Immigrant Parents Experiences Engaging with Schools when their Children require Specialized School Support

by

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ABSTRACT

Canadian schools are becoming more diverse due to increasing immigration rates. With the influx of immigrant children in schools, school staff must recognize their experiences and help facilitate a positive transition, especially when they require specialized services. Research has identified barriers related to communication challenges and knowledge-based obstacles for immigrant parents with a child who needs specialized support. This study adopted a case study

require specialized school support. Two case profiles were created based on interview data with mothers in Nova Scotia. The barriers experienced differed greatly depending on the support they received, highlighting inequities across the schools in the province. When barriers exist, parents may have difficulties connecting to school staff. On the contrary, when communication is accessible to immigrant families, school staff can achieve higher levels of parent engagement.

CHAPTER ONE

Literature Review

Immigration in Canada has been on a steady incline, with every Canadian census in the last 45 years reporting increases in the foreign-born population (Statistics Canada, 2017a). Between 2011 and 2016, over one million new immigrants were welcomed to the country, bringing the total percentage of Canadian immigrants to 21.9% of the population (Statistics Canada, 2017b). Immigrants to Canada fall into one of three categories: (1) economic, (2) family, and (3) refugee. For the purposes of the current discussion, the term immigrant will be used to refer to all three categories. Of the approximately 7.5 million immigrants in Canada, close to 2.2 million are children under the age of 15 (Statistics Canada, 2017a; Statistics Canada, 2017c). Overall, children with immigrant backgrounds make up 37.5% of the total population of Canadian children, and they are defined as first- or second-generation Canadians with at least one foreign-born parent (Statistics Canada, 2017c). Since 1971, every Canadian census has seen a steady increase in this group and by 2036, it is projected that 47.2% of all Canadian children will have an immigrant background (Statistics Canada, 2017c). These children contribute to the increasingly diverse group of students that make up our Canadian schools and childcare centres.

Immigration in Nova Scotia

Much like the rest of Canada, the number of immigrants in Nova Scotia has also been increasing. Between the years 2011 and 2016, Nova Scotia welcomed 11 790 immigrants, bringing the total percentage of immigrants in the province to 6.1% (Statistics Canada, 2017b). In 2019, the province set a record by welcoming its largest number of new immigrants with the arrival of 7,580 permanent residents (Department of Education and Early Childhood Development [DEECD], in press). Prior to the record numbers in 2019, immigration in Nova

Scotia peaked in 2016, largely as a result of the 1,500 Syrian refugees who arrived that year (Statistics Canada, 2017b; DEECD, in press). A unique characteristic of the Syrian refugee population is that at the time of immigration, most of the population consisted of couples with children (Houle, 2019). These children contribute to the increasing diversity in Nova Scotian schools and childcare centres. In the 2019-20 school year, there were close to 7,000 newcomers in Nova Scotia public schools this number includes immigrants as well as temporary residents (DEECD, in press). With the influx of immigrant children in schools, it is imperative that we recognize their experiences and facilitate a positive transition into the school system.

Importance of Parent Involvement

Parental involvement is a topic of interest in many research studies evaluating student success. Despite various researchers highlighting the benefits of increased parent involvement (Ferrara, 2009; Goodall, 2013; Jeynes, 2007), other studies have found that immigrant parents face many barriers to engagement (Antony-Newman, 2017; Birman & Espino, 2007; Cheatham & Lim-Mullins, 2018; Rah, Choi, Thi & Nguyen, 2009; Turney & Kao, 2009). By understanding immigrant parent barriers, educators can make plans to increase involvement. Research reports that parental involvement contributes to positive outcomes for students, highlighting the importance of understanding the obstacles to engagement that immigrant parents face. Studies report that higher levels of parent involvement contribute to higher academic achievement and better behavioural outcomes, and researchers found these benefits for both white and minority children (Ferrara, 2009; Goodall, 2013; Jeynes, 2007).

Locally, in Nova Scotia, the importance of parental involvement is reflected in policies that outline the importance of strong home-school partnerships (Njie, Shea & Williams, 2018). Both the *Inclusive Education Policy* and the *Program Planning Process* from the DEECD follow

recommendations from the research to support higher levels of parent involvement (DEECD, 2016a; DEECD, 2019a). Evidence that the DEECD values parental involvement are throughout their guidelines and recommendations, which consider parents as key partners in education (DEECD, 2016a; DEECD, 2019a). Knowing that local schools value parental involvement and that historically, immigrant parents face barriers to involvement, a gap between knowledge and practice may exist in Nova Scotia. This potential gap highlights the need for understanding

Barrier for Immigrant Parents with Children who Require Specialized Support

Previous studies have highlighted the communication and knowledge-based obstacles immigrant parents face when integrating their children into their new school system (Birman & Espino, 2007; Cheatham & Lim-Mullins, 2018; Rah, Choi, Thi & Nguyen, 2009). However, few studies have examined the experience of parents who have the additional challenge of integrating a child who requires specialized support. It is important to understand the barriers faced by this group. Although they are similar to other immigrant parents, the barriers are further exacerbated due to the increased need for collaboration with school staff to achieve appropriate accommodations for their children (Paniagua, 2015). When communication challenges and a lack of knowledge are combined, these factors pose unique challenges for parents of children who require additional support to meet curriculum outcomes (Akbar & Woods, 2019; Nilses et al.,2019).

A child who receives specialized support is a student who requires adaptations for school programming or additional services to meet curriculum goals. For the purpose of this discussion, the support to assist students to meet the outcomes will be referred to as specialized support. An adaptation is defined by the DEECD (2016b) as a documented strategy or resource that

accommodates the learning needs of an individual student. Such strategies or resources are in-class supports and can include providing a student with extra time to complete assignments or tests or access to assistive technology, such as text-to-speech software (DEECD, 2016b). Additional services to assist in reaching curriculum outcomes are provided by school-based staff and include assessments, interventions, and personal care (DEECD, 2016a). School staff that often facilitate this service include classroom teachers, resource teachers, learning centre teachers, speech-language pathologists, severe learning disability teachers, autism and behavioural specialists, and school psychologists.

Based on a review of the literature, two categories of immigrant parents' obstacles when integrating their children into public schools have emerged: communication challenges and a lack of knowledge from both parents and schools. For the purpose of this review, the communication challenges category has been further divided into (1) limited English language proficiency, (2) the use of technical jargon in verbal and written communication from school personnel and (3) inconsistent access to language support. The lack of knowledge category has been separated into (1) parents' lack of knowledge of the education system and (2) school staff not valuing or understanding parents' background knowledge. In general, both communication challenges and lack of knowledge can strain the relationship between immigrant parents and their children's schools.

Communication Challenges

Limited English Proficiency. A language barrier is one of the underlying factors contributing to the poor communication between immigrant parents and school staff. A key

languages (Chavez, 2019). Since 1921, Canada has seen a steady decline in the number of

immigrants who reported English or French as their mother tongue (Chavez, 2019). Despite 70% of immigrants reporting a language other than English or French as their mother tongue, over 90% reported being able to conduct a conversation in one of the official languages (Chavez, 2019). Although conducting a conversation is valuable, the language proficiency level, which Statistics Canada did not report, can influence parent fully in meetings (Akbar & Woods, 2019).

Parents whose primary language is not English note that meetings and policy documents provided in English are a barrier to communication. This barrier with the technical language scattered throughout the documents (Ladky & Peterson, 2008; Turney & Kao, 2009). Although there are minimum language requirements for immigrants to receive their Canadian citizenship, the technical language that immigrant parents face rarely lines up with the requirements of the Canadian government (Akbar & Woods, 2019; Citizenship and Immigration Canada, 2012). Levels within the Canadian Language Benchmark (CLB), a standardized system quantifying English language learners language ability, are used to assess language proficiency (Government of Canada, 2019). Of the four types of language skills included in the CLB, minimum requirements for citizenship are only mandatory for speaking and listening, and not for reading or writing proficiency (Government of Canada, 2019). At minimum, immigrants applying for citizenship should be at CLB 4 in speaking and listening, meaning they are able to give and understand simple information about common everyday matters. In the context of school meetings or for understanding technical jargon, the CLB level required is 9 or higher (Centre for Canadian Language Benchmarks 2013a, 2013b; Citizenship and Immigration Canada, 2012). Therefore, there is a discrepancy between what is required to attain citizenship and what may be expected in schools. Language proficiency

requirements for citizenship are lower than what is needed for many interactions with school personnel.

The discrepancy between what is required and what is expected can create a gap where immigrants are left struggling to fully engage in school settings. Also, Ladky and Peterson (2008) reported that these difficulties with English could interfere with the relationship between parent and school, and the relationship between parent and child. Parents attributed their inability to assist their child in navigating their new world, due to limited English ability, to feeling

Perreira, Chapman & Stein, 2006). Research on the experiences of ethnic minority parents with children who have special educational needs has found that despite parents wanting to advocate for their children, they felt as if school staff were not equipped to provide culturally competent services because of linguistic difficulties (Akbar & Woods, 2019). The common linguistic difficulties referenced in Akbar and Wood include a lack of familiarity with the English language, the speed of speech of school staff, and the inconsistent delivery of language supports.

Technical Jargon. Research from Akbar and Woods (2019) found that parents mentioned that their lack of English proficiency affected their decision-making and ability to communicate with school personnel. Even in cases with parents who could communicate in English proficiently, the technical language typically used in meetings was a barrier to comprehension (Akbar & Woods, 2019). Immigrant parents with children who require specialized support often report difficulties communicating with school staff, and this is also the case with parents who are fluent in English. The communication challenges that parents face are related to discussions about their children, which are often filled with medical jargon and other technical language (Paniagua, 2014). For the average parent, this language can be difficult to

understand, resulting

2014). When a parent is an immigrant and also the parent of a child who requires specialized support, the communication difficulties experienced by both these identities intersect to create an even greater barrier to receiving support.

Inconsistent Language Supports. In relation to their difficulty understanding staff, parents sometimes receive language support such as an interpreter or translated documents. Parents mentioned the benefits of using these types of language supports but note that the delivery of these services is inconsistent (Cummings & Hardin, 2017). Parents who work with an interpreter may have access to the interpreter one year but not the next, or perhaps during an initial meeting with staff but not for others (Cummings & Hardin, 2017). Parents also say this inconsistency applies to translated documents; some forms may be provided in their native language, whereas others may not be (Cummings & Hardin, 2017). When parents cannot comprehend the information given to them about their child, this contributes to another major obstacle that immigrant families face a lack of knowledge about the support systems available in schools.

Lack of Knowledge

of the Education System. Immigrant parents of children who require specialized support generally lack knowledge of existing resources. On its own, this unawareness of what is available is a barrier to accessing services (Nilses et al., 2019). Interviews with immigrant parents of children with autism identified overwhelming feelings

. These emotions were due to a general lack of knowledge about the diagnosis and feeling like they do not have enough knowledge of the systems put in place to support their family (Nilses et al., 2019). In relation

need for specialized support, Akbar and Woods (2019) reported that parents attributed their cultural differences to

Although some research has been conducted to examine immigrant parent experience, more work must be done concerning interventions for immigrant students experiencing behavioural and academic problems. Bal and Perzigan (2013) found that the lack of research in immigrant student interventions was in itself a barrier that immigrant and refugee families face when engaging with the public school system. If research does not exist to show a problem worth addressing, then such barriers will continue to be dismissed.

How to Support Immigrant Parents of Children who Require Specialized Support

Immigrant parents of children who require specialized support face many barriers when integrating their children into their new schools. Therefore, it is evident that staff in the education system need a way to support them. Although the research on best practices in intervention techniques for immigrant children and youth is limited, it does exist. Using previous research and national reports from the United States and Canada, a framework for best intervention techniques for supporting immigrant families in schools was established for this discussion. The two national reports come from The National Association of School Psychologists (NASP; 2015) in the United States and the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC; 2017). Although these challenges, their suggestions can also be generalized to the overarching immigrant category. The suggestions from these documents, which are also reflected in the research, have yielded many recommendations. These recommendations fall into the following themes: (1) understanding ies, (3) educating families, and (4) building relationships. These four elements work together to create an environment with fewer barriers to involvement.

The first suggestion from the NASP (2015) guide centers around understanding and recognizing the stressors that refugee families face. This recommendation was identified for refugee families, but it is echoed more broadly by researchers who interviewed parents of immigrant students, school staff, mental health providers, and community agency staff (McNeely, Sprecher, Bates-Fredi, Price & Allen, 2019). Through their interviews, McNeely et

before beginning any intervention. Parent interviews indicated that when schools start assisting with emotional or behavioural difficulties while their family is still struggling to meet their basic needs, the assistance can be seen as disingenuous (McNeely et al., 2019). This realization led to the researchers concluding that if help is to be offered, it must begin with meeting basic needs (McNeely et al., 2019). The NASP (2015) also stresses educators should understand relocation and acculturation challenges, such as the language difficulties previously discussed. When there are language difficulties, there may be challenges in understanding how the school functions, how to get help, or how to make friends. By understanding these stressors, educators can be sensitive to family needs, such as language support (NASP, 2015). Through education and engaging with families, support staff can better understand their needs to address them properly.

With the recommendation of understanding and recognizing stressors, recognizing the effects of trauma is also worth noting. The NASP (2015) reminds readers that refugee children and youth specifically face struggles that have been with them since before their relocation. Refugee children are often traumatized from experiences that led them to seek asylum and refugee status in a new country (NASP, 2015). Educators must recognize this as well as understand how the effects of trauma on school functioning can manifest as difficulties with

cognitive functioning, memory, and social relationships (NASP, 2015). Not only are the effects of trauma a factor to consider, but stress from relocation can contribute to internalizing symptoms like anxiety and depression or externalizing symptoms like aggression and conduct problems (NASP, 2015).

Understanding Cultural Identities

Along with the importance of understanding family stressors and needs, the NASP (2015) also stressed the importance of educators understanding the students' cultural identities with whom they work. Understanding these identities includes considering cultural views of mental health, especially when school psychologists are planning interventions. The importance of this recommendation is reinforced by research

barriers immigrant families face regardless of the category they belong to.

Educating Families

The third category of recommendation revolves around educating the parents of immigrant children. Research conducted by Birman and Espino (2007) stressed how important a school

schooling. To inspire involvement, school psychologists must ensure that immigrant parents understand what is takin

(Biman & Espino, 2007). Similarly, Cheatham and Lim-Mullins (2018) emphasize that educators have a responsibility to support immigrant parents so that they can have meaningful participation in getting support for their children and making informed decisions. Other suggestions revolving around parent education come from the Rah et al., study (2009), where they suggest that schools provide parent education programs about school system structures and policies.

Building Relationships

The final category of recommendations involves building relationships. The three previous recommendations all play a part in building the relationship between refugee parents

s. When educators first take the time to understand the families with whom they are working, they are in a better position to build genuine relationships. Research conducted by McNeely et al. (2019) emphasizes the need for

School staff can better assist families by building relationships through understanding stressors, acquiring cultural awareness, and empowering parents through education.

Navigating the Nova Scotia Public School System

em is a barrier to receiving support, it is essential to understand the complexities of the system they face and the foundational knowledge required to be an active and informed parent. This section provides context to the information provided from schools specifically for newcomers, including policy documents and program planning guides, which explain the level of communication expected from parents of children who require specialized support. The following section explains what is implemented locally by the DEECD. This context will assist in situating the barriers that immigrant parents may experience while requesting or receiving support for their child in a Nova Scotian public school.

Guides for Immigrant Parents

Guides for immigrant parents in Nova Scotia have been created to introduce newcomers to their new school system. In 2011, the Halifax Regional Centre for Education (HRCE; formerly Halifax Regional School Board) released the *Newcomers' Guide to Nova Scotia Schools*. The HRCE and the Nova Scotia Office of Immigration collaborated to create the guide, containing information about getting ready for school, common school procedures, learning English, and the Nova Scotia curriculum. It is important to note that this document is text-heavy and is written entirely in English. These elements may be problematic for immigrant parents if they are not proficient in reading English, thus making it questionable how helpful this guide can be. The DEECD (n.d-a) also has a *Welcome to School* guide on the Student Services Division Website

written in English, French, and Arabic. This four-page guide is similar to the much longer 37-page *Newcomers' guide to Nova Scotia Schools*. As a result of the shorter length, it has much less detail, with many sections telling parents to check with their school for more information.

Both guides provide a small amount of information about the resources for immigrant parents in Nova Scotia, especially regarding access to psychological or other support services in their schools. The longer newcomer guide only contains one sentence about school psychologists and speech-language pathologists and one additional sentence about Student Support Workers, a position described as a cultural role model for students. The *Welcome to School* guide contains even less information about support services by explaining that counselling services and other supports are available. Still, parents would need to check with their school for more information. By telling parents to contact schools, it puts the responsibility on them to initiate contact with no guarantee of culturally or linguistically responsive communication.

Student Services

The Student Services Division of the DEECD is one of three divisions of the Student Equity and Support Services branch (DEECD, n.d-b). Student Services is responsible for developing and implementing policies for Special Education, Learning Disabilities, English as an Additional Language, and Cross-Cultural Understanding and Human Rights. The Student Services division website is a place where parents can access policies and guides to assist them during the process of planning support for their children. For example, the previously mentioned *Newcomers Guide to Nova Scotia Schools* and the *Welcome to School* guide are found on this website. Three more specific documents related to receiving specialized support are the *Inclusive*

Education Policy, the guide to the *Program Planning Process* and the *English as an Additional Language (EAL) and French as an Additional Language (FAL) Strategy Framework*.

Policies, Processes, and Frameworks

Inclusive Education Policy. The Nova Scotia DEECD *Inclusive Education Policy* (2019a) took effect in September 2020. The purpose of this policy is to provide guidelines for education and student support related to facilitating inclusive education in all public schools in Nova Scotia (DEECD, 2019b). This policy is publicly available and applies to all students and employees of the Nova Scotia public education system (DEECD, 2019a). The DEECD (2019a) presents the *Inclusive Education Policy* by outlining its key features, which include the policy statement, objectives, directives, and guiding principles. The policy also outlines the roles of students, parents, and educators (DEECD, 2019a). The *Inclusive Education Policy* was not explicitly written for immigrant parents of children who require specialized support. However, in reading the key features as well as looking at the specific roles and responsibilities of relevant groups, readers can see how this policy could cover the potential needs of immigrant families.

The needs of newcomer parents and their children who require specialized support are reflected in the key features of the *Inclusive Education Policy*. The needs of this specific group can be inferred when the DEECD (2019a) proclaims that an inclusive school must be culturally, linguistically, and socially responsive. The DEECE (2019a) defines culturally and linguistically responsive teaching as practices that connect social, cultural, family, and linguistic backgrounds to what students are learning and their sense of belonging. The DEECD aims to achieve this through inclusive education, which requires a focus on equity. Schools can achieve inclusivity by supporting traditionally underrepresented groups, such as students with special needs (DEECD, 2019a). The *Inclusive Education Policy* also highlights the importance of parent involvement by

stating that inclusive education requires safe, caring schools that welcome parents and guardians as key partners in education. Finally, the policy outlines that inclusive education requires everyone to work together to support students in a culturally and linguistically responsive manner that honours cultural identities and values their experiences and world views (DEECD, 2019a). The policy provides guidelines related to the roles and responsibilities of students, parents, and school staff to ensure that all relevant parties know how to implement the policy.

Parents and guardians are encouraged to engage in and support their child's learning as well as support their child in attending school (DEECD, 2019a). To fulfill their responsibility of supporting their child's learning, parents are accountable for maintaining ongoing, regular contact with teachers about their child. Parents should let school staff know when they would like to be included in discussions around their child's well-being and achievement (DEECD, 2019a). The DEECD (2019a) also writes that the parent's role includes working with the teacher and principal when they need clarification. Parents are asked to collaborate on solutions when questions arise related to their child's education. After reviewing the literature that outlines the barriers immigrant parents face when engaging with schools, readers can conclude that many of these roles and responsibilities would be difficult, if not impossible, for immigrant parents to fulfill. The difficulty would be a result of cultural differences regarding expectations of parent involvement and the recommendations strong ties to communication, which the literature identifies as barriers immigrant parents face when engaging with schools (Antony-Newman, 2018; Chavez, 2019; Ladky & Peterson, 2008; Turney & Kao, 2009). The difficulties placed on immigrant parents may be addressed by the roles and responsibilities outlined for employees of the public education system.

The *Inclusive Education Policy* (DEECD, 2019a) includes guidelines that place accountability back on staff through the roles and responsibilities outlined for employees of the public education system. These guidelines put the onus back on staff to ensure they are working to eliminate and prevent systemic inequities and barriers within the classroom, schools, region, and system (DEECD, 2019a). They are responsible for creating positive, equitable, and accessible learning environments by working with parents to understand their preferred ways of engaging with school staff. These staff members are advised to work with parents to help them feel welcome in the school community by involving parents in planning and implementing programming and other supports for their children (DEECD, 2019a). Staff can achieve this outcome by empowering parents and valuing them as essential decision-makers. By striving to empower parents, the *Inclusive Education Policy* is in line with the NASP (2015) recommendation, which advises educators to engage with and empower families to be active participants in their children's educations. Educators in Nova Scotia can empower parents as essential decision-makers by encouraging parents to be a part of the Student Planning team. This team is vital in initiating the Program Planning process, where parents work with school staff to coordinate appropriate support for their struggling children.

The Program Planning Process. Specialized support in Nova Scotian public schools is facilitated through the implementation of *The Program Planning Process*. This process is outlined in multiple steps, and in 2016 the DEECD (2016a) created a guide for parents and guardians to describe the eight stages involved. The process can begin for multiple reasons,

trategies, for health

care reasons, or when a child needs specific educational planning and support after an assessment (DEECD, 2016a). Nova Scotian schools take a team-based approach to meet these

students needs, and as a team, the members share information to plan how they can support specific challenges. As previously stated, there are eight stages; however, not every child is required to move through all stages to achieve adequate support. This flexible framework is in (DEECD, 2016a, p.1), meaning that support is tailored to meet the needs of students and does not go beyond what is required. This guide states that appropriate support can help children succeed in meeting curriculum outcomes as well as to develop skills, independence, and self-advocacy. These supports are facilitated through the work of members on the program planning team (DEECD, 2016a).

Much like the *Inclusive Education Policy*, the roles and responsibilities of the program planning team are outlined in this guide (DEECD, 2016a). The team is made up of anyone responsible for the child's learning, including the parent as one of the key members. Again, the DEECD values parent involvement, and this follows the suggestions from the literature, which reports that higher levels of parent involvement have contributed to higher academic achievement and better behavioural outcomes (Ferrara, 2009; Goodall, 2013; Jeynes, 2007). Other members on the planning team include school administration, teachers, the student, other professional staff already involved in the student s learning, and any additional members who may be relevant depending on the student's needs (DEECD, 2016a). Although the roles and responsibilities for each member are outlined in this guide, for this discussion, the parent role is most important. *The Program Planning Process* guide states that parents should be involved from the beginning of the process to share information about their child's strengths, challenges, and interests. The parent's primary role is to be an informant, as they are encouraged to share relevant information about their child's history and what works best for them at home (DEECD, 2016a). This information will be helpful when developing a tailored program and follows

research findings from McNeely et al., (2019) that highlighted the importance of understanding stressors

Parents are involved in six of the eight stages of the program planning process, beginning with stage one (i.e., Screening and Identification). Among the remaining stages, parents are engaged during stage three (i.e., Referral Process), stage four (i.e., Program Planning Meetings), and stages five (i.e., Developing Adaptations), seven (i.e., Monitoring Adaptions) and eight (i.e., Reviewing Adaptations) (DEECD, 2016a). The remaining pages of *The Program Planning Process* include troubleshooting for when concerns arise and how to approach and prepare for the meetings. The guide even includes sample questions which parents can ask during the meetings to improve their understanding of how team members see and understand their child. This guide is very informative and can be a helpful tool for parents during the program planning process. It is unclear if this resource is being used effectively by immigrant parents before they enter the process of collaborating with school staff to get support for their children. This uncertainty is partly because this guide is tailored to the larger population of parents who require specialized support for their children, and not immigrant parents specifically.

Strategy Framework for Students Learning an Additional Language. A framework that is targeted towards the immigrant population, and more specifically, those learning either French or English as an additional language, is the *English as an Additional Language (EAL) and French as an Additional Language (FAL) Strategy Framework* (DEECD, in press). The DEECD developed the framework in response to Recommendation 17 from the *Raise the Bar* report, which recommended doing more to provide welcoming and culturally responsive supports in schools (DEECD, 2018). Many of the key features of this framework follow the recommendations reported above. This EAL and FAL strategy framework recognizes the

linguistic and cultural diversity of immigrants, including refugees and immigrants with a history of interrupted schooling, closely aligning with recommendations from the NASP (2015). The development of this strategy began with program review and consultation with members of the EAL and FAL workgroup (DEECD, in press). This workgroup included representatives from the English and French public school boards, the YMCA Centre for Immigrant Programming, Immigrant Services Association of Nova Scotia (ISANS), the Office of Immigration, the DEECD, and most importantly, newcomer parents thereby capturing the perspective of immigrant parents.

Through the process of program review and consultation, there were six goals and three foundations identified (DEECD, in press). Together, these goals and foundations work to inform the EAL and FAL strategy framework. The three foundations of the strategy include (1) having EAL and FAL guidelines to help schools develop procedures; (2) having an additional language assessment process to determine the proficiency of students in listening, speaking, reading, and writing; and (3) having additional language intake protocol to guide the orientation process for additional language learners and their families. The six identified goals will be implemented over three years and are related to resources, professional learning, communication, collaboration, creating culturally and linguistically responsive schools, and creating a continuum of community support.

All six goals clearly focus on facilitating a shift in mindset to include an asset-based view of bilingualism or multilingualism (i.e., looking for strengths, skills and abilities, and focusing on what is rner) (DEECD, in press). However, regarding the inclusion of immigrant parents, goals three, four, and five will be most relevant. Goal number three states that schools will strive to ensure communication and engagement to support

additional language learners and parents (DEECD, in press). The DEECD will support this goal by providing resources and information for classroom teachers on support strategies related to communication and engagement with newcomer parents. Also, the DEECD will work to provide information on the Nova Scotia school system for newcomer students and families, using various communication strategies in multiple languages, and the DEECD aims to develop provincial guidelines for interpretations and translation services. The strong focus on communication, which is a large barrier immigrant parents face when integrating their children into their new schools, shows a connection between what is reported in research and what the DEECD plans to implement locally.

Goal four (i.e., Collaboration) also includes specific strategies to eliminate barriers for immigrant parents (DEECD, in press). These specific goals include organizing regular information and networking sessions to empower newcomer parents to play an active and informed role in their child's schooling. This is recommendations regarding educating families and building relationships (Biman & Espino, 2007; Cheatham & Lim-Mullins, 2018). Finally, goal five (i.e., Culturally and Linguistically Responsive Schools) aims to provide parents support by implementing EAL or FAL supports at school activities open to parents. Overall, this strategy framework offers many suggestions related to supporting immigrant parents; however, no specific recommendations are given to support those parents who have the added challenge of integrating a child who requires specialized support.

External Resources for Immigrant Parents

Immigrant parents also have access to services outside of the school system to assist them during their transitions. The ISANS and the YMCA Centre of Immigrant Programs are two major Nova Scotia with programming to support immigrants. Both organizations have

programming targeted towards immigrants to Nova Scotia, and more specifically, they have support targeted specifically for immigrant families with children who are integrating into their new schools.

ISANS

ISANS is a local organization committed to helping newcomers build a future in Canada (ISANS, n.d-a). ISANS provides settlement services for new immigrants in different areas, including community resources, government programming, and most relevantly, the education system (ISANS, n.d-b). A key service provided by ISANS is their orientation program, which includes a series of information sessions titled *The Introduction to Nova Scotia Series* (ISANS, n.d-c). These information sessions cover an array of topics, including family life and education. Within the topic of education, information is provided about public schools, rules and expectations, school transportation, school programs and services, snow days, and English language support (ISANS, n.d-d). Services provided by ISANS reflect the recommendation to educate families, which is discussed above. Rah et al., (2009) recommend that schools provide parent education programs about school systems and policy, which seems to be fulfilled by the ISANS information session outlined above. The services provided by ISANS give immigrant parents an overview of what they can expect when integrating their children into their new schools. Still, the YMCA Centre of Immigrant Programs takes another step forward by providing support within the schools as well.

YMCA Centre of Immigrant Programs

The YMCA Centre of Immigrant Programs provides newcomers with community-based supports through their programming and outreach services (YMCA of Greater Halifax/Dartmouth, n.d.). The YMCA offers a multitude of different programs to assist

newcomers, but most pertinently, their School Settlement Program supports immigrant parents and their children in engaging with their new school environment (YMCA Immigrant Services, 2018). The School Settlement Program is available in schools across the province, and it includes on-site school settlement workers, orientation sessions, and awareness-raising presentations (YMCA Immigrant Services, 2018). The School Settlement Program also helps link families to school resources and helps to support families in becoming more involved in school-based activities (YMCA Immigrant Services, 2018). Providing school settlement services on-site creates an environment where psychoeducation for families, which is outlined earlier in this chapter, can be fulfilled. The School Settlement Program also closely resembles Rah et al. (2009) recommendations, highlighting the usefulness of creating a parent liaison position to act as a culturally competent mediator to facilitate connections and good communication channels between schools and refugee families. Other recommendations from the research highlight that parent involvement can be encouraged by ensuring immigrant parents understand what is taking by supporting immigrant parents in making informed decisions (Birman & Espino, 2007; Cheatham & Lim-Mullins, 2018). By having staff stationed in schools to support involvement and provide education to parents, the YMCA School Settlement Program seems to be using a framework supported by the research. Services such as ISANS and the YMCA Centre of Immigrant Programs seem beneficial to immigrant parents while transitioning into their new schools. However, without the perspectives, it is difficult to determine whether these services have the intended effect of helping immigrant families navigate the Nova Scotia public school system.

Summary

Immigrant parents face many difficulties when working to integrate their children into their new schools. When these challenges are compounded with having a child who requires specialized school supports, the challenges can be difficult to overcome. Although some research exists, these barriers are still not completely understood, especially in Nova Scotia. The DEECD, ISANS, and the YMCA have programs and policies put in place to assist parents in overcoming these obstacles. However, a lack of supporting evidence about how parents feel about these services begs the question: are the supports put in place truly helping?

Why is the Parent Perspective Important?

Research has found that immigrant parent perceptions of the school environment are

-being (Hamilton, Marshal, Rummens, Fenta & Simich, 2011). Therefore, conducting research with immigrant parents will assist the school staff in

could, in turn, result in a change in outreach practices and policies to better include diversity (Birman & Espino, 2007). When the unique barriers faced by immigrant parents with children with special needs are identified, schools can make appropriate plans to address them. Only when barriers to engagement are removed as well as traditional engagement practices are challenged and improved to include other forms of support, will parents feel that their engagement is meaningful

s (Georgis, Gokiert, Ford & Ali, 2014).

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CHAPTER TWO

Immigrant Parents Experiences Engaging with Schools when their Children require Specialized School Support

Parents play a vital role in supporting their children who require specialized support, often contributing to higher academic achievement and better behavioural outcomes (Ferrara, 2009; Goodall, 2013; Jeynes, 2007). School staff, including school psychologists, can facilitate this strong parental involvement through psychoeducation and encouraging parents to be a part integration (Birman & Espino, 2007; National Association of School Psychologists, 2015). However, for immigrant parents, there are additional barriers to engaging -Newman, 2017; Birman & Espino, 2007; Cheatham & Lim-Mullins, 2018; Rah, Choi, Thi & Nguyen, 2009; Turney & Kao, 2009). These barriers relate to communication and knowledge-based obstacles immigrant parents face when integrating their children into their new school system. The increasing diversity in Canadian schools emphasizes the importance of school staff understanding these barriers and addressing these issues to facilitate higher levels of immigrant parent involvement.

Since 1971, immigrant population has been increasing steadily (Statistics Canada, 2017a; Statistics Canada, 2017b). This increase is reflected in Canadian schools, with children who have an immigrant background making up 37.5% (Statistics Canada, 2017c). In Nova Scotia, the population of children with an immigrant background is growing as well. In the 2019-20 school year, there were close to 7,000 newcomers in Nova Scotia public schools (Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, in press). With the influx of immigrant children in schools, more research is needed that focuses on their experiences and identifying ways to facilitate a positive transition into the school system.

Previous research has highlighted the communication and knowledge-based obstacles immigrant parents face when integrating their children into their new school system (e.g., Antony-Newman, 2017; Birman & Espino, 2007). However, few studies have examined the experience of immigrant parents who have the additional challenge of integrating a child who requires specialized support. A child who receives specialized support is a student who requires adaptations for school programing or additional services to meet curriculum goals. It is important to understand the unique barriers this group of parents face. Although they are similar to other immigrant parents, the barriers are further exacerbated due to the increased need for collaboration with school staff to achieve appropriate accommodations (Paniagua, 2015).

Communication Challenges

When immigrant parents of children who require specialized support engage with schools, communication challenges typically manifest through three distinct barriers: limited English proficiency, the use of technical jargon, and inconsistent access to language supports. At a minimum, immigrants applying for citizenship are required to demonstrate language proficiency in speaking and listening by being able to give and understand simple information in English or French about common everyday matters (Citizenship and Immigration Canada, 2012; Government of Canada, 2019). In the context of school meetings or for understanding technical jargon, however, the language skills needed are much higher (Akbar & Woods, 2019). This discrepancy between the language proficiency required for citizenship and what is required to communicate meaningfully with school staff results in a communication barrier and leaves parents struggling to engage school (Akbar & Woods, 2019). It should be noted that applicants for citizenship must live in Canada for at least three years before applying.

Therefore, this minimum requirement does not apply to recent arrivals or for people who do not apply for citizenship (Citizenship and Immigration Canada, 2013).

Additionally, research on the experiences of ethnic minority parents with children who require specialized services has indicated that parents felt as though school staff were not equipped to provide culturally competent services because of linguistic difficulties (Akbar & Woods, 2019). Common linguistic difficulties include limited English proficiency, the speed of speech from school staff, inconsistent delivery of language supports, and the use of technical jargon. Even parents who could communicate in English proficiently reported communication difficulties due to the technical jargon used in meetings (Akbar & Woods, 2019). Finally, inconsistent access to language support is the final barrier to communication challenges. Parents mentioned the benefits of using language supports, such as interpreters or translated documents, but note that the delivery of these services is inconsistent (Cummings & Hardin, 2017). Parents who work with an interpreter may have access to one during some meetings, but not others, or they may receive some written documents in their native language and others in English (Cummings & Hardin, 2017). Additionally, when immigrant parents cannot comprehend the information provided, it can contribute to a lack of knowledge about the support systems available in schools.

Lack of Knowledge

Another key challenge for immigrant parents of children who require specialized support is a bi- s. In an interview-based study, Nilses et al., (2019) found that parents experienced overwhelming feelings about receiving a diagnosis due to a lack of knowledge about the systems and supports available. This overwhelming feeling may also be linked to cultural differences and how disabilities are viewed

by certain immigrant groups (Akbar & Woods, 2019). Similarly, school staff often lack

which can be further amplified when the staff struggles to communicate with the parents.

their children can be greatly reduced when psychoeducation is provided during the initial services, which discuss the diagnosis, presenting problem or possible supports (Niles et al., 2019).

School lack of knowledge of immigrant families can also lead to staff undervaluing parents' involvement. Paniagua (2014) reported that when parents were seeking help, the school staff did not provide enough support, and even when support was given, parents noted difficulties. The parents felt the staff did not encourage their participation or value their knowledge about their children. Parents indicated that school staff drew on

their children, which were sometimes misinformed about culture and often seemed prejudiced. Overall, the parents stressed the need for more comprehension, empathy, and clarity when schools communicated about their children's needs (Paniagua, 2014).

How Educators Can Help Immigrant Families

When immigrant parents of children who require specialized support integrate their children into their new schools, they face many barriers. Therefore, staff in the education system need recommendations on ways to support them. However, research on appropriate intervention techniques for immigrant children and youth is limited. Many of the recommendations come from the National Association of School Psychologists (NASP; 2015) in the United States and the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC; 2017). The two organizations recommend

identities, educating families, and building relationships. Researchers have echoed these

recommendations in their studies which support understand

the stigma around disabilities connected to certain cultural identities, and the importance of cultural liaisons who empower parents to get involved (e.g., Akbar & Woods, 2019; Birman & Espino 2007; Georgis, Ford, & Ali, 2014; McNeely et al., 2019; Rah et al., 2009; Tews & Merali, 2008). Research has also emphasized the importance of parent education programs and cultural training for staff (Cheatham & Lim-Mullins, 2018; McNeely et al., 2019). When educators first take the time to understand the families with whom they are working, they are in a better position to build genuine relationships.

Additional support is offered to immigrant parents through community-based programs specifically designed to assist newcomers in integrating into the school system. Partnerships between schools and community organizations help to facilitate relationship building between school staff and immigrant families, increase immigrant parent engagement, and even increase student well-being and academic success (Bajaj & Suresh, 2018; Georgis, Ford & Ali, 2014). In Nova Scotia, two major organizations are providing such programming: (1) the Immigrant Services Association of k A syst Services Associs2WF1 12 Tf1 0 0 1 333.4 37.75 Tm0 g0 G[( )] TJETQq0.0000

to immigrant parents while transitioning. However, without th s, it is difficult to determine whether these services have the intended effect of helping immigrant families navigate the Nova Scotia public school system.

The Current Study

The purpose of this study was to gain a better understanding of immigrant families' experiences integrating their children who require specialized support into school. Specifically, this research is interested in the parents' experiences working with school staff to coordinate their upports. Two research questions were asked: (1) what barriers are experienced by immigrant parents of children who required specialized support when attempting to access appropriate support for their children? and (2) what supports were made available to immigrant parents?

Method

Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative, embedded case study approach (Yin, 2014) to explore the immigrant parents experiences
children require specialized school support. Qualitative methods are employed for this study to capture in-depth responses about experiences, perceptions, opinions, and feelings related to the immigrant parent experience (Patton, 2002). This knowledge will add to the limited research on immigrant families in Canada who access specialized support in schools. The benefit of using a case study design is the ability to capture and consider the complex relationships between the case and the context that could not be captured through other methods (Yin, 2014). For this study, the case was the immigrant parent experience, and the context was the process of

obtaining specialized support for a child. The cases were based on interviews with immigrant

s.

Participants

Two participants were recruited with the assistance of a local organization with programming targeted towards immigrant groups. Pseudonyms (Fatemeh and Mariana) were used to preserve the confidentiality of the participants. Fatemeh and Mariana participated in interviews to discuss their experience integrating a child who requires specialized support into the Nova Scotia public school system. Purposeful sampling was employed to capture rich information and ensure useful manifestations of the phenomenon of interest (Patton, 2002). Both participants are Canadian immigrants who have immigrated within the last three years, and they both live in the Halifax Regional Municipality (HRM), an urban area of the province. Also, both have self- is Farsi, and

ic.

Materials

Interview Protocol. The semi-structured interview protocol had four main sections: (1) Demographic Information; (2) Supports; (3) Communication Challenges; and (4) Background Knowledge (See Appendix). The questions in the Supports section prompted parents to (a) comment on what they felt the school did well, (b) comment on what barriers they faced, and (c) provide suggestions for school staff when working with immigrant parents. The Communication Challenges section asked about: (a) level of English language proficiency, (b) technical jargon, and (c) ability to access language supports. The Background Knowledge section included

, and (b) whether school staff valued or understood pa

Procedure

Interviews took place in October 2021. One interview was conducted in person, and the other was conducted online, using videoconferencing. Both interviews were audio-recorded, and consent was obtained orally at the beginning of the interview session due to the participants limited English proficiencies. Both interviews were conducted in English, with a professional interpreter present. Participants mainly spoke in their native language (Arabic and Farsi), and the interpreter provided an English translation of the participants responses. After the interview, participants were thanked for their time and given a $25 gift card to a local grocery store.

Data Analysis

First, transcripts were created by transcribing all portions of the interview that were spoken in English, including anything said by the interviewer and the translation from the interpreter. Next, the transcripts were created for data analysis. The researcher eliminated any filler words such as um or ah to focus on the content of what was said. Quotations from the interpreter were also adjusted to present them as if the participant said them (e.g was changed to). After the transcription process was complete, one participant opted to review a copy for member checking. This process involved e-mailing a copy of the English transcript to the participant to review, and this was completed one-week post interview. Participants could also schedule a phone call to review the transcript orally; however, this offer was declined.

Next, the transcripts were analyzed deductively (Patton, 2002) based on the categories and subcategories used to create the interview (see Figure 1). Corresponding numbers and letters were written next to quotations to indicate relevant themes. For example, 3c was written next to the quotation, t to that school, she [the YMCA worker] was

Challenges and under the code for Access to Language Supports. Finally, case profiles were created based on the identified themes context for each case. Next, relevant details for the remaining themes were reported, with supplemental illustrative quotations provided to support the written summary. A cross-case analysis was conducted and presented in the discussion. This analysis was conducted by placing coded quotations side-by-side in a table. Each theme and embedded codes were reviewed sequentially, taking into account the context of both cases while looking for similarities and differences.

The Researcher

The researcher, who conducted the interviews, is completing a Master of Arts in School Psychology. As part of her schooling, she has received training in conducting interviews and has experience interviewing parents in school settings. Also, the researcher speaks Arabic at an introductory level and is a first-generation Canadian with immigrant parents. Her academic experience speaks to her credibility as an interviewer in this qualitative inquiry. Also, her lived experience and Arabic skills may have assisted her in building rapport with participants as well as contributed to

Results

Two case profiles are described below for Fatemeh and Mariana. Identifying information, including names and country of origin, were changed to maintain confidentiality.

Case 1: Fatemeh

Fatemeh and her family immigrated to Canada from Iran in 2019, and they speak Farsi as their first language. Fatemeh has limited English proficiency and is currently at a CLB 4[1]. She feels she is strongest in reading and writing over speaking and listening. Upon arriving in Nova Scotia, she connected with ISANS to help register her children in school. Once connected, staff at the school realized that , Aamir, would need more assistance than her other children. Thus, the process of coordinating support with the school began. Aamir is 17 years old, in grade 11, and has a diagnosis of epilepsy. He requires one-on-one support at school for all daily tasks, including feeding, changing, toileting, and communication. Currently, Aamir spends his time at school in the learning centre a self-contained, small class setting which is sometimes referred to as a special education classroom (Chignecto Central Regional Centre for Education, n.d.). Illustrative quotations from Fatemeh with corresponding coding categories are listed in Table 1.

Fatemeh expressed hope and relief when talking about her son and his future. Through the process of getting support school, she gained knowledge about the opportunities Aamir could access in the future. Also, according to Fatemeh, the school helped reduce her his behaviour and communication. However, Fatemeh also experienced some major challenges related to communicating with and feeling alone in the process of getting him support. All the communication she has received from the school has been in English. Yet, Fatemeh notes that Arabic-speaking families school receive documents in their native language.

1. CLB 4 indicates fluent skills in basic language such as interpreting and creating simple spoken communication (Citizenship and Immigration Canada, 2012).

school helped her understand the process of getting support for him, and she has never had access to a YMCA school settlement worker. However, despite having no support, she gradually began to understand the process through discussions with school staff and reports that were sent home. She expressed that overall, she understands what takes place when her son is at school. For example, she knows Aamir goes for walks and has dedicated time to work on motor skills, but she does not know much beyond this. For instance, Fatemeh does not know the specific details of Aamir s time at school. Fatemeh suggested the school staff should have a way to communicate with parents about the activities at school and recommendations for support at home. She also suggested that the school help Aamir work on his communication and how to express his feelings. However, she has not brought this up with the school. Fatemeh explained

she wishes she had an easier way to connect with his teachers. However, despite these challenges, Fatemeh feels that school staff value her opinions, especially when they asked for her consent concerning transition to the learning centre.

Case 2: Mariana

Mariana and her family immigrated to Canada from Lebanon in early 2020, before the COVID-19 pandemic began. Mariana speaks Arabic as her first language, and she reported her English proficiency to be at a CLB 1[2]. Najib, her 10-year-old son, is now in grade four and has a diagnosis of autism spectrum disorder (ASD). From the first day Mariana connected with her son's school, she had access to a YMCA Settlement Support worker named Souzan, who facilitated communication with school staff by interpreting between Arabic and English. With

2. CLB 1 indicates entry-level skills related to basic language, such as interpreting and creating simple spoken communication (Citizenship and Immigration Canada, 2012).

Mariana initiated support for her son when registering him in school. Mariana let the school know that her son has special needs and requires feeding, changing and toileting support. Around the same time, Najib completed an ASD assessment outside of the school. Najib first received his diagnosis before immigrating to Canada. However, he had to be re-assessed in Nova Scotia because his doctor could not approve the overseas testing. Once the assessment was complete, and with Mariana's permission, Najib's doctor shared the results and recommendations with the school. Almost two years later, primary forms of communication are through pictures and gestures. W has access to a speech therapist and a staff member who assists him with fine motor movement (see Table 2).

about things she would have never known she was eligible for, specifically government programming that assists with childcare. She explained how she appreciates all the services she receives for her son and how his whole life changed when he came to Canada.

Mariana receives detailed daily updates from her son's learning centre teacher, which are then communicated to her in Arabic by Souzan. She also receives phone calls from Souzan whenever English documents are sent home, so that Souzan can explain what is written. Also, Mariana explained that the school constantly provides her with progress updates related to the service Najib receives to help her feel more involved. As a result of Mariana's support from Souzan, she did not report any barriers when engaging with her son's school. Mariana described how lucky she felt because of her support, and this was even the case outside the school. When N

assistant explained the whole diagnostic process to Mariana. Therefore, she did not struggle to understand technical jargon. Overall, Mariana feels that the school values her opinions, and she

understands that without her consent, the school will not add additional services for Najib. She also is thankful that the school staff take the time to understand her thoughts. Specifically, they collaborate with her to address her son's behavioural challenges, which assists Mariana when parenting Najib at home.

Discussion

The two cases of Fatemeh and Mariana highlight aspects of the immigrant parent experience of engaging with schools to access specialized supports for their children. In the next section, the two cases are considered together in relation to the barriers and supports they received.

Comparisons across cases

Supports. In both cases, the children received similar types of support at school (i.e., help with feeding, changing, and toileting). Both boys require high levels of support and spend most of their time in the learning centre. Also, in both cases, the mothers were made aware of the support available for their children. They were grateful for the knowledge they had gained about the types of assistance and future opportunities available for their children. This observation provides evidence to contradict previous research highlighting a general lack of knowledge from immigrant parents of existing resources (Nilses et al., 2019). For Fatemeh, this came across when she explained the hope she got when finding out that in the future, her son would be able to work for a local organization that specializes in hiring adults with special needs. This awareness also

childcare. However, these are only two instances of gaining knowledge of existing resources and cannot entirely negate the finding from Nilses et al. (2019). Parents who speak English fluently, are from the dominant culture, or who grew up in a similar system to their children would likely have much more knowledge than the immigrant parents in this study.

Both parents received hope for the future by gaining knowledge and support from their son's schools. This hope was evident when Fatemeh explained her shift in perspective about her and Aamir's life post-high school graduation. Mariana explained that Najib's whole life changed once he came to Canada. However, there was a noticeable difference between the two cases related to the support they received from their children's schools. Subsequently, there are differences in the details they know about their children's services and the level of information communicated to them daily. Unlike Mariana, Fatemeh does not have access to a school staff member who speaks in her native language. This lack of access relates to her communication barriers and contributes to a lack of knowledge about the specifics in Aamir's daily schedule. Even without additional language support that Mariana receives, Fatemeh should have access to

For Fatemeh it has been a gradual process over two years of living in Nova Scotia to gain the understanding she has about the support possible for her son. This extended timeline highlights her persistence and determination to be involved and informed. Mariana was able to gain information much quicker than Fatemeh because of the supports put in place to mitigate her communication challenges.

Communication Challenges. Fatemeh and Mariana have differing levels of English proficiency. Currently, Fatemeh is at CLB 4, and Mariana is at CLB 1. Meaning that Fatemeh is fluent in basic language skills such as interpreting and creating simple spoken communication, while Mariana is at the entry-level with these skills (Citizenship and Immigration Canada, 2012). It is also important to note that Fatemeh was at the minimum level needed for Canadian citizenship, which requires a CLB 4 in speaking and listening (Government of Canada, 2019). Yet, despite having the proficiency requirements for citizenship, Fatemeh still struggles with communication s inability to

accommodate the needs of immigrant parents, especially given the fact that her skills line up with the national language proficiency requirements. Since Fatemeh meets the requirement for English proficiency and is comfortable reading simple English, it is a disservice that the school could not find ways to communicate with her effectively. Despite having a lower English proficiency level, Mariana's experience communicating with her son's school differed from Fatemeh's. Her access to language support mitigated her communication challenges. Both mothers claim to have never received documents in their native language, but when it came to accessing other language supports, Mariana had a clear advantage. Mariana has access to a YMCA school settlement worker who speaks her native language. The goal of the School Settlement Program is to provide support for newcomer parents and children; however, there is no guarantee of interpretation services (YMCA Immigrant Services, 2018).

The service that Mariana receives through her YMCA school support worker is consistent with recommendations made by Rah et al. (2009), who highlight the usefulness of creating a parent liaison position to act as a culturally competent mediator to facilitate connections and good communication channels between schools and immigrant families. The researchers stressed that these mediators should have an in-depth understanding of the school culture and the culture of the family (Rah et al., 2009). Receiving this type of service is not always the case for newcomer parents. To illustrate, in the Halifax area, YMCA has 18 school settlement workers, but they are only assigned to work in 30 out of 135 schools in the Halifax Regional Centre for Education (HRCE; n.d.; YMCA of Greater Halifax/Dartmouth, n.d.).

Unlike Mariana, when Fatemeh was asked if there were words that were hard for her to understand when talking to the school about Aamir's supports and services, she said there were. She explained that it was more challenging to understand the things that were "more important or

a little bit complicated" (Interpretation from Fatemeh interview). This type of barrier is reported by researchers who note that meetings and policy documents provided in English are barriers to communication due to parents' unfamiliarity with the technical language scattered throughout (Ladky & Peterson, 2008; Turney & Kao, 2009). When trying to understand these documents, Fatemeh reported feeling alone and having no one to ask for help. The challenges that Fatemeh faced were not factors in Mariana's experience. Fatemeh also noted that she sees Arabic students at her son's school receiving more support than students and family members who speak Farsi, such as herself. In part, this inequity could be due to the lower number of families who speak Farsi in the area. For example, across all Canadian immigrants who arrived between 2011 and 2016, Arabic was ranked third-highest for a non-official language spoken most at home, while Farsi was ranked sixth (Statistics Canada, 2017b). However, the inequities between the two cases seem to stem from a lack of effort from school staff school. By comparing Fatemeh and Mariana's experiences, two major inequities are noted: the lack of support provided to Fatemeh to help facilitate her understanding of key documents and communication about her ; and the potential inequality first language, such as between Arabic and Farsi speakers' access to translated documents.

Background Knowledge. Fatemeh and Mariana's knowledge about their sons' schools also differed. Fatemeh said that overall, she knows what takes place at her son's school but lacks knowledge about the details. Again, Mariana has the advantage because of her access to the school settlement worker, Souzan. Mariana's higher level of knowledge is gained through Souzan, who delivers daily updates about what Najib is doing at school from his learning centre teacher. In contrast, Fatemeh's knowledge about her son's services has grown slowly over time. Other differences between Mariana and Fatemeh's level of knowledge are also a result of

Mariana's access to interpretation services. Because of her access to Souzan, Mariana has someone to help her understand her son's day-to-day activities, facilitate communication between herself and her son's school, and explain any document she receives.

Many of the supports Mariana received relate to the suggestions Fatemeh had for school staff who work with her son. Fatemeh suggested that school staff communicate daily about her son's activities and give direction on ways she can help him at home. As reported, Mariana does have this daily communication, and she discussed how it benefits her when parenting Najib. This inequity highlights Fatemeh resilience and determination. Despite the difficulties she faced, Fatemeh was persistent, and over time she gained a better understanding of what was taking place at her son's school**.**

Fatemeh and Mariana had similar responses when asked if they felt that their son's schools valued their opinions. Both mothers referenced the school asking for their consent for the support their sons would receive. Fatemeh referred to this when talking about her son's transition to the learning centre, and Mariana explained it in relation to the specialists Najib works with at school. However, Mariana had access to an interpreter during those consent conversations, perhaps contributing to better-informed consent than Fatemeh's. Also, Mariana had the advantage of increased collaboration and behavioural problem-solving. Mariana explained that staff at her son's school work with her when coming up with solutions for Najib's behavioural challenges. This involvement counters findings in the research, which reported that when parents sought help, the school did not provide enough support and did not encourage their participation in the process (Paniagua, 2014).

Conclusions

The purpose of this case study was to explore the immigrant parent experience of integrating their children who require specialized support through an analysis of two cases. The conclusions address the research questions asked: (1) what barriers are experienced by immigrant parents of children who required specialized support when attempting to access appropriate support for their children?; and (2) what supports were made available to immigrant parents?

This research identified a major inequity within and between schools in the HRM. The barriers experienced by immigrant parents differ greatly depending on the supports they receive. Across schools, there appear to be differences in access to translated documents across non-official languages. Between schools, there are differences in access to YMCA school settlement workers. The inequities in HRM are large contributors to the communication challenges and knowledge-based obstacles immigrant parents face. The differences in services experienced by immigrant parents may contribute to parents feeling alone when navigating the system on their own and prolonging the time it takes for parents to understand what is happening at their

When communication barriers exist due to limited levels of English proficiency, parents may feel isolated and have difficulties connecting to school staff. These outcomes are possible even when parents have the minimum English proficiency requirements for citizenship. The discrepancy between citizenship requirements and what is needed to communicate meaningfully with school staff may leave immigrant parents struggling to engage with their children s. On the contrary, when communication between parents and school staff occurs in a way that is accessible to immigrant families, school staff can achieve higher levels of parent engagement. In this study, the higher level of engagement was facilitated through access to an interpreter who

provided detailed daily updates, facilitated communication at all meetings between the parent and school staff, and provided detailed explanations of the English documents sent home. The findings of this study identify that access to a cultural liaison who speaks the same language as newcomer parents is instrumental when facilitating this level of involvement. Yet, we know that this service is not available across the municipality. This specific inequity may result from a lack of funding for cultural liaisons and interpreters. Therefore, school staff must develop alternate solutions to provide accessible services to immigrant families. Also, it should be noted that the work done by external organizations, like the YMCA, are not funded through the school or the Nova Scotian government but through Immigrant, Refugees, and Citizenship Canada (IRCC) (YMCA, n.d). Also, as reported above, not all schools in the HRCE have school settlement workers, and even those that do, do not guarantee interpretation services (HRCE, n.d.; YMCA of Greater Halifax/Dartmouth, n.d.). Therefore, an additional finding from this research is that much of the supports given to immigrant parents do not come directly from the education system, further emphasizing the recommendation that school staff must take responsibility and develop skills to support immigrant families. Currently, it seems as if the school staff are passive, while external organizations take the lead.

Related to the inequity of language supports reported above, the findings of this study highlight the importance of providing support across all foreign languages that immigrant parents speak, and not only those with the highest proportion of students. Families with home languages that are less prevalent in Nova Scotia (i.e., Farsi) may not receive the same level of services as their peers who speak a more prevalent language. This inequity can contribute to the isolating feelings reported above. Also, without communication supports for English language learners, their consent may not be adequately informed. The disparity between the level of support

provided to the two mothers in this study highlights the high level of resilience and determ s, when staff are not providing adequate supports. Therefore, to ease the pressure put on parents and lessen the inconsistencies across HRM, there should be more effort into streamlining communication for all parents.

Finally, the findings of this study also highlight the importance of connecting immigrant families to community services and organizations designed to assist them. When immigrant parents learn about the support possible for their children, they also gain hope for the future. Parents of children who require high levels of support may not know what to expect of their s, but by gaining knowledge about what is possible, their outlook on disabilities can shift to reflect a strength-based perspective. Overall, these findings highlight that with the proper support, there is the potential for increased understanding, collaboration, hope, and the elimination of barriers to accessing appropriate programming for newcomer children who require specialized support. However, school staff need to take responsibility and balance inequities across the municipality by finding ways to streamline communication when translated documents and interpreters are not available.

Limitations

Although the current study highlights the barriers and supports immigrant parents experience, there are limitations. Due to this study's exploratory and qualitative nature, only two s were included. A key attribute of qualitative research is to build understanding and highlight participants' experiences in a specific context through thick and rich description (Sullivan & Sargeant, 2011). Thus, the purposeful selection of participants and the richness of the data, qualitative methods were appropriate and added to the limited Canadian

research on the subject (Malterud, Siersma, & Guassora, 2016; Patton, 2002). However, it should be noted that the cases only captured the experience of immigrant parents in a similar context. Both participants had limited English language proficiency, both lived in urban areas of Nova Scotia, and the types of specialized support needed for their children was similar.

Future research should aim to capture the experiences of immigrant parents with varying English language proficiency levels or those who live in rural communities. Additional research is needed about parents with children who receive support in the traditional classroom rather than in a learning centre, or for those who require academic support for a diagnosis of ADHD, a learning disability, or an intellectual disability. Another similarity between the parents in this study is how invested both were how determined they were to be involved with thei school. Furthermore, both parents were motivated to participate in research that could help improve communication for all immigrant parents. Another limitation of the research relates to the demographic information collected. Immigrant parents who work multiple jobs may face additional barriers or cannot be as i
There was no information collected about levels of education, family sizes, or their abilities to do research independently. Therefore, it is unknown whether prior education, self-acquired knowledge, or other life demands may have influenced their interactions with school staff.

Another limitation was the use of videoconferencing in place of a face-to-face interview, which was the case in one of the interviews, and may have limited the information gathered. The in-person interview was able to move freely between the participant and the researcher. In contrast, the interview over videoconferencing was intermittent when participants and researchers had to turn off their microphones while others spoke to avoid audio feedback.

The *Inclusive Education Policy* (DEECD, 2019) outlines that inclusive education requires everyone to work together to support students in a culturally and linguistically responsive manner that honours cultural identities and values their experiences and world views (DEECD, 2019). However, the policy is vague about how to achieve inclusion and does not include any direct reference about how to support newcomer families. As a first step towards achieving equity, the DEECD could include guidelines within the policy around documenting newcomer families' needs for language support. Such a policy could inform a communication plan to address the needs.

The findings from this research can also help create suggestions on what to include in the communication plan suggested above. It is evident through the results of this study the benefits of hiring more cultural liaisons who speak the same home language as immigrant parents. These cultural liaisons can help achieve goals related to streamlining communication. However, this service is not available to all immigrant parents who could benefit from it. Therefore, in cases where schools do not have that access, staff will have to find other solutions. Finding alternate solutions is critical because, as noted above, the funding for the YMCA school settlement workers is from IRCC (i.e., the Canadian Government) and not from the Nova Scotia DEECD. Therefore, there is no guarantee that this service will remain from year-to-year. Examples of how to achieve adequate communication, without an interpreter and translated documents, include providing documents written using simple English, only translating keywords or words that are difficult to simplify, and adding visual aids to assist parents understanding. These communication methods would be beneficial felt stronger with her reading skills compared to her speaking and listening skills. However, when

verbal communication is necessary, staff should ensure that they are not speaking too quickly and use simple language when appropriate.

Finally, this research can inform educators about the barriers and needs of immigrant families by communicating the findings and implications of this study to service providers for newcomers in Nova Scotia. The researcher plans to share the results of this research on an infographic that will be distributed to external organizations such as the YMCA, ISANS, and local school staff. By sharing the study results, educators and service providers can gain awareness of the inequitable distribution of services across schools in the HRM and learn how to best serve their clients and students.

Relevance to the Practice of School Psychology

The current study has several implications for the practice of school psychology.

case taken on by a school psychologist is a specialized service. The Nova Scotia Board of Examiners in Psychology (NSBEP; 2009) states that psychologist practitioners have sufficient diversity of training and experience to meet diverse service needs. However, there are no specific guidelines for school psychologists working with immigrant clients or English language learners.

At Mount Saint Vincent University (MSVU; 2020), there is course work to prepare school psychology students to work with diverse populations. Within this course there were presentations related to working with refugees and recent immigrants. There was also a guest lecture from a YMCA staff member who provided settlement services in local schools. This education provided awareness of the needs of immigrant students in the larger school context, including the need for trauma-informed care, building rapport, collecting background information, promoting resilience, and knowledge of service providers in the local community.

However, little emphasis was placed on specific school psychology practices related to assessment and academic interventions, and there was no focus on the importance of engaging the parent.

It should be noted that demographic trends in school psychology have not kept up with the increasing diversity of the public school system (Vega, Lasser, & Plotts, 2015). Recent reports from the United States (Goforth et al., 2021) found that in a sample of over 1,000 school psychologists, 86% were white demographic information about Canadian psychologists was not found. Therefore, the lack of diversity in the profession and limited education about servicing diverse students begs the question: are school psychologists adequately prepared and trained to advocate for the needs of immigrant families? This question highlights the importance of school psychologists seeking out research on best practices to guide their services.

Guidance from the NASP (2015) provides recommendations for school psychologists who provide and advocate for adequate service for immigrant families. The NASP recommends that staff working with immigrant families understand their stressors and cultural identities, focus on student strengths, and know about community resources and how to access them. The recommendations from the NASP could provide a solution to a problem identified in McNeely et al. (2019) research. In the study, parents commented that when a school assists with a emotional or behavioural difficulties, and the family is struggling to meet their basic needs, the assistance can be seen as lacking empathy and disingenuous. The findings highlight the importance of a comprehensive initial interview with parents to gather information and build rapport. The background knowledge gathered will also prepare school psychologists to conduct assessments with immigrant students and decide how to approach their interpretations. By understanding families needs, school psychologists can initiate professional development

training on how to serve this population better. For instance, the NASP (2015) stressed the importance of training staff in trauma-sensitive approaches. However, school psychologists also need to receive training on appropriate learning assessments and interventions for newcomer students.

An implication for the practice of school psychology found through this research is related to the need for informed consent. A school psychologist may have immigrant students on their caseload, and in all instances where support or consultation is provided, the school psychologist will need informed consent from a parent or guardian (Canadian Psychological Association, 2007). The informed consent process requires communication with the parent, and comprehension is crucial. For instance, the informed consent process for this study was facilitated by an interpreter to ensure the participants understood the nature of the study, as well as the potential risks and benefits. The presence of an interpreter allowed for the researcher to proceed with confidence that the participants were fully informed. The same confidence is essential for school psychologists who follow ethical guidelines from the Canadian Psychological Association (2017). When obtaining informed consent, the information should be relayed using language that the individuals understand, including providing translation to another language if necessary. Psychologists should take whatever reasonable steps are needed to ensure that the information is understood (Canadian Psychological Association, 2017). School psychologists should also consider adding interpretation services to their feedback meetings. The results from interventions and psychoeducation reports can be filled with technical jargon that is difficult to avoid. Therefore, school psychologists should make every effort to simplify their feedback as much as possible. However, when this is not appropriate, the school psychologist should provide interpretation services.

Another implication for the practice of school psychology is the importance of advocating for immigrant students and their parents. By understanding the needs of immigrant families, the school psychologist can help educate educators on these needs and advocate for better services and outreach practices. Birman and Espino (2007) identified that without adequate outreach strategies, it is unlikely that immigrant families will become involved in programs designed to help them. Through gaining knowledge of the barriers and supports available for immigrant parents in Nova Scotia, school psychologists can help facilitate adequate communication by advocating for interpreters and cultural liaisons in all schools. Also, school psychologists can educate school staff on ways to streamline communication when the school cannot access an interpreter.

Overall, school psychologists need to take the initiative to develop their knowledge and skills related to working with immigrant families and then disseminate their findings to school staff. The results of this study reveal that with the proper assistance, there is potential to eliminate the barriers to appropriate programming for newcomer children who require specialized support. School psychologists can share this message with educators and service providers to partner together to improve the experiences of the growing population of immigrants in Canada.

Figure 1

Coding Framework

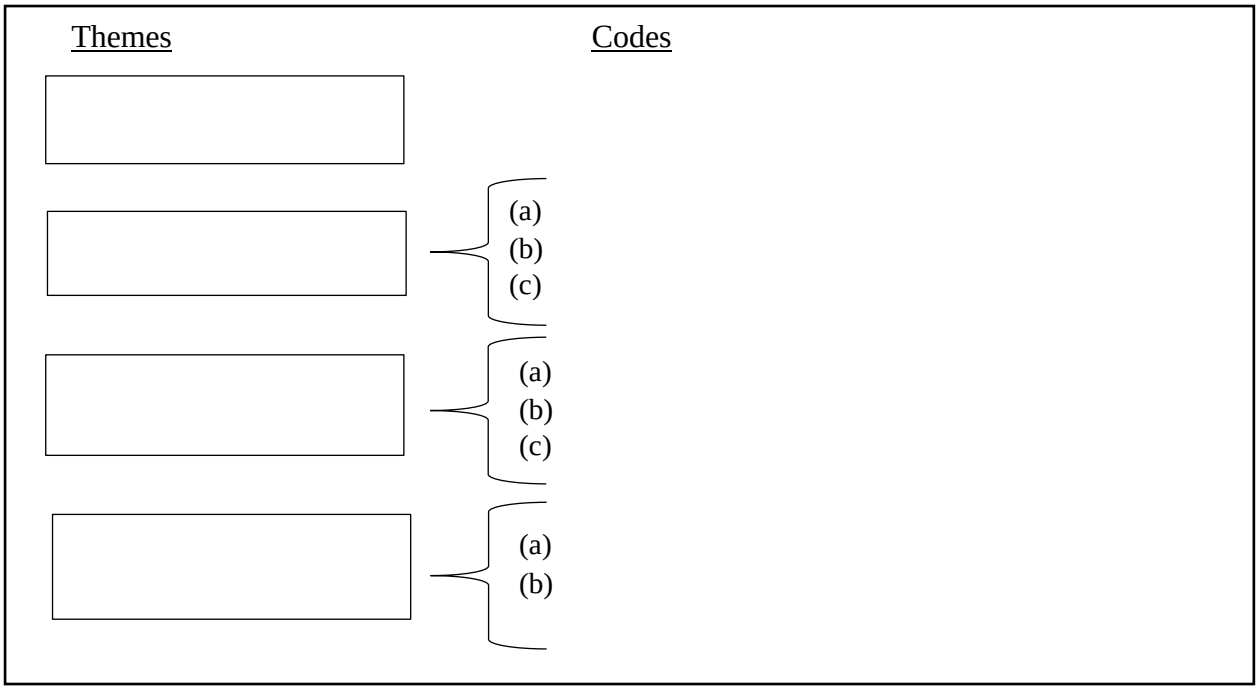

Table 1

Illustrative Quotations with Corresponding Categories: Fatemeh

Theme	Code	Illustrative quotations
Supports	What the school did well	I had challenges with him [Aamir] but this year the school helped me a lot and they helped me to reduce my problems with my son actually great. Especially when
	Suggestions	my phone, they have my e- school and the rest of the day in the house. If we had a way to
		The only thing is if they could help him more to speak fluently If he can speak or bring up

Theme	Code	Illustrative quotations
Communication Challenges	English proficiency	[CLB]
	Technical jargon	but for some things this are more important or a little bit complicated I can say ye
	Access to language supports	kinds of be great to understand exactly the details. If they send some Arabic, they can send some Farsi
Background Knowledge	Parent s knowledge of school	hands and how to use their hands. Overall, I know but the details, in detail no.
		[no one explained the process of getting support to me] not ISANS and not the school. But after a while, because of the reports and the questions they asked me, I step by step understood what they are doing and what they want
	School valuing parent s thoughts and opinions	[my opinion]. They asked me, and they valued it. For example, they sent me a message and just explained all the detail and all the problems they have with him during the class and with the classmates. And they just explain that they want to keep him in the learning centre to do more work with him to just improve his abilities and ask for my w

Table 2.

Illustrative Quotations with Corresponding Categories: Mariana

Theme	Code	Illustrative quotations
Supports	What the school did well	se [government funded childcare] are things I would never know, but they tell me about them. Like they say your son has a right to have this, or these are things he should get. They say, [The process of getting support was] the morning he is with one person for three hours, and then for the next three hours with another day in the regular classroom. They started every day for one hour. They are going to increase it little by little to one and a half hours, two hours. They want him to live a life just like everyone they started him with one hour, two hours, three. Every week they added an hour. Until they finally had him there for the whole day. And now my son likes school more than he likes coming wo years and every e pictures. They say we want you to be involved with what we do for your son.

Theme	Code	Illustrative quotations
Supports	What the school did well	same thing at home.
	Suggestions	[I do not have any suggestions], I see that they are dealing with my son in a beautiful way and not only my son but other Autistic kid in the school as well, they do everything
Communication Challenges	English proficiency	[I am at] The first level [CLB]
	Technical Jargon	developmental doctor that was assigned to my son, his assistant working under him... God always sends me people who can speak Arabic. She [the assistant] was
	Access to language supports	[the YMCA worker] will explain it to me. She will call me and say today you got a paper, and they are asking you this
		From the first day my children went to that school, she [the YMCA worker]
Background Knowledge	Parent s knowledge of School	lls me everything. I have a report every day did, how he got into the school, was he annoyed or was he calm, or tired, everything they write it down
	School valuing parent s thoughts and opinions	[speech therapist and specialist for movement]

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Appendix

Interview Protocol

This interview is meant to act as a guide. Questions are formatted to move from broad questions to those which can capture more specific details. If adequate information is captured from initial questions, and prompting (i.e., How? In what way? Tell me mor

1. **Demographic Questions**
    - Verify the relationship to the child (mother, father, another legal guardian)
    - What country did you immigrate from?
    - What year did you arrive in Canada?

        Have you lived in any other provinces before your arrival in Nova Scotia?
    - How old is your child?
    - What grade is your child in?
2. **Supports**
    - Do you remember how or why this process to receive support began?
    - What type of specialized services does your child receive at school?
    - Has your child received a diagnosis that affects their time at school?

        If yes, what is the diagnosis?
    - Tell me about your experience setting up support for your child.
    - How did your child feel about the supports/ services they received?
    - How did you feel about the supports/ services your child received?

- While setting up support for your child, was there anything you felt like the school did well?
- Did you face any challenges during the process of setting up the supports?

    What about once the support was in place?
- Do you have anything you wished the school would have done differently?
- Do you have anything you wished the school would have done? Is there something that you felt was missing?
- Do you have any suggestions for school staff who interact with immigrant families or parents who are English language learners?

3. **Communication Challenges**

- How would you describe your English language proficiency?

    Spoken

    Written

    Reading
- How would you describe your experience communicating with staff at your

- Who did you communicate with the most? (ex., classroom teacher, principal, resource, school psychologist)
- Did you have access to any documents in your native language?
- Was there language or terms related to your child

  that were unfamiliar to you?

    Was anyone able to assist you in understanding what these terms meant?

- Did you have access to staff (ex., YMCA settlement worker) from the school who could interpret or translate information for you?

4. Background knowledge

-
- At the beginning of the process of getting support for your child, did you feel as if you understood what was going to take place?

  What about once the process had begun
- Did anyone from the school explain this process to you?
-

  about your child and the supports they would receive?
- Did staff from your ch

  services your child would receive?
-

Finish interview by asking participant if there is anything they would like to add. Debrief by reiterating the purpose of the research and the next steps of the research process. Provide them with information about how they can receive updates if interested.