2019

Informing Research (practices) Through Pedagogical Theory: Focus Groups with Adolescents

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INTRODUCTION

This article presents a discussion of the methodological strategies used in a recent study (May-June 2016) on middle–schoolers' perspectives regarding bilingualism and their identities as bilingual speakers within the context of French immersion (FI) education in New Brunswick (NB), Canada. The study employed focus group methodology, drawing on key principles from two dominant perspectives in education, Universal Design for Learning (Gordon, Meyer and Rose 2014) and Multiple Intelligences (Gardner 1983), and on the broader framework of constructivist theory (Dewey 1938). While there has been growing interest in how pedagogy can be informed by research – for example, duo-ethnography is a burgeoning pedagogical practice in classrooms to encourage students to engage in deep reflection (Brown and Barrett 2015) – there has been little explicit exploration of how pedagogical theory can inform research methodology.

The theoretical context that motivated and framed our study is language socialization (LS) theory (Duff and Talmy 2011), which prioritizes the close relationship between language and the socialization of linguistic identity, within the context of language education. Here we adopt Norton's (2013) conceptualization of identity as "the way a person understands his or her

relationship to the world, how that relationship is constructed across time and space, and how the

person understands possibilities for the future" (p. 4). While full discussion of our theoretical

framing is beyond the discussion of this paper, a brief overview is pertinent to understand the

development of our methodology. First, all learning, but especially language learning, engages learners' identities and sense of self as they construct and negotiate multiple identities through language (Duff and Talmy 2011; Norton 2000). Kramsch (2009, 4) made this compelling argument in her work on the 'multilingual subject':

> We are fooling ourselves if we believe that students learn only what they are taught. While teachers are busy teaching them to communicate accurately, fluently, and appropriately, students are inventing for themselves other ways of being in their bodies and their imaginations.

Students actively construct new identities for themselves, consciously or unconsciously. And as they do, they are linked to specific communities of practice (Wenger 2010) within their schools, communities and country, drawing on broader socio-historical and political constructs of language (Duff 2008; Heller 2007; Kramsch 2009; Kroskrity 2000). And so second, in the words of Duff and Talmy (2011), language socialization studies give special attention to 'the local social, political and cultural contexts in which language is learned and used [and] on historical aspects of language and culture learning' (p. 96). As such, 'it is appropriate to pause and reflect on' (Kramsch 2009, 21) what immersion students think it means to be bilingual (or multilingual) as residents of Canada's only officially bilingual province. While there has been a plethora of research concerning Canadian bilingualism and French immersion education in Canada (e.g., Hayday 2015; Lepage and Corbeil 2013; Martel and Pâquet 2012), much of it centres of questions related to language acquisition, pedagogy, and policy; questions related to the meanings of bilingualism and identity, especially from the perspective of youth themselves, are rarely asked (apart from Roy 2010 and Roy and Galiev 2011). Speaking in the context of French immersion in Canada, Roy (2009) calls for more research on what children themselves say about

being speakers of one or more language. Greater attention should also be given to appropriate research methods for examining children's perspectives.

Our discussion maps as follows. After a brief description of our research context, we provide a summary of current methodological approaches involving adolescents, with attention to focus group research. We then discuss how we developed our methodology through pedagogical applications to research practices. Like Darbyshire, Macdougall and Schiller (2005), we take up Riches and Dawson's (1996) call for greater transparency regarding the often messy and unpredictable nature of qualitative research by highlighting the advantages *and* challenges of our methods and evaluating the quality of our data, asking, 'more insight or just more?' (Darbyshire, et al. 2005). After a critical reflection of our methodology, we conclude with recommendations of how pedagogical theory can inform research methodologies involving youth.

OUR RESEARCH CONTEXT

As Canada's only officially bilingual province with 67.1% Anglophones and 31.6% Francophones (Statistics Canada 2016), NB grants citizens the right to education in the official language of their choice, English or French, with separate school systems for Anglophones and Francophones. Within the Anglophone system all students must learn French as a second language. They have three options: English Prime, where students participate in Pre-Intensive, Intensive and Post-Intensive French instruction from Grade 4 to 10; Early French Immersion (EFI), the first entry point into FI at Grade 3[1]; and Late French Immersion, the second entry point into FI at Grade 6. For those in EFI, in Grades 3-5, 80% of the school day is conducted in French; in Grades 6-8, 70% of the school day is conducted in French. Most subjects are taught in

French, although programming varies by school. To remain in EFI in high school, students must take 50% of their courses in French in Grades 9 and 10, and 25% in Grades 11 and 12 (Government of NB n.d.). The students involved in our study were finishing their sixth year of EFI.

The constructs of bilingualism are fraught with ambiguity and paradox in NB, with competing ideologies (Boudreau 2016), paradoxical discourses of 'language as a right' and 'language as a resource,' (Ruiz 1984), and located within the national context of Canada's official bilingual policy (Haque 2012; Hayday 2015; Heller 2007). The goal of NB's official bilingualism is not to promote common bilingual communities, but rather, two separate L1 communities (Roy 2010). That is, it is a policy for *national* bilingualism, rather than *individual* bilingualism (Heller 2007). One attendant result of this policy is the framing of individual bilingualism by this national paradigm, such that bilingualism can only mean L1-L1 competency (Roy 2009). Who can be considered bilingual is not immediately apparent, particularly vis-à-vis identity (cf. Roy 2009; Roy and Galiev 2011). The objective of our study was to 'pause and reflect' on what it means to adolescent language learners to be bilingual after five years of FI education, and upon which local and national socio-historical and political constructs of language they draw.

APPROACHES TO RESEARCH INVOLVING ADOLESCENTS

Following international developments around children's rights (e.g., the 1989 United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child), research involving children and youth has moved away from research *on* children to research *with* children (Freeman and Mathison 2009; Melo-Pfeifer 2015; One 2010). Cook-Sather (2006) identified five 'stances' in education that inform research:

constructivism, critical pedagogies, post-modernism and post-structuralism, educational researchers' perspectives, and social critics' stance. All of these move research away from treating children and adolescents as passive subjects towards engaging them as participants and as social actors in constructing their own meanings (Kramsch 2009). For example, constructivism posits that children actively construct knowledge and meaning out of their own experiences. And so constructivist approaches regard the interview as a collaborative, meaning-making experience. Attention is given to the meaning of the interview from the participant's perspective, and how the interview process has shaped their own interpretations of their experiences (e.g., Corbin and Strauss 2008). Talmy (2010) captures this in his notion of the 'research interview as social practice.'

Surveys (Author et al. 2009; Lajoie 2011) and interview and observation within ethnographic research (Duff 1995; Norton 2010; Potowski 2007; Roy 2010) tend to dominate sociolinguistic research involving children, including language socialization research. There are some notable exceptions. Melo-Pfieffer (2015), for example, used visual narratives based on children's drawings of their multilingual selves and linguistic practices. And Jacobs (2016) used photovoicing, mapping, and research-based scenarios in addition to interviews and focus group discussions in her study of language ideologies and identity construction among dual language youth.

Because of its focus on students' own construction of knowledge and meaning, the principles of constructivism provide a fitting framework for developing methodologies to elicit adolescents' perspectives on bilingualism and identity. Below, we map out our methodological journey where we drew upon dominant pedagogical practices within the constructivist framework to develop our methodology within focus group research.

OUR METHODOLOGICAL JOURNEY

Focus group research

   We were acutely aware of the methodological challenges presented by the abstract nature of our topic and by involving adolescent participants. To address some of these challenges, and in keeping with the constructivist principles of how meaning and knowledge are constructed, we saw focus groups as an optimum methodological approach for our research. Focus groups are socially–oriented (Krueger and Casey 2015) and prioritize interaction *among* participants, making them potentially appealing to peer–focused adolescents (Grifford-Smith and Brownell 2003; Krueger and Casey 2015). And because they are interactive, they also create the possibility for more spontaneous responses (Krueger 1998; Onwuegbuzie, Dickinson, Leech, and Zoran 2009). Focus groups were also appealing because they enable meaning-making through dialogue, specifically regarding adolescents' meanings of bilingualism and bilingual identities.

   However, even with these advantages, our review of focus group research also raised some concerns. While the hallmark characteristics of focus groups are (a) that participants respond to a series of questions and (b) that participants share their perceptions, experiences, ideas, and opinions in an interactive manner (Krueger and Casey 2015), in practice, both of these features have been narrowly interpreted. First, the 'response' of participants has been mostly limited to linguistic response (Morgan 1996; Pfefferbaum, Houston, Wyche, and Van Horn 2008; Wilkinson 2004).

   Secondly, while focus groups are designed to facilitate interaction *among* participants, they often become (especially those involving youth) a round–robin set of questions answered by participants seated at a table (Bloor, Frankland, Thomas, and Robson 2001; Colucci 2008). Thus,

focus groups essentially become no more than individual didactic interviews in a group setting. Analyses of focus group data further perpetuate this 'individual interview' paradigm. Even though 'the group' may be the unit of analysis, Wilkinson (1999) points out, 'Extracts from focus group data are typically presented as if they were one–to–one interview data, often with no evidence of more than one research participant being present, still more rarely does interaction per se constitute the analytic focus' (p. 184). A challenge in focus group research, then, is to utilize response and interaction in ways that maximize the benefits of the methodology.

In addition to such narrow interpretation within focus group research, there are also numerous methodological challenges in research with adolescents – leading the *Journal of Adolescent Research* to devote a special issue (2001) to the topic. As Scott, Grant, and Nippolt (2015) observed, 'Asking youth to share complex insights about abstract concepts can be a tall order' (n.p.). Bassett et al. (2008) identified challenges arising from the silencing effects of recording technology and the formality of the process. Peterson and Barron (2007) noted youth participants are 'more likely to give one–word answers, more susceptible to peer pressure, and prone to socially acceptable responding,' and cited one facilitator as saying, extracting comments from the students was 'like extracting teeth' (p. 141). There are also ethical challenges in focus groups relating to lack of anonymity, and the potential influence of power relationships between the interviewer and youth.

Recognizing these challenges, some researchers have acknowledged the need for expanded formats of data collection within focus group designs (Colucci 2008; O'Neill 2003; Peterson and Barron 2007). For example, some have included stimulus materials such as articles, video clips, or interactive activities followed by discussion (Colucci 2008; O'Neill 2003; Peterson and Barron 2007). Scott et al. (2015) introduced a poster sticker activity in their focus group with

students as a way to encourage the children to make connections between the topic and their own lives, and to share and build on each other's ideas. Colucci (2008) utilized free listings, rankings, word association tasks, storytelling, picture sorts, role–play, and projective techniques such as drawing, third person narratives, and mapping in her focus groups. She found these strategies improved access to participants' views, making sensitive topics less threatening, reducing boredom, and increasing participation of less confident individuals.

While benefits are noted, even in educational research settings, little mention is made of why these methodologies might be important for research involving children and adolescents – beyond 'focus groups can be fun' (Colucci 2008). Furthermore, the primary objective in most of these studies continues to elicit verbal-linguistic data. However, brain–based research (Jensen 2005) on the complexities of adolescent cognitive processing suggests that such linguistic–based methodologies might only partially tap adolescent knowledge, perspective, and emotion and would not fully engage all participants. Not only is the data thus limited, so is the transformative potential for participants involved in research (AUTHOR and CO-AUTHOR 2016). And so, we were concerned about how to (a) reach the full depth of adolescent knowledge and perspective, especially given the abstract nature of our topic; (b) keep participants engaged and actively participating; and (c) create a space for participants to actively realize and construct their views/ knowledge within the context of our research.

As these objectives are not unlike the goals that educators would have for their students, we turned to best practices in classroom pedagogy to address our concerns. In particular, we turned to *Universal Design for Learning (UDL)* and *Multiple Intelligences (MI)*; both have had a significant influence in shaping current policies on inclusive education (e.g. Policy 322) and

inclusionary pedagogical practices within NB's schools (Government of NB, 2015), and both are

grounded in the broader principles of constructivist learning.

Pedagogical applications

Universal Design for Learning, a theory developed by Gordon, Meyer and Rose (2014) within

the Centre for Applied Special Technology presents a pedagogical model premised on

differentiation, designed to meet the widest range of learners through: *Multiple means of*

representation to give learners various ways of acquiring information and knowledge; *multiple*

means of expression to provide learners alternatives for demonstrating what they know, and

multiple means of engagement to tap into learners' interests, challenge them appropriately, and

motivate them to learn (Rose and Meyer 2002, 75). Learning improves, they argue, when

students are provided with multiple ways to access content and are engaged through various

means to demonstrate their knowledge. Howard Gardner's (1983) theory of *multiple*

intelligences (Hume 2008; Tomlinson 2014) suggests different ways this differentiation could

occur by identifying eight forms of expression that could measure student learning. These

'intelligences' have been summarized by Campbell, Campbell, and Dickinson (2004, xx-xxi) as

follows: *Linguistic* - the ability to think in words and use language to express and appreciate

complex meanings; *Logical–mathematical* - deductive reasoning, detecting patterns and logical

thinking, and the ability to understand complex and abstract ideas; *Spatial* - being able to

visualize with the mind's eye, to think in three–dimensional ways; *Bodily–kinesthetic* - engaging

the body/bodily movement to communicate ideas and feelings; *Musical* - a sensitivity to pitch,

melody, rhythm, and tone; *Interpersonal* - expression, understanding and interaction with others;

Intrapersonal - the ability to construct an accurate perception of oneself, including emotions,

beliefs, and values; and *Naturalist intelligence* - observing patterns in nature, identifying, and

classifying objects. While some dispute the validity of MI, the theory has been useful in expanding our understanding of how differentiation can be expressed (Sternberg 1999).

In our discussion below, we describe how we utilized these pedagogical principles of UDL and MI within focus group research as a way to access adolescent FI students' perspectives regarding bilingualism. Our research questions included: What does it mean to these students to be bilingual? What role do their bilingual competencies play their everyday lives? How do they position themselves within bilingual NB? Do they - and how do they - define themselves as bilingual speakers? To illustrate and critically reflect on how this methodology unfolded, we anchor our discussion on one of the schools, which we will call Green Ridge Elementary School. While similar themes emerged in all groups, the insights we gained from a differentiated approach were especially evident in this school.

OUR METHODOLOGY

We conducted focus groups in four schools in April–June 2016 involving 31 students. Two schools were located in an officially bilingual community, one in an officially Francophone community, and one in a predominately Anglophone community. Group sizes ranged from 3 to 10, and apart from one group of three girls, were co–ed (5 boys/4 girls; 4 boys/6 girls; 4 boys/5 girls). After receiving human subjects approval from our universities, the district superintendent, and principals, and after securing their parents' consent and their assent, we met with the students. Two schools selected the students a–priori (based on academic standing); and two schools invited us to speak to all of the Grade 8 classes and distribute information letters and consent forms to all students (all students who returned signed forms participated in the study).

We met with each group twice, for 1.5 hours each time, in a meeting room or classroom. In three of the schools, we met students during school hours; the fourth was held immediately

after school. Participants were given a $10 Toys–R–Us gift card for each session they attended. Given the complexity of our methodology and the difficulty of facilitating and taking notes at the same time (Maynard–Tucker 2000), all focus group sessions were recorded using a digital video recorder and digital audio feed. Each session was facilitated by one moderator, supported by a technological assistant.

Focus Group Session I (1.5 hours)

The focus group at Green Ridge Elementary School involved 10 students selected by the principal, three boys and seven girls. It was held during the school day in a large classroom equipped with movable tables and chairs. We set up five pair-stations around the room and formed a large table in the centre of the room around which students sat for our whole group discussions.[2] Upon arrival, participants were given a name label and a unique coloured marker. They were asked to write their personally–selected pseudonym with that marker, and, for the purposes of subsequent data triangulation, to use their marker throughout the focus group. They knew each other well, having been in the same classes for most of their elementary education. After a brief overview of the agenda, the session began with the *Language In My Everyday Life Checklist*. Participants were grouped into pairs and directed to stations around the room containing a recording device and survey. Through peer-interviews, they used the survey to gather biographical information, home language practices and places lived, and everyday language practices (e.g. do you watch French television, have Francophone friends, speak to your friends in French). In conducting these paired interviews and interacting with their partners, participants engaged their *inter–personal* and *linguistic* MI.

The total time taken for the peer interview ranged from 5.5 to 10.5 minutes. The varying time depended primarily on the rapidity of their questions and responses. Apart from Rachel and

Dylan who did engage in occasional extended discussion and took the longest time to complete the activity, participants kept closely to asking questions and providing mostly one–word answers. April and Victoria took the shortest amount of time, rapidly firing off the questions and providing answers which overlapped the questions. We were reminded of proforma worksheets (Knobel 1999) which, on their own, prioritize 'getting the job done', involving nothing more than disengaged, task–focused procedure and minimal possibility for deep engagement with the topic. This was also true with our survey. The required responses was given, and even though there was obvious camaraderie between partners, there was little engagement with the topic. However, at the same time, this activity did provide low–risk transition to the research environment and topic, as the researcher was not directly involved in their interactions.

Remaining at their stations, participants individually completed an *Attitudinal Survey* containing 23 language attitude items on a 5–point Likert scale. This task was more introspective, involving *intra–personal* as well as *linguistic* MI: participants reflected on their own stance regarding their learning of French, use of French, and the French language. Once participants completed their peer interviews and individual surveys, they gathered around a large table for group discussion. We began this segment with a *Listening Exercise*, drawn from Matched-Guise methodology. The recordings were on a computer connected to external speakers. The video and audio recording equipment were at one end, and computer and speakers used for the stimulus recordings of different varieties of French at the other. Initially the facilitator stood near the computer to play the recordings. However, participants tended to face her when speaking, which meant their backs faced the video cameras. She therefore moved after each audio segment to the side so that participants would face the camera and each other during

discussion. (In subsequent sessions, the support technician managed the audio to make this flow better.) This segment of the focus group lasted about 15 minutes.

As discussed earlier, language identities develop and LS occurs within the socio-political and ideological contexts of language learning (Duff and Talmy 2011). In NB's French communities, there are different regional varieties of French such as Québécois French, varieties of Acadian French, including Chiac (a hybrid language of French and English, spoken in south-eastern NB), as well as a regional, Standard French,[3] all of which are associated with local ideologies (Boudreau 2016). To document participants' identification with these varieties and the ideologies underlying/motivating their responses, we asked participants to respond to five recordings of different varieties of French occurring in radio broadcasts or podcasts. After each recording, we provided such prompts as: 'Can you tell where the speaker is from? What variety of French do you think they are speaking? How does it compare with kind of French *you* speak? Would you want to be able to speak like this speaker, and why?' This activity required reflection of one's own beliefs and values, as well as interaction with others, thus both ***intra-personal*** and ***inter-personal*** MI. It also engaged ***musical*** MI as participants deciphered and identified the varieties' differing phonological systems. ***Linguistic*** intelligence was also involved as participants, through metalanguage, discussed the complex meanings and ideologies associated with linguistic variation.

The group discussion after playing the first two sound files was very much driven by the interviewer and mirrored individual didactic interviews as discussed earlier: a question was asked, and various individuals responded. However, by the third recording, participants became more comfortable with the format and began communicating directly with each other, verifying or contradicting each other through extended dialogue. Six of the students actively contributed;

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however, four remained quite silent. The structure of the table could have been a contributing factor – it was difficult for all participants to see each other. Even when directly addressed, their contributions were less extended. Upon reflection, we could have first divided participants into smaller sub-groups to discuss their reactions, followed with whole group discussion. This would have supported those whose primary multiple intelligences was not linguistic and fostered greater participation.

Participants then had the opportunity to reflect on their understandings of bilingualism. We asked them to complete individually a *Quadrant Chart* handout (see Figure 1) containing questions about the meanings of bilingualism, adapted from Turbill (2002) (Our initial questions included direct reference to 'bilingualism,' but had to be revised to meet concerns raised during our ethical clearance): What does it mean to speak a second language? What can a second language be used for? How do you best learn a second language? What are the skills you need to speak a second language well or are acquired through learning a second language?

[FIGURE 1 NEAR HERE]

Once again *inter–personal* and *intra–personal,* and *linguistic* MI were employed in this component of the focus group as they discussed with each other and provided written response. *Spatial* MI was also utilized as participants moved through the visual sequence of the quadrant chart and in the ranking exercise.

However, we also realized that there was some missed s opportunity for nuancing data in the way we set this up. We could have arranged this as a pair activity where each pair *together* completed one quadrant chart, thus requiring greater discussion and deliberation and expanding

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the MI used. We saw this possibility when Dylan and Rachel spontaneously launched into an extended debate prompted by the quadrant activity. After about 4 minutes of mostly silent writing, Dylan interjected, 'I would like to add something. Learning French has come with a toll. If I was in the English program, I would be much further along in my English.' Rachel immediately responded in disagreement, and extended debate followed about the province's bilingual policy (which Dylan referred to as 'horrible Bilingualism'), and perceived discrimination against Anglophones with respect to employment opportunities (Dylan, 'Bilingualism has hit our province so much'). Others joined in, including some who had been silent in the earlier discussion. At one point, the facilitator probed to extend a comment related to identity, but for the most part, the discussion was between and directed by the participants. After about 23 minutes, when the discussion began to take on repetitive themes, the facilitator redirected the focus to the next segment.

Discussion continued with a collective introspective reflection on the journey of language learning. Our discussion prompts were based on Kramsch's (2009) narrative–based methodology in which she guided participants through journal reflection. Our goal was not to seek an 'explanation,' but rather an 'understanding' (Kramsch 2009), as participants reflected on their bilingual journey. Questions included: Describe what you remember of your first day in French Immersion. How did you feel? How did you feel when you heard your friends trying to speak French? How did you feel about learning French? Describe your journey as a learner of French. Because participants travelled this journey together, these questions also prompted shared reminiscing. Once again, this activity provided opportunity for the expression of *intra–personal, inter–personal,* and *linguistic* MI. The audio and video recording continued during this activity.

The group's collective reminiscence of their learning journey lasted about 6 minutes, and mostly guided by the facilitator, engaged all of the participants. The discussion began with a lively recollection of their first few days of FI in Grade 3. Two participants continued to say very little, and so the facilitator occasionally invited them to contribute to the discussion. When the discussion turned to 'describe yourself as a learner of French,' participants were asked to give a one word answer.

For all components that involved whole group discussion, we faced the same challenges discussed earlier (cf Bloor, et al. 2001): how to avoid the researcher focused question–answer format, how to engage *all* participants, and how to encourage discussion *between* participants rather than responding to the facilitator. There were moments of intense debate between some of the participants; however, participation was uneven. In part, this was a result of the unexpected large size of the group (the principal recruited 10 instead of the planned six), and the seating arrangement limited by recording devices. What Jacobs (2010, 14) says about program form and curricular function applies here: 'Form should support function and not lead it;' the physical setup should support the purposes and goals of the focus group, rather than the focus group implementation be shaped by the physical setup.

Our final component was an *Analogy Graffiti Wall*, adapted from a questionnaire developed by Kramsch (2003). Like Kramsch (2003), the purpose was not to find out what participants thought about learning French, but rather to explore how they constructed their experience. We taped three pieces of chart paper on the wall, each having one of the following three prompts: Learning French is like…. Speaking in French is like…. Writing in French is like…. Small digital voice recorders were placed strategically near each prompt, and the video was panned during the activity to capture as much of the groups' interaction as possible.

Participants naturally formed three groups around the three chart paper stations. Using their personal coloured markers, some immediately wrote an analogy, while others first verbally processed their ideas. Participants shared laughter and animated conversation as they developed their analogies. Some enacted their analogies through body movement. Everyone contributed to the charts and to the subsequent debriefing discussion. This segment lasted about six minutes. The analogies captured feelings towards their learning of French and use of the language that did not appear in earlier conversations, ranging from defeat, hard work, mixed with exhilaration and sense of accomplishment. For example:

Speaking in French is like… 'Alphabet soup;' 'A piece of cake (chocolate cake)'

Learning French is like… 'Beating a difficult video game;' 'Building a new brain'

Writing in French is like… 'Scoring 23 points, but your team still loses;' 'Poetry in motion'

Employing *kinaesthetic, inter-personal, intra-personal,* and *linguistic* MI, the analogies took their reflection to a deeper level than mere linguistic discussion did, enabling them to capture the *essence* of the meanings of their unique language experiences.

Writing Exercise (in French)

We presented participants with the following prompt for writing a short reflection in French: 'What if I had never learned French?' The premise of this writing exercise was Heath's (2000) distinction between 'What happened' narratives and 'What would happen if…' narratives. Heath argues that the latter places greater emphasis on students' personal growth as a user of language or as a bilingual/ multilingual person, beyond just a literacy task. We originally envisioned giving this prompt prior to the first focus group, hoping for unprompted reflection. But because we did not always know who the participants were until the day of our focus groups, we

presented this task at the end of the first session, to be completed at home and submitted during the second session.

Response was not as good as we had hoped for. In spite of email reminder from both the researcher and school administrator, only half of the 10 participants submitted their reflection. However, but the data in them reflect a variety of insightful perspectives on personal bilingualism. Some students mentioned the importance of French for interpersonal connections with family and friends; and each of the students discussed the utility of French for access to better jobs, whether locally, nationally, or internationally. Their reflective writing likewise served as an APK (access prior knowledge), priming them for our second focus group session. This exercise drew upon their *intra–personal* MI as participants reflected on the construction of themselves as language learners and bilingual speakers, and as well as *linguistic* MI through their writing. The hypothetical structure of the writing prompt also employed *logical* MI.

Focus Group Session II (1.5 hours)

We met the Green Ridge Elementary students the following week in the same room, during the school day. We presented students with the following scenario:

> *Imagine you have been commissioned by the Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages to produce a video promoting bilingualism in New Brunswick. Your audience of this video will be students in British Columbia who may not even aware that New Brunswick is Canada's only officially bilingual province.*

The objective of this activity was to examine what constructs these adolescent participants drew upon as they framed the promotion of bilingualism. They were given the option to work in smaller groups or one large group. They chose to work all together, and so we created a working area with tables arranged in a large square, supplied with chart paper, markers and school-

provided IPads with IMovie installed to create their videos. They were familiar with this technology, and no training was required. One of the IPads became the filming device while the rest were used for researching music and content ideas. They decided to write and perform a 'Bilingualism!' rap for their promotional video, celebrating their own bilingualism and the benefits they identified. Audio and video recorders were positioned to capture their conversations; however, as with all the focus groups, at times some of them would go into the hall or spread out in separate teams throughout the room, and so we obtained only partial recordings of the video–making process.

There were multiple MI involved in this activity: *inter–personal* as participants collaborated in the planning, design, and development of their videos; *logical* as they debated their positions; *linguistic* as they constructed their understanding of bilingualism through theatrical script; *spatial intelligence* when planning the video; *bodily–kinesthetic* intelligence as they engaged themselves through bodily movement to communicate ideas and feelings through role play, and for some groups, *musical*, through the choice of background music to support their video message. And importantly, we observed that the process of creating this video brought completely different participatory dynamics to the group. Participants who had been more silent during the first focus group played a more pivotal role, and those who had been most vocal played a secondary role.

For example, Rachel, most active in the group discussions, researched the benefits of bilingualism, and her findings (reduces dementia, increases intelligence, increases learning opportunities) were added to the group's brainstorming chart. However, mostly she sat under a desk where some of the filming was happening to hold a flashlight (the first segment was filmed in darkness, with a flashlight spotlight after the first few frames). Throughout the video rap, she

awkwardly stands at the edge of the group, staring blankly into the camera. Dylan wanted to include a scene in which an Anglophone bilingual speaker was denied a position for being bilingual, demonstrating how opportunity may become discrimination. He also expressed concern about the inaccuracy of the rap's claim that bilingualism enables one to go to university. While he did expand the debate, his ideas were not taken up by the group. Dylan is likewise disengaged in the video. Conversely, April, who only spoke when called on during the first focus group, immediately positioned herself as a leader. Within minutes, she stood up, saying, 'Do I have to sit? Can I stand?' and took on the role of scribe in documenting their brainstorming ideas on chart paper. Once the group had decided to develop a rap, she skipped to the table saying, 'I'm really good at writing songs! I can *do* this!' Olivia, even more silent than April during the first session, was her close partner. Others who had participated actively in the first took on an even stronger role in the second: Grace took on a lead role in being the 'director' of the video's production; as soon as the brainstorming led to the 'pros and cons of French,' Aaron began rapping; Jason became the lead actor. Ivy, Denise, and Abby collaborated with April and Olivia researching ideas and rhyming words. This is not to say each student was actively engaged at all times; there were moments of off-task behaviour for some while waiting for others to complete a task. However, all participants were actively engaged in significant ways at significant moments.

Not only were all members actively involved, their interaction during this exercise resulted in deep insights. Their brainstorming evoked ideologies of bilingualism's role in opening doors to friendship ('I can speak French; I want to be your friend, Ya!'), jobs, education, literature (French books), and enriched intelligence. Other ideologies included the normalcy of bilingualism ('there are no cons to learning French; you just learn it!'), of language becoming a marker of 'us' versus 'them' (bilingual versus monolingual), and a sense of the celebratory

nature of bilingualism (Jason and Aaron wanted explosions in the background to demonstrate the 'awesomeness of French').

REFLECTIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

We experienced challenges in conducting our focus groups, especially related to constraints imposed by recording technology, the physical layout of the room, and size of the group. We had to work against the impulse of a question–answer format. There were behaviour issues with some participants. However, the marrying of pedagogy and language socialization theory also resulted in rich data and a significant meaning-making experience for participants as they explored their linguistic identities and their perspectives on bilingualism in NB. As we critically reflect on our methodology practices, we go back to the underlying characteristics of constructivist theory (as summarized by Hein 1991) that frame UDL and MI to distil some of the key observation that can be made about the pedagogically-based methodology used in these focus groups. As noted earlier, constructivism is often associated with pedagogical approaches that promote active engagement and active learning. Within UDL, this active engagement means multiple forms of expression and engagement, enabling participation of all group members. The various MI suggests one way to understand this differentiation.

The first characteristic of constructivist learning is *participation.* We found that, rather than just 'more data', the range of different activities presented increased opportunities for participation for all members. Not only was this important for our data, but also for the participants themselves in terms of the learning and transformative potential that comes through active participation. The second characteristic is *reflection.* While the participants found the various activities enjoyable, fun itself was not the objective; rather, the activities aimed to engage

the mind. In the context of constructivist learning there needed to be 'reflective activity,' which the variety of activities were able to foster – both individually through intrapersonal reflection and collectively through inter-personal reflection and negotiation. A related third characteristic is *social interaction*. It is through interaction that meaning is formed. We found this to be the case in our focus groups, as participants engaged with each other in identifying and framing their ideas through dialogue and debate in our discussions, in supporting each other in developing their analogies, and through collaboration when designing their video project. The fourth characteristic is *repetition*: 'For significant learning we need to revisit ideas, ponder them try them out, play with them, use them… If you reflect on anything you have learned, you soon realize it is the product of repeated exposure and thought' (Hein 1991, n.p.). The variety of activities used to engage focus group participants in their views of bilingualism made possible this repeated exposure and thought.

A fifth characteristic of constructivism is *triangulation*: The multiple sources of data allowed for the validation of data. For example, while Dylan used strong language in expressing his critique of NB's language policy ('horrible Bilingualism' and view that 'policies of opportunity become policies of discrimination'), this alone did not express his full stance. For, he also proudly informed us that he won an oral French language competition for FI students. Proficiency in French was something he aspired to and was proud of, and had imbibed as part of his identity. Sixth is *nuance:* Bringing together the multiple sources of data thus also allowed for a more nuanced analysis, recognizing the socio-historical and political constructs of language within which these students learn French and develop their perceptions about French and their bilingual identities. For example, during the whole group discussion, a number of the participants engaged in intense debate and drew upon dominant political discourses on bilingualism in NB. In

the production of their promotional video, students engaged in identifying and appropriating a range of 'benefits' related to bilingualism. The analogy exercise captured their conflicting experiences with the acquisition of bilingualism – painful, defeating at times, yet euphoric when accomplished.

And so, by employing methodology that took into account the principles of UDL and differentiation, premised on constructivist theory, we were able to circumvent many of the challenges faced by researchers when conducting focus groups with youth. Through some of our activities, we were able to break through the didactics of conversation, eliciting nuances that might not have emerged through dyadic researcher/participant interview questions. Importantly, we were able to fully engage participants in the process of eliciting their perspectives on bilingualism. And for the adolescent participants, we initiated a conversation on the meanings of bilingualism and of being bilingual that, based on their own account, does not take place within their classes. As put by one student, 'We just have to focus on learning and using French in class,' suggesting a focus on language acquisition without discussion about the meanings of bilingualism and what it means to be bilingual within NB. Our research methodology allowed us to scaffold our research questions in a way that enabled these adolescents to process the concepts; their very participation contributed to their own learning and construction of knowledge. This was particularly evident in the graffiti wall exercise when students supported each other in developing their analogies of language identities, and in the collaborative development of their promotional videos. In that sense, by drawing on pedagogical theory, focus groups can be transformative, involved in the development and discovery of the bilingual selves (cf. Kramsch 2009). In varying degrees, students articulated what bilingualism and the French

language meant to them, how they saw them operating in their own lives, in their interactions with families, friends, and the broader community.

We acknowledge with Garrett (2007) that our analysis focused on only a 'fleeting phase' in the lifespan of adolescents. As social practice, language identities are fluid; the challenge for researchers is to develop methodologies that capture this complexity and fluidity. The process is often messy, with challenges presented by school schedules, limitations of technology, unexpected numbers of participants. However, our discussion contributes to this broader conversation, theorizing methodology for eliciting adolescent learner ideologies and identities, and is of relevance to other areas of research in providing ways to circumvent some of the challenges found in conducting qualitative research with youth.

ENDNOTES

1 In September 2017, the entry point for EFI moved to Grade 1.

2 This original setup was a semicircle, but with groups of nine and 10 students, modifications were required to optimize our recording quality while at the same time support group discussion.

3 French linguists have long described the notion *Standard French* as problematic, given global variation in the language (Klinkenberg 2001). Teachers and principals in this school district described *Standard French* as the variety spoken and taught in NB's immersion programs. While the *Office québécoise de la langue française* establishes a norm for Québécois French and related varieties, there is thus far no professionally-defined Acadian Standard (Boudreau 2001). However, during informal classroom observations which we conducted for another study, teachers appeared to be mostly speaking a standardized form of Acadian French.

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