HOW DO SCHOOL PRINCIPALS IN FRANCOPHONE MINORITY SETTINGS PERCEIVE THE FACTORS SHAPING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SCHOOLS AND IMMIGRANT FAMILIES?

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ABSTRACT

The relationship between schools and immigrant families follows a dynamic where expectations, needs, identities, values and ideas about belonging intersect and create intercultural contract. Many factors can shape this contact, such as the power dynamic between schools and the family, the ethnic origin, the level of education of the parents, the socioeconomic level of the family, cultural differences and the requirements associated with the adaptation process. Tensions can emerge because of different notions regarding education and because of feelings of distrust or the fear of being judged. In this article, we are sharing our research results on what factors, according to school principals, shape the relationship they build with immigrant families.

CONTEXT AND ISSUES

Similarly to other minority French-speaking communities in Canada, New Brunswick's community has become a choice destination for many new francophone immigrants. This community attracts families who want their children to attend schools located far from big urban centers, international students that later choose to become permanent citizens and refugees. These immigrants compensate for the demographic decline caused by an aging population and by youths moving out West in search for work. Indeed, the benefits of francophone immigration on the well-being of the minority francophone community of New Brunswick has been well-documented by many researchers (Akbari, 2007; Belkhodja, 2008; CIC and FCFAC,

2008; Gallant, 2004; Kasparian, 2008). However, the rapport the francophone minority community in New Brunswick has towards immigration is characterised by two elements: first, there is an instrumental aspect to this rapport as immigration is considered a social necessity, and second, the retention rates of newcomers that opt for New Brunswick's francophone community as their first choice of destination is relatively low. From this perspective, the boundaries that francophones from minority communities set towards immigration are indicative of the lukewarm, paradoxical even, relationship they have towards immigration: immigrants are seen as a necessity given that they increase the French-speaking community's demographic weight, yet they are at the same time somewhat rejected on the base of identity issues (Fermer, 2010; Gallant, 2004). However, this tendency to want to protect Acadian culture and language by closing it off has been replaced by a new openness to cultural diversity, a viable strategy according to Belkhodja (2008) because of Canada's recognition of linguistic duality. According to the same author, even though immigration is still limited, "it is causing profound and long-lasting changes on its host communities" (Bekhodja, 2008:4).

Indeed, one of the most impacted-on institutions of host communities is the school. Schools are the place where the immigrant child builds her first friendships with children from the host society and where her process of acculturation begins. It is there that she becomes aware of her identity and of her cultural difference, and it is also there where she develops her personality and self-confidence. It is through their child's academic and social experiences that immigrant parents learn about the host society's values and it is in respect to those new learnt values that they position themselves. However, it is also in school that closer and more intense intercultural ties between members of the host society and newcomers are forged. Thus, many researchers have studied the issue of immigrant integration in New Brunswick's Acadian schools since the early 2000s. These studies have shown that immigrant integration in French schools in minority settings run into obstacles of a different order than the ones occurring in majority settings; some of these obstacles are the lack of proper support structures, difficulties in learning French (Bouchamma, 2009), difficulties in math and language and social integration problems (Benimmas, 2010; Gallant, 2004). To that effect, a commission on French schools has already recommended that resources should be set up to "better welcome immigrant children" (Leblanc, 2008:71). For their part, Porter and Aucoin (2012, 35), who have studied immigrant integration in schools in New Brunswick, assert that French schools in the south of the province where the biggest urban centers are situated (Greater Moncton, Saint-John and Fredericton) have considerable difficulties when it comes to providing services to young refugees that have greatly fallen behind in their schooling and to young allophones needing to learn French.

In those cases, the relationship between immigrant families and schools represents a great opportunity to improve the academic success of its immigrant pupils. Education should be set in relation to the experience and specific needs of these youths and facilitate their acquisition of the new social codes required in order to integrate the host society (Benoît, Rousseau, Ngirumpatse and Lacroix, 2008). Given how this relationship impacts the socialisation process and education of immigrant youths, numerous researchers have started examining it (Vatz Laaroussi, Kanouté and Rachédi, 2008). These researchers have noted some factors that interfere on the relationship between schools and immigrant families such as socioeconomic status, expectations towards the way children are schooled, education level, language skills, ethnic origin, adaptation process, etc. The research which follows aims to explore and document the different factors impacting the relationship between schools and immigrant parents in a francophone minority setting in New Brunswick and does so by considering the perceptions of school principals about this relationship. To be more precise, our objective is to analyse the perceptions that school principals in New Brunswick's francophone minority community have of the factors that shape the relationship between schools and immigrant parents. This will also enable us to take a closer look at the school/immigrant family relationship. This study is the first to tackle this subject in New Brunswick's minority setting, a province where immigrant retention has become a major demographic, economic and sociocultural issue. Thus the objective of the following research is to analyse the factors impacting upon the relationship between schools and immigrant families and this from the vantage point of New Brunswick's school principals.

RESEARCH METHOD

To achieve our objective, we have elected to use a qualitative research method. Data was gathered through recorded semi-structured interviews (Savoie-Zajc, 2009). Six interviews were done with six school principals from the south and the north-west of the province; our participants administer schools that welcome an increasing number of immigrant students. Our data was first analysed by theme and then followed by an interpretative analysis (Paillé and Muchielli, 2008).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

According to our participants, the relationship between immigrant families and schools appears to be shaped by many factors such as a discrepancy in expectations, ethnic origin, parents' level of education, the socioeconomic level of the family, cultural differences and requirements of the adaptation process.

DISCREPANCIES IN EXPECTATIONS AND PERCEPTIONS

The discrepancy between the schools' expectations and the ones of immigrant family impacts the collaborative process between those two social entities. Indeed, according to school principals, immigrant parents should act just as the other parents do. *"According to me, they should do just as the others do"* (P3). They consider that parents should be present, participate, be involved and help out. However, according to school principals, parents should not make decisions that are to be made by the school, especially given that the latter has a mandate. *"Obviously we do not want parents to always be at school making calls for us since we have a job to do, we have a mandate"* (P5). Above all, school principals expect to be informed when a problem occurs so as to be able to make a decision in a timely manner. *"They should call us as fast as possible or reach us one way or another because if we know what is going on and that we can respond promptly, then it's easier"* (P1). As for the parents, their expectations do not seem to correspond exactly with the school's desires, which makes it hard for them to understand what is expected of them by the school: *"There's a parent that came here and thought that we'd find her a job, she didn't really get the collaboration part between parents and us, that is not collaboration"* (P3). According to school principals, the way the immigrant parents perceive the schools does not enable them to engage in a collaborative process with the school. According to the principals, the school should take care of everything and parents should not intervene in the school's role of training and educating children: *"You are there, you take care of our kid and you should not come to the school and collaborate"* (P3). In some cases, schools had to intervene because of how some parents where disciplining their children, especially when those methods were not in accordance with Canadian laws: *"...We have some families that come from different countries and in some of those, they discipline children by hitting them.* [...] *Thus, we had situations where we had to sit down with parents and explain to them what is allowed and what is not..."* (P4). Moreover, school principals recognize that they did not take the time to explain their expectations to immigrant parents: *"I've never spoken of that because it didn't cross my mind, and I'm not going to do it with the other parents either"* (D1). It seems that the schools expect the immigrant parents to understand the school's expectations even though they are never clearly explained to them.

ETHNIC ORIGIN AND DIFFERENCE

Ethnic origin has a similar impact on the collaborative process between schools and immigrant families. According to school principals, the region and culture of origin shape positively or negatively this partnership: *"...it depends where they are from"* (P4). Not understanding the cultural realities of the host society makes some parents regard the school with some distrust. *"That difference, I think it exists. I think they view schools differently. They view the school and the community differently. That's obvious. Me, if I was to go to Africa, I'm not sure I'd know what kind of role I could play. I'd get there and I think I'd overwhelm them"* (P3). It becomes clear in the statements made by this participant that not understanding the sociocultural realities of either side impedes the good partnership between schools and immigrant families. A poor comprehension of certain cultural aspects and lifestyles, as straightforward as they might seem, can have a crucial impact on the new student. The following testimony speaks of this reality:

"...she was wearing winter padded overalls. She didn't speak French or English, she was very shy [...] We wanted her to take off her pants and she didn't want to. She didn't understand us. And the teacher mimicked that if you take your overalls off, you will be less hot. She goes on doing this (makes a "no" sign with her head) until we finally realize that she wasn't wearing a thing under her overalls." (P6)

PARENT EDUCATION LEVEL

According to school principals, the level of education of parents has also a great impact on the collaborative process between schools and families. Parents that are less educated will often visit the school and inquire about their child's progress. However, as their children progresses through the grades, they become less involved with the school, even though they still remain involved in their children's schooling. *"The more educated they are, the lesser is their involvement in the school. When I say 'involvement,' it is not right, I think that they are involved in their child's education, but are less directly involved with the school"* (P3). The level of education also impacts the collaborative process between schools and families because, according to school principals, the parents which are busiest with their work do not usually have time to get involved with the school, especially when their child is in a lower grade. *"They are less available"* (P3). A lesser level of education tends to negatively impact the collaborative process between schools and immigrant families because, according to school principals, less educated parents tend to misunderstand to a greater degree their role and the school's role. On top of this, the language barrier adds to this miscomprehension.

THE FAMILY'S SOCIOECONOMIC LEVEL

The socioeconomic level is an important factor that may shape the collaborative process between schools and immigrant families. According to the school principals that we interviewed, the families that willingly chose to immigrate to Canada are better prepared: *"some are much more present in the schools, but those parents, they are the ones that came here ready, that made the choice to immigrate to Canada, that came here financially better equipped"* (P1). What can be understood in this statement is that immigrants that willingly chose to immigrate to Canada in order to build their professional and economic lives here are the ones that have less difficulties dealing with the school. Professional security allows families to concentrate on their children's education and to be responsibly involved in the school: *"When the parent immigrates and already has a job at the University of Moncton* [...] *I have this impression that the parents that come here better prepared are the ones that are more present in the school"* (D1). On the other hand, disadvantaged families, particularly refugee families that had to leave their country because of some political conflict have more difficulties dealing with the school because they are less well prepared and are faced with problems more pressing than overlooking their children's schooling: *"There are some people coming here that, judging by their financial resources, come from countries that have been torn by war or something like that"* (P1). Thus, the socioeconomic level of parents is a significant factor impacting the collaborative process between schools and immigrant families; parents that are financially stable have a better relationship with the schools.

CULTURAL DIFFERENCES AND THE REQUIREMENTS OF THE ADAPTATION PROCESS

Cultural differences constitute another factor that may impact the partnership between schools and immigrant families. Indeed, the fact that the immigrant parents belong to a culture different from the host society can prove to be challenging. Distrust, doubts and the fear of shocking others are other factors that negatively impact the bond between those two social entities. Incompatible customs and values are a significant barrier to the type of partnership hoped for by schools. *"When differences exist, they really are based on different family customs and values. Often they represent a barrier"* (P4).

Besides the linguistic barrier, refugee families deal with the stress brought on by a difficult migration process and the challenge of adapting to a new society. The behaviours of some are a testimony of the erroneous perceptions they have of the role of schools and their own role in the schooling of their children. Often, those perceptions are based on some practices held in their country of origin.

> *"…there are families that come here, but they are so intimidated or insecure when faced with new challenges* […] *it is stressful, coming to school. So we have also to be sensitive to that. And there are other families that bring their children to us and tell us 'you deal with them' (laughs), we trust you and we have to go take care of all the rest. You know, many of those families are in survival mode. Especially when they come from refugee camps, we cannot imagine everything they have been through and everything that they need to rebuild as families. So, often those families will drop off their children on us. Very often, we have a hard time communicating with them. They are hard to reach. It is hard to make them come here" (P6).*

Sometimes, tensions can emerge because of different social notions when it comes to education and because of feelings of distrust or the fear of being judged. According to school principals, in order to remedy those difficulties, teachers in charge of student integration and multicultural organisations have an important role to play. A teacher responsible of facilitating the integration process of immigrant students is an intermediary between teachers, immigrant families and school principals. She is responsible of facilitating the integration process of immigrant or refugee students and therefore is responsible of diffusing the tensions that could emerge between schools and families by explaining social notions to each party.

CONCLUSION

The factors impacting the relationship between schools and immigrant families are telling of the intercultural contact that happens in Acadian schools and of the challenges and changes that are brought on them with increased ethnocultural diversity. The miscomprehension of the role of schools is often associated with parental levels of education. However, migration and the difficult process of rebuilding one's family can impact the families' socioeconomic level even if the parents are very educated. Furthermore, school principals are faced with a wide variety of new cultural notions that they have to learn: *"We are more careful, but we also have a lot of things to learn. And it's a lot. We have to learn about the Chinese culture, we have to learn about the African culture. So it's a lot of things and sometimes we don't get everything"* (P6). This testimony highlights the great task schools principals have to accomplish in order to help students from different backgrounds to better integrate their new environment. Indeed, school principals have to explicitly explain to parents how schools work, they have to come to understand different types of cultural contexts and migration paths, they have to make sense of different social conceptions about schooling and to maintain a good communication level with parents, and they have to achieve all this while promoting francophone culture and helping Acadian youth in building their identities.

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