



# Creating equitable and inclusive French immersion programs for newcomer students

Stephen Davis, PhD  
University of Regina  
November 14, 2025



A scenic landscape photograph of a turquoise lake reflecting snow-capped mountains and a dense forest of evergreen trees. The text is overlaid on the upper portion of the image.

**Treaty 7 Land Acknowledgement: Territories of the Blackfoot Confederacy, the Tsuut'ina First Nation, the Stoney Nakoda, and home of the Métis Nation of Alberta**



# Key terms

- ***Multilingual learners*** include all students who speak multiple languages and language varieties in Canada. While terms like *English language learners* highlight the supposed deficiencies of such learners, *multilingual learners* is a strengths-based term that emphasizes students' diverse linguistic repertoires and resources.
- ***Newcomer students*** include all students who migrated to Canada as immigrants or as refugees.
- ***Refugees*** have been forced to flee their home countries because of persecution, war, or violence. Refugees have a well-founded fear of persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality, political opinion, or membership in a social group (UNHCR, 2001).
- ***Refugee-background students*** include all students with refugee experiences. This term is used to acknowledge that refugee experiences represent only part of the identities of such students.



# Overview of workshop

**1. Newcomer students in French immersion programs**

**2. Refugee-background students in French immersion programs**

**3. Creating equitable French immersion programs**





## 1. Newcomer students in French immersion programs

**Policy**

**Motivation**

**Language learning**

**Perspectives**



# Policy

- **Language education policies ensure access to education one of Canada's official languages, but multilingual learners do not always have access to bilingual programs (Galiev, 2013; Mady, 2007; Mady & Black, 2012).**
- **School divisions rarely have policies to include newcomer students in French immersion programs (Kunnas, 2019, 2024; Sinay, 2010; Sinay et al., 2018).**

## French is mandatory

- Ontario
- Quebec
- Prince Edward Island
- New Brunswick
- Nova Scotia
- Newfoundland-and-Labrador

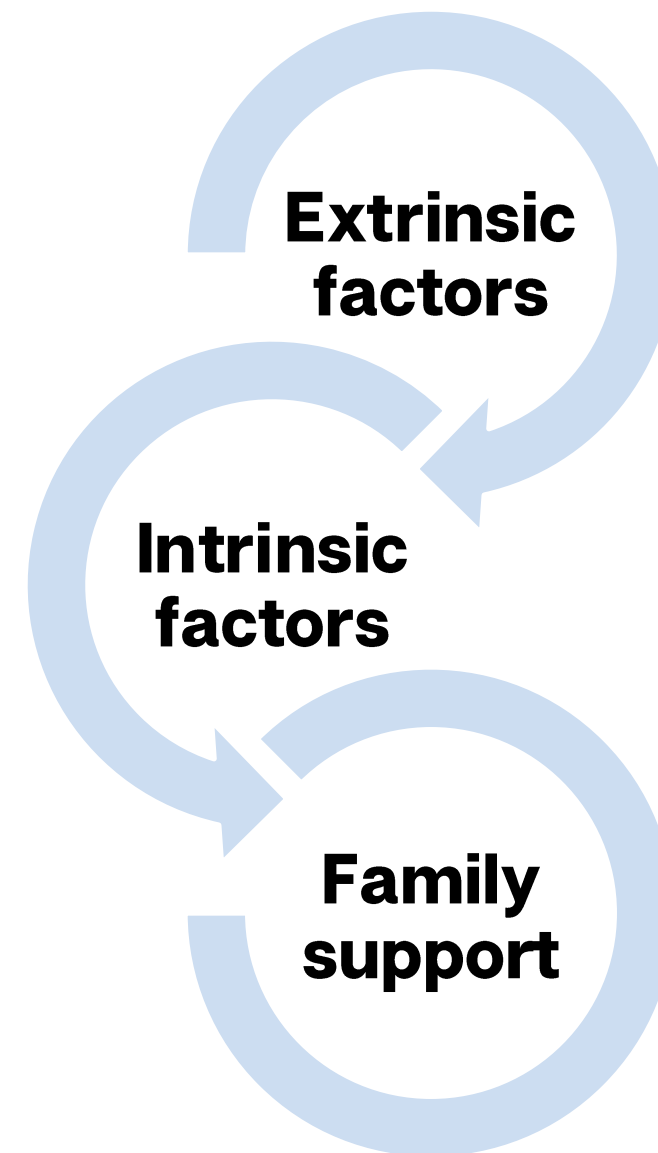
## French is optional

- British Columbia
- Alberta
- Saskatchewan
- Manitoba
- Yukon
- Northwest Territories
- Nunavut



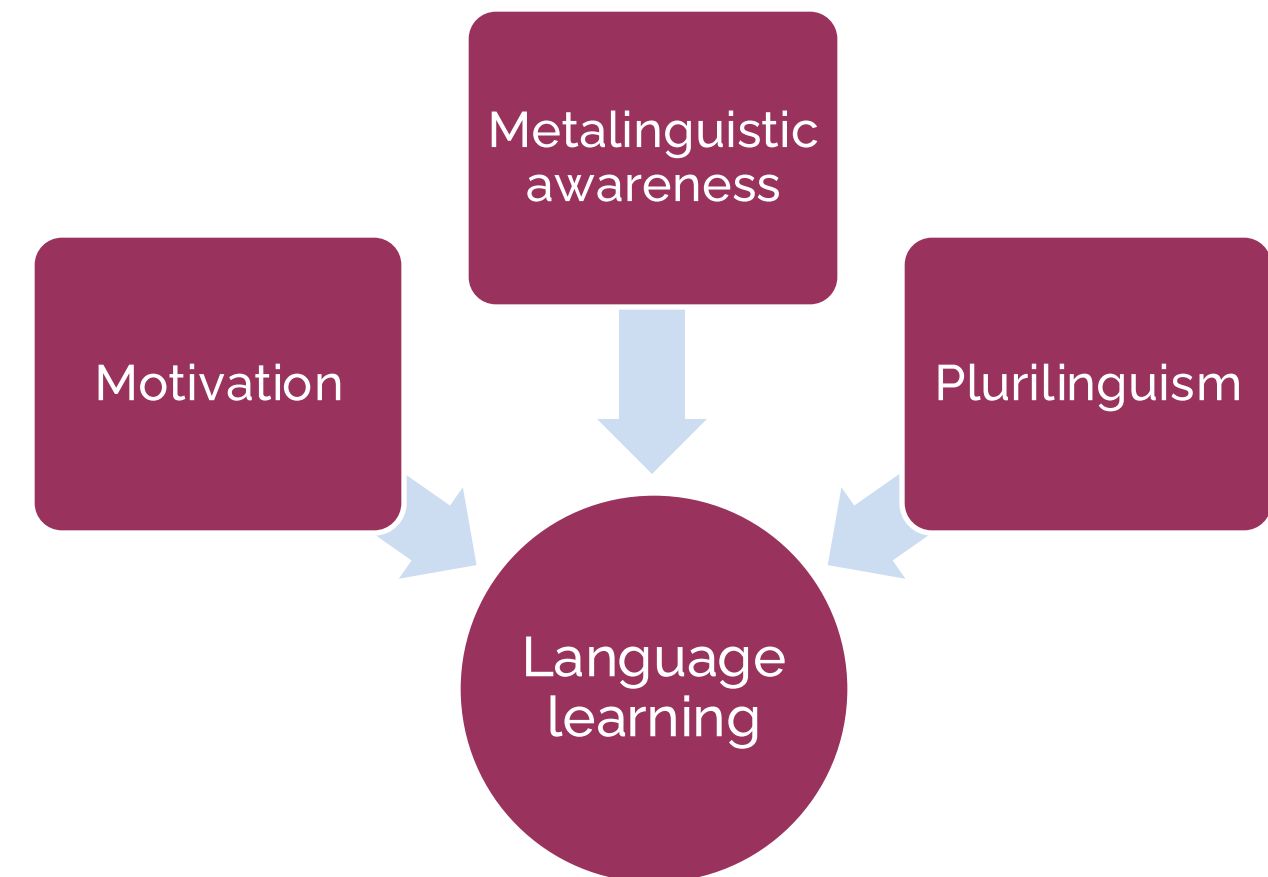
# Motivation

- **Newcomer families are often highly motivated to learn both French and English in Canada because they believe that official-language bilingualism will lead to opportunities in the future and because many newcomer families consider French-English bilingualism an essential element of Canadian identity (Dagenais & Berron, 2001; Dagenais & Jacquet, 2000; Davis et al., 2019, 2021).**



# Language learning

- **Newcomer, multilingual learners often develop stronger English proficiency in French immersion than their counterparts in regular English programs (Carr, 2007).**
- **Newcomer, multilingual learners in French immersion often develop stronger language skills than Canadian-born, English-speaking students (Bourgoin & Dicks, 2019; Mady, 2015; Knouzi & Mady, 2017).**





# Perspectives

- **French immersion educators and teacher candidates consider student diversity one of their greatest challenges (Mady & Arnett, 2016).**
- **Multilingual learners are often excluded from French immersion programs across Canada on the basis of low English language proficiency (Bourgoin, 2019; Davis, 2019; Davis et al., 2019, 2021; Mady & Masson, 2018; Roy, 2015).**





## 2. Refugee-background students in French immersion programs

**Research  
questions**

**Methodology and  
participants**

**Findings**

**Discussion**





# Refugee-background students in French immersion programs: Exploring the experiences, perspectives, and ideologies of educators across the Canadian Prairies (2024)

**Stephen Davis, PhD**

**Supervisor: Dr. Andrea Sterzuk**

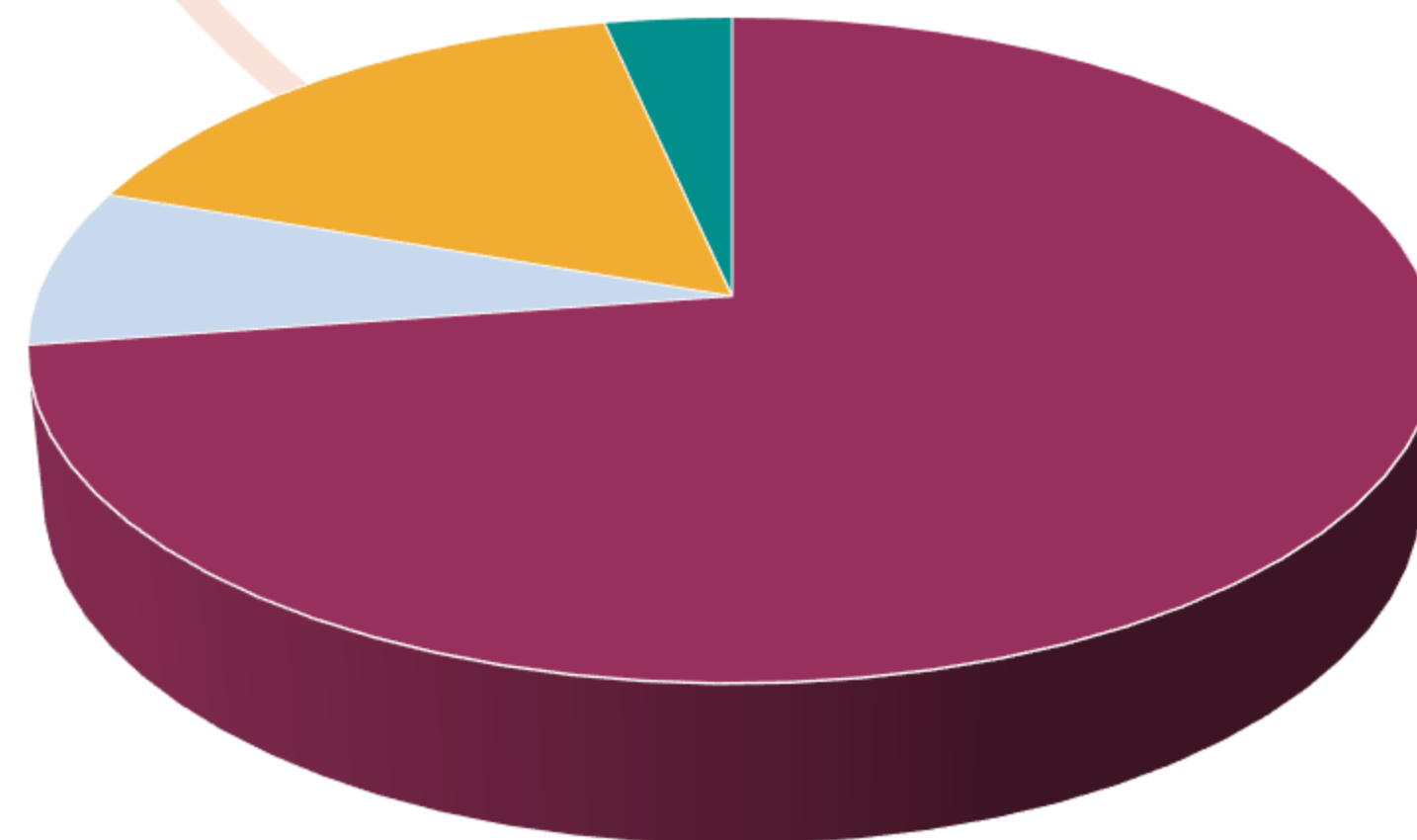
**Faculty of Education, University of Regina**

**What are the perspectives and ideologies of educators  
with respect to refugee-background students in French  
immersion programs across the Canadian Prairies?**

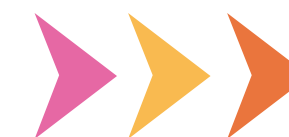


# Methodology and participants

- The present exploratory study used a mixed-methods research approach to examine the perspectives and ideologies of French immersion educators.
- Eight school divisions across the Canadian Prairies participated in this research, including four in Saskatchewan, two in Manitoba, and two in Alberta.
- The bilingual, online survey was completed by 126 educators across the Canadian Prairies, including 59 in Saskatchewan, 42 in Manitoba, and 25 in Alberta.
- Additionally, 40 of the above educators also participated in semi-structured interviews, including 26 in Saskatchewan, 10 in Manitoba, and four in Alberta.



- Elementary teachers (85)
- Secondary teachers (9)
- Principals (19)
- Central office staff (4)





# Overview of findings

**Diversity**

**Suitability**

**Language  
learning**

**Challenges**

**Inclusion**

**Exclusion**

**Policy**

**Resources**





# Diversity

**In my experience – I worked in dual-track schools in both circumstances – and it has seemed like the diversity of French programming is much less than that of the diversity of the English stream, even when we're operating in the same neighbourhood and the same building. And I do feel like, in [our school division], we have a fairly diverse student population as a whole, and so I think that there's some work to be done ensuring access for all students in French immersion.**

***Michelle, Central office staff,  
Saskatchewan***

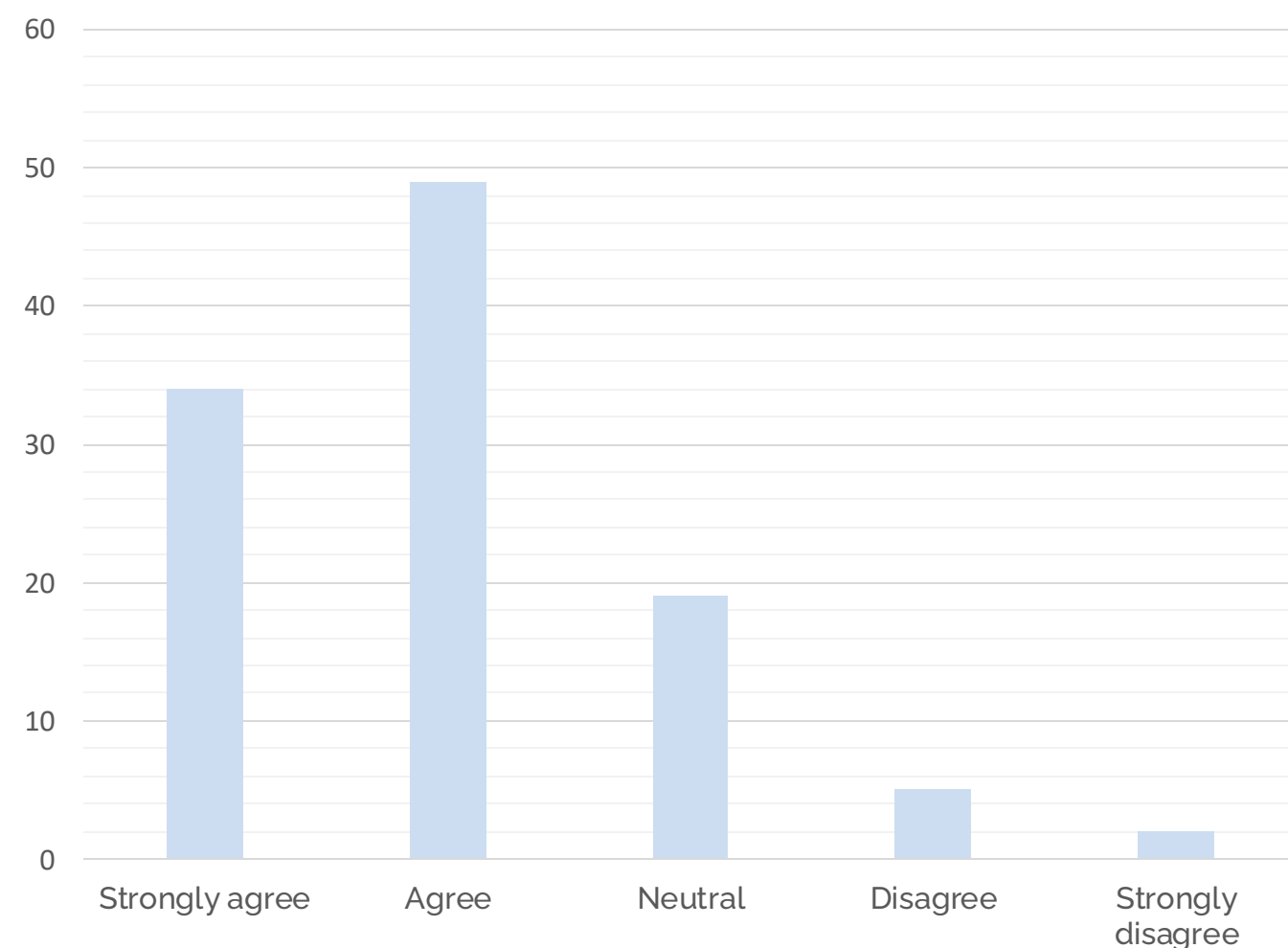
**Il n'y a pas assez de diversité. C'est mon point de vue personnel. Je regarde, par exemple, à ma classe. Dans ma classe, il y a juste une ou deux personnes qui ne sont pas des personnes blanches, tu vois? Il y a une seule personne noire et il y a une seule personne d'origine un peu asiatique. Alors, tu peux dire que la diversité, pas vraiment, même au niveau de l'effectif des enseignants ici. Je suis le seul enseignant noir à l'école. Alors, il y a un peu de diversité, mais pas vraiment.**

***Ahmed, Teacher, Saskatchewan***



# Suitability

**I believe that French immersion programs are suitable for refugee-background students.**



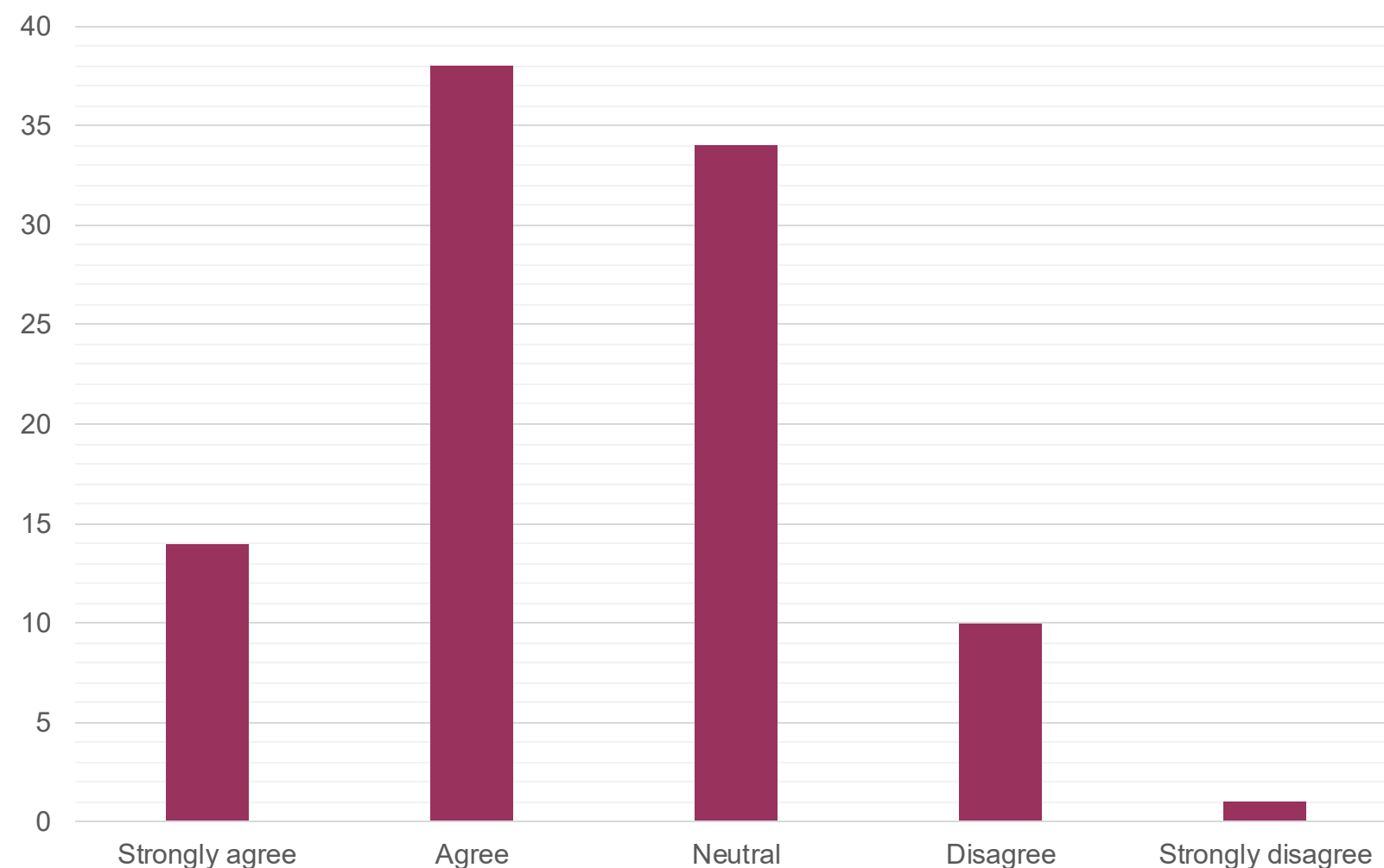
**There was a colleague and their student is in Grade 1, just moved from Ukraine, postwar. So, there's a lot going on for this kid. Not a lick of English and the student's in FI. The teacher's perspective was: "This kid just went through hell. Dad didn't come with them. And now you want to put them in a classroom in Regina, Saskatchewan, to learn French when they don't know a lick of English?" And the teacher was under the impression that this student should be in an English class, and then they could at least speak the majority language in this province... What I heard was: "This student just went through trauma and now they can't learn to talk to anyone, and they're learning the wrong language for this city."**

***Karen, Teacher, Saskatchewan***



# Language learning

**I believe that refugee-background students typically develop strong French language proficiency in French immersion.**



**De ce que je voyais, ils apprenaient très, très vite l'anglais parce que c'était la langue de la récréation et dans la communauté. Et ils apprenaient assez vite le français aussi parce qu'ils étaient entourés par le français. L'anglais était peut-être plus vite, juste parce que c'était communautaire.**

***Alexis, Teacher, Saskatchewan***

**Mom and Dad were both from the Congo, and they had some verbal, like, oral language in French... There are some significant learning issues with these boys. Now, that being said, all of the boys speak French.**

***Danielle, Principal, Alberta***



# Challenges

**Academically, he was not strong because he had been in a refugee camp before coming to Winnipeg, so he hadn't been in school for a while. We weren't actually sure that he was going into the right grade when he came. We weren't sure, like, where he had kind of finished off; they just went based off age. So, he didn't do, like, he wasn't strong, but he was a hard worker and he would answer questions in class all the time when he could. He got better and he improved throughout the year as well. Technology was very difficult, like, really hard for him because he had basically never used a computer before, right? And then the poor thing had to go remote. I felt so bad for him. But he managed. He did manage, even in that tough situation.**

***Elizabeth, Teacher, Manitoba***

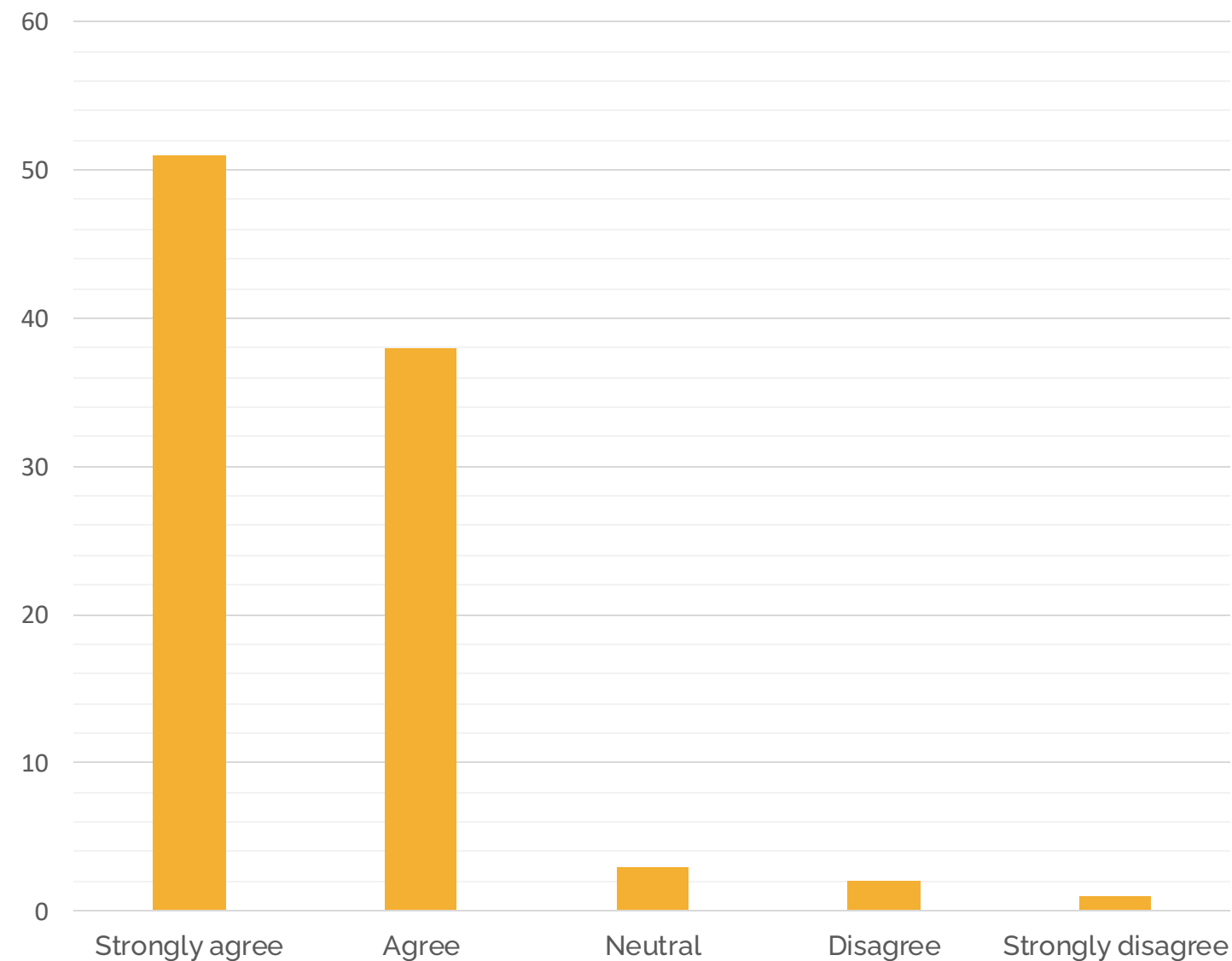
**The child from the Ukraine, she is doing well in the sense that she has a lot more understanding than you would expect, joining late. She has a knowledge of English, Ukrainian, and Russian, and so French has sort of flowed in most of her understanding. However, I think with the addition of, you know, her dad is still back home and he's not allowed to leave the country and she fled here with her mom and her brother in the middle of the night. So, there's just lots going on in the sense of trauma and ongoing warfare.**

***Alana, Principal, Manitoba***



# Inclusion

**I believe that the parents of refugee-background students should be able to choose the program of study for their children.**



**I think French immersion should welcome all of our refugee students, especially those coming from refugee backgrounds, even if they're not French backgrounds... I don't think we should close our doors to anybody!**

***Tammy, Principal, Alberta***

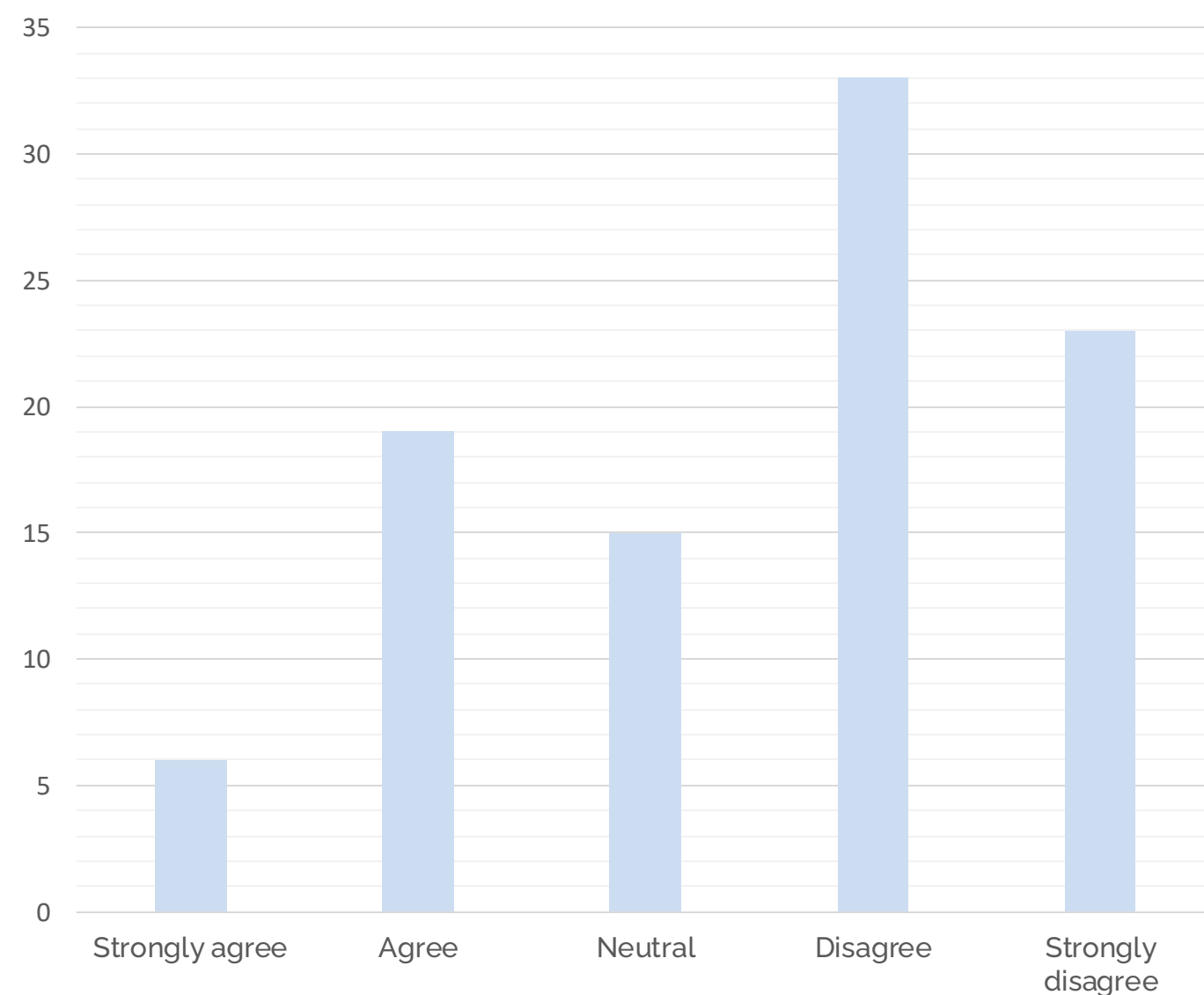
**J'ai entendu quelques enseignants et enseignantes qui se plaignaient de cela aujourd'hui: « Cet enfant vient d'arriver. Comment est-ce que je vais faire? C'est trop difficile. L'enfant devrait tout d'abord maîtriser l'anglais... Est-ce que cet enfant devrait être en immersion? On devrait le laisser en anglais. »**

***Omar, Teacher, Saskatchewan***



# Exclusion

**I believe that teachers and school principals should be able to decide whether to include or exclude refugee-background students from French immersion.**



**J'ai des directeurs qui m'appellent et qui disent : « Cette famille est intéressée en immersion, » mais le centre d'accueil suggère qu'ils apprennent l'anglais en premier... Je dirais que ce que je vois, depuis mes propres observations, c'est que les réfugiés sont découragés d'entrer dans nos écoles d'immersion. Alors, je peux dire qu'on a reçu 672 Ukrainiens depuis le mois de mars dernier dans nos écoles. Et je peux te dire que, bien que nous avons reçu beaucoup de réfugiés, il n'y a pas un Ukrainien qui s'est rendu dans une école d'immersion. Je dirais que les enfants réfugiés... C'est cette mentalité de « They've got enough on their plate. » On ne veut pas ajouter le français à cela.**

***Samantha, Central office staff, Alberta***



# Policy

**Je crois qu'il n'y a pas de politique spécifique. Tout le monde a le droit d'entrer. Je pense qu'il n'y a pas nécessairement de politique; c'est ouvert à tout le monde.**

***Mallory, Teacher, Saskatchewan***

**No, there is no policy. There's nothing written. Really, the only way that a kid will end up in French immersion is because they live in the area.**

***Elizabeth, Central office staff, Alberta***

**We're definitely the exception in the province. We go about it from a human rights and language rights perspective. Often, families arrive here and come to Canada and understand that French and English are our official languages, whether they come as refugees or not. And we look at it as a right for this family to pick what they want for their child.**

***Stephanie, Central office staff, Manitoba***

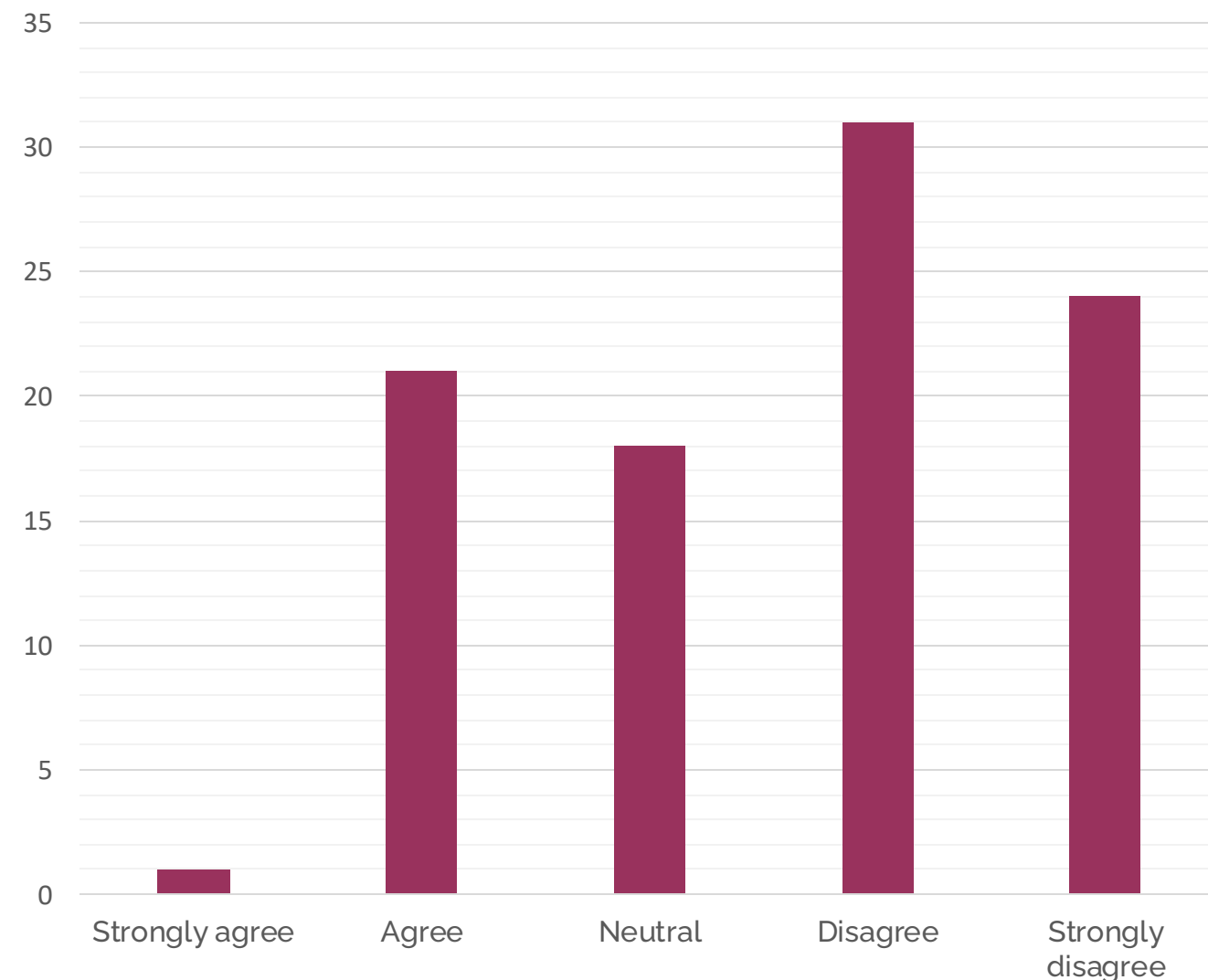
**I would say that it has certainly positively impacted us. It has diversified us quite a bit at my school. And to be honest, as I'm reflecting on who I had as FAL students previously, I had a student from Palestine when I was a teacher, as well as one from the Congo. So, those being my other previous experiences, they were both refugee families.**

***Alana, Principal, Manitoba***



# Resources

**I believe that my school division offers sufficient supports and resources for refugee-background students in French immersion.**



**Malheureusement, ce que je vois, c'est que l'immersion est un peu défavorisée... Je dirais que dans les écoles à double voix, on favorise les enfants qui sont en anglais quand ça vient aux appuis pour l'anglais comme langue additionnelle, et même pour les besoins spéciaux.**

***Samantha, Central office staff, Alberta***

**We actually had to advocate quite strongly since we have become a single-track school for supports to still be in place...There's a lot of people who would feel otherwise about these families, like: "Why would they be choosing FI?" So, I think that's interesting. We have had to advocate.**

***Danielle, Principal, Alberta***

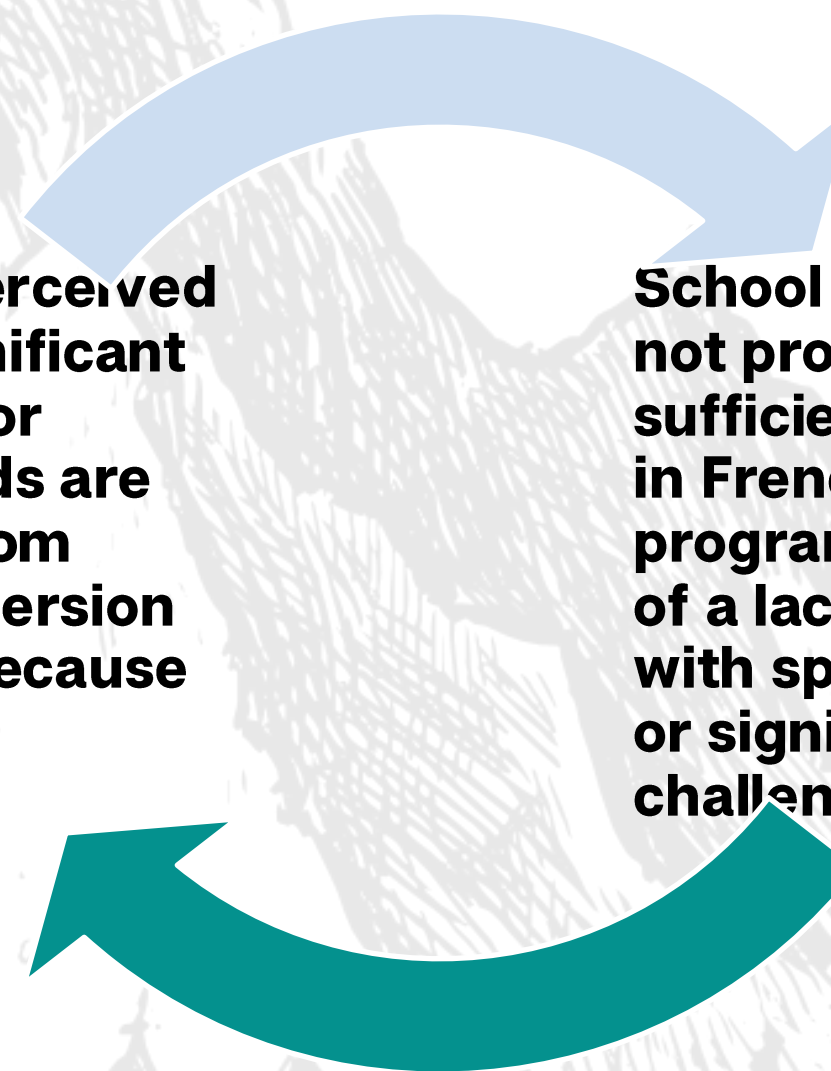


# Discussion of findings

- **Most educators would like to include refugee-background students in French immersion programs, but some are concerned about the lack of supports and resources for such students.**
- **The perspectives of some educators perpetuate deficit ideologies about refugee-background students and contribute to a cycle of exclusion and neglect in French immersion programs.**

**Students perceived to have significant challenges or special needs are excluded from French immersion programs because of a lack of resources.**

**School divisions do not provide sufficient resources in French immersion programs because of a lack of students with special needs or significant challenges.**





### 3. Creating equitable French immersion programs

**Recommendations**

**Policy and  
resources**

**Plurilingual  
pedagogical  
approaches**

**Discussion**





# Recommendations for school divisions

**1. Create  
inclusive  
policy**

**2. Create  
multilingual  
materials**

**3. Provide  
equitable  
resources**

**4. Plan for  
diverse  
entry points**

**5. Provide  
professional  
development**

**6. Adopt  
plurilingual  
pedagogies**



# Recommendations #1 and 2

## 1. Create inclusive policy

- **In the absence of official policies of inclusion in French immersion, many school divisions practice unofficial policies of exclusion.**
- **School divisions must create official, public-facing policies to ensure the inclusion of refugee-background students and all newcomer students in French immersion programs.**

## 2. Create multilingual materials

- **Many school divisions offer multilingual promotional materials for regular English programs, but only promote French immersion programs in English and French.**
- **School divisions must create multilingual materials to promote French immersion programs for newcomer, multilingual families.**



# Recommendations #3 and 4

## 3. Provide equitable resources

- **School divisions must provide equitable resources for refugee-background students in French immersion programs, including learning resource teachers, EAL instruction, and educational assistants.**
- **Supports must be offered to the same degree as they are offered in regular English programs.**

## 4. Plan for diverse entry points

- **School divisions must plan for diverse entry points into French immersion programs to include refugee-background students who arrive in Canada at all grade levels.**
- **Late French immersion programs are an effective approach for newcomer students who arrive in later elementary grades.**



# Recommendations #5 and 6

## 5. Provide professional development

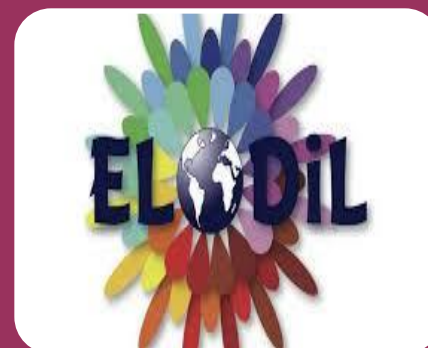
- **Most educators would like to include refugee-background students in French immersion programs but are unsure of how to support their learning.**
- **School divisions must offer professional development focusing on refugee-background students, newcomer students, and multilingual learners in French immersion programs.**

## 6. Adopt plurilingual pedagogies

- **The languages of refugee-background students, newcomer students, and multilingual learners are often ignored and unsupported in French immersion classrooms.**
- **School divisions and educators must explore and adopt diverse plurilingual pedagogical approaches in French immersion programs.**

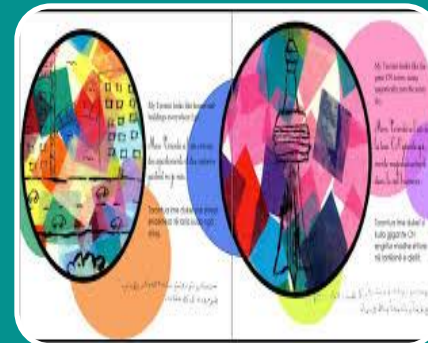
# Plurilingual pedagogical approaches

- **Plurilingual pedagogical approaches have emerged as an important area of research pertaining to newcomer students and multilingual learners in language education programs.**
- **The languages of newcomer students and multilingual learners are often ignored in French immersion classrooms. Plurilingual pedagogical approaches present avenues to recognize and empower their diverse linguistic repertoires.**
- **There are many plurilingual pedagogical approaches, but the central goal is to enable all students to see their linguistic repertoires not as obstacles to be overcome, but as strengths and resources in language learning.**



**Éveil au langage et ouverture à la diversité linguistique**

➤ Université de Montréal



**Plurilingual portraits in French immersion schools**

➤ Gail Prasad (2015, 2018, 2020)



**Storybooks Canada in French immersion schools**

➤ Rahat Zaidi, Robin Metcalfe & Bonny Norton (2022)





# Summary of workshop

**1. Newcomer students in French immersion programs**

**2. Refugee-background students in French immersion programs**

**3. Creating equitable French immersion programs**

- **Newcomer families are often highly interested in French immersion and newcomer students tend to develop strong language proficiency in immersion programs across Canada.**
- **However, newcomer students and multilingual learners are often excluded from French immersion programs because of a lack of inclusive policy and a lack of equitable resources.**
- **Educators, administrators, and researchers alike have important roles to play to create more equitable and inclusive French immersion programs for newcomer students across Canada.**



**Merci beaucoup! Thank you for your interest and participation! Au plaisir de vous revoir au Congrès ACPI 2025!**

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