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 school population of a Francophone school board located in an agglomeration of Alberta reflects these new migratory trends. A partial ethno-demographic 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

1. Introduction

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

The Franco-Albertan school system reflects the observed migratory changes and now serves students with highly diverse ethnocultural profiles. In 2003, a study conducted by the Conseil scolaire Centre-Nord revealed that the percentage of students from immigrant backgrounds was approaching 50% and that immigrant families came from 23 different countries. More than a decade later, few more precise data exist on the ethnic origin of immigrant students, but the phenomenon has intensified according to school administrators we have interviewed. To better understand the challenges faced by immigrant students and their families, as well as the support mechanisms put in place by the Francophone school to facilitate their adaptation to a new socio-educational context, we conducted research in four Francophone schools in Alberta involving various stakeholders (administrators, teachers, students, parents, settlement workers in schools [SWIS]). This research explores the challenges faced by the actors of these minority settings, such as the difficult daily adaptation of recently immigrated students, difficult communication with parents, insufficient family support for schoolwork as judged by school personnel, and different perceptions of school for families and the school environment.

In this article, we focus on the perspective of SWIS on these challenges. We will also discuss the strategies implemented by these professionals in mediating between the school and families.

2. Contextual elements

To our knowledge, few studies have been conducted on these new actors known as SWIS in Francophone minority environments. Therefore, the first step is to contextualize the Francophone school environment in Alberta and the institutional response to the challenge of ethnocultural diversity.

In Alberta, parents are considered engaged partners in collaborating and investing in students' academic success [3]. The new Quality Standard for Teaching, which came into effect in the fall of 2019, mandates teachers and school administrators to collaborate with families [4]. Francophone schools in minority contexts are based on the vision of a "community citizen 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 Triennial Action Plan 2018–2019 of the school board in which the research was conducted identifies "community engagement" and "a culture of success" among the five guiding principles stated: "We foster an environment that places the school at the center of the community and we encourage partnerships to enhance our students' learning, strengthen our families, and invigorate our communities". In this perspective, the action plan identifies two categories of community stakeholders: on one hand, community school stakeholders tasked with collaborating "with communities and schools to support identity and cultural development" through meaningful activities for students; and on the other hand, SWIS specifically tasked with supporting the integration of immigrant students and their families into the Francophone school in minority settings and ensuring their "retention" therein.

These SWIS are employed by a Francophone community organization as part of a federal In-School Settlement program. The SWIS plays a mediation role between the school and families, accompanying not only newly arrived families and students in their "acculturation process in encountering Canadian institutions but also supporting school personnel in considering different cultures within Francophone schools" (www.islss. org). The connection can be initiated either by families inquiring at the reception center and being assisted by counselors, or by school boards referring these families to the SWIS who work in different 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 fill out either alone or with the assistance of the SWIS.

In a 2016 SWIS job posting, the community center requires educated candidates (post-secondary

diploma), previous experience in the school environment, and knowledge of the Canadian educational system and Francophone and Anglophone organizations offering services to newcomers. Although the primary task stipulated is to welcome immigrant-origin students and families into schools, knowledge of migration pathways is not required. The community center organizes orientation week for newcomers each year at the beginning of the school year, covering topics such as the healthcare system in Canada, public transportation, healthy eating, and the school system. Other awareness workshops are offered to families throughout the year (for example, parental responsibility, children's rights, and employment). For each workshop, messages and phone calls are made to their clientele. Information brochures are provided, in paper or online, to each newly arrived family.

At the school board level, SWIS implements several programs such as homework assistance where education professionals often external to the schools can help students with difficulty more specifically. Another program implemented is the peer guides. SWIS selects students from immigrant backgrounds whom they consider well-integrated into the school and who will help the new student integrate and find a circle of friends. These peer guides receive training before they can support newcomers.

Other programs are implemented by the school board such as the Hope project around mental health which can support students experiencing certain behavioral difficulties, such as integration difficulties with other students. Support for the academic success of immigrant students is thus ensured through collaboration between several educational and community partners. Thus, the institutions set the objective of academic success for all students with a sharing of roles between schools, families, and communities.

It is now important to focus more specifically on the point of view of SWIS in their daily lives regarding their positions, the challenges they face, and the strategies implemented within this sharing of roles. The theoretical framework used focuses more precisely on the school-immigrant family relationships and the role of these community interveners known as SWIS within schools.

3. Theoretical framework

Partnership relations between schools and families are subject to paradoxes: while teachers and other school actors tend to have highly standardized expectations towards parents, the latter are regularly called upon to collaborate without a clear expression of how to do so and the school norm regarding what is expected of them [5]. Since it is a tacit norm, newly arrived parents, often with little knowledge of the school context and its functioning [6,7], are thus particularly disadvantaged in appropriating their role because the way they understand and interpret their role is based on what they think their relationship with the school is and on their own school experience. Charette [8] reiterated the fact that the academic success of the child is a crucial issue for immigrant families, but due to a lack of mastery and understanding of the institutional system of Quebec, they prefer to focus on what the author calls parenting strategies often invisible to the school environment, such as following the agenda and helping with homework, investing in the parental role, and the proactivity of some parents to enroll their children in schools better rated than administratively designated schools.

Vatz-Laaroussi *et al.* [9] developed a typology of partnerships between schools and immigrant and refugee families. They highlighted various ways of sharing the functions of education, socialization, and instruction between the school and families. This typology is divided into six models ranging from involvement assigned by the school that takes care of the three functions to a more balanced collaboration open to the community.

While, according to them, the geographical origin of families has no significance in these types of models, the socioeconomic status and the level of education of the parents play a determining role. In one of the models named, collaboration with mediation space, parents are sometimes supported and guided in their

relationship with the school environment by organizations or associations that serve as mediation spaces. This typology notably highlights the importance of the community environment in establishing certain partnerships between schools and immigrant families. Vatz-Laaroussi and Kanouté [10] identified several issues in family-school-community collaboration, such as changing perspectives to take into account the migratory, social, and intercultural backgrounds of these families to implement satisfactory collaborations with them that accompany the academic success of these young people.

As explained by Holt [11] in her doctoral thesis, interveners in immigrant family-school contexts have the role of cultural mediation, thus bridging two cultures by identifying cultural symbols, signs, and tools. She emphasized that these cultural objects and symbols are not unknown to immigrant families but now have a different meaning than they did in their culture of origin, thus obliging them to learn or relearn the meaning of certain familiar elements, norms, gestures, or procedures. Thus, in mediation, it is a matter of taking into account the contexts and harmonizing the private and public spheres of identities and assigned roles, expectations, and mutual recognition of each of the actors involved in the mediation process. To address this need for mediation, several Canadian provinces have called upon community interveners, whether they are intercultural community school interveners (ICSI) [12] in Quebec or SWIS in Alberta. These new mediation actors, hired by community organizations, emphasize the engagement of various partners to support students' educational success: the school, the family, and the community. As Charette *et al.* [13] reminded us, it sometimes seems easier for recently immigrated parents to envisage the realization of their role through community spaces rather than at school.

Jacquet *et al.* [14] identified three successive stages of the figurative construction of the mediator: distancing from experiences, their transformation into knowledge, and their service to others. In their research with ICSI, Charette and colleagues [15] identified several challenges faced by these actors, including the recognition of their roles within the school team, but also the transmission of institutional discourse to parents. These challenges regarding institutional positioning had already been raised by Leanza [17] in his study on community interpreter mediators in hospital settings. Indeed, the researcher pointed out that a majority of these Interpreters supported biomedical discourse at the expense of attempting dialogue between the two cultures. In this collaboration, the community intervener has a role in both cultural and social mediation by creating a bridge between the culture of the immigrant and that of the host province [10,12], while aligning the needs of families with those of the school.

While work on cultural mediation between school culture and sociocultural diversity has increasingly emerged in recent years, few studies have been published on mediation in minority Francophone environments [14,17]. Drawing on the discourse of the SWIS encountered, this article addresses the challenges faced by students and their families in their adaptation process to the Franco-Albertan school.

4. Methodology

This article is based on a larger research project aimed at identifying: the main challenges faced by Francophone schools within a Francophone school board in Alberta in their institutional adaptation process to the ethnocultural diversity of students; the means implemented to address them; and the training needs of school staff.

This qualitative research was conducted within four schools at the intermediate and secondary levels in an Alberta urban area. In these schools, we individually interviewed principals and SWIS and then conducted group discussions with teachers, parents, and students. In total, sixty-three individuals participated in semi-

structured interviews, allowing us to cross-reference their voices to paint a more detailed picture of the issue under study.

The interviews conducted in spring 2019 were transcribed verbatim and processed using NVivo, according to the following analysis categories: diversities within schools, challenges for the school and those perceived by families, and solutions found. Content analysis represents a "golden path" [18] for the analysis of qualitative data because it provides access to the actors' discourse by focusing on the meaning of what is said rather than the form [19]. Thus, during the interviews, school staff mentioned several challenges such as the difficult daily adaptation of recently immigrated students, both in their behavior and in their vocabulary and fluency in the French language. Other challenges related to families are cited, such as difficult communication with parents, insufficient supervision of schoolwork, and a different conception of school. The interview guides included common themes for all actors interviewed (professional and personal experience, training needs) and specific questions. In this article, we rely on the data collected from the four SWIS. In the interviews, we were particularly interested in their mandate, their vision of the profession, the challenges encountered, especially with students and their families, as well as the daily strategies deployed to promote the school-family relationship.

4.1. The four schools and their settlement workers in schools

In Alberta, data on the ethnic origin of students are not compiled, unlike in Quebec, where only the "language," whether native or second, is considered. In Francophone schools in the province, it is knowledge of French that determines the right to education in French under Article 23 of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, regardless of the ethnic origin of the students. Therefore, in the absence of official institutional statistics on the ethnic origin of immigrant students, we rely here on the knowledge that school principals have of their school environment.

School A is a Catholic secondary school located in the main city offering first-cycle programs (grades 7–9). It serves the surrounding areas to the south and east of the city and has 280 students. According to the principal, this school is increasingly welcoming students from immigrant backgrounds. SWIS-A, working at this school, arrived from a francophone sub-Saharan African country to pursue secondary studies at a CEGEP in Quebec. He believes that his migratory journey has strongly influenced his career trajectory, explaining that he was "always a minority, which is not the situation in our schools now." He notes an evolution between what he experienced, his position as a newcomer, and what he sees now 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 enrolls 215 students from grades 7 to 12, half of whom, according to the principal, are from immigrant backgrounds. A teacher at a Francophone college and SWIS for a year and a half, SWIS-B arrived from a Maghreb country three years ago. From this recent migration experience, she mainly recalls the cultural shock between Alberta and her home country. She often shares her own immigration experience with families to give them advice. She currently works with about twenty families per school, four or five of whom encounter difficulties.

School C is a public secondary school offering second-cycle programs (grades 7–12). Its students come from the city center, but its catchment area extends from the northeast to the west outside the city. It has a population of 176 students, the vast majority of whom, according to the principal, are second-generation immigrants and of the Muslim faith. Most parents come from North African countries and Somalia. Originally from a Maghreb country, SWIS-C has been in Alberta for six years and works in three public schools that welcome a large proportion of families recently arrived from the African continent. Before coming to Canada,

she was a science teacher for twenty years. She explains this career change by the fact that she did not like the idea of having to return to university to be able to teach in Alberta. Regrettably, she turned to welcoming immigrants within the school.

School D is a Catholic secondary school with 260 students from grades 10 to 12. It mainly serves the south and east of the city center. While students came from Rwanda and Burundi fifteen years ago, they are now replaced by students from French-speaking African countries, particularly Congo and Ivory Coast. Originally from a francophone African country, SWIS-D holds a master's degree in linguistics obtained before arriving in Alberta over ten years ago. After experiences in customer service, he obtained a diploma in child and youth intervention in Canada. He then worked as a community educator and settlement counselor in the suburbs of the city center, where he implemented the SWIS program. SWIS himself for a year, he works in three schools, one of which is at the secondary level. He sees his role as a liaison between the family, the school, and the 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 by students and their families, the strategies used by community interveners, and their mandates. In this section, we present, on one hand, the mandate of the SWIS within the school institution, and on the other hand, the challenges mentioned by the SWIS; and the institutional strategies to support school-family-community collaboration, whether implemented by the provincial government, the school board, or by schools and SWIS themselves.

4.1. The mandate of the settlement workers in schools

The four SWIS describe their role as facilitating the integration of newly arrived Francophone families, helping them understand how the school system works, and supporting families to promote student academic success. However, SWIS-D brings a nuance that was not noted in the other interviews:

SWIS-D: *If you are French, there is no issue. If you want to live in the north, south, or west if you know friends.*

Researcher: *But if I am a French family arriving here and I don't have a network here? Does it happen differently than for African families?*

SWIS-D: *No, if you are French, there is no issue, it's easier.*

While in fact, this service is available to all Francophone immigrants, this excerpt may suggest that this mediation service is implicitly, at least in the mind of SWIS-D, intended for recently arrived families from visible minorities.

All coming from visible minorities and having experienced immigration, the SWIS use their personal experiences differently. SWIS-A minimizes the role that their personal experience plays in the relationship: "*It should facilitate, then it's the person's personality that will prevail. So just appearance, I don't know. I don't use that, it's my personality.*" On the contrary, SWIS-B and C use their recent experience to empathize with families. "*They come to me to explain it to me because I don't know, there are affinities, a culture, they know that I will understand, there are affinities*" (SWIS-C). As for SWIS-D, still new to the profession, he relies on the regulations of the community center and has a very general vision of his role.

4.2. Challenges

We present here the main challenges mentioned during the interviews. They all intertwine and feed into each

other, calling for an overall interpretation. For the article and the reader's understanding, we present these challenges grouped into the following categories: acculturation, communication, and challenges with teachers.

4.2.1. Acculturation

The first challenge mentioned with families is the difference between the Alberta school culture and the school cultures of immigrant families. These differences sometimes blur the lines regarding the roles and responsibilities of each, as highlighted by SWIS-A: "*There are parents who tell us: my child is your child, do what you want with him. No, you are the parents, you are the ones who must decide. We try to clarify for you, but it is you who must decide what is the right direction for your child.*" This withdrawal of the parent regarding the education of children is mainly due, according to SWIS-B, to previous generations having had little education, accustomed to a school system where the teacher takes full charge of education. This withdrawal, SWIS-C also explains, is because families, upon arriving in Alberta, are quickly overwhelmed by other daily needs such as housing or employment.

"*They are busy, I understand them because I've been through that too. You have other vital priorities, so you understand that it will come later. Later, when they are settled, they start asking questions about the children, so we understand them at the beginning.*"

These different conceptions and expectations of the teacher's role, along with the difficulties related to the immigration of families, have consequences on the length of the student's schooling itself, according to SWIS-D: "*They have invested in the immigration process and when the child reaches 11th grade and is autonomous, they need to bring money home. There is this pressure.*"

These cultural differences and adaptation difficulties also manifest in the behavior of students from immigrant families. According to SWIS-B, it takes about three months for the student to adapt to this new school system.

"*They [the students] are used to a certain pace, a certain behavior in their home country, and they come here and behave 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's a problem.*"

When it comes to adjusting, some students, according to SWIS-A, do not have a comprehensive understanding of the differences, which can lead them to make mistakes. "*In the first few days, they are very polite because that's how it is in the system. [...] And after that, they see the freedom here. When they copy that, they copy it wrong.*"

These cultural differences are, in the eyes of the SWIS, a barrier to communication between the school and immigrant families.

4.2.2. Communication

All of them mention as a concrete consequence of these cultural differences the difficult communication between the school and families, whether it concerns means of communication or interactions daily with students and during parent-teacher meetings. The four SWIS consider their role to be "educating" (sic) parents, especially in responding to phone calls and messages left on answering machines. They all regret that communication and education tools such as brochures or workshops implemented by the community organization reach only a few parents, who often use "the excuse" (sic) of economic constraints, as SWIS-A explains: "*Some explain this by their economic constraint, that they cannot, that they are looking for a job, they are not interested in attending a workshop on how to help children at school.*"

However, the communication difficulties between the school and families do not stop at the means of

communication used or the physical presence. SWIS-D explains that even when parents meet with teachers, some misunderstandings arise:

"*When they come to meet the teacher, the teacher tells them that everything is fine because the teacher says everything is fine before getting to the problem. So, the parents wonder why they should come if everything is fine.*" Similarly, during interactions with students, some behaviors can be surprising, as pointed out by SWIS-B: "*But I have a high school student who can't even look at me when I talk to him. [...] Because for some, it's a sign of rudeness. We end up understanding that it's not his nature, but it's his culture. [...] That's a problem because even if he has problems, he doesn't dare to open up and talk.*"

The SWIS therefore notes challenges in communication, whether it is the means used, cultural differences, or difficulties related to the language used in a minority context. SWIS-B believes that not mastering English in a predominantly English-speaking province, but also not mastering French, by the student or his family, can represent an obstacle in Alberta. As for SWIS-C, she believes that even if families have sufficient mastery of French, the vocabulary used by the school may seem foreign to them. This problem is even more prevalent in a minority context, as some families, to better prepare the child to integrate into Alberta society, prefer English-language education over French-language schools, as SWIS-B explains:

"*But there are many parents who want to change schools because they say it's not the same, that in English schools it's better and that he will be strong in English and that 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.*"

4.2.3. Challenges with teachers

While the question of challenges was intentionally open-ended, all SWIS discussed the challenges encountered by newly arrived families and students in Alberta. Only SWIS-C mentions the challenges she may encounter with school staff. Indeed, in six years of activity, she has seen a lot of progress in taking into account cultural diversities, but she notes that there is still work to be done in recognizing the cultural subtleties of each individual by the teachers to avoid the abusive generalizations they may sometimes make in class:

"*[...] a student who felt targeted, uncomfortable, in [the social studies] class talking about Muslims and [who] says things she hasn't even experienced and she knows it's not true and it repeats, it repeats, she feels diminished in her culture, in her religion, she feels bad and she talked to her parents, the parents talked... things like that so we need to be tactful when we talk about these things.*"

Due to a lack of precise and sufficient knowledge on subjects concerning the cultural experience of students, SWIS-C suggests that school staff may generalize certain knowledge about Muslim students, thereby causing difficulties for some newcomers.

Faced with these challenges with families, the SWIS has implemented strategies to create a bridge between school and family.

4.3. Strategies used by settlement workers in school

As we have just seen in the challenges discussed, few SWIS mention any challenges with school staff. SWIS-A believes that institutionally, everything is already in place to facilitate relations between the school and newly arrived families. Thus, he places the responsibility for communication difficulties solely on the families.

Regarding families, the strategies used by SWIS mainly consist of creating a close bond and trust with them by regularly calling them and also visiting them at their homes. Thus, they all work proactively to prevent conflicts, regularly scheduling appointments with students at the school, with families at their homes, or within the community organization. Meeting families at their homes also allows the SWIS to understand the situation

more comprehensively than just the school-related issue, as SWIS-C explains:

"*It was needed because there was no contact with the school, everything was closed, parents didn't respond to anything, and the students had big needs, we had to sign the consents for them to get the necessary help, and no contact and I also had no contact so finally we showed up at their homes, me and a colleague, and we saw the situation [...], we saw that there was a need for help and so we explained the importance of being in contact with the school.*"

Regarding students, the SWIS is more in a position of support and listening to the young person. When conflicts arise, the SWIS explains that they can also intervene within families during intergenerational tensions, as SWIS-B explains:

"*We explain to the young person that [...] he must respect his parents. So, that's crucial. Even if they don't have the same ideas or see life in the same way, everyone has their opinion and they must respect them after all, they are his parents, so he must try to adapt gradually to the new situation with his parents.*"

When the conflict exceeds the SWIS's competence, they do not hesitate to rely on other competent actors within the community, whether they are mental health professionals or organizations implementing parenting workshops. However, in minority settings, SWIS are sometimes forced to resort to English-speaking resources. This is a real lack, as SWIS-C points out: "*Yes, we could develop parenting instead of sending them to Anglophones. That's a need there. Provide training for parents in French.*"

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

To address these challenges, SWIS act as support, advisors to families and students, liaisons to other community networks, or position themselves as cultural experts to teachers.

5. Conclusive discussion

All four SWIS are originally from the African continent and are identified as visible minorities. However, while SWIS-B and SWIS-C believe that being visible minorities themselves helps them in their relationship with families, SWIS-A believes that what matters is not the color of one's skin but the personality of the interlocutor.

In the literature, there is a consensus on the need to understand the migration experience of families and to develop the intercultural competencies of school stakeholders from an inclusive perspective [20-22]. However, the participants in our research intimately understand the migration experience as they have lived it themselves. It is noteworthy that none of them mentioned professional training on this subject. Indeed, during their interviews, they all recounted their migration experiences and how these experiences had influenced their career paths.

Their trajectories also demonstrate significant proximity to the Canadian school system: whether it's SWIS-A, who completed secondary school in Quebec, SWIS-B, who was a teacher in Alberta, SWIS-C, who was a teacher for over twenty years in a Maghreb country and wished to remain in the field of education, or SWIS-D, who, upon arriving in Alberta, obtained a diploma in child and youth intervention. With these experiences, the workers have all fully integrated into the roles and functions of the Canadian school system.

Furthermore, all four arrived under the status of skilled workers and are highly educated. SWIS-C is the only one to mention a trajectory that does not reflect upward social mobility following her arrival in Canada.

Since all mention that the families facing the most challenges in their settlement and acculturation processes are those whose heads of households have had low levels of education, this represents a major difference in their personal integration trajectories within Albertan society.

The SWIS have thus experienced different migration trajectories, come from visible minorities, are all highly educated, and have a deep understanding of the Canadian school system. While these traits are necessary conditions for employment by the community center, the question now is whether, although necessary, they are sufficient in practice to foster collaboration and bridge-building between schools and newly arrived families. It is noteworthy that while the program envisages that SWIS enables teachers to better understand the cultural background of families to adapt their teaching practice, the job description we rely on does not mention this aspect of practice. Furthermore, while some SWIS mention this necessary adaptation of education professionals, few consider it a challenge, preferring to mention the difficulties encountered by families and students in adapting to the Albertan system.

Furthermore, while SWIS have proven knowledge of the culture of their country of origin, they may not necessarily have as nuanced an understanding of the customs and traditions of other countries. Indeed, the SWIS we interviewed have experience with migration but have not received training on interculturality [23,24] that would provide them with critical tools to understand the cultural differences of newcomers without solely relying on their individual experience.

When asked to define their mandate, all speak of their role towards families but none mention the necessary role towards the school and teaching staff. Only SWIS-C mentions that teachers have made significant progress in understanding cultural differences, but that this work remains improvable. SWIS-A and SWIS-D, on the other hand, express admiration for the work of school staff. Thus, it seems that, as Leanza [17] had already identified, these professionals tend to support the institutional discourse massively, suggesting that the required distance from the school is not well conscious. The SWIS is thus more inclined to favor the dominant discourse than to facilitate exchange between the culture of parents and that of the school. As highlighted by Charette and colleagues [15], the risk would thus be to give little space to diversity.

Several explanations can be considered, including the youthfulness of the SWIS role in the school landscape [15], the lack of training for professionals [17], or the need to conform to the requirements of the position, as defined by the community organization and the federal funding institution, in a minority context where power struggles are very present and the risk of marginalization is real.

This situation is all the more prevalent as the professionals surveyed operate in a francophone minority environment that competes with the Anglophone school milieu. They are therefore required 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 as the school is no longer "the gathering point of a community that unquestionably shares the same interests, since in many cases, members of this community do not share the same language or culture" [25].

This article has addressed the challenges faced by immigrant families in the francophone minority school context from the perspective of SWIS. This exploratory study in a still under-researched environment highlights the importance of explicating discourse and practices around the school-immigrant family relationship in the context of linguistic and cultural diversity in a minority francophone environment.

Disclosure statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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