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Am I Really Worth It?

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Windsor House raises many questions about intrinsic versus extrinsic motivation, essential skills and appropriate canons of knowledge. These are the subjects of ongoing debates among families and staff at the school. But what's most striking about a Windsor education is that for the most part, for the students and families who attend year after year, it works. "My son was fine for kindergarten through grade three in the regular school system," explained one parent. "But when it came to grade four it was horrible—tests and grades filled him with panic. 'I won't go,' he said one day, 'and you can't make me.'"

Through cousins that were attending the school, the family found Windsor, where the boy could work on computers all day at his own pace. Within a few years he was a programming whiz and at the age of 19 started a successful business. "Until you actually have a kid who doesn't fit into the regular system, you have no idea. Our system pays for severe disabilities, but for kids that are just oddballs, or determined to do things the way they want to do them—you'd be surprised how little there is out there." Her younger daughter, on the other hand, chose a traditional school. "She'd visited her brother and cousins often at Windsor House. When I asked her if she'd like to attend, she said, 'You'll have to kill me first. It's anarchy over there.'"

Anarchy isn't the technically correct term, but it gives the impression. As you leave the Lucas Centre cafeteria and cross the courtyard to the north wing occupied by Windsor House, the halls resound with noise. Teenagers sit in clutches at the picnic tables, little boys organize forays to build forts in the woods, eight-year-old girls barter the contents of their lunchbags. Windsor House staff and students will be quick to point out that there is invisible learning going on throughout all these experiences, young people building emotional, interpersonal and communications skills. Marcjon Louwersheimer, a 19-year-old Windsor House alumnus and volunteer, believes that even hanging out has its purpose. "When I tell people how Windsor House works, a lot of them say, 'Well, I wouldn't want my kid to go there, because my kid wouldn't do anything at all.' If you transfer in from a regular school you need maybe six months to a year to relax and get your own direction back. Once the pressure's off, they'll want to learn again."

Traditional scholastic trappings are visible—scheduled classes on everything from math to scriptwriting, as well as the catch-up-with-your-traditional-peers hodgepodge known as WHIM (What Have I Missed). But academic skills like language arts and history are usually acquired organically, through theatre productions directed by local actors Kevin McNulty and Susinn McFarlen, student magazines like *Smiling Happy Intelligent Teenage Entertainment* (known by its more catchy acronym), and much-loved historical simulation games like Victorian Schoolhouse. Interests and crazes flare up in the school like brushfires and burn for a few weeks or months, then disappear.

There are drawbacks to the Windsor House approach. The lack of a canon of imparted knowledge, coercive or otherwise, creates the possibility of students who are emotionally healthy but who are, in the words of SFU professor and education theorist Kieran Egan, "ignorant as swans." Bryan Sjodin attended Windsor House from age five to age 17—now 19 and working in construction, he notices that his knowledge base is less than that of his traditionally-schooled peers. "Windsor House students learn things that my other friends have no clue about, like social understanding and life in general. They grasp reality. But people who went to regular schools had information drilled into them and now they have it, and I don't, and I notice it constantly."

Bryan's mother, a teacher at Moscrop Secondary in Burnaby, sees the other side. "Part of the great value of Windsor House is giving kids the ability to think critically. Most public schools are so marks-driven that kids adapt to that. I'm constantly having to counter my students' attempts to please me and get them to tell me what they actually think."

Windsor House does not offer a diploma that would be recognized by most higher education institutions, with students of all ages taking part in the "Leaving Windsor House" ceremony when they feel the school has given them what they need. Interestingly, of the 30-odd students (mostly 15-17 year-olds) moving on from Windsor House last June, nearly 80 percent are transferring to traditional high schools. Their motives are diverse, from wanting better darkroom facilities and sports opportunities to beefing up academic resumes. With this in mind, Windsor House seems to be a kind of prep school for the soul: a place where kids grow that clichéd but archetypically correct combination of roots and wings, and then move on if they want to master purely intellectual pursuits. But it seems that many of them—especially those from home-schooling backgrounds—simply want to dive into the tantalizing fray of mainstream teenage culture. For kids who love campy theatrics, few venues could be more irresistible than the average high school.

The school continues to grapple with the NVSD for a new and better location, and to maintain a thriving culture in the face of imposed student assessments and cutbacks. Back in the art gallery there's a photo print by Rodney Graham titled *Schoolyard Tree*; one of his series of upside-down trees, this one is starting to shed reddish-orange autumn leaves, its branches spreading down into the sky. When I comment on it to the gallery coordinator, she says kids often want to see it right side up. "But when I turn it, they can see it's not right. The balance and composition are off. You can see it's meant to be upside down, that it works best that way."

the french connection

IS IMMERSION PRIVATE EDUCATION AT PUBLIC PRICES? By Gloria Chang

To immerse or not to immerse? That is the question that keen new mothers are asking each other when they gather, with toddlers in tow, at parent groups, children's book parties and group swims. French is what *tout le monde* is talking about, with parents weighing the pros and cons, and school boards across the Lower Mainland scrambling to meet demand. Cultural and travel opportunities, an edge in the competitive job market, and fluency in Canada's other official language—these are the official reasons for the French frenzy. But if you drop by a Mother Goose singing group or a Waterbabies swim class, you won't get the poster version of why it's so popular. "The buzz about it is that it's private school education for free," confides Richmond mother Lindsay Peacock.

For most of the first two decades of French immersion—which launched in B.C. in 1973—the number of students in the program built up gradually, in fits and starts. Over the past few years, however, those numbers have skyrocketed. The Vancouver School Board turned to a lottery for entry into kindergarten this September to deal with the huge lineups they saw the year before; more than 200 children were put on a waiting list. Richmond and Burnaby haven't yet had to turn away students for kindergarten, but portables are evidence enough of a recent onslaught of hundreds of new immersion students. The trend spans the province. Last year saw a record breaking 35,600 students enrolled in French immersion—about six percent of the B.C. student population—with the largest one-year increase in numbers since the 1980s.

"Dare I say that it's a racist thing that may be driving some of these parents to the program?" says one observer about French immersion's popularity.

French immersion has become de rigeur among parents eager to give their children a leg up. It's seen as an elite program within the public system, where the brightest can sharpen their developing minds unfettered by any behaviourally-challenged classmates. "Once your kid is near school age, you talk about it all the time: if you've gone the English or French route, and about your experiences," says Peacock.

For her part, Peacock says she enrolled her six-year-old in the program because she and her husband believe it will open up learning opportunities. "A second language increases their ability to think."

So how do they really stack up—the French immersion kids, and the regular Janes and Joes? Well, if academic performance is the measuring stick, then French immersion students do appear to draw a longer one. The province's annual Foundation Skills Assessment—a snapshot of performance in reading, writing and numeracy—shows that French immersion students consistently meet or outperform their public school counterparts. But that's not because the French immersion students are more intelligent, according to Dr. Monique Bournot-Trites, an assistant professor of language and literacy at UBC. Partly it's because learning in French—especially for subjects like math—has been shown to improve a student's concentration skills and a capacity for abstract thinking. But mostly, says Bournot-Trites, better academic achievement can be attributed to one, decidedly non-scientific factor: "very involved" parents.

Theresa Mackie, a Vancouver mother who had her two daughters enrolled in French immersion, found there were higher expectations for students in the program. Although she credits the program for her older, studious daughter getting into an Ivy League college, she decided to pull her younger, exuberant theatre-bound daughter out of the program in Grade 8. "My younger daughter found it one layer too many to learn other subjects in high school," says Mackie. "I felt her English skills were dropping. You have to monitor your child and weigh out the benefits." The benefit she found both daughters acquired was better public speaking skills. "I think they quickly lose their inhibition of public speaking and of speaking their minds," says Mackie. Teachers attribute the increased self-confidence to more verbal presentations and to the risk-taking required to learn a second language.

The recent shift towards immersion as a childhood development tool has broadened the pool of applicants. "French immersion programs have been accused as being elitist," says Rita Parikh, executive director of the B.C. & Yukon branch of Canadian Parents for French. "I would say that accusation no longer holds." B.C. now has close to 7,000 members in CPF: that's one parent for every five children. And with French immersion now at 246 schools in 44 districts, classes are becoming ever more representative of the general population—including those with learning challenges, says Parikh. "We believe French immersion is good for everyone, and there's no reason why anyone should be encouraged to drop out." In fact, advocates point out that learning difficulties don't change with the language of instruction. "There's this idea that if you don't do well in French immersion, you can always go back to English and your children will do better," says Bournot-Trites. "That's a false idea. Their lives might be easier, but they'll succeed at the same level."

Yet in neighbourhoods with high percentages of ESL students, second language learning has taken on a decidedly Darwinian twist: to avoid those struggling with English as a second language, some parents are opting to move their kids over to French immersion. "I think ESL is the biggest factor for a lot of people," says Angie Hill, a Richmond mother who's leaning towards immersion for her 18-month-old. "My concern is that kids who don't have problems with English aren't being challenged. General learning resources have been cut; we have more ESL students. So it's a double drain. [In French immersion], you don't have to worry about teaching English; you're not having to try to play catch-up."

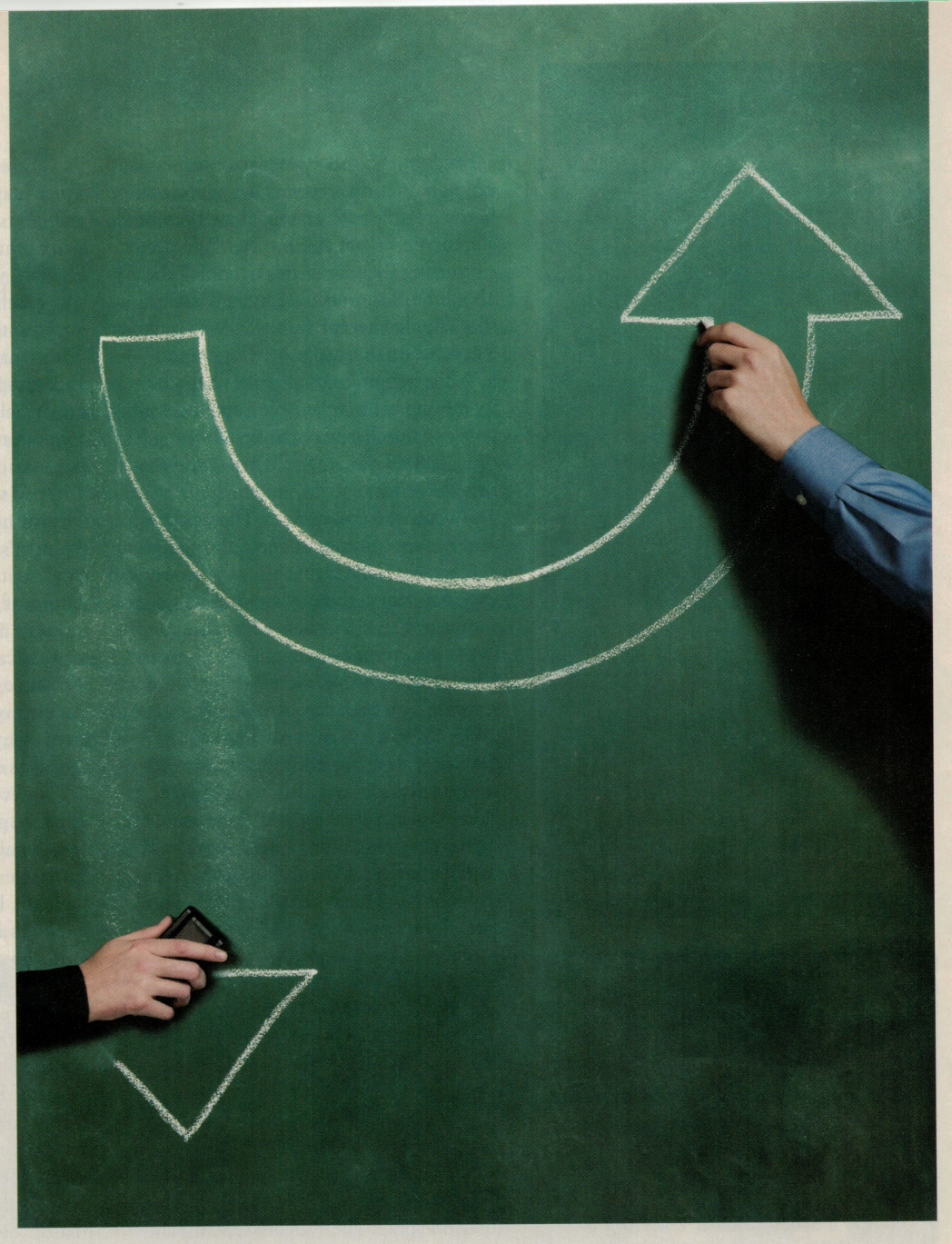
It's hard to ignore the demographics: in Richmond, for example, more than 60 percent of the student population—many of them Canadian-born—speak English as a second language; a quarter of these are not considered fluent at all. Diane Tijman, Richmond's district curriculum coordinator, is uncommonly upfront about French immersion's popularity among some parents. "Dare I say that it's a racist thing that may be driving some of these parents to the program? I have to say some of these parents may be looking at the faces in these classrooms and assuming they can't speak English." In fact, says Tijman, a significant number of those enrolled in French immersion in Richmond are ESL students—and they are thriving.

If varying English skills do have an impact on learning, however, school officials hope a one-year pilot study—starting this fall, and led by UBC's head of language and literacy education, Lee Gunderson—will help answer that question. "The purpose is to find out if the mix of ESL students and native English speakers makes a difference on language, reading and math acquisition skills, and on communication skills—in general and between students." Both Richmond and Vancouver school districts are participating. Given Richmond's high rate of high school graduation and entrance into postsecondary institutions, Tony Carrigan, district curriculum coordinator for ESL, suspects the ESL factor won't prove to be much of a hindrance to academic achievement.

Perhaps more telling will be the information gleaned from the study on what happens in the communications between students in classrooms with larger numbers of ESL students where they're speaking the same language. "The speculation," says Gunderson, "is that students don't have the same motivation to learn English. How does this affect the dynamic of the class? What does this mean for teaching?" What it means for some parents seems entirely based on fear. Among the reasons given

to this writer: concerns over social alienation, and worries that English was not the language of social interaction in the regular program. For these parents, perhaps the real draw of French immersion is that it separates their kids from those who, they perceive, are not embracing English as their social language—and thus, are not embracing the Canadian way of life.

It's not exactly what the pioneers of official bilingualism had in mind for French language education, all this social stratification. Yet French immersion has proven itself to be a successful alternative to the regular public program that, in the long run, can enhance rather than compromise English skills (and, in an effort to spread to word to all parents, Canadian Parents for French is now planning to partner with immigrant service organizations to offer French immersion information in a variety of native tongues). Questions remain: Will English, as a language, suffer? Will we, one day, develop into a society where speaking multiple languages becomes the norm, as in Europe? Will we realize Trudeau's vision: two official languages and a pluralist society? And perhaps most importantly, where are we going to find all these French-speaking teachers?



first nations second chance

THIS CITY'S ABORIGINAL STUDENTS ARE IN GRAVE PERIL. BUT HELP MAY BE ON THE WAY. By Sean Condon

As she steps to the podium to read her valedictorian speech, a nervous Shadae Johnson admits to the crowd that she has lost her notes. It's the kind of moment most people have nightmares about. Unsure if she should carry on, the 18-year-old Musqueam First Nations graduate from downtown Vancouver's Roberts Education Centre runs back to seek advice from one of the teachers. It's near the end of a long night in May at the Vancouver School District's aboriginal high school graduation ceremony and the crowd of about 400 students, parents and teachers packed into UBC's First Nations House of Learning Longhouse all have their eyes glued to her.

But instead of slinking back to her seat in embarrassment, Johnson sticks it out. And although she fumbles through her speech, she still manages to perfectly summarize the hurdles aboriginal students have to overcome if they are going to graduate. She speaks about being bullied because of her heritage, feeling alienated in a still-colonial school system, the difficulty of transferring schools four times and the trouble she had explaining to her teachers that she needed Fridays off so she could participate in powwow dance classes. Compared to what she's had to go through to get to this point, a mislaid speech seems like child's play.