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Parental Support for Newcomer Children’s Education in a Smaller Centre

Soutien parental pour l’éducation des enfants des nouveaux venus dans un centre plus petit

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Abstract

This study explored the issues around parental support for newcomer children’s transition to school in a smaller urban centre in Atlantic Canada where newcomer support is relatively limited. Data were drawn from semi-structured interviews with 11 newcomer parents, five children, and one settlement worker. The findings revealed newcomer parents’ difficulties in understanding the school system, limited engagement with the school community, isolation from other parents, and barriers to understanding and connecting with other parents. Among these newcomers, refugee parents are particularly challenged. We conclude that newcomer children’s parental involvement need to be viewed multi-dimensionally, and that the creation of a commonly comfortable “mediated space” may be hampered by both cultural miscommunication and inadequate support provided to newcomer parents and children as well as the teaching staff.

Résumé

Cette étude a exploré les problèmes liés au soutien parental pour la transition à l’école des enfants des nouveaux immigrants, dans un centre urbain très petit de la côte atlantique du Canada où le support aux nouveaux venus est relativement limité. Les données étaient tirées des entretiens semi-dirigés avec 11 parents récemment arrivés, cinq enfants et un travailleur d’établissement. Les résultats ont révélé les difficultés des parents nouveaux venus à comprendre le système éducatif, un engagement limité avec la communauté scolaire, l’isolement d’avec les autres parents, et les obstacles à comprendre et à se lier avec les autres parents. Parmi ces nouveaux venus, les parents réfugiés sont tout particulièrement mis au défi. Nous concluons que la participation des parents des enfants nouveaux arrivants doit être considérée de manière multidimensionnelle, et que la création d’un “espace de médiation” mutuellement confortable peut être entravée par une mauvaise communication sur le plan culturel et par un soutien insuffisant offert aux parents et enfants nouveaux venus, ainsi qu’au staff enseignant.

Keywords: newcomer, refugee, immigrant, parental support, education, smaller centre, mediated space, barriers

Mots-clés : nouveau venu, réfugié, immigrant, soutien parental, éducation, centre plus petit, espace de médiation, barrières

Background

Newcomers to Canada are comprised mostly of immigrants who choose to leave their homeland and live in Canada or refugees who come for protection from war, persecution, or other insecurities. Although both groups experience the impact of migration, their children’s education can be affected differently. Literature suggests that immigrants highly value the education of their children (Krahn & Taylor, 2005). However, not all newcomer parents possess the knowledge about the school system and are engaged with their children’s teachers, the school or other parents in typical ways expected in Western settings (Kanu 2008, Guo 2006). Bitew and Ferguson (2010) found that less-educated refugee parents tend to be even less involved. Thus, the issues surrounding the development of home-school relations may be more pronounced.

While research on the education and settlement experiences of immigrants and refugees in major Canadian cities has been gaining momentum (Anisef & Kilbride, 2003; Gunderson, 2000; Watt & Roessingh, 1994), the experience of such children in smaller centres has not been given enough attention (Karanja, 2007). In the province of Newfoundland and Labrador (NL), while newcomer population is very small, refugees constitute a significant portion of that population (Burnaby, 2010). With about 214,285 people living in its census metropolitan area (St John's and adjacent municipalities) in 2015 (Statistics Canada, 2016), St John's, the provincial capital city, houses most of the newcomers with refugee background and provides support services for them. The major government sponsored service offers a range of language and settlement programs for parents and children, and the school board offers ESL support for K-9 children through a handful of itinerant ESL teachers.

Local research in NL has indicated that the support for newcomer children, particularly refugee children with educational gaps, is insufficient (Burnaby, 2010; Sarma-Debnath & Castano, 2008), and the lack of specialized ESL teachers has led to general subject teachers being challenged to take on the role of educating this group of students without adequate training (Li, 2012). At the same time, parents were reported to be passive in connecting with teachers regarding their children's schooling (Sarma-Debnath & Castano, 2008). It was in this context that we conducted a qualitative study looking into the factors influencing newcomer parents' participation in their children's school settings. The purpose was to understand the transition of elementary newcomer students and their families into the education system in a smaller centre in Atlantic Canada—St John's, NL, and to provide educational personnel with a broader picture of the social and academic needs of refugee students and their families.

Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

Migration Stress and "Mediated Space"

Uncertainties and anxieties in a new cultural context cause enormous pressure on children and their parents. They need to learn to compromise and negotiate in order to create "a mediated space" that may not be ideal but comfortable enough to allow them to function (Li, 2010, 2015). This mediated space "is constructed through multi-directional interaction and negotiation" (Li, 2015, p. 242), focusing on commonalities between and among cultures, and negotiating different views and practices among members involved. The space is built upon the cultural "third space" in the post-colonial context (Bhabha, 2004); however, it does not suggest explicit power relations or "unequal and uneven forces of cultural representation" (p. 245). Instead, the mediated space emphasizes social inclusion and interaction of all stakeholders to achieve mutual understanding. This conceptualization is helpful in the school context where students with divergent linguistic and cultural backgrounds are involved. In our opinion, educators should take into consideration not only the mainstream curriculum and conventional practices, but also the cultural capital of the newcomer students and parents so that their educational values and practices are recognized as equally important and legitimate as those of the local people.

The process of adjusting to a new country, a new language, and unfamiliar customs is stressful for children, and more so for refugee children who bring with them residual effects of loss, trauma, family disruption and social isolation (Ahearn & Athey, 1991; Bhugra & Becker, 2005). Their premigration upbringing and life experience impact their adjustment to life in the new country (Bhugra & Becker, 2005). Similarly, newcomer parents also go through a period of cultural transition while trying to integrate their former experience with new information, which might be in conflict with their long-held beliefs (Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak & Terenzini, 2004; Sawir,

Marginson, Deumert, Nyland & Ramia, 2008). The complications experienced by parents can be transferred to children through family interaction, which affects parents' engagement with the school community (De Haene et. al, 2007). While teachers and local communities are more vocal about their concerns of lack of parental involvement, they also need to play an active role in forming this mediated space for newcomer children and their families. To do this, understanding the newcomer parents' perspectives is critical.

Importance of Family Support in Children's Education

In spite of the impact of the migration experience, literature suggests that education of children is highly valued by immigrants (Garcia , Akiba, Palacios, Bailey, Silver, DiMartino, & Chin, 2002; Krahn & Taylor, 2005). Multiple studies have shown that immigrant families' involvement in their children's academic life is a powerful predictor of academic achievement and social development as children progress from kindergarten through high school and higher education (Bang, 2011; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Turney & Kao, 2009). Turney and Kao (2009) note that parental involvement is linked to academic or behavioral success, and is vital in determining their children's early educational experiences.

Despite their emphasis on children's academic achievement, Turney and Kao (2009) notice that minority immigrant parents perceived greater barriers to involvement in their children's school than did native-born parents. Parents who have limited English language proficiency are restricted in their ability to support their children's sociocultural and linguistic learning in the host country, which is shown to be associated with children's academic achievement (Pong & Landale, 2012). Research has also shown that immigrant parents' prior education is a strong factor related to their children's educational attainment. Bitew and Ferguson (2010) found that less-educated refugee parents tend to be less involved although they show high interest in their children's achievement and may help in ways not measured by their studies. Since elementary school is a critical period for long-term educational outcomes (Turney & Kao, 2009), such perceived barriers and lower levels of involvement are a concern given that academic success and educational outcomes are strongly influenced by parental involvement (Bang, 2011; Bitew & Ferguson, 2010; Carreon, Drake, & Barton, 2005).

Though academic difficulty is not strictly the experience of any particular community in this country, it is more common and widespread among English-as-a-second-language (ESL) students (Watt & Roessingh, 1994). The roles of teachers and schools are of great importance to these students while they try to adapt to the new environment (Wiltse, 2005). School can help them integrate successfully into the Canadian mainstream (Anisef & Kilbride, 2003) by offering an "array of services" (Tanner, 1997, p. 237) and making "instructional modifications" (Goldenberg, 2008, p. 19). According to Miller and Endo (2004), a major step in planning programs for English language learners (ELL) is to understand barriers to their educational success. For effective instruction to take place, regular classroom teachers must be educated to accommodate differences in the learning of all students, including those of language minority students. Gàndara, Maxwell-Jolly, and Driscoll (2005) stress that "no matter what the method or program of instruction, teachers of English language learners need special skills and training to effectively accomplish this task" (p. 1).

ESL Support in Smaller Centres

Studies have reported that the support available for ESL students determines the quality of academic and social support they receive (Ashworth, 2000; Leung, 2001). Unfortunately, limited funding and ESL staffing usually challenge schools in smaller centres. In addition, many regular

classroom teachers are unfamiliar with or inexperienced in teaching ESL students (Karanja, 2007; Li, 2012). Berube (2000) examined the main challenges faced by smaller school districts; he noted that the lack of qualified and experienced ESL teachers and the low likelihood of incorporating pedagogical approaches that reflect diversity are the main challenges that prevent these schools from providing support for their English language learners.

The recent growth of newcomer children in the city in which the study was conducted is calling the provincial school district to provide these students with more special instructional programs and to consider the social and cultural needs of the children and their families (Dirnberger, 2010). Among the newcomer population, there is high proportion of protected persons and government assisted refugees who are less likely to have English proficiency. This makes communicating with parents and children, and understanding their perspectives especially important for creating a healthy mediated space for newcomer children. It is in this context that we conducted this study, guided by the following questions: (1) What are the experiences of newcomer parents in the process of helping their children's transit to school? (2) What are the experiences of newcomer children in this process? (3) What are the factors that facilitate or hinder the interaction of newcomer parents with the school community?

Research Methodology

The target group for this qualitative study was newcomer families who have lived in Newfoundland for four years or less, who speak English as a second language and have children attending primary or elementary school. Participants were recruited with the assistance of individuals working or volunteering with the newcomer population in language schools, adult basic education programs, and social and religious organizations. Translators were used to facilitate communication with parents experiencing difficulties with the English language during the recruitment and interview sessions. The participants included a settlement worker, 11 parents, and five children. Among them, four pairs of the parents and children were related. What is worth noting is that eight out of the 11 parents and four out of the five children were of refugee background. The participants were a diverse group originating from countries in the Middle East, Caribbean, Africa, South Asia, and Eastern Europe. They all spoke, or were learning to speak English as a second language. The children's ages ranged from eight to 12 and the adults' ages ranged from early-20s to mid-50s. Data were collected through conducting semi-structured interviews with the parents and children during the winter of 2014. An assisting settlement worker was also interviewed to offer her experience of helping some of the participants. This type of interview permitted the research team to elicit a depth of information from a relatively small number of participants (Guion, Diehl & McDonald, 2001). Child interviews were approximately 30 minutes in length while the adult interviews averaged 60 minutes. Due to the relatively small number of newcomers in the city, we are only able to provide a general description of participants to ensure their anonymity. We have made every effort to ensure that all identifiable information is eliminated from this report. Accordingly, codes have been assigned to each participant; parents and children will be listed along with an assigned number (i.e., Parent 1, Child 1). In cases where the quotation reveals the participant's religious or cultural information that may identify them, no name is provided.

We used content analysis to identify, code, and categorize the primary patterns in the data. The transcribed data was reviewed several times, broken down into meaningful analytic units, and coded. The codes used were *a priori*, based on the research questions, and are inductive—for those that emerged from the data (Schwandt, 2001). Following coding, categories and themes were individually and subsequently collaboratively developed and analyzed by the research team. Regular meetings were

held as a form of peer review in which research team members discussed interpretations and conclusions, provided insights, and posed challenges. Through this collaborative process, initial coding categories were modified, new categories developed, and old ones discarded. In using multiple analysts, insights were made through differing interpretations of the same data, which Patton (1990) refers to as analytical triangulation.

We must point out the limitations of this study. Although we made our best effort helping parents with limited English competence by providing a translator, the articulation of their concerns might be undermined due to meaning lost in translation. In addition, due to the refugee background of most of our participants, our data reflect the concerns of refugee parents and children more than of other groups of newcomers. Moreover, our sample of 11 parents and five children is far from exhaustive and does not represent all the newcomers of the province, and it is not our intention to make any generalizations based on such a small sample. Furthermore, based on the focus and the limited space of this article, we did not include the teachers' views; their perspectives are reported in a separate article. But the absence of their voice results in a gap in the discussion of the mediated space.

Results and Analysis

School and Community Supports: "They Did Amazing Job with the Kids"

Participants in our study commented positively on school and community supports. They were grateful to the government sponsored newcomer support association ("the Association" hereafter), praising it as a source of "light" in otherwise dark times of transition and confusion. Among other things, they mentioned assistance with school enrolment, meeting with teachers, translation services, summer camp enrolment and volunteer partnering. One parent said, "It was the Association from the first day: as soon as we arrived here they did arrange interpreters, they did schedule appointments, schools. Everything we needed, they were there¹." Another mentioned the importance of the settlement-worker-in-school program: "If we went [to the school] and there was nobody there to explain to us, it would be very tough for us... I would have jumped into the ocean!"

They were thankful to the teachers who "did amazing job with the kids." Teachers were also complimented for "treating [newcomers] very respectfully," and for putting in extra time and effort to ensure ESL students' success. Participants gratefully noted the extra miles taken by certain teachers to include and assist them. One teacher made a referral for a refugee student to see a public health nurse and do a vision test; another invited refugee students to her house for lunch, on which a student commented "we all had a fun time."

Parents' Challenges in Supporting Children

Confusion about the School System and Curriculum: "I don't know what they are doing"

Despite their many positive comments about community and school support and their gratitude toward individual teachers, school settlement workers, and the Association staff, many newcomer parents felt that their understanding of the Newfoundland education system and genuine connections with teachers and the school community remained largely elusive. One parent noted that the school system is not designed to help newcomer students; "the teachers themselves are the only people who might actually help."

Past research found that only about 50% of newcomers to Newfoundland had received information about how to access educational services (Gien & Law, 2009). Given this lack of

¹ To keep the authenticity of the participants' dialogues, the texts cited were kept in their original transcriptions without alteration of either grammar or context.

support, it is not surprising that an understanding of our education system is not imparted to newcomers. One parent believed that “the Association is [the one] who chose schools [for the kids].” When questioned, many parents were unsure as to how much, if any, ESL support their children were receiving, or how ESL teachers were distributed between schools: “I don’t know if he still have [an ESL teacher]... some school have more teacher for second language English and some school not have, don’t know why” (Parent 6). Another parent expressed uncertainty about what was happening in his daughter’s classroom: “I don’t know what they are doing there at the school. I know she is there at the school and if anything is offered to the students, she has to do what the other student does” (Parent 9).

One participant stated that he was “not familiar with the methods they apply when teaching” (Parent 2), while others expressed a desire to learn more about the teaching plan and curriculum that were not communicated to them:

I would like to see a detailed plan explaining what is going to happen next year (Parent 3).

One of things that really would like the schools here to tell us is: What are the textbooks and the curriculum that they teach our children? I once asked a teacher about this and she replied by listing them [so] quickly that I didn’t understand what she was talking about. I want to know what the syllabus is (Parent 4).

Their expectation to get informed about specific curriculum contents may be derived from the educational system in their home countries where students are assigned a textbook for each course they study. For some parents, this lack of familiarity with the new education system and curriculum was expressed as anxiety related to their children’s future even if the children were only in Grade 6:

We don’t know what are the best majors that the university provides and how the school [can] help the students in choosing these best majors. We don’t know what my girls are supposed to study in school in order to major in, say, engineering or medicine (Parent 2).

I don’t know what happens to my son after Grade 6 in terms of what subjects he’s going to study (Parent 3).

Although it is found that immigrant parents’ lack of knowledge of the education system negatively affected their provision of academic assistance to their children (Bitew & Ferguson, 2010), our participants’ worries seemed to suggest that they were far-sighted and pro-active regarding their children’s schooling. They desired to know more about the course offerings and subject matters, and the options for post-secondary education. Lack of (access to) information rendered them powerless and anxious.

Apart from the above, our data also indicated misunderstandings of the support programs that meant to help students with educational gaps. Guo (2006) found that dissatisfaction and fear of their children being “ghettoized” could arise when the purpose of ESL programs was not adequately communicated to parents. Similar fears and misunderstandings are apparent in the following quote from a parent in our study:

There is a system that they take the newcomers...in a group and put them alone. That is what I find out, that is not fair to me. They say that the newcomers, they do not understand different subjects so we cannot put them together with other Canadians...I am not quite okay with that system...(Parent 9).

In this case, the student, who was born and raised in a refugee camp, was given an opportunity to attend a program designed to meet the needs of students with significant educational gaps. Because this program was not adequately explained to the participant, it was viewed as “unfair” and “inconvenient.” This specific case further emphasizes the need for ensuring that newcomer parents have a genuine understanding of the education system.

Limited Engagement with School Community: “We Can’t Read the Applications or Forms”

For most parent participants, engagement with the school community was at a bare minimum, with only attendance at parent-teacher interviews. Virtually no parent volunteered to help their children’s school; they did not develop friendships with other parents, nor did they participate in school governance. Parent-teacher interviews seemed to be the strongest, and sometimes the only link to the larger school community for newcomer parents. Many parents went to great lengths to attend these meetings by securing a translator and means of transportation beforehand.

While some participants appeared to be comfortable with this level of communication, others were eager for more opportunities to communicate:

At the end of every semester the school provides the parents with a report card that explains his current level in the subjects that he’s studying...but through the semester we don’t hear anything from the school on how he’s doing...I think that every two weeks the teacher should contact me and tell me that ‘your son might have some difficulties in science and this is what we are going to do to help him improve,’ and the teacher should also mention that ‘this is what we want you to [do] as his parents’; but unfortunately this doesn’t happen (Parent 3).

This lack of communication with the school can make parents feel unprepared in assisting their children with schoolwork, and can also lead to missed opportunities for students:

[My child] isn’t involved in many of the school’s activities. Unfortunately, if the parents aren’t aware of what the school offers, their children might miss on many of these activities. Once you have missed registering for such clubs or activities, it means that you have lost your space (Parent 3).

The newcomer parents’ limited interaction with the school did not go unnoticed by their children. One young participant noted that her parents’ only involvement was her father’s attendance at the parent-teacher interviews, while another stated that “last year my old teacher never met my mom and this [current] teacher never met my mom” (Child 2).

Newcomer parents’ lack of engagement with the school community is further exacerbated by the mediums of communication (through school notices or web postings), which can be less effective for those who speak English as a second language:

And when he has to go on a field trip or some other places, we normally can’t read the applications or forms that we receive from the school.... Papers used to come before, and we didn’t understand anything and it is so hard (Parent 11).

Although the Department of Education of the province of NL highlighted in the document entitled *Whole School Inclusion of Immigrant Students* (2009) the need to “ensure messages sent home are written in simple, plain language,” it appears that refugee parents receive notices identical to those sent to the parents who are fully literate in English. While volunteers or settlement staff members assisted some parents with the translation of school notices, the latter do not always get the necessary assistance due to the frequency of these notices. The settlement worker in our study noted the difficulty of translating school notices over the telephone: “She called me and she told

me she cannot understand the application, and I didn't have time to go and look at that. . . .Some of the words are really big for her, so she spelled for me. . . .That is very tough."

Isolation from Other Parents: "We Don't Exchange Visits"

The disconnect of communication between newcomer parents and the school community is also apparent in their relative isolation from other parents. Participants noted the absence as well as the superficiality of connections with other parents.

There is no close relationship between us and other people. We don't usually exchange visits, not to mention that we don't really know many of these people (Parent 2).

We can talk to each other. . . [but] just when we meet, like "Hi!" "Hi!" and that's all (Parent 1).

The relationship that we have with many of these families isn't really that solid (Parent 3).

It's only when I drop off or pick up my children that I see them and sometimes greet them. Basically because we don't have anything in common that might start such a relationship (Parent 5).

It appears that for some participants, this disconnection was due to lack of opportunity or linguistic barriers, while for others unfamiliarity or belief in lack of commonality prevented relationship building. These findings point to the need to establish more opportunities for newcomer and local parents to connect. It is apparent that failure to do so can result in perceived hostility that may or may not be intended: "I sometimes feel that other parents try to keep their distance. I even think that some of them even hate us; the hate is clear." (Parent 4)

Given the well-documented benefits of parental involvement in their children's education in terms of academic and behavioural success (Bang, 2011; Epstein & Sheldon, 2002; Ji & Koblinsky, 2009; Carreon, Drake & Barton, 2005; Turney & Kao, 2009), this limited connection of our parent participants with the school community is a significant issue.

Barriers to Newcomer Parental Support

Many parent participants were eager for opportunities to communicate; they expressed regret that their personal situations did not allow it. Our data suggests that these parents' limited engagement with the school community was a result of the following factors: (1) Linguistic barriers; (2) Personal circumstances inhibiting opportunities; and (3) Cultural differences and assumptions.

Linguistic Barriers: "We Just Wave Our Hands and Walk Away"

Most participants spoke of linguistic barriers as an impediment to increased involvement in their children's education. One spoke with deep regret of her inability to communicate with her son's teacher:

We would like to go [to the school] and get involved. . . . And we would like to ask so many questions to the teacher who is there. Even his homeroom teacher, she just waves her hand and smiles and maybe she would like to ask things to me but she knows I do not speak English and there is no communication. Because of linguistic barrier, we do not talk to each other; we just wave our hands and walk away. We would like to ask how he is doing, how much grade he is scoring, so many things (Parent 11)!

Some participants had difficulty understanding the teachers' "fast English" and felt that teachers did not comprehend their difficulty. Other participants lacked confidence in their ability to communicate and worried about embarrassing the teacher on the end of the phone if the teacher failed to understand their "broken English."

The parents also expressed regret about their inability to assist their children with schoolwork: “But I still...blaming myself. I can’t help them so much around school because of the language barrier” (Parent 10). Those parents tend to rely more heavily on volunteers, homework clubs and community centres to fill in the gap.

Personal Circumstances: “I Get Very, Very Sick”

In addition to the challenges posed by linguistic barriers, many participants found that personal circumstances negatively affected their involvement in their child’s schooling. This is in line with Turney and Kao’s (2009) findings that socioeconomic status, time availability, and child support assistance are all correlated with parental involvement in school. While many participants expressed desire to be more involved in the school community, they spoke of hectic school and work schedules, childcare responsibilities and health concerns.

Many participants were simply too busy with ESL or Adult Basic Education classes and multiple low-paid jobs, and could not afford the time to get involve in their child’s school. Their responses echoed one another: “I don’t have a lot of time;” “...because I’m busy working;” “I’m always busy;” and they indicated that if they had time, they would like to become volunteers. For mothers in particular, it appeared that childcare responsibilities within the home placed limits on their availability for school involvement. Some women were faced with additional hurdles in improving their English—pregnancies and young children prevented them from attending ESL classes, which further limited their school engagement for their older children.

For a number of participants, coping with severe health issues not only restricted their involvement in the children’s schools, but also prevented their attendance at English classes and added to the existing financial strains: “I have arthritis...it is chronic pain...my pain is crazy...and it is expensive because you don’t have insurance for the medication, so I get very, very sick and I cannot get out of bed” (Parent 6).

Different Traditions and Habits: “That Is Only for the Teacher to See”

Many immigrant groups have traditional values different from the values of mainstream Canadian culture. In our interviews, a number of parents emphasized the importance of teachers’ understanding of cultural and religious differences. One parent spoke of how the practice of wearing a headscarf remained poorly understood by a teacher who exclaimed “What?!” [when throwing her hands in the air] upon hearing that the student was going to wear a scarf to school once she entered Grade 3. The teacher’s reaction brought negative repercussions and affected the daughter’s view about the practice. Another parent described a different scenario in similar nature in which the daughter in Grade 1 was included in a fashion show at school without the approval of the parents. This was considered by the family as violation of their religious belief.

Other than the perceived lack of respect for their culture and religion, some parents were troubled by different meal routine. One parent noted that they were used to the schedule of their refugee camp where people ate in the morning and in the evening. Packing snacks and lunch now for his child was simply an effort to comply with the school requests. “When he goes to school he takes his lunch, but that is only for the teacher to see; he doesn’t eat it.”

Our participants’ statements made it clear that cultural assumptions about everything from clothing, activities to meal times can negatively impact their children’s transition to Canadian schools and their sense of belonging. It is essential that individual teachers and the school system as a whole develop an increased awareness of these differences when designing programs and activities. The standard approach to inclusion may not be appropriate for all. Such incidents also have implications for the

Canadian school system and for the preparation of teachers. Our preservice teachers tend to be white, middle-class, female and monolingual (Hodgkinson, 2002), which is not in sync with the recent demographic changes in our province. Our findings highlight the need to increase diversity among teachers and ensure continual reflection on cultural assumptions.

Discussion and Implications

It is established in the literature that newcomer parents have strongly invested in their children's education, and they often place their hope in the next generation (Garcia Coll, et al., 2002). However, our findings suggest that there is more to be done in our education system in terms of engaging newcomer families and enhancing communication in order to facilitate refugee parents' understanding of the system. The discrepancy entails a deeper examination of both the definition of parental involvement and the context that creates these limits.

(Mis)Perceptions of Parental Involvement

Research suggests that parental involvement in education contributes to educational success (Bang, 2011; Bitew & Ferguson, 2010; Carreon, Drake, & Barton, 2005; Epstein & Sheldon, 2002; Turney & Kao, 2009). It stands to reason that when refugee parents are not presented with ample opportunities to understand and get involved in the education system, their children's educational success may be hampered. It is therefore imperative to address the factors that inhibit understanding of and engagement with the school system.

Misperceptions around roles within the school community are not uncommon. Long-held cultural traditions and deeply engrained attitudes towards education can affect both refugee parents' school involvement and teachers' perception of involvement (Huntsinger & Jose, 2009; Jimeno, Martinovic, Gauthier, Bouchard, & Urquhart, 2010; Turney & Kao, 2009). In our school systems, parental involvement is understood from traditional perspectives such as attending parent-teacher interviews, volunteering in schools, reading with children at home, and participating in school governance. This understanding may not work well with newcomer parents from other cultures. For instance, in Cambodia, teachers have absolute authority and control, and parental involvement in formal education is considered inappropriate (Garcia Coll et al., 2002). Some immigrant parents in Guo's (2006) study also viewed parental involvement in the school as a foreign or "Western" idea.

Teachers may interpret the level of parental involvement at school as a signal of the extent to which parents care about their children's educational outcomes (Turney & Kao, 2009). Our research suggests that this interpretation presents an inaccurate picture: while our participants' engagement with the school may have been limited, they were keenly interested in their children's success in school, and they passed on their linguistic, cultural, and religious knowledge to their children at home. Similarly, Guo (2006) maintained that external signs of parental involvement are insufficient gauge of interest. She stresses a better understanding of the low levels of involvement of the immigrant parents than assuming that it is interest-related. Whereas some parents expressed a desire for more communication from the teacher, it would be helpful for the teacher to elucidate that parent-initiated contact is both appropriate and welcomed. Teachers could encourage parents to call them any time they want questions answered. Other researchers highlight the need to view school involvement more multi-dimensionally and suggest involvement be understood from the parents' perspective, regardless of whether that presence is in a formal school space or in more personal, informal spaces, including those created by parents themselves (Carreón, Drake & Baron, 2005; Huntsinger & Jose, 2009).

It is also important that information of the Canadian school system and traditions is imparted to newcomer parents. Even though in Newfoundland, information about the school system and traditions is relayed to parents of immigrant families in the initial days of school, our research highlights the importance of sharing this information on an ongoing basis, as it is possible that families are initially overwhelmed with information. One practical avenue to relay information to parents is at the regularly scheduled parent-teacher interviews, as our findings suggest that newcomer parents made greater effort to attend these meetings. Schools could capitalize on parental attendance at these meetings by providing extra time for answering questions and addressing concerns, and by informing parents about the Canadian school system, customs, volunteer opportunities, and ways for parents to connect.

(Missing) Agents in Creating “Mediated Spaces”

In her work on identity reconstruction in additional language contexts, Li (2010, 2015) conceptualized the creation of mediated space which incorporates both home and host cultures and even beyond the overlap of the two. Seen within the context of the transition of newcomer families into a new school system, this theory suggests that as individual families and schools reconstruct their identities, they must also find a mediated space that is commonly comfortable. Failure to do so, as we have seen, can result in limited school engagement and cultural misunderstandings.

Both our literature review and research data highlight the multitude of struggles faced by newcomers as they adapt to a new language, culture and country. Newcomers are involved in an ongoing process of adapting, adjusting and accepting. The host country also changes and adapts with the arrival of newcomers. A review of documents prepared by the province’s Department of Education provides evidence of thoughts and energy expended in preparing teachers for the education and well-being of ESL and newcomer students. Each group, it appears, is in the process of reconstructing their identity and adapting to the presence of the other. Why then are newcomers’ understanding and engagement with the school system so limited? What is the missing agent in creating a shared mediated space where newcomer parents and the school community can truly and comfortably relate?

Our research suggests that the creation of a mediated space may be hampered by both cultural miscommunication and inadequate support provided to newcomers and teachers. Some participants expressed concerns in retaining their religious and cultural beliefs, and they felt disrespected by school staff. The “fashion show” incident was likely not to have been a deliberate act of disrespect, rather it was likely a lack of awareness that the family would not have approved or consented to their child’s participation. Perhaps greater diversity among teaching staff, additional settlement workers in schools, or funding for “cultural interpreters” as well as more in-service cultural diversity training for teaching and service staff would help rectify this issue. Such “cultural interpreters” could also coordinate other important supports for newcomer families and educators; for example, they can oversee the translation of school notices to parents.

We must also look within a larger socio-political context if we want to understand the factors that inhibit newcomer families’ understanding of the educational system and their engagement in school. While teachers and parents are ultimately responsible for the level of family engagement within the school community, factors outside the classroom affect what happens inside. Gien and Law (2009) have found that only about 50% of newcomers to Newfoundland received information about how to access educational services and even fewer (35-40%) received information related to housing, employment, language training opportunities or services to meet basic needs. Sarma-Debnath and Castano (2008) also found that families that immigrate to St. John’s often have minimal awareness of the

available public benefits and community services. These findings suggest inadequate provincial government investment in outreach and support for newcomers. In our own research, many parents found it necessary to work multiple low-paying jobs while attending school; they need to change their child's school when they moved into subsidized housing, and they rely on volunteers to assist with everything from transportation, homework to medical appointments. These findings hint at the importance of increasing government efforts in providing access to professions and trades for newcomers, and increasing funding for both settlement support services and an education department that can adjust to a new student demographic.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The creation of a mediated space between newcomer families and the school, or in a broader sense, between families and the community is complex. While there is no single solution to remedy immigrant parents' limited understanding of the education system and their lack of engagement with the school community, implementing some feasible measures may aid in creating a mediated space. For one, teachers and school staff could dedicate efforts to creating inclusive, welcoming environments for immigrant students and their families by engaging the cultural and linguistic resources of students in classroom instructional activities and homework (Bang, 2011). Assignments that engage familiar cultural references and resources in the students' families and communities help parents stay informed about their children's schoolwork and benefit the students. Local teachers could increase opportunities for newcomer parents to share their culture and traditions within the classroom as a part of the curriculum.

Teachers often promote ESL student interaction by employing strategies such as buddy system, peer tutoring and participation in extracurricular activities. Our findings suggest that it may be conducive to engagement if schools employ similar strategies with parents. The challenges of understanding school notices, culture, and practices could be lessened by pairing immigrant parents with a local "buddy" parent. To increase understanding and establish a sense of belonging, Guo (2006) suggested hosting newcomer parent nights and organizing a newcomer parent-teacher association where parents choose the topic for discussion and write monthly newsletters.

For some participants, issues related to cultural differences and assumptions hindered understanding and engagement with the school community. The issue could be addressed by broadening traditional views of parental involvement to include the recognition of unique ways that refugee parents engaged in their children's education, increasing diversity among school staff as well as providing diversity education and cultural sensitivity training. Local researchers have noted that teacher training programs and ongoing professional development should provide teachers with strategies and resources to address the specific needs and contributions of newcomers (Burnaby, 2010; Sarma-Debnath & Castano, 2008). Our data suggests the need for "cultural interpreters," individuals who can act as an intermediary between the parents and the teachers. Among other things, a cultural interpreter could help decipher and convey the differing cultural norms surrounding parental engagement and role expectations.

Given the increasing diversity within classrooms in smaller centres, it is essential that the schools find creative ways to work with all families. When communicating with parents who speak English as a second language without the aid of a translator, teachers must employ some of the same strategies used with their ESL students: speaking slowly and clearly, using visual aids, and providing additional time to ensure understanding. Given that communication between newcomer parents and teachers seemed to happen only at the regularly scheduled parent-teacher interviews, teachers might capitalize on this unique opportunity to connect with the parents.

Implementation of these recommendations requires increased government funding and a genuine commitment to supporting and engaging newcomers. If newcomers continue to have to choose between language classes and health, childcare or employment, if they don't see their communities' diversity reflected in the teaching staff, then the engagement of newcomers in the school and the broader community will not likely happen. Those participants who benefited from the services provided by the Association, the settlement-worker-in-school program, and community centres expressed deep gratitude for the assistance they received. It is essential that such programs receive continued and additional support to maintain and extend their services.

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