued by the new terms and values that were supporting my chosen pedagogy and I wanted to learn more.

Paula: Changing my classroom environment was concrete, hands-on, and fun. I worked to create areas where children could be independent in their learning. I created aesthetically pleasing and inspiring spaces, gave the children more opportunity to experiment in learning through play, and offered varied areas and time within our space and our schedule to do so. I was climbing many ladders towards my goal of a new pedagogical approach.

With this change in environment, I began to pay more attention to the total school experience and to seeing planned curricular outcomes differently. I strived to empower children and their families in concrete and authentic ways. I wanted my students’ stories and experiences to drive my curriculum and for it to be attentive to the diversity in their lives. As
I said before, I have always known children to be full of knowledge and naturally inclined to wonder, but I found my prior curriculum static and unsupportive of this belief. I was searching for a way to do, as Doll (1993) challenged, more than simply reform my methods and practices, but to question the assumptions on which these methods and practices were based and to develop a new pedagogical approach to teaching and learning.

I was then inspired by the book Black Ants and Buddhists: Thinking Critically and Teaching Differently in the Primary Grades written by Mary Cowhey (2006). I began looking for more opportunities to make connections between my students’ interests and the curriculum, to broaden and deepen their learning experiences, to increase authenticity in our classroom practices, and to build bridges between school and my students’ families as well as their community. I was moving from a teacher planned and taught curriculum to an emergent curriculum, one that arose out of the lives of my students. I was seeing my role as a teacher differently and my students’ positioning in relation to curriculum differently as well. With this new vision, I began creating curriculum with my students, just as Cowhey so often did. This new emergent curriculum arose out of the lives and interests of my students, rather than being created for them by me alone.

My goal was to catch my students’ sparks of wonder and to create a fire of learning. I wanted to observe them and listen to them. I wanted to be open enough to hear their questions and to recognize their interests. I wanted to use their interests and inquiries to create an environment of learning where our mandated curricular outcomes would still be achieved. However, I continued to grapple with how this could be accomplished. I struggled with the inclination to adhere to my old ways, and to rely on the planned, mandated curriculum as I tried to integrate stories from my students’ lives, their wonders, and their journeys into the curriculum. I also struggled with how to achieve this goal in a second language. Facing this struggle, I felt I needed more guidance.

Prior to the decision to further my education, I had not done a lot of reading on learning theories or early childhood development. Although I had often included reading and journaling as a process through which I obtained professional development, my choice in literature tended to be professional rather than academic. I enjoyed summaries of other educators’ successful practice, which I found offered motivation. However, when I was encouraged to read more academic literature in my graduate program, I recognized that rather than simply offering motivation, the academic literature provided me with the inspiration that comes from knowing the learning theory on which particular aspects of practice rest. With this new reading relating theory to practice, I found a stronger foundation on which to situate my developing understandings and choices.

Prior to expanding and deepening my choice in literature, I assumed the way I had been teaching was the way it should be done. However, with my new inspiration from the philosophies of Reggio Emilia, and from my colleagues and professors, I was learning to label the new practices I was implementing. I found myself asking: Why am I now drawn to a more emergent curriculum – a curriculum that is based on the students’ interest and passions as well as the teacher’s? Why do I feel this emergent curriculum is better supported by a different pedagogical approach than the one I have been using, one in which inquiry is central? What do I really know about this more constructivist approach?
Paula (September 2012):

With my new found enthusiasm, I was determined to implement an inquiry-based approach to teaching and learning in my classroom. In French immersion kindergarten, there is certain vocabulary that must be learned. Most kindergarten-aged children know their colours in English; therefore, the introduction of the French words for colours is non-threatening. I thought an inquiry-based approach to learning colours would offer a variety of interesting and engaging ways for children to use the new vocabulary in authentic situations. It would also achieve many curricular outcomes and give a good base of vocabulary for future inquiries.

Prior to beginning this journey, I would have had my students colour worksheets, play organized games, work in a type of booklet, or make a craft in order for them to practice and for me to assess their vocabulary learning. Then, early in my understanding of inquiry and assessment, I would have offered a variety of opportunities for the children to use the new vocabulary during play and exploration time, such as in centres and classroom activities. Now I had a different view. I felt I better understood the complexity of children’s thinking and learning. I wanted my students’ experiences of learning to be deeper. This time I slowed down, I listened, and I followed their lead.

After an initial lesson where I introduced the colour words in French and we practiced using them by answering the question, “What is your favorite colour?” [Quelle est ta couleur préférée?], I decided to deepen the learning. Although it was my choice to introduce the colour words in French, I wanted the students to guide their own learning and they had many great suggestions. After brainstorming about what we already knew concerning colour, one student asked, “What can we make with colour?” Since it was early in the school year, this question was asked by the student in English. I then modeled the question...
in French, wrote it down, and put it in a prominent place in the classroom, Qu’est-ce qu’on crée avec les couleurs? As the inquiry went on, we practiced answering the question using a modeled answer: Avec les couleurs je crée ... [With colour I create ...].

From this initial wonder, the students suggested many ways we could create with colour. One child had an experience playing music with a coloured xylophone at home, so we inquired about creating music with colour. We set up a music exploration centre with coloured drums, glasses of coloured water, and Boomwhackers, as well as paper and markers where the children could write their own music. Another group of children suggested working as scientists and mixing primary coloured water in vials with droppers from tubs of water. From this investigation, the children had more questions about colour shades and how to create other colours, so we experimented with a variety of paints. The paints then triggered another wonder: How do artists create with colour? This wonder began a discussion about real-life art and abstract art. The students eagerly awaited opportunities to paint and to use other mediums to create works of art and we were drawn into a mini Van Gogh and Pollock art study.

The students focused on many math concepts without even knowing it. They often asked for materials of many colours for sorting, patterning, and creating. Throughout the inquiry, we had many philosophical discussions concerning colour when students wondered: Where does colour come from? We debated whether colours in our environment are natural or manufactured by people.

I was surprised by some social awareness that came about from this inquiry on colour when we touched on the differences in the colour of a person’s skin. The children recognized through literature and through some deep discussion that some people at times make assumptions or stereotype other people because of the colour of their skin. One child even suggested spreading joy to others by using colour when they heard of a critically ill little girl who was collecting rainbows from all over the world.

Throughout this inquiry, I was very conscious to model the new French vocabulary – the colour words among many others. I also modeled the questioning with lots of Je me demande ... [I wonder ...] as well as Qu’est-ce que? Pourquoi? Comment? [What is? Why? How?]. Although some of those deeper conversations did happen mainly in English, I found my students making many efforts to use the French vocabulary that I had been modeling for them with much more enthusiasm. They also understood more and more of my French side of the conversation as well. This was just the beginning. This was just a taste of the complex and fulfilling fire of learning for which I had been searching.

Marielle (May 2009): I attended the most amazing Reggio Emilia Conference in Winnipeg. I have been learning so much about a teaching philosophy I have always been drawn to through my own personal reading and many discussions with the kindergarten teacher at my school. Seeing the children come from her classroom into mine made me see the importance of the wonderment and curiosity that I valued.

With many examples of how the approach designed in Reggio Emilia was used with prekindergarten and kindergarten-aged children, I questioned what it would look like in my Grade 1 classroom, especially since I taught in a French immersion school and had more academic expectations around levels of reading and writing. I continued to
question why play and curiosity seemed to have to stop when students arrived in Grade 1. I questioned how I could promote this wonderment and curiosity, but also meet the expectations required.

At the Reggio Emilia conference, I was in a session where we needed to present ourselves and state where we had travelled from. The lady presenting was so excited to hear that I was from Saskatchewan because she was introducing this amazing new resource called *Play and Exploration: Early Learning Program Guide* (2008) created by the Saskatchewan Ministry of Education. A little embarrassed, I admitted I had never heard of it.

As I explored this resource used by prekindergarten and kindergarten teachers in Saskatchewan, I was jealous! I wanted to teach children to read and write in a second language and to continue to support their hundred languages while we played, discovered, explored, and wondered in French!

After my return from the conference, I was inspired and motivated to make a change and started to look at the physical environment of my classroom. I wanted my classroom to reflect a home away from home. I start rearranging my classroom to reflect more group work with more community building and discussion areas. I start collecting more natural items to put in special places in my classroom. Many items I brought into school I had been collecting for my own home. But the changes didn’t stop there. I continued to follow my heart and organized my school days with plenty of time for inquiry projects that came from the children’s experiences and interests – all the while we were learning French and learning to read and write. My classroom had a feeling of peace that I saw reflected in my students. I had far less behaviour issues now that my environment was a calming one, but also because, during inquiry projects, all my students – no matter their academic level – could find a place to feel accepted and be part of the work.

**A New Curriculum**

Keeping in mind that Schwab (1973) challenged educators to conceptualize curriculum as being comprised of four commonplaces of equal rank (the learners, the teachers, the subject matter, and the milieus), we thought it was important to reflect upon our four curricular commonplaces. Who are our students and why are their interests and inquiries important? As teachers, what are our biases, stereotypes, and truths that affect our interpretation of the formal curriculum? How can we work alongside each other – teachers and students – to achieve the curricular outcomes? How does teaching a second language, as in our French immersion kindergarten and Grade 1 classroom, affect our curriculum and our pedagogy? How do we draw upon or how are we bound by our teaching milieus – our teaching environment, the culture of the school in which we are currently teaching, our classrooms, our students and their families?

We found the term *curriculum making*, used by Clandinin and Connelly (1992), as defining a teacher’s active inquiry into curriculum. This term is expansive, capturing an understanding of how the teacher makes curriculum alongside their students (Parker, Pushor, & Kitchen, 2011, p. 10). Clandinin and Connelly (1992) chose to use the term curriculum making rather than remaining with their earlier term *curriculum planning*. Curriculum planning was a term
Paula (Spring 2013): Who would have thought that the death of a classroom pet would bring about such an opportunity for learning? Our classroom had three well-loved pets: a bearded dragon named Spike, a corn snake named Lucky, and our spotted gecko named Lillian. When Lillian was found dead one morning, it caused quite a stir: Why did she die? Did we not take good enough care of her? Was she sick? Are we caring for our pets properly? Whew! Most of these questions left me feeling guilty, inadequate and uncomfortable.

I had, however, just finished a course offered through the Saskatchewan Teachers’ Federation called Responding to Children’s Interests. After the course, I had decided to really focus on teaching using an inquiry-based approach to achieve my curricular outcomes. I found one of the hardest parts of teaching using inquiry was the change in how a concept is taught, or even which concept is explored, because it depends upon the needs of the students rather than what I have decided – a new sense of curriculum, an emergent sense.

At this point in time, I was no longer teaching by themes, following my year-at-a-glance, or making all the decisions regarding my students’ learning. I was working to consider my students as co-authors and not reverting back to the old power structures of a modernist classroom. I was also working to create a home-away-from-home atmosphere in my classroom and to promote open, trustful connections that empower students to participate actively and responsibly in their learning. I did a lot of brainstorming with the students and I always wrote down everyone’s ideas and questions without judgment. This was not always easy. I had to work to see myself more as a mediator of learning alongside my students, and as an individual who was working to build a true learning community. I was no longer the keeper of the knowledge.

With all this in mind, I embarked on a learning journey with my students for which I was not at all prepared. I did not have books or supplies that would support a unit of study on reptiles. I did not even know that much about reptiles. I had acquired all my classroom pets from others who could no longer care for them and, up until Lillian’s death, I had simply followed the instructions left by their previous owners. Now this topic was something all my students were interested in and inquiring about. It was authentic.

I started by writing down all their questions, then I separated them into similar groups. We decided, after some discussion, that what we really wanted to know was how to properly care for the reptiles in our school. We divided into groups of interest: some chose to study Spike the bearded dragon, some selected Lucky the snake, and some picked Leo, the red-eared slider turtle that lived in the preschool room. My challenge was first to choose vocabulary that my students would focus on in French – reptiles had never been on my list of vocabulary to cover in French immersion kindergarten. Next, I needed to support their search for knowledge. How would we best find answers to their questions? We borrowed books, we used the SMART board to make searches on Google, and we invited experts to share their knowledge. We represented our learning in drawings, clay making, and paintings. In our search for answers, we learned about others’ ways of knowing while
reading First Nations legends about reptiles. I was no longer the only person speaking French in my classroom. My students were so enthusiastic about my engagement in their inquiry and their play that they were eager to use the new vocabulary I had introduced to them.

I recognized when the demonstration of skill, such as using new French vocabulary, was experienced in an authentic situation and in context with my students’ interests, they were far more likely to remember and to use the vocabulary in authentic ways. My focus was more on the process of learning and the ongoing learning that was happening rather than simply the end result. Yet our end result was wonderful! We presented a learning expo on reptiles to our families and school community. We also covered many of the curricular outcomes along the way under one of the big questions in the new French immersion interdisciplinary curriculum, “Quels sont les besoins des être-vivants?” [What are the needs of living beings?] This experience was driven by the students, yet I could have easily missed the opportunity. Did the students do it all on their own? Of course not! It was a lot of work on my part, but the risk and the work were worth it!

Marielle (Fall 2010): At the same time that my environment and my understanding of my teaching philosophy were changing, our school began collaborative, grade-alike group meetings with the North End Catholic Schools of Saskatoon. We began meeting once a month to discuss what was going on in each other’s classrooms, to work on collaborate units, and to create assessment tools. This work was very helpful, but out of the group of about 15 professionals, there were only two Grade 1 French immersion teachers.

At first, I was frustrated while trying to collaborate with first language teachers. In the end, however, this experience proved to be very rewarding for me as an educator.
Meeting and discussing with the other teachers made me realize that the outcomes for Grade 1 French immersion were generally in line with the Grade 1 English curriculum. We decided as a group that our first task would be to create common rubrics in writing, as reading already had its benchmarking. My French immersion colleague and I worked with the other teachers, but then adapted the rubric to reflect the exact outcomes and indicators found in our French immersion curriculum. It was a great opportunity to work as a teaching community and to align outcomes from school to school, but there was also much opportunity for conversations about our educational philosophies and pedagogies. The teachers at one school in particular were moving towards more of a Reggio Emilia/inquiry approach. Seeing that our outcomes were aligned with the English program and that I had been searching for more evidence to support the use of an inquiry approach in my own classroom, I was very enthusiastic to hear their ideas. We spoke endlessly of how to incorporate inquiry into our classrooms and still meet the required outcomes. My French immersion colleague and I visited another teacher’s Grade 1 first language, inquiry-based classroom. Though she was still in the first few steps in her journey towards a more constructivist approach to education, I was truly inspired by the changes she had made in her pedagogy and the effect it had on her students. It was like she had taken my vision and put it in motion. Although I knew that it would look somewhat different in a French Immersion setting, I felt I knew exactly what my first steps needed to be. So, I took the plunge.

We understand, as Delandshere (2002) pointed out, there is an essential need to reconnect our educational practices to theoretical and philosophical considerations as a means of clarifying the assumptions we make about learning and teaching. We were not sure how to accomplish this ideal until we were introduced to the idea of the critically reflective classroom through Riley and Rich (2011). The authors argued that creating such a classroom will call upon teachers to recontextualize the school context. Critically reflective classrooms emphasize co-operation, co-learning, and the rights of the teacher, the students, and the students’ families. They are places where the teachers, the students, and their families share ideas about learning, what to learn, and the ways in which to learn. It is through teachers sharing their own stories with their students, as well as listening to their students’ stories with respect, “sharing stories of who we are and what matters in our worlds ... stories of who we are now and who we might become” (p. 121), that all involved in the learning process will come to fully understand the critically reflective classroom and what this type of classroom might offer.

At a 2012 conference, it was exciting and thought-provoking to hear the keynote speakers Elena Giacopini and Loretta Bertani from Reggio Emilia, Italy explain that the approach used in Reggio Emilia was not a method, but an experience that is tied to the values and cultural aspects of their city. The infant and toddler centres and the preschools in Reggio Emilia have approached learning in an open way, using projects that are important in the mind of all citizens of every age. They spoke of the principles of early childhood education in Reggio Emilia and of their recognition that students should not be directly taught concepts but be given opportunities to construct their own theories. These theories are encouraged to be pliable so they can constantly be changed as the students give them meaning and collect more knowledge. They spoke of many different ways and points of access to knowledge; they explained that often education systems are asking students to
repeat and to regurgitate information rather than to construct and to share their knowledge and understanding.

When reflecting upon the traditional school systems we had come to know, we found this to be true. Doll (1993) wrote of how much of the pedagogical approach to curriculum to date has trained us to be passive receivers of preordained truths, not active creators of knowledge. We found that prior to beginning this journey towards a more emergent curriculum, we had been teaching truths or facts to our students after which we were expecting them to demonstrate the accumulation of these facts.

On the other hand, pedagogy, like the one enacted in Reggio Emilia, honours an individual’s ability to form, to plan, to execute, and to evaluate. It calls for a curriculum, as Doll (1993) described, that needs to be created by the classroom community, not by textbook authors. It calls for a curriculum rich in diversity, as well as a classroom atmosphere that fosters exploration. As we worked to define learning theories for ourselves, we found these ideals aligned with what we understood to be a constructivist approach to teaching young children.

Because constructivism views learning as a process in which the learner actively constructs or builds new ideas or concepts, it can be assumed that inquiry-based learning as a pedagogical approach arises out of the theory of constructivism. Constructivists believe learners construct their own knowledge and this knowledge is not set apart from the experiences of the learner or the community of learners. Tobias and Duffy (2009) cited constructivist authors who argue that “knowledge is situated in the activity of the learner and is a product of that activity and the context and culture in which it occurs” (p. 3).

Although we recognize our identity clearly supports a more constructivist approach to teaching, it also seems many educators have occasions to find themselves, like ourselves, struggling to define and to apply a particular approach, especially when including a second language.

Paula (February 2013): While working on inquiry with my students, I very much wanted the ideas and the wonders to come from the students. I consciously chose to step back, to wait patiently, to listen to hear their questions and discussions, and to see where the next wonder would lead us. I found it very difficult not to answer their questions right away. I bit my tongue and wondered with them, even if the answer was obvious to me.

At times, the conversations just would not happen. The interest was not there. One example of this occurred during an inquiry study into the northern lights. One day, after a long weekend in February, one of my students came to school excited to share an experience he had at his cabin in northern Saskatchewan. As he stood in front of the class, his excitement was contagious! He told us all about the dancing lights in the night sky and the other students were mesmerized. At the time, I was apprehensive. Did we really want to learn about the northern lights in kindergarten? How would I describe the science behind the lights if I did not really understand it myself? Is “aurore boréale” and its surrounding vocabulary worth learning in French at this age? I was not sure how to respond or how to scaffold this excitement. Should I just let it pass? Should I let them figure it out in their own ways? Although I ideally wanted to catch my students’ sparks of wonder and create many opportunities for discovery, I found it was not always a simple process and my role as a facilitator in their learning was not always clear.
When we decided to go ahead and learn about the northern lights, the results of this inquiry were amazing! We learned so many interesting things and chose many fascinating ways to represent our learning with modeling clay, watercolour paints, tissue paper, food colouring, and the light table. The children in this particular group were so excited that I wanted both my kindergarten groups to have the same experience. However, when I introduced the northern lights idea to my other kindergarten class and provided them with the same materials with which to create, they were not interested in the same way. There was some curiosity on the topic, but not nearly the same amount as the group who had been inspired by one of their peers. This was a clear example to me of the influence of the learning on the group when the curriculum came from the students’ interests. It was an example of the importance of being open to an emergent curriculum in my practice and the power that comes from using an inquiry approach in my pedagogy. It was also a testimony to students’ ability to learn new French vocabulary, especially when they felt they had ownership over the learning. I assumed the vocabulary that went along with “aurore boréale” in French would be too difficult for my young students, yet they were using the vocabulary I was modeling for them as easily as any other topic. I believe this was because they truly seemed excited about communicating their new knowledge and experiences with me and recognized my desire for them to use the new language as much as possible.

A New Pedagogical Approach

We gained much freedom within knowledge and self-reflection. Riley and Rich (2011) explored “curriculum as a story that unfolds and helps us to understand who we might become as teachers, co-learners and as human beings” (p. 101). We feel that reflecting upon our lived experiences is an important step in understanding and creating a new philosophy of education. While our main goal in the initial stages of our teaching careers was for learning to be fun, we have now climbed ladders to a place of new understanding and expectations for our students. We now desire deep learning and understanding, critical thinking, and authentic engagement – so much more than fun.

However, we are still facing some challenges. Clandinin and Connelly (2004) described a philosophy of education based on a foundation of lived experiences with a focus on shared narratives. We make efforts to share our lived experiences and to be open to the narratives surrounding us, but we also feel we are still learning. While reading the children’s book Dream by Susan Bosak (2004), a quote by Nietzsche (1978) heartened us. He stated “he who would learn to fly one day must first learn to stand and walk and run and climb and dance: one cannot fly into flying” (p. 195). At times throughout this journey, we felt we were crawling or walking or dancing. Other times we felt we were standing still and, recently, there have finally been times when we felt we were flying. We have now shared our part of our stories – our questions, challenges, and celebrations. Through a renewed philosophy, the development of a new pedagogical approach, the cocreation of an emergent curriculum, and the implementation of many new practices, we continue to question who we might become as educators, especially when teaching a second language in an inquiry-based, early childhood setting, and we look forward to the future.
Marielle (School year 2013-2014): I started teaching Grade 1 French immersion at a new school. My classroom had 20 students with a variety of cultural backgrounds. Cultural diversity, respect, compassion toward others, and friendship were essential in my classroom. We had explored the many different aspects of each individual and their culture through discussions, inquiry explorations, and questioning. We discussed the importance of each student's language, ways of celebrating, culture, and traditions. On the globe, we located the countries from which each student's families had originated, even if it was generations ago. We discussed compassion and the difference between tolerance and respect.

One of my favourite parts of teaching Grade 1 is the context “Tout sur moi” [All about me]. This consists of not only ourselves as individuals and our personal interests, but also extends to the exploration of our families and our community. I wanted this inquiry to be divided into three parts: the first part “Tout sur moi” [All about me], followed by “Ma famille” [My family], and finally “Mes amis” [My friends]. Right away, this inquiry seemed to build awareness of each other's differences and similarities that brought us to more of an understanding and compassion for each student's uniqueness. We were also reminded of how each of us plays an important role in our classroom, families, communities, and the world.

In Grade 1, once I mentioned the phrase “Tout sur moi” [All about me], the students were enthusiastic and fascinating discussions started immediately! They were excited to share about themselves and they asked many questions of others. There was an endless flow of stories and prior knowledge to share.

We started our inquiry by writing a letter to each family, explaining that we wanted to collect stories about ourselves. We also made personal identity cards with all our physical attributes and practiced reading them several times. We then presented these basics about ourselves to others, all in French.

Then we started a list of our likes and dislikes, for example, “Quel est mon animal préféré?” [What is my favourite animal?], Quelle est ma nourriture préférée? [What is my favourite food?], Quelle est ma couleur préférée? [What is my favourite colour?], etc. After making up the list of French questions as a class – we had practiced how to pose questions earlier in the year – we created a little booklet with the questions the students wanted answers to and the information they wanted to share with others. Prior to making an effort to use an inquiry approach, I would have made a generic booklet with the vocabulary I thought they needed to know and we would work through the booklet as a group, one page at a time. However, now I worked to allow the children some choice. I sent home the list of the questions in English to be discussed with their families. I also encouraged them to share something with the class – an interest or special talent – that maybe no one else at school knew about. In class, we wrote stories answering each question. I gave the children the option to represent their answers to the wonders by using the booklet, stories, and sentences, but I also encouraged them to represent their likes and dislikes, or their interests and talents, using their hundred languages. They chose drawing, painting, clay, collages, singing, etc. For example, one of the questions was about a favourite food and one student's favourite food was pizza. She created a pizza out of clay to represent her answer. Some students brought toys, pictures printed out at home, or pictures they had taken of their favourite things. For example, one boy brought a picture he had taken at his grandfather's farm of a farm tractor because he loves tractors. Another boy was obsessed...
In the end, each student prepared their presentations in unique ways and took ownership of their work. This was just the beginning of an inquiry unit that helped students learn many ways of representing their work through a topic they all knew and enjoyed. While representing our learning, we also worked on building various French language skills: oral language as well as reading and writing. I recognized during the time my students were encouraged to represent their learning through one of their hundred languages, all the students were engaged. Because they knew they would be presenting their findings about themselves in French, they practiced using the French vocabulary as they worked. Of course, during this work time, I would circulate and meet with each individual student. We would practice reading each point to ensure students had the vocabulary they needed and I would document their language skills and their comprehension.

However, their improved French language skills and enthusiasm to use French in more authentic ways were not the only changes I noticed. I also recognized everyone was on task and there was very little classroom management needed. All of my students, no matter their abilities or their level of reading or writing, were able to take part in the work. They seemed to take more pride in and ownership of their work. It seemed they all felt more valued and successful.

Also, because an inquiry classroom promotes the sharing of ideas, wonders, prior knowledge, and creativity of the students, I found students learned to listen respectfully to their peers in a different way. I continue to be moved by Cowhey (2006) as a curriculum maker and as I continue to learn more about inquiry-based learning. I see the importance of critical thinking and the importance of teaching critical thinking skills implicitly in my classroom. Cowhey encouraged me to look critically at each and every project I undertake in order not to reinforce stereotypes, to oversimplify a problem or a solution, or to fail...
to teach children an understanding of a social cause. She explained the importance of authentic lessons as well as teaching compassion and empathy – true, lifelong lessons. It is great to have a curriculum that supports this ideal with outcomes such as:

... the student develops a sense of social responsibility that can contribute positively to their physical, social and cultural environment. He or she is aware of the gifts and challenges that are unique to each person and each community. He or she can also collaborate with others to create an ethical space that encourages dialogue towards mutual concerns and common goals. (translated from Ministère de l’éducation de la Saskatchewan, 2014b, p. 8)

The questions we used in this inquiry about ourselves led us to a more in-depth inquiry. For example, “Quel est ton animal préféré?” [What is your favourite animal?] led us to an inquiry on animals where we questioned and explored animals and their needs. We wrote our very own funny story about an animal, as well as a descriptive/informative story about our favourite animal. Our research on the animal of our choice was done using picture information books from the library or by searching the Internet with my guidance. We then each created a PowerPoint presentation that we were able to present to our community of parents.

Also, after presenting to others about ourselves, we moved into our inquiry on “Ma famille” [My family]. We explored each of our families’ differences and similarities. We asked questions about what we wanted to find out about our friends’ families. I was sure to keep in mind something I learned from my colleague and friend Andrea McKinley: “the best questions for an inquiry are those you cannot find the answers to on Google” (Personal communication, June 2014). We therefore worked to ask questions that only we could answer, questions specific to the children in our class. There were questions about the different people in our families as well as our families’ cultural traditions and celebrations. Some members of our families joined us in the classroom to explain their roles within the family or their cultural differences. One of our families was expecting a baby, so we had the pregnant mom visit, and then visit again with her newborn baby. We wrote adventure stories about different family members. We read different books on families. We developed an understanding that not all families are the same and that no matter how our family is structured, every family is important. We discovered and reinforced the importance of our relationships with our family members. This study on “Ma famille” easily moved into a study of “Ma maison” [My home], which is one of the context questions from the Grade 1 curriculum. We discussed different types of houses, what houses are built out of, and where those materials come from. We discussed the importance of houses and how they shelter and protect us from the environment and the weather. We were also able to talk about how homes are different in different countries and cultures, including First Nations homes.

After taking a look at our families and our homes, we started an inquiry about “Les amis” [friendship]. I always start our inquiries with having the students share what they already know before having them ask questions about what they want to know on a topic (SVA). We started this inquiry on friendship by describing what makes a good friend. The deep understanding my students expressed in sharing what they already knew amazed me! I used to think I needed to feed them all the knowledge, but starting with allowing them
to share what they already knew made a stronger base to build upon. During this study, we expressed our ideas and wonders through many of the hundred languages. This time, however, the students suggested another way to express themselves – acting! What an interesting way to wonder and share together. For a final project, we wrote letters to our friends in French, telling them why and how they are good and respectful friends to us. We gifted our friends with these letters of appreciation and each child felt truly special.

Since my journey with inquiry began and as I learned more about my teaching philosophy, I became more confident as a teacher. My basic understanding of inquiry in a French immersion classroom and my role as a French immersion teacher was to teach the students French by modeling and practicing the vocabulary in authentic ways. Through working to create a strong base in oral language, the reading and writing will follow. The inquiry context is set by the students’ interests, curiosity, and wonder as much as possible. I firmly believe this curiosity is encouraged through the child’s immediate environment. When the first snowflake falls, start your inquiry on how snowflakes are formed or how living beings care for themselves in different types of weather. As students eat lunch or snacks, they might inquire about food or nutrition. Children are naturally curious about their environment, so as a French immersion teacher, I try to build their French language skills through their curiosity about their immediate and natural environment. The “contextes” (contexts/themes) and/or questions recommended in the new interdisciplinary curriculum easily support this type of learning.

This inquiry experience beginning with “Tout sur moi” [All about me], “Ma famille” [My family], “Ma Maison” [My home] and “Mes amis” [My friends] became the longest and most fascinating inquiry we had done all year; every new discovery led us to new experiences, further knowledge, and more wonders. I can only hope the development of questioning skills, exploration techniques, creative means of representation, critical thought, and compassion towards others are fostered and follow my students all the way into adulthood, creating a society of critical thinkers, efficient problem solvers, as well as understanding, compassionate French-speaking adults. I am very comforted knowing this will be the generation caring for our future.

Paula (School year 2013-14): In September, I always invite my students (and their families) to present on their interests, hobbies, or activities so I can get to know them better. This year, I had a student and his father come to class to present on the boy’s unique interest: skeletons. This interest of his emerged when his father began studying to be a nurse. With many nursing textbooks lying about the house, this five-year-old boy started asking more and more questions about how the human body worked, and he was especially interested in bones. After a year, he had collected a variety of skeletons – some real animal skeletons, many photos of skeletons, and one life-size plastic skeleton that he had fondly named Ronald. Ronald was a big hit with all the kids! They had so many questions about his different parts and Jacob knew many of the names of the bones, including some of the Latin medical terms. I was quite impressed with the conversation.
This rich discussion happened in English because the father did not speak French and the students did not have the level of French or the vocabulary for this type of conversation. As I have always made a point of teaching the body parts in French as part of my unwritten kindergarten curriculum, I now recognized this theme could easily apply as a base vocabulary to more than one of the big questions in my new kindergarten curriculum. I asked myself: Wouldn’t this be a perfect opportunity to teach the body parts? Since the children were already showing such an interest in the topic, I asked my young student if Ronald could live at the school for a while. When he agreed, I made sure Ronald was standing in a prominent place in the classroom. I made little cards with the French vocabulary I wanted the students to learn and we taped them to Ronald in the proper places: la tête, les épaules, les genoux, le dos, les pieds, les mains [head, shoulder, knees, back, feet, hands], etc. We each took turns representing Ronald in different ways. Some students chose to draw, some painted, some used clay or Plasticine, and some used wire. As we worked at representing Ronald as accurately as possible, the students were continually using the French vocabulary I had...
introduced to them. I also noticed their self-portraits matured immensely after the careful study of Ronald’s skeleton.

Prior to beginning this journey toward using a more constructivist approach in my classroom, I would have asked my students to practice the vocabulary through rote repetition every morning. I still did a bit of the rote practice, using Ronald to provide my young students with the knowledge base that would enable them to have the deeper conversations later on, but I also recognized my students were taking more ownership of the learning because it had more meaning to them. I observed they were more eager to use the new terms in our project work. I slowed down and I listened even more. Where would my students lead us in our learning now? Many of our discussions on the human body came back to health – mostly healthy eating, exercise, and sleep. Therefore, our next focus became healthy eating.

Prior to making an effort to create curriculum with my students, I would have taught them about the food groups and then practiced the rote French vocabulary, mostly the names of fruits and vegetables. After much modeling and repetition, we practiced asking, “Qu’est-ce que j’aime manger?” [What do you like to eat?]. From this wonder, we touched on another one of the big questions in my kindergarten curriculum, “Comment est-ce que je prends soin de mon corps?” [How do I care for my body?], as well as many curricular outcomes.

I then asked students to present on cultural or traditional foods they enjoy. These presentations encouraged us to learn French vocabulary I would have never introduced otherwise, as well as some of the basics the students were able to practice when presenting or asking questions of their peers. The kids could be heard singing the French songs I had presented to them and French vocabulary when asking each other, “Qu’est-ce que tu aimes manger?” [What do you like to eat?] and responding in full sentences, “J’aime manger ... ! [I like eating ...!]. It was amazing to me! In prior years, my students could name the vocabulary from flash cards, but I did not often hear them having conversations and using full sentences with proper meaning. This touched on another one of the big questions “Est-ce que toutes les fêtes sont célébrées de la même façon?” [Are all holidays celebrated the same way?] as they shared foods they ate for different cultural celebrations or traditions.

Learning that the healthiest foods were less processed or packaged brought us to a new wonder, so this spring we grew some of our own food in our classroom and learned about plants, including all the French vocabulary that goes with plant parts and what plants need to grow. Another curricular question was touched upon: “Quels sont les besoins des êtres vivants?” [What do living beings need?].

All this learning arose from one child’s presentation on skeletons and a teacher’s openness to hear the interests of her students! In reflection, I recognize I was able to cover many of the outcomes in the kindergarten curriculum and I had taught a lot of French vocabulary. This was the type of teaching I had been yearning for – the hundred ways of listening and of marveling together, the hundred worlds to discover – and we were able to discover them in a second language. I had found a way to protect my students’ thoughts without, as Malaguzzi warned, “separate[ing] the head from the body.” And I became more confident and more ready to explore what was ahead.
Conclusion

Implications and Recommendations for Supporting the Hundred Languages in a Second Language

Through all of our stories, we came to understand that although inquiry in a French immersion early childhood classroom may look different than its first language counterpart, it has many of the same important qualities: an effort to work towards an emergent curriculum arising from the interests of the students, freedom and time for students to explore these interests and search out answers to bigger questions, and attention to the process of learning, including the process of second language learning. Using an inquiry-based pedagogy in teaching can be a challenge in itself. The challenge of using an inquiry approach in a second language is an even greater challenge. As Cobb (1994) suggested, “making the decision to teach using an inquiry-based approach requires a sense of trust and confidence that this new way of thinking and doing will lead to valuable learning for students” (p. 8). The researchers and teachers in our study possessed such a sense of trust and confidence. Our words and stories demonstrate our belief that an inquiry-based pedagogy will lead to valuable student learning.

Even with all the wonders and questions we have, we understand children learn to do amazing things in oral language; all they need are opportunities to produce language in situations that are meaningful to them, to be understood, to be part of conversations, and to have a model of language to learn from. (Clay, 1998, as cited in Curriculum Services Canada, 2012a, p. 8)

By believing in and supporting the hundred languages of children described in Malaguzzi’s poem through an inquiry approach, teachers can model the second language and provide many opportunities for children to produce language themselves in meaningful situations. With this understanding, perhaps French immersion educators need to stop the comparisons to first language classrooms and create something new. However, it is not that simple. Without the examples of Cowhey, books such as Natural Curiosity (Chiarotto, 2011), or conferences like the Reggio Inspired Care and Education Conference and Complexities: Encounters with the Pedagogical Project of Reggio Emilia (Westminster, BC, 2012) that gave us first language examples of inquiry-based teaching, how would we have found inspiration?
The participants in this research were asked to share their educational timeline during their second open interview. We recognized there was a common thread in all their timelines. All of them, like us, found inspiration in first language examples through literature, site visits, and/or conferences. These first language examples were all we could find. Although it was frustrating at times to be inspired by these first language examples while questioning how it could be accomplished in a French immersion setting, there was still the need for opportunities to grow and to reflect. We all needed the motivation to change or to sustain our pedagogies through strengthening our educational philosophies.

As we recognized throughout our research, in sharing our stories and the stories of a group of teachers, three significant themes emerged: the definition of inquiry and the ideal of French immersion, the benefits and challenges of using an inquiry approach in a second language environment, and how our beliefs and philosophies of education affected our pedagogies. We found all our teachers were in need of more support – more time to collaborate and plan together as well as continued professional learning and guidance on how to use inquiry-based teaching practices supported by the new interdisciplinary curriculum for kindergarten and Grade 1. Our teacher participants felt more confident in their practice the more they collaborated and shared with others. However, they were also searching for inspiration and more applicable examples through professional development opportunities.

It is our hope that through this research and our personal stories, as well as the stories lived and told by our participants, we will encourage and affirm other teachers who are also on this journey toward a more constructivist approach to teaching a second language. It is our hope others will also choose to question their pedagogies and philosophies. Our stories as teachers will go on; we will learn from each other, from research, from readings, from self-reflection, and we will have more stories to share. It is our hope that as teachers continue to share their stories in the future, we will be able to create a more in-depth collection of examples of teachers using an inquiry-based approach in early childhood French immersion. “Stand aside for a while and leave room for learning, observe carefully what children do, and then, if you have understood well, perhaps teaching will be different from before” (Malaguzzi, as cited in Edwards, Gandini, & Forman, 1998, p. 82).
References


