

Experiences of Non-Francophone Parents Who Have Students in Francophone Schools

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Introduction

French minority language schools are key components for the maintenance and survival of the French language and culture in minority language contexts across Canada (Arsenault-Cameron, 2000; Fishman, 1991; Landry & Rousselle, 2003; Landry, 2010; Martel, 2001; Skutnabb-Kangas, 2000). Parents, alongside educators, play a vital role in the academic success of students and in minority French schools (Power, 2011). The *Canadian Charter of Rights* determines which parents are right-holders and eligible to send their children to minority language schools (Power, 2011). Yet, despite Charter definitions for eligibility, language boundaries are not clear. Some right-holder parents do not speak French, and an increasing number of the students populating French schools come from families where little or no French is spoken. Often in couples one parent is non-francophone (NF) married to a francophone (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2009). In this research, I explored NF parents' beliefs, experiences, and involvement in their children's education at a minority language French school.

Context

Extensive research has shown that parental involvement in children's education is an important indicator of academic and social achievement (Desforges & Abouchaar, 2003; Epstein, 2001; Jaynes, 2007, 2010; Weiss, Buffard, Bridgall & Gordon, 2009).

Literature from the minority language context confirms the theoretical and practical importance of parental involvement for student achievement. The minority language research literature also indicates that the role of family is critical to demonstrate value and support for use of the minority language and for identity construction for children (Archer, Francis & Mau, 2010; Council of Ministers of Education, Canada, 2003 [CMEC]; Fishman, 1990, 1991; Landry, 2010). However, across Canada, between 7.5 and 33.5% of children in French schools have NF parents and come from families where little or no French is spoken at home (CMEC, 2002; Allen & Cartwright, 2004; Cormier & Miller, 2013). A recent study I led in a rural setting in Atlantic Canada showed that 75% of the parents of children attending the French minority language school in the community were NF with minimal self-reported French proficiency (MacPhee, Turnbull, Gauthier, Cormier & Miller, 2013). Furthermore, 66% of right-holder students in Canadian minority French schools come from exogamous couples¹ with one NF parent (Landry, 2010), which indicates a large number of NF parents involved in French minority language schools. With more NF parents in francophone schools, understanding the beliefs, experiences, and involvement of these parents is important for school boards, administrators, and teachers, as well as for parents and parent support groups. What we learn here can also apply to other contexts where parents do not speak the language of the school.

The Study

¹Exogamous couples are comprised of two adults who speak different maternal languages. In this context the typical couple has one francophone and one anglophone parent.

This research followed a mixed methods research design with 9 focus group interviews involving 38 NF parents and four individual interviews. The discussions were preceded by participation in an online survey, with 86 NF parent participants, where parents indicated an interest to participate in interviews. The parent experiences and recommendations shared here are based on the transcriptions of the focus group interviews with NF parents and the survey data. The participants represented the classic exogamous couples (31.4%), as well as immigrant and allophone (parents who spoke neither French or English), NF parents with French heritage, and NF parents without French heritage. The participants were principally anglo-dominant, but 13 parents also had French proficiency from having been in French immersion or from using French in the workplace.

Findings

There were a variety of NF parent motivational beliefs that led to the choice of a French school for the children. The five most frequent reasons which emerged from the survey for choosing a French school were to develop bilingualism (66.2%), to improve future employment opportunities (51.1%), to reclaim French language and culture (34.9%), to benefit from small class sizes (33.7%), and to support the other parent who wanted the child to be educated in a French school (21%). One other motivation for the choice of school, which rang out strongly in the focus group discussions, was that many NF parents (N=14) had witnessed and preferred the rich culture in the French school with the presence of arts, music, and classroom content. Ten parents also mentioned the cognitive advantage of learning a second language.

Parents were asked to describe their experiences and any challenges as an NF parent to a child in a French school. Here I

highlight the most frequently mentioned themes that emerged from the majority of the focus groups. Several parents, especially those with French proficiency, reported having few challenges. Most NF parents were very involved at home and found parent teacher interviews were done in English for them, which was helpful. However, over half of the parents reported educational involvement and communication challenges and the French language was the barrier that created these challenges. Parents across focus groups repeated that at home they (53%) struggle to understand French written communication such as weekly newsletters from school and to understand homework content and assignments. Several parents emphasized having missed out on important information or events at school or having spent time figuring out a memo or written message to discover it was not even relevant to them or their children. The majority (59.3%) of participants agreed that being involved with French education takes much more time, energy, and effort than if it were in their mother tongue. In addition, many felt that they could not be involved at home or in school to the degree they would like without devaluing French by using English or their mother tongue, and they felt uncertain how to help with school or language development.

When the NF parents were asked about the children's future in the higher grades in a French school, many stated that they lack the information they need to make the choice between English and French secondary schools. These parents were concerned about the smaller number of students in secondary classes in French schools and about what academic and social opportunities would be available. When asked about French community involvement, over half of NF parents did not participate, others reported not feeling a sense of belonging to the French school or that without the French language it was awkward or difficult to participate. Some NF parents participated in French

library programs or other programs if they knew parents who would be at sporting or social activities in the French community. Two NF parents, despite no French proficiency, had been heavily involved and had played an instrumental role in setting up of the French school in their community. Several NF parents were also concerned about the travelling distance to the school for children and the time spent on the bus. The long bus ride to the French school rather than an easy walk to the neighborhood school meant long days and that school friends were not nearby in their neighborhood. Several parents of children with special needs found the resources they required were provided quickly and efficiently at the school, while other parents requested improved resources for special needs and to have reports from assessments be provided in English for NF parents.

The NF parent participants made recommendations for how school and teaching staff could help NF parents be involved or reduce barriers to involvement. I chose these comments based on the high frequency with which they appeared during the focus group interviews or in the survey. Parents made recommendations to help with communications from the school. They suggested providing a translation button to access an English (or other language) version of memos on the school website, having communication from school such as memos and weekly newsletters sent home in a bilingual format, and sending newsletters electronically in a format that parents could cut and paste text into a translation program. Another frequent suggestion was to provide school mentors or partners to help answer NF parent questions and facilitate relationship building. Parents agreed that it would be beneficial if teachers or administrators shared tips and programs at the beginning of school to translate notes from French to English. Several NF parents recommended reorganizing school newsletters for parents to easily find information on

youngest students earlier in the newsletter and older students later in the text, and to place general information relevant to all students prior to grade specific information. Parents explained that older children can read and help decipher French messages in the later grades but NF parents with children in the first three years required more support. Another proposal by parents included offering an English session or an English version of notes for parents to refer to, during meet-the-teacher night or open house sessions that occur in French.

Participants agreed that they would appreciate sessions for parents offered in English and which focus specifically on how NF parents can help students with reading, language development, literacy, and numeracy development, and programs or applications to help with pronunciation and reading in French at home. Many parents were afraid to make pronunciation mistakes that might mislead children or contribute to errors in French. Participants wished to be welcomed as parents and as important contributors with a role in education without having an anglicizing effect on the school. The NF parents wanted to be involved, have a sense of value and belonging, and have an opportunity for them as NF parents to volunteer in diverse ways even when their mother tongue is not French. I suggest that school boards or schools create a guide for NF parents, which would include information from the above recommendations and which would contribute to building bridges for the parents; bridges to support and enhance communication, relationships, and parent involvement.

An interesting finding that emerged from the focus group interview discussions was that many NF parents who had started their child in a French preschool reported a more positive parent experience with the child attending the French school. These parents explained that the preschool environment had permitted and encouraged more social contact, opportunities for

conversations, and the development of relationships with other parents as well as with early childhood educators. Because of these social connections, the NF parents felt more comfortable attending activities at the school or in the community because they would know and feel comfortable with some of the people who would be in attendance. It also gave a network of people to whom the NF parents could ask questions or share information.

Conclusion

During the focus groups, the NF parents revealed that they have a strong desire to be involved in the education of their children, they have a high regard for the value of bilingualism as citizens of Canada, and they feel the French school was the best choice for their children. Parents who had children in French schools for many years had increasingly positive experiences over time after the initial difficulty of translating school memos and navigating other communication and social issues. NF parents who had French proficiency or who had received strong support from early years educators in French childcare within school-community centres reported the most positive experiences. Finally, parents agreed that French education is a much greater challenge for them as parents than an education in the home language or in French immersion. However, these parents generally agreed that the difficulties they faced were worth it for the future opportunities and advantages for their children.

In conclusion, these findings present NF parent challenges and suggestions to address these difficulties. It is my hope that these preliminary findings will be helpful immediately, not only in the French minority school context in Canada but in any context where parents do not speak the dominant language of the school. Our communities in Canada and around the world are becoming more multicultural and multilingual. Therefore, welcoming,

informing, and accompanying parents in diverse ways and encouraging involvement in diverse ways, is extremely important. This research contributes to the gap in knowledge about NF parents who have children in French minority language schools and helps school professionals to understand the needs of parents and the barriers they face. I argue that French minority language school boards, administrators, and teachers who apply the recommendations proposed here, will empower and motivate parents to assist their children to succeed in a French school, and will promote and promulgate French language, culture, and French schools across Canada.

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