

# “French Teachers Can Figure It Out”: Understanding French as a Second Language (FSL) Teachers’ Work in the Context of the COVID-19 Pandemic

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## Article abstract

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## **“French Teachers Can Figure It Out”: Understanding French as a Second Language (FSL) Teachers’ Work in the Context of the COVID-19 Pandemic**

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### **Abstract**

In 2020, the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic forced teachers in Ontario to move online. Since then, teaching online or in hybrid models has been common across the province. To understand how French as a Second Language (FSL) teachers navigated these spaces, four Ontario French teachers were interviewed about their experience using educational technology and teaching online. Findings were analyzed in light of Hargreaves and Fullan’s (2020) reframing of classic understandings of teachers’ work in the context of the global pandemic. Findings show that factors influencing these teachers’ professional capital reflect common concerns among Canadian educators, alongside those specific to the FSL context. Participants’ professional marginalization and seclusion demonstrates the importance of both the psychic rewards of teaching and cultures of collaboration. Ongoing efforts to capture ways in which teaching FSL has been shaped by the pandemic experience, therefore, require looking beyond individual classrooms to connected systems and systematic efforts of reform.

### **Résumé**

En 2020, la pandémie (COVID-19) a forcé les enseignants de l'Ontario à se déplacer en ligne. Depuis lors, l'enseignement en ligne ou dans des modèles hybrides est devenu courant dans la province. Pour comprendre comment les enseignants de français langue seconde (FLS) naviguent dans ces espaces, quatre enseignants de français de l'Ontario ont été interrogés sur leur expérience de l'utilisation des technologies éducatives et de l'enseignement en ligne. Les résultats ont été analysés à la lumière du recadrage par Hargreaves et Fullan (2020) des conceptions classiques du travail des enseignants dans le contexte de la pandémie mondiale. Les résultats montrent que les facteurs influençant le capital professionnel de ces enseignants reflètent des préoccupations communes aux éducateurs canadiens, ainsi que des préoccupations spécifiques au contexte du FLS. La marginalisation et l'isolement professionnels des participants démontrent l'importance des récompenses psychiques de l'enseignement et des cultures de collaboration. Les efforts continus pour saisir les façons dont l'enseignement du FLS a été façonné par l'expérience de la pandémie exigent donc de regarder au-delà des salles de classe individuelles, vers les systèmes connectés et les efforts systématiques de réforme.

## **“French Teachers Can Figure It Out”: Understanding French as a Second Language (FSL) Teachers’ Work in the Context of the COVID-19 Pandemic**

In the spring of 2020, the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic forced teachers in Ontario to move online. While some educators returned to in-person school, others continued teaching online after the start of the 2020-2021 school year (The Canadian Press, 2021). However, while COVID-19 created chaos for schools across the country, it also “unleashed a wealth of energy in innovative, collaborative and laser-focused problem-solving,” particularly in the way that teachers used “digital opportunities to enhance existing professional capital and community” (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2020, pp. 334–335). Teachers were required to adapt to, and in many cases learn about, teaching online and using digital technologies – which were supported to varying extents and in different ways by schools and educational authorities (Kim, 2020; Mpofu, 2020). For French as a Second Language (FSL) teachers, a chronic lack of such support was already well documented before the pandemic (see Knouzi & Mady, 2014; Lapkin et al., 2009). These kinds of inequalities undermine the work of teachers, and the experiences of the pandemic have exacerbated educational gaps, disengagement, and attendance problems among students (Vaillancourt et al., 2021). How, then, did FSL teachers navigate the pandemic?

Originally, this research project was oriented by the following questions:

1. How did participating FSL teachers experience working online during the pandemic?
2. What affordances or challenges of technology have shaped online FSL education?

However, while it became abundantly clear that data and initially generated themes reinforced the chronic issues already noted in the FSL, educational technology, and online education literature, it was impossible to ignore the distinct and noteworthy nuances of the pandemic experience. Therefore, we felt compelled to reconceptualize the data in light of these developments and explore the insights that can be gained from these experiences in the COVID-19 reality. While we do not wish to downplay the serious consequences and immense difficulty students, teachers, and all stakeholders faced during the pandemic, we must also look to how we can move forward in ways that acknowledge and grow from these experiences (Vaillancourt et al., 2021).

### **Theoretical Framework**

Hargreaves and Fullan (2020) frame the pandemic as an opportunity to revisit Lortie’s (1975) ideas on the sociology of teaching and the ways in which the pandemic challenges, upends, and reinforces different concepts from this work. The authors begin with the “apprenticeship of observation,” saying that the pandemic has forced the world to learn more about teaching from the ‘other side of the desk.’ They discuss ways in which teaching was made visible during the pandemic, the changing opinions about teaching online, and seeing teaching differently as a result. Hargreaves and Fullan also highlight the importance of teachers’ emotional response to their practice, and how the psychic rewards of teaching and learning impact teachers’ satisfaction and engagement in their work.

Finally, the authors describe cultures of individualism and collaboration, and the ways in which we might proceed with open, supportive, and relational practices of teaching, learning, and wellbeing in schools.

We used the work of Hargreaves and Fullan (2020) as a theoretical framework for interpreting the generated themes in the data. Hargreaves and Fullan provide a recent look at teacher knowledge and professional capital during the pandemic, and the ways in which it has constrained education but also presented key learning opportunities. Additionally, several unexpected ideas from participants required us to expand on our initial literature review, to explore how these topics were being taken up in pandemic-era studies. In this article, we present our findings in a way that speaks to the themes of FSL education, using educational technology and teaching online, and the ways in which the experiences of the pandemic nuance these themes for FSL teachers specifically.

### Literature

Despite its challenges, online language learning provides opportunities to reimagine the good work that is already being done with technology in second language (L2) classrooms (Russell & Murphy-Judy, 2021). Generally speaking, technology has been shown to have a positive effect across all language competencies for learners of all ages (Chang & Hung, 2019). Its use can increase student motivation and engagement, foster positive attitudes, and highlight the relevance and global connection of language learning (Koua, 2013). These benefits are also achievable in exclusively online spaces (Hinkelman, 2011). Language learning online can take the form of a blended or “flipped” learning approach, which has received increased attention from both researchers and teachers as a way to augment in-person teaching or to facilitate distance learning (Hinkelman, 2011). Here, students interact with specific language resources (e.g., videos and a website) before class time, and the content is then actively taken up through discussions, group work, or writing (Russell & Murphy-Judy, 2021). This approach prioritizes communication in the classroom, and has been shown to promote work on grammar and vocabulary at students’ own pace by repeating content as needed, and using a variety of technology tools in a scaffolded sequence (Moneypenny & Simon, 2017).

Whether online or in-person, technology has been shown to support language learners in multiple aspects of the language learning process. Technology can support the design of engaging, learner-centred environments, and allow students the opportunity to build confidence and linguistic competence in collaborative spaces (Lawrence, 2014). Online language education allows for greater learner autonomy and self-paced content, while also promoting interest and increasing motivation (Wang & Vásquez, 2012). General technology competency, and the explicit ability to use digital tools and online resources for education, are increasingly recognized as fundamental skills for an information society (Niess & Gillow-Wiles, 2017). This requires adapting pedagogy to meet the affordances and constraints of the virtual space (Gacs et al., 2020).

Yet, technology and its adoption are “not ethically or politically neutral” (Weller, 2020, p. 188). The pandemic highlighted inequities in access to technology and reliable infrastructure, in addition to the existing educational and economic inequities that exist in classroom spaces (Vaillancourt et al., 2021). Disengagement and the lack of interpersonal connection when learning via distance emerged as key challenges to working during the

crisis (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2020). Nor were teachers and students adequately prepared for the shift. A survey of Quebec teachers highlighted that nearly 20% of respondents ranked their digital skills for online learning as ‘below average’, and over 80% indicated they received less than 3 hours of training for remote instruction (QPAT, 2021). This reflects ongoing concerns that teachers do not receive sufficient training with technology (Ertmer et al., 2012), and continue to use digital tools in ways that reflect teacher-centred, traditional classroom activities (Kopcha et al., 2020).

This dearth of attention is notable throughout the K-12 system. Despite widespread research in technology use in language learning in post-secondary online education (e.g., Money Penny & Simon, 2017), and ample research on the integration of technology in K-12 L2 programs (e.g., Lawrence, 2014), there are not yet studies exploring the delivery of FSL K-12 programming in an online or hybrid format resembling the virtual schooling situation of the COVID-19 pandemic. This is perhaps unsurprising, as the field of online K-12 learning generally has only begun to grow over the past decade (Arnesen et al., 2019). Thus, when COVID-19 forced FSL educators to teach at a distance, there was limited research evidence to inform their transition.

Teachers’ professional capital – their human and social value that makes it possible to achieve their goals (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012) – was also changed by the pandemic (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2020). According to Vaillancourt et al. (2021), the pandemic encouraged many teachers to develop new proficiencies (e.g., digital skills), engage students in alternative modes of learning (e.g., in outdoor environments), and support each other in ways that may have surpassed pre-pandemic levels. Yet, the complexity of working online during a crisis, the closing and re-opening of schools, isolation, and connecting virtually also depleted much of the existing capital (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2020). Proactive leadership will be essential to mobilizing resources and capital in ways that address the confusion and frustration experienced over the past few years (Vaillancourt et al., 2021).

Yet, for some teachers (including those teaching FSL), issues of professional capital are not new to the pandemic context. Indeed, the chronic marginalization and diminished capital in FSL education has been documented in the research literature for decades (see Arnott et al., 2019; Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages, 2014). These teachers may struggle to collaborate with other professionals (Knouzi & Mady, 2014), have limited opportunities for meaningful professional learning (Masson, 2018), and report feelings of isolation, exclusion, and disenfranchisement in their work (Masson et al., 2021). Relevant to the move to online education, access, knowledge, and training related to adopting technology are also longstanding concerns among FSL teachers (Smith, 2020; Turnbull & Lawrence, 2003). The extent to which these issues have persisted in light of a situation like the pandemic demanding more support is worth investigating in more detail. As the findings show, this kind of research in K-12 online FSL education can potentially further these two conversations as well as our understanding of how FSL teachers can work – and are working – in the juxtaposition of such novel, yet all too familiar, spaces.

## Methodology

This multiple case study explored FSL teachers’ experiences of professional learning and technology use while teaching during COVID-19. This research design provides variation and insight from across contexts and shifts the focus to collective

interpretations of the experiences (Stake, 2006). Four FSL teachers in Ontario who were working in schools during the 2020-21 school year participated in the study. Teachers were recruited from another study sample as ‘critical cases’ – i.e., those identified as potentially having strategic insights (Flyvbjerg, 2011) - based on their discussions of teaching FSL online. Individual, semi-structured interviews with each participant were conducted in March 2021. The interviews highlighted the teacher’s experiences and practices working online during COVID-19, their successes and challenges, and the kinds of professional support and technology that influenced their practice.

The transcribed data were analyzed via the six-phase reflexive thematic analysis process outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2020). Here, analysis occurs in an “interpretative reflexive process” where coding is “is open and organic” and themes “should be the final ‘outcome’ of data coding and iterative theme development” (Braun & Clarke, 2020, p. 6–7). The phases move researchers cyclically between familiarising themselves with the data, generating initial codes and themes, refining and naming the themes, and writing the analysis. Our analysis process was largely deductive, with theory and prior research informing the orientation of the analysis and interpretation. However, certain ideas were also more ‘grounded’ in the data and generated more on the content of the interviews than what was noted in the literature (Braun & Clarke, 2020). This was particularly relevant for ascertaining the impacts of COVID-19, which are only now being published in research literature. We attempt to foreground participants’ voices, in combination with our own analytic framing, in order to reinforce that these experiences are being authentically represented and to create a sense of vividness, sensitivity, and explicitness to the data (Whittemore et al., 2001).

## Participants

The participants’ background and demographic data are described below, alongside their current teaching assignment (see Table 1).

**Table 1**  
*Portrait of Participants*

Name <sup>a</sup>	Age	Gender	Region <sup>b</sup>	Years of Teaching Experience	Teaching Assignment <sup>c</sup>	Modality
Sandra	30	F	Eastern	8	Grade 4 Immersion	Hybrid
Josie	29	F	Central	7	Grade 5 Immersion	Online
Craig	30	M	Eastern	7	Grade 7 and 8 Immersion	Hybrid
Matt	31	M	Central	9	Grade 8 Immersion	Online

*Note.* <sup>a</sup> Pseudonyms. <sup>b</sup> Regions were taken from the Ontario Ministry of Education regional offices (OME, 2020). <sup>c</sup> Accurate as of March 2021.

***Sandra***

Working primarily in primary and junior classrooms, Sandra has been teaching in French Immersion (FI) and Core FSL settings since certifying as a teacher. As the school's technology lead, she is responsible for supporting her colleagues with technology management, integration, some hands-on training, and disseminating technology-related information from the school board. Sandra's school remained in-person for most of the 2020-21 school year, although some parents opted for their children to move online intermittently. This meant that Sandra had a hybrid classroom, with some students attending face-to-face, others connecting at a distance, and some changing modes suddenly (e.g., when her class was briefly moved completely online after a case of COVID-19 was identified among her students). Sandra is one of two FSL teachers in the school and considers herself to be proficient with working with technology. Sandra's class has 5 iPads and shares two sets of laptops with the other primary classrooms in the school.

***Josie***

Josie has worked in FI classrooms since graduating from her Teacher Education program in 2015. After one year in a large school with multiple FI teachers, Josie was moved to a smaller school where she initiated their FI program. For several years, she was the only FI teacher in the school, although she now has a colleague teaching FI to students in the earlier grades. Josie reported that her teaching assignment in the first term of 2020-2021 had changed repeatedly, with students in Grades 4 and 5 moving in and out of her class. Although assigned to teach online, she reported initially being required to teach that class from within her physical classroom, then having to work entirely from home. Josie is confident in her technology use, frequently integrating digital resources into her practice, and has used Google Classroom for many years. Josie often relies on students bringing in devices from home for day-to-day work, as her classroom equipment is limited to 6 outdated iPads. She also noted a communal set of iPads and laptops (around 25) that could be signed out by all teachers.

***Craig***

Craig has been a middle school Core and FI teacher in two boards in Ontario. He currently works with two separate FI classes, one Grade 7 and one Grade 8. Although his school has been operating mostly in person since September, students had the option to join synchronously or complete their work entirely asynchronously. Craig has therefore been live streaming from his class and converting his content for all three modes (in-person, synchronous, and asynchronous). Several positive cases of COVID-19 in either of the two classes meant he has sometimes been teaching in person for the Grade 7 class, but online for the Grade 8 class, and vice versa. Craig teaches in a rural school, which he notes lacks strong technology infrastructure. He reported he has very limited access to devices in his school – around 25 iPads and 20 laptops are shared between eight classrooms - which restricts his ability to design student-centred lessons with technology. Craig indicated that he was unsure if FI could work effectively online and that he did not see himself opting to teach it online if the choice was available.

***Matt***

A Core FSL teacher for several years, this was Matt's second year as an FI teacher. He works with two other FI teachers in the school. Matt's class was conducted entirely online this year, with no reported plans to return in-person this school year. Matt is confident with technology and, with every student on a device, designed his online classes to try new approaches and tools that would not be feasible in-person. When in-person, Matt has five laptops dedicated to his classroom and has access to a small pool of other devices with four teachers. While there is a keen interest in the FI programs from parents, and a growing number of offerings from the school board, he notes challenges in accessing resources that are at an appropriate level for his students' language competency. Despite advocating strongly for his program, Matt reports feeling discouraged with the support his board provides for FI.

**Findings & Discussion**

In an effort to fully capture the reality of participating FSL teachers' experiences delivering their programming online during a global pandemic, we analyzed the data and organize our reporting of findings using central themes from Hargreaves and Fullan (2020). Specifically, findings are organized into discussions of open professionalism, the psychic rewards of teaching, and cultures of individualism and collaboration. In addition to the challenges of adapting to online practice, the experiences of participating FSL teachers highlight how the pandemic particularly detracted from their job satisfaction and professional relationships, reinforcing an all-too-familiar sense of isolation.

**Open professionalism**

As COVID-19 brought attention to schools, the realities of students and teachers were magnified (Westheimer, 2021). Hargreaves and Fullan (2020) described how parents were able to see teachers and teaching in a new, albeit distorted, light, and the implications this has for teachers' professional capital. Parallels to these ideas were observed with participating FSL teachers in various ways (as described below), taking the form of teachers' adapting their practice to suit the online space and format, while also navigating the affordances and challenges of technology and resources.

***Adapting to Teaching Online***

Online teaching is not a mirror of the physical classroom in a virtual space, and the pedagogy associated with it is therefore altered to meet different challenges (Gacs et al., 2020). This idea was not lost on any participants, particularly Josie who stated that "we're working harder to do what we do [online] than we would in the classroom." Indeed, thinking about "how am I going to transform these in-person activities that I have already into something that's going to work digitally" was key for Sandra. Establishing and maintaining a routine was central to these teachers' online practice. For Matt, this meant keeping his lesson structure consistent with his in-person approach but modifying to the



online space: “we tried to keep the same routines as we had in class. So, we would do a ‘word of the day’ every morning, and then do simplified activities that work online.” For Sandra, her online routines were quite different than in-person; she noted, “I’ve been doing a thing of weekly activities for my kids on Google classroom. I put up an ‘Epic Book’ every week, I create a Blooket<sup>1</sup> homework activity, and put up a class challenge on Duolingo.” If well-planned, online routines can both reduce planning time, and support student success in online language learning (Russell & Murphy-Judy, 2021). In contrast, Craig noted he was disappointed in his online teaching, stating “it looked like a teacher-lead classroom, unfortunately, which when I’m in the [physical] classroom I very rarely have lessons like that.” Research indicates it is unsurprising that teachers who were not adequately prepared for online pedagogy may resort to more teacher-centred, controlled teaching styles (Hinkelman, 2011).

When discussing his approach to teaching online versus face-to-face, Matt noted that “content is really not the first step, but probably the fourth or fifth step when it comes to doing online learning and making it fun.” Keeping lessons engaging, while maintaining the use and relevance of French-language communication, was an ongoing balancing act. Craig noted that technology is “an engagement tool. I find when you can bring tech in, and anything on the Internet, it definitely engages your students and especially for Grade 7 and eight.” With language competence as central to the FI program, Sandra recalled “I was doing a discussion question like ‘which one doesn’t belong’ or some kind of game just to try and keep them going with the speaking because otherwise they weren’t going to retain it.” Assessing student language was a notable challenge for these teachers during the pandemic, and in managing the online space. Sandra notes “for the first 45 minutes of the day they had independent work to do, and I would try and meet with kids one by one and do reading assessments, writing assessments, and things like that.” Assessments of all kinds can be conducted effectively in online spaces when teachers are informed and prepared for adapting to these practices (Link & Li, 2018).

When working online, participants emphasized how the gradual release of responsibility and “flipped” learning reframed their lesson structure. Matt found that “I really have to break it up into chunks so they can actually get something done. Helping them move from concepts to ‘doing’ was important, and so was being there for feedback.” Frontloading the direct instruction, and shifting the content to videos, websites, and prepared packages, meant the teachers were better able to focus on active, student-centred strategies during class time (Hinkelman, 2011; Russell & Murphy-Judy, 2021). Matt explained that the “whole gradual release is really key to my programming... and extra important online.” As Hargreaves and Fullan (2020) describe, issues of access, (dis)engagement, communication, and changing home-school relationships have dramatically shifted understandings of teaching and learning, and simultaneously challenged and opened teachers’ professional knowledge and practice.

### *Navigating Affordances of Technology*

A central aspect of teaching online is the ability to engage in technology-enhanced practices (Gacs et al., 2020). For these teachers, their existing technology skills were an asset. Josie noted “I felt very comfortable navigating [Google Classroom] because I had already become so familiar ... I wouldn’t want to navigate a year of teaching online through

a tool that I wasn't comfortable using." Similarly, Matt felt that he is "fortunate enough that I enjoy technology ... I'm always willing to learn more and do some exploring." These teachers were also strong proponents of using technology in the L2 classroom and spoke to the ways different tools supported their ability to teach online. Sandra, for example, praised Google Classroom for its organization, saying "it's all centralized... turning things in, and not relying on students to share individual things with me ... you eliminate some of those issues."

Similarly, the range of accessibility tools was helpful for meeting the needs of different students. Sandra found that "for the students who are more successful at writing on the computer, you get more output from them than writing by hand. Being able to offer the option of one or the other was great." Matt used interactive whiteboard apps to allow students to submit multimedia assignments, or "record themselves on Flipgrid to do the speaking part." Josie similarly spoke to the benefits of multiple options for submitting coursework: "if you want to do your math practice on pencil and paper, do it on pencil and paper. We'll figure out a way for you to be able to share that with me. Whether it's through photos or a video voiceover recording or whatever else." Capitalizing on the affordances of the technology helped make their teaching not only functional in the online setting but augmented their practice, particularly in thinking about those students with special and diverse needs (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2020)

The gamified, "kid-friendly" nature of many tools kept students interested in their learning. Quiz games like Kahoot<sup>2</sup>, language courses, flashcard websites, message boards, and interactive presentations provided a wide range of options for presenting content online. Yet, as Craig noted, "most of that [pre-made content] is English content or Francophone content for native speakers, so you end up having to change it. There needs to be more of that for French Immersion teachers that are French resources." For years, FSL teachers have identified the dearth of French resources that are adapted for second language learners as a serious challenge they face on a daily basis (Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages, 2014). This is made all the more difficult when "educational technology is often prioritized for courses other than second language learning" (Lawrence, 2014, p. 61). As the next section shows, this chronic gap in support for FSL teachers was made even more visible during the pandemic, as it now manifested itself in online spaces. While Hargreaves and Fullan (2020) suggest that some "teachers earned new respect overnight" (p. 330), this was seemingly not the case for these FSL teachers.

### ***Resources, Supports, and Visible Gaps***

The teachers noted that each of their school boards set up a central repository or online portal to provide general support, resource recommendations, and updates to teachers for teaching online. This commonly included video tutorials, slideshow presentations to showcase certain resources, and often a large spreadsheet file describing tools and apps. Matt described his board distributed an "Excel spreadsheet with the name [of a resource], a quick blurb about it, the grade levels that it could fit, and the topic or subject area." The teachers also noted virtual meetings that presented different resources, some 'lunch and learn' information sessions, as well as regular 'office hours' held by technology specialists to allow teachers to seek advice from these experts. The participants agreed that these general, resource-focused initiatives comprised the majority of what their

board promoted, along with technical services “to help figure out glitches and whatnot” (Josie). Undoubtedly, technological support and expertise within the institution are critical to planned online learning (Gacs et al., 2020).

Yet, given the increased uncertainty felt as a result of the pandemic, Matt indicated that “a couple of videos to train us on how to start up the Google Classroom<sup>3</sup> was all the training that was provided. So, I mean, not great... not really sufficient technology training for a pandemic year.” Similarly, for Craig, “we didn't actually receive any mandatory training or anything like that. And it was all offered on personal time and it was all introductory level on how to use the [Microsoft] online software. I didn't need the basics.” With many of these training resources being crisis-prompted, the teachers became keenly aware of the lack of both initial and ongoing supports required to work effectively online (Gacs et al., 2020). However, as Starkey (2011) observed, even among teachers who are motivated and interested in technology, the pedagogical knowledge required to use these tools effectively for learning is not always guaranteed. In the case of Sandra, she noted a disconnect between the assumed level of technological competence that teachers on the board would have, and their ability to use that technology effectively in their practice. While Sandra supported her team in a recognized role, Craig explained that he became an unofficial technology coach in his school:

[My principal] approached a few of the staff members that were comfortable with some of the programs to work with a few older staff members. It was really tough on them just because they had no idea how any of it worked, and they didn't have online platforms already set up... Probably the hardest part was teaching a class for the first few hours of the day, and then usually have your lunch break, then you're hopping into another video call with Mrs. So-And-So, trying to teach her how to set up her Teams. *Then* it was helping them think about how to *teach* with the tools, and how they could make their lessons work online.

Sandra and Matt emphasized the ways in which these supports were mainly aimed at general, English-stream classrooms. Matt noted, “they've been able to do a lot of those [sessions] and creating these programs and apps to support [English] programming, but not for French ... there needs to be more of that for French Immersion teachers, [things] that are French resources.” When asked about supports for FSL, Sandra responded “no, not really anything French specific ... I think, because of the pandemic it's like ‘yeah, French teachers can figure it out.’” Even for Josie, who mentioned that some resources were targeted for FSL, she recognized that “it wasn't a ton; it was a tab on the portal, so at least there was something.” Sandra explained that FSL teachers commonly adapt online resources. Yet, with the demands of the pandemic, “scrambling” to find resources “in a pinch means I do a lot of work, *a lot*, to take something that has to be translated and then taking it and making it my own [so it can] be useful for my students.” However, Sandra noted times when the resources could not be adapted, adding that “the school board's not supporting us financially to get both” French and English versions of apps. She used the example of BrainPop<sup>4</sup>, in which content is only in one language, and the school indicated they did not have the funds to purchase the French version: “so, then they ended up going with the [English] one, and then I had to buy my own BrainPop subscription.” Josie noted a similar problem in her board which promoted apps for FSL although they had not

purchased a subscription: “some of them had a trial version, which is fine if you want to check it out. But to actually use it, you’re again forking out of your own money because the board won’t support that or reimburse that.” Craig expressed similar frustration with the need to purchase French resources; “in my old board, we had a few different resources that we could use. In my current school, we have nothing - we don’t even have library books in French.”

Matt indicated that he “ended up saying ‘okay, I’ll just do something else.’ I’ll figure it out on another app or recreate it somehow and not worry about it. I think the financial aspects of it were probably the most difficult.” These findings coincide with research documenting the time and effort required by language teachers to find and adapt quality resources as being a challenge that continues today (Lawrence, 2014; MacDonald, 2003). While the availability of online resources increases the teachers’ access to a variety of content, this access to resources is not uniform across all teachers (Stockwell, 2009). The technological considerations of the online space – including how resources, routines, classroom management, and feedback are transferred – become additional barriers (Kim, 2008). These excerpts speak to how these teachers’ perceptions of online learning are informed by a complex interplay of issues and affordances, which have come under increased focus during the pandemic (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2020; Viswanathan, 2019).

### *Navigating Technology Barriers*

As confident users of educational technology, perceived barriers to using technology largely centred on first-order (i.e., external) challenges (Ertmer et al., 2012). Sandra summed up the reality of working with technology by stating, “sometimes it works, sometimes it doesn’t. We just try our best.” Common issues, consistent with research literature, included: connectivity, availability of devices, managing multiple devices, device functionality, and infrastructure reliability (Ertmer et al., 2012). Craig highlighted his biggest challenge was “competing” for the limited devices in his school,

I have my Kahoot and stuff I use that maybe a maximum like five times a year. I just don’t really have a ton of tech that’s accessible. We have a computer cart, and some of [the laptops] work, some of them don’t. Then we have a couple bins of really old iPads, and most of those won’t stay connected to the Internet. If I had access to a class set of devices, I would be using tech more, for sure. I suppose when we were all online that was easier since everyone had to connect somehow.

Additionally, classroom management in the online space was a notable consideration. Matt noted, “you know we’ve had really great lessons, been through the whole thing, and that’s all gotten completely deleted within five seconds because of everyone’s ability to edit.” Using gamified behaviour systems and setting ‘netiquette’ community guidelines were two ways participants identified as being helpful for managing their online classroom space (Gacs et al., 2020; Hinkelman, 2011).

Yet, even as strong supporters of technology use, participating teachers advocated for striking a balance, as Josie clarified by stating “I’m not going to make everything they do tech-based because our entire program had to be virtual. They need that time away from screens as well.” Matt similarly felt he had “to help students get a chance to work offline

and have some learning away from their computers. Writing activities and brainstorming on paper were things I encouraged students to try.”

Hargreaves and Fullan (2020) highlight how stakeholders across educational systems have been able to ‘see’ teaching differently as the shift to online learning during the pandemic opened the classroom up to the world. The authors describe how teachers became ‘contortionists’ in order to make their practice viable in an online space, working through issues of access, disinterest, and ways of working with technology and curriculum resources. The teachers in this study speak to how their position as FSL teachers further complicates and challenges their work, including maintaining the use, relevance, and assessment of French-language communication, while finding appropriate resources for their classroom. While Hargreaves and Fullan discuss the perspectives of parents in this first section, we found that discussions of parental involvement and home-school connection more prominently featured in these teachers’ discussion of the psychic rewards of teaching.

As online learning required screen time for students throughout the K-12 system, questions around the effects of “Zoom fatigue” and what counts as “excessive” screen time have begun to proliferate in health and education literature (e.g., Copeland et al., 2021; Fry, 2021). As teachers experimented with adapting their practice to meet the needs and demands of online teaching, recognizing the potential risks it posed to their students’ wellbeing nuanced their perspectives of technology in learning. These considerations for their own and their students’ health also influenced teachers’ satisfaction with teaching French online. The changing face of these psychic rewards framed how these teachers responded to and approached their practice.

### **Psychic Rewards of Teaching**

Hargreaves and Fullan (2020) highlight the importance of the emotional response that teachers have to their practice. Psychic rewards are prominent in education as emotional labour is central to teachers’ work (Kendrick, 2019). Of particular concern are the compassion fatigue, burnout, and mental health distress that have been reported by teachers during the pandemic (Alberta Teachers’ Association, 2020). Craig was explicit that “I just hated the whole process of going online.” For FSL teachers, the psychic rewards of teaching are mitigated by chronic issues in the profession (Arnott et al., 2019; Masson, 2018), many of which are echoed in the findings from this study.

### ***Marginalizing FSL***

Similar to other Canadian studies (e.g., Knouzi & Mady, 2014; Lapkin et al., 2009), the perceived inequitable treatment and lack of support for FSL by school boards was echoed by participating teachers in this study. The pandemic renewed their awareness of these issues, and in some cases, reportedly exacerbated the inequalities. As Josie noted, “in a year when [the board] is trying to navigate online learning, their focus is going to be for the majority, which we aren’t.” Although resigned to this current reality, participating FSL teachers were firm in continuing to advocate for the program and the needs of themselves and their students.

All participating teachers reported that their board's goals for FI in particular were not aligned with the support being provided for students and teachers in these programs. Matt noted that although the "board is trying to push the number of students enrolling [in FI]", he did not think they are "supporting the [students] who are already in... they need supports as well." Josie and Sandra had a similar sentiment regarding their board's efforts to make FI accessible to all students, but without providing programmatic supports. For Josie, "the board is saying '[FI] needs to be accessible to everyone,' which I do get. But our board does not have the supports in place ... there is no such thing as an FSL support teacher." Likewise, Sandra noted that "students that are normally getting support in English - they're not getting that same support from a specialist teacher for French. I am the FSL support teacher because I *am* the French teacher." Contrasting themselves with their English stream counterparts, all four participants expressed concern over having to be an FSL specialist in addition to their general classroom responsibilities. Craig also commented on the lack of supports for FSL teachers in his current school board:

In my other board, there were a lot of PD [professional development] opportunities. I got released usually once a year to be able to attend them and they were French specific. In this school board, I've never even met the French consultant, and I've never been offered any French PD.

These concerns for their programs reflect contextual influences on these teachers' satisfaction with their work (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2020), and are compounded by other stressors present in the pandemic-induced online environment.

### ***Pressure to 'Perform'***

When asked about whether she felt supported by her school board during the past year of the pandemic, Josie responded, "not really, if I'm being completely honest." The transition to teaching online, even in September, was described by Matt as "really hard to navigate in the beginning ... we really weren't getting a lot of guidance or information from the board." Sandra recalled that "our director was giving us a lot of encouragement ... but it was still very much up to us to just figure it out and saying, 'you're all great people; I know you're going to be able to do this' didn't make it easier."

The emotional impact of this time was felt strongly by participating teachers. Matt described that "everyone was under an immense amount of stress and pressure ... a lot of teachers were very, very frustrated." Sandra added that her Fall term was "was extremely hectic ... I was just trying to survive." Craig echoed this feeling, adding that "just juggling all three learning models has been insanity... it's absolute chaos. There's been so much shifting between in-person learning and going online – whether it's one kid or the whole class." For Josie, navigating the unknown was described as daunting, and there were perceived pressures from the board, the Ministry of Education, and from parents to "perform" in certain ways: "The Ministry telling teachers that 'you're doing the same thing, but online' gave me that mentality. I was comparing what I was doing online to what I would do in the classroom and that situation is completely different." These messages were also not consistent, according to Sandra: "you only have that much time and there's some

families who don't want to do anything at all, some families who are saying you're not sending enough and just anywhere in between.”

As fundamental aspects of their work were becoming even more destabilized beyond the already difficult move to online learning (e.g., Josie's teaching assignment being frequently changed), participating teachers became doubly concerned with the effect on their students as disinterest and disengagement increased, thereby compromising the psychic rewards of their teaching (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2020).

### ***Barriers to Supporting and Connecting with Students***

Beyond their frustrations with school boards, the teachers' emotional connection focused largely on their ability to work with their students. Student engagement and feedback is a key contributor to teachers' work, yet similar to teacher participants in other studies (e.g., Domina et al., 2021), these FSL teachers reported student engagement was concerningly lower during the pandemic and that connecting with them was additionally challenging. As Josie described, “on top of all the other emotions that you're feeling, not being able to reach your students was awful ... I can't give them the same quality of support when I'm online.” Craig attempted to mitigate this disconnect by scheduling time to connect with his students individually:

I had constant chat messages coming in through [Microsoft] Teams while I was trying to present or have them do work online. I tried to set up calls with kids typically either on my lunch breaks or, for the most part, I just did it after school if they could. I had no time to check on those asynchronous students throughout the day so usually any of my asynchronous check-ins - and even any actually good, thorough check-ins with my synchronous students - came after school hours. But that was a lot of extra time and stress.

These concerns compounded feelings of a loss of control and uncertainty in their practice. Matt mentioned that “it goes back to that idea of me being out of control. I was opening breakout rooms, so the groups would be working on Google, and I ended up trying to be in all places at once. I can't see how they're doing like I can looking around the classroom.” Matt continued, “I feel like it is to be expected, but it... it makes it more challenging when you can't reach those kids on the same level as you normally would. I know I need to do something, but what? Especially online, I don't know...” Sandra also worried about the effectiveness of her online practice, “I don't know... I don't know if it's the best thing or not, but it seems to work for now.” This uncertainty and concern for their teaching practice speaks to the need for consistent, quality professional learning related to technology integration for in-person, hybrid, and online language classrooms (Levy, 2009). School boards cannot assume that teachers have the theoretical and pedagogical knowledge required to design effectively with technology, and the ways the modality shifts their language teaching (Koua, 2013; Lawrence, 2014).

Participating teachers noted a need to rely on students to take greater responsibility in their online learning. As previously mentioned, student ownership and self-regulation require attention when learning in online spaces (Hinkelman, 2011). For Craig, his

students' independence was positive, stating "thankfully my asynchronous students are fantastic. So, they pick up a lot of my slack when I post my programming. I know they can reach out and take on some of that extra responsibility." When working with younger students, Josie noted that "you can set your expectations as much as you want, but you lose that easy way to keep them on track." This was particularly the case given the different kinds of distractions and challenges that came with online learning during the pandemic. Sandra explained, "with them having so many distractions at home it's easy for them to just say 'nope' and go to something that they would much rather do. And I can't tell if they have their camera off" Matt echoed that "the same level of engagement and effort has to be put forth by the students. You can work your tail off to create these things, but if they're not going to even look at [the online portal], then you know there's an additional struggle." He continued, "it's their choice to participate in the chat, to turn on their cameras, to not have another window open and be doing something else. I had to really emphasize that ownership to them." Craig noted a similar shift in some of his students' engagement:

I can have good discussions, and the kids are a little bit more likely to actually be engaging and talk with one another and share their thinking. Whereas even now some of my really good kids just go silent. When we're in person I can hear the conversations that are happening but, for the most part, when folks are online I rarely hear from them. Sometimes I can, you know, force them to write something in the chat box to let me know that they're alive, but...

Josie addressed this in her class by noting that students need to "realize that the accountability piece plays a huge part, even more than in person." Despite the challenges of the pandemic, she contended that persistence was a key message she relayed to her students, "wouldn't you rather be able to learn these skills so that you, moving on to the next year, are going to be successful? Instead of saying 'oh yeah, my Grade 5 year was online, but what did I really learn? Nothing.'"

This responsibility was also connected to students' technological skills. Students with more knowledge and advanced skills with technology could be relied upon more to navigate the online environment, meaning that the teachers' attention could then be given to students who were less adept with technology. For Matt, working with Grade 8 students was made simpler because the "students that I had this year had already learned about using [Google Classroom] in the spring, and their teacher from last year had been using it before the pandemic." This was different from Sandra who noted she needed to teach her Grade 4 class "how to create a new document and then share it with me, how to navigate the [portal], where to find their tasks ... they don't necessarily have the tech skills to be jumping right in." Josie found herself in a position where she was unable to consistently share video content from her screen and had to "rely on my Grade 5 students to play a video for the class, which I didn't think I would." Studies of educational technology have consistently noted the ability of students to show teachers "new ways to use technology" and help them "to troubleshoot technology problems" (Ertmer et al., 2012, p. 434), yet, teachers cannot presume that students have the ability to use technology effectively for learning (Blake, 2016; Niess & Gillow-Wiles, 2017). As Hargreaves and Fullan (2020) point out, while challenging, these kinds of changing roles and expectations of students and the teacher in online spaces can also factor into the psychic rewards for these teachers.



## **Cultures of Individualism and Collaboration**

The benefits of teacher collaboration have been well established in the research literature (e.g., Stoll & Louis, 2007). While not all teaching can take place collaboratively, when it does, “the ideas and strategies [teachers] pick up will mean they become better when they are on their own” (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2020, p. 332). In this vein, nuanced ideas of self-sufficiency and individualism, peer collaboration, and relationships beyond their schools were discussed by these teachers.

### ***Isolation and Self-Sufficiency***

There has been a chronic shortage of French teachers in Canada since the turn of the century (Commissioner of Official Languages, 2014; Lapkin et al., 2009). Sandra described the situation in her board: “we don’t have enough French teachers, so the main focus for helping French teachers in the board this year was hiring new teachers, and they left us to figure out the actual teaching.” Feeling like they had been left “on [their] own,” as Matt put it, was not unique to the pandemic experience; however, it served as yet another manifestation of the perceived lack of support for FSL. Josie commented, “there is no one else to help you ... you figure it out because there is no other way.” Feelings of isolation are related to higher stress, potentially leading to burnout and teachers leaving the profession (e.g., Ostovar-Nameghi & Sheikhamadi, 2016). This is a substantial concern for school boards, as these issues of professional isolation and dissatisfaction continue to plague FSL teachers (Commissioner of Official Languages, 2014), who, like other teachers, explicitly value collaboration, collegial feedback, and interaction with other professionals (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2020)

Despite this perpetually bleak situation in FSL, it is interesting to note how the participating teachers recognized that the ability to be self-sufficient in times of uncertainty was a strong skill they had developed as FSL teachers. The teachers reflected this feeling consistently:

I think we're more used to it, so then when it came to the pandemic, I told myself “okay, this is not that much different.” (Craig)

You know, there isn't that same level of support and focus on our program, I guess, just because we are numbered... It always encourages you to be self-sufficient. (Matt)

FI is a lot of self-discovery and exploration anyway, but with the move online, I realized I have to figure out how I'm going to navigate this. (Sandra)

These excerpts highlight not only the lack of relevant and accessible resources these FSL teachers face in their schools, but also bring to light how the pandemic likely reinforced the sense of disconnection. Matt noted, “being in FSL already amplifies your lack of broader connection to what's going on in the board generally. So online you're... almost unaware of

everything else.” Similarly, Sandra commented, “I mean it's more work [online], but it's nothing out of the ordinary to have to try and do things for ourselves.”

Such feelings of isolation and disconnect have been previously reported among disempowered and unhappy FSL teachers (Knouzi & Mady, 2014; Masson, 2018).

However, the ways in which the pandemic and online experience may have reinforced this kind of disconnect requires ongoing attention (ATA, 2020). In the meantime, supporting these teachers with formal, informal, and peer support is one possibility for alleviating this sense of isolation, and “flexibly scheduled” online meetings can help strengthen collaboration and relationships among teachers (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2020, p. 334).

### ***Creating Opportunities for Collaboration***

Interestingly, participating teachers created their own opportunities for connection within the online space. For example, they noted peer collaboration and professional networks as potential supports as they navigate varying challenges in their practice (Rhoades & Woods, 2015; Vescio et al., 2008). For them, resource sharing was particularly highlighted as a means by which FSL teachers provided support to each other. For Sandra, “I have a really good colleague at another school, so we would collaborate together and we would co-create some resources to be able to use with our students online.” Josie looked to “social media, Facebook groups, and even Teachers Pay Teachers were a big help ... because no one wants to reinvent the wheel.” Matt noted that while these opportunities were rare “a group of teachers working together to create things that are more authentic is so important when it can happen.” Craig perceived a trade-off between structured and informal collaborations among teachers in his school:

I have to be pretty independent... I mean right now we're not supposed to be doing any in-person collaboration anyway. But we stop by after the kids are gone and say “hey, what are you doing for passé composé?” or whatever it is. We definitely float a lot of ideas past one another that way. But there's been no structured collaboration between us. It's been mostly just the after-school talks or sending emails, or quick messages in our chat or by text when we were online. I would say there's a lot less ‘long term’ planning and a lot more ‘last minute’ planning where we're trying to quickly plug a hole in our lesson plans.

In her role as the technology lead for her school, Sandra found comfort in being “able to figure it out for the school. To help people out and make things easier for them.” Matt also recalled times when he “stepped up to support colleagues who were struggling. When it was hard, we'd look to [other teachers] and say ‘I need this now. This has to work in this exact time and this exact way. Help me.’” Josie added that although she “would rather take the time to explore independently, I still really appreciate the connections with other French immersion teachers at different schools.” Still, participating teachers were unaware of any formal networking initiatives through their board. These excerpts reinforce Hargreaves and Fullan's (2020) position that “COVID-19 has both weakened and strengthened” collaboration for teachers (p. 332).

## Implications & Conclusions

Participating FSL teachers' experiences highlighted the ways in which their professionalism and practice, emotional responses and connections to teaching, and their work in isolation and collaboration changed during the pandemic and the shift to teaching online. In light of the emerging literature on teachers' experience during the pandemic (i.e., Hargreaves & Fullan, 2020), the implications of chronic issues in the field of FSL are amplified and contextualized in ways that require renewed and re-envisioned efforts. The participants' in-depth discussion of their professional marginalization and seclusion in FSL highlights the importance of both the psychic rewards of teaching as well as cultures of isolation and collaboration described by Hargreaves and Fullan. The teachers seem to express feelings of disconnect from their schools and boards yet note continued efforts on their part to try to collaborate and connect with their colleagues. Similar to teachers cited by Hargreaves and Fullan, these FSL teachers' professionalism and ability to adapt to teaching online were key to navigating the realities of the pandemic, yet their technology-focused competencies did not alleviate the persistent challenges they faced in their context. Teacher participants spoke to the emotional, mental, financial, and physical toll of this year, and their concern for working online with minimal guidance and support - a working environment simultaneously plagued by COVID-19 as well as the kind of perpetual marginalization of FSL teachers that existed long before the pandemic (Lapkin et al., 2009). More than ever, it has become abundantly clear how "teachers' working conditions are children's learning conditions" and that "we should do everything we can to assist [teachers'] efforts (Westheimer, 2021, para. 11). In FI, in particular, addressing these issues is essential to providing the quality instruction that school boards promote, and students and parents expect. Hargreaves and Fullan (2020) state that "the social capital aspect of professional capital has been ... a precondition of how well teachers have been able to respond to COVID-19" (p. 334); and yet, the participating FSL teachers' ability to connect with others and reflect on the realities of their practice was largely absent, yet sought after. These teachers expressed a desire to talk to teachers about what they were doing, and how they could make their technology-enhanced practice more effective, whether online, hybrid, or in-person. For them, the pandemic emphasized that quality of content in the online environment is more important than quantity of coverage (Westheimer, 2021), reinforcing that we must be focused with our use of "digital opportunities to enhance existing professional capital and community" (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2020, p. 335). These priorities cannot be realized unless FSL teachers are able to connect with colleagues and learn from and with one another. Transforming the cultures of individualism in FSL into cultures of collaboration is, therefore, an essential post-pandemic call to action.

Capitalizing on the way concepts such as open professionalism, psychic rewards, and collaboration have been shaped by the pandemic experience and "modernized to apply to teachers, parents and students learning together" (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2020, p. 335) requires looking beyond individual classrooms to connected systems and systematic efforts of reform. Networking FSL teachers across schools, addressing the marginalized status, and fostering their professional capital requires more than disparate, one-time interventions that often characterize teacher supports (Keay et al., 2019). By paying attention to these teachers' 'small stories' (Masson, 2018; Vásquez, 2011), we can be better positioned to

respond to the needs of FSL teachers in both crisis-prompted and planned-teaching settings, whether in-person or online.

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### Notes

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- <sup>1</sup> Blooket: <https://www.blooket.com/>
- <sup>2</sup> Kahoot: <https://kahoot.com/>
- <sup>3</sup> Google Classroom: <https://classroom.google.com/>
- <sup>4</sup> BrainPop: <https://www.brainpop.com/>

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