

Immigrant Families: Educating Children

FASAL KANOUTÉ AND GINA LAFORTUNE
Université de Montréal

Abstract: The authors begin by underscoring the heterogeneity of the profile of immigrant families, then go on to discuss the impact of the acculturation process on efforts by immigrant families to educate their children. That discussion is followed by examples of measures immigrant families have taken to help their children succeed at school and ways schools can support families.

Schooling is an intellectually complex undertaking that puts identity to the test (Bautier and Rayou, 2009). It is an academic and sociocultural challenge for students and their families alike. Every society educates its children in its own way through a curriculum and provides the human and material resources needed, in the case of Quebec, "to provide instruction with renewed conviction; to socialize, to prepare students to live together in harmony; and to provide qualifications through a variety of options" (Government of Quebec, 2006). Students come first in education, but families also play a role in terms of providing support and supervision, acting as a catalyst and seeing their children through good times and bad. In his novel *Chagrin d'école*, Daniel Pennac (2007) says that he was a poor student and that his mother, despite the fact that her son became a successful professional and is recognized for his literary work, always worried about him, and that it was that worry that had made him a poor student in the first place. De Queiroz (2005) rightly states that education is a family venture and that how a child fares in school has a significant impact on how the child fares as an adult. Families endeavour to shape their children's future through conversion, retention and improvement, and the acquisition and enhancement of social capital. Immigrant families, too, need to have this relationship with their children's schools.

Immigrant families: Different profiles and different relationships with schools

When relationships with schools are being analysed, the heterogeneity of the "immigrant origin" category demands that the parameters be refined based on factors including families' socio-economic profile, pre-immigration situation and migration plan, the standing of each minority in relation to other ethnic groups, differences in schools' expectations of students from different minorities, negative connotations of school resulting from bad experiences, the gap between mother tongue and language of instruction, and the length of time since immigration. The conventional grids used to analyse these relationships cannot be applied to immigrant families without taking that heterogeneity into account. (Aldous, 2006; De Queiroz, 2005; Kanouté et al., 2008; Kao and Rutherford, 2007). For example, a migration plan built around the dream of substantial social mobility means that some immigrant parents who have little schooling or who are otherwise disadvantaged, defy projections of a positive correlation between that situation and the academic failure of their children (Kanouté et al., 2008; McAndrew, 2001). It is therefore important to look at both quantitative research, which highlights major trends among immigrant

families, and qualitative research, which documents the uniqueness of each family's acculturation.

Acculturation is a general process of psychological and sociocultural adaptation that people go through when they come into contact with one or more cultures different from the culture in which they were first socialized. Some researchers (particularly in Canada, France, Belgium, Great Britain and Australia) have endeavoured to characterize the possible outcomes of that process: acculturation approaches or strategies (Bakker, Van der Zee and Van Oudenhoven, 2006; Berry, Phinney, Sam and Vedder, 2006; Bourhis, Moïse, Perreault and Sénécal, 1997; Chow, 2007; Kanouté, 2002) and identity strategies (Camilleri et al., 1990; Hohl and Normand, 1996; Taboada-Leonetti, 1989; Verhoeven, 2006; Wakefield and Hudley, 2007). Stress occurs during the acculturation process when people, seeking to give meaning to their life at the lowest cost, run into cultural codes that are somewhat different and may even conflict. Insight into the relationship that immigrant families have with school can be gained by analysing the mobilization of the family's sociocultural capital (including human capital) in a context of acculturation (Bankston III, 2004; Noguera, 2004). We define that capital as the ability to act made possible through a social network (Germain, 2004) and facilitated through psychological, physical and cultural access to school and other resources (Rahm, 2006). In that sense, we share the concerns expressed by Frideres (2006) regarding the stigmatization of the desire of some families to participate, depending on their needs, in "ethnic" organizations, which are an important component of their social network. These organizations help families understand school culture, share their migratory experience, support their schools, deal with acculturation stress, and so on.

Acculturation stress and its impact on families' support for their children's schooling

We begin by analysing the impact of the sociocultural aspect of acculturation stress. Are schools capable of sufficient openness and recognition to enable immigrant parents to play their role as parents and convey their culture? Policies require schools to demonstrate such openness; some do, but others are more reluctant. That reluctance was reported by immigrant parents in a study that described relations between schools and immigrant families whose children were doing well in school (Kanouté et al., 2008; Vatz-Laaroussi, Rachédi and Kanouté, 2008). In the words of one father, [translation] "School teaches and conveys values. As parents, we also have a duty to convey our values ... but to do it at school as well. In order to do that, we must be present and heard at school." Other parents spoke about meeting a member of school staff who was understanding and able to receive and analyse the request and explain the benefits to the family. The following description from one teacher illustrates one such encounter:

[Translation]

"The father came to see me because he didn't agree with my marks. At his insistence, I gave Vadim a make-up math test. He passed and was able to start Secondary 3 the next year along with all the other students. At the end of that year, he was one of the top students."

While language issues are not among our primary research objectives, they often crop up in data on misunderstandings between schools and immigrant families. In a study on the role of academic assessment in the practices of immigrant families (Kanouté, Duong, Audet and Lafortune, 2007), one parent spoke about language issues:

"When they are writing the remarks, they write it in French. So it is difficult for us to understand. ... they should write the remarks in English, if they are writing for us. If not, it is ok, but if they are writing for us, we are not learning the language there. We know English, we can understand only English. ... Blindly signing the paper is nothing. It is like sending nothing to us. We don't know what we get ...We feel shy for that. We do not want to embarrass people."

What impact does the socio-economic aspect of acculturation stress have on families' support for their children's schooling? Added to the sociocultural issues of the acculturation process are labour market integration issues. Families' migration plans are centred on two main hopes: first, finding a job that corresponds to their qualifications so that they have a decent life; second, living in a place that fosters the academic success of their children. An analysis of longitudinal data by Blaser (2006) showed that immigrants from Haiti, Vietnam and South America are especially disadvantaged ethnic groups in terms of labour market integration, even after living in Quebec for a decade. Doubly disadvantaged, they hold less prestigious jobs and earn less.

The research puts forward a number of hypotheses that attempt to explain that disadvantage: cultural differences in the ability to alter migration plans, the problem of credential recognition and professional dequalification rooted in systemic discrimination, especially against "visible" minorities (Blaser, 2006; Savard, 2007). This type of precarious situation, which can last a very long time for some families and in some communities, inevitably affects parents' ability to be hopeful about their children's academic success. Schooling therefore suffers because of the problems encountered by the parents in putting their own capital to use (Bankston III, 2004; Driessen and Smit, 2007; Kao and Rutherford, 2007; Noguera, 2004). We are reminded of an educated mother

from the Maghreb who constantly speaks words of inspiration to her children in order to get them to work hard in school, which they do (Kanouté et al., 2007). That mother, however, suffering the effects of her own professional dequalification, says that it is hard to fulfil dreams of success: [translation] "Imagine a person who really feels out of his or her element; the person will sort of keep an eye on the children's education, but will not feel comfortable preparing the child for everything." She also wonders how long her words of inspiration will work in her specific situation: her children might ask, "Why should we do well at school if it isn't going to do us any good in the end?" In the course of our research on immigrant families, we sensed that the chronic nature of professional dequalification ultimately causes parents to feel that their identity is discounted.

Given these obstacles to the integration of immigrant families, where does promise lie in terms of families' support for their children's education? We will now discuss some of the best options through examples involving immigrant families and recommendations to schools.

Examples of immigrant families' contribution to academic success

Needless to say, immigrant families have a responsibility to support their children's schooling and development. In high-risk settings (juvenile delinquency), researchers have shown that the "familism" of some immigrant families helps reduce juvenile delinquency (Bergeron and Potter, 2006; German, Gonzales and Dumka, 2009; Ghazarian, Supple and Plunkett, 2008). Another factor that protects youth in the host society is a process of family acculturation characterized by the integration of cultural codes (rather than by loss of identity or assimilation) or strategies for identity flexibility (as opposed to adherence to a single identity) (Berry et al., 2006; Lahire, 1998; Verhoeven, 2006).

A study of the paths taken by immigrant students who do well in school (Kanouté et al., 2008; Vatz-Laaroussi et al., 2008) showed that beyond different sociocultural capital, beyond the dim view that families take of schools' unwillingness to integrate diversity, beyond the different formats of report cards, these families are all committed to supporting their children's school experience. We divided family support into three categories: success and continuity, success and advancement and success for the family.

Success and continuity: Academic success as a continuation of a family tradition

Parents in this category attended university and were highly regarded professionals in their country of origin (engineers, chemists, teachers). They excelled in school. They understand that migration entails a risk to the family. Consequently, while they have expectations for academic achievement similar to those of non-immigrant parents with the same social profile, immigrant parents are more demanding and more vigilant in implementing their school-related strategies. These are parents who are clear and specific about their views on success.

- Mother of one student: "She's definitely going to go to college and then university. She has to be very well educated, highly trained, earn a very good salary, have the best house, the best car."
- Father of one student: "In our family, having a degree is an end in itself; it brings prestige. People go to school a long time. It is highly regarded and very rewarding."

Success and advancement: Academic success as a means of social advancement

Parents in this category are less educated and less equipped to understand school issues. However, they see immigration as an opportunity to put

the family on a path of upward social mobility; had they stayed in their country of origin, their standard of living would have remained the same or declined. In contrast to the specific message from parents in the success and continuity category, parents in the success and advancement category talk about academic success in less specific but equally intense and recurring terms, and that message is clearly heard by young people. Parents are proactive in their search for models of academic success and support for their children.

- Student: "My dad is a labourer. All he ever talks about is education."
- Student's mother: "We want her to do something she likes, but she has to go to school. We're going to do whatever we can—at least I am—to ensure that Juana graduates, gets a good job and is able to do a lot of things."

Success for the family: Academic success for the family

Students and their parents have a very strong connection to their country of origin, as much of a symbolic or emotional link as possible. Academic success involves not only family issues, but community and national issues as well. Families tend more to rely on services and networks in their ethnic and religious community when they want general parenting support or to monitor their children's schooling.

- Father of a student: "We didn't come here for a holiday or to work in a factory. ... She has to go to university and then she can decide what she wants to do ... A child's success is shared by the entire family. The tree bears fruit and everyone gets to eat."

These examples show that, at the same they pull together to foster equity in our society, looking in particular at the situation of stigmatized social groups, immigrant families can support their

children and students by enabling them to lay firm roots in society and move forward. These are families who believe that academic failure contributes significantly to the stigmatization of minority groups and that a diploma opens the door to effective challenging of systemic discrimination. However, schools have a major responsibility in ensuring family support, helping put an end to stigmatization and fighting racism and discrimination.

School support for immigrant families

School support must meet a need among families for recognition of sociocultural capital and also a need to understand the school system and find resources (structure, program, special services, teaching methods, etc.). The following are suggestions for schools (Abdallah-Preteuille, 1997; Hohl and Normand, 1996; Kanouté, 2008; Lafortune, 2006):

- Promote in policies and practices an educational mission that takes into account the ethnocultural diversity of society.
- Diversify the ethnocultural profile of school staff.
- Gain a better overall understanding of the social and socialization practices of immigrant families.
- Document the challenges faced by immigrant families (language barrier, professional dequalification, exclusion).
- Recognize the right of immigrant families to voice their opinions on education issues and to question the operating and socialization standards applied in schools.
- Assure families that their children's social and school experience is free of stigmatizing forces and that there is a commitment to ensuring equal opportunity for all in day-to-day school life (student-teacher relations, interpretation of curriculum, group/class

management, etc.).

- Make day-to-day school life family-friendly by adopting approaches that are welcoming to all parents.
-

In conclusion, we reiterate some of the winning conditions for immigrant families' support for their children's education: a welcoming atmosphere that reduces the impact of acculturation stress; families that are supportive of their children's schooling; and schools that are open to ethnocultural diversity. In addition, issues raised by relations between schools and immigrant families should figure prominently in initial and ongoing teacher training so that schools have a better understanding of those issues. Finally, recent studies on the relationship between schools and immigrant families in Quebec have tried to clarify that relationship by examining it from a broader perspective that includes the link between immigration and disadvantage.¹

About the Authors

Fasal Kanouté is a professor with the Department of psychopedagogy and andragogy, Faculty of education, Université de Montréal. She is also the coordinator of Domain 3 (Family, Children and Youth) at the Quebec Metropolis Centre-Immigration et Métropoles. Her research interests include the socio-academic status of immigrant students, relations between schools and immigrant families, multi-ethnicity and disadvantage, and interculturalism.

Gina Lafortune is a doctoral candidate with the Department of psychopedagogy and andragogy, Faculty of education, Université de Montréal. She is the agent for Domain 3 (Family, Children and Youth) at the Quebec Metropolis Centre-Immigration et Métropoles. Her research interests include school experience, identity strategies, and associations with academic knowledge in the context of migration.

References

Aldous, J. 2006. "Family, ethnicity, and immigrant youths' educational achievements." *Journal of Family Issues* 27(12), 1633-1667.

Abdallah-Preteuille, Martine. 1997. "Pour une éducation à l'altérité." *Revue des sciences de l'éducation* 23 (1), 123-132.

Bakker, W., K. Van der Zee and J. P. Van Oudenhoven. 2006. "Personality and Dutch emigrants' reactions to acculturation strategies." *Journal of Applied Social Psychology* 36(12), 2864-2891.

Bankston III, C. L. 2004. "Social capital, cultural values, immigration, and academic achievement: The host country context and contradictory consequences." *Sociology of Education* 77(2), 176-179.

Bauthier, E., and P. Rayou. 2009. *Les inégalités d'apprentissage : programmes, pratiques et malentendus scolaires*. Paris: PUF.

Bergeron, J. and S. Potter. 2006. "Family members and relatives. An important resource for newcomers' settlement." *Canadian Issues / Thèmes canadiens* Spring, 76-80.

Berry, J. W., J. S. Phinney, D. L. Sam and P. Vedder. 2006. "Immigrant youth: Acculturation, identity, and adaptation." *Applied Psychology* 55(3), 303-332.

Blaser, C. 2006. *Intégration linguistique et performance économique d'une cohorte d'immigrants à Montréal : une approche longitudinale*. Doctoral thesis in sociology. Montréal: Université de Montréal.

Bourhis, R. Y., L. C. Moïse, S. Perreault and S. Sénécal. 1997. "Towards an Interactive Acculturation Model: A Social Psychological Approach." *International Journal of Psychology* 32, 369-386.

Camilleri, C., J. Kastarsztein, E. M. Lipiansky, H. Malewska-Peyre, I. Taboada-Leonetti, and A. Vasquez-Bronfman. 1990. *Les stratégies*

identitaires. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France.

Chow, H. P. H. 2007. "Sense of belonging and life satisfaction among Hong Kong adolescent immigrants in Canada." *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 33(3), 511-520.

De Queiroz, J.-M. 2005. *L'école et ses sociologies*. Paris: PUF.

Driessen, G. and F. Smit. 2007. "Effects of immigrant parents' participation in society on their children's school performance." *Acta Sociologica* 50(1), 39-56.

Frideres, J. S. 2006. "Ethnogenèse. L'origine ethnique des immigrants et le développement des clivages sociaux qui y sont associés." *Canadian Issues / Thèmes canadiens* Spring, 65-68.

Germain, A. 2004. "Capital social et vie associative de quartier en contexte multiethnique: Quelques réflexions à partir de recherches montréalaises." *Journal of International Migration and Integration / Revue de l'intégration et de la migration internationale* 5(2), 191-206.

German, M., N. A. Gonzales and L. Dumka. 2009. "Familism Values as a Protective Factor for Mexican-Origin Adolescents Exposed to Deviant Peers." *Journal of Early Adolescence* 29, 16-42.

Ghazarian, S. R., A. J. Supple and S. W. Plunkett. 2008. "Familism as a Predictor of Parent-Adolescent Relationships and Developmental Outcomes for Adolescents in Armenian American Immigrant Families." *Journal of Child and Family Studies* 17, 599-613.

Quebec Department of Education. 2006. *Programme de formation de l'école québécoise*. Québec City: Government of Quebec.

Hohl, J. and M. Normand. 1996. "Construction et stratégies identitaires des enfants et des adolescents en contexte migratoire : le rôle des intervenants scolaires." *Revue Française de Pédagogie* 177, 39-52.