# The Nature of Principals' Work and Leadership in French as a Second Language Learning in Ontario Schools

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## Abstract

French as a second language (FSL) education is mandatory in Ontario from Grades 4 to 9. The majority of students enrol in Core French (CF), which has an obligatory status in policy but is marginalized in practice. Our study aimed to illuminate the dynamics behind this paradox, drawing from research on the nature of principals' work and instructional leadership. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with Ontario principals and CF teachers in eight schools. Thematic triangulation revealed principals working to contain problems typically associated with CF by positioning teachers as the first line of defense and viewing student engagement as success. Reminiscent of 1980s research, findings suggest little progress has been made in resolving this CF paradox.

# Résumé

L'enseignement en français langue seconde (FLS) est obligatoire en Ontario à partir de la 4e à la 9e année. La majorité des élèves s'inscrivent en français de base. Bien que ce programme de FLS ait un statut obligatoire en politique, il est marginalisé en pratique. Notre étude vise à éclairer la dynamique derrière ce paradoxe. Des entrevues semi-structurées ont été menées avec les directeurs et enseignants de français de base qui travaillait aux huit écoles en Ontario. Sur la base de la recherche actuelle sur la nature du travail des directeurs d'école et le leadership pédagogique, nous avons examiné la manière dont les directeurs et les enseignants percevaient leurs expériences concernant ce programme FLS. Une triangulation thématique a révélé une tendance parmi les directeurs à contenir les problèmes habituellement associés au programme de français de base en positionnant les enseignants comme la première ligne de défense et en considérant l'engagement des élèves comme un succès. Ces résultats se ressemblent à celles des années 1980, ce qui suggère que nous avons fait peu de progrès dans la résolution de ce paradoxe en français de base.

*Mots-clés :* français langue seconde, français de base, administration scolaire, leadership en éducation, leadership pédagogique, direction d'école

# Introduction

According to the Official Languages Act (promulgated in 1969), the Government of Canada is responsible for promoting bilingualism by enhancing opportunities for citizens to learn English and French. This is accomplished through the support of federal language programs in French- and English-speaking communities. Since education is under provincial jurisdiction in Canadian provinces and territories, language policy and program implementation differs across geographic regions. Such is the case with French as a second language (FSL) education in English-speaking contexts, where decisions on which programs (e.g, French Immersion, Extended French, Core/Basic French, Intensive French) are offered at which point during a child's education vary across the provinces and territories (Canadian Parents for French, 2015).

In Ontario—the context of the present study—ministry-based policy promotes bilingualism by identifying FSL as a mandatory subject of study from Grades 4 through 9. Almost 80% of Ontario elementary students are currently enrolled in Core French (CF), a program where French classes take place daily or a few times a week (Canadian Parents for French, 2015). Considering the Canadian research to date, two paradoxes emerge regarding the delivery of CF programs. First, although CF has an essential status in curricular policy, studies have shown it to be chronically marginalized in Canadian elementary and secondary schools (see Lapkin, Mady, & Arnott, 2009) including in Ontario. When surveyed, CF teachers identified the lack of classroom space, adequate resources, and priority scheduling as contributing to their dissatisfaction (Lapkin & Barkoui, 2008; Lapkin, MacFarlane, & Vandergrift, 2006). For many CF teachers, these problems have led them to shift to another subject area or to leave the profession entirely (Karsenti, Collin, Villeneuve, Dumouchel, & Roy, 2008). A related paradox shows that, when asked to evaluate the degree of support they received from administrators, practising FSL teachers characterized their school administration as being "very supportive" despite also reporting adverse school-based working conditions (Lapkin et al., 2006). Former FSL teachers also cited problematic relationships with school administrators as a main reason for their departure (Karsenti et al., 2008).

With a view to illuminating the dynamics behind the first paradox, this article reports findings of exploratory research on the nature of principals' work and instructional leadership in CF program implementation in Ontario elementary schools. Using a

qualitative design, we analyze and compare the perspectives of principals and FSL teachers from eight Ontario elementary schools on the principal's role in CF programming. We ask: How do principals characterize their role in CF? How do CF teachers characterize their principal's role in CF? To what extent do the views of principals and teachers diverge or converge?

# Background and Literature Review

A systematic search yielded little Canadian empirical literature addressing the leadership role of principals in CF programming. Recent studies have focused on school-based administrative decisions related to the inclusion of immigrant students in FSL programs (see Mady, 2006, 2007a, 2007b; Mady & Turnbull, 2010). A more relevant but dated study conducted by Calman (1988) examined issues raised by principals about the state of CF programming in an urban Ontario context. Here, 89 principals completed a questionnaire and a subsample of four principals participated in a group interview. Data showed that administrators tended to attribute the success or failure of the CF program in their school to the CF teacher. Principals reported feeling "the Core French program was as good or as poor as the people teaching it" (p. 20). With respect to their own role, principals "indicated that in many cases the evaluation/supervision of the French program is not as high a priority as that of the rest of the curriculum" (p. 20). More than 80% of questionnaire respondents indicated there was only some or little integration of French into the overall curriculum (e.g., French bulletin board displays, integration of French into school assemblies).

Recently, a Curriculum Services Canada (CSC) project sponsored by the Ontario Ministry of Education aimed to provide guidance to school administrators on how to strengthen FSL learning. Through newsletters (CSC, 2014a) and a viewer's guide to footage of a focus group of principals (CSC, 2014b), calls are made for administrators to use flexible timetabling and scheduling to (1) provide students with a wider range of FSL options and avoid conflicts with mandatory courses, and (2) facilitate collaborative inquiry and common planning time between English and French teachers. Other strategies cited for school leaders include participating in FSL teachers' professional learning

and promoting school-wide acknowledgment of their FSL teachers as "literacy special-ists"—a recognition not commonly attributed to CF teachers (Arnott & Mady, 2013).

These CSC publications repeatedly draw on tenets of instructional leadership as the basis for their advice and suggestions for the FSL context. For example, the work of prominent instructional leadership researcher Kenneth Leithwood is cited in CSC (2014b), which reads "school leadership acts as a catalyst without which other good things are quite unlikely to happen." Coupled with the lack of recent research on this topic, empirical study of the role of principals in CF programming through an instruction-al leadership lens is warranted and timely.

## Conceptual Framework

We drew on an instructional leadership lens, complemented with findings about the nature of principals' work. We felt this would provide a robust framework for looking at the paradox of FSL because it combined a descriptive perspective (i.e., how principals work in the face of ongoing demands and pressures) with a prescriptive point of view as to what they ought to be doing to have a positive influence on teaching and learning in their schools.

## The Nature of Principals' Work: A Descriptive Lens

Studies on the nature of principals' work highlight how they "manage in the middle" (Lortie, 2007, p. 208). Dealing with daily imperatives (Cuban, 1988) like school disci-pline, scheduling, attending to the physical infrastructure, budgeting, and reporting, they respond to superiors and system-wide reforms, manage a teaching staff that has signifi-cant autonomy, and interact with students, parents, and stakeholders, often under difficult circumstances. Confronted with many shifting priorities, their lives are a constant balanc-ing act in which negotiation, compromise, mediation, and the establishment of workable relationships feature centrally (Kaplan & Owings, 2015).

When it comes to managing and leading a teaching staff (the most significant dimension of the principal's role for our study) the literature reveals that principals use a variety of strategies to shape behaviours and influence change, sometimes relying on formal authorities (e.g., staffing, scheduling, procurement), other times on processes of

influence (e.g., persuasion, facilitation, provision of resources, rewards, and recognition) (Hodgkinson, 1991; Winton & Pollock, 2013), and occasionally on coercive tactics (e.g., micromanagement, neglect, limiting access) (Blase & Blase, 2002; de Wet, 2012). The data we report reflect a range of these contextual and relational dynamics, signalling a significant variability in the skills and approaches principals bring to their roles.

## The Principal as Instructional Leader: A Prescriptive Lens

By studying the practices of principals who have been successful in leading improvements, researchers have identified leadership practices that have positive effects on student achievement (Hallinger, 2005, 2011; Leithwood, 2006) but are considered second in importance to teachers' instructional efforts (Le Fevre & Robinson, 2014; Leithwood, Seashore Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004; Robinson, Lloyd, & Rowe, 2008). Principals' impact on students' learning is understood to be indirect (Leithwood, Patten, & Jantzi, 2010), occurring "through actions they take to influence school and classroom conditions" (Hallinger, 2005, p. 229).

   Some accounts of instructional leadership emphasize the role of principals in supervising/inspecting teaching practices, but most proponents argue for a broader view. Leithwood (2006) distinguishes four categories of leadership practices: setting direction, developing people, designing or restructuring the workplace, and managing the instructional program. Actions associated with setting direction are seen to have the most significant effect while effects related to instructional management are least important (Hallinger, 2003, 2005; Leithwood, 2006).

   In Ontario, these leadership practices have been institutionalized through a school-level leadership framework (The Ontario Institute for Education Leadership, 2015) that articulates 112 desired behaviours grouped according to Leithwood's (2006, 2012) categories and research. Because this framework is a key instrument used to mobilize knowledge and expectations amongst Ontario communities of administrators, we elected to use it, along with its underlying research base, as part of the lens for our analysis of findings (a decision bolstered by the centrality of instructional leadership in the CSC project on FSL described earlier).

   Table 1 presents practices expressed in the framework. Italicized items represent additions to Leithwood's schema, including prescriptions for developing trusting, secure,

healthy, and productive relationships; connecting schools to their broader contexts; and distributing leadership. These add-ons can be linked to ministry priorities like the healthy and accepting schools agendas (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2015c), while also representing (self) critical changes to the instructional leadership paradigm in light of research on transformational leadership (e.g., Bass & Avolio, 1994; Marks & Printy, 2003; Sheppard, 1996), distributed and shared leadership (e.g., Sheppard & Dibbons, 2011; Printy, Marks, & Bowers, 2009), and teacher leadership (e.g., Mangin & Stoelinga, 2008; Neumerski, 2013). Table 1 does not include a category from the framework entitled "securing accountability" because other items encompass it (i.e., identifying goals, creating high expectations, monitoring progress).

**Table 1.** Instructional Leadership Practices Articulated in School-Level Leadership Framework for Principals in Ontario (The Ontario Institute for Leadership in Education, 2015)

| Setting directions | Building relationships / developing people | Developing the organization | Managing the instructional program |
|---|---|---|---|
| - Building a shared vision<br>- Identifying shared goals<br>- Creating high expectations<br>- *Communicating the vision and goals* | - Providing support and demonstrating consideration for individual staff<br>- Stimulating growth in the professional capacities of staff<br>- Modelling values and practices<br>- *Building trusting relationships*<br>- *Establishing productive working relationships with teacher federation* | - Building collaborative cultures and *distributing leadership*<br>- Structuring the organization to facilitate collaboration<br>- Building productive relationships<br>- *Connecting schools to the wider environment*<br>- *Maintaining a safe, healthy environment*<br>- *Allocating resources in support of vision and goals* | - Staffing the instructional program<br>- Providing instructional support<br>- Monitoring progress in student learning and school improvement<br>- Buffering staff from distractions |

*Italicized text reflects additions to Leithwood's (2006) construct of instructional leadership.

In what follows, we describe and analyze data from principals and teachers about their roles and experiences in implementing CF programming through the twin lenses of (a) the nature of principals' work and (b) their instructional leadership role. We do this to reveal if and how principals managed, in the middle of their complicated environments,

to manifest aspects of instructional leadership relative to CF and to shed light on the subtle forces that serve to marginalize or support CF.

# Methodology

We draw on empirical data collected as part of a larger study examining stakeholder perspectives on the implementation of pedagogical change in eight different CF school environments (see Arnott, 2012). The point of entry for the larger study was a new FSL instructional initiative being used in each CF context (i.e., AIM Language Learning, 2015). While specific features of AIM implementation are reported elsewhere (see Arnott, 2012), we concentrated on a subset of data extracted from the larger study that address the goals of the present research. These data were derived through semi-structured, individual interviews with eight principals and eight CF teachers from eight schools (henceforth referred to as principal–teacher pairings or pairings). In each pairing, both parties were asked about how they perceived the principal's role in FSL.

## Participants

Participants were recruited from eight elementary (Grades JK–8) schools from two Ontario school boards (i.e., Board A and Board B) (see Table 2 for board characteristics). One CF teacher and their principal were recruited from each of the eight schools, making eight principal–teacher pairings (see Table 3 for participant characteristics). For reporting purposes, we refer to each participant using the letter of the board in which they worked, a number associated with their school, and their role (e.g., teacher from school #2 in Board A = A2 teacher; principal from school #3 in Board B = B3 principal). Schools are referred to by the board and number (e.g., school #2 in Board A = A2 school or A2).

**Table 2.** Characteristics of Participating School Boards

|  | **Board A** | **Board B** |
|---|---|---|
| Size of board (km2) | 12,000 km2 | 9,000 km2 |
| Geographical description | Several large municipalities (45,000 people in largest); many rural areas | Mostly rural; one large municipality (30,000 people) |
| Approximate # of students (elementary and secondary) | 30,000 | 19,000 |
| Core French starting grade | Junior Kindergarten | Grade 4 |

**Table 3.** Characteristics of Participating Principals and Teachers

| | **BOARD A** | | | | **BOARD B** | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| *Principals* | **A1P** | **A2P** | **A3P** | **A4P** | **B1P** | **B2P** | **B3P** | **B4P** |
| Experience as principal | 10 yrs | 12 yrs | 15 yrs | 15 yrs | 10 yrs | 3 yrs | 3 yrs | 6 yrs |
| Experience at current school | 1 yr | 1 yr | 5 mths | 1 yr | 1 yr | 3 yrs | 3yrs | 6 yrs |
| CF teaching experience? | No | No | No | No | No | Yes | No | Yes |
| Grades taught to date | 1–8 | 1–8 | JK–8 | JK–8 | 1–3, 5–8 | 1–8 | 4–8 | 1–8 |
| *Teachers* | **A1T** | **A2T** | **A3T** | **A4T** | **B1T** | **B2T** | **B3T** | **B4T** |
| CF experience | 5 yrs | 4 yrs | 5 mths | 12 yrs | 17 yrs | 7 yrs | 1 yr | 20 yrs |
| CF grades being taught | 4–8 | SK–4 | SK–5 | 2, 4, 8 | 4–6 | 3–6, 8 | 4, 5, 8 | 4–6, 8 |
| Experience at current school | 1 yr | 3 yrs | 5 mths | 9 yrs | 2 yrs | 5 yrs | 5 mths | 15 yrs |

## Data Collection and Analysis

Findings were derived from the analysis of data collected from one interview with each principal and four interviews with each CF teacher. Interviews were conducted in English, audio-recorded, and transcribed. Interview design allowed for direct comparisons of principals' and teachers' perspectives on similar or mutually related questions posed to both parties. The data from these parts of the interviews were responsive to our research questions (Merriam, 2009); for example, principals were asked what role they played in CF implementation in their school, while CF teachers were asked about the role they saw their principals playing; similarly, principals were asked what they did to support CF teachers, while those teachers were asked about how they were supported.

During other parts of the interviews, principals and teachers also voluntarily expressed observations on aspects of leadership in FSL programming, instructional situations, and working relationships between principals, teachers, students, and other stakeholders. These data addressed our research questions and were included for analysis.

In terms of analysis, we approached the data in two stages and adopted a hybrid process of deductive and inductive coding and theme development (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). Stage one focused on the data that allowed for direct comparison of principal–teacher perspectives. We performed multiple close readings of each participant's interview transcript(s), coding segments of these data that related to the instructional leadership practices (see Table 1) and highlighting meaningful quotes for subsequent reporting. Then, as Miles, Huberman and Saldana (2014) recommend, we created a table to display a summary of these data, which enabled us to inductively code even further. First, we coded segments across the data set (e.g., student engagement, proactive leadership, discipline, and school culture), an exercise that led to the identification of the key issues and main themes that are presented in our findings and discussion. In stage two, we went back to other parts of the interview transcripts to code, extract, and summarize data (in the same table as stage one) that were also responsive to the study's questions. Following Merriam (2009), we then analyzed data within each principal–teacher pairing (as represented in each column) to (1) assess the presence or absence of instructional leadership practices, (2) identify points of convergence and divergence in perspectives, and (3) develop a sense of the nature of each principal's work and leadership in FSL. During this analysis, we returned to the transcripts to ensure our interpretations were properly contextualized (Patton, 2002). This procedure provided the basis for structuring our presentation of findings and generating an overview of the status of instructional leadership practices in principal–teacher pairings (see Table 4). Finally, we analyzed the data across the pairings, at which point four key themes emerged, which we identified to be strategies the principals used to lead and manage CF programming (see the "Discussion" section).

# Findings

We present the findings relative to the core practices of instructional leadership (as summarized in Table 1), with certain terms italicized to signal the connection of the

surrounding text to those practices. Where applicable, we present data from teachers on their perceptions of accounts offered by principals to illuminate points of convergence and divergence in how principals described their work and how it was experienced by teachers. In the "Discussion" section that follows, Table 4 condenses these findings to reveal the extent to which instructional leadership practices were evident and the degree of convergence or divergence in perspectives within principal–teacher pairings. Readers who desire an analytical foreshadowing of the findings are invited to review this table before reading this section.

## Setting Directions

Principals from two of the eight schools expressed visions for FSL. One reported, "I put great emphasis on the French program…it's a program that's necessary for our children to live in Canada" (A1P), and another claimed to keep French "as equally supported as other programs…and not just tucked away somewhere" (B4P). These principals contrasted their aspirations with those in other schools, where they saw CF being assigned a reduced status by being scheduled around the "planning time" for more important subjects (A1P) or by a "parent community [that] doesn't support it" (B4P). Principals from two other schools reported efforts to include CF students in school activities—for example, featuring French plays in assemblies so CF students could be "very proud" to do something "unique" (A3P) or having academic awards for French similar to those for English (B2P). In these four schools, there was evidence the CF teachers perceived their respective principals to be working with them to realize *shared ambitions* for FSL.

Three principals also indicated they had *expectations* for CF in terms of student learning. For example, B2P observed the implementation of AIM "required all of us to… look at French with a new attitude and to raise our expectations." Another said she encouraged teachers to "re-evaluate, adapt and improve" and reported being "astounded at the comfort level [and] level of French being taught" in the school (A3P). In another school, it was the CF teacher who observed the principal had "a very positive attitude [toward French] and I think the staff in turn has a positive attitude because that's the expectation" (B4T).

The other four pairings offered a varied picture as to how *direction setting* happens in CF. The B3 principal admitted, "I feel bad…you know we're so focused on

literacy and math and all these huge pushes from the ministry… [T]hey hold us to these goals and French is sometimes the forgotten cousin." The B3 teacher shed light on how directions were set:

> If there's not a steady stream of students to the office…if parents aren't knocking on the door asking what's going on in French class, if students aren't complaining, then principals are…happy with the French program.

This observation resonated with the B3 principal's self-described leadership, which was to "set the table" (e.g., provide a classroom and resources) and then "expect the teacher to do the rest." In the other three pairings, no explicit *direction setting* was evident, but it could be inferred that *expectations* stemmed from the actions of parents, students, and CF teachers. For example, the B1 principal observed FSL was "well supported in the community" so "student engagement" in CF was good; while the A4 principal noted that "the French teachers for the most part…do a good job…and parents see the results at home." In A2, the principal observed, "I've been…very fortunate because AIM was already up and running…when I came here, so it wasn't a matter of trying to convince people that it was important." But the A2 teacher contradicted this claim, observing "other staff mostly think AIM is silly and I feel like I'm…a maverick." In these three examples the principals' expectations for CF also seemed to centre more on student engagement and less on language learning than in the other schools. For example, in discussing the instructional initiative, the A4 principal observed being "more interested in student engagement as a result of the [new] method," and the B1 principal reported, "What I [saw was] kids more engaged." We return to this focus on engagement in the section below on managing instruction.

## Building Relationships and Developing People

Data related to *individual consideration* existed in seven pairings. At A1, A3, and B4, principals and teachers reported working together to ensure the CF program was visible and had the necessary instructional resources. A1P also worked with the CF teacher to "develop their own schedule as to what would be the most beneficial" so as not to relegate French to whatever periods a classroom would be open based on other teachers' planning time. At A3, the principal said she visited the CF class regularly, taking the

time to review teaching materials "to know what the expectation [was] before [walking into] the room." In other schools, B2P consulted the CF teacher on how better to include French in the school culture and supported that teacher (who was well-regarded in the district for serving as a mentor to other CF teachers) to continue her professional growth through participation in provincial conferences; while, at B3, the principal encouraged the CF teacher to put forward a proposal to the school council for additional resources and helped position the proposal for success.

In two other pairings, the teachers saw things quite differently from their principals. The A2 principal claimed, "I do what I can to encourage and promote and support our staff," but the A2 teacher observed, "Support within the school…there isn't any." B1P stated, "I trust that the requests the French teacher makes are appropriate," suggesting these requests were given individual consideration, but B1T signalled a lack of support: "The principal…can be a huge road block" while observing there had been "no money this year [for the instructional initiative]…which [was] very frustrating."

In terms of *staff growth*, there were five schools where principals made mention of training and professional collaborations for CF teachers. In three pairings, the findings indicated the teachers had access to both such opportunities—at A1, the principal claimed "all my teachers went for…any training that was offered [on the instructional initiative]" and made sure the CF teacher was on a relevant district-level committee. At B2, the principal supported the CF teacher in serving as a district-level mentor and trainer in a teacher induction program. The CF teacher at B3 reported having access to a community of CF teachers outside the school, implying the B3 principal left it up to the teachers' initiative to engage with colleagues. In the other two schools it appeared teachers did not have access to such opportunities. A2P said the teachers looked "very confident…like they know what they're doing" and was thus "just keeping in mind the need for people to receive training." The A4 teacher reported having received training under a previous "highly supportive" principal, but observed training was "not sustained locally" since the arrival of the current principal.

## Developing the Organization

In terms of establishing a *collaborative culture*, B2 stood out, with the principal opening up the school as a mentoring site for CF by providing days "for [the CF teacher] to

go and visit [mentee teachers] and have them visit here…to have some planning time together." In B3, the principal reported placing the two CF teachers in neighbouring classrooms to encourage them to "share materials and work closely together," a practice that contrasted with the situation at B1 where the CF teacher was isolated in a portable classroom.

Data related to *relationships with families* was reported in seven sites. Generally, the principals seemed to concentrate on keeping parents "happy" (a pattern emphasized earlier by the B3 teacher) with the underlying motive being to minimize complaints and conflicts. A3P described the success of AIM in particular, by noting, "We haven't had parents come in and ask to have their kids removed from French." Broadly speaking, the A4 principal reported not having to field many parent inquiries "because the French teachers for the most part…do a good job…and parents see the results." Evidence also emerged of principals looking at relationships with parents as a means to foster greater understanding of (and hence support for) FSL—for example, B2P reported encouraging the CF teacher to contribute to the school newsletter.

References to the *allocation of resources* were prominent in six schools. In four pairings (A1, B2, B4, B3), the data indicated principal support in the provision of resources, as confirmed by their CF teachers. For example, A1P noted, "I was able to get resources and bring them in…then I looked to be a pilot school so we could get the next unit," and A1T confirmed, "[The principal] got me all the resources…she [used] her contacts." At B3, the teacher confirmed working with the principal to find additional funds. In contrast, the situations were less positive in the other two pairings. A2T described her inability to acquire an instructional video, citing this as part of her claim that support for CF was lacking; and B1T observed there had been "no money this year" for two needed resources.

## Managing the Instructional Program

In all pairings, the data revealed the principals *supported* CF teachers through direct classroom observation. Some had intimate knowledge about what transpired in CF classes (e.g., A1, B2) and others had a cursory awareness (e.g., A2). The data also showed some of the principals working to create a stable infrastructure for instruction in response to their perceptions that CF is underprioritized for space and scheduling in schools. For

example, B3P did not "like French à la carte" and thus dedicated two CF classrooms in a central location of the school. In B4, the principal managed to commit a room for CF (the B4 teacher claimed this had "been great") but acknowledged "[the CF class] will be the first to go if we ever need it for a regular classroom." Some principals reported providing support in other ways, including coordinating field trips to French cultural events (B4), encouraging French in school activities (A3, A1, B4), and serving as a judge at a district-level French competition (B2).

In terms of *monitoring progress*, the data were limited to the reports principals offered about their classroom observations. Here, some saw students' "oral ability…being more advanced" (B2) or "pronunciation [being] better" (B3) since AIM was being used, while others talked about broader advancements in pedagogy, such as the use of differentiation in the teaching-learning process (B1, B2, B3).

Seven principals emphasized student engagement, making it an important theme. For example, A2P said, "I found it particularly encouraging to watch the wee ones in primary class…they really got into it," and A3P reported, "The kids in Grades 4 and 5 love French…there's never any balking at [it]." Some administrators connected their concern with engagement to the historical issue of disciplinary problems associated with students who become bored or frustrated in CF classes. Here, B3P was the most direct: "The joke [has] always been—have a good French teacher because [if you don't] that's where most of your behaviour issues come from. They'll come from French class…because kids do not want to be there."

These concerns about student engagement and discipline informed how principals practised their *buffering* role, with six indicating that strong CF teachers were the best buffer for the CF program (and for the principals themselves). As B2P noted, "Sometimes discipline issues are associated with Core French. We don't tend to have that very much…because the program is strong and the teacher is strong. It's a win-win for everybody."

# Discussion

We discuss these findings in two interrelated ways—first providing an overview of the status of instructional leadership practices across the pairings, and then describing four

strategies the principals used relative to CF. As this was an exploratory study, we also identify areas for future research.

## Instructional Leadership in CF: Points of Convergence and Divergence

The application to the findings of the prescriptive lens of the school-level leadership framework (Table 1) reveal variability across the principal–teacher pairings about whether and how instructional leadership manifested in CF contexts. Table 4 provides a condensed overview of the extent to which instructional leadership practices were evident and the degree of convergence/divergence between the principal–teacher pairings relative to each practice. A legend is provided that encapsulates our analytical approach.

Looking across the schools and pairings (i.e., columns), our analysis revealed three pairings (A1, B2, B4) where positive instructional leadership practices emerged in all core areas alongside convergence in principal–teacher responses with respect to those practices. In two pairings (A3, B3) there were indications of positive practice but less convergence of perspectives. In other pairings, divergent perspectives were reported by principals and teachers, with the latter indicating negative leadership practices.

Looking across the sites, the most popular instructional leadership practice employed was "managing the instructional program," albeit to differing degrees. According to Leithwood (2006), this practice has the least positive effect on instructional outcomes, especially if emphasis is on classroom inspection instead of providing a stable and supportive infrastructure for teaching and learning (e.g., through dedicated space and resources). Our findings indicated the former approach existed in seven cases and the latter in five.

**Table 4.** Overview of the Status of Instructional Leadership Practices in Principal–Teacher Pairings*

| Instructional Leadership Practices | BOARD A Schools | | | | BOARD B Schools | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | A1 | A2 | A3 | A4 | B1 | B2 | B3 | B4 |
| Setting directions | ✓ | ✗ | ✓ | ✗ | ✗ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| Building relationships | ✓ | ✗ | ✓ | ✗ | ✗ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| Developing organization | ✓ | ✗ | -- | -- | ✗ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| Managing instructional program | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |

*Legend: ✓ = evidence of some degree of positive leadership practice (larger font signifies convergence of principal–teacher perspectives and/or evidence of considerable positive practice); ✗ = some evidence of divergence of principal–teacher perspectives indicating some degree of negative leadership practice (larger font signifies divergence of principal–teacher perspectives and/or evidence of considerable negative practice); -- = no data exists.

## FSL Instructional Leadership Strategies

Four themes emerged, which we identified to be key micro-level strategies the principals used relative to their CF programs and teachers. Research on whether such strategies are evident in rural and urban school boards, as well as other provinces, is certainly warranted, as macro-level constraints and affordances (e.g., program requirements, funding for FSL) vary across these contexts.

***Strategy 1: Advance a vision for CF.*** The principals' explicit or default visions for CF seemed to centre on two themes: enhanced status of CF and problem containment.

Some principals envisioned placing CF on more solid footing, recognizing the tendency for CF and the French language to have a tenuous status despite their mandatory place in the curriculum and in Canada. The concrete practices used (e.g., French in school assemblies, on bulletin boards, in newsletters) were similar to those documented by Calman (1988) more than two decades ago, suggesting little has changed. It seems timely for current principals to consider different ways of realizing a proactive vision, including recent suggestions to promote school-wide acknowledgment of their FSL teachers as "literacy specialists," or participate in their professional learning, regardless of whether they have an FSL background (CSC, 2014b). Future research on the impact of these and other types of low-cost initiatives would help to shed light on their potential to reduce the constant struggle to make French more prominent in the curriculum and school culture.

Some of the principals who indicated a vision for CF, as well as several others who did not, appeared to hold a baseline view of success as the containment of problems typically associated with CF, in particular student disengagement and discipline issues (see Lapkin et al., 2009). The B3 principal and teacher laid bare the administrative logic behind this focus; that is, that engaged students caused fewer discipline problems, making life less difficult for principals. To be fair, the B3 principal, along with some of the others, also discerned a pedagogic rationale for focusing on engagement and sought to give CF teachers a "leg up" to improve language learning (e.g., B3P allocated dedicated class-rooms to CF, A1P made CF a priority in the class schedule, B2P opened up the school for CF teacher collaboration). Nonetheless, the administrative logic of engagement trumped pedagogic rationales.

The containment focus was not so much on specific issues or students as it was on warding off the potential spread of disciplinary issues, which could cause cascading problems. Despite their concerns, none of the principals or teachers reported disengage-ment and discipline to be actual problems in CF classes. Indeed, the absence of discipline issues was seen to be an important indicator of success. This tendency was understood by B3P to be a realistic (if disappointing) compromise in light of system-level pressures to commit time and energy to higher profile subjects. Some teachers maintained a defensive stance toward CF represented a way for principals to manage their workloads, accepting this as a pragmatic administrative attitude (e.g., B3T said, "You know what? I'm OK with that") or signalling it fell short of expectations. While principals in Calman's (1988) study reported similar pressure to focus on other subjects, no study has been conducted to date on the dynamics of proactive and defensive leadership stances toward CF. Future research could focus on how, through these stances, principals in other provinces mediate local and systemic pressures and constraints relative to curricular programming, and how this affects CF.

***Strategy 2: Position CF teachers as the first line of defense.*** Similar to participat-ing administrators in Calman (1988), principals in our study placed a premium on having competent CF teachers at their schools, with most indicating gratitude (even relief) to have such teachers on staff. Half of the principals took a positive, proactive stance toward their teachers by positioning and supporting them in their efforts to advance CF in and beyond their schools; but even in these pairings there was a tendency among principals

to position CF teachers as the first line of defense against undesirable developments, a strategy linked to underlying concerns about containing known (and possible) problems related to CF. Many of the teachers seemed to be aware this was how they were being positioned, with some accepting it, some using it as a bargaining chip (e.g., to secure resources or gain autonomy), and some embracing it as an opportunity to expand their professional capacity and influence. Further research on CF teacher perspectives in this regard would enhance understandings about the extent to which principals influence the development of CF teachers' professional identities and strategies.

*Strategy 3: Put CF teachers in charge of instructional matters.* In most pairings the principals entrusted CF teachers to do their jobs and appeared to believe in the value of teacher agency (Arnott, 2011), with one principal (B2) clearly encouraging teacher leadership (Neumerski, 2013). These arrangements resemble Sheppard and Dibbons's (2011) ideas about distributed instructional leadership; however, two principals' approaches only appeared to include direct classroom observation, which represents a narrow approach to instructional leadership (Sheppard & Dibbons, 2011) and according to Leithwood (2006) has the smallest effect on instructional improvement among the range of possible practices.

*Strategy 4: Exercise influence on CF through resource allocation.* The allocation of resources—budgets (instructional materials), opportunities (professional development), time (scheduling), and space (classrooms)—were sufficient to participants in most sites. In A2 and B1, however, limited resources were a source of dissatisfaction for the teachers. In these pairings, principals exhibited laissez-faire stances, with one coasting on the groundwork laid by a previous administrator and the other counting on existing support in the parent community. These administrators had also apparently not worked to set direction, which likely adversely affected resource allocation because there was no basis for making decisions.

Previous studies identified a lack of priority in scheduling and classroom space as being central to discontent among CF teachers (Lapkin et al., 2006). Our findings revealed some principals (B2, B3, B4) attempting to counteract such problems; however, they faced ongoing school- and system-level constraints in doing so. The CSC (2014a, 2014b) guidance for principals in leading FSL programs points out specific strategies for

allocating opportunities, time and space to FSL and CF programming. Future research could focus on understanding the benefits of these resource allocation avenues and how principals can overcome barriers and constraints to them.

# Conclusion

Throughout this exploratory study we have asked ourselves: In what ways do the data and our interpretations illuminate the dynamics and continuing presence of the paradox of CF being a mandatory but marginalized program? Our findings and discussion revealed some familiar notions about this paradox while emphasizing an under-researched point of view—that of principals. The perspectives documented here echo sentiments from the limited number of studies previously conducted (see Lapkin et al., 2009) in which participants indicated how CF requires constant preservation efforts to avoid becoming what B3P in our study called a "forgotten cousin." Findings also revealed concerns among administrators and teachers that CF programs tend to develop an underlying culture of disengagement, which demands a focus on managing the threat of disciplinary and reputational problems. Although our data did not reveal these to be actual problems in participating schools, they indicated the visions and strategies principals developed toward CF were tied to their concerns about the ever-present threat. Some (even those with positive goals for CF) assumed defensive leadership postures for administrative reasons. Although the principals (and teachers) believed this to be a practical and necessary approach, some also saw it as insufficient for realizing larger ambitions for CF. If such approaches observed here are representative of those in other schools, boards, or provinces, then practices emphasizing problem containment may be contributing to the reproduction of CF marginalization and restricting principals from having a more proactive leadership stance toward it. Future research examining leadership practices across different provinces would certainly help to broaden our understanding in this respect.

The overall tenor of the findings presented here is reminiscent of research from the 1980s (Calman, 1988), suggesting little progress has been made in altering the dynamics of this paradox in CF in Ontario. On a more positive note, the struggle to improve CF programming and the status of French is still on the agenda, as revealed through the recent CSC initiatives. It appears to be high time to try something new. The CSC

documents, coupled with some of the principals' practices presented here, offer sources of inspiration for school leaders who may wish to move from laissez-faire or defensive postures to proactive stances that could influence movement from "what is" to "what could be."

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