

## SECTION III – FOUNDATIONS OF THE FRENCH IMMERSION PROGRAM

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### 3.1 – INTRODUCTION

The French Immersion Program is, first and foremost, a language program. It prepares students to be proficient in Canada’s two official languages—French and English—to achieve academic success and to cultivate their plurilingual identity. The Program is based on the philosophy of learning language through content in authentic and meaningful academic, cultural, and social situations. The unique character of the Program derives from the fact that the French language is both the medium and the object of instruction. The development of students’ French language competencies is therefore crucial to their engagement, motivation, and success.

Given that the vision of the Program in Manitoba is to ensure that students **become proud, confident, engaged, plurilingual global citizens**, educators must value and encourage students’ French immersion experience by focusing on their pathway to learning and using the French language and living in French.

It is imperative to reflect constantly about the successful implementation and the evolution of the French Immersion Program by asking the following questions:

- Do all students achieve a high level of linguistic competency in both French and English?
- Are students proud of their linguistic competencies? Do they have confidence in their ability to speak French in various settings?
- Do all students achieve academic success? Are they supported appropriately?
- Are students aware of their own cultural identity? Are they open to other languages and cultures? Do they have the confidence and interest to participate in activities in the Francophone community, here and elsewhere?
- Do students value the learning of languages? Do they see the relevance of French in their lives?

To support students effectively in their French immersion experience, the following subsections describe how the Program promotes students’ French language acquisition, cognitive growth and personal growth.

### 3.2 – THE FRENCH IMMERSION PROGRAM PROMOTES STUDENTS’ FRENCH LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

French language acquisition is at the heart of the French Immersion Program and must be at the forefront of the minds of educators, students, and parents. French immersion educators therefore focus on French language learning and oral proficiency throughout the day and in all subject areas.

Educators and students must be aware that speaking is a fundamental component of the language learning process, and that the development of oral skills maximizes learning and the effective use of French. French language learning therefore becomes as much a priority as the learning of the subject matter. For all subjects taught in French, students need to have equal opportunities to speak, listen, read, and write in order to develop their language proficiency and confidence.

In addition to learning curricular concepts, students need continuous opportunities to speak French and hear themselves and others using the French language proficiently. To this end:

- Students need to learn and use subject-specific and social vocabulary and expressions orally.
- Students need to interact orally and aurally with various types of texts in order to improve their understanding of phonetics, pronunciation, and the rhythm and intonation of the French language.
- Students need to understand that writing is a silent verbal practice that is connected to listening and speaking. When students write in French, they need to hear themselves think in French, as this silent practice of writing is often enhanced by a verbal one. Speaking aloud about what has been written is a way of clarifying thinking as well as finding the right ways to put thoughts into words. By discussing, reflecting on, and editing what they have written, students consolidate the language skills they are acquiring with more accuracy.

Students’ French language acquisition can be further supported by exposing them to other languages, encouraging them to learn additional languages, and validating the languages they already speak. It is important to understand that language learning does not happen in isolation; all language learning is, rather, interdependent and interconnected. Students’ knowledge and experiences related to the languages they know influence each other and contribute to the development of a larger language repertoire.

### 3.2.1 – FRENCH LANGUAGE ACQUISITION IN THE CLASSROOM

French immersion practices integrate language instruction and content-area instruction. Students **learn** the French language, they **learn** about the French language, and they **learn** through the French language.

- **Learning the language** enables students to listen, speak, read, and write in French.
- Students **learn about the language** when they study French as content unto itself.
- Students **learn through language** when they use French in every subject area to solve problems, understand concepts and create and share knowledge.

These three notions are developed simultaneously and interactively. As such, French immersion students are given opportunities to use the French language in meaningful and authentic learning situations for a variety of purposes. The more students develop their language competencies in the classroom setting, the more they develop greater understanding of the content. Consequently, every teacher in the French Immersion Program is a teacher of language with the dual task of:

- teaching subjects in the target language
- ensuring ongoing learning and sustained use of French in the classroom

### 3.2.2 – FRENCH LANGUAGE ACQUISITION IN THE SCHOOL COMMUNITY

Since most French immersion students in Manitoba have little or no contact with the French language outside of the school environment, experiences that require communication in French are of the utmost importance and should be maximized throughout the school setting.

Therefore, students need to participate in multiple types of interactions in French, inside and outside the classroom, which promote significant, relevant, and engaging use of the language. These opportunities are vital in creating a space where students are invited to play, socialize, think, and create in French. These ongoing interactions with the target language enable students to develop fluency and accuracy, foster their linguistic confidence and independence, and increase their pleasure in learning French.

### 3.3 – THE FRENCH IMMERSION PROGRAM PROMOTES STUDENTS' COGNITIVE GROWTH

Research has shown that learning another language not only exercises the brain to perform more effectively, but it provides a mental consciousness and flexibility that builds intellectual character (Forget; Light Shields). Knowing more than one language changes the way people use their first language and even the way they think. They do not merely attach another language to their repertoire; they are unique plurilingual individuals who build a communicative competence to which all knowledge and experience of language contribute, and in which languages interrelate and interact (Cook; Council of Europe).

#### 3.3.1 – FRENCH LANGUAGE AND LINGUISTIC FLEXIBILITY

Users of two or more languages think flexibly, are more aware of language in general, and have a more open attitude towards other cultures (Cook; Council of Europe). People learning another language tend to compare it to their first language and other learned languages. Competency in a first language has a positive effect on the acquisition of a second language, while competency in a second language has a positive effect on the acquisition of a first language. The two languages interact and this phenomenon accounts for the fact that first language development is not disadvantaged and, in fact, enhances mastery of both languages. Plurilingualism allows a language to be learned in relation to another, where one language draws on the other(s). As a result, plurilingual students and teachers explore and share the differences and similarities in which various languages express ideas. Focusing on the connections between language and culture is therefore intrinsic and fundamental to the study of languages.

### 3.4 – THE FRENCH IMMERSION PROGRAM PROMOTES STUDENTS' PERSONAL GROWTH

According to John Ralston Saul, students who speak two languages have two ways of thinking, two ways of perceiving the world, and two ways of expressing ideas. Thus, they see things differently. Because they have another perspective on life, they can easily imagine that other languages exist and that there are other ways to view and interact with the world. This allows them to become aware of their own cultural identity and to open themselves up to other languages and cultures.

Students' sense of identity and self-esteem are enhanced as they become **proud, engaged, global citizens**. This added value is complex, but life-changing. Students therefore need to become conscious of their choice to speak and to live in two or more languages. Their personal growth as plurilingual learners and users needs to be recognized and celebrated in order for them to feel validated for having chosen this path (Girouard and Drzystek).

It is therefore incumbent on educators to have students reflect and talk about their language learning experiences by having them share their emotions, their concerns, and their successes. Students need to be commended and encouraged to go further by taking responsibility for their language learning and for living in both (or all) languages they have learned.

### 3.4.1 – FRENCH LANGUAGE, CULTURE, AND IDENTITY

For French immersion students, school is not just a place where they spend time and learn but also a place where they become part of a unique French immersion cultural and linguistic community. It is an environment where they feel valued in their culture of origin, as well as in their emerging linguistic and cultural identity. This plurilingual identity is influenced by a shared culture within their school community. Students, in a linguistically rich environment, co-construct their identity through dynamic and varied social, cultural, and academic interactions.

In order for students to build their identity, they must have multiple opportunities to interact with Francophone communities so that they become familiar with Francophone cultural references: local, national, and international. The more students understand these references, the more they develop a connection with the language and culture and a greater sense of belonging to the Francophone community. This also allows students to broaden their cultural perspectives, both as a form of personal enrichment and as a means of better understanding themselves and others. Language learning and building a plurilingual identity go hand in hand when cultural references are valued and integrated in the school community.

Thus, the role of educators as models within the school community becomes central as they share their own engagement with French language and Francophone cultures and share their identity as plurilingual learners or speakers. As educators share their personal pathway of living and using French in various contexts, they also guide students to find their own pathway of living and using French in their own lives.