SCHOOL-FAMILY COLLABORATION: THE PERSPECTIVES OF QUEBEC-BORN AND IMMIGRANT PARENTS

A PRELIMINARY ANALYSIS OF THE RESULTS OF TWO STUDIES

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For decades, already, the collaboration between schools and families has been an integral part of the prevailing discourse held in Quebec on student retention and academic success. Furthermore, the literature on the topic often presents the link between this relationship and student academic success as obvious. In this article, we highlight the perceptions of family-school partnerships held by Quebec-born (*Québécois de souche*, or "old-stock Quebecers") families and immigrant families. We will see that our participants have clearly integrated the discourse surrounding this type of partnership, but that if we consider this collaboration in light of Epstein' typology, family involvement remains minimal and is mostly limited to monitoring a child's learning progress at home. Can we therefore consider this to be a true partnership between schools and families? Our data indicates that there is in fact an absence of real dialogue between the surveyed families and teachers, but that for the time being, families seem satisfied with this situation.

The partnership between schools and families is now, in Quebec as elsewhere in the West, an integral part of the discourse on student retention and academic success (Dufresne, 2014; Deslandes and Bertrand, 2004; Duval, Dumoulin and Perron, 2014 Larrivée, Kalubi and Terrisse, 2006; Saint-Jacques, Turcotte and Oubrayrie-Roussel, 2012; Tremblay, Dumoulin, Gagnon, Giroux, 2015; etc.). To understand the current interest in Quebec for this type of collaboration, it is necessary to look a few decades back.

In the 1960s, Quebec society experienced profound political upheavals. Indeed, the State invested areas that were previously under the jurisdiction of the Church. This is particularly the case with education. In fact, between 1963 and 1966 the Parent Commission produced a five-volume report of recommendations aiming to democratize Quebec's education system. This report radically changed the face of Quebec schools. Under the influence of this report, education became considered as a right and not a luxury, and consequently, the government wanted everyone to have the same opportunities to access it (Pigeon, sd). In order to achieve this, the government made education free, built new schools and secularized the education system (ibid.). The Ministère de l'Éducation was created in 1964; school boards were grouped together; curricula were standardized; comprehensive secondary schools (offering general and vocational courses) were created and general and vocational colleges (CEGEP) started appearing (ibid).

In parallel, aligning with this reform, government measures were introduced to encourage parental involvement in the

various instances of management and decision-making that were gradually introduced in schools (e.g. school and parent committees in 1970; parental involvement in defining school objectives in 1979, school boards in 1997). These measures also required families to provide support in their child's educational process through their commitment to academic and extracurricular activities and their child's homework supervision. While the principle of close collaboration between the school and families is regularly put forward by the Conseil supérieur de l'éducation[1] (1991, 1993), it is in 1995 that this type of partnership[2] became considered as a possible solution that could be applied to elementary schools and high schools (Conseil supérieur de l'éducation, 1995a, 1995b, 1995c). Nevertheless, we cannot talk about this kind of partnership without addressing the multiethnic reality of Quebec and, by extension, the province's cultural communities[3].

Indeed, in the late 1960s and throughout the 1970s, three laws aiming to restrict the access of immigrant students to English schools were passed by Quebec's Assembly: Bill 63 in 1969, the Official Language Act in 1974 and the Charter of the French Language or Bill 101 in 1977 (Paillé, nd). While the first two laws were rather ineffective, Bill 101 had immediate effects and there have been changes since in the linguistic and ethno-cultural composition of school populations in Francophone public schools (ibid.). A few years later, in 1985, the Ministère de l'Éducation published a report which highlighted the integration problems in schools of students having a different cultural background. This report advocates the development of closer ties between families and communities in order to facilitate psychosocial integration (Government of Quebec, 1985). In 1993, the Conseil supérieur de l'éducation in turn produced a report on the issue. It emphasized the need to support intercultural dialogue and strengthen francization and youth socialization efforts. It notably proposed to establish a more formal and stronger partnership between schools and immigrant families. From 1998 onward, the government emphasized the need of such a collaboration given that it constitutes a crucial element facilitating "social, linguistic and cultural integration" (p. 17) (Government of Quebec, 1998). This view is reaffirmed in the teacher-training program of 2001 (Government of Quebec, 2004). In autumn 2009, the Ministère de l'éducation committed to working towards increasing the graduation rate of young Quebecers (Government of Quebec, 2009). To achieve this, it called upon different sectors and families, asking them to emphasize the value of education to their children, to take all means necessary to guide them to success, but also to work in close collaboration with their schools.

For over 40 years now, researchers have been studying this notion of school-family partnership. It is easily noticeable in the literature that the link between this relationship and academic success is generally presented as obvious (Dufresne, 2014; Deslandes and Bertrand, 2004; Deslandes, nd; Deslandes, Potvin and Leclerc, 1999; Larrivée, 2011; Marsolais, 2004; etc.). Taking this assumption as our starting point, we intend in this article to highlight the perceptions surrounding the family-school partnership that Quebec-born families and immigrant families hold in order to, first, verify if there is a correlation in their minds between the academic success of their children and parental involvement in schools; second, to assess what form this type of involvement takes, and third, whether the school-family partnership as it is understood and embodied by the Quebec-born and immigrant parents plays a role in the retention and academic success of their children. In parallel, we will try to assess if there is a difference in the discourse surrounding family-school partnership held by Quebec-born families and immigrant families.

WHAT IS SCHOOL-FAMILY COLLABORATION?

The term "collaboration" implies an initial association and a close consultation between stakeholders where everyone has different responsibilities depending on their specific expertise and their complementarity. This shared responsibility requires preliminary negotiations. In addition, an active collaboration implies that the process is interactive.

The school-family partnership necessarily implies the presence of relationships that are more or less involved between the various actors responsible for a child's education (Larrivée, 2011). However, the expectations and practices of families and teachers can change according to situations, which inevitably affects their preferred forms of collaboration. In this regard, researchers often resort to Epstein's typology (2001) which describes six types of parental involvement:

- **role and parenting skills**, which refers to the help that the school should provide with child rearing and the role of parents in helping schools understand the history, culture, concerns, objectives and needs of their family, as well as their vision of their child;

- **communication**, which refers to the interaction between the families and the school about school programs and student progress;

- **volunteering**, which refers to the recruitment and training of family members as volunteers and as an audience during school activities to support students and the program;

- **learning at home** which implies the involvement of families in their child's learning activities at home (homework and other activities, decision making related to the curriculum);

- **decision making**, which aims to include families in the decision-making process in schools, within the administration and through the promotion of education through associations, school councils, committees, action groups and other parental organizations;

- **collaborating with the community** which aims to coordinate resources and services to students, families and schools with businesses, agencies, and other groups and provide services to the community.

Nevertheless, despite this typology, the definition of parental involvement remains unclear (Larrivée, 2011) and allows for a multitude of interpretations and expectations. Indeed, according to Larrivée (ibid.), scientific literature shows that parental involvement is multifaceted and complex. This could explain, according to this same author, the presence of several terms such as "involvement", "participation", "co-operation", "coordination", "partnership" used to describe the relationship between schools and families. For my part, I will refer, as Beaumont, Lavoie and Couture (in Beaumont, Lavoie and Couture, 2010, p. 7) do, to Friend's and Cook's definition of collaboration: "Interpersonal collaboration is a style for direct interaction between at least two co-equal parties voluntarily engaged in shared decision making as they work toward a common goal."

This definition has the merit of insisting on the establishment of egalitarian relationships between involved partners, on the importance of direct interactions between them and on their common commitment towards a shared goal. Friend and Cook (ibid.) also insists on the notions of volunteering, of sharing responsibilities and resources, of valuing the collaboration between partners and the presence of mutual trust and a sense of belonging.

If this definition was applied carefully to the school-family relationship, it would have the effect of dramatically changing the relationship between the school and family environments. Indeed, we could for instance have jointly defined programs and school activities, but also formal information exchanges concerning the child-student extracurricular activities. Shared responsibilities and resources would also be clearly defined. In short, the definition of parental involvement would be more precise and the respective expectations of schools and families regarding the other party would be clearly identified. But as we will discuss in this paper, this is not exactly what happens in practice.

METHODOLOGY

The data on which this article is based comes from two completed studies: Tension instruction-socialisation dans l'enseignement primaire (Lenoir, Y., funded by SSHRC 2011-2015) and Regards croisés sur les relations école-familes immigrantes comme déterminants de la persévérence et de la réussite scolaire (Lenoir, A., funded by SSHRC 2010-2015). Both projects, which took place in the city of Sherbrooke in Estrie[4], aimed, among other things, to identify the expectations of Quebec-born families and immigrant families toward schools and to analyze the differences in expectations existing between the families, teachers and other socio-educational specialists[5] when it comes to the relationship between the school and family. The same interview guide was used in both projects.

Data collection with families was carried out through semi-directive individual interviews, conducted in French, with a duration ranging from 30 minutes to 1 hour. The questions focused on the families' global education objectives, the notion of success, the school's objectives, academic and social learning acquired in school, the choice of a primary school, the role of teachers, the role of parents, the school-family partnership.

Our convenience sample consists of 97 parents. We did interviews with 61 mothers, 27 fathers and 8 joint interviews (in these cases, the combined answers of both parents count as one participant) and, finally, one grandmother who is a legal guardian. We had only one simple criterion for selection: to have at least one child attending primary school at the time of the interview. Recruitment was carried out over two years, 2013 (20 participants) and 2014 (77 participants), and in 3 steps. A first wave of recruitment was carried out amongst four schools belonging to the School Board of the Region of Sherbrooke (57 participants), followed by word-of-mouth recruitment (15 participants) and finally through a poster placed in a community centre and in an adult education centre in the region (25 participants).

Here are some characteristics of our participants:

- All the participants we met, except one, sent their children to a public elementary school.

- Of the 97 participants, 53 were born in Quebec and 44 were immigrants. However, we have assigned one immigrant who arrived in Quebec as a six-month-old child to the Quebec-born group.

  - Our immigrant participants come from the following regions: Asia (Vietnam) (n =2), the Western Europe (France) (n = 2), Eastern Europe (Albania, Romania, Czech Republic) (n = 3), North Africa (Algeria, Morocco) (n = 5), East Africa (Burundi) (n = 5), West Africa (Senegal) (n = 1), North America (Mexico) (n = 2) and South America (Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Peru, Venezuela) (n = 23).

  - The length of stay in Canada for immigrant participants ranged from 1 to 4 years in 19 cases, 5–9 years in 12 cases and 10–14 years in 11 cases. Only

two participants have been in Quebec for 15 years or more.

- The immigration status of our participants: Canadian citizen (n = 21), permanent resident (n = 19), temporary resident (n = 2), refugee (n = 1).

• Amongst the participants we met, 74 were part of a nuclear family (this was the case with 40 Quebec-born parents and 34 immigrants), 12 were single parents (5 Quebec-born and 7 immigrants), 8 were part of a blended family (7 Quebec-born and 1 immigrant), 3 were part of adoptive families (2 Quebec-born and 1 immigrant).

• Amongst the participants we surveyed, only 7 were part or have been part of a mixed couple (2 Quebec-born and 5 immigrants). For the purposes of this research, we only considered the ethnicity of the participants in order to assign them to either one of two groups: Quebec-born or immigrant.

• Quebec-born families and immigrant families have roughly the same number of children. The number of Quebec-born families and immigrant families who have one, two, three, four or more children is similar.

• Because of the methods we used to recruit our participants, the age of the children differs significantly between Quebec-born families and immigrant families. Indeed, given that the first participants that we recruited were people that happened to be on the premises of the four schools we went to were mostly Quebec-born (57), their children happened to be enrolled in the second level of primary school and were mostly in the 3rd or 4th grade (thus the children were 8, 9 or 10 years old). When we recruited participants by word-of-mouth and through posters, we were able to recruit mostly immigrants (40) and most of their children were attending either one of the two elementary school levels (hence the immigrant children ages range from 6 to 12 years old).

• Education levels differ slightly between Quebec-born individuals and immigrants. While the majority of Quebec-born individuals and immigrants hold a university degree (respectively n = 29 and n = 35), the proportion of immigrant participants with a degree was higher than Quebec-born individuals (83% vs. 76%) and immigrant participants had obtained a higher degree than Quebec-born individuals (15 immigrant participants had a Graduate diploma compared to 4 Quebec-born individuals).

• However, income levels differ highly between the two groups. While more than half of Quebec-born participants reported a household income of over $95,000 (n = 30), this was the case for only three immigrant families. One third of immigrant participants report that their household earns less than $20,000 (n = 15), which is the case for only two Quebec-born families.

We would like to note here that the Quebec-born families that agreed to participate in our interviews differ from the average family living in Sherbrooke in that they are more educated and have higher annual salaries. Our sample is hence not very representative of the Quebec-born population in Estrie. For their part, our immigrant participants are representative of immigrant families living in that region.[6]

RESULTS

For the purposes of this article, we have made a preliminary analysis of five questions (there were 29 questions in total) which all concerned the partnership between schools and families.

To the question: *What steps does your family take to make sure your child succeeds?* Our participants, whether Quebec-born or immigrant, answered: we follow up on, help or supervise homework, we enroll children in classes that interest them (sports for Quebec-born and cultural activities for immigrants), we communicate with children and support them. However, once again, these answers differ in their details. Indeed, while the so-called old-stock Quebec families stress the importance of developing discipline and of supervising their child's education while also teaching them about autonomy (by making them participate in family chores for example), immigrant participants emphasize instead that they stress the value of education to their children and that they try to stimulate them.

We also asked: *Do you have an active role at school?* Almost all participants said that they have accompanied their child's class during school outings or that they attended shows and other events organized by the students for their parents. Some, however, limit their participation to parent-teacher meetings or to monitoring report cards, while others, a minority, have volunteered on a school committee (school meetings, school board, etc.). It is, however, worth noting that, on the one hand, families are not encouraged to attend report card meetings if their child is doing well in class and that, on the other hand, several participants mentioned that their work schedule or the fact that they have young children at home seriously limit their ability to get involved with the school or their capacity to accompany their children during activities. Among the obstacles limiting their participation, immigrant participants also mentioned the language barrier and the fact that they do not own a second car.

We asked our participants: *In your opinion, does the school have special expectations of parents?* For most of them, the answer is yes, but some parents mention that these expectations are implicit and that they decode these expectations through personal interactions, in report cards, notes in their child's agenda, etc. and some parents feel that those expectations are explicit and can be found in the school's handouts, in teachers' speeches during meetings or in the school's code of conduct. Our participants mentioned that the school's expectations, whether expressed explicitly or implicitly, are that parents monitor their child's homework and that they get involved in their child's academic progress. It is also expected that parents meet their child's basic needs (in terms of clothing, food, bedtime, etc.) and make sure that their child does not miss school days. The school also seems to be expecting that parents participate in school life, that they at least take part in the activities organized for them by students, but also that they join various committees and accompany students on school outings. Overall, all agree that the school expects that parents cooperate with the school, namely by respecting the teachers' work, by helping their children with their homework when necessary, but without encroaching on the teacher's competence, and by following up their child's progress with the teacher. The discourse held by Quebec-born participants and immigrant participants differs in two ways: the former believe that the school expects that families support the school when it has to intervene with their child; immigrants believe that the school expects that families contribute financially to the school's activities. These two very different responses can be easily explained. Indeed, at least 9 out of the 54 Quebec-born participants have a child with a learning disability who requires a special intervention plan from the school while this is not the case with any of our immigrant participants. By contrast, as we have mentioned it earlier, immigrant participants are significantly poorer than the Quebec-born participants and consequently, they experience the various requests for financial contributions from parents throughout the school year as more of a burden than the families that are financially better off.

In what context do you communicate with your child's main teacher? To this question, participants answered: during report card meetings and through email. However, Quebec-born participants said they meet their child's main teacher in connection with intervention plans, that they talk with them by telephone or that they communicate through notes left in the agenda. For their part, immigrant participants said that they try to talk with their child's teacher in person as soon as they need to (for example, by meeting them when a class ends or during school activities).

In addition to your child's main teacher, do you know the different people involved in your child's education? In general, the response is negative, except in the cases when the family uses the child-care centre. In fact, Quebec-born participants and immigrant participants who use the service are acquainted with the people working there. However, for the families that do not use this centre, their main contact with the school remains their child's main teacher and they are not acquainted with the other specialist working at the school. The majority of parents only meet very briefly the other specialists working at the school at the beginning of the year during the first general parent-teacher meeting, or when a specific problem arises with their child.

DISCUSSION

It appears to be obvious that our participants have highly integrated the discourse on school-family collaboration. Indeed, Quebec-born individuals as well as immigrants emphasize the importance of monitoring and supervising homework; virtually every participant claimed that they set up a routine for this purpose; and all declare that they value education at home. This discursive uniformity can be explained by the characteristics displayed by our participants: their high level of education, especially amongst our immigrant participants, and the high socioeconomic status of our Quebec-born participants. Indeed, it seems that parental education levels and socioeconomic status are good predictors of student retention and dropout rates (Claes and Comeau, 1996). In addition, the importance given to education by the families, as well as to the educational and career aspirations of their children, also appears to be a good predictor of academic success (Ibid.). In fact, all our respondents consider that education is the way leading up to future professional success. Indeed, the families we met, which were extremely well-educated, or had high revenues, expect the school to stress the value of education to their children; these families are already planning that their child's future includes attending university. This is especially the case with immigrant families seeking upward mobility (Vatz Laaroussi, Kanoute and Rachédi, 2008) who justify their migration on this basis. Nevertheless, we must add a small distinction between both participant groups; Quebec-born families also expect that their child "feels good" at school (happy and at ease), while immigrant families want their child to "be loved" (appreciated by the teacher).

Furthermore, the families that we met certainly consider school important, but they also view school as one of the many environments promoting their child's development. This is especially the case for Quebec-born families who enroll their children in various sports or artistic activities outside of school. Immigrant families, for their part, also like the idea of furthering their child's education outside of the school, but they tend to choose to enroll their children in cultural activities or tutoring related to their child education.

However, if we refer to Epstein's typology, we notice that family involvement is minimal. Indeed, while parents seem to strongly adhere to the typology's 4th type, *learning at home*,

few parents get involved in types 3 and 5, *volunteering* and *decision making*. But, as we have stated previously, work schedules and the multiple activities that fill family life seriously limit the possibility of engaging in school life. However, type 2 in Epstein typology, *communication*, is also invested more or less strongly depending on the participants. Of course, all participants have said that they contact their child's main teacher if it is needed by leaving a note in the agenda, by email or by phone, but such contacts remain scarce overall. Some immigrant families say that they take every opportunity they can to meet their child's main teacher in person. Overall, participants know little about the other specialists involved in their child's education.

CONCLUSION

Can we therefore speak of a collaborative relationship between the school and families? Claes and Comeau (1996) implicitly question this assumption by showing that in fact, while all stakeholders recognize the importance of these two environments (the family and the school) on the child-student's life and development, these two milieus do not interact very much and still remain two very separate worlds. Of course, the school has certain expectations towards parents, notably that they prepare their children for school life and that they oversee their homework. Parents, for their part, also have expectations of the school, the main one being that the school shapes and educates their offspring. Both the school and families expect from the other that important information be communicated to them about the student-child. But these mutual expectations and their responses are not sufficient in themselves to establish a partnership between the school and families. Indeed, as we have seen in our research, parents do not know or know very little about the various specialists involved in their child's education, and the school's activities program is not created with the help of parents and, similarly, activities done at home to improve the child's educational outcomes are not shared with the schools.

As we mentioned in the introduction, all the literature written on school-family collaboration, to our knowledge, states that a good partnership between those two entities promotes student success… Literature written on the subject asserts that there is an obvious link between this partnership and academic success. But Vatz Laaroussi, Kanoute and Rachédi (2008) note that despite this assertion, there is nothing to substantiate the link between the cause (the school-family partnership) and effect (student retention and success). Our results point in the same direction. When we listen to the discourse held by our participants, it is seems obvious that parents are involved in monitoring their child's homework. However, it seems that this type of parental involvement would happen even if parents were not holding onto the discourse on school-family partnerships. We can therefore assume that if students are successful, it is not so much because of school-family partnerships, but because it aligns with the will of their parents and the guidance they provide.

Our data indicate that there is in fact an absence of real dialogue between the families surveyed and the teachers. Yet the families interviewed seem to be satisfied with their relationship with the school. Perhaps the families we met were "out of the ordinary", given their socio-cultural capital and their openness to participating in a research. Perhaps it could also be attributed to the fact that the students-children of the families surveyed do not face major learning or integration problems. We wonder if this would still be the case if the families in question came from disadvantaged backgrounds or if students were considered "problematic" by the school.

In short, we can say that the families interviewed seem to be walking in the same direction as the teachers, but that they are on parallel roads which never really seem to come together. At this moment, both parties seem to be satisfied with this arrangement. However, in the absence of effective partnerships, this balance could easily be upset by any sudden turn taken by one of the parties.

NOTES

[1] The *Conseil supérieur de l'éducation* is an autonomous paragovernmental. structure put in place by a policy in Quebec in 1964 which aim is to advise the Ministry of Education on any issue relative to education.

[2] See Lenoir, Kalubi and Lenoir-Achdjian (2006) for an analysis of this notion.

[3] The notion of cultural community has been around since the 1970s. This notion refers to immigrant populations living in Quebec who identify with cultural or religious identities that are different from the Francophone majority or the Anglophone minority.

[4] The Estrie is an administrative region in Quebec situated along the US border. The region is formed of seven regional county municipalities (RCM) and of 89 local municipalities. In 2013, 318,350 people lived in the region and slightly more than half, 160,745 individuals, lived in the RCM of Sherbrooke (Institut de la statistique du Québec, 2914a).

[5] By socio-educational specialists, we mean the diverse group of professionals that carry out social interventions in school settings (psychologists, speech therapists, social workers, etc.).

[6] According to the Institut de la statistique du Québec (2014b), the pre-tax median family revenue for the Estrie region was of $62,640 in 2011.

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