For more than a decade, the Center for Advanced Research on Language Acquisition (CARLA) at the University of Minnesota has sponsored a variety of summer institutes that cater to the needs of language teaching professionals. These institutes serve as one of several outreach venues for the dissemination of CARLA's various projects including the Immersion Research and Professional Development Project. During two consecutive summers, 2003 and 2004, the annual “Meeting the Challenges of Immersion Education” institute focused specifically on one of the field’s more complex and persistent challenges—language and learning disorders (LLD) in the dual language and immersion context. Consistent with CARLA’s Immersion Projects’ professional contributions to this field, this publication targets a variety of dual language settings, including one-way (foreign language) immersion, two-way (bilingual) immersion, and indigenous immersion.

Multiple factors contribute to the enduring nature of this challenge. First, immersion programs are elective programs within the public school system. This means that children and families are able to move to a non-immersion program if they believe it is in the best interest of the child. Thus, individuals who are involved in immersion education can and do ask, “Is immersion the best program for this child?” Most parents ask themselves this question prior to enrolling their child, and if the child begins to show signs of struggling academically, linguistically, or socially, parents and educators are likely to revisit the question time and again.

Secondly, as public schools, immersion programs are open to all children. No prescreening of applicants occurs for initial program entry in K-1 for the vast majority of U.S. programs. Lateral entry in grades 2 and beyond typically requires some kind of language and literacy skill assessment to ensure that the newcomer can be successful learning in two languages. Because immersion programs open their doors to all families, immersion students can be expected to exhibit an incidence of LLD similar to that found in other public schools. The National Center for Learning Disabilities (Cortiella, 2009) reports that in 2007, 9% of all public school students were identified as eligible for additional educational assistance by
the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA, 2004); 4% of all children received services under the category of specific learning disabilities (SLD) and 2% were identified for speech or language impairment (SLI). The prevalence of elementary-aged children receiving support for SLI was higher, slightly more than 4%. Eligibility for SLD-related services was even higher among certain ethnic groups; in the category of SLD, for example, 5% of Hispanic children, 6% of African Americans and 7% of Native Americans were eligible.

A third factor that contributes to the persistence of this challenge for immersion educators is the steady rise in program numbers. According to the Center for Applied Linguistics (2006, 2009), there are currently 310 foreign language immersion programs and 346 two-way bilingual immersion programs. While these numbers may not appear large, as a percentage of the total number of elementary language education programs in the U.S., the number of immersion programs continues to rise. Over the past thirty years, national survey data indicate growth from 2% of all elementary foreign language programs in 1987 to 8% in 1997 to at least 13% as of 2008 (Rhodes & Branaman, 1999; Center for Applied Linguistics, 2008). This upward trend for immersion programming is even more remarkable given the overall decline in elementary-level foreign language program numbers in the past decade from 31% of all elementary schools offering foreign language programming in 1997 to 25% as of 2008 (Center for Applied Linguistics, 2008).

In addition to the topic's persistence, the unique nature of language and learning differences increases topic complexity. Questions that arise about any given child are highly learner and situation specific and vary a great deal. For example, immersion parents and teachers might ask:

- Are the child's reading struggles due to learning to read in a second language or might there be some other language-based disorder at play?
- Since early intervention is key, how long should teachers and parents engage in “watchful waiting” with a struggling learner before requesting additional learning support?
- Are children who have already been diagnosed with attention deficit disorder or autism able to be successful in the immersion classroom?

While questions are many and varied, answers are few and far between. Pertinent research findings from studies carried out in immersion contexts are limited, and in some cases, inconsistent. Securing funding and designing and carrying out high-quality research studies in this area is a challenge. Moreover, many areas in the U.S. lack a sufficient number of students and programs to create an adequate sample size of struggling learners for certain types of research. As a result, administrators, teachers, parents, and other specialists are frequently asked to make difficult decisions about children who struggle based on incomplete information and relatively few guidelines.

Bilingual school psychologist, Aline Petzold, presents the district’s process for distinguishing between a language/learning delay and a disability.
In an effort to meet the challenge of learners who struggle in immersion programs, more than seventy professionals with experience in language immersion education gathered over the course of two summers to engage issues relevant to educating the struggling immersion learner. Together, they examined research, exchanged ideas, and listened to specialists, including researchers, special education teachers, school psychologists, and speech-language pathologists.

The goals of the institutes were:

1. To establish a professional forum for immersion educators and specialists who are interested in this topic to exchange ideas and practices.

2. To examine the research literature on struggling second language learners and discuss implications for teaching and learning in immersion settings.

3. To consider a range of pre-referral procedures and assessment practices that can provide feedback on students’ language development and learning.

4. To explore a variety of instructional adaptations known to be effective with underperforming language immersion learners and discuss how to integrate these strategies both at the classroom and program level.

5. To collaboratively create a list of recommended instructional adaptations that address particular language and learning disorders and create a more inclusive learning environment.

The Immersion Projects coordinator, Tara Williams Fortune, facilitated the weeklong event. Various educational specialists from Minnesota’s immersion schools presented, as well as Kathryn Kohnert, associate professor in the Department of Speech-Language-Hearing Sciences. All but one Taiwanese participant came from immersion programs located in 16 states representing all continental regions of the U.S. and Alaska. They represented three distinct immersion education contexts: the one-way foreign language immersion context (represented by 71%), the two-way bilingual immersion context (represented by 24%), and the indigenous (heritage) immersion context (represented by 5%). The immersion languages targeted by participants’ programs included Spanish, French, German, Japanese (one-way programs), Spanish-English, Cantonese-English (two-way programs), and Yup’ik (an indigenous program).

Collectively, participants brought a wealth of experience in the immersion setting and a wide variety of professional perspectives. On the first day of the institute, participants were invited to complete a survey that requested information about their role and years of immersion experience, as well as the range and frequency of language and learning issues they
Struggling learner S and language immersion education had encountered in their professions. Of the fifty-four participants who responded, the majority of respondents had three or more years working as classroom teachers in an immersion setting (see Introduction Figure 1). In addition, many respondents were educational specialists and program support personnel (see Introduction Table 1).

The “Survey of Exceptionalities and the Immersion Classroom,” developed by Dr. Fortune in advance of the institute, was given to all participants at the beginning of the week. It included a list of exceptionality categories recognized by Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA) 2004. A brief definition was provided for each category. For example, the label “visual impairment and blindness” was followed by this descriptive text “visual impairment includes any type of sight problem which, even with correction, adversely affects educational performance.”

Participants were asked to indicate how often they had encountered the particular exceptionality in their immersion practice using a five-point scale that ranged from “never” to “always.” See Appendix A on page 115 to review the actual survey.

Results from this informal survey indicated that the most frequently encountered disorders fell under the broad category of SLD, with the exception of two: attention deficit hyperactivity disorder and speech or language
impairment. The seven most frequently encountered issues of exceptionality are listed below beginning with the issue cited most often:

1. Reading Comprehension (SLD)
2. Basic Reading Skills (SLD)
3. Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)
4. Listening Comprehension (SLD)
5. Speech or Language Impairment (SLI)
6. Oral Expression (SLD)
7. Math Reasoning and Calculation (SLD)

Appendix B on page 118 displays the survey data totaled for the two institutes.

The following practitioner-oriented document began to take shape during these summers. It is framed by ten questions that were individually identified and mutually agreed upon by institute participants in the summer of 2003. Beginning with these questions the following summer, 2004 summer institute participants broke into groups of four or five and selected one of the already identified questions to examine in greater depth over the course of the institute. As various presenters shared information and research, participants were invited to apply what they were learning from one another to their group’s question. They were also encouraged to avail themselves of the rich array of research articles in the institute’s Struggling Learners’ Lending Library. Based on institute presentations, discussions, and readings, each group put together a list of relevant research findings. On the final day of the weeklong institute, the groups brainstormed implications and offered recommendations for immersion classroom and program practices.

The work presented here expands on this initial collaboration. Over the past few years, Tara Fortune and Mandy Menke, a Ph.D. candidate in Hispanic Linguistics at the University of Minnesota, have reviewed and refined the practitioner contributions from the summer institutes. The ten original questions were reduced to nine chapters because questions 5 and 6 were combined into one. These nine chapters have been organized into two sections: Part One: Program Suitability and Learner Disability, and Part Two: Best Practice at the Classroom- and Program-Level. Part One addresses educators’ uncertainties about the appropriateness of immersion schooling for various learner profiles and learning needs, initial literacy challenges, and the subtleties involved in differentiating delay vs. disability, including the development of assessment practices to determine eligibility for special education services. Part Two focuses on classroom-based and program-level responses to language and learning struggles. It discusses ways that teachers, reading specialists and special education teachers can modify and adapt instruction; presents a variety of early support programs and services developed by immersion educators; provides guidance for the “In which language?” conundrum; and addresses the important role of home-school communication.

To provide a more meaningful reading experience, a number of veteran educators who work in immersion programs were invited...
to share a personal case story that relates to the question at hand. Their lived experiences offer readers a forum for reflecting on the issues at a deeper level. Each chapter then begins with questions. The questions in chapters 1-8 are followed by an immersion educator’s narrated experience with the particular challenge introduced by the questions. Next, background information on the topic precedes a brief discussion of relevant research and literature from the field of language and culture education. Depending on topic complexity, these discussions may be on occasion further organized into sub-topics. After the presentation of research, there is a list of research and practitioner-informed recommendations intended to guide program and classroom practice. Finally, a number of online and print resources are listed that can serve to provide further information and support best practice. More complete citations for print resources can be found in the reference section. References and a master list of resources for each of the nine chapters are also accessible on the CARLA website at www.carla.umn.edu/immersion.

This document was designed with practicing immersion educators in mind. We hope that those who work in immersion contexts are able to use this document as a resource as well as a tool for professional development. It has been our intent to bridge the research-practice divide by synthesizing research findings in the context of practitioners’ lived experiences and the questions that stem from these experiences. We have sought to present this information in a format that is readily accessible to Child Study Teams within the immersion setting, including teachers, administrators, special educators, school psychologists, social workers, speech language pathologists, and other educational specialists. This resource can also be used as a course textbook for language teacher education programs, and other post-secondary programs that offer professional development for allied professionals (e.g., school administrators, special educators, school psychologists, social workers, speech language pathologists, etc.) who work in bilingual and immersion environments.