

The Experience of Non-Francophone Parents in a French Minority-Language School

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Abstract

Parent involvement is an important indicator for student achievement and is especially important in minority language education. Across Canada a steadily increasing number of students in French minority-language schools come from Anglo-dominant families or other non-Francophone families, where little or no French is spoken. This highlights the importance of understanding the involvement of non-Francophone parents whose children attend French minority-language schools. This paper conveys the experiences, beliefs, and involvement of non-Francophone parents who have chosen a French minority-language school for their children in Atlantic Canada. French school administrators and teachers were also consulted. We relied on a mixed methods approach to improve understanding of this situation. The parents reported satisfaction with their choice of a French minority-language school but also shared challenges they faced to being educationally involved with their children at home, at school, and in the community.

Résumé

L'engagement des parents est un indicateur important pour la réussite des élèves et il l'est encore plus en situation de langue minoritaire. Pourtant, au Canada, un nombre croissant d'enfants dans les écoles françaises vient de familles anglo-dominantes et il y a un grand nombre de parents qui parle peu ou pas le français. Il est vital de comprendre l'engagement des parents non francophones dans la situation des écoles de langue française minoritaire. Nous avons examiné les expériences, les croyances et l'engagement des parents non francophones qui ont choisi une école française au Canada atlantique pour leurs enfants. Des enseignants et des directions d'écoles ont aussi été consultés. Nous avons utilisé les méthodes mixtes afin de comprendre les complexités de l'expérience sociale multidimensionnelle. Les parents étaient satisfaits de leur choix d'école, malgré les difficultés qu'ils éprouvaient à s'impliquer à la maison, à l'école et dans la communauté.

The Experience of Non-Francophone Parents in a French Minority-Language School

Introduction

Despite efforts toward cultural and linguistic revitalization in minority Francophone communities across Canada, these communities are suffering a decrease in vitality (Landry, Deveau, & Allard, 2006). There has been a decrease in the Francophone population across Canada and an increase in exogamous¹ couples. Also, the migrating effects of urbanization are taking Francophones from French communities to English centres (Landry, 2010). Researchers in minority French contexts feel an urgency to help minority French communities in Canada to thrive and maintain their language and identity (Cormier, 2005; Gauthier, 2001; Landry et al., 2006; Rocque, 2006). Schools play a critical role in this language maintenance and revitalization process (Arsenault-Cameron, 2000; Council of Ministers of Education, Canada [CMEC], 2003; Skutnabb-Kangas, 2000) and Canada has minority schools which offer a French education to children of right holder parents.

A right holder parent, as determined by section 23 of the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms* (1982), is eligible to have his or her children attend minority language schools if they are citizens of Canada and meet at least one of the following three criteria: (a) parent's first language learned and still understood is that of the English or French linguistic minority population of the province in which they reside, (b) parent has received his or her primary school instruction in Canada in English or French and reside in a province where the language in which he or she received that instruction is the language of the English or French linguistic minority population of the province, or (c) parent has a child who has received or is receiving primary or secondary school instruction in English or French in Canada. Though it varies in school boards across Canada, usually non-right holder non-Francophone (NF) parents need to apply to an admissions committee to be admitted to a French minority-language school. In some provinces, a grandfather clause permits admission of students with a Francophone grandparent (Commission Scolaire de la Langue Française, 2014; Conseil des écoles fransaskoises, 2013; Conseil scolaire francophone de la Colombie-Britannique, 2013; Conseil Scolaire Francophone de Terre-Neuve-et-Labrador, 2013; Vincent, 2010).

While issues of French ethnolinguistic revitalization are being addressed to some degree in research and government policy, there is also a need to study the role that NF parents play in French minority-language schools. All Canadian provinces and territories have reported between 7.5% and 33.5% Anglo-dominant students in French minority-language schools (Allen & Cartwright, 2004; CMEC, 2002; Landry, 2010). In a recent study in Atlantic Canada, 75% of the parents at one French minority-language school were Anglo-dominant (MacPhee, Turnbull, Gauthier, Cormier, & Miller, 2013). Although many of these students' parents are constitutional right-holders, many do not speak, read, write, or understand French; in minority areas many Francophones have been assimilated. Moreover, students in French minority-language schools are often underachieving on standardized tests such as Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA; Knighton, Brochu, & Gluszynski, 2010) and other common assessments (Allen & Cartwright, 2004). Where international research has demonstrated that parent involvement (PI) positively affects children's academic achievement (Desforges & Abouchaar, 2003; Eccles & Harold, 1996; Epstein, 2001; Jeynes, 2003, 2007, 2010), children whose NF parents cannot assist in French at home may be vulnerable due to lack of PI and inability to

assist with French vocabulary, literacy, numeracy, and communication with school. In French minority-language schools, PI is important for the aforementioned reasons. Moreover, it is crucial to help children to make academic and linguistic progress in French, especially where English dominates (CMEC, 2003; Landry, 2010).

Parent Involvement

The importance of PI in the education of their children is well documented (Cox, 2005; Desforges & Abouchaar, 2003; Hornby & Lafaele, 2011; Wong & Hughes, 2006) including in minority-language settings (CMEC, 2003; Jeynes, 2003; Landry, 2010). Research on parental role and experience has identified that PI should be assessed in both home and school contexts. The literature has also indicated that parents' beliefs influence their levels of involvement and their quality of experience as involved parents (Hoover-Dempsey, 2011; Hornby & Lafaele, 2011). Two streams of PI international research have also (a) identified barriers to PI in order to address the barriers and thereby improve PI (Hornby, 2011; Turney & Kao, 2009) and (b) included recommendations to encourage school professionals to do more to incite and enable all parents to be involved in diverse ways (Edwards, 2011; Hoover-Dempsey, 2011; Hornby, 2011; Paik, 2011).

The PI that has been considered to be important includes assisting with homework, attending school activities, and community involvement. Specific examples include reading with children, attending parent-teacher nights, and going to the community library with children (Epstein, 2011; Hornby, 2011; Landry, 2010). Another aspect of PI that has been identified as key is when parents discuss the importance of education or speak positively about the school or the teachers. The most important PI indicators of academic achievement and social adjustment have included high expectations for children; loving and effective communication; supportive, non-authoritarian, but structured parental style; reading aloud at home (Jeynes, 2011a); "at-home good parenting" (Desforges & Abouchaar, 2003); academic socialization and educationally enriching activities (Hill & Tyson, 2009); communication with children; and, finally, bidirectional communication with school and parents (Jeynes, 2003, 2011b; Weiss, Buffard, Bridgall, & Gordon, 2009). In a minority setting, it has been noted that PI also includes accessing resources and sociocultural events in the minority language (CMEC, 2003; Epstein, 2011; Hornby, 2011). In French minority-language schools in Canada, PI is certainly important because, in addition to typical involvement, parents need to value and promote the minority French language that English threatens to assimilate (CMEC, 2003; Landry, 2010). In the next section, we discuss the research specific to NF parents.

Minority School Context

Some researchers have raised questions with respect to NF parents and French minority-language schooling. Arsenault (2008) questioned whether there were sufficient strategies to enable an Anglophone right holder parent to be involved while being true to the purpose of Francophone schools. Other questions revolved around whether parents get enough information when making their school choice, and the degree to which there is linguistic and social network insecurity for Anglophone parents (Arsenault, 2008). Dalley and Saint-Onge (2008) examined school choice options including Francophone, English, and English with French immersion programming with 20 exogamous couples in the

Yukon. Their findings indicated that all 20 couples valued bilingualism. Social class and belonging to the Francophone community were, as in other research, important factors for choice of school. However, the researchers were left with questions about the lived family reality and inclusion at home and at school of Anglo-dominant right holder parents. They suggested a need for more research on the involvement of exogamous couples since their numbers are increasing in French minority-language schools across Canada.

Research with NF parents has been done in Alberta and New Brunswick. Rocque (2008) conducted a case study based on 12 exogamous couples in Western Canada and found parents chose the French minority-language school for the quality of education and because they valued the French language. Other findings were that parents used mostly English in the home and faced communication challenges with the school that left many NF parents feeling excluded. Cormier and Lowe (2010) interviewed school personnel and NF and Francophone parents about how parents in exogamous couples had been welcomed and assisted by French minority-language schools in New Brunswick. They found that the decision-making process experienced by parents in order to choose the French school was arduous, however, most felt well supported by the efforts of the school and were satisfied with their school choice. Thus, the current literature revealed some valuable information about NF parents' school choice and experiences, but there are many questions that remain unanswered.

More research is needed in order to understand how NF parents support their children's learning as well as their potential to contribute to enhanced vitality in French minority-language schools. The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences, beliefs, and involvement of NF parents in a French minority-language school, identify any barriers to NF PI and how can they be addressed, and examine what French minority-language school leaders and teachers identify as key issues in supporting and ensuring NF PI and student success.

Research Questions

Attention has been paid to NF parents in exogamous couples for some time; however, no mention has been made about different types of NF parents other than those in exogamous couples navigating the French minority-language school system. Research examining PI of NF parents within minority Francophone contexts remains limited. In the current study, we explored beliefs held by NF parents related to their motivations, degree of control and influence, and ability to help, and to the value of their involvement when the children's education happens in the French language. Thus, this small-scale exploratory study was guided by the following questions:

1. What are the experiences, beliefs, and involvement of NF parents who chose a French minority-language school for their children?
2. What barriers to NF PI exist and how can they be addressed?
3. What do French minority-language school leaders and teachers identify as key issues in supporting and ensuring PI of NF parents and academic success for NF children enrolled in their schools?

Methodology and Methods

A mixed-methods concurrent and equal status design (Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2009) was used to understand the complexities of this multi-dimensional social experience (Greene, 2007; Mason, 2006; Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2011) with an online survey and interviews.

Participants and Context

Purposive sampling was used to involve any NF parents who had enrolled their children in one rural, French minority-language school in Atlantic Canada. The school encompassed Kindergarten to Grade 6 with approximately 80 students. In total, 15 parents took part in an online survey and most were in uniquely Anglo-dominant couples rather than exogamous couples. The survey sample was quite homogeneous as 100% of the NF parents who participated were Anglo-dominant and the spouses were reported as 93.3% Anglo-dominant. Even paternal and maternal grandparents were reported between 86.7% and 93.3% Anglo-dominant, respectively. The other grandparents had learned both English and French from birth. Of the 15 parents who completed the survey, 86.7% ($n = 13$) were female and 13.3% ($n = 2$) male. Parents' ages ranged from 30 to 50 years ($M = 43.2$ yrs); 73.3% ($n = 11$) were married or equivalent; and all were Caucasian. Household incomes varied: 46.7% reported incomes of \$75,000 and higher, while 46.7% reported incomes of less than \$75,000 annually. The education of parents ranged from less than high school, to doctoral degree. Parents reported the grade levels of their children from Kindergarten to Grade 12.

Six parents began as participants in a focus group discussion; however, one had to leave early and, thus, we report that five parents participated fully. These five focus group parents also participated in individual interviews. These parents were chosen for personal interviews to reflect those parents who had children who were typical (3/5), those parents who had children with special needs (2/5), a parent who had French proficiency (1/5), and a parent who had a child in *francisation*² due to transfer to the French school at an older age who required extra French help in class and after class time (1/5).

A group of seven teachers from the school participated in a teacher focus group discussion about the role of NF parents. Additionally, 10 administrators from across the French school board participated in a focus group discussion about NF parents in French minority-language schools.

Data Collection Instruments

For data collection with parent participants, we prepared a 10-minute survey that was completed on paper or online. We also conducted a 70-minute focus group interview. Individual interviews with parents (average 40 minutes) followed the analysis of the survey and focus group data to more deeply explore the involvement and experience of these NF parents. In addition to collecting data from parent participants, we held one 60-minute focus group interview with a group of teachers and another with a group of school leaders, in order to understand the perspectives of these stakeholders.

On the closed question parent survey, there were two questions with 5-point Likert scales: one with 16 items assessing the frequency and types of PI, and the other measuring agreement on 21 items about parents' beliefs, experience, and involvement. A comparison with other PI and school climate assessments for parents (Hornby, 2011; Vienneau, 2011; Washoe County School District, 2012) confirmed commonalities with our construct indicators, and after pretesting with NF parents, as well as survey and educational experts, we finalized our survey.

The questions for the focus groups (with parents and other stakeholders, alike) and individual interviews (with parents) were open ended and related to the issues revealed in the research literature, such as reasons for the choice of school, type and frequency of PI, and barriers to PI (CMEC, 2003; Epstein, 2001; Hornby, 2011; Landry, 2010).

Data Analysis

We transcribed the parent focus group and individual interviews and used content analysis to discover common and divergent themes relevant to the research questions. We used SPSS to check frequencies and to conduct other general descriptive analysis of the survey data. There was mixing in the analysis of the parent data, going back and forth from qualitative to quantitative data to identify convergence or lack thereof. Despite the small sample size, we used some exploratory factor analysis, which helped to create factors from related survey items from the frequency and agreement questions that we then placed into three scales. Table 1 presents descriptive statistics. Tables 2, 3, and 4 present the three scales and the attained acceptable Cronbach's alpha scores, which compute the reliability of the items in each scale (Vogt, 2007) relevant to parent experience, involvement, and beliefs. Thematic analysis of the teacher and school leader focus group data was conducted separately and is presented after the parent results.

Results

The results from the quantitative and qualitative parent data are presented below in narrative and table format. We present the descriptive statistics as well as three factors from exploratory factor analysis about the NF parents' experiences, involvement, and beliefs. Then we share the interview and focus group findings relevant to NF parent beliefs, experiences, involvement, barriers to involvement, and NF parent recommendations to address involvement barriers. Finally, we share the teacher and school leader results. An exploration of the results follows in the discussion section.

Descriptive Statistics from Parent Data

Table 1 displays the descriptive statistics with the mean and standard deviation, and some percentages, from NF parent responses to questions of agreement or frequency on a 5-point Likert scale about their experience with a child in a French minority-language school. The agreement answers ranged between 1 and 4 and the frequency answers ranged between 1 and 5. A mean score of 1 represented *strongly disagree* or *never involved* and 4 represented *strongly agree*. A 4 or 5 represented *frequently involved*. The mean for parents speaking and understanding French was based on a 5-point scale where 1 meant *no French competency*, 2 meant *between 1% and 25% or low ability to speak and understand*, and 5

meant *between 75% and 100% competency*. Parent responses about feeling awkward or welcome are displayed initially in Table 1 with descriptive statistics and in Table 2 as part of a factor of PI at school.

Table 1
Non-Francophone Parent Experience

| Items from parent survey | <i>M</i> | <i>SD</i> |
|---|----------|-----------|
| Parents feel welcome at school | 3.93 | 0.26 |
| Parents feel awkward visiting the school | 1.1 | 0.35 |
| Mothers speak and understand French | 2.4 | 1.24 |
| Fathers speak and understand French | 1.64 | 1.28 |
| Parents satisfied with school's communication about child's academic progress | 3.67 | 0.72 |
| | | % |
| Parents have no or low confidence to use French | | 86.7 |
| Parents use English to communicate at school | | 93.3 |
| Parents use English with principal, teachers, staff, other parents, child, and students | | 86.7 |
| French preschool used by NF parents (first child/second child) | | 73/81.8 |
| Children will complete Grade 12 in French minority-language school (yes/unsure) | | 73.3/20 |

Tables 2 and 3 display two factors with the mean and standard deviation of NF parent responses to questions of agreement and frequency on a 5-point Likert scale about PI at school, or at home, respectively. A score of 1 represented *strongly disagree* or *never involved* and a 4 or 5 represented *strongly agree*, and *frequently* or *very frequently involved*.

Table 2
Non-Francophone Parent Involvement at School Factor

| Items from parent survey | <i>M</i> | <i>SD</i> |
|---|----------|-----------|
| I feel welcome at school | 3.93 | 0.26 |
| I feel awkward visiting the school | 1.13 | 0.35 |
| I do not attend meet the teacher night | 1.13 | 0.35 |
| I chose a French school for French culture as well as language | 3.33 | 0.72 |
| I have considered moving my child to an English school | 1.93 | 0.70 |
| I feel uncomfortable at social events in French | 1.93 | 0.70 |
| I am satisfied with school's communication about child's progress | 3.67 | 0.72 |
| I agree that the school has provided helpful tips and strategies | 3.29 | 0.73 |
| I attend parent-teacher interviews | 3.13 | 0.64 |
| I volunteer at school | 3.14 | 1.83 |
| I participate in fundraising for the school | 3.33 | 1.11 |
| I am in contact with the school via notes, calls, or visits | 4.80 | 0.56 |
| I ask for updates on my child's progress at school | 3.87 | 1.13 |
| I discuss the value of education with our children | 4.20 | 1.21 |

Note. Cronbach's alpha = 0.72.

Table 3

Non-Francophone Parent Involvement at Home Factor

| Items from parent survey | <i>M</i> | <i>SD</i> |
|---|----------|-----------|
| My child has supplies and a quiet space for homework | 3.60 | 0.63 |
| I believe parents should be involved in a child's education | 3.93 | 0.26 |
| We discuss reasons French is important with our child | 3.93 | 1.39 |
| I praise my child for effort at school | 4.07 | 1.03 |
| I assist my child with homework | 3.53 | 1.25 |
| Our family goes to the library | 3.27 | 1.71 |
| I believe as a parent I have influence over my child's learning | 3.69 | 0.48 |
| We have access to someone who can help in French | 2.85 | 1.1 |
| I read to or with my child in French | 2.93 | 1.5 |
| Our family does activities in French in the community | 2.67 | 1.40 |
| I help my child improve French vocabulary | 2.47 | 1.55 |
| We use French radio, TV, or computer for French language activities | 2.47 | 1.73 |
| I do activities in French at home with my child | 2.20 | 1.42 |

Note. Cronbach's alpha = 0.73.

Table 4 displays a third factor with the mean of NF parents' responses to questions of agreement regarding parent beliefs. A score of 1 denoted *strongly disagree*, and 4 denoted *strongly agree*.

Table 4

Non-Francophone Parent Belief Factor

| Items from parent survey | <i>M</i> | <i>SD</i> |
|---|----------|-----------|
| There should be staff at school who speak English | 3.47 | 0.83 |
| Teachers should use some English in class | 2.40 | 1.35 |
| The <i>francisation</i> at the school has been very helpful | 3.60 | 0.74 |
| The school should enforce a French only policy for students | 3.27 | 1.10 |
| Student achievement depends on effort and work | 3.27 | 0.80 |
| Student achievement depends on ability | 2.87 | 0.64 |

Note. Cronbach's alpha = 0.78.

The statistics in Table 1 revealed that parents had low self-rated French competency but nonetheless felt welcome at the French school, as 86.7% used English in the communication with teaching staff. There was high PI at the school with regard to parent-teacher interviews, volunteering, fundraising, and communication with notes and discussions about student progress. At home, PI was high for the first seven items in the home involvement factor; however parents were less involved when French would be required in reading, vocabulary, media, or activities.

Parent Interviews and Focus Group

The analysis that follows is based on the transcriptions of two types of parent interviews: (a) the focus group interview conducted with six NF parents (one of whom had

to leave early, and thus results are presented out of five) and (b) the individual interviews with the same five parents, conducted several weeks after the focus group. The analysis was organized into the main themes of parent beliefs, parent experiences, and PI. Parent comments were assessed to consider the frequency of certain types of comments or opinions and the percentage of parents who shared a similar opinion, comment, or answer (e.g., 20% = one of the five parents, 100% = five out of the five parents). Quotes were chosen from parents' answers to illustrate typical statements regarding the NF parent beliefs, experiences, and involvement.

Beliefs. Parents shared their beliefs about educational involvement and French and English language use, as well as the reasons why they chose a French minority-language school. All NF parents (100%) agreed on valuing bilingualism as a primary motivation for their choice of school. For example, one parent stated:

When we had children, we decided we wanted some type of French education—it opens up a lot of doors. We are a bilingual country, my husband feels everybody should have both languages; we don't, and want to give that to our kids.

Also, 60% of parents commented that French facilitates future employability, for example, "If kids speak two languages they will have better jobs, and better chances to have a good job." Choosing a French school was also linked to family heritage, identity, and reclaiming French culture for 60% of the parents, as one parent indicated, "they [the children] would not get the same cultural identity in another program that they would get in a first language school."

In this study, the location of the French school and preschool was an important motivator for two (40%) of the participants in order to access childcare close to home, as well for two others (40%) in order to move their child from a bullying situation at a nearby school. One participant said:

We had no daycare or after school programs, no option for daycare, with both parents working, so . . . this was the only prekindergarten program . . . For a working family it was the daycare that drove me here.

Interestingly, only one participant mentioned accessing the school as a political or language right. Comments from 60% of the participants indicated that they believed the school needed to be promoted by highlighting its attributes as well as its accessibility:

Maybe the school . . . needs to do a better job of letting the community know how good it is . . . they need some marketing that is more visible . . . and to specify whether or not they still need that grandfather clause.

When questioned about involvement beliefs, 100% of the parents agreed, sharing a belief that PI in education is important in order to know what is going on with children and to help them as much as possible. Three participants (60%) commented that they believe communication with the school in English facilitated their involvement:

I do appreciate that they understand I don't speak 100% French and they are willing to go out of their way to speak English, because that is not their job . . . every effort made to me in English I really appreciate.

However, 40% of parents stated that they believed French should be used with students as much as possible.

Experiences. The participants showed enormously positive regard for their chosen school and seven main themes were found with regard to what parents identified as positive attributes of the school. One overriding factor identified as making the school welcoming and accommodating was the use of English with NF parents. The school personnel facilitated effective communication with the NF parents by using English during phone or in school conversations, as well as by emailing bilingual messages or French messages with a link that could be used to translate the message into English. One parent explained how important it was to not have to take time to translate messages from the school: "It makes my life an awful lot easier; you're trying to fit in homework and supper and bedtime, and mommy is sitting at her computer trying to figure out what she is supposed to be doing!"

Five other factors that parents remarked upon as contributing to a positive experience were the quality of education provided by great staff and teachers (80%), the quality of education due to small class sizes (80%), the quality of the French language acquired by the students (80%), the transfer of French culture to the students (40%), and the transfer of language competencies from French to English (40%). One parent commented on the quality of French and transfer of skills to English having said, "She [my daughter] went in [Grade 1] not speaking or reading a word of French, just her alphabet, couldn't read any English, and she finished and she was fluent, she could speak and read French and she was reading English." Finally, the other factor that emerged from the conversations was having access to the school (60%). Parents explained that the access was either due to "use of the grandfather clause," or because of "access to preschool childcare and care before and after school."

The overarching factor that made the experience positive and communication possible for the NF parents was that the school, teachers, and events were accessible to them, at least in part, in English while the student experience remained consistently French. The general evaluation was that parents experienced overall satisfaction. However, despite positive experiences with this school, NF parents reported challenges, negative experiences, and discouraging feelings and concerns, which are examined next.

Negative experiences and challenges. The most significant challenges, voiced by 80% of the parents, were difficulties understanding messages from the school and a lack of an extended curriculum for students (80%), followed by reduced PI in educational activities (60%). Despite a willingness on the part of the school personnel to use some English with parents, difficulties were caused by messages sent home in French. For example, a parent explained one problem:

Communication—and I don't like to ask for it to be sent in English because it is a French language school . . . but I am missing out on stuff . . . sometimes I don't understand the homework assignment *because* I put it in the translator! (original emphasis)

Parents also had concerns about there being few extracurricular activities and opportunities for students: “Sometimes small is good but sometimes they miss out on things because it is small, like sports or after school programs, and enrichment, and band.” One parent even considered changing schools—“might move to English if there are not the programs, sport teams . . . and I want that . . . as a French language school”—but stated that the decision would ultimately be made when the child reached higher grades. Parents sometimes felt that they could not participate at school or community events in French: “To be quite honest, when my oldest first started school, at first I was very intimidated by going to them [school events] . . . because I did not speak French.” Similarly, parents worried that they were not able to help with school work at home in the French language: “Because I cannot pronounce the French language properly in the first place so I don’t want to impact her, and I did feel insecure actually, a little dumb.”

Several other negative experiences shared by parents included a lack of family and professional support for having chosen a French school (40%), lack of resources for students with special needs (40%), and comments indicating a lack of support for the French school in the community (20%). For instance, one participant explained:

[I have received] no support from anybody. Friends and family did not support this choice. And I had English teachers tear a strip off me, “why are you doing that, are you crazy? Your children aren’t going to speak English.”

Parents faced negative comments about the French school as well, and one parent reported:

There was a lot of hoopla, very divided . . . the fact that it is a separate school built and the money it cost and English schools are overflowing and here the brand new school and only x amount of kids.

One parent also voiced a politically-loaded concern:

The school board could be doing more than it is doing to support their staff members. . . . I think it is under-resourced and maybe doing the best it can do. They are not given an operational budget to promote growth but the bare minimum to not be taken to court.

Overall, the negative experiences and challenges reported by the participants were diverse and were present at home, at school, and in the community.

Parent involvement. Parents’ comments revealed a range of levels of involvement from very high to low. One of the NF parents had the highest involvement, having been active on the school parent committee, involved with the community council, and hoping to run as a school board trustee. Three parents (60%) stated that it was easy to be involved and gave examples of their PI at home and at school, including meeting with teachers, coming to parent-teacher interviews, and coming to the school to ask for help. Two parents (40%) reported having little involvement beyond what they were invited to attend at school functions such as meet-the-teacher night, parent-teacher interviews, and school plays. Three parents stated that they would not go to social functions unless the kids wanted to go. All of

the parents provided books and sat with their children to read; 60% reported they helped with homework in mathematics and science or vocabulary and spelling, offered French games and puzzles to the children, and encouraged watching TV and movies in French. Two parents (40%) said they promoted listening to French music. Based on parents' comments, in general, NF parents were more involved at home than elsewhere.

Barriers to parent involvement. Although parents were involved at home, they still reported facing involvement barriers based on the children's ages. As the children aged and their interests diversified, parents became less involved. As one parent stated:

I don't come [to school and community events] very often anymore, but I used to. I felt fine but it's just as they [children] get older they are so involved in things that it lands on a night that they are involved . . . they get older and busier.

Another way in which age was a barrier was that, when children approached adolescence, English became more important and more used than French and the parent did not want to force the use of French:

The older my daughter got, the more English took over . . . I don't know why, it just did . . . when they get older, you don't want to annoy them with it [French], you want it to be positive rather than negative.

Parents also mentioned barriers to their own involvement at school and in the community. Three (60%) of the parents said that their involvement was limited: "If it [the activity in question] was only in French I wouldn't be able to participate." Three parents (60%) mentioned that their focus was different from the focus of the school, with regard to the children's interests:

They [the school staff] are really big on building a playground, but my son is in Grade 5 and it is not top of mind for me, I will help out but . . . it's not where my interest is right now, nor his.

Finally, two parents felt uncomfortable getting involved if they did not know other parents who were involved: "Well I don't know anybody, and I don't want to say it's trying, but that could be the word I am looking for; it can be at times, it can be quite intimidating." School and community involvement was more challenging for these NF parents than home involvement.

Parents' recommendations to address barriers to parent involvement. Parents made recommendations to address the barriers that impeded PI. To address the social barriers, 60% of the participants made comments indicating that they would appreciate a support network and help building social connections, such as, "I think there should be some little getting to know the other parents—that would be beneficial." Also, parents said that in the past, support had been available for helping children with homework: "We had a homework buddy system where we exchanged numbers, like a phone tree, and we had good friends whose children went here . . . they said that if you struggle . . . and need any help with translation they were willing to help." That buddy system was no longer functioning,

but some parents thought that bringing it back would help PI, as would getting to know other parents from the school.

Three parents suggested addressing the communication barriers by sending parents electronic documents and providing material in both languages, or providing links to material that could be translated. One parent said: “The email, even by just sending the notes home by email, having the e-document is fabulous help.” Electronically shared documents could be cut and pasted into a translation program, which saves time. Parents indicated their appreciation of the effort made by staff to communicate with them in English with the following comments:

The teachers and administrators are also so willing to speak in English . . . extremely accommodating . . . and I would definitely appreciate if someone was there to help me out more and maybe you would be able to get more parents involved.

Every effort made to me in English I really appreciate.

Another language concern that parents reported having was about how they, as non-Francophones, could use French at home with their children. For example, one parent said: “It is very frustrating, I think . . . because I cannot pronounce the French language properly.” Thus, parents wanted to know about a computer or online program for proper pronunciation so as to not misguide their children, and wanted tips and strategies about how to use French at home. Parents also made other suggestions to address PI barriers that could be applicable to any school, such as offering childcare to improve parent ability to participate in school committees and fundraising efforts. Two different participants explained that childcare was a barrier, one of whom said, “I have tried to become more involved with the school, with the parent committee; I cannot attend every meeting because I need childcare options.” The NF parents made the above recommendations for how school staff might address the communication and social involvement challenges for NF parents without creating situations in which students would be exposed to more English.

Teachers’ Perspectives

During our focus group interviews with teachers from the school and with administration personnel who represented six schools, all participants acknowledged a very high number of NF parents and students enrolled in French schools. A brief discussion about the marketing campaigns to attract students revealed that teachers were concerned about having resources to meet the needs of increased numbers of students from NF families, and they could see the need for and benefit of a developed *francisation* program. Further to this, the teaching staff indicated that the greatest need they saw for their students was in developing and using literacy strategies for the vocabulary and terminology found in the French-language textbooks. For these teachers, vocabulary and literacy development was crucial.

The teachers who participated all agreed that parents play a very important role in the education of their children and have the ability to help the children be educated in French. Thus, these staff members were willing to communicate in English to enable the parents to understand the students’ progress, be involved, and understand the mission of the

school, even though French is ultimately meant to be the language of communication in Francophone schools.

School Leaders' Perspectives

A group of 10 school leaders (superintendent, director of instruction, principals, and vice-principals) acknowledged that an increasing number of NF students are enrolled in French minority-language schools, yet many of these students come from exogamous couples wherein at least one parent is a right holder for French language education. However, in most of the cases, English is dominant in the home and in some cases neither parent is proficient in French. All school leaders indicated an interest in and a need for special efforts to support NF students and parents to ensure both groups' involvement, as well as the students' academic success. However, there was no real consensus about what this support would look like in schools or which stakeholders (i.e., schools, school board, parents, community) have the main responsibility for this support.

The school leaders highlighted the importance of parents and acknowledged the need for specific support for parents. However, participants lamented the fact that staff members already have heavy workloads and argued that it is necessary to get the school and families to work together, pointing to the need for a collaborative approach to parental support and education.

It was clear that these participants resisted the use of English in Francophone schools and all were aware of the struggles involved with the presence of English in the Francophone community and the attraction of English as a majority language. However, they recognized that students and their parents do use English and it is tied to their identity as bilinguals. Moreover, NF parents needed communication from the schools in English to fully understand how to support their children. Participants acknowledged that skills developed in one language normally transfer easily to other languages being learned. All agreed that it is important to cultivate a sense of pride at school for the French language and culture; teachers and school leaders must model maximized use of French and a respect for English as an integral part of the identities of many of the students and families.

Discussion

This project has permitted us to explore the presence, beliefs, involvement, and experience of NF parents whose children are educated in a French minority-language school. We also heard the perspectives of the teachers and school leaders. Unlike previous studies (Cormier & Lowe, 2010; Rocque, 2008), where the majority of parents were exogamous couples, the majority of couples in this study were NF with little French proficiency. Many had used a grandfather clause to access French education, though some had their children begin in a French preschool and applied to an admission committee to continue in the French minority-language school. This highlights the need for more research about diverse NF parents and their needs as Anglo-dominant or immigrant parents when their children attend French minority-language schools.

The survey results showed that despite possessing little French competency, the NF parents at this school reported a very positive experience with the school and staff. Parents felt very welcomed, generally satisfied with the communication from the school, and the majority wanted their children to continue through to graduation in the French system.

Comments expressed during interviews supported the quantitative findings that parents were satisfied and felt welcome and involved despite their NF status because English was used by school staff with parents. Parents' negative experiences were more likely to occur in the community or at home rather than at the school, and were most often due to language challenges in understanding or translating French communications from the school, or feeling uncomfortable in situations where others spoke in French or had negative opinions of the French school.

Interview comments confirmed findings from Cormier and Lowe (2010), which indicated that for many parents it had been a difficult decision to choose the French minority-language school, but that parents nonetheless felt great satisfaction with the choice. Some of these parents' children had received early *francisation* by choosing the French preschool, which helped early French language development. Those whose children did not attend French preschool prior, still reported being satisfied with the French school. Parents who had children enter the school in Grade 5, and who required *francisation*, were also happy with their choice.

The parent participants reported frequent involvement and contact with the French minority-language school on the survey and varied degrees of involvement from the interviews. They also reported a desire to expose their children to the French culture specifically, as well as the language, when they chose this school; this finding is consistent with reports from Dalley and Saint-Onge (2008). Bilingualism was explained by these NF parents to be the most important motivation for having chosen the French school. Despite frequent involvement and positive experiences, some parents reported having considered transferring their children to English schools. Some perceived that there was a lack of services available to the students in the French system, and they lamented feelings of being excluded and of incompetence with regard to helping their children. The interviews also revealed varied and waning degrees of PI as the children aged and the interests of the children changed. The parents in this study reported that the barriers that prevented or decreased PI were more present at school or in the community than at home, because activities in these first two places (i.e., school, community) occurred in French.

The survey data revealed that parents were accustomed to being involved in their children's education at home and had a strong desire to do so. However, parents were less involved at home with activities involving the use of French vocabulary, as well as with other activities such as listening to music and using media. Arsenault's (2008) study raised questions about parent insecurity. Based on the interview data collected in this study, it appears that parents feel less able or less confident to do activities in French at home. For example, parents indicated that they worried about how to ensure or model proper pronunciation of French words.

The parent responses to the survey showed that they believe in effort more than in ability when it comes to factors affecting student achievement, which corresponds with their willingness to be highly involved as parents and work with their children (Hoover-Dempsey, 2011). Participants also reported that they rely on and need English in communication with the school in order to be able to help their children, which lends support to Rocque's (2008) recommendation that schools address the communication needs of NF parents. Participants acknowledged that the school does not have to use English with parents but that it helps enormously in order for them to understand progress reports, homework assignments, and frequent newsletter and memo communications from school. However, parents did not see a need for the school to use English with NF students.

Teachers and school leaders were motivated to help NF students and parents. They agreed that NF parents played an important role in their children's education and language acquisition. Early intervention and socialization in French were recommended as ways to promote the acquisition of French as a minority language. Teachers and school leaders also mentioned the importance of vocabulary and literacy development and the transference of skills between languages. The teachers and school leaders resisted the use of English in school, in order to maximize the use of French, but were willing to use English to help NF parents understand and be involved in their children's education. Teachers and school leaders agreed that there is a need for preservice and in-service professional development in the area of minority language teaching, in *francisation*, and in preparedness for the diversity of students present in the French minority-language school in terms of developing strategies to meet their linguistic and academic needs.

Edwards (2011) argued that educators are aware of differentiating teaching for all students due to a variety of factors including language, exceptionalities, and experiences. Edwards suggested that applying similar principles of differentiation to PI could benefit all school families by considering and encouraging differentiated involvement of parents. Certain parents may need more support, such as low-literacy parents trying to read with children at home or those parents with a language that is different from the dominant language used at school. Edwards argued that school professionals ought to get to know parents and their needs, which change as children age. In turn, this knowledge would help teachers support parents, who in turn could better support their children.

Conclusion

Overall findings from this study corroborate those from other research. Moreover, the results from this study add to the existing research with information specific to a French minority-language school in Atlantic Canada and by underscoring the need for research about different types of NF parents who have chosen French minority-language schools. The current reality of French minority-language communities is that the majority of students in the French minority-language school classrooms no longer come from traditional families with two Francophone parents (Landry, 2010; Rocque, 2008). School administrators, teachers, Francophone parents, and NF parents all have an important role to play in continued efforts in the maintenance and revitalization of Francophone and Acadian communities. The NF parents from NF couples or from exogamous couples who have chosen a French minority-language school do play a role in the transmission of French language and culture and in community revitalization. It is critical that administrators and teachers have a clear understanding of diverse forms of PI as well as strategies for encouraging and enhancing PI. School professionals can then inform NF parents and all parents about how they can help, regardless of language, in home, school, and community contexts, leading toward effective PI, improved outcome for student achievement, and the maintenance of French language and culture.

School boards and school administration can make choices about policy and practice that will not have an anglicising effect on students in the schools, yet will respond to the needs of NF parents, reduce the barriers to PI, and assist students. Such choices could include, for example, providing bilingual information on memos or websites addressed to parents, adding a translation function on websites, offering sessions in English to parents

about literacy or numeracy strategies to use at home with children, or providing handouts in English to accompany NF parents during open house or meet the teacher events.

For future research we recommend using a larger sample, searching out a less homogeneous population of parents, and focusing on the diversity of types and needs of NF parents whose children attend French minority-language schools. More research is recommended to help understand the maintenance and revitalization process for French as a minority language. More research is also needed due to the fact that our classrooms in Canada, and globally, are becoming more multilingual and multicultural (Iannacci, 2006). What researchers and educators learn from the French minority-language school setting will also have value for all classrooms in Canada or any classroom where linguistic diversity is present, and where parents or children do not speak the dominant language of the school.

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Notes

¹Exogamous couples comprise two adults who speak different maternal languages. In this context the typical couple has one Francophone and one Anglophone parent.

²*Francisation* means giving extra support for French language, identity, and cultural development in order to bring non-Francophones to a level similar to their peers in school. It includes activities such as French camps, French courses, family evenings, and parent workshops or parent partners to offer guidance (CMEC, 2002).

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