

Fairness and Equity: A Lesson From Grade 5 Students of Intensive French

By Katy Arnett

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During the last academic year, I had the opportunity to implement a multi-site study of French Second Language (FSL) classrooms in New Brunswick.

Consistent with my previous areas of research, this study sought to consider ways in which teachers negotiated a range of learning needs within a class, all the while balancing the challenge of fostering second language proficiency. The study included various FSL contexts at the elementary and high school levels—Core French, French immersion, Intensive French, and Post-Intensive French. For this article, I will be focusing on the Grade 5 Intensive French classroom included in the study; this particular FSL context has not been featured in a lot of research to date, so there is a need to add to our understanding of the ways in which teachers can support student needs in this program.

Several interesting sub-themes emerged within and across the data from the different classes, but for this article, I will focus on one: student conceptions of the difference between fairness and equity in the Grade 5 class. Though I am currently in the midst of writing up a more detailed research article for publication on these data, it is my goal in this article to provide you with a broad overview of the data's implications that could be immediately relevant to your work in the classroom or to your thinking about issues of inclusive teaching practices.

The Classroom Context

This Grade 5 Intensive French (IF) classroom consisted of 16 students in an urban region of New Brunswick. The classroom teacher had been teaching for five years at the time of the study; she began teaching in the province just as the IF program was being launched as a required program¹ in 2008, so she has only taught IF in her career. In many school settings in this province and district, the majority of students who have Special Education Plans (SEP) are in the English stream and will be enrolled in the IF program.

The parents of all of the students in the class provided consent for me to interview their children, which I did in the middle of February, just after they finished their five-month Intensive French block. I also spent about eight days observing the class officially between November and April and made a few more unofficial visits in between. I interviewed the teacher twice, but we regularly had informal conversations and email exchanges to keep in touch.

In this class, there were 11 boys and 5 girls, and many of the students were identified as having specialized learning needs, either through an official SEP, or because of other known challenges. Four of the students (all boys) self-identified as having ADHD, one of the female students was a recently arrived newcomer from east Asia, several students received additional support for their reading skills, and one of the students had Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). This student, whom I'll call Deacon, had a lot of difficulty regulating his emotions and behaviours, but he could navigate the cognitive demands of the classroom when calm and focused.

The students in the class were open to my presence; I had been presented to them as another teacher who wanted to learn more about how to teach French. I often sat at a table in the back of the room, taking notes, but during certain activities, I was invited to circulate through the room and help students, or the students were directed to check their work with me. Largely, my role could be described as that of a participant-researcher.

Given the volume of data generated in the bigger project, I am still only in the stages of preliminary analysis. Thus, the implications of the research at this point are still only being recognized. What is being shared in this paper speaks to an idea that emerged quite quickly when the data were being examined; thus, it is possible that closer analyses will later reveal some caveats to the points raised here.

1. In the province of New Brunswick, students who do not enroll in the French Immersion program are required to study French through the IF program.

“Fairness” and “equity” in action and in reflection

At the end of the student interviews, I asked the question, “Is there anything about Madame’s class you think I should know?” Four of the students (all boys) immediately began their exchange by referencing Deacon and his learning needs. With some very careful probing (e.g., Could you explain that more? Why do you say that?), they came to talk about how they understood that Deacon sometimes had a hard time keeping his frustration in check and that Madame sometimes needed to calm him down and work with him differently than she had to work with them when they were frustrated. The students, to different degrees, viewed Deacon’s actions and emotions in the classroom as something he could not always control because, as one boy put it, “that’s the way his brain works.” All four of them acknowledged that Madame’s help to Deacon was in response to his particular needs.

In the middle of the year, a reward system had been implemented with Deacon that granted him computer time if he behaved appropriately for a certain window of time. This plan of action was developed by the teacher in collaboration with school personnel who provided support to students with special education needs. Deacon’s love of computers (and anything Pokémon) was well known by everyone in the room, and this decision to use the computer as part of the incentive system was in line with recommendations in the literature about behavioral supports for students with ASD (Friend, 2011). When Deacon’s behaviour started to stray from expectations, he was often reminded how close he was to earning his computer time, and that often brought his behaviour back in line. Once he would earn the computer time, Deacon would often go under another table in the room. Deacon told me during our interview that he viewed the space under the table as “safe”, so it was especially calming for him to be under the table AND be on the computer playing a particular game. Deacon would sometimes be playing his game as students were completing

their assigned work—in this kind of scenario teachers often worry about being perceived by the other students as «unfair».

As mentioned previously, the students who deliberately mentioned Deacon and his behaviour all acknowledged that Madame’s approach to supporting him in the classroom was different from her approach to supporting them. Three of the boys had explicitly referenced the computer time as a way Madame was helping Deacon, so I carefully asked the question, “Do you think that’s fair?”, typically couching it with some statements to make sure the students did not perceive the question negatively or as a criticism of Deacon. And each time, the response I got was “yes”.

Intrigued, I asked more questions (e.g., “Could you explain that more?”). Each time, the boys came to the same conclusion: Madame’s work with Deacon, and in particular her use of the computer-based reward system, was fair because it was what he needed. It was not a problem, from their view, that he was getting to do something they did not; they were not interested in the “equal” treatment. Two of the boys offered nearly the same extension to that response—that it was okay that Madame helped Deacon in this way because they knew that if they needed help with something Madame would help them. They did not want Madame to be always giving everyone the same help (i.e., ensuring equal treatment); they spoke how Madame’s efforts should be spent making sure each student receives the right help.

Needless to say, after these interviews, I asked the teacher informally if there had ever been discussions in her class about the fairness versus equity issue. She indicated that she has never broached the topic with them and could not recall if other teachers had had a similar conversation. By the end of our conversation, I was fairly confident that the students had come to these conclusions on their own.

Conclusion

While more advanced data analysis remains, as does consideration of the issue whether ALL of the students felt this way, the conversations with these Grade 5 students showed that teachers may not need to be as concerned as they sometimes are about finding the balance between fairness and equity in the classroom. It could be the case that the students find it for themselves.

References

Friend, M. (2011). *Special education: Contemporary perspectives for school professionals* (3rd ed.). Boston, MA: Pearson.

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About the Author

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