

“MY MOTHER IS FROM RUSSIA, MY FATHER IS FROM RWANDA”

The Relationship between Immigrant Families and the School System in Francophone Minority Communities

Francophone immigration in minority communities is an issue that mobilizes social actors. No longer approached as an exceptional phenomenon, it is now the object of a national strategy (CIC 2003 and 2006). It has an important diversifying effect in educational establishments. Schools play a defining role in shaping the population, as access to knowledge is a key factor of academic achievement; conversely, failure leads to stigma (Kanouté 2006). The challenges encountered by Francophone immigrant families are not well known. How can we approach the question of diversity in minority schools? How is the transformation experienced in public schools? What are the obstacles to school participation? The objective of this paper is to gain a better understanding of school participation issues.

I will present findings from two studies conducted in French schools in Ontario, the first conducted between 2002 and 2004, and the second between 2003 and 2006. The first study was conducted in a metropolitan area, where we analyzed representations and institutional practices in 15 schools, as well as one community initiative developed by a local association of immigrant women¹ (Farmer et al. 2003, Farmer and Labrie, forthcoming). The data gathered in the second study concerns a school located outside of the major urban centers, in one of the oldest Francophone regions in the province, where immigration is seen as a recent phenomenon. This school belongs to a wider sample, pulled from a study on school work and socialization.² The analysis that follows is based on three series of indicators: issues linked to the context, issues that arise from the schools' solutions to managing diversity, and issues of family positioning. This enables us to see the transformation of French schools and the obstacles encountered by immigrant families. The following are some clarifications on the concepts that will be developed.

Studying the relationships between school and family

There is a dominant discourse in everything from science research to educational policies, teaching practices, and common wisdom that underscores the benefits of parent school participation and sets out the obstacles to participation (Epstein 1995, Fullan 1982, Labrie, Wilson and Roberge 2003). Obstacles can be materials (time, resources, access) and are especially symbolic (knowledge of the school system, its norms). Additional structural factors must be taken into account when identifying obstacles to participation. First, the relationship between schools and families is mainly defined from the institution's point of view. The school prescribes parental involvement and defines what a good parent is; this form of control can extend to the promotion of certain parenting methods (Dubet 1997, Duru-Bellat and van Zanten 1992, Migeot-Alvarado 2000, van Zanten, 2001). This is quite a revealing factor that can explain the institutional position of the parties involved in our two studies.

Furthermore, the relationship between the school and the family is shaped by the relative distance between the parents and the institution. This position is far from fixed; it can vary according to the position of the family in relation to the school. Some parents have more control over education, which puts them at an advantage in a competitive system. This leads to a first rift between families, based mainly on class differences.

The rift widens when it comes to immigrant families (Vatz-Laaroussi et al. 2005). According to Kanouté (2002), many elements contribute to this distance, including fluency, immigrant/refugee status and links to the home country, socio-economic and professional situation and integration experience. This situation is not without influencing school access and opportunities for academic achievement. The studies below take this concept of distancing into account, and question the school processes that have a distancing effect on Francophone immigrant families.

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Issues linked to context

I will approach the question from the perspective of a study conducted on the relationship between the school system and immigrant families in Francophone minority communities (Farmer et al. 2003, Farmer and Labrie, forthcoming). The study explored how relations between institutions, parents and the community are structured in the context of school diversification in the region. The project was conducted in all French schools in the city, namely 12 elementary schools and three secondary schools. The data was gathered from official documents, 35 individual interviews, one group interview, observations and group discussions.

Schools in this region are culturally very diverse. In some establishments, we counted over 50 languages. This diversification can be explained by the waves of migration that began in the late 1980s. It can also be explained by the settling strategies privileged by immigrant families. The migration movement continued within the school district, depending on the families' integration conditions and improvements in living conditions.

From the point of view of the institution, while some schools welcome well-established families, others receive families in very precarious situations, especially downtown and near the airport. French schools in minority communities are considered regional, as they offer services over a greater territory than do neighbourhood schools in majority communities; however, the neighbourhood still has an influence on the school. Regarding mobility, the study showed that families are not the only ones moving around. School administrators rarely remain at one school for more than three years, and the teachers are also fairly transient.

Those are the first issues linked to school participation: the transience of actors (families, teachers and administrators) and the significant disparity between schools.

Institutional response to school diversification

The findings from that study also showed that the discourses and practices developed to manage the diversity of public schools arose from a certain "institutional gap." Francophone school boards have only been established in Ontario since 1997, following an in-depth education reform. They have not had the opportunity to implement the policy against racism developed a few years earlier (MÉFO 1993, Gérin-Lajoie 1995) and put aside by the Conservative government elected in 1995.

Our study revealed that school boards in the region are very interested in the issue and this greatly facilitated our access to schools. On the question of diversity, leadership is asserted by the school principals. Few school administrators responded that they have no school activities related to diversity (3 out of 15 schools). However, the responses were ad hoc, and mainly limited to arts education. The study underscored the school administrators' feeling of isolation and the urgency to act to fulfill pressing needs. Denouncing this situation, a school principal expressed his concern and said that he knew that there was talk about the big feast... and that something else must be done (Farmer and Labrie, forthcoming: 15).

Institutional measures have been taken to "manage" diversity. The first measure occurs before the child even attends the school; school registration is not automatic for immigrant families, who do not have the same educational rights granted to official language minorities. They must make a request to an admissions committee. The French development program is transformed into an informal reception program when necessary. This is mainly done on a case by case basis. Lastly, a settlement program was established in the schools, thanks to joint efforts of Citizenship and Immigration Canada, school boards in the region and the community. Appreciated by all the administrators, it was seen as a way to reach out to new families and, for secondary schools, to work with young refugees.

Many issues have been observed in this regard. Linguistic minorities' educational rights do not extend to Francophone immigrant families. Access to minority schools depends on the perception of the role of the admissions committee's (which is perceived as responding to requests from families in different ways or again as controlling access to French schools). The lack of a formal policy has important consequences, including spontaneous practices, lack of resources and failure to adjust to educational or legal measures (admissions committee, language classes). The leadership demonstrated by some school administrators and the partnerships developed recently, for example in settlement services, are avenues to be explored.

Issues associated with families' positioning

I will approach this last question based on the two studies conducted between 2002 and 2006. In both cases, we noted that schools tend to approach immigrant families based on "differences," which has a certain impact on the quality of this relationship. This can be seen in the type of contact between families and the school (the principal knows all the other parents, but not me), of school activities (talk to me about *your* country), and in the admissions process (I have to appear before a committee) (Farmer et al. 2003). Such practices distance families and the school and create significant barriers.

The second issue is related to the untapped potential for the community to facilitate relations between families and the school. An initiative by a local African women's association that we observed over a period of two years revealed many continuous negotiation processes between the association, the families and the school system. It also showed the support that can be provided by the community to the school (Farmer and Labrie, forthcoming).

The study we conducted from 2003 to 2006 also aimed to understand the school experience of children placed in multi-level classes, in various schools throughout the province. The school in question, established at the turn of the 20th century in an area that is now in a serious linguistic minority situation, saw its attendance diversify quickly in the last few years. This phenomenon really mobilized the discourse of school actors. We conducted 15 days of in-class observation, interviews with teachers, school administrators, parents and school children aged 9 and 10 (18 respondents in total), as well as a literature review. Here are some observations on the data collected.

We found that the teachers' discourse presented the school and its environment as separate spheres. The school is Francophone, in an Anglophone environment, and is attended by allophone families. Children, however, took much more nuanced positions in how they defined themselves in relation to their family and school. One child's mother was from Russia and the father was from Rwanda (d31oc5: 4).³ A girl said that she was from Syria and that she spoke several languages (d1no5: 2). Another girl said that she was Muslim, came from Lebanon and liked to help out (d31oc5: 2). Thus, the challenge is to better understand this Francophonie, with its multiple trajectories, and try to break the isolation of the cultural Francophone minority.

This last element brings us back to equal opportunities for academic achievement. Children serve as intermediaries between the school and the family in day-to-day communications (Perrenoud 1995). Some of the students we met not only had to manage this daily reality but had to translate, both literally and symbolically, school documents and expectations, which is a heavy burden not all children share. Regarding homework, peer assistance was essential for some children. The challenge for schools and families is to better understand functions and expectations in separate contexts. This brings us back to the relative distance between parents and the school.

This paper is labelled under sociology of education, a sociology that focuses on the educational institution, its logic (system of constraints) and the interplay of social actors – teachers and other education professionals, parents, students and the social environment (Dubet and Martuccelli 1996, van Zanten 2001). This approach allows us to further study the school system. It also gives us a better understanding of educational and social inequalities as they emerge (Coulon 1990: 236). A better grasp of the processes puts actors in a better position to promote positive change. We have identified many issues that prevent immigrant families from participating in school life, as well as some challenges faced by the school. These include the transience of actors in the school system, the disparity between schools and the families' living conditions, educational rights for linguistic minorities, the lack of a formal educational policy, the complexity of local contexts, and partnerships that remain untapped. To this, we add distancing between the family and the school, and the representation of immigrant families based on differences. The real issue is the question of equal opportunities for academic achievement in children of immigrant families.

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Notes

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