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'Mothers of immersion' recall battle for bilingual education



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When three mothers in St-Lambert started Canada's first French immersion program in a public school, they never dreamed it would transform education across the country.

"We never set out to make history. We just wanted to make sure our kids knew French," said Murielle Parkes, who co-founded the "language bath" system with neighbours Olga Melikoff and Valerie Neale at Margaret Pendlebury Elementary School in 1965-66.

The concept soon spread, and by the 1980s enrolment in French immersion programs was soaring across Canada.

In 2014-15, 409,893 students were enrolled in French immersion nationwide, up 4.5 per cent from the previous year, according to Statistics Canada.

On Friday, Parkes, 79, and Melikoff, 89, were on hand at a conference at Vanier College on the future of French immersion, organized by Canadian Parents for French, a volunteer network that promotes French instruction.

While the founders did not speak at the conference, they sat at a table in the lobby during the lunch break to share their memories and show off a fat binder of documents and photos chronicling their struggle for bilingual education.

It's a sore point with "the mothers of immersion," as the trio have been dubbed, that the late McGill University psychologist Wallace Lambert has often been credited with inventing French immersion.

According to Parkes and Melikoff, when the mothers first sought Lambert's support for the project in 1964, he was skeptical and advised them to send their children to French school. (Melikoff had actually sent her two older sons to French school, but the local French public school then refused to admit any more anglophone children, saying they held the others back.)

Lambert got involved only in 1966, once the first kindergarten class was up and running, Melikoff and Parkes recounted in an interview.

However, there is no doubt that Lambert's testing, which established that children in immersion score higher for verbal skills in both French and English than those in traditional programs, was key to its success.

Parkes, whose five children are now 47 to 58 years old, said what motivated the mothers was that French instruction at the time was woefully inadequate.

"I came from Ontario, so my French was pathetic," she recalled. "Partly it's because I didn't want my kids to be like me."



"We never set out to make history," says Murielle Parkes, one of three women who spearheaded a push for the immersion system in 1965. "We just wanted to make sure our kids knew French." Parkes and fellow co-founder Olga Melikoff attended a conference Friday at Vanier College on the future of French immersion. ALLEN MCINNIS / MONTREAL GAZETTE

Half a century after it all started, immersion has come under fire for making public education more elitist by siphoning off stronger students, while weaker ones and those with learning disabilities are relegated to the English stream.

It has also been criticized for failing to produce perfectly bilingual graduates.

But the fact remains that millions of young Canadians have been exposed to French language and culture through immersion programs.

"It revolutionized education, not only in Quebec but across the country," said Dan Lamoureux, chairperson of the Riverside School Board on the South Shore.

"We were pioneers in that," added Lamoureux, whose 31-year-old son is a French-immersion teacher in Calgary.

Speaker after speaker at the daylong Vanier conference emphasized that enrolling a child in an immersion program is not enough.

Without speaking French in everyday situations, most children will not achieve the desired proficiency, they said.

"There has to be a commitment by the community at large and parents to make the program better," Lamoureux said.

"Now it requires tweaking to make it more responsive to the needs of today."

For example, as teachers retire, schools are making sure new hires are perfectly fluent in French, he said.

Paule Langevin, project director of the Community Learning Centre Initiative, which fosters the role of Quebec's English schools as community hubs, warned that unless students learn French naturally, "by being immersed in a cultural environment, they will never be fully bilingual."

Initiatives promoting that goal include sports teams and choirs made up of both francophone and anglophone students; activities that bring together children and seniors; and exchanges between French and English schools, she said.

Caroline Erdos, a speech-language pathologist at the Montreal Children's Hospital, said children with learning disabilities are just as capable of handling immersion as other students.

"We have to provide the support in the language the child is learning and not delay the services for the child who has needs," she said.

Benoît Côté, an educational psychologist at the Université de Sherbrooke, gave a presentation on Option-études Châteauguay, a program founded in 2007 that brings together students from a French and English school for Secondary 1 and 2.

With 30 children per grade — half anglophone and half francophone— the program builds strong bonds without members of either group losing their cultural identity, he said.

"The best protection against intolerance is to have friends in the other group," Côté said.

David D'Aoust, chairperson of the New Frontiers School Board, said the program has eased language tension between students at Howard S. Billings High School and École Gabrielle-Roy in Châteauguay.

"It built ties between francophones and anglophones. It made friendships that are everlasting," he said.

"Parents want it. Students want to be there."

Immersion "is just a minimum," said Ardeth Neale, 54, the daughter of late co-founder Valerie Neale. She attended the conference with Parkes and Melikoff.

"I really am a product of this," said Neale, who attended a French CEGEP and taught English as a second language. She is now studying translation at Concordia University.

"You cannot have an intercultural understanding without speaking the language," she said. "I wouldn't be who I am."

Melikoff said the enduring popularity of immersion is a vindication for years of hard work.