Voices of Resilience from the Bottom Rungs: The Stories of Three Elementary Core French Teachers in Ontario

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This paper reports on a study that used activity theory (AT) as a framework to understand the dialogical relationship between three elementary Core French (CF) teachers' personal and professional experiences and their literacy teaching beliefs and practices. This study used a case study design collecting data from three different teachers in three different locations by means of semi-structured interviews to help capture teachers' perspective of their professional experiences. The interviews exposed the teachers' creativity in dealing with concerns about their personal and professional goals and (limited) resources available, documented facilitating or constraining effects on the community that operated within the same activity system, and identified unspoken agendas of their wider professional communities. The analysis of the teachers' narratives reveals that the definition of the status and role of CF within the Canadian educational context is an essential source of tension that affects the teachers' teaching practices and their sense of professional identity.

Cet article porte sur une étude ayant comme cadre la théorie de l'activité pour comprendre le rapport dialogique entre les expériences personnelles et professionnelles de trois enseignantes de français de base à l'élémentaire d'une part, et leurs croyances et pratiques par rapport à l'enseignement de la littératie d'autre part. Cette étude repose sur modèle d'étude de cas et a impliqué la collecte de données par le biais d'entrevues semi-structurées auprès de trois enseignants différents dans trois lieux différents de sorte à obtenir leur point de vue quant à leurs expériences professionnelles. Les entrevues ont révélé la créativité des enseignants face à leurs préoccupations relatives à leurs buts personnels et professionnels et les ressources limitées disponibles; documenté les effets facilitateurs ou restrictifs sur la communauté qui fonctionnait au sein du même système d'activités; et identifié les intentions tacites de leurs communautés professionnelles élargies. L'analyse des récits des enseignants a démontré que la définition du statut et du rôle du français de base dans le milieu éducatif Canadien est une source de tension qui affecte leurs pratiques pédagogiques ainsi que le sens de leur identité professionnelle.

In Ontario, Canada, French as a second language (FSL) is a compulsory subject of study from Grades 4 to 9 inclusively, through the Core French (CF) program. Whereas the optional French immersion program is acknowledged as a successful program (Genesee, 2007), the core French[1] program is associated with poor results for the students (e.g., Canadian Parents for French, 2008) and marginalisation of the teachers (e.g., Lapkin, MacFarlane, & Vandergrift, 2006). These negative associations with the CF program are issues that have been repeatedly identified

(e.g., Marshall, 2002) and yet continue to persist, hence the need to investigate different aspects of the CF context using new theoretical lenses so as to achieve a better understanding of the reasons for such educational and professional shortcomings, especially as 80% of Ontario students learn FSL through CF (Canadian Parents for French, 2011).

The federal government of Canada (2006) acknowledged the need to support CF by providing additional funding to Ontario in order to renew teaching methods. Within this policy, the Ontario Ministry of Education (2009) commissioned this study to examine literacy instruction in CF in schools that chose to start teaching FSL in CF Grade 3 (rather than at the compulsory Grade 4), focusing especially on the question of transfer of literacy skills between L1 (English) and L2 (French).

This paper presents the results of a case study conducted in three Grade 3 CF Ontario classrooms. This case study sought to explore the ways that primary CF may contribute to L1 (English) literacy. More specifically, it uses activity theory (AT) as a framework to understand the dialogical relationship between three CF teachers' personal and professional experiences and their literacy teaching beliefs and practices as revealed through semi-structured interviews. The study is innovative at two levels: exploring the literacy transfer issue aligns CF research with the broader research in FSL immersion programs and adopting an AT lens allows an alternative and differently conceptualized view of the CF situation, thus shedding light on factors and tensions within the CF teaching situation that may have been overlooked in previous research.

Literature Review

This section presents a brief review of the research on CF, which informed our research agenda and guided our reading of the participants' interview transcripts. This review is followed by an overview of research on literacy in second language classrooms. We then explain why we chose AT as the lens or the framework to re-story (Creswell, 2007) our participants' experiences.

The Persistent Issues of Core French in Canada

The effectiveness of the CF program in Canada has been a topic of debate and concern for the last four decades. Several large-scale studies have documented contextual factors that affect the program's success. Kissau (2005) reviewed official federal and provincial policy documents, as well as reports and research findings published by FSL stakeholders. He found a contradiction between the federal government goal of increasing bilingualism and several concerns of the CF profession, such as severe cuts to federal funding of FSL programs, lack of accountability for the funds allocated to CF, and inconsistencies in programming within and across provinces including whether FSL/CF was mandatory or optional. Kissau explained that these gross inconsistencies led to the marginalisation and depreciation of the CF profession.

Kissau's conclusions corroborate the findings of several studies based on field research. Richards (2002) interviewed 21 elementary CF teachers to understand the relationship between elementary CF teachers' high attrition rates and the systemic marginalisation that has become characteristic of this element of the profession. The findings indicated that elementary CF teachers' marginality was fostered by the lack of control over working conditions and exclusion from decision-making processes. More specifically, CF teachers were deprived of physical and temporal resources (especially classroom space and instructional time) and were not consulted by board or school authorities on issues that directly affected their practices (e.g., curriculum

decisions, class timetabling). Daiski and Richards (2007) classify elementary CF teachers at the *bottom rungs* of the educational profession's hierarchy and propose that difficult work conditions often lead to physical/mental sickness, disillusionment, and, consequently, to thoughts of leaving the profession.

Similarly, Lapkin and Barkaoui (2008) found that 23% of the Ontario CF teachers who responded to a national survey were planning to leave the profession within three years because they were dissatisfied with lack of designated classroom space, inadequate curricular resources (e.g., computer software, professional development opportunities), lack of support from colleagues, and the overall negative attitude to French in the community and more importantly among parents. Lapkin, Mady, and Arnott (2009) pointed out that there was a growing dissatisfaction with the results of the CF program evidenced by the high student attrition rate beyond the mandatory level (Grade 9 in Ontario).

It is important to emphasize that whereas most of the studies yielded lists of problems, shortcomings and constraints that affect the CF profession, they have failed to identify their combined and/or accumulated effect over time on specific aspects of a CF teacher's practice. This fragmented research effort explains in part why recent research has repeatedly identified the same challenges as the ones documented by Stern in the seventies (1976, 1982). The lack of progress is often blamed on systemic shortcomings but paradoxically the studies are often commissioned by the highest educational authorities that represent *the system*. Ultimately, CF teachers are often portrayed as victims of an oppressive system, suffering through an unfulfilling career until they decide to give up. We believe that a new approach is needed not to identify the shortcomings and constraints but to explain how they influence the tensions that they create and how they tangibly affect the daily decisions of a classroom CF teacher.

Considering the Role of Literacy in Language Learning

Contributing to the marginalization of the CF teacher is a negative judgment of the subject area (Marshall, 2002) and the methods used to teach it. For example, CF is associated with the use of repetitive (Calman & Daniel, 1998) and grammar-focused activities, which appears to be inconsistent with current research findings that suggest the adoption of a literacy-based approach in CF. This research is grounded in Cummins' interdependence hypothesis that purports literacy skills can be transferred from one language to another. This has been supported by several second language studies in Canada (e.g., Carr, 2007) that have found both languages (i.e., English and French) benefit from a focus on literacy across the languages.

Successful application of a literacy-based approach has been noted in the more intensive FSL programs of French immersion and intensive French. Kristmanson, Dicks, Bouthillier, and Bourgoin (2008) found that following a literacy-based model in writing in French immersion increased the quality of the students' writing. Students experiencing science through a literacy-based approach in Cormier and Turnbull's research (2009) also improved their writing and their science knowledge. Research conducted in the intensive French program not only found that a literacy-based approach improved student outcomes but also that an explicit acknowledgement of the interconnectedness of language skills proved advantageous to students' language competencies. Although a literacy-based approach is the foundation of French immersion and intensive French[2], its application has yet to be examined in the CF context. In general, the role of a teacher in choosing classroom approaches is paramount (Cummins, 2001; Martin-Beltrán, 2010). In a CF context, given the literature reviewed above, it may be more difficult for teachers

to apply a literacy-based approach. Application of this innovative approach in this context, then, would require teacher agency.

In summary the three salient factors affecting the CF profession, difficult working situation, individual teachers' coping mechanisms, and a mixed message coming from decision-makers, may present challenges to teachers applying a new approach in that context. We believe that AT offers a conceptual framework to help understand the tensions and interactions among these three factors.

Activity Theory

One of the central tenets of AT is the dialectical relationship between individual agency and social/cultural structure. It emphasizes the sociogenesis of the human mind but rejects the traditional deterministic interpretations of *context* that fail to account for human agency. According to AT, individuals use socially- and culturally-mediated tools (i.e., artifacts, practices, and institutions) to purposely transform and revolutionize those tools (Engeström & Miettinen, 1999; Lantolf & Thorne, 2006; Lektorsky, 1999). In so doing, they develop as individuals and create new realities that are not bound by the initial affordances of those cultural tools or contexts (Davydov, 1999). Engeström (1993, p. 67) explained that "for activity theory, contexts are neither containers nor situationally created experiential spaces. Contexts are activity systems." In this regard, activity is a holistic unit that is bigger than the sum of its constituents, the subject, the object, the goal-oriented actions, and tools.

In this study we use AT as a principle of explanation (Engeström, 1999; Fichtner, 2010) that provides conceptual tools to determine goal-driven practices, inconsistencies, constraints, and affordances within an activity system. The framework has conventionally been represented as a triangle that evolved with three AT generations broadly associated with Vygotsky, Leont'ev and Engeström (see Swain, Kinnear, & Steinman, 2012 for a detailed, step-by-step illustration of the AT nested triangles). In this section, we focus on Engeström's model of nested triangles as a basis for our analysis. Engeström (1993, p. 67) explained that an analysis within an AT framework identifies a subject "whose agency is chosen as the point of view in the analysis" and describes how s/he uses available internal and external mediational tools to act on the object and transform it into a desired outcome. The AT framework also accounts for the facilitating or constraining effects of the community that operates within the same activity system, the rules that regulate practices and interactions between community members, as well as the division of labour, defined as "both the horizontal division of tasks between the members of a community and the vertical division of power and status" (p. 67).

Blunden (2010) highlighted the three-way relationship of mediation between the individual, the community, and the environment in Engeström's model, which is another essential conceptual tool in the framework as it allows the researcher to have a holistic view of the system. Eskola (1999, p. 111) underlined that the purpose of analysing an activity system is to understand "the structure and development of activity and its meaning to different actors, the laws and rules that actors take into account in this activity and the logics on the basis of which they do so." Besides, Engeström (1993, 1999) underscored that the aim of the analysis of an activity system goes beyond the description of the actors and their interactions to identifying inner contradictions. He explained that tensions, which can be identified within system components and/or between different components, create crises that are paradoxically a driving force or motive behind the structure and development of activity and creativity within systems.

In other words, new realities emerge as crises are resolved and tensions are dissolved and since some tensions are located within activity components, the resolution entails a redefinition of the component and its relation to other activity actors.

When designing the present paper, we approached CF teaching as an activity system that involves different actors and a wide community of educators, administrators, and other stakeholders who interact to ensure success of the educational operation within the boundaries of rules of practice, administration, and conduct. In the following three stories, we explore the CF activity from our three teachers' perspectives. Each teacher is a subject within an activity system who guides us as we explore her account of classroom practices and apply the explanatory principles of AT to understand the tensions.

Methods

Broader Study

This paper presents partial results from a larger study previously completed for the Ontario Ministry of Education that included a questionnaire and classroom observations. While our current study focuses on the interview findings, we present some of the previous study's results here in order to better contextualize our study's rationale and findings. The complete study's quantitative data yielded inconsistent results. Classroom observations revealed that the three CF teachers tried to work within the Ministry's literacy guidelines and in line with research findings on literacy teaching best practices. However, we noticed considerable differences in the number and types of strategies used by the three teachers and in some cases we observed classroom instructional practices that were inconsistent with the teachers' expressed goals or beliefs. For this paper, we explore the in-depth interviews to understand the reasons behind these inconsistencies.

This study used a case study design collecting data from three different teachers in three different locations by means of semi-structured interviews.

Interview Protocols

We conducted four interviews (24 minutes long on average) with each participant. The interview protocols covered three themes:
1. Teachers' experiences teaching literacy (e.g., to what extent do you take part in the school's literacy plan activities?);

2. Teachers' beliefs and approaches to teaching reading and writing in Grade 3 CF (e.g., what importance do you place on the development of reading/writing skills for your Grade 3 CF students?); and

3. Teachers' explanations of the literacy practices we observed during classroom observation sessions (e.g., what aspects of the class focused on students' developing literacy?).

The interviews were audio recorded, transcribed verbatim, and verified by the participants. The credibility of the data is ensured though the use of multiple interviews and the trust and insider knowledge that were built during multiple class visits (with a minimum of four visits over four months) and the lengthy immersion in the professional contexts of our three teachers. The trustworthiness of the analysis and the interpretive process that it entails is ensured

through the rigorous and iterative process of data analysis, discussions of data and analyses results among the authors, and consultation of the literature on using AT for interpreting and explaining interview data (cf., Bernard & Ryan, 2010; Creswell, 2007).

Interview transcripts presented narratives of the participants' lived experiences as CF teachers that included detailed anecdotes and illustrative examples. Each transcript formed a unique story that highlighted the salient meanings in the professional and personal life of an individual and revealed how these meanings affected the teacher's instructional practices and professional identity. These narratives helped us (as researchers and readers) *achieve empathic understanding* (Bernard & Ryan, 2010) of the three CF teachers' experiences that went beyond the mere identification of the constraints that are known to afflict the CF profession.

In this regard, because most previous studies were concerned with identifying and tracing the development of systemic constraints, they mostly adopted large-scale designs (e.g., Lapkin & Barkaoui, 2008). Findings are usually reported as numbers and trends with occasionally a few pertinent quotes. The CF teachers remained mostly invisible and their voices unheard. This may in fact have reinforced the CF teachers' marginalisation as research subjects or a topic of discussion and analysis but not as agents with an audible voice. In this paper, we believe that "telling the stories of marginalized people can help create a public space requiring others to hear what they don't want to hear" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011, p. 415). We are aware that our writing of participants' stories can restructure the teachers' accounts and introduce a foreign voice in the narratives (see Swain et al., 2012). Therefore, to ensure that our re-storying is faithful to the participants' accounts, we respect the flow of each story (i.e., we did not impose a template on all three stories) and we rely heavily on participants' quotes, which are often embedded in the main text.

Participants

Amy, Beth and Cate (pseudonyms) were selected by their respective boards (all in Ontario) as potential participants because of their long experience teaching CF. The three teachers were qualified in FSL and experienced CF teachers teaching multiple grades. More pertinent information on each teacher's personal and professional background is presented below because we believe that such information is a crucial aspect of the analysis and story of each participant.

Findings

The findings are presented in order by participant, starting first with Amy, followed by Beth and then Cate.

Amy: Practice on the Periphery

Amy has 10 years teaching experience, consisting of one year as a generalist teacher and nine years as a CF teacher. She holds FSL Part 1 qualification. At the time of the research, she was teaching CF classes from Senior Kindergarten (SK) to Grade 6. We visited Amy in her split Grade 3/4 class (25 students), which meets for 30 minute sessions multiple times a week and takes place in a portable outside of the school. All the support material we observed in the classroom was in English.

The interviews showed Amy to be a dedicated teacher who works diligently to maintain

contact with other mainstream teachers and achieve her goal of promoting oral literacy as mandated by the school and the board. However, several tensions and conflicts positioned her outside the nucleus of the literacy teaching activity in her school. She often found herself at the periphery of the activity both physically (she was teaching in a portable classroom) and professionally (she was experiencing a lack of engagement), striving to keep in touch and maintain a meaningful professional relationship with her community. This situation impacted her sense of identity as a literacy teacher and shaped her teaching.

Amy drew a resilient sense of identity as a literacy teacher from three main sources. First, she had confidence in her previous experience and the length of her residency in her current school. When answering a question about opportunities for collaboration with her colleagues she stated, "I'm very open with what I'm doing. So they definitely know what my game plan is, because I've been here for a while. So they know how I work." Second, her confidence stemmed from previous involvement with the design of reading and writing student profiles for her board about seven years ago. The length and breadth of her previous experience not only as a literacy teacher but a curriculum developer empowered her to see herself as an expert. Third, this feeling was further reinforced by her active role within the Accelerative Integrated Method (AIM)[3] literacy team. She explained that she received training as well as support material from AIM. She also assumed a leadership role as a member of a committee of mentors. She stated, "there's five of us that are on a committee to help the teachers that are new with the literacy for the AIM program." Amy felt empowered by her role within this small literacy committee. We noted her sense of belonging and solidarity to this group through her consistent use of the first plural pronoun (*we* and *us*) when she talked about their academic activities.

Another factor that underpinned Amy's identity as a literacy teacher was her sense of achievement in seeing her students' success and development. Even though she was not required to test her students formally, she insisted on verifying their progress regularly. She stated, "It really is gratifying to see that they're into the lesson, they're listening and they understand what they're doing." This showed how deeply personal the teaching activity was for Amy, as she felt gratified and fulfilled through her students' achievement.

Amy's description of her professional context revealed a number of tensions relating particularly to the division of labour and rules within her CF teaching activity (the tensions are represented as lightning bolts in Figure 1). In terms of division of labour, Amy faced what seemed like a systematic exclusion from any opportunity to partake or contribute to the literacy planning or decision-making in her school. Amy resisted this exclusion but had limited power to change things. For instance, she explained that the professional learning communities in her school excluded the French teacher and noted, "Most [of the] time . . . it is everybody in the school but the French teacher." She added that she tried to "battle it" with little success.

Another example of the alienation experienced by Amy in her school was expressed in the following quote. She said, "I'm currently part of the junior team just because I actually don't really know why, it's just the way it falls and they talk about what their strategies are. They usually have one student to report on and they try and figure out a way to help that one student in each class." The fact that she did not know why she was included in the team suggests that she was not consulted and that the decision was not justified to her (for instance with reference to her qualifications or expected contribution). This alienation was reflected in her use of the third person pronoun (*they*), which reinforces the sense of distance from these teams. She seems to be a by-stander as the reporting and the 'figuring-out' takes place.

When asked if she had access to any workshops offered to the school staff, she answered that
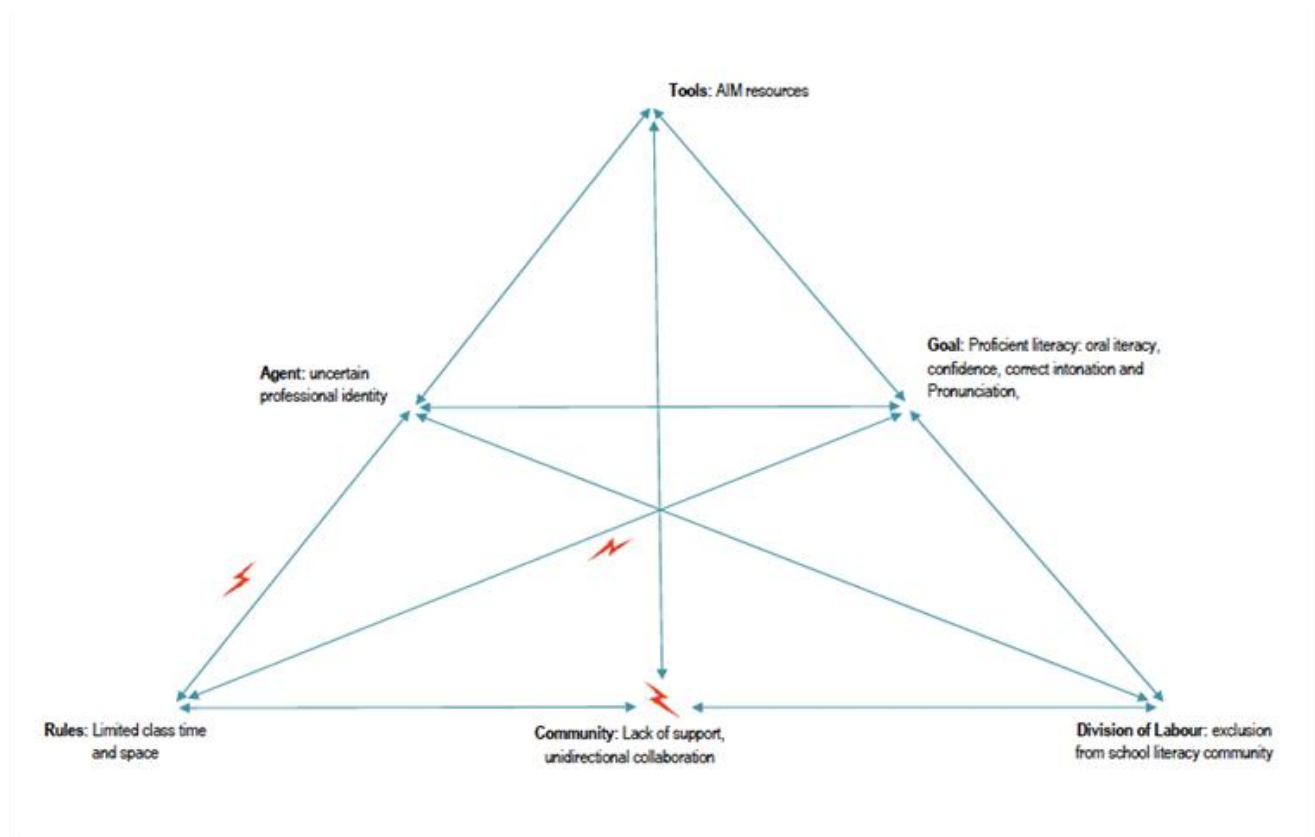
Figure 1. Components and contradictions within Amy's CF literacy teaching activity.

"there have been [workshops], and again, it's usually not including the French teacher." Her word choice in this quote is again quite meaningful. Instead of referring to herself alone, she speaks of *the French teacher* thus suggesting that the exclusion targets the whole profession and not just her person. This statement echoes perhaps the general feelings in the profession. It might also explain why she was able to not take this exclusion personally and stayed confident in her practice and experience, seeing that it was affecting all teachers of French and not just her.

In spite of these instances of exclusion, Amy insisted that she felt supported by the other primary teachers in her school, qualifying them as "wonderful staff." She spoke appreciatively about colleagues who agreed to teach their classes the English version of a play that Amy was teaching in French. She added that she updated them regularly on what area she was covering and "what kind of avenue [she was] going down."

A closer examination of all the instances of what Amy considered as collaboration with the primary teachers reveals that it was a one-directional type of exchange whereby Amy initiated the conversation and determined the type and timing of the support she needed. There was no indication in Amy's account that the primary teachers sought *her* support or felt the need to inform her of their plans. While the primary teachers' willingness to support Amy certainly denoted a positive attitude, it also accentuated the unbalanced division of labour within this community whereby the French teacher was not only excluded from the main activities, but was left reaching out for support, recognition, and help. Underlying this division of labour, there seemed to be a conception that the CF teacher did not possess knowledge capital as well as an underestimation of the contribution she could make to the community. Amy, in fact, affirmed that "to say that we [she and the primary teachers] work together in the planning I wouldn't say

that we do" and she gave several explanations that have to do with the rules set up in and for this community of practitioners, which were the second source of tension affecting Amy's activity. Amy explained that the teachers' busy and often conflicting schedules did not allow for optimal collaboration, especially when no official planning time was built in these schedules. Amy also noted that this was especially difficult for her because she only had classes three times a week.

Limited classroom time was presented as another constraint on Amy's activity, affecting especially her teaching practices and pedagogical choices. Amy noted that she met her G3 CF students for a short twenty-minute session each time. She stated, "in that twenty minutes they need to learn something and leave with something." The tension between the limited time and the demands placed on Amy created a taxing situation that she managed in two ways, adaptation and compromise. She conceded, "there's a lot to cover so I don't find I have enough time." Amy adapted her lesson plans to the restrictive twenty-minute slot by adopting a "very repetitive program" whereby each session started with a review of what was learned previously. Amy also organized her teaching in terms of "minimal building blocks" that she stretched over extended periods of time. She rationalised her practice saying, "there's a lot of the oral based, there'll be classes that are completely oral . . . so it's minimal, but, it's a building block." Another strategy that she used to alleviate the pressure of time was that she prioritized, opting to allot less time to writing. She explained that she spent about 15% of instructional time on writing, "I don't do all the written work that they're supposed to do; just because I don't feel it all needs to go towards this particular class."

Amy's narrative conveys the many tensions in the CF activity and Amy's strategies to diffuse those tensions and the resources she draws on to achieve her teaching goals. However, despite her resilience, Amy was left with an uncertain professional identity as she stated, "I'm trying to get that French is literacy" but she underscored the mixed messages she was receiving from the broader community.

Three main tensions are highlighted in Figure 1: the conflict between her understanding of her role as a literacy teacher and the poor available resources that limited her ability to 'feel' like a literacy teacher; the negative effect of limited temporal and physical resources on her ability to define and achieve her goals; and the contradiction in the definition of the community of practice with flawed perceptions of status and capital.

Beth: Teaching CF in a Capsule

Beth is the veteran of our three teachers, with 33 years of teaching experience, 28 of which is in CF teaching. She is an FSL Honour Specialist. At the time of data collection for the project, she was teaching CF in Grades 2 to 8. In Beth's school, CF was started at Grade 1 and taught in 20-minute daily sessions. There were no specific classrooms dedicated to FSL. We observed Beth with her CF class of 20 students. The sessions took place in a room located with other primary level classrooms. The walls and blackboard were filled with signs and posters in English.

Like Amy, Beth was dealing with challenging *frame factors* (Miettinen, 1999) related specifically to the division of labour in her professional community and the institutional rules (see Figure 2). However, Beth conveyed a more acute sense of isolation than that experienced by Amy. There were several hints to feelings of fatigue, alienation, and resistance expressed at different points of her interviews. She did not seem to identify with her community. Given the lack of support and recognition from her school/board, she seemed to have chosen to channel all her energy towards building a strong supportive community within her classes that was

independent from what was happening at the school level. This situation affected her daily practices, sometimes in ways that conflicted with her beliefs and instructional goals. It also left her with an uncertain professional identity.

The unbalanced division of labour in Beth's professional activity materialized in two telling instances reported in the interviews. First, when asked about the opportunities she had to contribute to the school literacy plans, Beth's stern reply was, "absolutely nothing." She added that not only was she not directly involved, but she was often called on to supervise the classes of those colleagues who attended the literacy committee meetings. "They have other people supervising their classes and a lot of the times we're some of the people supervising." This seemed to create a hierarchy in the school with the CF teachers being positioned at the same level as "supply." This impression was further substantiated by another example that Beth used to illustrate the lack of support and integration in her community. She argued that she "had to" sit through an Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO) meeting to discuss students' scores on standardised literacy and numeracy tests. Beth felt that her presence was an administrative requirement, a chore, rather than an opportunity to learn and contribute. She lamented that "it was just thrown in, . . . we had to sit there because otherwise we would have free time or we would be able to work on our lessons God-forbid . . . so yes, we had to sit through it all."

The absence of shared planning time with the other teachers contributed to the general feeling of alienation expressed by Beth. She argued that in order to collaborate effectively with the English teachers of her other eight classes she would have to meet with them individually, which she deemed "would become quite difficult if you're trying to think of it in practical terms."
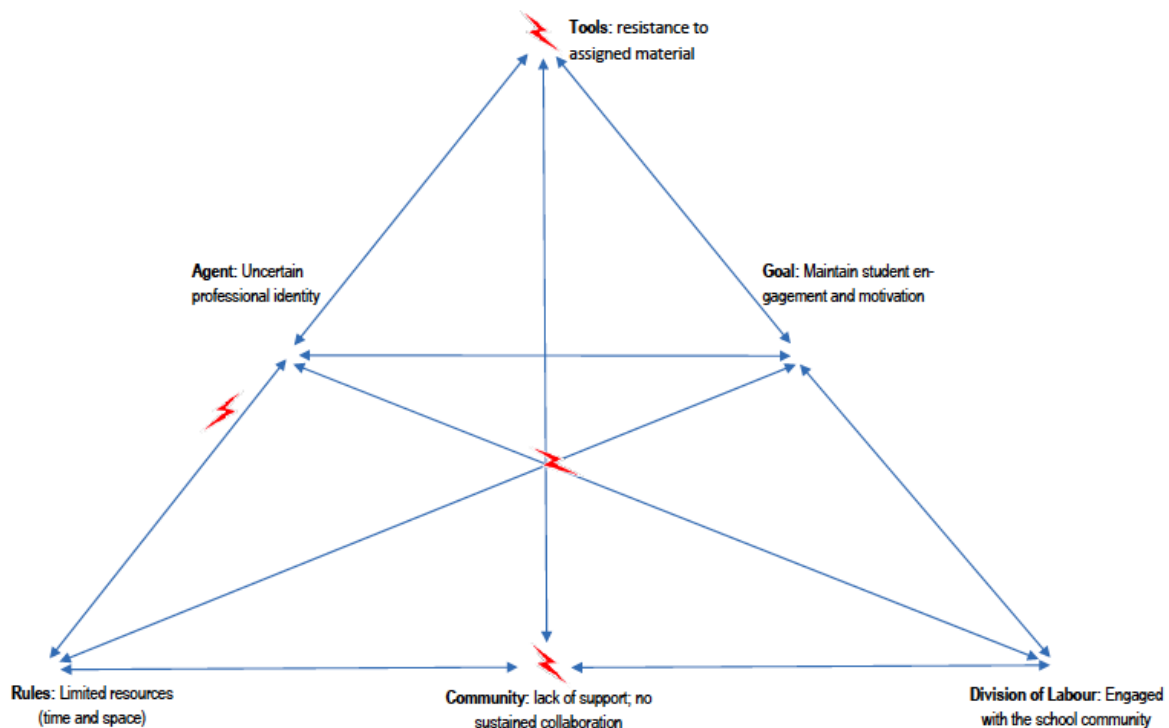

Figure 2. Components and contradictions within Beth's CF literacy teaching activity.

She stated that often the only contact she had with the other teachers happened during the transition from one session to another, that is, "unless some teachers don't mind if I walk in and they keep me waiting while they finish what they're doing so I can pick up a little bit of it, but most of the time they're just ready for me so I go in and take over."

These adverse factors seemed to impact Beth's: (a) sense of professional identity: (b) her perceptions of her role in her community; and (c) her instructional classroom practices. In light of the difficulty in establishing a productive collaboration with her colleagues, Beth seemed resistant to exert any additional effort in this direction. Talking about the possibility of collaborating with the other English teachers, she said, "I never thought of it . . . no we're totally separate." Further in the interview, she argued that collaboration should be initiated and sustained at a higher level, and emphasised "if I had to go to eight different teachers, I'm not gonna do it." This reaction contrasts with the one adopted by Amy who, as explained earlier, did her utmost to maintain an adequate level of contact with her colleagues. Beth's approach may have inadvertently led to further isolation from the school community. However, it is important to note that this resistance does not stem from indifference; it is rather rooted in substantial questions about identity, professional status, and ultimately power (or lack thereof). Beth seemed eager to take a greater leadership role and be more involved in professional development (PD) opportunities specifically oriented to the FSL teachers but then quickly retracted, "I might be able to do it if I start with one year at a time and then work my way up but I also like a little bit of support and what exactly am I . . . how am I gonna do this? What am I gonna look for? And how do I start it?" These substantial questions revealed Beth's malaise as a community member, with an undefined role and status. This malaise seemed to be more pressing than the issue of time, conflicting schedules, and other physical constraints mentioned. Beth reiterated this sentiment on several occasions throughout the interviews. The sense of alienation was especially clear in the following statement about the EQAO meeting she had to attend, "Whatever I could use to apply to the kids, I would try. . . . A lot of the times I don't have the chance."

Beth's ambiguity about her role in the community was further exacerbated by her own understanding of the collaboration activity itself. In fact, she seemed to assume that the onus was on her to initiate any collaborative effort with other teachers. She then saw herself as a passive recipient of knowledge with nothing to contribute in return. She said, "Find the time to meet with individual teachers to apply whatever they're doing and then find a way of applying it to the French class." This view of collaboration was certainly another indirect obstacle that hindered meaningful cooperation between colleagues; it suggested that Beth had internalised (and now endorsed) the view of the FSL/CF teacher as a subordinate community member with little knowledge capital to contribute.

These tensions carried over to the classroom space. We noted instances where Beth seemed to have little control over the classroom but also several instances where she exerted her agency in the type of community she created between her students and the instructional choices she made. It is important to note that Beth did not have a dedicated classroom space and had to meet her students in their classes. This proved to be a challenge and led to missed learning opportunities. The room for Beth was an empty vessel, a gathering spot that she couldn't use productively for her practice. In one instance, the researcher noted that one student pointed to a picture of the moon posted on the wall (by the English teacher) to illustrate his understanding of the play *le chat et la lune* that Beth was teaching. Not only was Beth not aware of the poster and therefore unable to integrate it in her lesson, she was not able to build on the student's pertinent

observation. When the interviewer asked Beth if she tried to facilitate L1-L2 transfer to help make the connections between the two languages, she stated, "It's nice when they can connect it or when I can connect it but I don't . . . I come in to a classroom at different times so I never really know what they're teaching." This statement contrasted disconcertingly with her actual practice as we observed it in our visits and with other comments where she insisted that she believed in the value of connecting the two languages for the students. In a different interview session, she explained, "If I can find a comparison, I do, [and] I'll throw in the Italian or English . . . just to try to connect them all and then they find it easier . . . I use a lot of English in the classroom." Therefore, there seemed to be a conflict between her beliefs and her overall teaching goal as well as her inability to make explicit and coherent L1-L2 connections that drew on the students' English classes.

Another fundamental conflict was due to the 30-minute class session. Beth stated that she did not schedule a lot of time for writing even though it was mandated in the school board's guidelines. The following statement, however, indicates that this was not a pedagogical choice but rather an adverse consequence of the short sessions. "Forty [minutes] seems to be just about right. I can do a little bit of oral and then or maybe half oral and then the last 20 minutes I introduce the writing activity and then give them time to do it, whereas now I find that with the half hour, by the time I do my review I do my oral, I look at the clock and I have five minutes left and I think, 'hah'." Notwithstanding all these tensions in Beth's activity and the general sense of alienation and helplessness she conveyed, we noted several episodes where she seemed to reclaim control over her activity, essentially by asserting her agency in the type of community she created in her class and in some of the pedagogical choices she made. Throughout the interviews, Beth seemed concerned about maintaining her students' interest and not "losing them." She stated that she found the school board's guidelines "vague," so she chose to mine the materials that were made available to her and she continuously looked for new materials that better suited her students' level and ultimately her own goals.

Figure 2 illustrates the four main tensions in Beth's activity. Limited resources and an unbalanced division of labour led to an uncertain professional identity and feelings of marginalisation. The resistance to the materials being used was another source of tension in Beth's practice, as well as the sense of isolation from her own community.

Cate: CF as a Meaningful Activity

Cate has 15 years of teaching experience that includes teaching English immersion outside of Ontario, homeroom teaching in English, and four years of CF. At the time of the research, she was teaching CF in Grades K to 8. Her FSL qualifications included FSL Part 1 and a master of education degree in second language education. Cate's school starts CF at the Junior Kindergarten level.

Unlike Amy and Beth, Cate spoke extensively about the affordances available to her. She enumerated many accessible resources, within her classroom space and within the community. She described a cohesive and supportive community where she enjoyed several opportunities to collaborate with colleagues and engaged in literacy-promoting initiatives. These affordances seemed to have a positive impact on her classroom practices and her sense of professional identity. She reported using a wide variety of literacy strategies, which we then observed in her class sessions. She also expressed a strong and unmitigated sense of professional identity as a literacy teacher. These factors seemed to attenuate the effects of some tensions related to rules
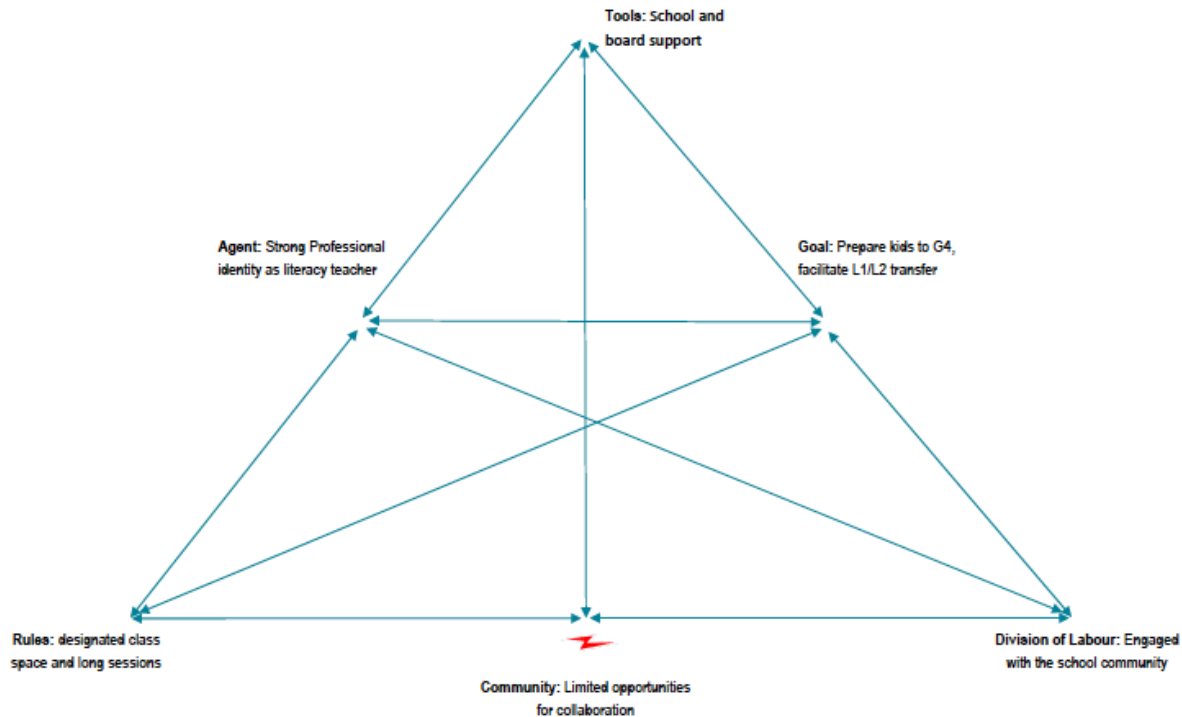
Figure 3. Components and contradictions within Cate's CF literacy teaching activity.

and division of power identified by Cate.

Several resources were made available to Cate and her community, both at the school and the school board level. We visited Cate's 3/4 split grade class during sessions that were 35 to 47 minutes long and took place in a classroom dedicated to FSL. The class walls were full of French language reference posters and materials such as vocabulary charts and a word wall. The class was well equipped with audio-visual equipment, such as a CD player, an over-head projector, and a computer. Cate was able to capitalize on these affordances to create extended literacy activities. She was the only teacher who was able to plan for regular writing activities and for extended literacy tasks beyond the sentence level. Thanks to the 40-minute-long session, she was able to use a variety of strategies to create meaningful and integrated reading and writing activities.

There was no indication in the interviews that she felt rushed or that she had to adjust her lesson plans or make compromises. The following statement helped convey the fluid and deliberate pace of her class sessions, "We do an awful lot of shared reading . . . they also do some group reading of the plays . . . and I also use the DVD program so that sometimes . . . we turn off the screen cause I use an LCD computer monitor for my TV." This was arguably one of the main reasons that she was able to draw on her previous teaching experience as an English teacher and transfer her expertise to the CF without conflict. She said, "I taught regular homeroom for several years so I draw on all my resources from English like using the four block methods that I was using ten years ago teaching primary classes." Both Amy and Beth talked about their previous experiences as a valuable resource, a reference point, or a source of confidence; Cate had the additional privilege of being able to transfer her expertise directly to her class because

she had enough time and the adequate space and resources to do it.

Other resources offered by both the school and the school's board included funding, release time and PD opportunities. Cate's school received funding to pay for supply personnel and release time so teachers could do action research. Cate was able to attend monthly meetings with the other teachers to discuss literacy. She also talked about funding destined to support the CF teachers specifically. In addition, Cate spoke at length about several PD opportunities and training seminars sponsored by her school board. She stated, "Last year our school board actually started doing professional development for differentiation in Core French." She continued to explain how this impacted her teaching as she started, for instance, using more graphic organizing and implementing what she learnt from PD into her class. She also described a character education workshop and AIM training, which she received from her school board and added that this was all done on school time because the school board paid for supply teachers.

The board-sponsored PD opportunities have been presented here as instances of material resources, however, they were essentially one aspect of the community support available to Cate. Cate seemed to be a well-integrated, respected, and engaged member of her school and board communities. She was consulted on which literacy committee meetings she wanted to join and she seemed to be in control of the extent and scope of her participation in these committees. She explained, "I have been given a choice before about which professional learning committee I wanted to join . . . I don't participate in any of them this year but last year I participated in some of the primary literacy meetings occasionally just so that I would have an idea of the types of strategies that they're using and teaching methods." Her participation was clearly motivated by a personal goal, one that was meaningful to her and her practice. She also seemed to allow herself some latitude in what she chose to adopt out of these meetings. She stated, "Last year they focused on something called the EASY strategy . . . and I didn't use it at all in French . . . but the one that I focused on was giving evidence . . . so I chose just that one component that the whole school is working on." It is important here to note that she exerted her agency within the framework of the school's overall philosophy and general guidelines. This in turn suggested that she was aware of the specificity of her CF class/students and was able to address it within the framework of the school's overall literacy approach. The empowerment that ensued was certainly a boost to her identity as a professional who relied on firm support and an array of resources and she was still able to exert agency and make decisions that were geared towards achieving her goals, which were a key condition of meaningful activity.

In spite of all these affordances and Cate's awareness of their positive impact on her practice, the interviews revealed a few tensions within Cate's activity. These concerned her perception of power and the knowledge capital within the teacher community. There was a mismatch between Cate's immediate goals and those of the other literacy teachers in her school (Figure 3). When asked about opportunities for collaboration with other homeroom teachers, Cate echoed the experiences of Amy and Beth. Cate talked about incidental, informal but unidirectional collaboration. She lamented, "I have to say I don't get asked what I do." She explained that what she labeled as "collaboration" was limited to listening to her colleagues' conversations or asking them directly about their practices. She said, "For me it happens very informally but I do try to connect it and I'll ask them if I'm thinking of trying a new activity; I'll go and ask the primary classroom teachers . . . then I'll draw that connection for the kids." It was interesting to note that this unidirectional collaboration was not felt as a burden or an imposition (as perceived by Beth, for instance). Even the complaint expressed in the first quote seemed to suggest that Cate felt

that it was the colleagues who failed to ask her about her techniques who were the ones missing out. There seemed to be a collegial environment in the school fostered by feelings of integration and inclusiveness. Consequently, these impromptu conversations seemed to be part of an ongoing meaningful conversation for Cate.

Another tension in Cate's activity related to a conflict between her immediate goals and those of the other teachers. She spoke of some committee meetings that were not relevant to her because the other teachers focused on expanding discourse beyond the sentence level while she was struggling to build a functional vocabulary with her students. In general, there seemed to be a difference in long-term objectives and projected outcomes. She explained, "I don't find it helpful to be part of their team meetings because they talk a lot about EQAO and test scores and tying everything back to that data and I don't have that data for French. . . . [S]o I don't find that collaboration so useful."

In conclusion, even though Cate faces some of the same challenges as Amy and Beth, she does not experience the same level of alienation. The supportive community, the multiple affordances, and the sense of engagement and inclusiveness contribute to a meaningful activity and a strong professional identity. Cate affirmed that she was both a French and a literacy teacher and explained, "I don't know that everybody that teaches Core French sees themselves that way. My suspicion is that it's the opposite from when I go to PD and I talk to people but I think because I spent 10 years in a regular classroom before deciding to teach Core French I brought all that experience and baggage with me. I used to teach Grade 3 [and] I taught for the EQAO test. I was doing that just 5 years ago so I can't shed all that knowledge."

Figure 3 illustrates the major tension between rules and division of labour that affected Cate's practice as explained above.

Summary and Conclusion

Amy, Beth, and Cate were selected by their school boards to partake in this study because of their long experience and their reputation as successful FSL teachers. Therefore, their stories may not represent the experiences of other CF teachers who have to deal with other additional sources of tensions identified in previous studies. However, we believe that their stories remain valuable accounts of the CF activity, even if atypical. We believe that typicality is neither possible nor desirable in this case.

The use of AT as a framework to re-story Amy, Beth, and Cate's experiences highlights the complexity of the CF activity beyond what has been revealed in the literature. The narratives presented above paint a complex picture where factors such as previous experience, community support, and the teachers' sense of professional identity mitigate or aggravate the effect of the obvious shortcomings. They also suggest that what happens in the classroom does not always or necessarily reflect the pedagogical choices or beliefs of the teacher and can be more of a response to other non-pedagogical variables. The narratives expose a dialogical relationship between frame factors, inconsistent teaching practices, and the deeper problems of the formation and perception of the professional identity of the CF teacher. This paper also suggests the three teachers were *creative* (Engeström, 1999) as they maximized available affordances and dealt with the constraints and tensions of the CF system. They adjusted their practices to their teaching situations and exerted their agency in the choice and range of material and strategies they used. Based on the participants' stories, we illustrate the CF activity in Figure 4 to help show tensions and inherent contradictions in each of the components of the activity. These
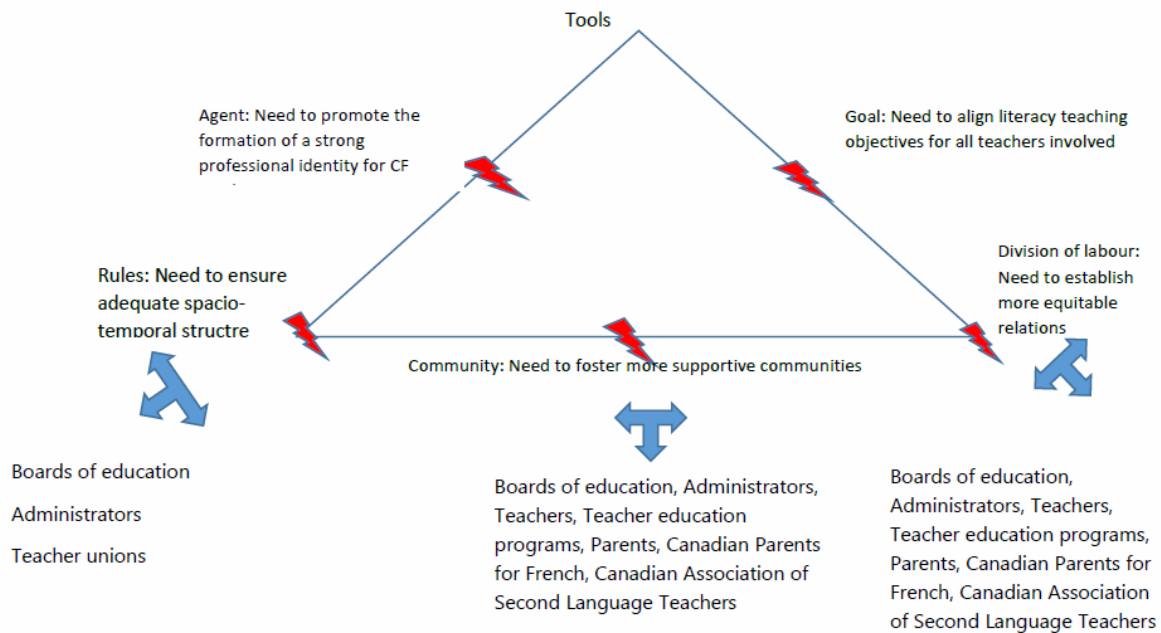
Figure 4. CF activity system: tensions, partners, and stakeholders.

tensions are represented as "needs to be addressed." Figure 4 also identifies some of the stakeholders and partners (represented by the three-headed arrows) that have to be involved in the improvement of the CF program.

There is an essential contradiction in the definition of the professional status and role of the CF teacher who is expected to facilitate L1-L2 transfer of literacy skills but is denied the pedagogical support and tools to do so. This marginalization leads the CF teacher to question her professional identity and creates a hierarchy that is ultimately internalized by the CF teacher and accepted in the wider community. Efforts to minimize this *inequitable hierarchy* (Pavlenko, 2003) have usually focused on the CF teachers by providing additional PD opportunities and trying to integrate them in school board and school literacy committees. However, our teachers' narratives suggest that this strategy has limited impact. We recommend that PD opportunities should be offered to mainstream teachers to raise awareness of the contribution that the CF teacher can make and teach collaboration strategies that reinforce power balance and shared goals. Pennycook (2001, p. 39) argues that "empowering individuals within inequitable social structure not only fails to deal with . . . inequalities but also reproduces them." Thus, there should be a shift in the overall discourse around literacy teaching and CF programming from one that sees the CF teacher as a problem to one that problematizes literacy teaching and bilingualism as educational objectives in Canada. Doing so will require active engagement of stakeholders and partners beyond suggestions and calls for action. For instance, a 2013 FSL framework document issued by the Ontario Ministry of Education makes several recommendations to promote FSL education (e.g., "provide materials to school principals to support them in promoting the learning of FSL" [p.14]) and integrate the CF/FSL teacher (e.g.,

"create opportunities for FSL educators to collaborate with English-language colleagues" [p. 17]) but the language used remains weak and the effective steps to be taken are vague, ill-defined, or undefined. We believe a new look at CF as an activity system that interacts, complements, and collides with other activity systems (e.g., educational budget design and planning, literacy teacher education) would help identify the wider activity system network that affects CF. It will also help determine the tensions within this activity network and help address them.

Acknowledgments

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Notes

1 Core French (CF) is the study of French as a subject in short daily periods.
2 Intensive French (IF) is a program that offers an intensive study of French for one semester in Grade 5 or 6.
3 AIM is an approach that combines target language use with gestures, high frequency vocabulary, and drama (see Mady, Arnott, & Lapkin [2009]).

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