

Relations Between School and Immigrant Families in Albertan Francophone School: Perspectives of Settlement Workers in Schools — A Secondary Publication

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Abstract: In recent years, Francophone schools in Alberta, a province in western Canada, have seen significant ethnocultural diversification of their school population, thus reflecting recent migratory changes in Canada. The population of a Francophone school board located in an agglomeration of Alberta reflects these new migratory trends. A partial ethnodemographic portrait carried out in 2003 in six of its schools indicates that 50% of the pupils come from an immigrant background and come from 23 different countries; mostly from sub-Saharan African countries. This demographic reality, confirmed more than a decade later, represents a major structural change for Francophone schools. In Alberta, as in other Canadian provinces, inclusion is at the heart of discourse and educational practices. With a transformative aim, it intends to promote ethnocultural diversity in the classroom and equal opportunities through school equity practices. This article focuses on the settlement workers in schools responsible for bridging family, community, and school cultures. The analysis of the interviews of the four workers sheds light on and questions both the institutional practices and the personal strategies put in place to face the challenges encountered in this tripartite collaboration.

Keywords: Educational inclusion and exclusion; Immigration and ethnicity; Interculturality and multiculturalism; Family and education; Help for pupils and students; Actors in education; Canada

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1. Introduction

In recent years, Alberta has seen significant immigration from French-speaking sub-Saharan Africa, representing one of the major structural changes for the Franco-Albertan population ^[1]. Census data show that they represented 20% of all French-speaking immigrants in 1991 and 40% in 2011 ^[2]. According to these authors, the “Black” group, including African and Caribbean populations, exceeds 25% of the French-speaking immigrant population in Ontario, the Prairies, and Alberta.

The Franco-Albertan school reflects these migratory changes and now serves students from a wide range of ethnocultural backgrounds. In 2003, a study carried out by the Conseil scolaire Centre-Nord (CSCN) revealed that the percentage of students with an immigrant background was close to 50% and that immigrant families came from 23 different countries. More than a decade later, little more precise data exists on the ethnic origin of immigrant students, but the phenomenon has become more pronounced, according to the school administrators we met. To gain a better understanding of the challenges faced by immigrant students and their families, as well as the support mechanisms put in place by French-language schools to help them adapt to a new socio-educational context, we conducted research in four French-language schools in Alberta with various stakeholders (principals, teachers, students, parents, and school settlement workers [SSWs]). This research explores the challenges faced by those involved in these arrangements in a minority setting, such as the difficulty of adapting to the daily life of recently immigrated students, difficult communication with parents, family supervision of schoolwork deemed insufficient by school staff, and different conceptions of school for families and the school environment.

In this article, we focus on the SSWs' perspective on these challenges. It also looks at the strategies used by these professionals to mediate between schools and families.

2. Study background

To the best of our knowledge, little research has been carried out on these new players, the SSWs, in minority Francophone settings. The first step is therefore to situate the Francophone school context in Alberta and the institutional response to the challenge of ethnocultural diversity.

In Alberta, parents are seen as partners committed to collaborating and investing in students' academic success. The new Quality Standard for Education by the Ministry of Education, which comes into effect in the fall of 2019, requires teachers and principals to collaborate with families^[3]. Francophone schools in a minority context are based on the vision of a "citizen-community school," where school-family-community collaboration is fundamental to supporting the success of all students and, more broadly, the development and vitality of the Francophone community in Alberta.

Indeed, the school board's 2018–2019 Three-Year Action Plan in which the research was conducted identifies "community engagement" and "a culture of success" among the five guiding principles stated: "We foster a climate that places the school at the center of the community and we encourage partnerships to improve our students' learning, make our families stronger, and vitalize our communities." With this in mind, the action plan identifies two categories of community stakeholders: on the one hand, community school stakeholders are responsible for working "with communities and schools to support identity and cultural development" through meaningful activities for students; and on the other, SSWs are more specifically responsible for supporting the integration of immigrant students and their families into French-language schools in minority settings, and ensuring their "loyalty" to the school.

These SSWs are employed by a Francophone community organization as part of a federal In-School Settlement program. The SSW acts as a mediator between the school and the families, accompanying not only the families and newly-arrived students in their "acculturation process as they encounter Canadian institutions, but also accompanying school staff in their consideration of different cultures within Francophone schools" (www.islss.org). The process can be initiated either by the families themselves, who contact the welcome center and are taken in hand by counselors, or by the school boards, which refer these families to the SSW that intervenes in various schools. It is also the Francophone school board that determines the student's eligibility as

a Francophone. A nine-page registration form is used, which families complete either on their own or with the help of the SSW.

In a 2016 job advertisement for the position of SSW, the community center requires educated candidates (post-secondary diploma), previous experience in the school environment, and knowledge of the Canadian education system and Francophone and Anglophone organizations offering services to newcomers. Although the primary task is to welcome students and families of immigrant origin to the schools, knowledge of migratory routes is not required. Every year, at the start of the school year, the community center organizes an orientation week for newcomers, covering the Canadian health system, public transport, healthy eating, and the school system. Other awareness-raising workshops are offered to families throughout the year (e.g., parental responsibility, children's rights, employment). For each workshop, messages and telephone calls are made to their clientele. Information brochures are provided, in hardcopy or on the Internet, to each newly-arrived family.

At the school board level, the SSWs set up a number of programs, such as homework help, where education professionals, often from outside the schools, can provide specific assistance to students in difficulty. Another program is the peer-guide program. The SSWs select students from immigrant backgrounds whom they consider to be well-integrated into the school and who will help the new student to integrate and find a circle of friends. These peer guides receive training before they can support the newcomers.

Other programs have been set up by the school board, such as the *Projet-espoir autour de la santé mentale* (mental health hope project), which can provide support for students experiencing certain behavioral difficulties, such as difficulties integrating with other students. Support for the academic success of immigrant students is thus ensured by the collaboration of several educational and community partners. In this way, institutions clearly set the goal of academic success for all students, with roles shared between schools, families, and communities.

We now turn to the point of view of the SSWs in their daily lives, looking at their positions, the challenges they face, and the strategies they have put in place to share these roles. The theoretical framework used focuses more specifically on relations between schools and immigrant families, and the role of SSWs as community players within schools.

3. Theoretical framework

Partnership relations between schools and families are subject to a number of paradoxes: while teachers and other school actors tend to have highly standardized expectations of parents, the latter regularly find themselves called upon to collaborate without being clearly told how this is to be done or what the school norm is in terms of what is expected of them ^[4]. Since this is a tacit norm, newly arrived parents, who often have little knowledge of the school context and how it works ^[5,6], are thus at a particular disadvantage in appropriating their role, since the way they understand and interpret their role is based on what they believe to be their relationship with the school and their own school experience. Charette ^[7] reiterated the fact that children's academic success is a key issue for immigrant families, but in the absence of a mastery and understanding of Quebec's institutional system, they prefer to rely on what the author calls parental strategies that are often invisible to the school environment, such as agenda monitoring and homework help, investment in parenting, and the proactivity of some parents in enrolling their children in schools that are better rated than the administratively designated schools.

Vatz-Laaroussi *et al.* ^[8] developed a typology of partnerships between schools and immigrant and refugee families. They highlighted the different ways in which schools and families share the functions of education,

socialization, and instruction. This typology is broken down into six models, ranging from the involvement assigned by the school, which takes charge of all three functions, to a more balanced collaboration open to the community.

While the geographical origin of families is of no significance in these models, parents' socioeconomic status and level of education play a determining role. In one of these models, collaboration with a mediation space, parents are sometimes supported and guided in their relationship with the school environment by organizations or associations that act as mediation spaces. This typology highlights the importance of the community in establishing certain school-immigrant family partnerships. Vatz-Laaroussi and Kanouté^[9] identified a number of issues at stake in family-school-community collaboration, such as a change of perspective that takes into account the migratory, social, and intercultural backgrounds of these families in order to establish mutually satisfying collaborations that support the academic success of these young people.

As Holt^[10] explained in her doctoral thesis, the role of immigrant school-family workers is to act as cultural mediators, bridging the gap between two cultures by identifying cultural symbols, signs, and tools. She pointed out that these cultural objects and symbols are not unknown to immigrant families, but have a different meaning from what they had in their culture of origin, forcing them to learn or relearn the meaning of certain familiar elements, norms, gestures, or procedures. Thus, in mediation, it is a question of taking contexts into account and bringing into line the private and public spheres of identities and assigned roles, expectations, and reciprocal recognition of each of the actors involved in the mediation process. To respond to this need for mediation, several Canadian provinces have called on the services of community interveners, from Intercultural School Community Intervenors (ICSI)^[11] in Quebec to SSWs in Alberta. As Charette *et al.*^[12] reminded us, it sometimes seems easier for recent immigrant parents to consider actualizing their role through community spaces rather than at school.

Jacquet *et al.*^[13] identified three successive stages in the figurative construction of the mediator: the distancing of experiences, their transformation into knowledge, and their use in the service of others. In their research with ICSIs, Charette *et al.*^[14] identified a number of challenges faced by these actors, including the recognition of their roles within the school team, and the transmission of institutional discourse to parents. These challenges to institutional positioning had already been identified by Leanza^[15] in his study of community interpreter-mediators in hospitals. The researcher pointed out that the majority of these interpreters supported the biomedical discourse, at the expense of an attempt at dialogue between the two cultures. In this collaboration, the community interpreter has both a cultural and a social mediation role, creating a bridge between the immigrant's culture and that of the host province^[9,11], while at the same time matching the needs of the family with those of the school.

While work on cultural mediation between school culture and sociocultural diversity has been emerging more and more in recent years, little research has been published on mediation in minority Francophone environments^[13,16]. Drawing on the discourse of SSWs encountered, this article discusses the challenges faced by students and their families in the process of adapting to the Franco-Albertan school.

4. Methodology

This article is based on a larger research project whose objectives were to identify: the main challenges faced by Francophone schools in a Francophone school board in Alberta in their process of institutional adaptation to the ethnocultural diversity of students; the means implemented to meet these challenges; and the training needs of school staff.

This qualitative research took place in four schools at the intermediate and secondary levels, in an Alberta community. In these schools, we spoke individually with principals and SSWs, and in focus groups with teachers, parents, and students. In all, 63 people took part in semi-structured interviews, allowing us to cross-reference their voices in order to paint a more detailed picture of the problem under study.

The interviews conducted in spring 2019 are transcribed in verbatim form, processed using NVivo, according to the following analysis categories: diversity within schools, challenges for schools and perceived challenges for families, and solutions found. Content analysis represents a “golden way” of analyzing qualitative data ^[17], as it gives access to the discourse of actors by focusing on the meaning of what is said rather than on the form ^[18]. Thus, in the course of the interviews, school staff mentioned a number of challenges, such as the difficulty of adapting to the daily lives of recent immigrant students, whether in terms of their behavior or their vocabulary and fluency in French. Other challenges related to families were cited, such as difficult communication with parents, insufficient supervision of schoolwork, and a different conception of school. The interview guides included themes common to all the actors we met (professional and personal experience, training needs) as well as specific questions. In this article, we draw on the data collected from four SSWs. In the interviews, we were particularly interested in their mandate, their vision of the profession, the challenges they face, particularly with students and their families, and the day-to-day strategies they deploy to foster school-family relationships.

The four schools and their school-based settlement workers are described below:

In Alberta, data on students’ ethnic origin is not compiled, unlike in Quebec, where only the “language” indicator (mother tongue or second language) is used. In the province’s French-speaking schools, it is knowledge of French that determines entitlement to French-language education, in accordance with section 23 of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, regardless of students’ ethnic origin. Consequently, in the absence of official institutional statistics on the ethnic origin of immigrant students, we rely here on school principals’ knowledge of their school environment.

School A is a Catholic high school located in the main city, offering undergraduate programs (grades 7–9). It serves the surrounding areas to the south and east of the city and is attended by 280 students. According to the school’s administration, the number of immigrant students is on the rise. The school’s SSW-A arrived from French-speaking sub-Saharan Africa to pursue his secondary education at a CEGEP in Quebec. He feels that his migratory background has strongly influenced his career path, explaining that he was “always in the minority, which is not the situation in our schools today.” He notes an evolution between what he experienced, his positioning as a newcomer, and what he now sees in the schools where he works.

School B is a Catholic secondary school serving a very large urban and rural area northwest of the city center. It has 215 students in grades 7 to 12, half of whom, according to the principal, are immigrants. A teacher in a French-speaking college and SSW for a year and a half, SSW-B arrived from a Maghreb country three years ago. What she remembers most about this migration experience is the culture shock between Alberta and her country of origin. She often shares her own immigration experience with families to give them advice, and currently works with around twenty families per school, four or five of whom encounter difficulties.

School C is a public high school offering senior programs (grades 7–12). Its students come from the central city, but its catchment area extends from the northeast to the west outside the city. The school has a student body of 176, the vast majority of whom, according to the school management, are second-generation immigrants of Muslim faith. The majority of parents come from North African countries and Somalia. Originally from a Maghreb country, SSW-C has been here for six years, working in three public schools with a high proportion of recently arrived families from the African continent. Before coming to Canada, she was a science teacher for

twenty years. She explains this change of direction by the fact that she did not like the idea of having to return to university in order to teach in Alberta. Reluctantly, she turned her attention to welcoming immigrants to the school.

School D is a Catholic high school with 260 students in grades 10 to 12. It mainly serves the south and east of the city center. Fifteen years ago, students came from Rwanda and Burundi, but today they have been replaced by students from French-speaking African countries, in particular Congo and Côte d'Ivoire. Originally from a French-speaking African country, SSW-D holds a master's degree in linguistics, obtained before arriving in Alberta over ten years ago. After gaining experience in customer service, he completed a diploma in child and youth intervention in Canada. He went on to work as a community educator and then as a residential counselor in the suburbs of the central city where he set up the SSW program. A SSW himself for the past year, he works in three schools, one of which is a secondary school. He sees his role as a liaison between family, school, and community, with the ultimate goal of integrating families into Alberta society.

5. Results

The results of this article are presented around the three themes discussed above: the challenges encountered with students and their families, the strategies used by community stakeholders as well as their mandates. In this section, we present, on the one hand, the mandate of SSWs in the educational institution and, on the other hand, the challenges raised by SSWs; and institutional strategies to support school-family-community collaboration, whether implemented by the provincial government, the school board or even schools or SSWs.

5.1. The mandate of SSWs in school establishments

The four SSWs described their role as being to facilitate the integration of newly arrived French-speaking families, to help them understand how the school system works, and to support families in order to promote the student's academic success. However, SSW-D brought a nuance that we did not note in the other interviews:

SSW: If you are French, the problem does not arise. If you want to live in the north, south, west, if you know friends.

Researcher: But what if I am a French family who arrives here and who has no network here? Does it happen differently than for African families?

SSW: No, if you are French the problem does not arise, it is easier.

While in fact this service is available to all French-speaking immigrants, this extract may suggest that this mediation service is implicitly, at least in SSW-D's mind, intended for recently arrived families from visible minorities.

All from visible minorities and having experienced immigration, the SSWs used their personal experiences differently. SSW-A minimized the role that his personal experience plays in the relationship: "It should make it easier, afterward it is the person's personality that will take precedence. So just the looks, I do not know. I do not use that, it is really my personality." On the contrary, SSW-B and C used their recent experience to empathize with families. SSW-C: "They come and explain it to me because I do not know, there are affinities, a culture, they know that I will understand, there are affinities." As for the SSW-D, still new to the profession, he relied on the regulations of the community center and had a very general vision of his role.

5.2. Challenges

Here we present the main challenges raised during the interviews. They all intertwine and feed off each other, which calls for a global interpretation. For the purposes of the article and the reader's understanding, we present

these challenges grouped according to the following categories: acculturation, communication, and challenges with teachers.

5.2.1. Acculturation

The first challenge discussed with families was the difference between Alberta school culture and the school cultures of immigrant families. These differences sometimes blur the lines on the roles and responsibilities of each person, as SSW-A pointed out: “There are parents who tell us, ‘my child is your child, do what you want with it.’ No, it is you parents, it is you who must decide. We are trying to clarify things for you, but it is you who must decide that this is the right direction for your child.” This withdrawal of the parent from the education of the children is mainly the fact, according to SSW-B, of previous generations having had little education, accustomed to a school system where the teacher takes complete responsibility for education. SSW-C also explained this withdrawal by the fact that families, upon arriving in Alberta, are very quickly overwhelmed by other daily needs such as the search for housing or work. “They are busy, I understand them because I have been there too. You have other vital priorities, so you understand that that will come later. Later, when they are settled, they start asking questions for the children so we understand them at the beginning.”

These different conceptions, expectations of the role of the teacher, and the difficulties linked to immigration of families have consequences on the length of schooling even of the students according to the SSW-D: “They have invested in the immigration process and when the child is in grade 11 and is independent, he must bring the money home. There is this pressure.”

These cultural differences and adaptation difficulties particularly affect the behavior of students from immigrant families. According to SSW-B, the student takes around three months to adapt to this new school system. “They [the students] are used to a certain rhythm, a certain behavior in their country of origin and they come here and behave in the same way even though it is not allowed for example. [...] they can say words that are not accepted here or make brutal gestures and that is a problem.”

When it comes to adjustment, some students of SSW-A lack a comprehensive understanding of the differences, which can lead them to make mistakes. “The first few days they are very polite because that is how it is in the system. [...] And afterwards, they see the freedom that there is here. When they copy that, they copy it badly.”

These cultural differences are, in the eyes of the SSWs, an obstacle to communication between the school and immigrant families.

5.2.2. Communication

All mentioned the difficult communication between school and families as a concrete consequence of these cultural differences, whether through means of communication or in daily interactions with students and during parent-teacher meetings. The four SSWs believed that their role is to “educate” (*sic*) parents, in particular to answer the telephone and messages left on answering machines. Everyone regrets that the communication and education tools such as brochures or workshops set up by the community organization only reach a few parents who often take, in their words, the “excuse” (*sic*) of economic constraints, as SSW-A explained: “Some explain this by their economic constraints, that they cannot, that they are looking for a job, they are not tempted to come and attend a workshop on how to help children in school.”

However, the difficulties of communication between school and families do not stop at the means of communication used or face-to-face, SSW-D explained that even when parents meet teachers, certain misunderstandings arise: “When they arrive to meet the teacher, the teacher tells them everything is okay,

because the teacher says everything is okay before they get to the problem. So, the parents wonder why they have to come if everything is going well.” Likewise, during interactions with students, certain behaviors may be surprising, as SSW-B points out: “But I have a student in high school who cannot even look at me when I talk to him. [...] Because for some, it is a sign of rudeness. We end up understanding that it is not his nature, but it is his culture. [...] That is a problem, because even if he has problems, he does not have the courage to open up and talk.”

The SSWs therefore noted challenges in communication whether it be the means used, cultural differences, and difficulties linked to the language used in a minority context. SSW-B believed that the lack of mastery of English in a predominantly English-speaking province as well as the lack of mastery of French, by the student or their family, can represent an obstacle in Alberta. As for SSW-C, she believed that even if families have sufficient command of French, the vocabulary used by the school may seem foreign to them. This problem is all the more serious in that in a minority context, certain families, in order to better prepare the child to integrate into Alberta society, favor education in English rather than French-speaking schools, as stated by SSW-B: “But there are many parents who want to change schools because they say that it is not the same thing, that it is better in English-speaking schools and that he will be strong in English and that the English is more considered here in Alberta, but we try to convince parents that they learn English in the same way as in English schools.”

5.2.3. Challenges with teachers

If the question of challenges was deliberately open, the SSWs all mentioned the challenges encountered with families and students newly arrived in Alberta. Only SSW-C mentioned the challenges she may encounter with school staff. Indeed, in six years of activity, she has seen a lot of progress in taking cultural diversity into account, but she notes that work remains to be done in recognizing the cultural subtleties of each person on the part of teachers in order to avoid the abusive generalizations that they can sometimes make in class: “[...] a student who felt targeted, bad about herself, in [the class] of social studies which talked about Muslims and [who] said things that she has not even experienced and she knows that it is not true and it repeats itself, it repeats itself, she feels diminished in her culture, in her religion, she feels bad and she spoke to the parents, the parents spoke... things like that so you really have to have tact when we talk about these things.”

In the absence of precise and sufficient knowledge on subjects affecting the cultural experience of students, SSW-C implied that school staff can generalize certain knowledge about Muslim students, thus putting certain arrivals in difficulty.

Faced with these challenges with families, SSWs have implemented strategies to create a bridge between school and family.

5.3. Strategies used by SSWs in school settings

As we have just seen in the aforementioned challenges, few SSWs mentioned any challenge with school staff. SSW-A believed that at the institutional level, everything is already in place to facilitate relations between the school and newly arrived families. It thus places the responsibility for communication difficulties solely on families.

Concerning families, the strategies used by SSWs mainly consist of creating a bond of proximity and trust with them by calling them regularly, as well as by visiting them at home. Thus, everyone works ahead of a possible conflict, making regular appointments with students at school, with families at home, or within the community organization. Meeting families at home also allows the SSW to understand the situation more generally than the school issue, as SSW-C specified: “It was the need and because there was no contact with the

school, everything was closed, the parents did not respond to anything and the students had great needs, we had to sign the consents so that they could have the help needed and no contact and I also had no contact so finally we arrived at their house, me and a colleague and we saw the situation [...], we saw that there was a situation of need for help and therefore we explained the importance of being in contact with the school.”

Concerning the students, the SSWs are more in a position of support and listening to the young person. When conflicts arise, SSWs explain that they can also intervene within families during intergenerational tensions, as SSW-B explained: “We explain to the young person that [...] he must respect his parents. So that is essential. Even if they do not have the same ideas or do not see life in the same way, everyone has their own opinion and they must respect them and after all, they are his parents, he must try to gradually adapt to the new situation with his parents.”

When the conflict exceeds the competence of the SSWs, they do not hesitate to rely on other competent actors within the community, whether mental health professionals or organizations setting up parenting workshops. However, in a minority environment, SSWs are sometimes forced to call on English-speaking resources. This constitutes a real need, as SSW-C pointed out: “Yes, we could develop parenting instead of sending them to English-speakers. There is really a need there. Do training for parents in French.”

Regarding the challenge for teachers to have a detailed understanding of each student, only SSW-C explained that: “[t]here is no structure that helps the teacher [to open up to others, but there is me, they [them] teachers] ask me questions, I explain to them why the parent behaves like that, why the student behaves like that, [...] the [cultural] background.” During our interviews, no other SSW shared this point of view. She also specified that she intervenes at the request of the teacher. If previously it was done during teacher meetings at the start of the year, these group presentations are no longer done due to lack of time on the part of school staff.

To face these challenges, SSWs provide support, advice to families and students, relays to other community networks or even position themselves as experts on various cultures among teachers.

6. Discussion and conclusion

All four SSWs were from the African continent and are identified as visible minorities. Though SSW-B and SSW-C believed that being a visible minority themselves helps them in their relationship with families, SSW-A believed that what matters is not skin color, but the personality of the interlocutor.

In the literature, there is consensus on the need to understand the migratory experience of families and to develop the intercultural skills of school stakeholders from an inclusive perspective ^[19-21]. However, the participants in our research are intimately familiar with the migration experience since they have experienced it themselves. Note also that none of them mentioned professional training on this subject. Indeed, during their interviews, everyone recounted their migratory journey and how it had influenced their professional orientation.

Their paths also trace a significant proximity to the Canadian school system: whether it is SSW-A who completed secondary school in Quebec, SSW-B who was a teacher in Alberta, SSW-C who was a teacher for more than twenty years in a Maghreb country who wanted to remain in the field of education or SSW-D who, once arriving in Alberta, obtained a child and youth worker diploma. With these experiences, the workers have all perfectly integrated the roles and functions of the Canadian school system.

Furthermore, the four arrived under the status of skilled workers and are highly educated. SSW-C was the only one to mention a journey that does not reflect upward social mobility following her arrival in Canada. Since everyone mentioned that the families encountering the most challenges in their settlements as well as in their acculturation processes are those whose heads of family have had little education, this is a major difference

with their own personal journeys of integration into Alberta society.

The SSWs have therefore experienced different migratory paths, come from visible minorities, are all highly educated and have in-depth knowledge of the Canadian school system. If these traits are necessary hiring conditions of the community center, the question now is whether, although necessary, they are sufficient on the ground to promote collaboration and the creation of bridges between schools and newly arrived families. Note that if the program provides that SSWs allow teachers to better understand the cultural background of families in order to adapt their teaching practice, the job description on which we rely does not mention this aspect of practice. Furthermore, if some SSWs mention this necessary adaptation of education professionals, few consider that this constitutes a challenge, preferring to mention the difficulties encountered by families and students in adapting to the Alberta system.

In addition, if SSWs have a proven knowledge of the culture of their country of origin, they do not necessarily have as detailed knowledge of the habits and customs of other countries. Indeed, the SSWs that we interviewed certainly have experience of migration but have not received training on interculturality^[22,23], which would allow them to have critical tools in order to understand the cultural differences of newcomers, without relying solely on their individual experience.

When we asked them to define their mandate, they all talked about their role towards families but none talked about the necessary role towards the school and the teaching staff. Only SSW-C mentioned that teachers have made great progress in understanding cultural differences, but that this work can still be improved. SSW-A and SSW-D, for their part, said they are impressed by the work of the school staff. Thus, it seems that, as Leanza^[15] had already identified, these professionals seem to overwhelmingly support the institutional discourse, suggesting that there is little awareness of the required distance from the school. The SSW is thus more inclined to favor the dominant discourse than to promote the exchange between the culture of parents and that of the school. As Charette *et al.*^[14] pointed out, the risk would be to give little room for diversity.

Certain avenues of explanation can be mentioned, whether it is the youthfulness of the role of SSW in the educational landscape^[14], the lack of training of professionals^[15], or even the need to comply to the requirements of the position, as defined by the community organization and the federal granting institution, in a minority context where power issues are very present and the risk of marginalization is real.

This situation is all the more significant as the professionals interviewed operate in a French-speaking minority environment that positions itself in competition with the English-speaking educational environment. They are therefore led not only to build a bridge between various cultures in a social context where the preservation of cultural and linguistic heritage is a major issue, even though school is no longer “the gathering point of a community that undeniably shares the same interests, since in many cases, the members of this community share neither the same language nor the same culture”^[24].

This article made it possible to address the challenges of immigrant families in the French-speaking minority school context from the perspective of SSWs. This exploratory study in a still little-investigated environment highlights the importance of explaining the discourse and practices around the school-immigrant family relationship in the context of linguistic and cultural diversity in a French-speaking minority environment.

Disclosure statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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