

CASLT's FSL Teacher Education Project:

Highlights, Gaps, Recommendations, and Next Steps

In 2020, CASLT launched a pan-Canadian research project to identify ways to better equip new FSL teachers for success. The goal was to document and describe current realities, while validating the perspectives and efforts of new FSL teachers, School District representatives, and Faculty of Education (FOE) representatives. In the context of the ongoing FSL teacher shortage, the project asked: What do participants identify as strengths, challenges, and opportunities regarding FSL teacher education, practice, and professional learning in the early years after transitioning to the field?

Methodology

Methods and tools gathered information from three sources: 1) scans of all 44 Canadian FOE websites that offer FSL, and all provincial/territorial FSL teacher certification websites; 2) an online survey; and 3) focus groups.

Survey analysis identified three top-of-mind dimensions of FSL initial teacher education (ITE) and professional learning: 1) language development and support; 2) pedagogical knowledge and skills; and 3) mentorship. Focus group discussions centred on courses of action (i.e., what individuals or institutions were doing to address these issues, obstacles they were encountering, etc.) and other possible solutions that individuals/institutions were contemplating or struggling to implement regarding these three dimensions.

Findings

Retention

Undoubtedly, there is a collective concern about retention spanning the entire teacher education timeline (not just after graduation). 56% of participating teachers were considering leaving.

Systemic Challenges: The Avalanche

All participants expressed concern about the negative impacts of a system-level FSL culture of deficit thinking and marginalization on FSL teacher candidates in FOEs and in schools. The combination of these issues is creating problematic realities for FSL teacher education. Taken together, these issues create what we call *the avalanche*.

Central to the avalanche are issues that **push** (i.e., drive teachers to leave FSL/the profession) or **pull** (i.e., encourage teachers to stay).

Push Factors

- Insufficient courses in FSL initial teacher education (ITE) programs to succeed in the practicum and/or enter the field
- Feeling unprepared to answer pedagogical questions during the teaching interviews
- A lack of accessible professional learning in their schools or local regions

Strengths

Despite the ever-present avalanche, participants were eager to share examples of what they are accomplishing as individuals and micro-communities. Interestingly, strengths were not always system-level; instead, they were often local, grassroots initiatives (typically initiated by FSL teachers, or by individuals within different institutions). Key examples included the following:






- FOEs and Districts making efforts to reinforce language development as an ongoing, lifelong endeavour have the strongest potential for improving recruitment and retention of FSL teachers.
- Participating FSL teachers identified informal mentorships and collegial networks as most successful in their experience (e.g., “wrap-around support” for beginning FSL teachers). Informal opportunities for speaking French, sharing resources, partnerships, answering questions, etc. were more powerful than formalized mentorship initiatives put in place by FOEs and Districts.
- The practicum becomes a clear strength when the teacher candidate is paired with a mentor teacher who is a “good match.” When the supervising teacher is motivated, skilled, and engaged — and a solid relationship is built with the pre-service teacher — the placement can have a lasting positive impact.

Gaps

The research identifies five specific gaps in the preparation and ongoing professional learning of FSL teachers in Canada and offers recommendations in the form of questions to consider. These recommendations are intended to provoke reflection before action. We strongly encourage consulting the full report for a more complete sequence of sample questions as well as an explanation of our rationale for this approach.

Pull Factors

- ← Identifying more reasons that encouraged them to choose a career as an FSL teacher
- ← Being an elementary teacher (compared to middle- or high-school colleagues)
- ← Participating in a larger number of professional organizations

| Gap | Description | Recommendations (Questions to Consider) |
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| <p>GAP #1 Deficit vs. Development Perspectives</p>  | <p>A pervasive focus on what FSL teachers “cannot do” at every stage in their career dominated most conversations. This contrasts with perspectives that prioritize the supports and opportunities teachers need to continue to develop.</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How do I understand the idea of “being proficient” in French? • To what extent is a “development orientation” to FSL teacher language proficiency present in my work context? • How is FSL teachers’ subject and linguistic expertise similar to/different from that of teachers of other disciplines? |
| <p>GAP #2 Time and Access</p>  | <p>Calls for “more” opportunities are not without their own complications. Having access to options is a necessity, but so is the time and support required to develop, organize, run, and even attend such initiatives.</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What do I currently dedicate the most time to in support of FSL teacher professional learning? • What FSL resources/professional learning opportunities are currently accessible in my work context? Does this match my preferences/needs? • With the time and access that I have at my disposal, what could I do differently to maximize FSL professional learning relative to my expressed needs? What would I want to do if I had more time/access allocated to FSL? |
| <p>GAP #3 Resources: Material and Human</p>  | <p>A lack of material resources (e.g., funding, supplies, lesson plans, books) is a well-known and substantial issue. In addition, a lack of qualified people in FSL positions throughout the system (teachers, substitutes, coaches, instructors, principals, etc.) continues to hamper progress.</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What human resources do I find most useful in my role? • What are the most pressing resource gaps (material and/or human) in my FSL context? • How do I draw upon material and human resources and supports from professional organizations? |
| <p>GAP #4 Teaching as an Individual vs. Relational Process</p>  | <p>Several teachers compared FSL teaching to being on “an island.” Teachers valued the relational side of the profession to deal with this isolation. By seeing FSL teaching as a relational process and profession, participants hoped that numerous issues in the field can be improved.</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In what way(s) are collaboration and community building promoted in FSL in my work context? • Is feedback provided to FSL teachers in my context? How often? By whom? What skills does the feedback target (e.g., linguistic? pedagogical?) • Does the mentor pairing process privilege an expert-novice approach? What about in-school pairings? How are FSL teachers supported in mentoring each other? • What barriers do I face to fostering a community-based orientation to FSL teacher professional learning in my work context? |
| <p>GAP #5 Taking Responsibility: From Individual to Shared</p>  | <p>Rather than continuing to divide responsibility for FSL teacher preparation into discrete aspects, a collective responsibility requires coordinated efforts that all FSL stakeholders must bear.</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To what extent do I feel comfortable with furthering the status quo in FSL (i.e., seeing the issues described in this report as being a “fixed reality” for FSL ; “That’s the way FSL has always been done”)? • Am I aware of the barriers others face regarding filling these gaps? If so, what do I do to help? If not, why not? • How open am I to participating in collaborative examination of how each of the gaps described in this report are manifested in different stakeholder contexts, including my own work context? |

The FSL Teacher Education project was carried out by a consortium of research experts from three Canadian Faculties of Education: Stephanie Arnott and Mimi Masson of the University of Ottawa (Central); Karla Culligan, Joseph Dicks, Paula Kristmanson, Josée Le Bouthillier, and Lisa Michaud of the University of New Brunswick (Eastern); and Valia Spiliotopoulos and Meike Wernicke of the University of British Columbia (Western). We would also like to acknowledge the contributions of all graduate students to the collection, analysis, drafting, and overall project management that made the successful completion of this project possible. They are listed here in alphabetical order: Amanda Battistuzzi, Diana Burchell, Lisa Michaud, Liza Navarro, Robyn Ouimet, and Cam Smith.