

The Participation of Immigrant Families in the Activities of Family Resource Programs

Marie Rhéaume

▼ Abstract

Marie Rhéaume, Executive Director of the *Conseil de la famille et de l'enfance*, reports here on a research project which examined the participation of immigrant families in family resource programs (FRPs) in Quebec and the framework created to welcome them there. Information was collected first through a survey of family support organizations, followed by interviews with practitioners and participants in five selected FRPs. Mothers from both long-established francophone Québécois families and from newly arrived families were interviewed about their experience in FRPs. Immigrant families are found in FRPs in almost all the regions of the province, not only in Montreal. They are attracted by the openness of these community-based programs. In addition, they are often identified as belonging to vulnerable populations and are referred to a local FRP by social services, even though practitioners note that targeting families in this way contradicts the principles of family support. Drop-ins and other activities in an FRP provide immigrant mothers the opportunity to learn about how Quebec society works in general and how to find resources in their neighbourhood in particular. Their children also have an opportunity to improve their French in preparation for school. Cultural differences in parenting practices mean that immigrant families are less inclined to attend parent education activities. The question of the language spoken during activities can be a sensitive one, as can the Islamic veil or headscarf. FRPs tend to respond to issues of diversity on a case-by-case basis. Collaboration with settlement organizations tends to be limited. The research project identified several issues that create distance between immigrant mothers and long-established Québécois mothers, but in general the study paints a largely positive picture of the experience in FRPs. The values that underlie the work of these community-based organizations, particularly the climate of respect, help build bridges between the two groups. For many participants, the first contact with an individual from the other group happens in an FRP. Connections are based on the shared experience of having children and the need to overcome the loneliness that a parent at home often feels. Participation in activities at an FRP gives all participants a chance to share their experiences and learn from others. Moreover, FRPs reduce obstacles to the full participation of immigrant families in their adopted country, especially as regards their children. Funding, however, is not always adequate for FRPs to properly respond to the needs of immigrant families.

This article presents a general report on a research project which examined the participation of immigrant families in family resource programs (FRPs) and the framework created to welcome them there. After a short description of the methodology that was used, we will look at some of the results. We will finish with an overview of the factors that build bridges between immigrant families and Quebecers of French-Canadian origin,¹ and the factors that set them apart. In conclusion, we will raise some issues and further research questions suggested by the results of this study.

Methodology

Before beginning, it might be useful to define what family resource programs are. FRPs identify themselves as welcoming places where all family members may gather and participate. Parenting support and enhancement of the parent-child relationship are at the heart of their mission. They are open to all families at all stages of the life cycle. In addition, they participate in certain programs that target vulnerable families.

This research project was a collaboration between the *Fédération québécoise des organismes communautaires Famille* (FQOCF – a provincial federation of family-oriented community organizations) and the *Conseil de la famille et de l'enfance* (a council for family and childhood).² It was carried out between May 2005 and December 2006. The members of the *Conseil de la famille et de l'enfance* wanted the study to focus on the participation of immigrant families rather than their integration. This perspective echoes the point of view of participants in activities in FRPs.

In the project's first stage, a survey was sent to FQOCF's 200 member organizations. They were asked to answer a self-administered questionnaire; the response rate of 46.5% was high enough to be considered representative given the sample size. The aim of the survey was to measure the participation rate of immigrant families in activities at FRPs, an area which had never before been studied.

This process gave us an initial set of data on the nature of this participation and the climate in which it takes place. The second stage involved five case studies, carried out in FRPs that had answered the survey and had indicated their interest in continuing to participate in the study. They were also chosen to reflect the varied rates of participation by immigrant families found in the survey.

In each FRP, interviews were used to determine the dynamics of this participation. They were about an hour in length and were done with one or several of the staff of the organization, one or several parents who were Quebecers of French-Canadian origin, and one or several immigrant parents. The choice of people to be interviewed was left to the staff of the organization.

The great majority of participants in FRPs are women. Since all the people interviewed were women, the study reflects an essentially female perspective. In addition, we noted that the sample of immigrant mothers included a heavy representation of women from North Africa. This bias is partly explained by the fact that they speak French better than some other groups.

Findings

One of the first things we noted is that immigrant families are present in FRPs in almost all regions of Quebec. This presence reflects fairly accurately the fact that immigrants are dispersed throughout the province and not only in Montreal.

All the immigrant mothers who were interviewed emphasized how important the FRPs' stated attitude of openness was when they decided to participate in activities. This suggests a significant convergence between the family support approach that is characteristic of FRPs and the values of these mothers who have arrived from elsewhere. These families seem to come to FRPs through the same channels as do other participants.

Their participation is also due to the fact that immigrant families are considered vulnerable under various

1. In French, the expression "Québécois de souche" is used to refer to families who trace their origins back many generations in Quebec. In this paper, the translator has chosen to use the term in English "Quebecers of French-Canadian origin." This follows the suggestion of the recent report of the Bouchard-Taylor commission on "reasonable accommodations" between cultural groups in Quebec. According to Statistics Canada, 80% of the Quebec population aged 15 years and older in 2002 could trace their roots in Canada back at least three generations; most of this number were of French descent. - Statistics Canada (2003) *Ethnic Diversity Survey: portrait of a multicultural society*, www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/89-593-x/89-593-x2003001-eng.pdf, consulted December 10, 2009.

2. Family resource programs are called "organismes communautaires Famille" (OCF) in Quebec and the provincial association is called *La Fédération québécoise des organismes communautaires Famille* (FQOCF). The research project discussed in this article was a collaboration between the FQOCF and *Le Conseil de la famille et de l'enfance* (a council for family and childhood). This council is a government body whose mandate is to advise the government of Quebec on the direction of family policy and other matters related to family life. It works with a variety of partners, including community organizations.

programs of the *Centres de santé et services sociaux* (CSSS; health and social services centres), including pre- and post-natal programs. Through these programs, they are invited to participate in FRP activities that are financed by social and health services. It is difficult, however, to estimate the percentage

of participants involved. In this regard, all the staff members interviewed insisted on pointing out that targeting certain groups contradicts the approach promoted by FRPs, which consider themselves to be open to all families.

Mothers who were the most recent immigrants (a few months to a few years) unanimously said that themed activities and informal drop-ins allow them to get to know Quebec society better (how things work—the financial system, health system, schools, social norms, etc.), as well as their own neighbourhood (where to find bargains, resources, etc.). We were surprised to find that immigrant mothers use the short-term, occasional child care services offered in FRPs as a way for their children to learn French, even when they spoke French well themselves.³

It is still a minority of immigrant parents who choose to participate in parenting support activities. Parenting is an area which may evoke a confrontation between values. Immigrant mothers often disapprove of the way authority is exercised here, at home and in school. Some reject particular behaviours that are socially encouraged or permitted in this country. In at least two FRPs, immigrant women talked about their fears concerning the Charter of Rights and child protection.

Managing diversity poses challenges to FRPs, just as it does in other settings. Attitudes could be summed up as follows: “Yes to diversity, but not diversity at any price.” FRPs in this study managed situations on a case-by-case basis, except in one organization which has a clear statement of policy (set of values). The study obtained some information about the framework developed by FRP staff to respond to diversity. Because of the limited sample, we must be careful in drawing conclusions.

Mothers who were the most recent immigrants (a few months to a few years) unanimously said that themed activities and informal drop-ins allow them to get to know Quebec society better . . . , as well as their own neighbourhood

Two of the five FRPs employed immigrants or second-generation immigrants, including one director and some staff in the occasional child care programs. Opinions were divided about how their presence affects the participation of immigrant families. Most of the organizations we met

try to ensure that diversity is also reflected in the make up of their Board of Directors. They encourage immigrant mothers to come forward, just like other parents.

The question of the language used during activities can be an issue. Different locations manage the question differently. One of the FRPs has adopted a clear policy and insists that all the discussions take place in French. In another, where staff noted that isolated immigrant mothers need to socialize in their mother tongue, the rule about using French is more flexible during meals; however, this choice creates tensions with other participants.

A minority of respondents, mostly FRPs in Montreal, indicated that they work regularly with organizations that respond to the needs of refugees and immigrants. This usually means making referrals and getting involved in time-limited projects. Staff mentioned a number of factors to explain the small number of connections, including the lack of organizations in neighbourhoods where immigration is recent, a lack of interest in immigration issues, and the lack of a “family” approach at sectoral round tables. One can conclude that collaboration is possible, but that it depends on the willingness of the people involved.

What creates distance, what builds bridges

The case studies were designed to better understand what creates distance and what builds bridges between immigrant families and Quebec families of French-Canadian origin in FRPs. The picture that emerges of how immigrant families participate is largely positive, but it is also realistic about the difficulties encountered.

3. Many FRPs in Quebec offer a “halte-garderie” as part of their programs. This is short-term, occasional child care, usually offered in the same place as the drop-in programs.

Apart from one organization, all the locations where interviews took place are in poor or modest neighbourhoods. In two of them, participants of all origins had basically the same profile. In two others, however, the immigrant mothers who were interviewed had post-secondary degrees or had held professional positions in their country of origin, whereas the mothers who were Quebecers of French-Canadian origin had a much lower level of schooling. When they worked, they held non-specialized jobs. Interviews with this latter group brought out a feeling of injustice when faced with those better educated parents who, in spite of the difficulties that accompany recent immigration, were perhaps more mobile and better equipped.

In fact, it is often in an FRP that an immigrant mother has her first conversation with a Quebecer of French-Canadian origin, or at least an exchange that is more than a simple "hello." The reverse is also true. Thanks to these conversations, some non-immigrant mothers were able to get beyond prejudices and stereotypes, but this was not always the case. While cooking activities can often bring people together, sometimes serving traditional foods, such as ham at Easter and at the maple sugar shack, keeps people apart. Some immigrant mothers said they avoided signing up for activities that would include a meal.

Although there are limits to the sample, this study brought up a wide range of situations dealing with male-female relationships, including some that were very difficult (domestic violence affecting both immigrant and non-immigrant mothers). Practitioners needed to be highly skilled and sensitive to deal with these situations. The picture that emerges from conversations about women's rights and equality with men suggests that they are an opportunity for mutual discoveries and learning.

Of all the potentially difficult issues, the veil is without question the most sensitive. In one FRP, it is definitely a taboo subject; in at least two others, immigrant mothers wearing the veil or headscarf have evoked curiosity, reservations and a certain discomfort. (It must be noted that the heavy representation among interviewees of North African

women certainly contributed to the importance given during the discussions to the issue of wearing the veil.)

The values which underlie autonomous community organizations can be considered to encourage a climate which leads to building bridges. For instance, all the participants were unanimous in saying that the environment of openness that is characteristic of FRPs makes it possible for different points of view to find expression, with no need to change the other's position. No one denies the existence of tensions from time to time. Several of those who were interviewed talked about confrontational or difficult intercultural relations they had experienced in the outside world and emphasized the difference between these situations and the climate of respect that is the norm in FRPs.

The parenting experience itself contributes greatly to making differences less important, whether those differences are related to socio-economic status or to the origins of participants. This is the strongest finding that emerges from the study. The mothers, wherever they were born, strongly expressed their need to break out of their isolation, a loneliness which is felt especially strongly by immigrant mothers who are far from their immediate family.

All the mothers, irrespective of their origin, want to share what is going on in their life, what they have found out and what tricks have worked for them. They realize that their situations are similar, at the same time as they learn to understand their differences. The FRP is also a place where mothers from elsewhere can become familiar with certain aspects of the culture here.

In this sample, it was unusual for immigrant mothers and Quebecers of French-Canadian origin who had met at the FRP to continue their relationship in other settings. The non-immigrant mothers say that they remain reserved, while the immigrant mothers would like to build closer relationships. They are confused by the social codes that they don't completely understand; they see the signs of distance at the same time as apparent friendliness. Not surprisingly, however, participants are clear that these situations are not a problem for the children, who socialize spontaneously at the FRP, as they do in nursery school or at school.

Several [mothers] talked about confrontational or difficult intercultural relations they had experienced in the outside world and emphasized the difference between these situations and the climate of respect that is the norm in FRPs.

Conclusion

As far as the *Conseil de la famille et de l'enfance* is aware, this was the first study looking at the participation of immigrant families in the activities of FRPs. The lack of other studies, as well as the small size of the second stage of this project, means that one must be careful in drawing conclusions.

An important way that immigrants participate in the life of their adopted country is through their work. More and more immigrant women are finding a place in the labour market, sometimes even before their husband, but still fewer than half of them have a job. In addition to encouraging sharing around the theme of parenting, FRPs are unique and important settings where many immigrant mothers can socialize and learn about how Quebec society works. FRPs help reduce the obstacles to their full participation in their adopted country, especially in everything that concerns their children.

It would be interesting to better understand the role that occasional child care services in FRPs play in teaching French to the children of immigrants. The capacity of practitioners

to respond to these expectations without compromising all their other activities needs to be examined.

The study also raises the question of possibly improving coordination with practitioners in the fields of education and early childhood. This is an issue because FRPs, whose precarious financial position has been well documented, do not always have the resources needed to respond to the situation and special needs created by the presence of immigrant families in their programs.

The *Conseil de la famille et de l'enfance* considers that there are benefits to gain from better understanding the ongoing process of how immigrant families participate in family resource programs.

Marie Rhéaume was appointed in 2008 to the position of Executive Director of the *Conseil de la famille et de l'enfance*, a governmental body which advises the Quebec government on family policy. At the time the study described in this article was undertaken, she was the executive director of the *Fédération québécoise des organismes communautaires Famille*. An original version of this article was presented at the seminar "Familles immigrantes et intervention : les valeurs en jeu" (immigrant families and practice: values at issue), held in Montreal May 30, 2008. The seminar was organized by the social research partnership *Familles en mouvance et dynamiques intergénérationnelles* (<http://partenariat-familles.ucs.inrs.ca>).