

The Challenges of Communication: A Study of Immigrant Parents and School Staff in Halifax,  
Nova Scotia's English School System

by

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Dedicated with all my love to Joan Baker, June Anderson and my lovely abuelita Dorita. I know they are always with me.

Dedicated also to my parents, to my family back in Mexico and my family here in Nova Scotia.

Dedicated to Conrad, William and Sebastian.

And with special dedication to all immigrant parents, teachers and school staff who decide to be part of this research experience. Without your sharing of experiences this thesis would not be possible.

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## **Abstract**

This thesis employs an anthropological approach to analyzing the communication between immigrant parents and school staff at elementary schools in the west end of Halifax. I focus on the communication process in relation to children's education. Working at the intersection between migration studies, the anthropology of education, intercultural communication and anthropological political economy, I use William Roseberry's concept of "common discursive framework" (1994, 1996) to ask how the communication process for immigrant parents and the Halifax education system occurs. I pay particular attention to power relations among the institution of the school board, school staff and immigrant parents. I address how immigrant parents understand and navigate Nova Scotia's public education system and how they communicate about their children's education. The qualitative interviews with parents and school staff reveal problems with this communication. I consider the difficulties that parents and school staff face in attempting to communicate with each other and how they try to resolve those situations. I found that there are established official channels and tools for communication, but these are designed to send messages in one direction from the school to parents. Immigrant parents and teachers find solutions despite and around the system, but that depends heavily on teachers' personal sensitivity and experience.

## **List of Abbreviations used**

CIC- Canada Immigration and Citizenship

IRCC - Immigration Refugees and Citizenship Canada

ESL - English as Second Language

EAL - English as an Additional Language

HRSB - Halifax Regional School Board

ISANS - Immigrant Services Association of Nova Scotia

LSIC - Longitudinal Survey of Immigrants to Canada

YMCA - Young Men's Christian Association

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

When I came to Canada as a landed immigrant I did not speak English and my children did not either. While my son attended primary school, I attended adult English classes. A few months after my arrival, my teacher, knowing my interest in education, invited me to a presentation by a spokesperson for the provincial education department, an orientation session for immigrant parents to explain education policy in Nova Scotia. I understood enough English to follow a question posed by an immigrant parent at the end of the presentation. She asked the representative how she could find out what her son was learning at school. The parent explained that in her own country, she could constantly review the activities and learning her son was doing and how he was progressing. In Nova Scotia, she said, she could not track what he was doing at all and did not know how to find out. The presenter said that all she needed to do was to visit the website of the school board, and there she would find a document called the "curriculum outcomes framework". He delivered the answer quickly, giving it as little importance as if he had been asked "what is your name?" and moved on to another question. But even though I spoke little English, I could tell by the expression on the mother's face, that she was not satisfied with the answer. As one mother to another, one immigrant to another, I recognized her sense of frustration.

For the mother, it was part of her role as a parent to review what her child was learning at school, but she could not find out. In fact, the document the official referred her to, the curriculum outcomes framework (which I will describe in more detail in next pages), is a very short document, without enough detail to explain what a child is doing day-to-day

at school. Teachers know what their students are doing, but for parents it can be a mystery. Knowing how they can help their children is an even bigger mystery. What I saw that day looked like a problem of communication. What the mother was looking for is not something that can be summarized on a website. But for the school representative, immersed in the policies and protocols of the department, it was the obvious answer. The two were using the same language and same vocabulary, but they did not understand each other.

In my view, the miscommunication was not based only on language differences, but on cultural differences, rooted in the knowledge each one had of different education systems (the Nova Scotian, and that of the immigrant mother's native country), their understandings of the roles parents are expected to play in the education of their children, and even what education itself means. Several years later, after having faced similar difficulties myself, and having spent many hours in schoolyard chats with other parents, both Canadian and immigrant, I decided to investigate how the communication process works, and not work, between English elementary school system and parents of immigrant children.

\* \* \*

During 2013-2016, I conducted empirical fieldwork on these questions as described below. According to economists and other social scientists, immigration to the province of Nova Scotia is necessary to help boost the economy and fill the labour gaps left by an aging population (Goodsell, 2016; Kustec, 2012). Immigrants that move to Halifax buy or rent places to live, they look for jobs and they send their children to schools. According to Immigration Nova Scotia, the provincial government department that regulates immigration,

there were "2,370 new immigrants in 2012<sup>1</sup>, an 11 per cent increase from the previous years" (Immigration Nova Scotia, 2013, p. 3). These newcomers arrived under four types of classification determined by federal and provincial immigration policies: 1651 under the economic class, 470 under the family class, 195 under the refugee class and 54 in other classes that are not specified. Immigration has particular implications for the school system. During the 2008-2012 period, according to Immigration Nova Scotia: "2,475 children aged 0-14 arrived in NS, accounting for 20.6% of total immigrant landings. Of these 78.5 % arrived as dependents of economic immigrant, 9.3% came under the family class, 11.3 % came in the refugee class and 0.9 % came other categories" (Immigration Nova Scotia, 2013, p. 4). Increasing numbers of children can put the system under pressure, change the nature of teachers' work and the composition of classrooms. According to the report "Focus on Learning: English as an Additional Language" (King and Grcic-Stuart, 2014), written by the director of the program and the English Second Language consultant for Halifax Regional School Board (HRSB), schools are changing with the incorporation of children of immigrants, where 85 % of newcomer students require help with English to improve learning.

This thesis focuses on experiences in elementary education, from Primary to grade 6, with a few references to grade 7-9, Junior High. In Nova Scotia most elementary school teachers, who speak only English, now find themselves trying to communicate with immigrant parents and their children. Many studies have highlighted the importance of the parents' participation in the education of their children (Dyson, 2001; Ogbu, 1982; Osborne,

1 The most recent year for which figures are publicly available

1996). Others are focused specifically on communication between immigrant parents and teachers ( Bernhard, Freire and Pacini-Ketchabaw 2000; Guo and Mohan, 2008, 2012; Li 2006; Zhou, 2013). Unsurprisingly, effective communication with and participation of parents favours student achievement. For example Jiang, Zhou, Zhang, Beckford and Zhong (2012) found that Chinese immigrant parents recognized that "regular communication... could bring beneficial outcomes to their children's education" (p. 59). The HRSB also recognizes the importance of communication; in a magazine distributed to parents through elementary schools, Elwin LeRoux the HRSB superintendent, has called the school board, teachers and parents "partners in education" (LeRoux, 2016). In a partnership, communication is key "Communication among the student, parents/guardians, and the teacher is a key to success" (LeRoux, 2016, p. 29). This thesis will examine that communication, by asking "how do immigrant parents and teachers talk to each other?" "What do they say?" "What do they not say?" "Do they understand each other?".

## **1.1 Research Location**

I carried out research during 2012- 2016 in the Halifax West area, one of the most diverse areas within the Halifax Regional Municipality (Boehm & Boudreau, 2009). Immigrant families that settle in this part of the city come from all over the world including Asia, Africa, Latin America and Europe. Neighbourhoods within this area include Fairview, Glenforest, Clayton Park and Rockingham. I also included Timberlea, Bedford and Larry Uteck in the research. Those different neighbourhoods are adjacent but have social and economic differences that I considered during the design, fieldwork and analysis stages. For instance, many students of Fairview and Glenforest are from low-income working-class

families and they have different situations and experiences related to these social and economic differences (Boehm & Boudreau, 2009). Immigrants that arrive as refugees live in this area because rent is a little cheaper and it is the place where welfare institutions help them to settle (personal communication: this information comes from informal conversations with immigrant friends and observation). Immigrants living in these neighbourhoods are considered to have “social risk factors in terms of income, education, employment and mobility” (Boehm & Boudreau, 2009: 20). Other neighbourhoods like Park West, Rockingham, Larry Uteck and Bedford are generally settled by business class immigrants or skilled immigrant workers. These neighbourhoods appear to have more economic resources than do Fairview and Glenforest. The immigrants here tend to own houses or rent comfortable apartments and they bring their children to school by car rather than walking.

My research is just a first step in what I hope will be further studies into the education of immigrants in elementary schools in Nova Scotia. Although immigration in the province has been well researched from an economic (Akbari, 2005), social (Dobrowolsky and Tastsoglou, 2011) or labour (Foster, 2013) perspective, the education of children of immigrants has received almost no attention. As part of my own research I searched for peer reviewed articles, theses and papers related to communication and the education of children of immigrants. I found much more research from provinces and cities with traditionally high rates of immigration such as Toronto, Montreal, Edmonton, and incorporated them into my own work (see the next chapter). But I found no work relevant to my field in Nova Scotia. Halifax's case is different from other cities with greater immigrant populations, where typically the city increases services for this new population. In Halifax, however, the influx

of children of immigrants in recent decades has been almost "invisible" for educational and provincial authorities. For example, it is only since 2010 that the school board distributed a brochure for children of immigrants and their parents to give some information and orientation to parents. People who arrived before 2010 or people who arrived and do not know about this brochure have to find the information for themselves, through friends or through immigrant settlement services, like Immigrant Services Association of Nova Scotia (ISANS) or the YMCA Centre for immigrant programs. The brochure has not been updated since then. As we will see in the interviews, many parents are not aware of even basic education policies here.

## **1.2 Policies**

Three of these policies form the center of my study, so merit explanation here:

1. English language instruction. In Nova Scotia, when children of immigrants are accepted to schools, they are sent directly to a grade that parents and principals agree to. Even when the children do not speak English they are placed in a regular English-speaking classroom. They receive some extra English instruction in the school. Sometimes children are placed in a grade with children younger than them to give them time to "catch up" because of the language barrier. This contrasts with some other provinces such as Quebec, and many cities in England which have special classes just for immigrants, who are integrated into regular classes once they achieve a certain level of proficiency in the local language. In Nova Scotia, students are placed in English-speaking classrooms immediately on arrival, and "provided with appropriate educational programming and supports for English language acquisition as long as they require them" (Nova Scotia Department of

Education, 2003), including English as Additional Language (EAL) classes. "School boards are responsible for the allocation of personnel, time, and materials, including technology, to ensure that all students have access to adequate learning experiences and appropriate resources" (Nova Scotia Department of Education, 2003). EAL instruction is offered during class time, and students sometimes leave their regular classrooms to attend, while at other times language teachers help a child in their regular classroom. The English language instruction was previously known as English as a Second Language, but the name has been changed by education departments nationwide over the last decade, because "this revised term better reflects the additive nature of learning another language" (Government of Manitoba)<sup>2</sup>.

2. Homework. Until 2016, homework was banned from classrooms for children up to grade 4, and is still kept to a minimum today. More recently, the policy was changed to include homework from grades P-6 (NS department of early childhood education, Provincial Homework Policy P-12). Homework can serve as a powerful window onto the classroom for parents, so I asked questions related to how parents and teachers communicate about homework? How do they describe homework in the abstract and in the particular case of their children/students? What kind of homework do parents and teachers expect and what do they consider is appropriate? What do they think is the purpose of homework and how do they express this?

2        The name change, and the reason behind it, has been the subject of much confusion, and even some of my interviewees referred to it as English as a Second Language, ESL. Although the government of NS does not have a public document explaining these names changes, Manitoba does.

3. Curriculum outcomes framework. The Provincial Learning Outcomes are a series of statements that strictly regulate what, "knowledge, skills and attitudes students are expected to show at the determined grade and subject level" (NS department of early childhood education, Learning outcomes P-6, 2015, p1). They are described in a document developed by the Nova Scotia department of education that defines what each child is expected to learn in a school year, broken into particular items of learning for each subject. The framework was developed more than twenty years ago (Mr. Baker, personal information) and revised again and approved in 2015. Teachers are required to base their teaching and assessment on learning outcomes designated to their grade level. Report cards written by teachers about their students' learning at grade level are based on these curriculum outcomes.

### **1.3 Thesis outline**

For my study I have had to draw on research and theory from a number of different fields, including intercultural communication and the anthropology of education. In Chapter 2, I review previous work on communication, education and immigration that has helped me with my own research and I describe the various theories I use to explain my findings. I emphasize the work of Roseberry on the nature of power and subordination, and how dominant and subordinate groups communicate. I will use his idea of "common discursive framework" (1994) to describe how parents and teachers communicate.

In Chapter 3, on methodology, I describe the two groups I will be examining, what I call the "home sphere" and the "school sphere," the purposive selection method I used to recruit interviewees, and the semi-structured interviews I conducted with them. These



interviews were based on a discussion of the three education policies mentioned above, to try to understand how parents and teachers view the underlying issues and how they discuss them with each other. I also discuss limitations of my methodology and the difficulties I encountered conducting research. I discuss obstacles I faced researching the school sphere and the role of ethics reviews in research.

In Chapter 4, I describe and analyze the interviews with members of the school sphere which reveal teachers who really care how children feel in school. Their idea of education is not limited to the academic work; it includes the emotional well-being of the children and how comfortable they feel in class. Comfort is a theme they mention often. They do not talk as much about academic issues and do not have a clear idea of immigrant students' academic abilities, except for the fact that as English learners, they are always "catching up" to the other students. Teachers express frustration with many of the limitations the school system puts on their ability to communicate with parents. School settlement workers, provided by the YMCA, have slightly more liberty to communicate with parents.

Chapter 5 looks at the parents' point of view. Here, I describe their understanding of what education is by looking at how education fits into their reason for migrating, their expectations and the role they play in their children's education. I show that immigrants have a holistic idea of education, based on their international experiences and their knowledge about a complex and changing world. I find they are dissatisfied with many aspects of schooling in Halifax, but are unable to communicate this effectively to teachers. Many parents give up trying to communicate, or seek alternatives to public schooling for their children.

Chapter 6 is an analysis of the ethnographic information described in Chapters 4 and 5. I find that parents and teachers have different ideas about education. Even though both are concerned with the well-being of children, the teachers concern with comfort unconsciously promotes a type of integration, much like the integration policy of the Canadian government. Parents' on the other hand expect education to be a kind of discomfort and sacrifice for children, reflecting their own experiences as immigrants. These different ideas lead to misunderstandings when the two talk to each other. This is made worse by the narrow and limited nature of the official channels of communication provided by the school board. Parents usually give up trying to express their concerns through these channels. For instance, parents look for other sources to supply for what they feel their children's education needs. The deepest communication between the two groups occurs when teachers step outside official channels, an act which can put their job at risk.

## CHAPTER 2

### **A Multidisciplinary Approach to Communication**

This chapter is about the academic body of theory and concepts that I apply to understand, interpret and explain the process of communication between immigrant parents and teachers. This is an area of study that touches on many different fields, immigration, communication, education, and draws on theory from anthropology, intercultural studies and communication studies, among others. After discussing the intersections, I place special emphasis on Roseberry's concept of “common discursive framework”.

#### **2.1 Migration**

The movement of people from a place of origin to another place in the world is probably as old as humanity itself. Recently, migration rates have been increasing, with the development of transportation technology that facilitates the movement of people (Gibson and Rojas 2006; Ryan, 2006), and more recently still, owing to wars in certain parts of the world. In 2010, the International Organization for Migration reported about 214 million migrants in the world, 232 million in 2013 and 244 million in 2015 (IOM website). In consequence, we have witnessed an increase in academic interest in the phenomenon of migration. According to Caroline Brettell, anthropologists and scholars of migration studies have paid special attention to trying to understand three basic interrelated questions: why do people migrate; who moves; and how well they fit into the new places where they settle (Brettell, 2003). Migration scholars in North America have used different concepts for trying to understand the immigrant experience.

For many years the most popular framework was assimilation theory. Scholars in this field thought that migrants, in order to assimilate into a new place, had to leave behind their old culture and assume the culture of the new place. According to Margaret Gibson, the assimilation process “...implies the absorption, on a cultural level, of one group by another and, at the individual level, the replacement of one's old identity for a new one” (1998, p. 623). Subsequently, scholars argued that the migration experience did not always work like this. Sometimes migrants develop different modes of incorporation to maintain their identities and adapt to new settlements (Portes and McLeod, 1996). Studies on education and second generation immigrants found that the children of immigrants developed different strategies that did not always imply discarding their parent's culture. This was termed “accommodation and acculturation without assimilation” (Gibson, 1998, p. 623) and indicates that the children of immigrants became skillful in mainstream society and at the same time were able to maintain their own ethnic identities. Gibson (ibid) also describes another variant of this approach called “additive acculturation” and refers to the incorporation of new knowledge and skills from the main society as an additional resource rather than a replacement of their prior knowledge (Ibid). In contrast to those studies from the United States, Guofang Li (2006) found a variation of accommodation and acculturation without assimilation in Canada. Her research with Chinese middle-class immigrant families described how they have lived in the host country with few contacts and relationships to the larger society. She refers to this variation as “non-accommodation” and implies that Chinese immigrant parents perceived the mainstream society as “opposite to themselves” (Li, 2006, p. 195). They tried, unsuccessfully, to challenge the power of teachers and school boards.

### **2.1.1 The Canadian Policy: Assimilation or Integration?**

Another common term in the field of migration studies is "integration." While "assimilation" is used more in academia and is based on interpretative and descriptive studies about the immigrant experiences in the world, integration is more appropriate when talking about the situations that people live. The term integration is commonly used in policy-making and refers to an ideally constructed migrant interaction in a receiving society, similar to what Barber (2008) refers to regarding the way Western societies attract the "right kind of immigrants" to cover the "gendered, racialized labour market" (pp. 1265-1266) they need. In this sense, integration refers to specific processes and steps that migrants go through when they arrive in a new country and the ways they manifest their agency (Barber, 2008). While assimilation is a way of classifying the result of the process after the fact, integration is a term used more by policy makers and analysts to describe the process itself.

The coordinator of the International Migration Integration and Social Cohesion in Europe, Rinnus Penninx, defines integration as "the process[es] by which immigrants become accepted into the [host] society, both as individuals and as groups have long duration" (Penninx, 2003, para 2). He emphasizes that integration is a long term process and for that reason scholars should look at the second generation to measure it. For him "integration and exclusion are mirrored concepts" (Penninx, 2003, para 4). The problem I find with Penninx's definition is that it is like a black and white photograph, composed of opposites. Based on my own immigrant experience there are situations and moments where you feel integrated and other situations where this is not so much the case, and definitely other moments where you feel like an outsider. Sometimes the feeling of exclusion does not mean that there would not be situations where you may also feel integrated. For example,

Bill, feeling happy about being Canadian, has children born in Toronto, who he wants to learn Pakistani, and thus to learn his family culture. But living in Halifax, he says, and although all his middle class neighbours are really nice and polite, there is something that makes him feel that he still an outsider.

At the Migration Policy Institute, Brian Ray adds that integration is a bi-directional process. Integration is more than the “melting pot predicated upon a process of uni-directional assimilation orchestrated by the receiving society” (Ray, 2002, para 4). I agree with Ray that these days integration is, “a sustained mutual interaction between newcomers and the societies that receive them” (Ray, 2002, para. 4).

Integration is central to official policy in Canada. By 2012, The Department of Citizenship and Immigration Canada (CIC) calls for newcomers to “settle, adapt, and *integrate* as quickly and comfortably as possible so that they may become contributing members of Canadian society” (CIC<sup>3</sup>, 2000, p. 28, my emphasis). In this view, newcomers to Canada should start making contributions to their new place and into Canadian mainstream society as soon as they can; this implies that under Canadian policy, it is the responsibility of immigrants themselves to make this integration happen, contrary to the statement of Ray, above. Although CIC does not offer a definition of integration, the focus is clearly a call for economic integration and a contribution to the Canadian tax system and economy in general. Yet, the social interactions between Canadians and immigrants that lead to integration are complex and cannot be regulated by legislation; they can be facilitated by the government and the host society through suitable policies and funding of

3 Now called IRCC (Immigration Refugee and Citizenship Canada). The name changed to include Refugees under the government of J. Trudeau.

programs and institutions. As Penninx (2003) writes, “the responsibility for integration rests not with one particular group, but rather with many actors, immigrants themselves, the host government, institutions and communities, to name a few”(Penninx, 2003 para 2).

Assimilation and integration refer to different processes. As noted, assimilation is used frequently in academia and has formed the basis for academic interpretative studies about the newcomer experiences in the world. Assimilation refer to processes and frameworks, while integration is used more in immigration policies.

Some US academics see integration as part of what Margaret Gibson has called “additive acculturation” (Ghafar-Kucher, 2006). However, “equating integration with acculturation” as Ray suggest (Ray, 2002, para 7) leads to a false "expectation that immigrants will be incorporated directly" into what is often perceived as a set of "unwavering norms, values and interests of the established receiving society” (Ray, 2002, para 7). Increasingly, it has been acknowledged that there is not a homogeneous mainstream society into which an immigrant chooses to "assimilate". Rather every receiving society, even small cities like Halifax, are complex, with diverse cultural populations and social, economic environments. Doubts arise as to whether there is a total integration. Ray describes five types of integration: linguistic, educational, labour market, civic/political and residential (ibid). These may occur at different levels and not at the same time. This study contributes to thinking about these issues because parent-teacher communication is an important part of educational integration as schools are among the first public institutions that immigrants access in the city.

The concept of integration that I use in these pages is a combination of both the academic use, closer to assimilation, and the common use. So, integration here is considered

as a positive addition to the settlement process in the sense that it involves “additive acculturation” and means that migrants do not have to lose their identities and their cultural knowledge in order to be accepted in the host society. I recognize that there are layers of integration, the same way that there are layers of assimilation. Next, I explore some critiques of assimilation.

### **2.1.2 Critiques of the Assimilation Paradigm**

The assimilation paradigm was well accepted in US anthropology and other social sciences until recent decades, when doubts about its applicability to contemporary migrant groups arose (Alba & Nee, 1997; Portes and Zhou, 1993; Rumbaut, 1994). Critics point out that its latent ethnocentrism presupposes that all immigrants want to be part of the mainstream, typically a European-descended middle class. In the assimilation paradigm, assimilation equals a, “full and successful incorporation; assimilation does not take into account other forms of incorporation”, it fails to "consider that immigrants might look for support among their own ethnic group rather than the host society" (Alba & Nee, 2003 pp. 3-7). Other criticisms focus on its negative representation of the immigrant as weak and needing support. This representation precludes the notion that migrants may not necessarily be looking for full assimilation. This is especially true for today’s immigrant experiences; as Ghaffar-Kucher points out, the accessibility of internet and inexpensive communication systems allow immigrants to maintain stronger ties to their country of origin and therefore they may feel less need to assimilate (Ghaffar-Kucher, 2006, p. 4). Following Conzen, et. al (1992), she also recognizes the dialectical exchange that takes place between immigrants and the host society with the resultant change on both sides (ibid).



Some scholars consider that the problem with assimilation and integration is their double discourse: immigrants make efforts to adapt to the new country, but the host society does not try to adapt to the new migrant population (Gordon, 1964; Li, 2003). In this sense, immigrants conform to the values and ways of living of the host country where they are trying to adapt and settle (Li, 2003). However, based on my own experience, I recognize that the host society does change a little but slowly, even without a conscious desire on the part of the hosts. With or without direct interactions among both groups, the presence of immigrants necessarily changes a host society.

## **2.2 Anthropology of Education**

The role that schools play in the integration of immigrants has been studied by anthropologists of education. Within the anthropological work I reviewed, schools are considered to be a kind of micro society where the values and culture of the larger society are at play and are constantly being taught or reinforced (Gibson and Rios Rojas, 2006). Using ethnography as a principal method, anthropologists aim to understand the role and process that schools play in cultural transmission; they analyze the micro and macro structures and their interrelation with social institutions (Ogbu, 1981).

### **2.2.1 Anthropology of Education and Assimilation**

My work is inspired particularly by John Ogbu's statement on the importance of a holistic approach to the anthropological study of education (1981). He and other scholars in this field have exposed the challenges faced by students from lower class and minority backgrounds, (Ogbu, 1982, 1986; Foley, 1990; Gibson, 1988, Willis, 1997). In his research

into children of immigrants studying in public schools in the US (1982), he emphasized how cross cultural studies have shown that immigrant families, including their children, use “adaptive strategies” in relation to schooling, including imitating the behaviour of elites, and collective action, and that the ethnographer should consider the linkages between sociocultural structures and school systems. “School ethnography...should show how education is linked with the economy, political system, local social structure, and the belief system of the people served by the schools” (Ogbu,1981, p.6). I take this advice a step further, by looking not only at the belief system of “the people served by school”, but also those who serve at school, such as teachers, principals and support staff, and how those two systems interact. Including these two groups in the research gave me a better understanding of the complex communication process between the school sphere and the home sphere, allowing for the kind of holistic study John Ogbu calls for.

Academic research on the education of children of immigrants has revealed that frequently immigrant parents misunderstand the education system of the host country (Li, 2000; Garcia-Gaytan, 1992; Leman, 1999; Bathi, 2002). Parents bring their own experience from their country of origin and most of the time use their own past experiences as an example of what to expect for their children's schooling. According to Bathi (2002), they often expect their children to achieve success at school as if they were in their own country, speaking their native language with a similar education system. They thus feel disappointed when their children do not meet their expectations.

Scholarship on education in relation to the children of immigrants has focused to a great degree on the outcomes of schooling (Foley, 1990; Lemon, 1991), indicators of student performance at school, such as marks, and if they pass or fail the school year. Some studies

show that there is a relationship between academic performance and financial status. Children from low income immigrant families achieve less at school than children from high income families (Foley, 1990; Leman, 1991); for example, in Belgium children of immigrants in working class neighborhoods were more than three times as likely to repeat a year in elementary school (Leman, 1991). Further, in a Canadian study of children of immigrants in Alberta (Hardwick, et al., 2004), poor outcomes in the early years of school were found to have negative repercussions for immigrant children later in life. They establish a pattern that is difficult to overcome later. The authors found that when children reach high school they have already given up trying to get good marks at school (Hardwick, et al., 2004).

Ghaffar-Kucher (2006) criticizes studies of the difficulties faced by children of migrants in US schools for following an assimilationist model. The studies, she says, accept the schools as they are without taking into account the position of immigrant children within them. Schools are considered, “the primary vehicle for 'assisting' immigrant students to assimilate” (2006, p. 3). Hence, they do not look for new ways to incorporate the knowledge and diversity that immigrant students bring. Scholars also argue that the official language of instruction devalues the child’s native language; students feel pressure to learn the host country language (Gaffar-Kucher, 2006; Li, 2003). For Canadian sociologist Peter Li, there is a nationalist strain to this process, as language instruction promotes linguistic integration (Li, 2003) and thus, potentially, national policies of integration. Peter Li insists that behind the integration discourse there is promotion of, “conformity as a desirable outcome for immigrants... despite the rhetorical commitment to diversity and multiculturalism” (Li, 2003, p. 321). In this thesis, I will discuss these arguments especially with respect to

parents and school staff points of view.

Communication is a key element in the anthropology of education of immigrants. Studies have highlighted the importance of communication between home and school for students' academic success (Goujeon, 1993; Ran, 2001; Salzbers, 1998; Guo and Mohan, 2008). Ogbu (1982) and Osborne (1996) point out that limited home-school communication is one of the reasons immigrant students fail in school. Dyson (2001) emphasizes the importance of parents' involvement in the education of children whose first language is not English, particularly in elementary school. She insists that "cultural and linguistic differences may prevent effective home-school communication, and hence hinder parental involvement in school activities" (2001, p. 456). More recent scholarship found that communication is key to the improvement of child outcomes at school and that also plays an important role within power relations in USA. For instance, Fan found that immigrant parents think that improving communication with teachers could have positive outcomes for their children's education. (Fan et al., 2012). While Guo and Mohan (2008; 2012) found in their study on meetings between ESL teachers and parents that, "parent participation was strongly limited by the structure of power marginalized parents faced within the school space" (Guo and Mohan, 2012, p. 136). For Guo and Mohan the cultural differences between groups creates "dissimilar interpretations and expectations about how to communicate competently" (2008, p. 19). The authors observed a meeting between ESL teachers and Chinese parents. The meeting followed a format and protocol developed by the teachers and school representatives. At the end of the meeting, teachers felt they had adequately communicated their subject matter, while parents felt that their concerns were not addressed. Parents were concerned about the "length of time" their children stay in ESL

classes because it delayed their incorporation into main classes and, as a consequence, their graduation time. The authors identified that, "ESL parent-teacher communication process was problematic and was not able to resolve their differences" (Guo and Mohan, 2008, p. 31). This is one of the few instances where power is discussed by researchers. This is an important gap in research that I address.

### **2.3 Intercultural Communication**

The anthropology of education literature that I have discussed above focuses on ethnic groups in their ethnic communities, but in this thesis I want to look at communication process and the place of power in the interrelations between schools and immigrant parents. To do this, first, I will turn to intercultural communication as a framework to help me understand the communication process between immigrant parents and school staff. This field is one of several types of communication studies that gained importance towards the end of the last century as attempts to make sense of how cultures, countries, and regions communicate with each other in the context of globalization. Subfields such as international development communication, cross-cultural communication, and intercultural communication started making contributions to the understanding of global change, as well as benefiting from the rise of globalized business. All of these fields attempt to analyze social problems and are often connected with questions of social change (Rogers and Hart, 2002). They are concerned with "clashes of values and belief systems" (Rogers and Hart, 2002, p.1) Some of the themes that these new subfields of communication focus on are "folk systems, technology options, flows of information and who generated them, discourse analysis, social movements and cultural identity" (Rogers and Harts, 2002, p. 9).

Intercultural communication studies differs from other types of communication studies in its focus on interpersonal communication rather than mass communication. In the *Handbook of International and Intercultural Communication* Rogers and Hart (2002) say that intercultural communication, "generally involves face to face communication between people from different national cultures" (p. 3). Samovar, Porter and McDaniel consider that intercultural communication occurs when members from two or more different cultures try to communicate with each other. For these authors, the process of communication, "is symbolic, contextual and has consequences because it involves interaction between people whose cultural perceptions and symbol systems are distinct enough to alter the communication event." (Samovar, Porter and McDaniel, 2007 p. 10). Misunderstandings about communication appear to happen in the elementary school context in Halifax where those misunderstandings are catalogued as intercultural miscommunication. A focus on the power relationship immigrant parents and teachers are involved in could highlight other dimensions of the situation. This thesis looks to cover the gap by incorporating power into the analysis.

### **2.3.1 Clearing the Field**

Recent intercultural communication scholars criticize much of the earlier work in the field for relying on a concept of "culture" that is ethnocentric (Young and Sercombe, 2010; Piller, 2011). Investigators, normally European or North American, tend to describe the subject culture from their own perspective. Ingrid Piller (2011), argues that too much emphasis is placed on the characteristics of different nationalities or different regions, as if they were synonymous with cultural group, when differences exist even among people from

the same nationality, and that many similarities may exist across national boundaries. For example, in Mexico people from the north are very different from the south, and among states within the country there are also many differences, but outside of Mexico, and when referring to Mexican people, it is common in public discourse and academic studies to make cultural referents to Mexico as if all Mexicans have the same cultural characteristics. Studying people from different places does not necessarily make a study “intercultural” (Piller, 2011). Universities, for example, offer courses in intercultural communication based on this meaning. Piller (2011) say that in England, intercultural courses are increasingly popular, advertized as giving students tools to cope with problems they could face while working in another country, i.e. a "foreign" environment. Here too, the term culture is used as a synonym for country or nationality. More recent studies propose that in the future research should move beyond a discussion of how cultures assimilate to consider how cultures interact within a host culture and/or maintain multiple identities. In this way, the question of whether an immigrant maintains different identities in order to fit into the new place and into different groups needs to be taken into account. More recently, Piller (2011) added more complexities to the use of the term culture. She builds on Benedict Anderson's statement, "whether culture is viewed as nation, as ethnicity, as faith, gender, or as sexuality, all these ‘cultures’ have one thing in common: they are *imagined communities*" (Anderson, 1991, p. 6). Anderson argued in his study of nationalism, that a nation, "is imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion" (1991, p. 6). Piller, pointed out that Anderson's term has been extended to different communities or culture groups such as ethnic, gender and religious groups,

meaning that members of these groups may see themselves as part of that particular group, with the image of having a characteristic in common.

## **2.4 Including Power: Hegemony and Common Discursive framework**

While a shift towards cultural relativism has freed intercultural communication studies from ethnocentrism, some critics argue it has still failed to take into account the dimension of power relationships among groups and social structures (Piller, 2007; Arguedas 1987), along with the mechanisms by which power is hidden or manifested (Arguedas, 1987). When they do not take power into account studies of intercultural communication become works of folklore, descriptive of differences without explaining the conflicts of interests between the groups. There is no consensus in the field about how to include an analysis of power. In the field of education, on the other hand, Bourdieu's concept of habitus is often used for this role.

### **2.4.1 Habitus**

Habitus as a concept was first developed by Bourdieu and Passeron (1977). It is the system through which individuals learn the correct values and behaviours acceptable to their social class and context. The system includes the subjective, related to how individuals learn, and the objective, related to the way they reproduce behaviour or act in a given context. These contexts include specific societies, groups, social classes and even schools and homes. The concept works alongside Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital, or the knowledge, skills, values that a person has in relation to his/her context and background.



Habitus has been used as a way to analyze how social inequalities are reproduced. Habitus and cultural capital, among others, also explain how power is reproduced. For example, the habitus and cultural capital of the dominant class, such as the mode of speech and the accent of the dominant class are reproduced in schools (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977). When someone from a lower class does not have the "accepted accent", or correct attitudes, they find themselves at a social disadvantage, which can translate into fewer possibilities for finding work, and less earning potential. In this way, the habitus and cultural capital of the hegemonic group are reproduced as if they are superior to the lower classes, which perpetuates inequalities. Since its beginnings, the concept has been closely linked with education. In fact, Bourdieu proposed it in the context of schools to explain how acceptable social values are reproduced through the classroom. In my methodology chapter, I will explain that the concept of habitus is similar but not equal to my concept of the school and home sphere. Habitus implies preconceived notions about social reproduction within a group, and even a certain homogeneity of the group. In my case, I am less interested in the constitution of the group itself than the communication between the two spheres. I will return to habitus when I have fully examined the two spheres in my analysis chapter. But as a starting point for my analysis, Roseberry's concept of common discursive framework is more useful.

#### **2.4.2 Hegemony**

Roseberry (1996) builds on Gramsci's concept of hegemony, but he interprets it differently from traditional Marxism. Hegemony is a theory of power that implies certain forms of domination (Bates, 1975), of one group over another or others. Marx was among

the first theorists to elaborate on hegemony, with a focus on the economic domination from a ruling class over subaltern classes. Gramsci moved beyond the material domain to state that in society people, "are not ruled by force alone, but also by ideas" (Bates, 1975, p. 351). Other authors, such as Bordieu (1977) and Heywood (1994) point out that elite hegemony is reproduced in institutions like universities, churches, government offices, and media, among others. Through established mechanisms, they produce consent and legitimacy over the subaltern. In this sense, hegemony can be exerted by coercion, persuasion, instruction and could imply a tacit acceptance of the imposed power. This gives rise to misinterpretations because hegemony has been understood for most scholars as if the subordinate class accepts their status without question. Roseberry (1996) corrects this by explaining that hegemony is not a static product of domination, but more an active process, or processes in which the subaltern expresses, in some way, not a complete consent to the domination but also dissent and contestation. Hegemony is:

... different ways in which the words, images, symbols, forms, organization, institutions and movements used by subordinate populations to talk about, understand, confront, accommodate themselves to, or resist their domination are shaped by the process of domination itself. *What hegemony constructs, then, is not a shared ideology, but a common material and meaningful framework* for living through, talking about and acting upon social orders characterized by domination (Roseberry, 1996, p. 361, emphasis added)

For Roseberry, Gramsci considers hegemony as part of complex situations and practices that happen during power relations between many different competing groups that occur in different fields.

For this study I consider that during their social interactions school staff and immigrant parents use a common material and meaningful framework that William Roseberry defines as "common discursive framework"(1996).

### **2.4.3 Common Discursive Framework**

The common discursive framework as a concept is used to explain how subordinate groups negotiate with and express dissent to ruling groups without openly challenging the legitimacy of the dominant group. Roseberry considers that the "common material and meaningful framework is, in part, discursive: a common language or way of talking about social relationships that sets out the central terms around which and in terms of which contestation and struggle can occur" (Roseberry, 1994, p. 361). It is more than language; it can include forms and means of communication which define relations of power in a society and regulate communication between the dominant and subordinate groups, everything from the regulation of strikes, media laws and protests to bureaucratic processes, official documents and formats, events, monuments, rituals. It is established by the group in power for its own ends and in order to maintain its position, but the subordinate groups can use a common discursive framework to express discontent or to make their claims heard. By using these mechanisms, they recognize the legitimacy of the group in power, without necessarily accepting the power exercised over them.

The term "discursive", in the concept of common discursive framework is understood not as simply orality or "just talk". It includes all the practices that express ideas, including body language or written language, vocabulary, jargon, and terminology. For example, DuBois cites the case of North American indigenous people who have to use the

language of private property, in order to make a claim about their territories, or when "communicating" with the government and the mainly white population (DuBois, personal communication, June 2017). "In order to be able to contest, to struggle, they have to put things in a language that can be heard" (DuBois, personal communication, June, 2017) and more or less understood by the hegemonic groups. Hegemony and common discursive framework can be used to understand "struggle, not to understand consent" (Roseberry, 1996, p. 80).

Common discursive frameworks are "historically quite rare" (Roseberry, 1996, p. 82). Sometimes, Roseberry explains, hegemonic and/or subaltern groups dissolve the common discursive framework, at the linguistic or at the material level. At the linguistic level, the hegemonic process may break down as when subaltern groups find solutions among themselves, instead of making claims to the elite group. A common discursive framework can also be dissolved at a material level. When the centralization of the state stops working, it stops being effective and its regulations and routines lose their meaning, and are no longer recognized as a common discursive framework anymore (Roseberry, 1996, p. 82). But as we will see in the case of immigrant parents and teachers a common discursive framework does not even form, despite the absence of political forces.

#### **2.4.4 Importance of Common Discursive Framework for Communication**

##### **Analysis**

Roseberry's particular understanding of hegemony as process or processes, helps us analyze group social relations in the formation of power relationships. Identifying the common discursive framework and struggles are helpful when we want to understand

situations of inequality. In this research, I seek to identify the struggles in hegemonic relationships at schools in order to analyze how immigrant parents and teachers use a common discursive framework in Halifax to communicate with each other about the education of children. Given that immigrant parents come from different cultures and are in the process of adapting to the Nova Scotian education system, I believe the power relationship between school and home spheres help us understand the situation that immigrant parents face while trying to settle and integrate into the society in Halifax. For example, how do schools use certain specific ways of talking and interpreting the success or failure of children of immigrant students? These frameworks use particular concepts and categories which shape how teachers deal with students and parents. Immigrant parents, coming from different ethnicities, also have concepts and categories in common that are framed during the communication process with school staff. Roseberry's perspective is helpful in thinking about communication between home and school spheres in this study for the following reasons:

- 1) It allows one to identify how power is exercised and point out where there is miscommunication, precisely because the voice of the migrants is not considered in the hierarchy.
- 2) It helps to situate, not only the points of conflict where parents and teachers are not communicating, which go beyond simple intercultural misunderstandings. Moreover, it also helps to underline that teachers are also subjects of the hegemony and framework of outcomes that are part of the educational structure that regulate their teaching and their communication with parents.

3) It demonstrates that the breakdown of understanding between parents and teachers is not only a communication problem, it is a question of how power is exercised by the school sphere, which in the end is also a reflection of government institutions and their relationship with migrant groups in this province.

The kind of issues this study identifies, and describes in the next chapters, are not new but they are not addressed in current educational policies, in part because they are challenging. It is important to conduct more qualitative research, including participant observation and ethnography, in order to unravel the meanings and practices of education, They may be micro processes, observable in small-scale interactions, but they have large-scale consequences. In Halifax, for example, the issues I highlight may help explain why so many immigrants leave the city. Yoshida and Ramos (2015) analyzed trends regarding interprovincial migration in Canada from the Longitudinal Survey of Immigrants to Canada, of a 2006 cohort. Their analysis shows that Atlantic provinces are challenged with a 29 percent "high rate of out-migration" (p. 46). They found a pattern showing that migrants in the Atlantic region "move within six months to two years after arrival" (p. 46). Furthermore, other studies in this field also suggest that education is a factor that contribute to out-migration, as migrants care about it and look "to place their children in what they consider to be better schools" (Tastsoglou, Dobrowolsky and Cottrell, 2015, p. 26). I add my voice to these scholars who point out the importance of understanding reasons for out-migration or the integration of migrants into the Atlantic provinces. It is also important to understand the consequences of miscommunication between immigrant parents and school staff, in order to build another kind of relationship with immigrant families.

## CHAPTER 3

### METHODS AND METHODOLOGY

In order to study the communication between parents and teachers, I conceptualized it taking place between two separate spheres, which I call the “home sphere” and the “school sphere”. The “home sphere” is characterized by cultural capital like knowledge, expectations and experiences of parents derived from their own lives in their native countries and their experiences as immigrants to Canada. The “school sphere” is characterized by the cultural knowledge that teachers, principals and school staff share, the official policies of the school board, education department and teachers' union and the official norms established by them as well as the unofficial practices that I found. The school sphere includes school workers' expectations of and experiences with immigrant parents. Although all schools in Halifax share the same guidance from the Halifax Regional School Board, every school has different resources with which to teach students.

However, in this thesis, I was looking for a way to analyze the communication between school staff and immigrant parents rather than the practices and values within each group. Habitus may be a useful concept for understanding how and why each group communicates as it does, but it would require me to assume there was a cultural homogeneity within each group and without focusing *a priori* on inequalities between them. While the school system creates a culture for all its members, parents come from many different places with many different experiences and I do not want to assume any kind of shared habitus among them. Although I assumed there must be many sources of inequality between parents and the school system, I did not want to make any assumptions about how

these arise. I wanted to approach the communication between the two with an open mind, to fish out clues of how both groups live the inequality and express it in their own particular way. In this sense, my use of the two "spheres" is not a theoretical model, but a methodological approach, a way of separating each group and analyzing them separately. At the same time, I was open to the possibility of encountering evidence of habitus and cultural capital within the schools, even if these were not the focal point of my analysis. I make reference to these findings in Chapter 6.

Communication between these two spheres occurs through a variety of mechanisms, sometimes directly, through face to face conversations, parent teacher interviews or other meetings, sometimes indirectly through the child, or through a variety of common message systems such as emails, phone calls, worksheets, newsletters. Most of these methods are tangible, familiar and seemingly intelligible to everyone. They are communicated in English, which both sides tacitly accept as the language of communication, and they share a common concern for the welfare of the child. However, they are shaped by the codes, belief systems, experiences and expectations of each sphere that are not always understood in the same way by both parties. Presumably each sphere influences the child, aiming to shape him or her in particular ways. Sometimes misunderstandings occur which are not obvious to those in the other sphere.

In order to study these spheres, I needed a methodology that would allow me to dig deeply into their experiences. Participant observation and ethnography are the most common techniques in the anthropology of education. Unfortunately, participant observation is challenging in Halifax schools due to difficult permission requirements from the school



board. For this reason, I used in-depth one-on-one interviews instead. To triangulate my data, I reviewed documents and public information from HRSB. I used only public information for my research. It was difficult to gather information beyond what is on the website. I wrote to the EAL consultant to ask whether I could find public information relative to the population size they were working with and instead of receiving an answer, I received an email from the HRSB department of research, asking me to fill in some forms for doing research. "Anyone interested in conducting research involving HRSB schools, staff, students or parents is required to fill out an Application for Approval of Research" read the email. I had been told beforehand by other researchers about the difficulty of getting research approval with HRSB, but what really surprised me in this email was that, even to talk to parents off school premises and outside school hours, I was still requested to fill out a complete application. Taking into consideration the tight control that HRSB has over education, I am not surprised that teachers did not want to talk to me, as I relate below. Many were probably afraid of saying something wrong, about that institutional power they work for, with the possible consequence of losing their job.

I conducted this research in the west part of Halifax. I interviewed eighteen parents with children studying in elementary schools in the district or whose children studied there in the past. The information in the interviews was related to their experience with elementary schools, although sometimes other schools were mentioned. To avoid identification I do not give details about schools and school staff that can be identified. As part of the school sphere I interviewed six teachers and other school staff that have experience working with children of immigrants. They relate to seven schools in the west part of the city.

Unlike other anthropological studies on the intersections between education and migration, particularly those in Canada, which focus on the education of particular ethnic groups (Li 2006; Bernhard, Freire and Pacini-Ketchabaw 2000; Dyson 2001), I chose to study immigrants from diverse ethnic backgrounds. Halifax is a small city, and members of ethnic groups are relatively few. Parents of elementary school children have not developed the same kind of self-awareness or political power as in other provinces (Li, 2006), nor do they receive any kind of special attention from Halifax Regional School Board either, as did the subjects of Li's work in Vancouver, where there was a large community of Chinese immigrants. Halifax immigrants often form much more ethnically diverse groups of friends. Despite this diversity of ethnic background, I decided to treat immigrants as a group, for two reasons. First, I was interested to learn to what extent the experience of being an immigrant itself affected parents' approach to education. Second, being an immigrant can be like being part of a group. Indeed, according to the participants in this study many immigrants find they have more in common with other immigrants and find it is easier to communicate with other immigrants regardless of nationality than with other Canadians. After all, Comaroff (1996) has argued that ethnicity is culturally produced in context. In that sense, immigrants of different countries and cultural backgrounds identify themselves as different or opposite to the main Canadian population, in a sense forming something like an immigrant group, without becoming an organization, but sharing a disperse understanding of "living here, coming from there".

In my interviews, I asked some open-ended questions about education and their experiences in the Halifax school system, and allowed participants to freely make observations at will. I created an interview guide to ensure consistent coverage of three

specific policies of the school board: 1) English as an Additional Language instruction (EAL, also known as ESL); 2) The Nova Scotia Learning Outcomes Framework; and 3) Homework. I discussed these policies in detail in Chapter 1. These are three areas where the Nova Scotia education department or the Halifax school board have defined policies which have been the subject of much debate in the province. Parents in general, and immigrant parents in particular, are often deeply concerned about these topics. I thought they would incite much conversation between parents and teachers. My questions identified the narratives that parents and teachers use to communicate, and the types of resources they use to overcome language barriers, such as body language and technology. In relation to curriculum outcomes, I asked how parents understand and interpret the provincial Learning Outcomes Framework; do parents understand the stipulations and goals of the document in the same way that the teachers do? Do they share the same language when talking about outcomes? As a parent concerned with knowing what my child has learnt during the day, I imagined that other parents would be keen to discuss this with teachers. I included homework thinking that homework can serve as a powerful window for parents onto the classroom so I asked questions related to how parents and teachers communicate about homework? How do they describe homework in the abstract and in the particular case of their children/students? What kind of homework do parents and teachers expect and what do they consider is appropriate? What do they think is the purpose of homework and how do they express this to the other sphere?

### **3.1 Methods: Qualitative interviews**

The primary method I used for this research is qualitative interviews. My plan was to

do twenty qualitative interviews: ten interviews with parents (home sphere) and ten interviews with school staff (school sphere) but I only found five people working in the school system willing to talk about their experience with immigrant parents. On the other hand, I found more immigrant parents willing to do an interview, eighteen in total. As part of school sphere I interviewed one teacher, one retired principal, and three school staff who work at the schools, but who were employed by the YMCA. Immigrant parents I spoke to had children attending schools in the same area represented the home sphere.

The interviewee parents of the home sphere do not form a homogeneous group. They consist of immigrants from eleven different national backgrounds. Their different nationalities and religions influence some expectations of education that parents have for their children. The school sphere is also not homogeneous: teacher interviews exhibited differences not only in how they approach their work with immigrant parents but also about the years of experience they have encountered and their personal backgrounds.

### **3.2 Methods of Recruitment**

The quantity of interviews proposed was never intended to be representative of the school or immigrant population; it was intended to take in as broad a diversity of opinion as possible, while it allowed me to investigate the communication and education theme in depth. For this reason the combination of purposive selection and snowball were the methods that were best suited to recruiting participants. According to Maxwell: “The purpose here is to ensure that the conclusions adequately represent the entire *range* of variation, rather than only the typical members or some 'average' subset of this range” (Maxwell, 2013 p. 98). In the case of teachers, purposeful selection allowed me to target my

investigation towards different aspects of communication in the school. These included professional experience and technical or academic information that teachers, principals and other school staff are concerned with. For example, some teachers cast light on administrative concerns, while others had more to say about the teachers' concern for curriculum outcomes. In the case of parents, I was looking for a diversity of characteristics that could enrich my sample such as age, years in Canada, country of origin and education.

For the snowball method, I started with a broad contact list for initial recruitment. These contacts were generated through my own relationships as an immigrant mother trying to settle in Halifax. I met immigrant parents from English classes or while playing at parks with my children; it is common to talk with other immigrants about country of origin, reasons for coming, how they are adapting to the city and so on. So the snowball method was relatively easy. I first contacted each person on my list who was a parent of students from primary to grade 6. After friendly greetings, I explained my research as a Masters Student of Social Anthropology at Dalhousie University and my interest in the communication between school life and home life as important aspects in the education of immigrant children. Then I invited them to participate in the interviews; if they agreed then we made an appointment. Most of the interviews took place in coffee shops. At the end of the interview I asked each participant to recommend or suggest people they knew who have a similar experience. In this way the study population grew. Some interviewees were so enthusiastic about my project, they offered to put me in contact with friends even before I requested it. The use of purposeful selection allowed me to select some parents over others; for example, when I had enough contacts from one school I decided not to contact more, and instead look for parents whose children attended school in a different area. My objective

was to investigate the communication process between a diversity of schools rather than concentrate on one or two schools.

In the case of the school sphere, I faced many difficulties when I tried to follow the same method of recruitment. Firstly, when I interviewed a teacher or a school worker and I tried to use the snowball method, I had to give up. Interviewees did not want to put me in contact with a colleague, because this would have revealed their participation in the research, which they wished to keep secret. Then I asked some friends and colleagues to put me in contact with teachers that they knew and this worked well. I contacted some teachers who at first agreed to do the interview but at the last moment cancelled. When they cancelled, most asked me to arrange the interview through the Halifax School Board, even though they had initially accepted. One participant declined to continue with the research of fear that the interview could affect his career. Some teachers and principals told me that I would need to go through the HRSB's own ethic review first, even though my research was not related directly to students or to teaching but to communication with parents, and that I had already undergone an ethics review by Dalhousie. The process would have been too costly and time consuming for me.

### **3.3 Recording the Interviews**

Prior to the interviews, I asked permission from the participants to record them. The interviews were held individually. From school sphere, I interviewed six school professionals. From the home sphere I interviewed eighteen parents, four fathers and fourteen mothers. The parents were all from different households except for one, where I did interview the mother and father from the same household, although I interviewed them

separately. Each interview was conducted in sessions of between 20 and 90 minutes long, depending on their time available. The sessions were open-ended using the interview guides (See Appendices A and B).

I did not have any problems with recording the parents as most of the participants approved and told me they were not uncomfortable with the recorder. But, I noticed a different attitude or response toward the instrument I used to record the interview. My first interviews were made using a large, broadcast quality recorder. Some interviewees commented about it and were always conscious about the recording, which might have influenced what they said, or their predisposition to the interview. Later, I began using my cell phone and I noticed that people felt more comfortable with the cellphone, and the interview was more casual, probably because cellphones are more common.

In the case of school sphere one teacher appeared uncomfortable with the recording, but was also the same person who told me that first they would have to ask the principal of the school for permission to use the interview. I was told they would contact me later but they never did, my follow-up calls went unanswered. The other four participants of the school sphere in the research agreed to be recorded. I used the same recorder with them. During the interviews they did not reveal concern about the recorder.

### **3.3.1 Language of the Interviews**

It is well documented that when communicating using a different language than your mother tongue, some complications could arise in the process of communication, perhaps misunderstandings or problems of interpretation (Gudykunst and Mudy, 2002). The situation could be even more complicated in this study, because both myself, the

interviewer, and the interviewees were still learning to communicate in English. We were all using a language that we had not mastered. Although I have conducted many interviews in Spanish, and know how to engage interviewees, I was still nervous at first. So were my interviewees, at least at the beginning of the interviews. The protocols at the beginning, explaining my research goals, going through the ethics form and signing it, did not help at all. In some of the recordings of my interviewees, especially the first few interviews, I can hear my voice and that of the interviewee trembling. But after a while we began feeling more confident. We forgot about the formalities and started laughing and double checking that we were understanding each other without feeling awkward. In fact, interviewing in a second language has many benefits. Once you overcome the nervousness then you can communicate better, you double check that you are understanding, you do not get over confident about the meaning of the interviewee's statements. Also I have learned not to depend so much on the spoken language, we have five senses and we rely mostly on the spoken language. So this time I learned to use other senses, body language, eye contact, and I also let my intuition guide me. I believe that thanks to pauses, second thoughts, second and third questions and trying to make sure that I am not misunderstanding what the interviewee was telling me, and making sure that the interviewee was feeling something similar to me, helped me to overcome language barriers. In fact, I had more difficulty communicating with native English speakers for this study, who would sometimes assume I had understood everything they said, and speak faster than I could process their words.

### **3.4 Ethical Considerations**

When I first met with each interviewee, I followed the University Research's



protocol for ethics consent. I gave them the printed letter of consent. After reading the letter, I also explained to the participants about their rights, just to make sure that they knew the implications of their participation. I explained that they would not have to answer questions if they felt uncomfortable, that it was their choice to limit their answers, and/or withdraw from the project if they wanted to. I explained that all the information that the participants provided would be anonymous and that their participation would remain confidential (only I know who has participated). While all this information is in the consent form I had given to the participants to read, I went through this form with the participants to ensure that they understood the document.

Immigrant parents whose native language is not English did not show discomfort with the form. I believed they are more used to doing new things and at the same time they are trying to adapt to their new life. What I mean is that I did not have issues related to the consent form with them, although some participants gave me only oral consent. I expected that interviewees who were new to the country, or who were still learning English would request to be recorded with a pseudonym. But in fact, it was native Canadians, members of school staff who were most uncomfortable with the process, and did not feel comfortable signing an ethics form.

### **3.4.1 Why The Ethics Form?**

This question has been debated for years, not least in the field of anthropology. Some have argued that the research ethics policies that most universities follow in Canada are not necessary (Gotlib, 2005), and that it is more a strategy that universities implement to protect themselves legally rather than strictly protect the rights of research participants (Sylvain,

2005). Dalhousie University's web site states:

The Dalhousie University Policy on the Ethical Conduct of Research Involving Humans is intended to ensure that all human participant research conducted by university faculty, students and staff, or conducted under the auspices of the university is carried out according to the relevant ethical and legal standards.

That means that a Research Ethics Board has to “approve” the ethical procedures underlying your research project. Sometimes this process of approval is easy, sometimes it is more difficult. In my case, however, I felt that obtaining informed consent as detailed by the Ethics Review Board procedures at Dalhousie was a deep hindrance to my research. It made it more difficult for me to obtain a balanced number of participants by intimidating government employees already fearful for their jobs. In the case of school sphere, one of my informants told me, “A lot of the teachers and principals are afraid of the school board, they are afraid to say something that the school board doesn't approve of. They don't understand that if you don't say it, people won't understand you.”

### **3.4.2 Doing Fieldwork at Home**

Doing fieldwork in the neighbourhoods near where I myself have settled with my family has implications that I had not experienced before. Working on fieldwork at “home” with people that I already know made this stage sometimes more difficult and sometimes easier than I have experienced in my past fieldwork.

Against my expectations, living in the same city as interviewees actually made it more difficult to arrange meetings at a convenient time; people were busy working or busy with their children's schedule and I sometimes had to wait months before getting an answer,

positive or negative, about participation; also cancellations at the last minute were common. I found that when you do fieldwork in another place where you live and you explain that you only have a short amount of time to be at that place, participants make a space for you faster than when you are always there. At least this was my own experience. One of the difficulties in this case is to balance the energy and time you put into the invitation, so I learned to be patient and not write or call frequently because I was worried about being pushy or that so many calls or emails could be confused with harassment.

An important aspect to consider is the relationship between researcher and possible participants. I started the snowball method with possible participants that I had met before even starting my master's degree studies. Some participants were my friends, others were friends of friends or people who were still in contact since we first met. Talking with some of them I found that some participants were worried about the interview, they were worried if their answers were right, if they could say something inappropriate. A few of them even asked me to send the interview questions in advance so they could prepare the right answer. Of course, I explained that there is no right answer because it is a question of their own experiences and not about their knowledge, so as the interview progressed they were relaxing while understanding that there were no good or bad answers. When I explained about the anonymity of their participation, some of them talked more freely.

Methodologically, it was challenging being an immigrant mother doing research with educators. I wonder if teachers felt able to express themselves freely to me as a researcher when talking about other immigrants. With parents it was easy to build rapport as fellow immigrants, after all we share the experience of being "the others". While with school staff, I was an immigrant asking questions and that could be uncomfortable for them, in the sense

that they would be more careful in what they have to say and how to say it to not offend me, a sad reality of the implied values that appear during research, after all we were immersed in a social relationship too.

One aspect that was confusing for me was situating myself during fieldwork. Because of my own experience as an immigrant, I had to remind myself that I was not a participant so I really focused during the interviews on not influencing the participants with my own experience. But also, I found that because my experience as an immigrant was related to the experience that participants shared, it was a form of affinity, probably because both of us were immigrants that tied us together during and after the interviews. I wonder how it would be interviewing Canadian parents.

### **3.5 Triangulation of Information: Analysis of Documents and Texts**

In addition to analyzing the interview data, I used other sources of data like bibliographic research. I reviewed and analyzed publicly available documents of the Halifax School Board about the education system especially those about outcomes, such as policy statements, and descriptions of the outcomes framework. I included too, reviews of newspapers and teachers' theses about education in Halifax. This information was analyzed in comparison with the information from the interviews. For example, I focused on whether and how parents understand the HRSB curriculum outcomes and, and the review about homework that was underway.

### **3.6 Self/identification**

When I identified myself with the immigrant parent sphere as an immigrant, it was

understood that I was also a mother and a person who has experiences with the Halifax school system as well, but this was not discussed. In the majority of cases these aspects of identity opened the doors of the interviewees' houses, or to their time at a coffee shop, but it was not always like that. In the case of Susana she accepted to do the interview, gave me a slice of cake from her husband's birthday but was not open about her feelings and experiences. Most of her statements were really closed ended, and I could not trespass beyond that wall even when we went swimming at the lake, at her invitation. In another case, a friend invited Megan for a coffee at her home, while I was there, and I invited her to participate. Megan's reason for refusing was that she had not encountered any racism and that "everybody treated her and her family nicely". Megan was thinking that I was only looking for negative cases and although I explained what my research was about, she did not change her mind. This experience made me wonder how anthropology is stereotyped in the public view.

There were other cases where being an immigrant, I believe, opened the way to an atmosphere of trust among participants, although being an outsider at the same time. This case was reinforced by the anonymity of their participation. For example, after Zoe asked me twice about her anonymity and after I promised that nobody would know what she said, she opened up about what she felt, especially about the derogatory "special treatment" that first year parents received from the principal of her son's school. When Zoe decided to participate, she also invited a friend of hers, who has more time living in Halifax, to participate too and do the interview together. At some point she received help from her friend to explain in English what she first explained in her own first language.

## CHAPTER 4      SCHOOL STAFF: COMMUNICATION EXPERIENCES

The Halifax school board recognizes the importance of parent-teacher communication. Every school is required by the board to develop a “School Plan for Communicating Student Learning” which “outlin[es] multiple strategies and procedures to ensure effective communication and meaningful engagement of the broader community”(HRSB. C.007-student-assessment.pdf). Each teacher should also develop their own plan. The policy does not state what those strategies should be but all schools offer various official channels such as emails, telephone calls, agendas, newsletters for communicating with parents. Some of these channels only permit communication in one direction. Others, such as parent-teacher interviews could be considered as two-way communication. Parents must follow particular protocols for using them. Education workers sometimes develop their own channels and techniques of communication to supplement them. In addition, the YMCA supplies settlement workers in 33 schools throughout Halifax, where need is highest, these workers act as a bridge facilitating information among school staff and immigrant parents.

In the previous chapter, I explained the difficulties I had with finding teachers willing to participate in this research. My interviewees consisted of one recently retired principal, two elementary school teachers and three settlement workers. Among them, five were raised in this province and they are working in six different schools in the west part of Halifax city. Only one participant (a settlement worker) is an immigrant. This person speaks 4 different languages, while the others are monolingual in English. All of them have years of experience with many years working in the school system. Participants’ names are changed

to avoid personal identification and following ethics requirement of anonymity.

All interviewees demonstrated that they take the responsibility of working with immigrant students and their parents very seriously. They shared many examples of their ingenuity and passion in helping immigrant students. In the case of the settlement workers this is their specific job, but they all, including teachers, thought deeply about the dilemmas and difficulties of working with immigrants, and expressed empathy for them. “The kids are so brave at this age level,” said a teacher. “Even when they don’t totally understand what I’m saying they still put up their hands.” She tries to be involved in making sure all her students advance in their learning, keeping an eye out for them and encouraging participation from those who are just learning English. She relates one case:

...[W]e were talking about [animal] migration... and [a] student said “some animals eat a lot of food” and I said yeah... that is not really about migration but I still wrote it down... I want him to feel valued, but then we watched a video about migration and it said that a lot of animals eat a lot of food to prepare for a long trip, so I had to tell him “I’m so sorry,” let’s get that up [on the board], that I made a mistake, that is not just preparing for winter, it is preparing for migration<sup>4</sup>.

Teachers do not receive any training in working with children of immigrants, and they must rely on their own creativity. One educator has learned some special strategies through years teaching and adapts them in her classroom; using visual aids like pictures or drawing stick figures, explaining step by step while constructing the

4 In order to protect informant identities, in some cases I do not name them.

meaning or concept, pairing a stronger student with somebody weaker, teaching keywords ahead of a new lesson and using a lot of computer programs to learn vocabulary.

Mr. Baker, the principal, emphasized building trust and the “comfort level” of children at his school. When a young girl from a Palestinian refugee camp arrived at his school, she spent weeks crying. One day, when he had an extra substitute, he sent the substitute to take over the class, while the child’s regular teacher took the girl alone to the gym:

They were able to get into the gym, they played, for maybe an hour and after that the trust with that little girl was with the teacher because of the one-on-one time and she did not cry again, and then her learning started.... all she needed was a comfort level with her teacher. (Mr. Baker)

Mr. Baker also waited at the school door for the arrival of the child's mother each day. From his experience over the years he had learnt to work at gaining parents’ confidence “Parents felt they were welcomed,” he said, “they felt we, as a school were able to help them....And it takes time to do that. We built that up over years.”

The school staff I spoke to expressed sensitivity to cultural differences and made big efforts to respect parents. But intercultural misunderstandings in school are difficult to avoid. Sometimes school policies are at the root of those misunderstandings.

I worry about insulting people... you know, we have several allergies in our class, and in parent teacher or curriculum night I have to ask everyone to wash their hands before coming to class and I still hadn't met the parents, they came



in and I said, please wash your hands and they spoke in different language and they went to wash their hands and then they left and, I thought, did I insult them in some way?'... I don't want to insult someone, and again just not knowing the difference between the cultures and the school system. (Ms. Smith)

Ms. Smith said subsequent attempts to communicate with the parents by telephone and email went unanswered, and she never spoke to them again. "I don't know what to do. I can't go to their house," she said.

Settlement workers, in particular, are on the watch for cultural differences that might cause friction. Lunches can be particularly problematic when children bring food from their native country, said Ms. Johnson, a school settlement worker from the YMCA designated to work on two schools in low income neighbourhoods.

There's a stigma around it unfortunately. Sometimes kids will tease other kids who have food that is different, or smells different, or looks different, so, we just want to make parents aware that it's an issue and that, you know, we will work together for those types of things. (Ms. Johnson)

And as a school settlement worker, she has to deal with concerns that are not even related to school, such as the culture shock faced by immigrants moving to lower income neighborhoods and the social situations associated with that.

I've had many times, you know, that I can recall where the parents have been upset or concerned, because their kids are being exposed to certain types of activity that they don't want them to be, and there's, you know, sometimes bullying, and there's, domestic violence,... That's a little shocking for people,

new people to this area because, you know, they are, let's face it, there are drugs, there are, you know, criminal activities, and I hate to paint that with a brush and say that everybody, it's not all like that, but, there are more incidents of those types of behaviours, or, you know, in, in the public housing, (Ms. Johnson)

It was interesting to note the stilted language she used to refer to social problems related to lower socioeconomic neighbourhoods here in Halifax. It contrasted with the freeness with which my interviewees discussed social problems and violence faced by the immigrants students in their places of origin. This situation mirrored the issue that poverty and social problems associated with poverty such as drugs, domestic violence, underemployment in the city, are not talked of openly and something Nova Scotians do not want to see. When referred to, it is associated with shame and individual failure. It is like a hidden racism that reinforces western privilege. Hidden because most middle class people do not want to see it, do not want to talk about it and only welfare institutions deal with it.

## **4.1 Channels of Communication**

### **4.1.1 Phone Calls**

Phone calls between parents and teachers are rare. Teachers are only available to take calls during lunch or recess when children are on break, when many parents are working. Phone calls from the school to parents are usually one-way, such as recorded announcements about popcorn sales or other school activities. Elementary public schools offer what is also known as the Safe Arrival program, where school secretaries call home if a child has not been registered as present by a teacher. This program is not always reliable,

unfortunately, and my interviewees told me of cases where the school erroneously reported a child missing from school. It turned out that the child was safely at school, but the “shaky body” and “scary moment” do not go away easily, explained Alice. This also happened to my family. To help improve communication with parents, Mr. Parker, a settlement worker, gives out his cell phone number and checks messages before 10pm every night in case parents need something. As a YMCA employee he is able to do this. Teachers are not permitted.

#### **4.1.2 Journal**

Elementary school children carry coil-bound agendas back and forth between home and school each day. When teachers want to send a message to a parent, they can write a short note in the student's journal. It is a parent's duty to check the journal every day and to sign it to demonstrate to the teacher that the message has been received. Parents can also write back to the teacher in the journal. However it becomes more a kind of homework for parents than real communication. Often, the messages are intended for all students and not particular to any child, sent as a printed note inside the journal. These are usually reminders about activities.

#### **4.1.3 Email**

For many teachers, email has become the preferred means of communication, but several of my interview subjects said it is not adequate for immigrant parents who are still learning English. A school staff, Ms. Johnson, explain:

I know that teachers use email a lot now with parents... but really sensitive teachers, who understand, will not. They'll give a phone call or they'll often come to me and say I need you to help me, you know, especially with something that is complicated in any way, that's when I will get a teacher that says: would you mind giving the parent a call, and this is what I want them to know, or could you set up a meeting?, that's the ideal scenario, that's what we hope teachers will do, is kind of use our presence as a support.

By calling this an "ideal scenario" Ms. Johnson suggests that teachers frequently *do not* use her services as an intermediary, although I was not able to interview enough teachers to confirm this.

#### **4.1.4 Meeting on the school grounds**

Teachers, too, emphasize the importance of face to face meetings, especially in the first years of school when it is common for parents to pick up their kids after school. At Ms. Smith's school, parents are required to make an appointment through the secretary to meet with a teacher. However,

I like to take the kids out after school. And sometimes, if I just hang around for a bit, parents that have concerns, we sneak over, and then we can come in and have a little conference. So I like to go out and make myself seen and then if somebody has something to talk about or talk is easier I think, especially if is a different language if we talk one on one" (Ms. Smith),

Ms. Johnson recognizes that body language can be almost as important as words in communicating with a parent. But she admits, even she can have difficulties "Sometimes I don't understand what they are saying, even when they have some English and it is written. Sometimes I'm not sure what they are asking me", said Ms. Johnson.

There is no funding for translation services at schools. With the help of the YMCA settlement program, schools are sometimes able to provide translators, but there are no funds to make frequent use of these. Children or colleagues can be pressed into service as translators, or parents will be asked to bring friends or people that they trust. However, according to Mr. Parker, they are often reluctant to draw on members of their own language community because they do not want to reveal personal matters to people they know. Lack of translation services seems to be a reason why parents often miss crucial meetings.

#### **4.1.5 Curriculum Night**

Curriculum night is an event at the beginning of the year, when parents are invited to meet their child's teacher. The objective of this meeting is for parents to know what their child is going to learn during the current school year. It is difficult for teachers to explain in one meeting what the whole course is about, so most parents just get an overall idea of what the learning will be for that year and some of the expected learning in the main subject areas, such as English, math, science and social studies.

For Mr. Baker it was a constant concern that few immigrant parents attended these meetings. "Many parents don't come, partly because they don't know about it", he speculates. "All of our communication was in English, so we would send home a newsletter and it would say we are having a meeting on Tuesday at 7 o'clock, and they wouldn't have a

clue what it said, so they wouldn't be at the meeting". With the help of YMCA settlement workers and volunteer translators, Mr. Baker and his staff organized curriculum nights with translators of various languages present. This was a major undertaking. A settlement worker used her network of parents to send out invitations and recruit translators. She even went around to homes to let parents know about the meeting.

If I was just doing it just in English it would have taken 10 minutes, but with the translators of all the different languages, and the first meetings I just, blew my mind because I had to talk very slowly, then I had to wait until all of the translators finished, but those meetings were very effective because then the parents would ask a question to the translator and the translators would then in turn ask the question to myself or the teachers so they, then, were able to get information.

This was an extraordinary measure that teachers cannot ordinarily undertake because the school board offers no funds for translators. The multilingual meetings were eventually cancelled because volunteer translators were not always available.

#### **4.1.6 Parent-teacher Interview**

The most in-depth official communication channel is the parent-teacher interview. Twice a year, at the end of fall and spring, parents are invited to have a meeting with their child's teacher. Meetings are scheduled for ten minutes each and parents can choose between attending during the early afternoon or during the evening, just when parents finish their work day. During those 10 minutes teachers show some of the work that the child is

doing, folders with examples of their writing, reading or math. At a particular school, unusually, many parents who are still learning English did show up. “They are so brave,” the teacher admired, “I think if I go to your country and I have to go to the school I won’t show up. But they come in and are prepared and tell me what their worries are.” Her school is in a higher socioeconomic area where immigrant parents tend to be better educated and arrive already speaking more English.

Ms. Green, a teacher from a different school, explained that some immigrant parents came with their questions already written. She especially remembered the mother of one of her students. The mother came alone. She could not speak English. When the teacher started explaining about the work the child was doing, as she does with every parent, she felt like the mother was not satisfied. “She didn’t have the words, but she was saying it clearly with her eyes.” She put aside her standard presentation and instead told the mother about the girl’s troubles with math, and showed her some of the girl’s work papers. “The look in the mother’s eyes changed.” This is an example of how communication occurs outside of spoken language but it really depends on the particular teacher’s sensibility. Some participants expressed the thought that the school board should provide training for dealing with immigrant parents in these circumstances, instead of leaving teachers to work it out for themselves.

#### **4.1.7 Report Card and Curriculum Outcomes**

Three times a year, schools send home a report card to parents, grading their children’s performance. Each subject is given a letter grade and a verbal description of the child’s performance. The report cards also include a small blank space where parents and/or

students can write a response related to the child's achievement. When my children first started at school, I used to write a response, and so did my children, but after a few years we stopped because we never saw that this resulted in a conversation with teachers. It felt more like a bureaucratic form than genuine communication.

The report card is based on the child's achievement of official provincial education department curriculum outcomes (see below) and the verbal description consists of phrases taken directly from the outcomes document and compiled by computer. Examples, taken from my own children's report cards, include:

“[Your child] demonstrates achievement with thorough understanding and application of concepts and skills in relation to expected outcomes covered in this term in reading and listening.”

“[He] can use math manipulatives and everyday materials to help solve simple number problems”.

“[He] can independently connect the importance of children needing a certain amount of vigorous activity and moderate exercise each day for optimal growth and development.”

For Ms. Smith explaining this somewhat technical language can be difficult:

I don't think that is only immigrant parents that are struggling with English outcomes, because I spoke to other parents as well, our report card comments have to be outcomes based and have to be outcomes language and I spoke to parents and they have told me '*I don't even understand what you mean*', because its teacher language and we have gone to school and have studied and we are on this all the time, so just for any parents I think it's hard to understand (Ms.



Smith).

The quotation above illustrates how education discourse is framed by outcome languages and school board regulations. This educational structure seemingly built to communicate with parents, in fact, limits communication because it encloses how and what teachers communicate with parents. This language is reproduced in report cards.

However, report cards sometimes do not benefit the children of immigrants in the school system, according to Mr. Baker. He sometimes skipped sending a report card home. He preferred face -to-face communication: “The easiest way is to invite the parents in, and talk to them... so that they would feel comfortable and know that their child is doing ok.” He did not think the grade always reflected the child’s progress or effort in learning. If a child was not able to achieve the expected curriculum outcomes because of language or cultural barrier, he was concerned this would hold the child back in later years: “As principal I would take a chance and I would say to the teacher, don’t do a report card, as much as the school board says 'do it!' I would insist, 'don't', because in the translation it would look like the poor little girl was failing, but that wasn’t the case.” He sometimes even fudged grades a little to protect children from what he feared were overly demanding parents:

"In some cultures when they come, if the report card is not good the parents get very upset and they, physical violence is not necessary, but sometimes really strong discipline and because, what they are reading on paper says the student is not doing well...it’s a cultural thing for some of them" (Mr. Baker).

He does not only skip report cards to protect children from parents, but also from the school system itself. He said that the behaviour of immigrant children could be seen as

aggressive, which he often attributes to frustration at their new environment, and worried that this will be taken out of context at their next school, that students status as immigrants affects how they are perceived.

“Immigrant students, the same as Canadian students, can get into trouble, or do something that could lead them to be mistaken as a ‘troublemaker’ and when they go to the next school..., then teachers take for granted what is in the report card and start judging them, they focus in the status that is an immigrant not that is just a child”  
(Mr. Baker).

#### **4.2 Interpreting Parents**

How do school staff interpret the expectations and ideas of the parents? Participants in this thesis commented that “The number one concern with parents is just, do I make sure my child is able to, you know, fit in.” said Ms. Johnson. “Are they able to understand the teacher? Are they making friends?” This was a very common theme with all my interviewees; that their job was about more than just academic subjects, it was about building self-esteem, social well-being and safety. Mr Baker, with more than ten years as a principal in a multicultural school, considers that another concern of parents is that their children "be good". This is not an academic concern, and probably in the literature about education it would not even be taken into account, but I include it here because, as we will see in the next chapter, from the perspective of parents, being a good citizen is an integral part of education. A person is considered well educated when they have values that make them be a good citizen.

And in many cases the parents, no matter where they came from, no matter what they

had seen or lived with, they wanted the kids to be good, they did not want them to be violent in any way, they did not want them to be hurting other kids, and to me that was almost universal with the immigrant families.(Mr. Baker)

In contrast, teachers and school staff spoke much less about the academic side of their roles, and did so in less detail. Concerns over academic problems were often framed as language differences or cultural differences. For example, Ms. Smith said that in general “parents worry if their kids are understanding what I’m teaching or not. Basic concerns that other parents have as well, but wondering if their kids are understanding even with the math.” Language deficiencies are synonymous with academic performance. “They are learning a whole new language, so sometimes it takes longer, or their marks aren’t as good as they have been in their first language. ... [I]t can be hard for their self-esteem because they always feel like they are trying to catch up,” says Ms. King. And sometimes language problems mask deeper problems such as autism or dyslexia that can make teaching immigrant children especially difficult. “[You wonder] why is this child not catching up? There’s a lot of support that needs to be put in place to kind of figure out where the problem is,” said Ms. Johnson.

Scholars of education have shown that immigrant parents absence from school events such as curriculum night and parent-teacher interviews, could be interpreted wrongly as showing they do not care about their child’s education (Epstein, 1990; Garcia- Gaytan, 1992; Guo and Mohan, 2008). My interviewees took a different view. Ms. Johnson said that “...parents will often shy away from coming to the school, because they... don’t have the language, and... they are embarrassed, or they are, you know, they’re just intimidated to come and try to discuss things because they feel lost.” And the fear of going to the school

goes both ways. This next reflection comes from Mr. Baker, when he started as principal in a school with a large percentage of immigrant students. He never had worked with immigrants before:

When I first went there (the school he was principal of), the immigrants, both the kids and the parents, they scared me. I was terrified because I didn't understand them and they didn't understand me. The language difference and I would not know, I wouldn't understand if they were upset, I didn't know if they would understand things I was trying to tell them. All in the best interest of the kids of course. So I was in my first year, scared to death, terrified, but the funny thing was, once I started to realize, they are people, and they are people just as all of my friends here, the only difference was the language (Mr. Baker).

“Catching up,” was a frequent expression used by my participants in reference to their students. They refer not only to the fact that sometimes children are placed in grades one or more years behind where they used to be in their native country, but also they refer to the fact that students are still learning English and that this situation makes their learning slower. Whenever my interviewees discussed students, it was always in terms of “catching up,” like students were in a permanent state of being behind. None of them ever discussed students as being “ahead” or more advanced in any way. This is an interesting use of language which shows how teachers think about education and their role when dealing with immigrant students but also what they talk about with parents.

My interviewees did mention that parents did not always seem satisfied with the education system, but this was, again, framed as a cultural difference. For example, Ms. Johnson said that many parents complained about “split classes,” where two grades are

taught by one teacher, an economizing solution implemented by the school board to fill classrooms.

Academically sometimes it's a very different systems, so it can either be that's not challenging enough in their mind, that they are not getting enough of whatever subject they think, you know, sometimes science, or math, you know, they don't think that its, you know, enough"(Ms. Johnson).

### **4.3 Communication about Academic Policies**

As with parents, I asked teachers questions about three areas of the school's academic policy: English language instruction; the outcomes framework and homework.

#### **4.3.1 English Language Instruction**

When I was volunteering<sup>5</sup> a few years ago the teacher had a very tight schedule. One day the EAL teacher and I worked one hour with grades primary, one and two (five students in total). Later on the same day we worked with grades three to six all together. There is the difficulty, because every child was at a different level and needed different approaches; for example one might need help with reading, others with writing and another with their science homework. Sometimes I helped with reading at one corner of the classroom while the teacher worked with pronunciation at the whiteboard with other grades. Two of us working together was sometimes insufficient for the number of students, but she worked

5 Volunteering is one activity highly suggested to immigrants, in order to get to know the city and how life is here. So, I decided to volunteer at an elementary school that was different from where my children were attending.

alone much of the time.

At Mr. Baker's school at least, the EAL teacher would try to incorporate classroom projects and presentations with the English lesson. "The idea was that they would then take and present this in the classroom... and then have to speak... giving the comfort level to stand up in front of the class."

EAL and school settlement workers usually have the same clients, except those newcomers that have good English and do not need help with English. They collaborate and share information about students and support each other, but it is not a formal collaboration, depending on students and teachers needs and because they do not always coincide on work shifts. "Sometimes schools will try to have the YMCA here on different days if possible from the EAL because then every day of the week there is a support for those students, instead of having us double." (Ms. Johnson)

EAL and YMCA school settlement workers bring valuable and necessary services for children, parents and teachers, but in the case of EAL students working twice a week for one hour on learning and practicing English it is not enough. "[They]...work really really hard and they do as much as they can to support, but I think that we can use more support in that area" (Ms. Johnson). More institutional funding is necessary to contract more EAL teachers or to contract them for more hours to realistically work more time with each student.

### **4.3.2 Homework**

Homework policy has changed. Before 2016 it was considered inappropriate for students from grades primary to three to do homework. Now students from these grades are

allowed to have homework. Probably because homework for grades primary to three was banned in schools at the time of the interview, only Ms. Smith referred to homework. She said that parents would often ask for homework, but school policy prohibited it. "... First I was told, just say no, we don't give homework; but then, I thought that if someone wants to support their kids at home so I just made up an extra package of math sheets and sent it. It is a lot like what we are doing in class, but just another sheet, that they can cover at home".

She asked parents not to spend much time on homework, because she only wanted to incorporate what they were learning at class. "But also when I do that, I stress they should stay positive...so not to spend too much time doing homework and it's also try to incorporate it into what we are learning at class and in this grade are basic things." She recommended guidelines she read in a study that suggested that homework should take no more than 10 minutes per grade level; for example, grade one should take only 10 minutes while grade 6 can also take 60 minutes. Homework should be enjoyable. She used games and cards to reinforce what they are learning. In Ms. Smith's experience, parents mostly requested more math homework. They were less interested in ESL work, since they expected the school to take care of the child's English. Li's research in Vancouver also found that parents expect teachers to work on English with students, basically because immigrant parents are afraid of their kids picking up their "accent" and they want their kids to learn good English pronunciation (Li, 2006).

### **4.3.3 Learning Outcomes**

Curriculum outcomes are the knowledge and themes that students are supposed to learn in each grade as defined by the Halifax Regional School Board. The school board has

a link on its website where parents can download and/or read the outcomes established for their children's grade. Standardized provincial tests in grades 4 and up are based on these learning outcomes. Teachers have their strategies to test children learning in the classroom that include formats that they have to document to show that they are working on those outcomes. Report cards are also based on learning outcomes.

To explain outcomes to parents, Ms. Smith tries to explain by giving examples of things a child can do or knows when they achieve an outcome. She does not know how successful this technique is with some parents who do not speak much English. “It is difficult to know, unless parents come to me with questions, that is when I can explain it, otherwise I just assume that people understand what that means; but if you don't come to me and ask me then I wouldn't take the time to explain, right?” I believe that many do not ask. My neighbor and also a participant in this research was always calling me to ask questions: “Why did the teacher do that? Why did she say this?” and I remember telling her that I do not really know and that she should ask the teacher, but she never did.

There are no outcomes for EAL. Unlike the regular curriculum, EAL teaching has no measures on benchmarks of progress. The first time I learned about this class not having curriculum outcomes I was shocked, because from my previous experience as a volunteer helping the EAL teacher (who was a substitute), we found that the students were not progressing in their English skills. They came to EAL classes expecting to play and have fun, which is important, of course, but the teacher I worked with wanted to implement more academic learning, like reading aloud and learning grammar and pronunciation. It seemed to me contradictory that teachers associate academic progress closely with language learning, but it was not subject to the same kind of rigour.



Some of my interviewees said that many people within the education system do not think outcomes frameworks are appropriate for any students. “They are going to review the education system because teachers for many years have been complaining about the outcomes and the number of outcomes,” said former principal Mr. Baker. He added: “But it has been 25 years since they have been doing this, so you start to think, we are 25 years behind the times.”

Mr. Baker said that immigrant children are automatically at a disadvantage with respect to the outcomes, because many are based on cultural knowledge of Canada, and they could receive help at home from parents who share that knowledge. For this reason, he said he did not emphasize testing for outcomes amongst children of immigrants who lacked this cultural capital. But then he turned the question around and said the school system should value the cultural capital of immigrant children:

Sometimes learning outcomes are... what we have to do, but they are not the most important thing... sometimes learning is more, “I’m learning from you as opposed to the teacher telling me.” So when they have discussions. The kids contribute information about what is like in other places. That is a learning situation... hopefully the kids from here are learning those life messages, but we don't test that.

In this chapter we have seen that even though HRSB acknowledges the importance of communication with parents on their website and in their publications, most of the channels of communication only permit communication in one direction. Teachers send messages to parents through journals, emails, agendas and phone calls, but without engaging in an active communication. They send messages in English when most parents have difficulties understanding the language. They use school board sanctioned vocabulary that

neither immigrant nor Canadian parents understand. Teachers, principal and YMCA settlement workers care about the well-being of the students, but their view of them is framed by the language difference, seeing the children as handicapped by their lack of English. They talk and see the child as always "catching up"; they worry about their "comfort level" more than their academic level.

The communication problems are not just language or cultural misunderstandings. They are rooted in an education system that is designed to work in only one way, and only in the terms of the system itself, without fostering a two-way conversation about education and student achievement. Teachers who do try to engage in communication based on parents' questions in relation to policies like homework or student outcomes have to go outside the system, like sneaking out to talk face-to-face with parents, using body language or organizing meetings with translators, or skipping report cards.

## **CHAPTER 5      COMMUNICATION PARENTS' PERSPECTIVES**

We saw in the last chapter that the teachers I interviewed believe that the social integration, well-being and self-esteem of their students was just as important, maybe even more important, than the subject matter they taught each day. But how do immigrant parents conceive of education? In this chapter it is important to review the ideas that parents have about education before discussing their communication with the school, because these ideas shape what they look for in their children's education and the ways they react towards school policies.

### **5.1 Concept of Education**

The parents I interviewed came from many different countries, and were from varying socioeconomic backgrounds. Not surprisingly there were differences in their views on education. Some placed more emphasis on education as a key to advancement in later life, others on the socialization that takes place at school. Some thought that education was about hard work and sacrifice, as it had been for them. Others preferred to see their children spend more time playing. Some expressed an ambivalence about this, and were unsure which was better for their child.

Despite their differences, common themes emerged: all parents come from cultures that emphasize the utility of education, they have made considerable personal sacrifices in the hopes of achieving a “better life,” and all know what it is like to live between different worlds. Like the teachers in the previous chapter, their concept of education could be called holistic, but of a different kind that links past, present and future. We could say that for

them, education is part of being a well-rounded, successful, humanistic citizen of the world.

One of the clearest statements of this view was made by Lucy, a single mother caring for her only son. For her, education is a form of learning for the whole life: "education is really important because when you learn something new doors open to your world, open your vision for new things. As humans we came to learn, so when somebody closes that door of learning, they close also the possibility of learning and to experiencing things as part of their life". Jennifer came from Eastern Europe. Although our conversation was about education, she specifically mentioned how much she appreciated a Canadian passport, a "world passport" where restrictions to travel around the world are less compared with her first home country. She wants her children to have a global view of the world and "not to believe stupidity from TV shows." She says that education gives you an understanding of the world and that education helps you to develop critical thinking and to be a global citizen, where borders and frontiers should be open because people travel around the entire world these days.

Parents said they were very concerned that their children should learn English at school, but they also emphasized learning their own native language, and even other languages. In other words, language education should create multilingual children, not just ease their transition into Canada. Sarah, for example, speaks Spanish, French and is learning English here in Halifax. She explained that French was her second language and they moved to Halifax with the explicit aim to add English to their collection of languages. She mentioned that becoming multilingual opened more possibilities of finding good employment for their children. Lucy, who immigrated 12 years ago, also believed that learning another language makes children more intelligent. Her son is learning Spanish,

English and French.

Jacob, Jennifer and Heather also are trying to maintain their home language so their children would be able to maintain family ties, "because if we go to visit grandparents how is he going to communicate? It is difficult, his English is better, but we try as much as we can, to keep and remember Russian." After several years in Halifax Bill, planned to return to Toronto in part because there they have family members who could help with their interaction to keep his native language alive. "It is hard for [my children] to communicate with my parents, it's not that I want them to learn the Pakistani culture, but I think it's good to do it. They will learn the culture when they understand the language".

## **5.2 Preparing for a Complex World**

Some parents emphasized the economic benefits of a good education, because with education you have more possibilities of finding a well-paid job. For Sarah, education, "is the base for everything, if you want to have a good job and enough resources to pay your bills you need education". Despite already having professional credentials, she and her husband both spent several years in a Canadian college in order to get a better job. For her, it was natural that their child should be willing to do the same. Emma is another example. In her own country she was a teacher and director of a Montessori school. She could only get minimum wage work in Canada, and so spent time and thousands of dollars on a community college diploma in order to work as Early Childhood Educator. She takes her own experience as an example that education and having a proper certificate help you to find a job that you like, "if not at the same level that you had in your home country at least close to it".

On the other hand, parents noted that the world is changing and good schooling did not guarantee a good job at the end. Jacob is really worried about his older daughter who soon will be in junior high and he is already trying to prepare her for university, though wonders whether it is going to be worthwhile: "If high educational style will be priority, I want that, but I'm not sure that in the modern world this is the first option, first priority, because I have heard a lot of examples about people finishing their education...and can't find a job". He and other immigrant parents are realizing that having a university degree does not guarantee a good job anymore, but are still conditioned by their own experience as professionals. Jacob thinks his kids will need to learn many different skills to navigate the complex ties of modern life.

What I expect for my kids, first of all, they need to have some kind of knowledge and I'm not talking about knowledge of math or literature, I'm talking about geographical style...I want them to know not only a lot about our life, also economic style, about saving money. For example my daughter asked me to buy something, I asked do you need it? You don't have it? Yes, I expect that they have a common knowledge of the life, from history and geography, when somebody want to talk to them I expect that they will answer the questions.

From his statement I infer that he does not expect the school to do the whole job, he is also teaching his children at home about economy, how to be independent, and developing research skills.

### 5.3 Ethical Children

Behaviour and morality were a big concerns for parents, and these are linked to the environment children grow up in. Some thought that Halifax offered excellent influences for their children. Zoe said that when she travelled to her native country: “people asked me if my kids were from there or not because their behavior was different, they were more quiet and more respectful.” Others, especially those in rougher neighbourhoods, had different experiences. Sarah, for example, explained that her son was bullied as a small boy, that he did not want to go out of her apartment because wherever the bully found her son, he hit him. When she was telling me about this situation, she explained that her idea of education went beyond school and included trying to understand the environment where the child lived and then understand why he behaved that way: "a child behaves bad because there is something in his home, something that could be the reason. You have to look at his environment where the child lives, sometimes kids copy what they are seeing or living."

For Bill, religion is a key component of morality. In his case that is Islam (“but it’s the same for any religion,” he says.) Another reason he plans to return to Toronto is because religious education is easier there. He himself cannot speak Arabic, but wishes better for his kids. "Religious education is easier there. The teacher comes to your house. I want them to learn the Koran also. Religious education is difficult here, there is a mosque here, but it is difficult to drop them off. Now they are getting religious education online. [Because] I want them to read the Koran, and also to know the meanings." Some parents also emphasized the emotional component of schooling. Emily was a preschool teacher in the Middle East. As part of her experience she recalls the necessity of attending to the emotional need of students and not only "teaching actual knowledge." For her, this included a student's self-esteem,

security, and the respect that teachers should have toward students and which she had not experienced here with her daughter's teachers.

In summary, we see that immigrant parents I spoke with have a vision of education that goes beyond schooling. They not only look at the economic aspects, although these are important, but for their children to have the tools to understand the world that they will be living in and hold an intelligent conversation, in other words a liberal and humanistic education as a foundation for their whole life, one that also includes the emotional needs of their children. These are the concepts of education that parents have which they expressed during general, unstructured conversation. I also asked them about three specific policy areas of education in Nova Scotia (see methodology): Homework, English language instruction, and the provincial Curriculum Outcomes Framework.

## **5.4 Views on Education Policy**

### **5.4.1 Homework**

As stated, the Nova Scotia Education department sets policies about the amount of homework teachers can give out. At the time these interviews were conducted, homework was actually banned for children up to Grade 3. Since then a minimal homework policy has been implemented, but not much change has been reported by parents. None of the participants in this research were aware of the policy when they first put their children into school. Many learned about it indirectly, through their children. "Everyday [my daughter] she come back home, I ask do you have anything to do? I don't have anything," said Mary. She said she could not understand why. When Ann saw her child was not bringing home



homework, she asked a teacher why and said the answer surprised her:

"I heard ... because people have different [economic] situations 'we don't obligate a student to make a project because maybe it hurts their feelings. For example, a student does a good project, but the other student can't do it so it makes him or her feel bad'. She said that is why the HRSB don't want the kids to do lots of homework."

Ann did not like this reasoning, and was not convinced it was helping her son learn. At the end of the year, she moved her son into a private school.

Most parents disagreed with the policy, although they seemed uneasy about expressing this too forcefully, as if they did not want to appear to be criticizing the school system. Ann lowered her voice when she said: "You know, I think here everything is very easy. They don't want their children to do homework". And Janet laughed nervously when she told me. "There is no homework here. Students here are very relaxed...My son started Grade 1 here and he thinks studying is just to be relaxed. No homework, Nothing. Nothing else." They also worried that this overly relaxed culture was influencing their children. Heather complained that her son "has lots of free time to spend with his friends." Others complained their children spent too much time watching TV or Youtube.

Parents thought that homework was an important tool for reinforcing classroom learning, particularly given the disadvantages their children faced while learning a new language and culture. Janet said "...if there was homework in house it is better. Because he understands and can speak but can't write well. For example he likes to write in front of his door 'stay out' and he wrote 'stai' with an 'i' He needs spelling. I think that if there was

dictation or spelling in his school it will be very nice. He needs homework on math and writing, spelling.” Others were even more explicit about their point of view. Mary said: "I think it would be perfect if they had any homework. Let's say not every day but at least once a week. I think they are missing the thing here."

Naturally, parents' views are shaped by their own experiences. Most of my interviewees made a point of comparing the children's schools with those in their native countries. Ann recalled the stress that parents and children share about completing homework, but emphasized parents' role as guides for their children:

In my country homework it is very different. Lots of pressure...Parents are really concerned about that. My sister has a daughter, every night she checks with her daughter, OK this is done, or why did not you do that, and did you forget that one? She checks the notebook to see what homework there is to do and marks when it is done. I mean that is the kid doing homework but with the guidance of the parents.

Mary recalls similarly“... [In my country] that was the issue, they have a lot of homework. A lot of homework, their bag is so heavy! Notebook to bring every day and they have everyday homework. And if they don't do that, of course, their score goes down...They have a lot of homework.” Her tone and her emphasis on the heaviness of the bag suggested that it was a mark of hard work and suffering that paid benefits in the long run, underlining a culture of sacrifice for future success that she grew up in. When she talked about it, she almost sounded nostalgic. “Yes. It's not the same habits”, said Jill. Her son was taking distance education from France even while studying at a Halifax school. "Sometimes [my

son's] friends ask to play in the park and I have to explain to them that, he has to do his homework from France and his reading from here, and I talked to some parents that he has to do homework... and they say 'woow'. Parents worry that their children are not learning enough here. Lucy said "It will take him longer to learn things that I did at his age and grade. He got bored in first and second grade because he didn't find it interesting."

Some parents seemed ambivalent about homework. They were conscious that in their home countries homework could be very difficult for children. For Joe, it was even a reason for emigrating. He explained how he found his son crying because he could not resolve a test made for high school when he was in elementary school, he made the connection of suicides that happen in his country because this "pressure" on learning and homework. Ann and Jennifer talked about how children have to do a lot of homework in their countries that is too much. And despite that, they wanted homework. But this ambivalence was not clear to themselves, as if they had not worked out their own opinions.

When parents learnt about the homework policy, they first asked the teachers to send homework, but rarely received a response they found satisfactory. Lucy not only requested homework, but asked for more challenging tasks for her child. Her son "explained to the teacher: 'I know all that. Why do I have to do it again?' He asked for more complicated stuff but it was always the same" (Lucy). Max had a similar experience with his daughter, who was in grade seven: "She was complaining about getting bored at school, I talked to the teachers... and I said 'give her more homework, give her more complicated work' but they look at me like 'whaaaaat?'" , complained Max. Jacob asked the teacher to send homework, but was told "this is the system". He emphasized the word 'system' with frustration in his

voice.

Some parents reported experiences with teachers who bent the rules and sent home homework they labelled “optional”. Zoe, for example, was happy that her daughter was sent optional homework, and even better that the teacher corrected it. Her son, who has a different teacher, does not get homework and the lack of homework for him created a conflict at home, with one child doing homework and the other without homework. She tried to supplement with workbooks and educational apps. When teachers sent homework, parents felt grateful to the teachers. Parents still recall the specific activities that were sent home, partly because they worked together with their child on them. For example, Emily still remembers "My daughter received help after school". Her teacher asked her to stay few times to help her older daughter, or when "[teacher] sent home flash cards for me, to help my daughter with math; and now she is having As, and that was thanks to them, the school community. The teacher was awesome..." Among the parents I interviewed, these teachers were the exception, however.

Homework is not just a way to make children work harder. It is also a way for parents to feel involved in their children’s education. “We don't know where they are in this program” complained Max. “That is a big difference with France. In France the kids send home their scribbler and what they are doing, and we can see, oh they are doing that, and they have their books and their scribbles and we can see to help them to learn their lessons, but here we don't know exactly what they are doing.” Despite working full time jobs, most parents seemed to enjoy helping their children with homework and considered it their responsibility.

To supplement the lack of homework, parents sought other methods to help their

children. Janet made her own flash cards. Zoe bought apps and exercise books based on the Canadian curriculum. Bill, Jennifer, Jacob, and Lucy soon transferred their children from public to private schools. In private school they have homework and parents mention that their kids have learned to manage their time in order to do their homework. Others registered their children in the popular tutoring franchise Kumon, although all parents who did so said they were not satisfied because the techniques, based on repetition and filling blanks in worksheets, were too similar to what their children experienced at school. Emily's daughter was having problems in math. After trying a private tutor, they decided to do their own teaching. "My husband is engineer and he is really good on math," she said. "He sat with her and taught her for one hour, every night and now she is getting A, A+. They asked bonus questions and she could answer them all..."

#### **5.4.2 English Language Instruction**

Most of the parents I spoke to worried a lot when their kids first started going to school without speaking much English. "I mean, how should we speak to his teacher?" asked Ann. "They were very nice teachers, but if you have language limitations and because my son is not that social, I was worried he hides everything inside." Most parents experienced a culture shock during the first months adjusting to their new life, and saw the same thing in their children, who did not know how to express themselves at school. Zoe said that "The first few days were very depressing for us, because they didn't know English. I think for about six months they didn't speak at all." Mary said her child cried a lot at first because she could not understand anything in class. "She didn't want to go to school. She said, 'well I can't understand what they want from me, and listen why do you bring me here?"

I want to go back to my grandma!”

At the same time, most immigrants saw the language barrier as incidental to the question of academic learning, and were frustrated that teachers conflated the two. Joe explained that "in my country we are passionate about math. My children were considered as genius here, they could get confidence really easily." But at the beginning, when they first arrived his son was being misunderstood in class, as if he had problems understanding math. Joe decide to talk to the teacher "I said my son knows math, it was the English that he could not understand well, the terminology. So I ask the teacher to ask my son to do the math exercise in the blackboard rather than spoken words in English."

Parents reported that frustration over poor communication led to bad behaviour. Jill's son was constantly being called to the principal's office in his first year at a Halifax school. She noticed his behaviour improved considerably in the second year after he was assigned a classroom teacher who spoke his native language and also was an English Additional Language teacher. But it is not only students who behave badly. I once overheard the daughter of Zoe telling her friends about her primary teacher who used to shout at her so much she was afraid to go to school. "I didn't even know English", the girl said. Her parents transferred her to another school the next year.

The school system is conscious of the language barriers for immigrant children, and provides English language classes for those who need it, as noted earlier. When an immigrant student is registered at a school, he/she is assigned a language instruction teacher. Some EAL teachers work permanently at one school; others move between schools. This teacher will do an assessment of new students in order to know their English level and work based at their specific levels. The children usually receive between one and two hours of

instruction a week. Sometimes the teacher takes the student to her office and teaches them, other times the EAL teacher goes to the main classroom and helps the student there with the task they are doing in the classroom. When I was volunteering, the EAL teacher went to pick up a few students from their classrooms and we read aloud with them, other times we had group lessons, like grammar lessons and practice using the whiteboard. The teacher organizes time to work twice a week with each student in elementary school also helping with the main class's projects.

Most parents said they appreciated the program. They followed the EAL teacher's instructions about how to help their children. Although most of them think that their accent at speaking and reading is not good, they still helped with reading at home. "ESL classes weren't that formal. I think they did it once a week, an hour. I'm not sure. I'm not sure."(Ann). Some parents were very happy with the program. "My children didn't speak English for few months. It was a shock, Now they only speak English...ESL helped a lot on reading, speaking and to gain confidence. It is really a good program. The teacher told me what they were reading, or if they got some homework to read" (Zoe).

But surprisingly, although the language barrier was a deep concern for parents when their children first started at school, most did not know very much about the program, and did not express a great deal of curiosity about it. Mostly, parents seemed to trust the service implicitly which is why some of them told me that during parent-teacher interviews, they preferred to talk to the main classroom teacher to know how their child is doing in academic subjects, because they know how their kids' English is improving. "I met the ESL teacher once. It was at a meeting, she just said 'I'm the ESL teacher and [your child] is doing fine. Because there were only 15 minutes of the meeting and I should speak with classroom

teacher and I preferred to speak with main teacher, I didn't ask more” said Ann. Partly this might be because they saw teaching English as a job exclusively for the school (unlike other academic areas). As mentioned in the previous chapter, Li found that Chinese parents expected the school system in Vancouver to take charge of English instruction for their children to avoid passing on their own accents (Li, 2000). But also, unlike the regular academic classes, EAL sends home frequent homework assignments, readings and other activities for children to work on with their parents. Perhaps parents did not feel the same need in order to follow up with teachers to know about their children’s progress.

A few parents criticized the program. Jacob was not convinced when the EAL teacher told him his daughter was improving in English. He said the EAL teacher focused too much on building confidence and enabling kids to communicate and not enough on grammar. Max said the support was simply not enough. "It's not very good. My son saw her ten times the first year. He still following ESL classes on the second year. Every time we go to school for a meeting I made an appointment with her, she said he is doing OK." Max feels that ESL instruction does not focus on academic English learning, while the teacher "wants to make the children quickly communicate with other children" (Max), parents would like them to learn to write English well.

The more holistic vision of language as a window on the world does not seem to be shared by all teachers. Mia speaks Danish, her husband German. When their children were in third grade, they went to live one year in Germany with the aim of teaching their children their father's language. They thought that this would be good for their children, but the teacher insisted that they were wrong, that doing that is like "torturing and giving mental problems to their children". For many years Mia says she has lived with feeling guilty for



"torturing" her children. But on the day of our interview, she could not stop talking about this experience. She said she resented that teachers seem to think they have the "truth" about education.

### **5.4.3 Curriculum Outcomes**

As we have seen, curriculum outcomes are the knowledge and skills that children should get at school, itemized and categorized by grade and subject. These are the foundation of teaching in Nova Scotia. Nevertheless, when I asked parents about outcomes, their answer was typically a blank stare. "What? What?" said Jill with surprise. Despite their obvious interest in understanding what their children learn at school, most parents had never heard of the policy and expressed frustration at not knowing what their children were learning.

At their request, I sent the Curriculum Outcomes framework from the HRSB website to five of the parents I interviewed. Jill read the outcomes for her son's grade and told me that they were more or less similar to the ones he was following from her native country, but that the work he brings home from school is not as in depth as the framework shows. Others were dismayed that the Curriculum Outcomes seemed to be behind the curricula of their native countries. One mother said, for example: "what [my child] is learning here I learned in grade seven, what she is studying in grade 11, I did it in grade 7 in Brazil." Emily remembers when they had just arrived in Canada, a teacher warned her that the math here is behind what they have learned in the Middle East. She attributes her children's later success in their first year of university to the fact that they had already learnt what many Canadian children were only just beginning to learn. Jacob was more direct, saying that "here education is weaker. Children are not prepared to go to university." Later on, he wondered if

children are taught to a low standard on purpose because "they don't want engineers, they want fieldworkers or something like cheap labour."

Max agrees. "In France [my son] is doing addition and multiplication and here he is only doing addition of two and three digits." He did not know about the Nova Scotia outcomes framework, but he said that teachers just stick to "official requirements" as if he sensed that education here was based on a rigid policy. "I think they are just following the program and they are not going outside the program" to encourage children's learning.

## **5.5 Talking to the Teacher**

How do parents express these and other concerns to teachers? As mentioned in the methodology chapter, the Halifax school system offers numerous official channels of communication between parents and teachers, and as we saw in the previous chapters, teachers sometimes step outside these channels to find other means of communicating in greater depth with immigrant parents.

### **5.5.1 Curriculum Night**

In general parents seemed pleased with curriculum night and understood its purpose. "It was about each class; arts, science, how are they doing in class, reading, writing, math" (Heather). Parents said they liked the effort teachers made to communicate at these events. "They try to understand us. They have lots of patience" (Zoe). They did not understand the connection between curriculum night and the provincial curriculum outcomes, in other words, that curriculum night was an opportunity to explain the provincial outcomes framework. "Oh, I get it," said Ann, when I told her about the framework. "That is what the

teacher explained to us.” Parents who did not speak English sometimes skipped curriculum night. Several female interviewees sent their husbands, because according to them, they spoke better English.

### **5.5.2 Parent-Teacher Interview**

Parent-teacher interviews can be a source of anxiety. Immigrants often feel very self-conscious in these meetings. Ann considers herself to be "shy" with her son's teacher. "I know I don't communicate enough and sometimes, if I want to communicate a lot, I think the teacher thinks I want too much attention for my kid". However, when they first arrived, parents said they took Parent-teacher interviews very seriously. "We have to do our homework, to prepare our questions," said Heather. Another parent, Bill, quickly became disillusioned. "I went two times but I could not get much [information]." Part of the problem, he and others said, was how short the scheduled meetings are, just ten minutes. Charlotte compared this to the interviews at the private school where she transferred his child.

Not only do you have more minutes to talk with the teacher, you also see their work before, their work will be outside for you, so you go through your child's work before you go to talk to the teacher. They also explain clearly, they say 'he is good on this and this, he needs to work on this and this' but here (public) is not that much.

The purpose of parent-teacher interviews is not always clear or consistent for parents. I always thought they were for all parents, but I once received an email from a teacher saying only parents of children with problems need attend. Surprisingly, the email even included a sign-up sheet with the names of parents who would be coming printed on it.

Having heard that the interviews were only for children with problems, Emily skipped her parent-teacher meeting. She did not want her daughter to think she did not trust her.

Parents said the meetings were too infrequent, and came only at the end of term, too late to correct any problems. And they said that specific problems were rarely reported in detail. A teacher initially told Ann that her son was “doing fine.” She was surprised since she saw many spelling errors in his work, but it was only when she asked directly that the teacher said he had problems in that area. “We need more inputs about her behavior in the class,” said Jacob. “How she studies. About her problems. We as parents see their problems”.

### **5.5.3 Report cards**

Report cards are intended to be an objective assessment of a child’s performance, but parents thought they were not a true reflection of their children. Some actually complained about grades they considered too high! Ann, for example, often received calls from the music teacher about her son’s poor behaviour in class, yet he received a B on the term (she believed he deserved a D). Likewise, his spelling problems were not reflected in his English grade. The opinion of many of the parents was that the report cards were trying to be “too polite.”

As with the parent teacher interviews, they said the information about their children was not specific enough. Max appeared annoyed by the way the written report is just a compilation of phrases taken from the outcomes framework.

It should be a personal observation of the kid! ... Now it is done by computer, not human... copy and paste... I understand they don't want problems with

parents. It has to be positive. For me is not negative when the teacher points out their weakness. I would like to see he needs to work on this. He needs to improve in that. In the report card there is zero about that. The report card is written by computer, means nothing. It is a selection of text that makes no sense about my child, we are not used to that report card.

Parents felt that teachers do not address what their children need to work on to improve. Janet said: "I have to approach the teacher, asking many times, 'tell me what to do, what is he missing?' [The teacher answered], 'no no he is fine,' and then I found he is not doing fine. Right? I put him in Kumon, because the way he was supposed to do it. He was behind in math, in English."

## **5.6 Social activities**

Schools sometimes organize social activities for staff, parents and children, such as barbecues, movies and bingo nights. Jill said she enjoys these, which made her feel more connected with other parents. "During a pot luck dinner, we were with a family we didn't know, the man was talking with my husband, I could talk with other women, not as difficult but not to integrate, people are very friendly, very tolerant, even when I speak [English] very bad." Other parents were not so enthusiastic. Lucy for example, said she always felt like an outsider. Joe said he felt like "an invisible man." He joined the PTA for a time, but said the atmosphere reminded him of American films he watched while in Korea, in which black people were treated as different. "I could feel the coldness. Even my wife could feel it, even though her English is really limited."

Perhaps the particular school makes a difference. The difference between Joe and

Jill's cases may be that Joe's child attends a school of predominantly white Canadian children, while Jill's is one of the most ethnically diverse in the country. At her school, all parents feel like they are in a similar situation, while at Joe's, parents have already established cliques and bonds. Also, some of the social distance may come from self-perception. When Ann talks about not having Canadian friends, for example, she questions if some Canadian would accept her as a friend. "Maybe because I come from the Middle East and this is a higher, first world country, compared to my country. That is why high/low level. That makes a big difference"(Ann).

### **5.7 Out in the cold**

It is important to take note of the coldness some parents observed at social activities, because parents also reported something similar when dealing directly with school staff. At a meeting for immigrant parents, Zoe said:

The principal's attitude was arrogant. He is not rude, but maybe he thinks that [because some of us, immigrant parents] have problems with English that we won't understand him. He spoke to us making us feel that we are immigrants, we are from fourth world, making us feel less, not the same level of people.

This was a sentiment that was repeated often by parents. "Maybe they are afraid of us," wondered Emma. When her older daughter was struggling at math, she went to talk to the teacher. "The teacher was really defensive... [She] thought that I was aggressive." According to her, the teacher's only solution was for her daughter to drop out of school. Later, when her younger daughter had problems, she did not bother going to speak to the teacher. She adds, "They just repeat and repeat [the same thing]. If we only do what school

say, they never finish school... People there don't understand. What I saw, I don't see help.”

When dealing with the school, she said, she “felt alone.”

Bill expressed his experience with school staff closer to apathy in relation to children' safety. One example seemed very important to him. During snow storms, when school was cancelled, he would often see a child walking the streets going to school. He was worried about this student wandering alone during snow storm. Then, Bill told the principal, suggesting he call the child's parents. “They just say 'yeah, yeah, we'll do it'. The principal said that so many times, and nothing happened. I don't think they followed up.” He also noted that his own son had several accidents at school, but he was never notified. “I found that alarming,” he said.

Charlotte was part of the School Advisory Council (SAC) at her son's private school but when they went into public school, she was rejected when offering her time and experience joining the SAC, even though she had experience because she was part of the SAC in her children's previous school, a private school. "We don't know you," she was told. Charlotte emphasize,

I find where ever I go, any group or institution, I have to show up, different times, because of your accents, or other things. They don't trust you. I have to show that I'm a doctoral student, we know what a fundraiser is, I feel the more I'm around them, the more I show my face, the more they maybe [include me], is not that inclusive staff.

These displays of social power reveal how social interactions and discursive practices shape the way inequality between immigrants and non-immigrants parents occur at school environment. It makes it clear why only some parents can speak to school board

officials.

Parents come from various countries and socioeconomic backgrounds, and even though those aspects are different, they share a humanistic and holistic view of education. They have expectations for their children to be prepared for a more complex world. They also see learning as not only a part of schooling but as lessons they can draw for their entire life. Ethical and moral formation is almost as important as math and science. These ideas about education shape their relationship and communication with school staff and their views of education policies. For instance, although the policy of homework contradicted their ideas of schooling as sacrifice and their work ethic they did not show their disappointment to teachers, in part out of shyness, or self-consciousness about the condition of being immigrant.

Parents feel that their ideas about education and the follow up they do for their children are rejected by school staff. When they asked for more homework, or more advanced learning, or learning more languages, they feel they are being judged as if they are torturing their child. It is as if there are two world views that do not understand each other. Furthermore, few parents are conscious of the "system" that governs the teachers and their children's learning. When parents ask for homework, the answer is "no, because of the system," referring to the policies that teachers have to follow such as learning outcomes. The language of that policy is inserted in the report cards. Parents insist that report cards do not give clear feedback about their children's challenges and difficulties. Rather they seem to be written by a machine, or copy-pasted. For instance when they go to parent-teacher interview it is too late to help the child if he/she requires it; but when they ask to teacher about how their kids are doing, they receive a "fine, they are doing well," even though



parents note that their children need more work on spelling, writing or math. They perceive this as a rejection, which was sometimes also felt in social situations. Parents participate in schools activities like a BBQ or multicultural potluck. The way parents are received there depends on the context, the familiarity that the neighbours have with immigrants, which affects whether they are welcomed or are "invisible". This rejection that they face at school activities is extrapolated to education, parents' institutions such as the PTA, where they are unlikely to be accepted until they "know you". As a consequence, they look for other resources outside the school system to keep their children learning, such as phone apps and books, tutoring services and in the more extreme cases moving to private schools.

## CHAPTER 6

### COMMUNICATION, EDUCATION AND POWER

The main research question I asked at the beginning of this thesis is: what is the common discursive framework that immigrant parents and school staff use to talk about education? In the last two chapters I described the experiences and ideas about education and communication from the point of view of school staff and immigrant parents. Now to identify the common discursive framework, we must first analyze those ideas about education because their ideas of education influence what they communicate and how they communicate. The ideas of education of both groups are conditioned by their life and work experiences, and by their circumstances. The parents' perspective is influenced by their experience of migration and how they integrate into Halifax life. Teachers and other school staff perspectives are constrained by their own life experience as well as by their roles in the institutional education system. Because of these differences, it is possible that even when the two groups appear to be communicating, even using the same vocabulary, they may be talking about different things. After we analyze these ideas, we can look at the process of communication itself, and the channels by which they communicate, and how this affects what they say to each other. Finally, we can analyze the power structure that is revealed in the communication channels, a power structure where teachers are just part of a larger hierarchy.

#### 6.1 Concepts of Education

The school sphere and the home sphere both have a holistic idea of education that

goes beyond academic teaching, but their holism is not the same. For parents their idea of education is related to the world and their children's future. This includes getting a good job and good economic prospects, but also a moral education, and awareness of the world around them. School staff also have an idea of education that goes beyond schooling. They see their role as caring for their students' lives and social well-being. They care especially about easing the children's insertion into school life, and more generally, Canadian life.

Teachers' philosophy of education is framed by the institution they work in, including the tasks, policies and procedures they have to follow, even by the objectives of the forms they have to fill in every day. They must teach very specific and narrowly defined "outcomes". Student performance, and their own, is measured by how they are taught. Even an activity like "wondering" is evaluated by the outcomes framework. In an academic sense, "education" *is* learning the outcomes. At the same time, the system also promotes a relaxed, egalitarian approach to education. During interviews, teachers talked a lot more about their student's "comfort level" than about academic performance or the ideas and knowledge they brought to the classroom. It was clear from the conversations with them, and from what parents and I, myself have seen, that teachers do not make great demands on their students, and students are not encouraged to learn outside the outcomes. Instead, they are treated homogeneously. Self-esteem and equal class participation are valued above high academic achievement. There is no homework to allow play and free time for children, and also, apparently, to avoid creating hardship for students whose parents do not help them at home. In the words of several parents I interviewed, the system "teaches to the weakest" instead of promoting the strongest.

The parents had a view of education that was more demanding, but also more

humanistic, drawing from their own past and looking to their children's future. In my interviews, they were more concerned with talking about the academic side of education than the teachers were. They took an active interest in what their children were doing at school, and were dismayed when they thought their child's grades were not an accurate reflection of their performance (even when they thought the grades were too high). For their children's future they have expectations beyond the economic aspect. They want their children to be able to talk about the world, about philosophy, geography. They see education as preparation for a complex future, different from our present. They try to connect the education their children are receiving with their own backgrounds, by taking them to ethnic classes, where children learn about their own ethnic history and language, and even many of the same subjects they themselves learn in school but in their native language. Their ideas about education are also influenced by their own immigration journey, where sacrifice and hard work are key. They had already made sacrifices, leaving family and friends and sometimes a better socioeconomic position. They would like their children to work as hard as they did. When they compare the amount of homework and the knowledge they had at their children's age, they see school in Halifax as soft and academically behind their own countries. Some parents also have an expectation that their children would be educated to be citizens of the world, where they can understand the complexities and travel around the world almost as if it were without borders.

## **6.2 The Language of Schooling**

Surprisingly, parents were not very interested in talking about the English language instruction their children receive at school. Parents told me they prefer to go and talk with

the main teacher rather than EAL teacher. In part, this is because they have more access to their readings and activities that EAL send home, so they have an idea of how they are advancing. Although some parents do not want their kids to pick up their accent, they still help them, with cards, apps or books even paying for tutoring for their children to get more academic language acquisition and not only enough to be able to "communicate" as they feel is promoted at school.

Unlike academic subjects, they took little interest in helping their children at home. It is not that they do not see language as a significant barrier to education. On the contrary. But as Li (2006), and as many teachers reported, they see language teaching as a job for the school only.

For the teachers, on the other hand, language was their main concern when discussing immigrant children. The children are seen and interpreted as a function of their limitations in English, almost like an empty bucket waiting to be filled once they learn English. In keeping with their concern for the comfort of the students, English instruction is a way of helping kids feel like part of the class, raising their self-esteem. But until they learn English, they are always "behind" or "catching up." The language teachers use here suggests the academic level of the children is equated with their English ability; until they acquire English they are labouring under a handicap. They do not go beyond the language barrier to consider the knowledge or ability a child may already have. It is not that teachers are not aware that children have an intellectual life independent from their English ability, but they do not incorporate it into their discourse about the children, or if they do it is to contemplate other difficulties the children may have. So one school staff warned that some children may have "other learning difficulties" that will become only visible when they learn English; that

person did not offer the possibility that learning English would reveal gifted children or extraordinary knowledge.

I imagine a diagram where teachers and parents are both discussing the child, but teachers see the child through the language barrier like looking through a curtain or smoked glass. Parents see the child first, and only secondly see the language barrier. Even this barrier they see a challenge that they as immigrants have to work at overcoming, rather than a deficiency or handicap. They see their child with opportunities, like any other child, and expect they will have to work hard to be competent at English learning. Joe, for example, did not see that a lack of good English was a limit to his child's learning when his son was already ahead on math. The few parents who had something to say about EAL classes, criticized it for its lack of rigour, and focus on classroom integration, rather than grammar and pronunciation. Other parents were concerned that the overall relaxed approach to schooling, including the lack of homework, meant their children were not working as hard as they expected. They did not think it appropriate to relax or spend too much time playing, even if they were still only learning English. To compensate for these shortcomings in the school system, many parents looked for alternatives, such as tutoring services, where children could practice English, writing and spelling along with math, or they even put them into private school.

### **6.3 Comfort and Conformity**

Schools are among the first institutions immigrants get into contact with on arriving in Canada. For Ghaffar-Kucher (2006, p. 3) they are considered as primary vehicles for promoting assimilation. More specifically, Peter Li says that English instruction and

tailoring English as the main language for schools promotes not only linguistic integration, but nationalism and conformity among immigrants (Li, 2003). As we have discussed, integration is a stated policy of the Canadian government. The CIC calls for newcomers to "settle, adapt and integrate as quickly and *comfortably* as possible" (my emphasis). The policy extends to schools, where national symbols are promoted. The *HRSB Newcomers Guide for Immigrants*, for example, advises that "students are expected to stand during Oh Canada." (p. 9). But there are other significant, but more implicit, ways in which schooling reflects official integration policy.

When teachers tell parents not to worry about their child's progress or "to be positive" about the lack of homework it invites them to conform, in Peter Li's sense, to the education system and, by extension, to life in Halifax. When teachers, exasperated with school board rules, tell the parents "it is the system" it is a way of deflecting criticism and opposition. In Chapter 2, I noted that critics of integration have argued that it tends to portrays immigrants as "weak and needing support". This is visible in the focus teachers have on building comfort for students, which is frequently mentioned in the context of assisting children who have suffered or come from disadvantaged backgrounds in their home countries. Teachers evidently care about the children and their families, they have been deeply impressed by the violent situations they know most refugees have lived. To some extent, some school staff extend that impression of violent life to other children of immigrants, as if it were a universal condition of immigrants. Teachers mentioned several stories of children's suffering and these stories had an impact on how the teachers dealt with the children. On the other hand, when they discuss violence and poverty in Halifax, they speak with discomfort as if not wishing to offend. At the same time, except for Mr. Baker,

they do not discuss taking into account any difficulties that immigrant families face here, such as looking for a job, dealing with bureaucracy, or discrimination. Their concern is heartfelt, and it would be unfair to say it is poorly placed, but it suggests there is a charitable side to dealing with migrants, and recalls the common description of immigration, used colloquially and in official circles, of "searching for a better life." Teachers never discuss or take into account that some aspects of the family's life may have been better, or with different advantages, in their own country.

Ray (2002) and others say that ideally integration is a two-way process in which a host country adapts to immigrants as well as immigrants adapting to the country. Schools attempt to promote two-way integration, for example through multicultural nights where Canadian families and migrant families get together, once a year to share their food in a potluck. According to Mr. Parker they aim to promote inclusion and get Canadians to be more open to the immigrant community, and "communication" among mainstream society and their new residents at school neighborhoods. But these occur only in a specific place and time, once a year, as if multiculturalism was a special thing. In day-to-day life, however, multiculturalism is not incorporated; bingo, school musicals and BBQs for example, remain traditionally Canadian experiences. At these, some immigrants said they felt "out-of-place" or like an "invisible man," ignored by their neighbours when trying to introduce themselves and start a conversation. And while "ethnic" food was acceptable at multicultural night, it was less welcome in the lunch room. When settlement workers worried about kids being "teased" for their foreign food and talked with parents about this situation, they asked parents to adapt to the reality that "here" in this place children bring other kind of food lunches like sandwiches. Parents and children have to adapt to their "new situation" in a new



place, but the place that is "accepting" them is not changing, as Peter Li have observed (2003).

The teachers never explicitly state they want to "integrate" the children, or enforce some kind of official integration policy. The integration seems to be a completely unconscious act, which comes from good intentions. In fact, teachers complained that they were not given any training at all in dealing with immigrants. But through their actions, and their language when talking about the children, they reproduce values associated with and promoted by the government, and tacitly accepted almost as a moral duty by society. This is a situation that Bourdieu calls social reproduction, in which "the values of the dominant class are reproduced in school through the habitus and cultural capital" (Bourdieu, 1977). And while the teachers' actions are unconscious, social reproduction is explicitly built into the curriculum design. When the principal Mr. Baker says that children lack the knowledge of Canadian life to appreciate many of the curriculum outcomes, he is talking about their lack of cultural capital, a lack which can easily perpetuate social inequality.

Like the teachers, parents see the school as a vehicle for integration. The depression and anxiety they suffer on arrival and as their children start school without speaking English, diminishes as their children begin to communicate in English with their classmates and make friends, and begin to feel comfortable in the classroom, just as their teachers promote. Despite the criticisms of Peter Li and others, parents see nothing wrong with integration. But their vision of integration is not as homogeneous as the government of Canada proposes and the schools reproduce. Different parents have different strategies. Bill is moving to Toronto to make it easier for his children to learn Urdu and get religious instruction. Zoe, on the other hand, avoids associating too much with people of her own

nationality: "I came here to be Canadian". But integration is not a straight line, and does not always occur in the places indicated. Many mentioned they do not have Canadian friends, and have seen their efforts to mingle at school events fail. At the same time, most do not become 100 per cent Canadian, and are not interested in doing so. Instead they combine different identities. While they are genuinely grateful for the teachers' efforts to help their children feel comfortable at school, they know that comfort, and integration, go much further than this.

#### **6.4 Communication**

For immigrant parents education can be a struggle, in much the same way they themselves face a struggle in attempting to build a new life. The education system in Halifax was created before large scale immigration became a policy for the province. The curriculum and many other school policies were designed for Canadian children with lifelong experience in this country. Even teachers I interviewed mention this deficit. Migrants, therefore, have to adapt to a system not built for them. Conflicts arise when they do not share educational values, or just as often, they do not understand them. Parents and teachers both understand that this gap in values exists, but communicating across these differences is full of difficulties. When teachers and parents try to communicate, even when they are speaking the same language (that is English), and the same words, the meanings of those words is often different for each sphere and they misunderstand each other, without even being aware of it. The two spheres seem to coincide when they talk about the social well-being of the child. Parents are very concerned that their children have friends, and can communicate and overcome isolation. They perceive the teachers concern for the students in

this regard as positive. "The teachers are very nice," is a frequent comment from parents, even when they criticize other aspects of education. Misunderstandings arise from the fact that the teacher's sense of comfort and well-being seems to extend into the academic aspects of schooling.

The most tangible example of a misunderstood term is "homework." For the teachers, homework is like extra work, both for them and their students, that takes away from children's play time and makes them tired. When teachers reassure parents that homework is not necessary, they are trying to make the parents feel comfortable. But for the parents, homework is a continuation of learning, a chance to practice what they learnt in the class, and part of their belief in discipline, sacrifice and continuous self-improvement. So they interpret the teacher's message as unnecessarily relaxed, even dismissive. They worry that their kids will become lazy and incompetent, and not work hard for their future, as they themselves have.

Report card marks are another source of misunderstanding. For parents, marks should be a correct reflection of their children's effort and achievement in class, and a guide to what the children need to work on. They sometimes think their marks are too high for what their children are learning and doing and complain that teachers are too lenient. But teachers interpret those complaints as a sign that parents are too demanding of their children, and unwilling to take into account the fact of the language barrier that children face in class. They even fear the children will be punished at home for getting low marks and deliberately inflate marks, possibly aggravating the misunderstanding.

In parent-teacher interviews, teachers try to make reassuring or general comments about their child, telling parents to "be positive," or "your child is doing ok." The intention is

to help the parents feel comfortable, but for many this comes as a surprise. As Bill said "I know my kid is not doing well." They come to the meetings expecting guidance in areas where they can help their children, but leave without understanding the purpose of the meetings.

## **6.5 Channels of Communication**

The channels of communication established by the HRSB and provincial education department are structured as mostly one way communication, from school sphere to home sphere. Student's journals, newsletters, emails and phone calls function to send information from school to parents. Most of this information is announcements rather than individualized messages. They do not promote a real dialogue about education, because few of them allow a return response. They invite a passive relationship on the part of the parents.

For parents still learning English it is especially difficult to use those channels. Even when parents can speak some English they worry that their messages are not clear or well-written or that the teacher would not understand what they wanted to say. Parents also explain that they cannot express themselves in English as they would if using their own language. There is a gap in the translation of messages they want to send to teachers. Phone calls do not work well when parents try to contact teachers, because teachers are busy in the classroom with students. If they leave a message it is not returned. They acknowledge that their children's teachers are really busy.

With respect to in-person meetings such as curriculum night or parent-teacher interviews, these are also structured to communicate to all parents in general, to explain or pass along information but not to receive responses. Parents say the 10 minutes allotted to

parent-teacher interviews is not enough time for them to adequately express their doubts and questions and be sure they understand the answers. The meetings are also infrequent, and come at the end of term, by which time if they are told that their children had difficulties on learning a concept, it is already too late for parents to find ways to help their children. In this way, parent-teacher interviews work as a kind of brief report to parents, but not as a conversation about their children learning, including their achievements and difficulties.

Much communication from the school is phrased in the language of the school board, with technical terms and assumptions derived from the curriculum outcomes framework. Teachers are restricted by this language in what they can discuss, and it is very rare for parents to have a spontaneous conversation about anything that isn't in the outcomes. In interviews, teachers recognized that this language can be difficult for parents to understand, to all parents not just immigrants. And often, teachers say, they have difficulties explaining it in parent-teacher meetings. Teachers use specific examples to parents when they explain the grade specific outcomes, because "the language used in learning outcomes is teacher language", I was told. The overall effect of the narrowness of these communication channels is that parents sometimes feel like the school is not listening to them and they give up attempting to communicate.

Teachers are very aware of the limitations of the official channels of communication. Some of the deepest and most successful communication reported in these interviews occurred when teachers stepped outside of official channels of communication. Teachers emphasized the importance of face-to-face communication where possible, and said they would "sneak out" to the schoolyard after school to grab a word with parents, this way avoiding the standard bureaucracy of arranging a meeting through the school secretary. Mr.

Baker arranged for translators and volunteer to help to organize multilingual curriculum nights on his own initiative. In a sense, the YMCA settlement workers operate outside the school system all the time, by making themselves available in the evenings and providing translators when they can. But simple human intuition also plays a role: in a parent-teacher meeting, Ms. Green could sense that a mother was not satisfied only by the look in her eyes. She dropped her standard presentation, and did the best she could to offer specific information about her daughter across the language barrier.

Communication among parents and school staff happens mostly on the school board's terms. It is conducted through channels and using language determined by the school board. If teachers and parents want to send messages to each other, they have to follow specific protocols, and even send them during specific events. Exceptional communication happens outside these channels, and is often the most effective communication with parents. However, teachers risk being caught and sanctioned for doing something that is not stipulated by school policies or the teachers' union, and many are unwilling to do so. Parents sense that beyond the teacher there is something else that teachers have to follow, a structure that actually parents cannot change and does not listen to them. Several talked about the "system" with a tone of resignation.

When I started this thesis I imagined the school sphere as being part of a structure of power in the city, with immigrant parents at the bottom. Now I can see that school staff also are not the ones who hold the power, but are under the control of higher levels in the government system. I now picture teachers and principals as being in the middle, between parents on one side, and the school board, the provincial department and even the teachers' union on the other. The groups with power stipulate when, where and what the teachers can

and cannot do as part of their employment. In consequence, few teachers and school staff dare to challenge those rules in order to better serve their students' and parents' needs. Mr. Baker explained why he told a teacher not to make a report card for a child, "As principal, I would take a chance and I would say to the teacher, don't do a report card, as much as the school board says do it". From parents' sphere, when Jacob complained about the lack of homework, a teacher responded "It is part of the system" with a tone of voice that suggested they do not have the liberty to help their students academically, beyond what is outlined in the outcomes framework." They are afraid of the school board" one teacher told me. It is not only parents who do not feel listened to by the system. Teachers seem to feel this way too.

## **6.6 The Common Discursive Framework**

The common discursive framework is a conceptual tool I borrowed from Roseberry to analyse the process of communication across levels of social power. A common discursive framework exists when subordinates try to make their demands heard by a group in power using the forms of communication controlled by the group in power. Those forms includes administrative forms, specific vocabulary and terminology, bureaucratic processes, officially sanctioned symbols, images and rituals. This discursive framework maintains existing power relations; subordinates learn to use it for their own ends without necessarily accepting those relations, although it may look like they completely agree with it. It is an arena for struggle as well as agreement. But for this study, the concept helped me to identify the conflicting nodes during parent-teacher communication.

In Halifax, the provincial education department, the city school board and the education system in general form a structure of power. Immigrants who arrive to this city

and place their children in the schools, are inserted into this structure as subordinates. Within the power structure, they share a status with Canadian parents, but they have particular needs and demands that cannot be expressed in the same way as those of other parents. In addition, the system is not designed to take those demands into account. Following the theory of common discursive framework, the parents recognize the legitimacy of the schools' power, and the channels of communication that must be followed in order to be heard. These include the report card, the curriculum night, the parent-teacher interview among others. Parents make use of these channels to express dissatisfaction, ask for changes, converse about their child's progress and even to step out. However, they feel that they are not heard and that becomes a constant struggle. Those who can pay the economic price step out of the public system.

Moments of tension and discontent appear, but they are not clearly manifested. Struggles arise when attempts at communication occur, but the tension remains hidden, inconformity is not manifested, and most of the time not openly recognizable by both parts. Immigrant parents use the channels of communication, but the struggle continues. The problem is deeper than to learn English and how to use the established channels of communication. The important things for parents are without a means to have a dialogue about a system that is not designed to hear them.

Some immigrants stop participating in meetings and showing up at schools when they get aware of those situations, like crashing into an invisible wall. So, there is no common discursive framework, Gaventa mention that in power relationships a latent and generalized form of discontent (1980, p. 252) appears among subordinates, which results in a tension in their interactions with the group in power, even as negotiate through a common



discursive framework. In this study, I found discontent on both sides, the home sphere and school sphere. Parents expressed frustration with the "system" when they were not able to get teachers to understand their point of view, or obtain the information they wanted about the school. Teachers expressed frustration with policies that limited their ability to communicate more deeply and spontaneously with parents. However neither side expresses the frustration to the other. On the contrary, both spheres mention the "niceness", "bravery" and other qualities of the other that make interactions at least polite, if not satisfactory. Because their values, experiences and the meanings of the words they use are so different, neither side recognizes there is a misunderstanding going on, nor fully understands the frustrations of the other.

On the other hand, there is a "common discursive" among parents. It is a different common language among parents that creates an invisible bond of understanding even among people of different ethnicities. There is a shared experience in the manner of communicating with teachers, but also a shared experience in being an immigrant, we share the same social status in the city, regardless of religion, socioeconomic status or class. Immigrants share expectations about their children having a better future than them, of being good citizens and good professionals. They share the same language of sacrifice, rooted in their own experience coming here, of discipline and hard work. They share manners of achieving their expectations. This mutual recognition that you are like me, an outsider, appears when parents start discussing their experiences. "I found she had the same problem as me" said Janet referring to a casual chat she had at school yard with another immigrant parent. Alice, who is Jewish, expressed that she had more in common with Muslim women than white Canadians. I call this "common identity discourse" a result of a conscious

realization of being an immigrant and not part of mainstream society. Jennifer, expressed this clearly "it is better to make friends with immigrants than Canadians..., sometimes I feel that if you cannot be useful to them...stick to the immigrants." She expresses the feeling that, in Halifax, being part of the immigrant community situates you in an identity group. According to Anderson, we are all part of "imagined communities"(1991 p. 6). When you walk in the street, and smile at another immigrant, or share a few words with another immigrant mother in the schoolyard, you feel yourself part of that imagined community, even if it never goes beyond that, to the formation of formal organizations or groups.

As a result, the school sphere and home sphere continue reproducing their intents of communication, as in two parallel lines of communication. Without properly trying to make their expectations and frustrations heard by the structured power, an intent to further communicate, school staff step aside the structured forms and try other creative ways to communicate with parents. For their part, parents step outside the public system and look for other ways of "helping" their children; some change to private education, some send them to their own ethnic school, where at the same time they practice their home language while they also work on math, history, science.

## CHAPTER 7 CONCLUSION

The difficulties that parents and teachers have with communicating owes not just to an intercultural misunderstanding, or the limitations of language. At roots are two visions of the world that encounter each other within a rigid system, and are forced to communicate following certain limited protocols. We have seen that parents, even though they come from different countries, religions and socioeconomic levels, share an idea of education: holistic, built on sacrifice, much like the sacrifices they made themselves as children in their home countries and later as immigrants leaving everything behind to come to Canada. They see that these values are not appreciated in the school system, but are rejected, and go against fundamental school board policies such as homework, outcomes and EAL. The parents are confronted by a system of communication that goes only one way and does not promote a real dialogue which takes into account their points of view or expectations.

Roseberry pointed out that cases where there is a common discursive framework between subordinate and dominant groups is rare. I believe that this applies to the case of parents and teachers. Parents use the school's communication channels, but they are unaware of the accepted vocabulary such as outcomes, or used with different meanings such as homework. To ask for questions about things that they really care they do not know how to frame questions in the language of the school. When their requests are denied because "that's the system" or that too much homework is "not good for their child" or that "comfort" is more important than hard work, they see an invisible wall between them and the school. They perceive they are not being understood because their values and beliefs about education are different from the policies and school pedagogy.

Roseberry's perspective on communication between groups and the common

discursive framework has helped this study focus attention on the ways parents and teachers are subjects in a power relationship that constrains what they can do and even what they can communicate. The two spheres, home sphere and school sphere are inserted in a power relationship that exercises control over what can be communicated between the two. Teachers are governed by policies established by the school board, which not only establishes how parents must talk to teachers, but what they can talk about and even the terms in which teachers view the students. They view EAL students through the lens of language deficiency, for example, as if the child is an empty bucket that will be filled little by little only as they learn English. Students' own native knowledge is not taken into account as part of the knowledge they can contribute to the class. Parents by the other hand, are conscious about the obstacles their children face, including the language, but see their child and his or her native abilities and knowledge first. They see the language barrier only as a challenge to be overcome with hard work and effort, but not as a handicap. Parents already have made a sacrifice when they come here that they want to "teach" their kids the values of effort, sacrifice in order to be competitive in the labour market and be prepared to deal with the uncertainty of the complex world in the future.

Despite these differences, parents do not try to challenge the education establishment, in part because of shyness or lack of English. Their self-consciousness of being an immigrant and outsider to the system does not help them in trying to communicate their ideas and expectations. Silence is their tool to contest the established system, similar to what Narotzky (2011) found among industrial workers in Spain, a way to deal with struggle and bad economic times. She used Roseberry's understanding of hegemony to identify how silence was a strategy to deal with power relations.

Parents in Halifax, do not confront teachers, much less the school board. They ask polite indirect questions, and eventually most of them look outside the system as a way to encourage their holistic idea of education. They register children in ethnic schools that function at weekends as a way to promote the continuation of their language and cultural background, while reinforcing their academic learning. They support their children's interest in music, arts, sports and each family pays for these extras according to their economic situation. Those who can pay for private education switch to that and parents who would like their children to attend private school but cannot pay for private elementary school, find other resources that they can afford.

I separated my field of study into two spheres because I wanted to understand how members of each sphere feel and see what is in play when they try to communicate with the other side. Instead of approaching each group as a predefined group, with predefined characteristics, I wanted to approach them as assemblages of individuals, to "disassemble" them into participants, taking into account their own individual habitus, cultural capital and ideas that surround their practices. In the case of the parents, as I built them back up again, I found that they did indeed share a holistic, liberal and humanistic view of education, despite the fact that they came from different ethnic, religious and socioeconomic backgrounds, and have different paths of "integration" into Halifax. I even discovered, when interviewing them that I had a certain shared understanding with them, built on our common experience as immigrants and outsiders to Canada. Dealing with the spheres separately, also helped me to identify with the struggles they faced, and identify myself with their situation within the power relations that frame them. Parents faced clear problems, by the nature of their position in Canada, but teachers faced struggles too. It would be also easy to categorize them *a priori*

as the "dominant" group, but in fact, I discovered that they too are subordinate to other, much less visible powers, the formats, regulations and policies that control what they can and cannot do. By treating them as individuals first, I found that they are not simple extensions of Canadian integrationist policy. They are genuinely concerned about the well-being of these kids. This concern has the unintended consequence of blunting criticism, a kindly paternalistic way of promoting conformity in the system we are all part of. If teachers are part of that conformity, it is for their own job security, as well as the framework that shapes views and discursive practices.

I believe this study dismantles the myth that communication problems in schools are fundamentally intercultural misunderstandings. They arise also from the power relations between the spheres, the roles each member of the two spheres play, the struggles they face to manifest dissent through discursive practices: contention occurs in the form of silence (Narotzky, 2011), staying away from the public school system or maintaining minimal participation in school activities. After all, despite the fact that the school board has a system for communicating messages from teachers to parents, including email, monthly newsletters and parent teacher interviews, a common discursive framework does not exist yet, because parents cannot really express their objections and thoughts to the school board. This therefore becomes a latent discontent (Gaventa, 1980). It is not expressed directly by parents to teachers, nor by teachers to the school system; as Gaventa illustrates about power inequalities: "What is voiced by the powerholders in the decision-making arenas may not always reflect the real conflict, but may articulate norms or myths which disguise or deflect the more latent conflict" (p. 256).

The problems described in this thesis have existed for a long time, not only in

Halifax but in other provinces too. At a recent anthropology conference, a former teacher from Quebec told me that her mother, an immigrant who came to the country 40 years ago, had experienced similar difficulties when communicating with teachers. When she read my poster, she said that it brought back many memories for her. Although the problem has persisted, it has usually been interpreted as intercultural misunderstandings, easily resolved by teaching immigrants English and helping them to integrate. I have suggested that the problem is more deeply rooted in power relations. I believe more research is needed into this line of reasoning. Research that would include classroom ethnography and direct participant observation with parents and teachers, could probably bring light on how to diminish the problem of communication. Such research might include applied ethnography that takes into account the power that holds with both spheres.

I cannot imagine a society without a form of power. The way our own society is going to evolve is also uncertain. How are immigrant parents and teachers going to 'negotiate' their power relations within the structure already established? Through a common discursive framework? Or will the cycle will continue until the silence and latent discontent evolve into something else?

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## **Appendix A**

### **Coming to school in Halifax: how communication works between parents and teachers from immigrant families?**

Following is a list of topics I will explore in my interviews with immigrant parents

#### **Parent's interview guide**

##### **Personal information**

- name, age, country of origin
- Place of job, year of immigration or number of years living in Canada
- Family structure (parents and other household members)
- school attended by your children
- how many of your children are attending this school? (ages and grades)
- immigration trajectory (i.e were there other stops along the way)

##### **The education system here and there: Expectations and understandings about education**

- Importance of educating your children in Canada compared to education in home country
- The importance of education in your decision of coming to Canada
- Describe your first day going to school with your child. Feelings. Worries. People you met.
- How have being adjusting to life at school and the city? Difficulties. Facilities
- How does the school here compare with school from your country? Similarities and differences, ways of learning, frequency of meeting and talking with school staff.
- Describe your most recent meeting with the teacher here. Topics, subjects that you talk about.
- When your child has difficulties with homework, ESL or others terms, how do you communicate this situation to the teacher?

- Other ways that you use to communicate with school staff?
- Participation on events or activities organized by school (Bingo, festivals, field trips, etc) Why do you go or why do you not go?

### **ESL**

- Children and parents level of English language
- Language spoken at home and language used when doing homework
- Frequency of meeting with ESL teacher and description of the meeting.
- Knowledge of programs that family participates in Halifax for learning English or help for school

### **Homework**

- What is homework like in the country backhome and what is it like here.
- What kind of homework do parents prefer?
- what do you do to help with homework?
- Resources that you have for helping your child at homework (computer, internet, etc)

### **Outcomes**

- Describe the first time you heard about outcomes and the meaning of outcomes for you. What, when and how do you communicate with school about outcomes?
- Places were you talked with other parents about school and what about do you talk with other parents? For example report cards

## Appendix B

### Coming to school in Halifax: how communication works between parents and teachers from immigrant families?

#### **Interview guidelines for teachers, principal and other school staff**

##### personal information

- name, age, country of origin or province of origin
- number of years teaching and teaching immigrant children
- how many immigrant students are in your classroom?
- Countries where your students come from

##### **About education system here and there.** Please tell me or describe your thoughts about the specific questions

- Your knowledge about the immigrants parent's expectations for the education system in Canada. How do you feel about their expectations?
- When and how frequently do immigrants parents tell you about what they expect from the school system in Canada?
- How do you communicate with parents and what about?
- Type of knowledge that some of your students home country emphasized back there.
- Describe the kind of things were you trained about working with immigrant children and where do you learn that? (PD days, B. Ed, university, etc.)
- what resources do you have at school for working with immigrant children? Is this enough?

##### **ESL**

- Describe your feelings about talking to the parents when they don't speak very much English.
- How is the communication with parents who are not fluent on English?
- Tell me an anecdote about trying to communicate with parents of immigrant



children.

- What means of communication do you use with the students parents individually or in group
- What are your expectations of the parents in relation to the students' achievement? Is it the same as for Canadian parents or is it different for immigrant parents?

### **Homework**

- Describe your means of communication with parents about homework.
- Have you had parents complaining about homework?
- Have you have parents congrats about homework?
- Describe how you communicate with parents about homework: Is this easy, difficult, complex?
- Tell me, please, the frequency with which you assign homework and what kind
- Describe the ways of encouraging parents to help with homework
- To what degree do you expect parents to helps with homework?

### **Curriculum outcomes**

- Describe what the curriculum outcomes are and how they work?
- Describe the different ways that you use the curriculum outcomes? Can you give an example?
- When and how do you talk with the parents about curriculum outcomes?
- Do you think they understand? What do you do when they don't understand?
- For you as a teacher what do outcomes mean to you and what are their importance
- What was the system when you were a child?

## Appendix C- Invitation



**Project title:** Coming to school in Halifax: how communication works between parents and teachers from immigrant families?

**Researcher:** Rosi Rodriguez Franco  
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### Invitation

Researcher: Rosi Rodriguez Franco  
Masters Student of Social Anthropology  
Department of Sociology and Social Anthropology  
[rs594817@dal.ca](mailto:rs594817@dal.ca)

The researcher and the Department of Sociology and Social Anthropology at Dalhousie University invite you to take part in a research study being conducted by Rosi Rodriguez Franco who is a graduate student at Dalhousie University, as part of his Master's Degree program in Social Anthropology. Your participation in this study is voluntary and you may withdraw from the study at any time. The study is described below. This

description tells you about the risks, inconvenience, or discomfort which you might experience. Participating in the study might not benefit you, but we might learn things that will benefit others. You should discuss any questions you have about this study with Rosi Rodriguez Franco.

The study will consist of an interview about the education of immigrant children attending different elementary schools. Ideally parents, teachers, principal and other school staff will give their opinions, experience, narratives about educating immigrants children. This project only will interview adults representatives from home and from school.

Ten of the interviews will be conducted with teachers (working with immigrant children and ESL teachers), principals, viceprincipals, YMCA workers assigned to schools in the west part of the city. Another ten interviews will be conducted with immigrants parents. The project is unlikely to bring a direct benefit to you personally, although we hope the experience is enjoyable and interesting. What is learnt from the study may help others in the future.

The purpose of the study is to understand what the immigrants parents face when they arrive from a different culture and school system and try to adapt in the new Canadian educational system. The goal is to understand the nature of the communication between two different worlds: home and school. Considering that the children live in between two worlds: the home and the school. It is important to know how parents and teachers communicate and interact with each other and what kind of resources are available for the immigrant children to have successful academic and personal lives in Halifax.

You may participate in this study if you are over the age of 18. The interviews will be conducted by Rosi Rodriguez Franco. During the interview and in the whole research

project, is not our aim to judge the ways that home and school work. Also this is not a test of your abilities or interests and I will not be evaluating or judging the activities that you produce during the education process. The interview will be conducted with you alone in a place and time of your choosing, and I will start by answering any questions about the research. All the information is anonymous and confidential. Your identity will be kept anonymous, as will the comments and information you offer during the study. I will assign you a pseudonym in the text of my thesis so that your name or other personal information will not be revealed. The interview will be recorded, your comments transcribed, and in some cases cited. The recording will be kept in the secure possession of Rosi Rodriguez Franco.

The focus of the study is not an evaluation of politics or any other contentious issue as part of the education system in Nova Scotia. Although, possibly, the dialogue could touch on current political subjects and recent events, you should not feel pressure at any moment to express opinions that you would prefer to keep private. As well, your participation in the study is voluntary and you are free to withdraw at any time.

There will be no monetary compensation for your participation in the study. I will do the interview at a time and place convenient for you.

This research will be carried out by Rosi Rodriguez . If you have any doubts or complaints, you can contact Catherine Connors, Director of Dalhousie University's Office of Human Research Ethics, Administration (902) 494 1462, [ethics@dal.ca](mailto:ethics@dal.ca) or Rosi Rodriguez , at (902) 406 9863, [rs594817@dal.ca](mailto:rs594817@dal.ca)

[Thank you for your interest and participation.](#)

**Appendix D- Consent form**



**Project title:** Coming to school in Halifax: how communication works between parents and teachers from immigrant families?

I have read the explanation of this study. I have had an opportunity to discuss it and all my doubts have been cleared up. I give my consent to participate in this study. However, I understand that my participation is voluntary and I am free to leave it at any moment.

I consent to having my voice recorded: Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_  
I consent to having my comments quoted in the final report: Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_  
I consent on using a pseudonym when the researcher quote my comments: Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name and Signature of participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name and Signature of researcher

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

**Information:**

If you have any difficulties with, or wish to voice concern about, any aspect of your participation in this study, you may contact Catherine Connors , Director, Research Ethics, Dalhousie University at (Collect calls will be accepted) (902) 494-1462, [ethics@dal.ca](mailto:ethics@dal.ca)